

Setting the Agenda with Lies: Misinformation and the Undermining of Democracy in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of fake news poses significant threat to the functioning of democratic processes, particularly in countries with weak democratic institutions where digital illiteracy is not uniform. This research examines the impact of misinformation on Pakistan's 2018 and 2024 general election. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), it examines how false stories - spreading via social media, partisan networks, and digital tools - influenced voter opinion, political debate, and trust in democratic institutions, by using academic research, fact-checking reports, and media reporting.

Agenda-Setting Theory is the framework to set for analysis. There is an evidence that fake news 'steered attention from policy issues to scandals and fake controversy'. In 2018, most disinformation appeared in the form of fake headlines, rumors, and WhatsApp messages. By 2024 campaigns were deploying deepfakes, synthetic audio and bot networks. These strategies did not just lead to increased polarization, they undermine the faith in the electoral process itself.

The study reveals recurring patterns in the production, circulation and reception of misinformation. It also finds that current responses - from regulators, fact-checkers, and media outlets - have struggled to keep pace with the speed and scale of false content. To address these challenges, the paper suggests enhancing fact-checking, supporting digital literacy, deploying artificial intelligence-based detection tools and modifying regulatory frameworks.

By placing Pakistan's experience in the wider context of debate in other countries, the paper helps illuminate how disinformation campaigns can be used to influence political agendas and undermine trust in elections, and that many emerging democracies have agreed with this view.

Keywords: Fake news, elections, misinformation, democracy, Pakistan, agenda-setting theory, media manipulation

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of fake news has transformed the way communication is carried out worldwide, with worrying consequences for electoral democracies in particular. In countries where democratic institutions are unstable, there is mismatched media oversight and often lack knowledge of how to use the internet, the spread of misinformation occurs with more ease and has a more acute impact (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Pakistan is one such case. What once seemed like a side issue has now become central to how elections unfold, shaping narratives, influencing voter behavior, and eroding confidence in electoral institutions.

Over the past decade, the information landscape in Pakistan has been transformed. More than 70% of internet users now rely on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, TikTok, and WhatsApp as their main sources of news (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). These same platforms have been exploited by political operatives, state-aligned actors, and partisan influencers to circulate misleading or fabricated stories, particularly during election cycles. Misinformation has not only been used to discredit individual candidates but also to undermine institutions such as the Election Commission of Pakistan, contributing to a wider climate of distrust.

Regulatory responses have struggled to keep pace. Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016 was intended to address online harms, but critics argue it has been inconsistently enforced and vulnerable to political misuse (Arshad Khan, 2018). Fact-checking groups like Soch Fact-Check and AFP Pakistan have tried to counter viral falsehoods, but their reach is limited compared to the speed and scale at which fake news spreads.

The 2018 and 2024 elections highlight how misinformation in Pakistan has grown more complex. In 2018, disinformation circulated mainly through WhatsApp rumors and manipulated headlines. By 2024, the landscape had shifted toward more technologically advanced tools, including deepfakes, synthetic audio, and algorithm-driven campaigns. These novel kinds of material are not just more persuasive, but also more difficult to identify by voters, which also echoes the findings indicating that false news spreads faster than truth (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

In this paper, I will use the Agenda-Setting Theory to analyze the way in which fake news affected 2018 and 2024 in Pakistan. According to the theory, though the media might not force people to think but it has a strong capacity of affecting what people think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The disinformation, in this instance, meant switching the focus of meaningful policy discussions towards the invention of controversies, enhancing polarization, and discrediting the institution (McCombs, 2005; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), the current study summarizes academic articles, fact-checking reports, and media analyses to determine the influence of fake news on the agenda-setting process in the Pakistani elections. It also assesses how political campaigning, online sources, and regulation systems boost or curb false information. In this way, it can add to the scholarly literature on political communication in the Global South and provides practices that might end the impact of the effects on democracy in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

The research paper embraces the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to explore the impact of misinformation on the electoral procedure in Pakistan. This approach allows organizing the research and analysis of available studies to minimize biases and enhance authenticity (Snyder, 2019). Because the studies covering the topic of political misinformation in Pakistan remain distributed across various domains, an SLR provides a stable method to consolidate various results, uncover common themes and examine the evidence using the identical reliable instrument.

Research Design

The main purpose of the given review is to comprehend how fake news and digital disinformation influenced the responsiveness to voters, agendas of the media, and the confidence voters had in institutions to vote in the 2018 and 2024 elections. Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) informed the review as it also shaped both inclusion criteria and the coding process. According to the standard procedures of SLR, the study employed five stages:

1. Defining research questions.
2. Identifying and retrieving relevant studies.
3. Applying inclusion and exclusion criteria.
4. Synthesizing findings.
5. Interpreting results through thematic and comparative analysis.

