



RESEARCH PAPER

Look at the Sender, Ignore the Information: Authenticity and Opinion Leaders in Spreading Fake Information to Teenagers

¹ Waqas Mahmood*, ²Dr. Rana Umair Nadeem, and ³Iffat Masood

1. Ph. D. Scholar, Department of Media Studies, Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Public Relations and Advertising, School of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Ph. D Scholar, Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising, University of Barcelona, Spain

***Corresponding Author:** waqas436@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This massive flow of information on social media has strongly affected authenticity which has become a crucial problem in the last couple of years among social media users. Due to excessive exposure to modern technology and recent political instability affecting all the fields and the whole population of the country, teenagers are also actively participating in posting and sharing political content on social media. Teenage social media users not only get political information from public pages, groups, and accounts, but they also receive information from their friends, family members, and opinion leaders such as social media influencers, political figures, journalists, teachers, and their elders in the family in the form of their Facebook posts, tweets, and WhatsApp messages. It is observed that this two-step flow of information in which the information is flowing from a comparatively influential person to the less influential teenage social media user is limited, directly or indirectly impacting trust and authenticity. The results of a Quantitative survey of teenage ($N = 200$) social media users showed that teenagers are mostly not very interested in political information but they take interest when it is shared by opinion leaders. The positive correlation between political information shared by opinion leaders and sharing without verification shows that teenagers don't take an interest in verification if they get information from their opinion leaders.

KEYWORDS Fake Information, Media Mindfulness, Opinion Leaders, Political Information, Social Media, Two-Step Flow

Introduction

Social media users have changed their ways of communicating and interacting with their parents, friends, and peers. They are sending messages to their friends, but using voice calls and voice messages to their parents and peers (Campbell & Park, 2008). Building contacts with engagement on social media is becoming very easy for teenagers. Social media is replacing traditional media as a large number of teenagers consider social media as their top priority to interact with others (Ali et al., 2014). Social media platforms are an essential part of every smartphone user including teenagers. These teens thought that social media was really good for depicting social status and popularity as social media influencers. Smartphones have become an essential part of teens' social lives and they can't live without them. They have access to current events, family, friends, and their social circle by messaging, and scrolling digital platforms (Majid, 2015). In recent years, the traditions of receiving information have speedily changed, and an important dimension is the heavy dependence on social media as a main source of information and news. The reason is that social media is very much different from traditional media types, including radio, TV, and newspapers. It is still an ongoing debate that how social media

users process and evaluate the heavy trafficking of information coming from social media platforms. It is very critical to understand what factors are involved in trusting social media information; these aspects are rising concerns for scholars (Sterrett et al., 2019).

Social media is globally used as the best tool for political updates, discussions, and engagement. It is an essential tool that can strongly influence voting behavior and the political opinion of the public. In the general elections of 2008 in Pakistan, it was only used by political parties to disseminate manifestos and some other statements, afterwards, new media especially Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube became an essential part of Pakistani politics. In the next elections in 2013, new media was used by all the political parties to motivate and influence their voters, they especially target young voters who are using social media to counter the propaganda against their favorite leaders (Zaheer, 2018). The playing field is changed by the excessive use of smartphones and digital media platforms. Due to the use of smartphones, our children and teenagers are always directly reachable by opinion leaders, social media influencers, brands, and sometimes extremist groups. The parents and family members are trying to insert their traditions and values into the children ("U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report: A State-by-State Survey of the Status of Media Literacy Education Laws for K-12 Schools", 2020). Children, adolescents, and teens are using smartphones for multiple purposes including playing games, listening to music, watching movies and videos, making videos, taking pictures, interacting with others using social media platforms, and also getting help in their studies (Tariq et al., 2018). The new media has a strong influence on the students and it improves political efficacy, it is really helpful for the students to know about government activities. The students actively share, and discuss political posts and take part in political events. Social media is supportive of contact with politicians and candidates in elections (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Researchers have investigated the formation of opinion Leaders from a variety of angles, including sociology, physics, politics, economics, and philosophy. Several individuals who have differing points of view on a subject interact with one another to discover the truth or reach an understanding along with their experiences and privileges defined as opinion makers or opinion leaders as they have a strong influence on society and the public (Chen et al., 2016). The rise of digital communication has changed the role of opinion leaders and now they are also called "influencers" and in the latest versions, they are called "social media influencers". Social media platforms make it easy for these opinion leaders to share and spread any information and news that these influencers want to share with their followers. Who has millions of followers or are they bigger influencers or opinion leaders? These social media sites make people opinion leaders and also, they are earning money by sharing their thoughts and information (Yang et al., 2017). The influencers are Everyday, common digital media users who grow generous followers and subscribers on new media and the internet by the use of text, images, videos, and visuals describing their own lives and lifestyles to interact with their digital circle in both online and offline surroundings and monetize their audience by including "advertorials" in their blogs or social media engagements (Abidin, 2015). Since numerous media options are available, audiences are shifting their focus from conventional and traditional media to social media (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019).

