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## **ABSTRACT**

Social media has played a crucial role in spreading information about COVID-19 control in Pakistan. However, on the other side social media is also held responsible for reporting several fake news and rumors which lead to the further spread of the pandemic. The study aims at investigating the role of social media after the outbreak of COVID 19 in Pakistan. The study also highlights the spread of misinformation and rumors regarding the outbreak, its spread, and possible treatments of COVID-19. This study employed an inductive approach in the form of content analysis for the collection of data. The researchers selected the top two platforms of social media i.e., Facebook and YouTube for the collection of data. The researchers analyzed the social media content for one year from 15 March 2020 to 15 March 2021 and reported the results. This study concluded that social media has played a significant role in providing information about Covid-19 symptoms and precautions but the misinformation and rumors about the pandemic may lead to further spread.

**Keywords:** Misinformation, Covid-19, social media, Pandemic,

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is facing the fifth wave of deadly virus COVID-19 pandemic and so far, it has affected more than 1.35 million people of which over 29,065 have died and 3,197 patients are critical (Mumtaz, Gul, & Science, 2021). Unlike the first and second waves which affected elders, the latest waves reported cases among children as well. It is also reported that the spread of the fifth wave is faster than the first and second waves. During the first wave, the government imposed strict lockdown in all the provinces and banned all types of gathering to prevent its spread. However, due to the effects on the economy, education, and length of the pandemic the government decide to impose partial lockdown and later resumed all the activities.

The pandemic impacts all the sectors of human activities. The pandemic has paced up the digitization of the country. The universities, colleges, and schools conducted online classes and exams. The public and private sectors allowed employees to work from home. Thus, the use of technology and dependency on technological tolls and the internet increases. According to a report, social media users increased by 21% from 2020 to 2021 in Pakistan. During this span, Covid-19 was the most sought-after topic on social media. There were pieces of information about the origin of COVID-19, its spread, symptoms, and precautions. This information helped people to protect themselves from the deadly virus by wearing a mask, keeping social distance, and following all the SOPs suggested by the government and other institutions.

However, social media has its demerits. Through this platform, everyone can create a free account and spread information to the masses without any research. Therefore, several available pieces of information are not from authentic sources and some of them are misleading the general public. The problem of fake news is not new and it has always misguided and mislead people. Due to a lack of monitoring and censorship, these latest platforms of communication circulate much misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 which may result in the further spread of the virus (Naeem, Bhatti, & Journal, 2020).

Although the role of social media in spreading information and fighting Covid-19 is highlighted by many researchers. But there is little literature available on the prevailing myths about covid-19 on social media websites such as Facebook and YouTube in Pakistan. Therefore, this study aims to analyze social media websites and highlight the prevailing myths and controversies about covid-19 which may help the relevant institutions to counter these myths by making strategies and controlling the spread of the pandemic in Pakistan.

### **Objectives:**

The objectives of the study are as following:

1. To highlight the role of social media in fighting Covid-19
2. To investigate the prevailing myths about COVID-19 on social media.
3. To highlight the role of social media in awareness regarding the pandemic.
4. To understand the patterns of fake news dissemination on social media platforms.
5. To comprehend the effects of social media on health issues.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pakistan is facing many challenges in the form of economy, health, education, and law and order situation is also badly affected by the coronavirus. (Atif, Malik, & management, 2020) Highlighted that the outbreak of COVID-19 is a major threat to the health of the people of Pakistan. The country is not in the position to control its widespread and provide the standard suggested by World Health Organization. Many factors increase the spread of the pandemic including lack of competent doctors, poor facilities in the hospital, organizational and regulatory voids, and travel patterns of people.

In Pakistan, it may become very difficult to control the spread of pandemics like the developed countries did. As investigated by (Elías, Catalan-Matamoros, & Communication, 2020), in Pakistan science is not considered the source of knowledge but the source of persuasion. Many people do not believe the findings of science about the pandemic and believe that the science contradicts religion and the basics of Islam. Many people believe that the best way to fight diseases is in religion not in science.

Even with thousands of people are already affected and dying, a large number of conspiracy theories appeared in the Pakistani media. Some political opinion leaders of Pakistan stated that the coronavirus is an illusion and a conspiracy against the Muslims, some stated that due to hot weather we are safe, while others alleged that Muslims are safe. Pakistan has already suffered a lot from such rumors and has experienced a failure in the polio vaccination program despite its repeated rounds of vaccination. (Khan et al., 2020).