Research Questions

The review is built around four guiding questions:

- What were the main sources and formats of fake news during the 2018 and 2024 elections?
- How did misinformation shape public discourse and voter behavior?
- In what ways did misinformation align with agenda-setting mechanisms?
- How did regulatory and civil society responses evolve over the two cycles?

Search Strategy and Data Sources

Relevant literature was collected from Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and IEEE Xplore. The search focused on peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and policy reports. To supplement these, the study also reviewed reports from fact-checking organizations such as Soch Fact-Check and AFP Pakistan, as well as publications from media outlets (e.g., *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*) and institutions such as the Election Commission of Pakistan and the Digital Rights Foundation.

Search terms combined phrases such as “fake news,” “misinformation,” “disinformation,” “Pakistan elections,” “social media,” “deepfakes,” “agenda-setting,” “political communication,” and “digital propaganda.”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure quality and relevance, the study included:

- Peer-reviewed work and reports published between 2014 and 2024.
- Studies focused on misinformation in Pakistani elections.
- Analyses of social media, digital platforms, or AI-generated content in shaping political narratives.
- Fact-checking reports documenting concrete cases.

Exclusions were:

- Non-English studies.
- Opinion pieces or blogs without empirical grounding.
- Research on non-political misinformation (e.g., health or financial).

Screening and Selection Process

The search produced 164 documents. After removing duplicates and irrelevant titles, 89 remained. A full-text review narrowed these to 46 that met the criteria for rigor and relevance. While a PRISMA flow diagram is not included here, the screening followed established protocols for transparency in qualitative synthesis (Moher et al., 2009).

Data Extraction and Thematic Coding

A coding sheet was used to extract details such as publication type, misinformation source, platform, targeted actors, and documented impacts. These were grouped into five themes:

1. Sources and channels of fake news.
2. Impact on voter behavior.
3. Digital platforms and algorithmic amplification.
4. Regulatory and institutional responses.
5. Agenda-setting and narrative framing.

These categories formed the basis of the thematic analysis and enabled comparisons across the two elections.

Methodological Limitations

Like any literature-based review, this study has limits. Reliance on English-language sources may overlook narratives in Urdu or regional languages, especially in rural areas. The absence of primary data means voter-level experiences could not be directly captured. Encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram posed additional challenges, as much of their content remains inaccessible to researchers. Finally, the fast pace of technological change means that some of the newest misinformation tactics may not yet be reflected in the literature.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents the main findings of the review, organized around five themes: (1) sources and channels of fake news, (2) its impact on voter behavior and public discourse, (3) the role of digital platforms and algorithms, (4) regulatory and institutional responses, and (5) agenda-setting effects. The analysis combines documented cases from the 2018 and 2024 elections with insights from the literature and is framed by Agenda-Setting Theory.

Sources and Channels of Fake News

In 2018, disinformation campaigns in Pakistan were relatively unsophisticated, relying on doctored headlines, memes, and text-based WhatsApp messages. Despite their simplicity, these tactics proved effective in spreading rumors. By contrast, the 2024 elections marked a technological leap: deepfakes, synthetic audio, and AI-generated videos became common tools for political manipulation (Giacomello, 2025).

High concentration on misinformation changed. When it started out as personal attacks on individual candidates, it subsequently moved to higher levels of attack on agencies like the Election Commission of Pakistan. They planned these campaigns through the assistance of social media usage such as Facebook, Twitter/X, Tik Tok and Whatsapp and they posted this information.

Impact on Voter Behavior and Public Discourse

Research demonstrates that misinformation not only falsely informs, but also forms assumptions of trustworthiness, strengthens partisanship, and affects voting patterns. In 2018, disinformation centered primarily on attacks of oneself. It aimed at the integrity of the institutions and the integrity of the electoral procedure by 2024.

The agenda-setting Theory is useful to justify those processes: bogus scandals and viral controversies in the periphery of policy conversation remaking perceptions of what mattered to people (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2005). Their emotional weight increased their coverage, in accordance with the fact showing that fake news disseminates more quickly than pre-existing facts in news coverage (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018).

Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Amplification

Platforms acted as accelerators. Facebook and Twitter/X amplified polarizing hashtags, WhatsApp enabled the rapid circulation of unverified messages within private groups, and TikTok spread emotionally engaging videos to younger audiences.

Because platform algorithms reward engagement, they often boost sensational or divisive content. As a result, fact-based journalism was routinely drowned out by hoaxes and manipulated media.