Literature Review

Social media replaced the mainstream media and provided multiple options to get news and information without any filter even though without any authenticity. For a few years, social media provided a place for everybody to share news and all kinds of information in every form including video, audio, picture, and text (Turcotte et al., 2015). Influencers strategically display their identities on social media to grow their following,

portray their status as superstars by pretending as well-wishers to both fans and visitors, and consider themselves brand ambassadors (Duffy et al., 2017). Digital media use for information has positive and negative impacts. People pursue and consume news via social media due to its low charge, the comfort of access, and the rapid spread of information. It increases the extensive diffusion of "fake news," and low-quality content that comprehends false information. The common distribution of fake news can negatively affect people and culture. As a consequence, detecting fake information on social media platforms has emerged as a wide-ranging area of research and researchers are taking a keen interest in this area. The unique characteristics of social media are becoming a massive hurdle in uncovering fake information. The traditional practices of news authentication are ineffective or irrelevant (Shu et al., 2017). Credibility and authenticity in information and news nowadays a big question marks on social media platforms. However, journalists from traditional media still can differentiate accuracy and disinformation through their journalistic abilities (Wellman et al., 2020). An object or act that may or may not be accepted by pertinent people is called authenticity. Influencers can project authenticity and increase trust by being transparent about their collaborations with for-profit companies (Peterson, 2005). While opinion leaders' relationships with commercial products can take numerous different forms, from making onsite appearances at events to simply carrying particular products, A typical preparation is for influencers to generate and share rewarded content, which is defined as "paid content that is designed to mirror the format of non-paid content in the platform where it is placed" (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2020). Fake or false news is also defined as disinformation; we have multiple scenarios for receiving disinformation. The recent pandemic is an example of worldwide witnessing disinformation via social media at a high level. Using disinformation people have witnessed every type of false and fake news. once there was no clarity for the common individual to identify disinformation and accuracy. This affected adult young social media users negatively and left fear and hopelessness among them (Veeriah, 2021). Youth and teenagers are powerful change agents. In this modern and social media world, they are very active on social media and receive news and information rapidly. But; sadly, they are also facing disinformation and dealing with fake news and information. They need to learn where to be inspired by information and where to check the authenticity of the news and information. It is called social media literacy (Sachdeva & Tripathi, 2019). Fabrication, propaganda, defamation campaign, and manipulation are pieces of fake news that create hate sentiments and unrest among the people (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Recently, Pakistani social media users have received a flood of disinformation from all political opinion leaders in the form of false news, defamation, and trolling mems.

Hypotheses

- H₁** Political Information shared by opinion leaders on social media is positively correlated with sharing without verification by teenagers.
- H₂** Political information shared by opinion leaders is positively associated with teenage social media users' perception of authenticity.