Misinformation about Covid-19 started to circulate right after the news of Covid-19 first broke (Tapia & hygiene, 2020). Similarly, a content analysis highlighted that the most common topics regarding covid19 misinformation are its cure and conspiracy theories. In follow, up interviews, the researcher found that despite the third layer and thousand deaths in Pakistan, still, some people believe that corona is not an actual virus and we do not need any precautions. (Rafi & Review, 2020). Likewise, (Groza, 2020) highlighted the prevailing myths on social media such as Corona only affect elders, exposing yourself to the sun can protect you from it, drinking an excessive amount of water can flush out the virus, eating raw ginger counter the virus, coronavirus is spread by Chinese food, spraying alcohol on your body can kill corona and much other fake information. Unfortunately, the false information becomes true due to a large number of circulations on social media websites.

Also, (Vijjali, Potluri, Kumar, & Teki, 2020) stated that People start believing in fake news due to its spread on the leading social media websites. This research further highlighted that news appeared on social media that salty and sour foods cause the “body of the COVID-19 virus to explode and dissolve but it is not true and such foods have no relation with the virus. The problem of fake news is not only limited to Pakistan. The fake news about COVID-19 is a serious threat due to which even the WHO has offered a WhatsApp service to counter the fake news. They also

advised the doctors to play their role and tackle the misleading news due to which many people are reluctant to take the vaccine or take precautions (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020).

However, (Orso, Federici, Copetti, Vetrugno, & Bove, 2020) highlighted that the available news about coronavirus on social media is not always fake. Most of the time, the information comes from trusted sources such as spiritual heads, other experts. But such information cannot be trusted in scientific or medical terms. (Ceron, de-Lima-Santos, Quiles, & Media, 2021) highlighted that the number of fake news increases during times of crisis. After the pandemic, the number of fake news increased drastically which might have misled the general public. Therefore, this research suggests a method to differentiate between false and true news. Likewise, (Calvillo et al., 2020) highlighted the relationship between political ideology and perception of the threat of COVID-19. This study found that not only social media but electronic media present a large number of headlines and reports that are not based on facts. Secondly, the threats of COVID-19 are politicized by the government and opposition parties which lead to misinformation and disinformation.

Another research conducted by (Ahinkorah, Ameyaw, Hagan Jr, Seidu, & Schack, 2020) investigated that misleading information about the pandemic would increase its spread and affect public health. We need to filter the information and pass out only relevant and accurate information to the general public. Also, (Murphy, 2007) stated that fake news is putting public health at high risk. This research found 1225 pieces of Covid-19 fake news. The dominant themes of fake news include misinformation, conspiracy theories, and false claims about the covid 19 effects, treatment, and precautions. Similarly, (van der Linden, Roozenbeek, & Compton, 2020) conducted a study to highlight the effects of fake and misleading news on people's health. This research highlighted three techniques commonly used for spreading misinformation about the COVID-19: fearmongering, the use of fake experts, and conspiracy theories. Due to fake news, people stop taking care of their health and spread the virus by not following social distancing, wearing masks, and other guidelines provided by the health authorities.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is facing the fake news problem. In some cases, it is difficult to differentiate between fake and real news. The scientific community needs to highlight the fake news and spread the actual news. (Rodrigues & Xu, 2020) highlighted that every country's government has taken steps to counter the misleading news about COVID-19. Even countries hard to govern due to the large size of population such as China and India have taken many steps to control the spread of fake news through seminars, conferences, and punishments.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study through content analysis highlights the prevailing myths and rumors about COVID-19 in Pakistan. For the collection of data, the researchers selected leading social media websites namely Facebook and YouTube. The researchers analyzed the social media content for one year from 15 March 2020 to 15 March 2021 and reported the results.