Table 1 compares how misinformation evolved between 2018 and 2024, highlighting changes in format, platform use, and strategic goals.

Regulatory and Institutional Responses

Pakistan's regulatory response has been uneven. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016 was designed to curb harmful online content but has been criticized for weak enforcement and political misuse.

Civil society organizations attempted to fill this gap. Groups like Soch Fact-Check and the Digital Rights Foundation have tracked and debunked false claims, but their efforts remain small compared to the scale of viral disinformation.

During the 2024 elections, the Election Commission issued occasional statements, but these were mostly reactive rather than proactive.

Table 2 summarizes the key misinformation themes identified in both elections and links them to agenda-setting processes.

Agenda-Setting and Narrative Framing

The review finds that fake news did more than distort facts; it redefined the boundaries of political debate. Instead of discussing governance or policy platforms, much of the discourse revolved around hoaxes, rumors, and fabricated scandals.

Through an agenda-setting lens, disinformation worked not just as background noise but as a force that redirected attention, shaped voter priorities, and weakened trust in democratic institutions (McCombs, 2005; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Table 3 maps how disinformation narratives gained salience during both elections, showing how fake news crowded out policy issues and amplified political polarization.

Comparative Trends: 2018 vs. 2024 Elections

The comparative analysis reveals a distinct evolution in both the methods and targets of electoral misinformation between 2018 and 2024:

Table 1.

Aspect	2018 Elections	2024 Elections
Main Tactics	Fabricated letters, WhatsApp hoaxes, doctored headlines	Deepfakes, synthetic audio, bot-driven trends
Primary Targets	Individual candidates (e.g., Nawaz Sharif)	Institutions (e.g., Election Commission of Pakistan)
Tech Sophistication	Low to moderate	High (AI-generated content, algorithmic promotion)
Platform Usage	WhatsApp, Facebook	TikTok, Twitter/X, encrypted apps

Regulatory Response	Limited enforcement of PECA ad hoc fact-checking	Increased takedown notices; fact-checker collaboration; concerns about political bias
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This shift illustrates a deeper strategic aim in 2024: rather than discrediting individual politicians alone, disinformation campaigns increasingly sought to undermine the legitimacy of electoral institutions themselves, signaling a move from personalized attacks to systemic delegitimization.

Role of Social Media in Amplifying Misinformation

Social media platforms act as powerful amplifiers of fake news because their algorithms prioritize emotionally engaging and controversial content over nuanced reporting. Research highlights the following dynamics:

- **Echo chambers:** Users are exposed primarily to ideologically aligned content, which reinforces misinformation and reduces exposure to alternative perspectives.
- **Virality bias:** False information spreads faster and more broadly than factual reporting, particularly on platforms such as Twitter/X (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).
- **Influencer involvement:** High-profile political supporters and partisan media accounts boost engagement by driving coordinated messaging campaigns.

Although platforms have attempted to label or remove harmful content, the speed and scale of viral disinformation frequently outpace fact-checking responses. Furthermore, takedown measures are often perceived as politically biased, which deepens public distrust in both platforms and institutions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Case Studies & Examples

2018 case — miscaptioned “rigging” video

During the 2018 Pakistan elections, an online video showed a woman presiding officer video-taped while rigging. The video has been debunked by establishing a trace back to an incident during which the allegations had nothing to do with the allegations in Karachi in 2008; the allegation in 2018 had been mis framed. The episode as shows that the rumors shared in Facebook/WhatsApp as written messages above pictures were showing the focus on collective discourse on election day since men were focusing their attention on policy rather than were taking offense in allegations of ballot stuffing, etc. The formation of an agenda through salience as described in the case is illustrated by how the concept of rigging is raised above others several times and the media relocate a made-up scandal into the mainstream until the electorate is conditioned not to trust the results (AFP Fact Check, 2018).

2024 case — Basharat Raja boycott deepfake

On 8 February 2024, video footage showed PTI running Muhammed Basharat Raja boycotting the election. According to a declaration by Soch Fact-Check, a forensic examination showed AI produced images and audio mismatched results. That video went trending on Tik Tok and X miles outside the narrative of the day (around boycotts), and has diluted the last mile message of the GOTV politics the hallmark of agenda-setting which involves producing a reply riddled with emotional content (McCombs, 2005). Deepfakes even slow down the voter inference process and fact-checking, and fully cater to the fake interests on the agenda (Soch Fact-Check, 2024b).