Two-Step Flow of Information

The two-step flow of information theory highlights the mediating role of opinion leaders in influencing the thoughts of others, their role is very important in terms of circulating information, it may be in the support of true or fake information (Pang & Ng, 2017). The two-step flow highlighted that information travels from mainstream media to opinion leaders and they share it with a large number of audiences. These leaders can be seen as experienced experts who can influence their followers by sharing their experiences, use of personal relationships, use of social or psychological (Dubois et al.,

2020). Social media users rely on their interactions and they ignore the facts if they are influenced by several opinion leaders because the users consider the feedback of opinion leaders important. A large number of subscribers and followers or the key position of opinion leaders in society have an impact on selective behavior and online interaction with others (Wang et al., 2020). The opinion leaders in a family are very active in communicating political information, leaders' identification, political awareness, political system, voting, and voting preferences to their teenagers (Mehmood & Rauf, 2018). The two-step flow theory is extremely related to this study as it elaborates on the moderating relationship of opinion leaders.

Media Literacy and Social Media Mindfulness

Media Literacy is a broad term that covers the use and creation of all kinds of traditional and digital media content. It can be defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and take action with all forms of communication, and encompasses the foundational skills of digital citizenship and internet safety including the norms of appropriate, responsible, ethical, and healthy behavior, and cyberbullying prevention" ("U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report: A State-by-State Survey of the Status of Media Literacy Education Laws for K-12 Schools", 2020).

Teenagers must know that every piece of information shared on the Internet and social media is true. Every social media user should be mindful because the overload of information may create confusion in our minds, affecting the psychological health and behavior of teenagers (Roberts, 2018). Mindfulness can be elaborated as amplified attention and awareness of a present experience, learning, and reality. It may be referred to as a psychological trait or a condition of awareness. An individual can take an interest and pay consideration, to get awareness, and be attentive to what is happening in the current moment without any decision or attachment (Apaolaza et al., 2019). Attitudes of media users toward the use of media can be changed by Media Literacy. The understanding of media messages can be improved among teenagers with the knowledge and training in media literacy but the interpretations of media content are different from user to user. Teenagers with training in media literacy can process the media use and content in a very different way and their attitudes are different also (Marcello-Serafin, 2008). Mindfulness requires no effort and is not harder than inactive receiving such understanding refers to the idea that consciousness can lead people to be more receptive to learning prospects (Noor et al., 2015). It is observed that there is a significant impact of social media mindfulness to reduce the intention to share and disseminate fake information received by friends, this impact is mediated by the perceived influence of a friend and engagement in social media. Mindfulness has dual roles; it helps to raise engagement on social media meanwhile decreasing the intention to share fake news. Mindfulness also has a very strong effect on lowering friends' perceived influence on social media (Bansal & Weinschenk, 2020). Media literacy and social media mindfulness are essential to encourage well-informed and socially responsible media exposure and consumption. Media literacy primarily emphasizes the in-depth analysis and assessment of media content, whereas social media mindfulness focuses on intentional, responsible, and being attentive while using social media platforms (Mahmood & Shahzad, 2023).

Material and Methods

In the current study, teenagers both male and female ($N=200$) from 13 to 19 age randomly participated in the quantitative survey. All the respondents were from central Punjab and were students in school (age 13 to 16), College (16 to 18), and 1st year of university (18 to 19). To collect the data a questionnaire was designed on Google Forms

and the form link was shared with educational institutes in central Punjab by visiting and mailing. The questionnaire was designed in Urdu and English language because English is a second language and school students are not very fluent in reading. College and university students can easily understand English because the language of instruction in these educational institutions is English.

The questionnaire has close-ended questions with a Likert scale and 4 sections according to variables. 4 questions were about the demographics, questions 5 to 8 were about the exposure to political information on social media, 9 to 13 were about verification and the last four questions were related to the perception of authenticity. Political Information shared by opinion leaders on social media was taken as an independent variable and verification by teenagers and teenage social media users' perception of authenticity was the dependent variable of this study.