Researchers searched the required information through different keywords on both social media sites, i.e. Facebook and YouTube. The keywords included pandemic, Covid, Covid19, Coronavirus, Chinese Vires, Covid19 waves, remedies for Covid19, effects of Coronavirus,

Covid19 treatment at home, etc. The researchers then studied the relevant posts, videos, and news and collect them for further study. After the collection of data, the fakebook posts, comments, and videos were analyzed for information and misinformation. A similar, process was repeated for YouTube videos. The researchers used qualitative content analysis for data collection and interpretation. Two separate coding sheets were designed for Facebook and Youtube. The unit of analysis included textual and visual information on both of the platforms. The purposive Sampling Technique was used to collect the sample. After the analysis, the results were divided into two sections. Section one included the information that was true such as the corona pandemic, statistics, effects, and precautions. While in the second section the controversies were reported. The controversies mean false, misleading, and biased information that is circulating on social media and other channels of communication. These pieces of information were not originating from authentic or official sources. After the collection and analysis of data, the results were compiled.

#### 4. RESULTS

This section of the paper presents the result of the research. The results are presented in the following two parts.

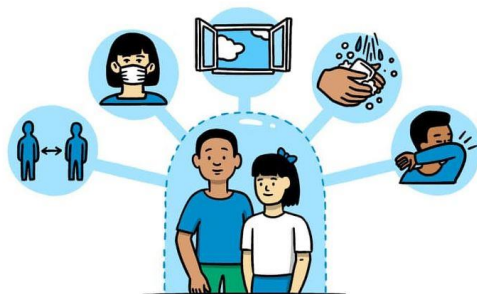
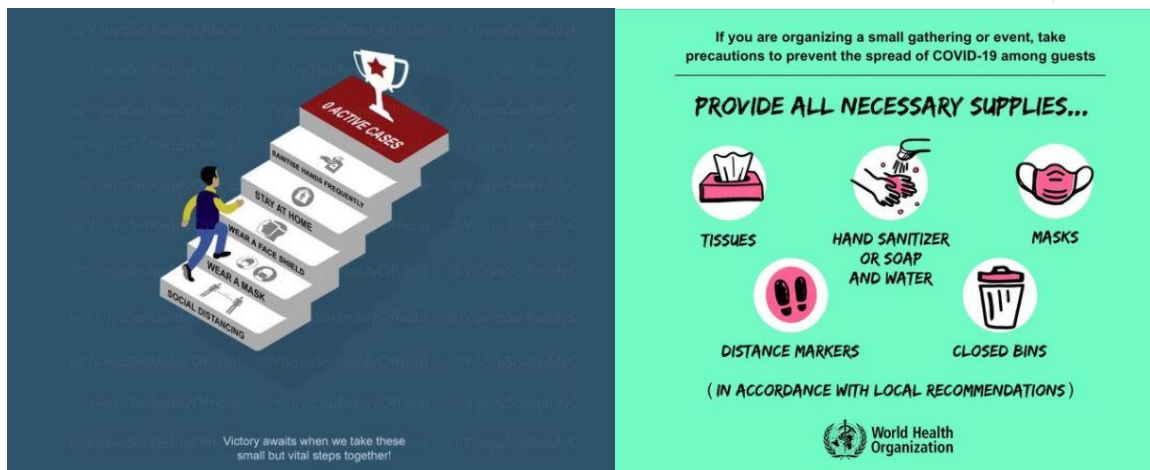
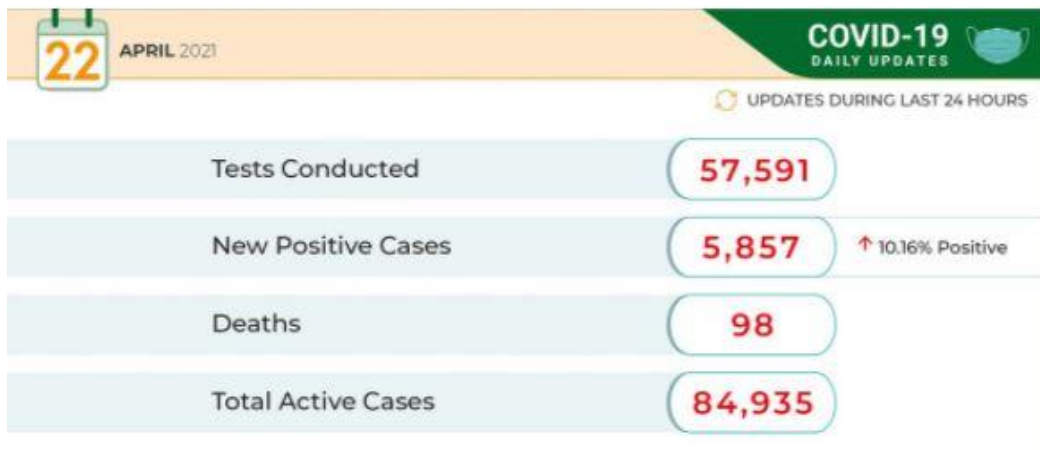
##### 4.1 Positive information about COVID-19 Pandemic on social media

Table number 1 highlights the positive role of social media in fighting the COVID-19 Virus. The table shows that social media played a significant role in highlighting the pandemic and its effects. The majority of the people believed that the Covid-19 is deadly and people should follow the guidelines of health authorities to remain safe and healthy.