2024 case — AI audio urging a boycott

Before the election, audio tapes allegedly of Imran Khan were circulated on the internet suggesting boycotting. In the 2024 country report of the Freedom House, at least some of these AI audios and

videos have been mentioned where PTI figures, including Khan and his defense staff, are mentioned, which will surely cause core voters to decide not to vote. An example of an agenda-setting phenomenon, which entails being overwhelmed with the garbage upon which the news itself seems to rest at the moment of the decision, is discussed in the story of the preparation of the synthetic boycott (Freedom House, 2024). The Incident Database of AI tracks Case Incident 648, in which the ability to cross-dock platforms and put voter-confusion in play are some of its features and risk (AI Incident Database, 2024).

Hashtag wars & trend manipulation

It was brought about by the polarizing frames due to the platform dynamics. Twitter/X research focused on Pakistan showed the following trend: 665 trending hashtags (5.4M tweets; 1.9M users) and entailed a trending panel perhaps controlled largely by political hashtags, and human-blooded behavior (organized manipulation) of trending hashtags and Automated Bots. An engineered form of virality leads to redirecting media reporting and social discourse towards prioritizing conflict-inducing inputs, and pushing the focus of policy discussion into the background an agenda-setting effect produced by algorithm (Kausar et al., 2021).

Regulatory response — fake ECP schedule & warnings

In December 2023, a fake version of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)-style schedule was viralized, fact-checkers compared the fake schedule to the actual one, and pointed out several discrepancies of the schedule. The same tip is intended to include the messaging of the situation manipulation via a new warning that ECP issued in January 2024 and addressed the population with the threat of fake WhatsApp calls, which impersonated high-ranking officials (Soch Fact-Check, 2023). These were predominantly post-viralization of fake news when appearance was urgent to control the situation, and impossibility of intent or credit with fake news to seize an agenda in acute need.

Agenda-setting via “foreign sanctions” rumor

A more egregious hoax that spread days after the vote in 2024 was an imaginary quote by the European Union that threatens to impose sanctions upon the Pakistani Army generals on the other red team, alleging election rigging. The retracing of the graphic to non-EU was made by Soch Fact-Check and was regarded as false. What made the claim powerful was the ability to turn post-election reporting into a system of geopolitical not only crime of an institutional type, but constituency issues-setting concerns through an external-threat frame, prompting that individuals feel more emotion and concern.

Platform amplification — fake PTI candidate portal

Dawn (in cooperation with iVerify) revealed a look-alike site named pticandidate.com that announced falsely identified names/symbols of the candidates on 25 January 2024. The clone was also changed through a typographic similarity with the actual portal, where undecided or people in a hurry visited it to get information at the last hour. This type of information infrastructure impersonation serves as a distractor and can act against vote-choice heuristics - an agenda-setting instrument that substitutes platform-level confusion with a policy content (Dawn.com, 2024).

Public trust & access — throttling X during results

The act of national security on 17 April 2024, the interior ministry of Pakistan recognised the blocked x around the 8 February election. According to the claims by the rights groups, the act impeded real-time transparency/fact checks because the rumors propagated more quickly than the corrections (Reuters, 2024). Freedom House also lists the outburst in deepfakes and suppression about the same time as the elections, the two together which leans to drive the citizens towards sensational fake news

and cuts off the voices of the masses to speak out, the again-agenda setting, an agenda-setting with Anti-Scarcity and Noise (Freedom House, 2024).

Miscontextualized “Nawaz accepted defeat” post

An X/Twitter tweet post elections 2024 said that Nawaz Sharif admitted defeat. It cannot be addressed upon authoritative words, which the post contained but was misunderstood, which was revealed to the investors as misunderstood and then verified by Soch Fact-Check. As can be seen in the episode, all it takes is a viral assertion to shift the news agenda to focus on leadership legitimacy and outcome narratives instead of counting procedures or how the policy changes will alter what the public believes once they turn in a ballot vote (Soch Fact-Check, 2024a).

2024 — Fake “Supreme Court video-call” of Imran Khan

As a result of the Khan hearing confronted before the Supreme Court in Pakistan, which proceeded by a secure video teleconferencing connexion because of his imprisonment in Afghanistan, a video purporting captured live argumentative footage of him in court has been released. Upon investigating the viral clip regarding standard reporting, Soch Fact-Check found out that the courtroom video did not exist on account of which there was just one single picture on that day and a former media strategist of the PTI declared that the viral clip was a hoax. The hoax stimulated, through the courtroom as its central representation, a narrative of first-order disobedience and de facto validity, pushing the agendas of news beyond matters of substantive integrity of merits of the particular case and due process out to the periphery (Soch Fact-Check, 2024c).