Data Analysis

Table 1
Demographics Profile of Respondents (N = 200)

Demographic Variables		N	Number of Respondents (%)
Gender	Male	76	38.0%
	Female	124	62.0%
Age	13-14	35	17.5%
	15-17	38	19.0%
	18-19	127	63.5%
Studying in	School	44	22.0%
	College	61	30.5%
	University	95	47.5%

Table 1 highlighted the demographic profile of the respondents where female respondents 62% are higher than male respondents 38%. The table shows that the age of 63.5% of respondents are 18- to 19-year-olds 47.5% studying at a university, 30.5% are in college and 22% are in school.

Table 2
Correlation of Information shared by opinion leaders with verification by teenagers and perception of teenagers

	IS	SV	PT
IS	1		
SV	.563**	1	
PT	.699**	.761**	1

IS = Information shared; SV = Sharing without Verification; PT = Perception of Teenagers

**."Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)"

To analyze H1 which is Political Information shared by opinion leaders on social media is positively correlated with the sharing without verification by teenagers. Table 2 shows that Information shared (IS) correlates with Sharing without Verification by Teenagers (SV) at .563. It indicates a moderate positive linear correlation between Information Shared and sharing without verification, so the findings supported H1 because the positive correlation is identified between Political Information shared by opinion leaders on social media and sharing without verification by teenagers.

To test the H2, that is Political information shared by opinion leaders is positively associated with teenage social media users' perception of authenticity. Table 2 depicts

the correlation at .699 between Information shared (IS) with Sharing without Verification by Teenagers (VT). It directs a moderate positive linear correlation between Information Shared and sharing without verification, so the findings support H2 because a positive correlation is identified between Political information shared by opinion leaders and teenage social media users' perception of authenticity.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study about the level of authentic political information on social media showed that 36% of the respondents were very dissatisfied and dissatisfied, and 44.0% were Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied, which reflects that more than one-third of participants thought political information on social media is not authentic and nearly half of the respondents were in an ambiguous situation about the authentication of political information on social media. Another question, results showed that 33.5% Never and 25% occasionally took help from friends to authenticate Political information received from opinion leaders. In the last question of the survey, 18% of the respondents revealed that they were very unfamiliar and 33.5% were unfamiliar with the fact-check websites, which showed more than half of the respondents didn't have any sufficient knowledge about the fact-check tools.

The results of variable Information Sharing without Verification (SV) express that the majority of the participant teenagers agree that they were sharing political information without verification received from opinion leaders. However, most of the respondents were not taking an interest in political information while using social media but when they got some political information from their opinion leaders, they took interest by linking, sharing, and sometimes commenting on it. The findings of the second dependent variable perceptions of Teenagers (PT) show that the majority of participants perceived political information received from opinion leaders as authentic. A large number of participants were not satisfied with the authenticity of political information on social media, they have some knowledge about the authenticity so they trust political information received from opinion leaders without raising questions about the accuracy and reliability of the information. Moreover, the respondents don't have much knowledge about fact-checking techniques, fact-checking websites, and trending methods to verify political information.

Conclusion

Democratic movements, political information on digital media, and political polarization in Pakistan are affecting teenagers and adolescents, but these teenage social media users are always struggling to distinguish between real and fake information. Previous research shows that fake information spreads faster and wider than authentic information. These social media users not only get political information from public pages, groups, and accounts, but they also receive information from their friends, family members, and opinion leaders such as social media influencers, political figures, journalists, teachers, and their elders in the family in the form of their Facebook posts, tweets, and WhatsApp messages. Opinion leaders are the people who affect the political thoughts, attitudes, faiths, inspirations, and actions of others leading to manipulation of the political thoughts and beliefs of teenage social media users if these users do not authenticate the fake information they will be exposed to a spread of misinformation in the teenagers. It is observed that this two-step flow of information in which the information is flowing from a comparatively influential person to the less influential teenage social media user is limited, directly or indirectly impacting trust and authenticity. The users care about who is sharing the political content rather than checking the sources and authenticating the content directly. Mindfulness is very

important to make people more concentrated and attentive to their surroundings and it enhances the central level of awareness, lowers cognitive laziness, and raises numerous optimistic behavioral consequences. Social media mindfulness will be helpful to minimize the political influence of opinion leaders by minimizing the intention to share the information without authenticating it from Factcheck or any other reliable source.