2024 — Doctored plane banner calling Khan a “watch thief”

Articles published prior to a June 2024 New York baseball game showed a plane dragging a banner stating Imran Khan was a watch thief. The forensic investigation of AFP proved that the video had been altered—the car did not have a banner like this. By cutting into viral high stakes sport identity content, the fake has tried to form an entertainment and political alliance by preloading the viewers to a corrupted discourse and no concentrating a policy on morality characterization conventional agenda setting with visual virality. The outcome of the Fact Check feed by AFP to suppress spread was also true (AFP Fact Check, 2024).

DISCUSSION:

The results of this review demonstrate a strategic evolution in the use of misinformation during Pakistan’s electoral cycles. Drawing from the Agenda-Setting Theory, the following discussion highlights how fake news influences issue salience, manipulates political discourse, and destabilizes institutional legitimacy. To support this analysis, summary tables and proposed figures are included.

From Misinformation to Agenda Manipulation

The influence of fake news in Pakistan’s elections aligns closely with the agenda-setting function of the media. Rather than changing voter opinions directly, disinformation redirects public attention toward sensationalized or fabricated issues. As a result, substantive debates are displaced by scandal-driven narratives.

Narrative Support for Figures

Figure 1 traces the sources and channels of misinformation.

Figure 2 illustrates the pathways through which false narratives spread across platforms.

Figure 3 highlights the psychological consequences—cynicism, disengagement, and fatigue—that weaken democratic participation.

Figure 1. Agenda-Setting Impact of Misinformation During Election Cycles



As seen in Figure 1, misinformation functions not just as noise in the information ecosystem, but as a structural force that defines which topics receive public attention. This manipulation of issue salience lies at the core of agenda-setting dynamics.

These fake narratives often include:

- Personal scandals (e.g., false corruption allegations)
- Institutional conspiracy theories (e.g., rigging by the ECP)
- Fabricated media (e.g., AI-generated audio or video)

It agrees with the argument of McCombs & Shaw (1972) that the element of salience in some issues that individuals bring to the fore is not inherent as the content in either case is synthesized in the current media news.

Comparative Evolution: 2018 vs. 2024 Misinformation Landscape

The love of the second amazing dissimilarity is the fact that the disinformation campaign was more sophisticated during all the steps of the election in both periods. Table 1 is an example of how the strategies this paper describes as misinformation are developed between the two election years including the differences in the strategies themselves, the media, the intended audience, and the institutional activity itself.

The 2024 campaign period witnessed the shift to assail the electoral institutions instead of assailing candidates with histories. It is not merely a show of technological advancement that such a accumulation is partaking, and a more concerted and better concerted effort to undermine democratic plausibility.

It means that, rather than a disinformation campaign at the candidate tier, it represents a shift towards system-level delegitimization, whereby an effort to propagate misinformation targets not just the delegitimization of people, but the delegitimization of the democratic process.

Thematic Breakdown of Disinformation Agendas

Based on this analogy, Table 2 also identifies the most common themes of misinformation and their corresponding consequences in agenda-setting, noting how particular soap stories are used to direct voter interest and discourse priorities.

Table 2. Key Disinformation Themes and Agenda-Setting Effects

Theme	Typical Content	Agenda-Setting Impact
Character Assassination	Leaked audios, corruption hoaxes	Shifts voter attention from policy to personality
Electoral Rigging Claim	Fake reports, conspiracy theories	Delegitimizes electoral outcomes
Religious/Ideological Framing	Misinformation about zakat, blasphemy	Mobilizes sectarian or emotional voting behavior
Foreign Interference	Rumors of external manipulation	Fuels nationalist polarization, distracts from local accountability
Bot-Driven Trends	Hashtag manipulation	Manufactures public sentiment, pressures institutions