There could be several aspects involved in the perception of authenticity, such as the experience and communication skills of opinion leaders, the authority and influence of opinion leaders, time-related issues, overflow information, and notable media literacy techniques. It is assumed from the theoretical framework and previous studies that media literacy skills can play an important role in developing abilities related to critical thinking and positive use of digital media, it can also develop the habits to fact-check information and evaluate the authenticity of political information. Media literacy is very helpful in critically analyzing and evaluating media content but being literate cannot be a possible solution to achieving authenticity. It should be a mix-up with social media mindfulness/media mindfulness, which focuses on the intentional, responsible, and attentive while using social media as well as traditional media. Both concepts can be promoted to control fake information, misinformation, and disinformation in the digital age. Social media users not only trust perceived authenticity based on opinion leaders, influencers, and sources. Perceived authenticity is helpful in some scenarios but the practices of fact-checking, and information authentication from multiple sources make teenage users more responsible at an early age when exposed to political information on social media.

Recommendations

There are multiple stakeholders involved who can play their role in promoting authenticity among teenage social media users. The Ministry of Education must ensure to launch of training programs for the teachers who can further educate the students. The goals of these training sessions should be promoting critical thinking, basic knowledge of checking sources, careful use of social media, and information verification using fact-check tools. Educational Institutions should update their curriculum and the topics of media mindfulness and media literacy should be added to the courses to minimize the effects of fake information by promoting verification before sharing any content on social media. Parents should learn about media literacy, and media mindfulness so they can help their children to fight against the harmful influence of social media. Social media platforms should update their algorithms by changing in the reporting mechanisms.

References

- Abidin, C. (2015). *Communicative intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness*.
- Ahmad, T., Alvi, A., & Ittefaq, M. (2019). The Use of Social Media on Political Participation Among University Students: An Analysis of Survey Results From Rural Pakistan. *SAGE Open*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019864484>
- Ali, S., Aamir, S., Rizvi, A., & Qureshi, M. S. (2014). Cell Phone Mania and Pakistani Youth: Exploring the Cell Phone Usage Patterns among Teenagers of South Punjab. In *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* (Vol. 8, Issue 2). www.mobilephonereviews.org
- Amazeen, M. A., & Wojdyski, B. W. (2020). The effects of disclosure format on native advertising recognition and audience perceptions of legacy and online news publishers. *Journalism*, 21(12), 1965–1984.
- Apaolaza, V., Hartmann, P., D'Souza, C., & Gilsanz, A. (2019). Mindfulness, compulsive mobile social media use, and derived stress: The mediating roles of self-esteem and social anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 22(6), 388–396.
- Apuke, O. D., & Omar, B. (2020). Fake news proliferation in Nigeria: Consequences, motivations, and prevention through awareness strategies. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 8(2), 318–327.
- Bansal, G., & Weinschenk, A. (2020). Something Real about Fake News: The Role of Polarization and Social Media Mindfulness. *Proceedings of the Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS), Online*, 10–14.
- Barnidge, M., & Peacock, C. (2019). A third wave of selective exposure research? The challenges posed by hyperpartisan news on social media. *Media and Communication*, 7(3), 4–7.
- Campbell, S. W., & Park, Y. J. (2008). Social Implications of Mobile Telephony: The Rise of Personal Communication Society. *Sociology Compass*, 2(2), 371–387. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00080.x>
- Chen, S., Glass, D. H., & McCartney, M. (2016). Characteristics of successful opinion leaders in a bounded confidence model. *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and Its Applications*, 449, 426–436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physa.2015.12.107>
- Dubois, E., Minaeian, S., Paquet-Labelle, A., & Beaudry, S. (2020). Who to Trust on Social Media: How Opinion Leaders and Seekers Avoid Disinformation and Echo Chambers. *Social Media and Society*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120913993>
- Duffy, B. E., Pruchniewska, U., & Scolere, L. (2017). Platform-specific self-branding: Imagined affordances of the social media ecology. *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Social Media & Society*, 1–9.
- Mahmood, W., & Shahzad, M. (2023). Diffusion of Misinformation on Social Media; Content and Effects Study. *Pakistan Journal of Law*, 2. <http://pjlw.com.pk>
- Majid, A. (2015). *Impact of Smart Phones on Pakistani Youth*.