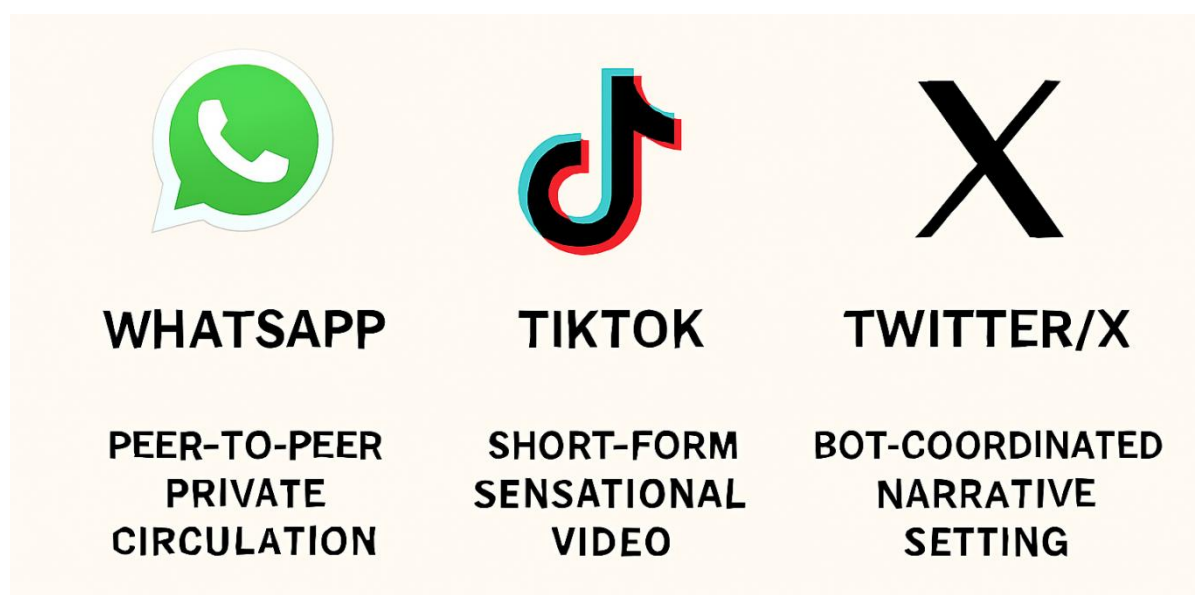
These common themes demonstrate that disinformation incorporates disregard to substantive policy discussion as it off-loads debate on things that are contentious and scandalous, with the attention of the populace drawn instead to cameo politics.

What is argued about, rather than merely how issues are imagined, is shown in these themes. The accrued result is a twisted electoral agenda exhibiting lies.

Digital Platform Ecosystem and Viral Amplification

The importance of online media is hard to overestimate. Both of the social media sites are participating differently in the dissemination of misinformation. The previous figure (see Figure 2 above) visualizes the role of such platforms as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter/X, and TikTok in the disinformation ecosystem of Pakistan.

Figure 2. Role of Social Media Platforms in Amplifying Misinformation



The figure highlights the differences in the platform-based misinformation schemes, and various tools and formats are used to attack dissimilar nominal groups of the electorate.

Although Figure 2 visualizes the amplification mechanics, Table 3 breaks them down by platform, displaying the disaggregated action of the various tools and communities being strategically targeted during campaigns.

Table 3 includes the content of Table 2 but goes further to describe the operations of each platform in reference to the target audience and ways to deliver a message.

Table 3. Platform Functions in the Disinformation Ecosystem

Platform	Function in Misinformation Spread	Target Audience
WhatsApp	Private forwarding of fake PDFs, messages, and audio	Rural, older voters
Facebook	Viral image/text posts, fake news page shares	Urban, middle-class voters
Twitter/X	Hashtag engineering, coordinated bot trends	Journalists, youth, influencers
TikTok	Deepfake video campaigns, influencer-driven content	Gen Z, first-time voters
Telegram	Encrypted group coordination, leaked documents	Politically active digital users

Since these platforms are agenda-setting agents, they prefer those communication pieces that have an emotional appeal, are easily moving, and are the first ones pushed by the algorithm.

Public Trust, Institutional Distrust, and the Psychological Fallout

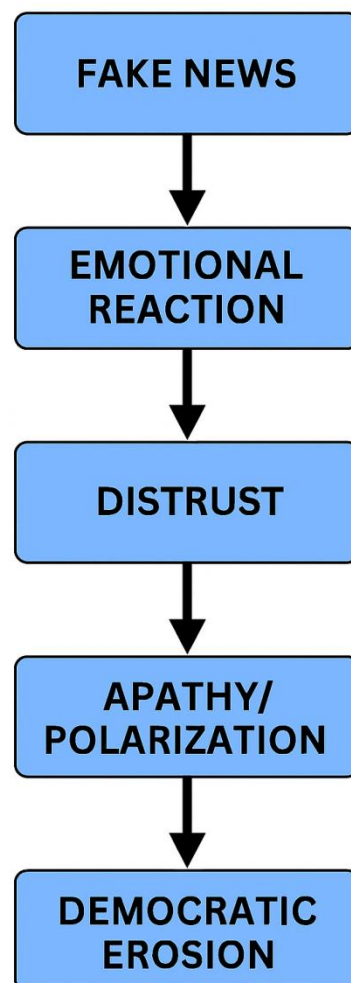
Disinformation does not just change information flow, it undermines the community. Constant exposure to bogus information brings about:

- A lack of faith in an election, even by the winners.
- Denial of fact-checking as partisan or biased.
- De-implication in democratic participation.