- Marcello-Serafin, G. (2008). *MEDIA MINDFULNESS: DEVELOPING THE ABILITY AND MOTIVATION TO PROCESS ADVERTISEMENTS*.
- Mehmood, W., & Rauf, A. (2018). Family, Politics and Socialization: A Case Study of Jamaat-I-Islami in Dir (KP), Pakistan. In *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* (Vol. 12, Issue 1).
- Noor, S. M., Rasoolimanesh, S. M., Ganesan, V., & Jaafar, M. (2015). Effective interpretation using various media toward mindfulness: A case study of Malacca. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 10(3), 263–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2015.1005625>
- Pang, N., & Ng, J. (2017). Misinformation in a riot: A two-step flow view. In *Online Information Review* (Vol. 41, Issue 4, pp. 438–453). Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-09-2015-0297>
- Peterson, R. A. (2005). In search of authenticity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(5), 1083–1098.
- Roberts, F. C. (2018). Mindfulness in the social media age. *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings*, 31(2), 250–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08998280.2018.1441474>
- Sachdeva, P., & Tripathi, D. (2019). A Critical Education for 21st Century: A study on Youth and Media literacy. *Journal of Content, Community and Communication*, 10(9), 64–72.
- Shu, K., Sliva, A., Wang, S., Tang, J., & Liu, H. (2017). Fake news detection on social media: A data mining perspective. *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter*, 19(1), 22–36.
- Sterrett, D., Malato, D., Benz, J., Kantor, L., Tompson, T., Rosenstiel, T., Sonderman, J., & Loker, K. (2019). Who Shared It?: Deciding What News to Trust on Social Media. *Digital Journalism*, 7(6), 783–801. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1623702>
- Tariq, K., Tariq, R., Hussain, A., & Shahid, M. (2018). Smartphone Usage and its Applications among School Going Children (5-16 Years) in Lahore, Pakistan. *Journal of Ecophysiology and Occupational Health*, 18(1 & 2), 52–58. <https://doi.org/10.18311/jeoh/2018/20017>
- Turcotte, J., York, C., Irving, J., Scholl, R. M., & Pingree, R. J. (2015). News recommendations from social media opinion leaders: Effects on media trust and information seeking. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20(5), 520–535.
- U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report: A state-by-state survey of the status of media literacy education laws for K-12 schools. (2020). <https://medialiteracynow.org/u-s-media-literacy-policy-report-2020/>
- Veeriah, J. (2021). Young adults' ability to detect fake news and their new media literacy level in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Content, Community and Communication*, 13(7), 372–383.
- Wang, J., Ding, K., Zhu, Z., Zhang, Y., & Caverlee, J. (2020). Key opinion leaders in recommendation systems: Opinion elicitation and diffusion. *WSDM 2020 - Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining*, 636–644

- Mahmood, W., & Shahzad, M. (2023). Diffusion of Misinformation on Social Media; Content and Effects Study. *Pakistan Journal of Law, Analysis and Wisdom*, 2(02), 389-399.
- Wellman, M. L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M., & Ekdale, B. (2020). Ethics of authenticity: Social media influencers and the production of sponsored content. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 35(2), 68-82.
- Yang, L., Tian, Y., Li, J., Ma, J., & Zhang, J. (2017). Identifying opinion leaders in social networks with topic limitation. *Cluster Computing*, 20(3), 2403-2413. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10586-017-0732-8>
- Zaheer, L. (2018). New media technologies and Youth in Pakistan. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* (Issue 55).