It like coincides with the research done on a worldwide scale, which revealed that fake news becomes spread faster and deeper than the truth due to the fact that it induces the most significant feelings (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

There is a serious matter of psychological impact of consistent exposure to misinformation (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018). Figure 3 presents the results of emotional and cognitive responses that erode trust in democratic participation.

Figure 3. Psychological Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Participation



In the same way, as demonstrated in Figure 3, not only perception, but also engagement, cynicism, and exhaustion - fundamental psychological barriers to engaging in democracy are induced by misinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Benefiting not only a final result of the election process, but also degrading the degree of democratic involvement, faith in evidence, readiness to push consensus of the views and trust in the work of the institution, this condition of misinformation turns into a rather widespread phenomenon in the political life of the state when it transforms into a fixed pattern in the state.

Summary

Finally, Table 4 synthesizes the core findings of the discussion section, linking observed disinformation patterns to the agenda-setting framework.

Table 4. Summary of Discussion Themes and Theoretical Linkages

Finding	Observed Pattern	Agenda-Setting Function
Strategic Disinformation	Coordinated use of AI, influencers, bots	Controls narrative salience
Platform Dynamics	Differentiated use across demographics	Targets audience-specific agendas
Psychological Manipulation	Appeals to fear, anger, identity	Heightens issue resonance
Institutional Targeting	From candidates to ECP & judiciary	Undermines legitimacy of process
Weak Regulatory Response	Limited reach, political misuse of PECA	Leaves agenda uncontested

As summarized in Table 4, the disinformation ecosystem in Pakistan operates across psychological, technological, and institutional levels. Its cumulative agenda-setting impact is both immediate (shaping voter sentiment) and long-term (undermining system legitimacy).

While this study is framed primarily through Agenda-Setting Theory, complementary perspectives could further enrich the analysis. To illustrate, Framing Theory suggests that the same problem can be framed in a variety of ways in order to define interpretation and meaning, a process evidently observed in which a selection effect of scandals and conspiracies is portrayed during the elections (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Correspondingly, Spiral of Silence Theory can help understand the reasons why dissenting voices are still stifled online because users are afraid of social isolation or being backlashed by major disinformation stories presented by mainstream media. The fact that these views are included also

highlights the many faceted aspects through which misinformation can have an impact on not only what people think about but also how they think about it, and whether they can feel safe enough to express disagreement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION:

The paper has addressed the topic of misinformation in the electoral process in Pakistan through the examples of the 2018 and 2024 general elections. It showed that fake news is an illusion and instead control over the political agenda by means of a careful review of literature and in media and Agenda-Setting Theory application. In Pakistan, the trend in disinformation campaigns ceased to focus principally on particular and discrete acts of falsehood targeting political leaders; instead, it involves mass campaigns oriented toward weakening the integrity of such democratic institutions as the Election Commission of Pakistan.

Its findings reflect or imply increased crisis of perceived publicly trusted at the expense of amplification by algorithms of foundations, emotion-oriented fake narratives and lack of control. Besides having a long-term psychological ramification that lowers civic participation, misinformation has eliminated large parts of policy discussion, made political partisanship a significant factor and amplified a polarization effect (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Authentication and ensuing legislative barriers and impediments exist, though they are not sufficiently established and efficient enough to address the velocity, volume, and spread of new misinformation.

It requires a multidimensional solution including technology innovation, change in the legislation, and education of the people and ethical journalism to overcome this menace. Recommendations have been enabling to advance electoral purity and democratic strength in Pakistan and contain the following six.

Strengthen Fact-Checking Ecosystems

- Establish a centralized, independent, and publicly funded national fact-checking consortium.
- Integrate real-time fact-checking mechanisms into newsrooms and election commission portals.
- Expand collaborations between social media platforms and verified local fact-checkers.

Promote Media and Digital Literacy

- Integrate critical media literacy into school and university curricula.
- Launch targeted awareness campaigns, especially in rural and low-literacy regions.
- Provide training for journalists, influencers, and content creators on misinformation detection.

Regulate Political Use of AI and Bots

- Enact legal provisions that explicitly ban the use of AI-generated content, deepfakes, and bots for political manipulation.
- Mandate political advertising transparency, including disclosures of content origin and funding sources.
- Develop pre-election audit protocols for social media campaigns by political parties.

Enhance Platform Accountability

- Require digital platforms to implement timely takedown mechanisms and content labeling during election periods.
- Incentivize algorithmic transparency and bias audits through regulatory and fiscal measures.

- Encourage localized content moderation teams with contextual language and political knowledge (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Recalibrate Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

- Reform the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) to prevent political misuse while enhancing enforcement against verified disinformation.
- Establish an independent digital media oversight authority with cross-sector representation.
- Introduce penalties for political parties or candidates found guilty of intentional disinformation.

Support Ethical Journalism and Independent Media

- Provide legal and financial protections for independent journalism.
- Encourage investigative reporting on disinformation networks and digital propaganda.
- Recognize and reward media outlets that maintain high standards of factual accuracy and public accountability (McCombs, 2005).

Pakistan's experience with electoral misinformation also mirrors trends in other democracies. In India, coordinated WhatsApp campaigns have been instrumental in spreading partisan propaganda during elections; Brazil has witnessed large-scale mobilization of disinformation through Facebook and YouTube; and the Philippines has been described as a global testing ground for "disinformation for hire." These parallels suggest that while Pakistan's context is unique, its challenges are embedded in a wider global crisis of democratic communication.

Final Reflection

The battle against electoral misinformation in Pakistan is not only a media challenge—it is a democratic imperative. If left unaddressed, the continued normalization of fake news will erode public faith in institutions, weaken the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, and distort the foundation of representative governance. Pakistan can start to regain the dignity of its democratic processes by engaging with fact-based communication systems, by nurturing the digital resilience of its citizens, and by establishing credible institutions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Limitations

Although this paper provides a holistic overview of how misinformation affects the electoral processes in Pakistan, it is not without weaknesses.

First, the review will be based solely on secondary information sources, such as peer-research studies and institutional reports, as well as fact-including databases. This means it does not measure key data at the voter-level that would provide insights into the nature of the interaction or impact of certain types of fake news (Snyder, 2019).

Second, the review is restricted to English-language publications that might miss important accounts of that misinformation being spread in Urdu and other local languages. This presents a possible prejudice since Pakistan has a rich linguistic background and media segmentation is present, thus, leading to misinformation not being properly represented within rural and non-English speaking communities.

Third, walled gardens can be problematic when it comes to collecting data, WhatsApp and Telegram can be identified. Such private or encrypted spaces have extensively been used to incite politically charged information, but the analysis tampered could not review its space systematically due to privacy policies and restrictions on access.

Fourth, there is an inherent limitation in the evolving nature of digital misinformation. The pace at which new technologies (e.g., generative AI, synthetic media) are integrated into disinformation strategies means that some of the most recent tactics may not yet be documented in the available literature.

Fifth, the study focuses solely on the Pakistani context, which, while valuable, limits the generalizability of the findings to other political environments without further comparative work. Nevertheless, the screening process and review strategy followed established guidelines for transparency and replicability in qualitative synthesis (Moher et al., 2009).

Finally, there are inherent challenges of self-censorship and restricted access to sensitive political misinformation data. Content circulating in closed Telegram groups, encrypted chats, or even dark web sources remains largely beyond the reach of researchers. This limits the ability to fully capture the scope of disinformation, particularly where it overlaps with state surveillance, political intimidation, or covert propaganda networks.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings of this review highlight several critical avenues for further inquiry:

Empirical Studies on Voter Behavior

Future research should include survey-based, experimental, or interview-based studies that directly measure how different demographics interpret and respond to electoral misinformation. Such work can help identify which narratives are most persuasive and why, especially in the Pakistani context where voter attitudes are shaped by complex political and cultural dynamics.

Big Data and Network Analysis

With increasing access to social media APIs and computational tools, future studies can employ network analysis, bot detection, and virality tracking to map how misinformation spreads and identify key nodes in disinformation networks.

Cross-Linguistic and Regional Misinformation

Comparative studies across linguistic and geographic boundaries within Pakistan would provide a richer understanding of how fake news operates in diverse media ecosystems—especially in underrepresented areas. Integrating qualitative approaches such as thematic analysis could help unpack these narratives in greater depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Comparative International Research

Pakistan shares many electoral and media characteristics with countries like India, Brazil, and the Philippines. Comparative studies can help identify patterns in disinformation strategies, regulatory responses, and public resilience.

AI and Deepfake Detection Tools

As synthetic media becomes more advanced, there is a pressing need for real-time AI-based verification tools that can be deployed during election cycles. Future research can evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of such technologies in electoral contexts.

Impact of Platform Regulation Policies

More research is needed to assess the effectiveness of platform-specific interventions, such as content moderation, labeling, algorithm changes, and partnerships with fact-checkers, particularly in non-Western democracies.

Longitudinal Studies on Trust and Democratic Participation

Tracking changes in public trust over time, in relation to misinformation exposure, would offer important insights into the long-term effects of disinformation on democratic legitimacy and civic behavior.

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