S.NO	Topics
1	Information on Corona Virus
2	Keep social distance
3	Wear mask
4	Avoid social contact
5	Wash hands frequently
6	Take healthy foods
7	Consult a doctor if symptoms appear
8	Take vaccine
9	Impose lockdown
10	Corona is deadly
11	Corona affects young children
12	Precautions are important
13	Avoid handshake
14	Get isolated if tested positive
15	Follow the guidelines of health authorities

**Table 1: information about Covid-19 on social media**

People on social media spread positive information about the precautions of Covid-19 particularly, to keep social distance, wear a mask, use sanitizer and soap for washing hands, and avoid unnecessary contact.



COVID-19 vaccine trials for children are still under way. For now, following proven health measures is the best way to keep them safe.

Social media content also suggested that one should take proper care and if any symptoms appear then they must get tested and isolate themselves so that other people remain safe from the virus. Similarly, social media content also recommended that the new wave is more dangerous and we need to impose lockdown in all the major cities where corona spread is higher.

**4.2 Prevailing myths/Misinformation about COVID-19 on social media**

When the first cases were reported in China in December 2019, it was called the Chinese virus, and several baseless hypotheses were forwarded about the virus. Some people stated that



this coronavirus was spread in China by the USA to affect the economy of China and beat them economically.

Similarly, the people of Pakistan particularly the religious sects thought that coronavirus is the punishment of God to the non-Muslims, and we are safe from it. People do not take it seriously, and eventually, it's spread in the country through contacts and transportation. When a large number of cases were reported in Pakistan, instead of taking precautions and following the guidelines, propaganda and smearing campaigns were launched on social media channels that doctors are killing people in hospitals so Pakistan could get financial aid in the name of coronavirus.

Now, Pakistan is facing the fourth wave of coronavirus and it is more deadly than the previous waves. In some cities, the positivity rate had reached 25% and the government imposed smart lockdown.

#### 4.2.1 Prevailing myths about COVID-19.

The table below highlights the prevailing misinformation about the existence of coronavirus. Pakistanis still believe that coronavirus is not a real or dangerous disease. Deaths are not due to corona in hospitals, but doctors are killing them on the instructions of the government to get financial aid from the developed countries. They alleged that a real pandemic ends in 70 days. It affects only old and weak people and it is just like simple flu. Although the third wave is dangerous the people question why it again appears only in the holy month of Ramadan which Muslims spend in prayers and other Islamic activities. They think that the West wants to stop us from the prayers through corona propaganda.

There are several fake news available on social media such as eating hens can spread corona, if one can hold breath for 10 seconds or more without coughing means they are corona free, the west wants to install a chip on us and control our genes through vaccination, corona does not spread through contacts but the doctors inject it in the hospitals to kill people and west invented it to sell the vaccine and earn money. Finally, the people of Pakistan believed that being a Muslim we should trust our God, and wearing a mask and fearing corona is against the basic principles of Islam.

S.NO	Prevailing myths
1	No Covid-19 virus exist, this is fake
2	COVID-19 is just like flu
3	Doctors are killing people in hospitals and blame corona
4	Third-wave appear again in Ramadan to affect our prayers
5	Pandemic end in 70 days
6	Coronavirus affects only old, weak, and sick people
7	Children cannot get COVID-19
8	Eating Hens spread the coronavirus
9	Being able to hold your breath for 10 seconds or more without coughing means you're free from COVID-19.
10	Chip installation through COVID-19 Vaccine
11	Do not visit hospitals, doctors will inject corona

12	DNA will be controlled through the COVID-19 Vaccination
13	Developed countries invented it for earning money
14	Wearing a mask is against the basic principles of ISLAM
15	Fearing corona is against the religion

**Table 2: Prevailing myths about covid-19****4.2.2 Treatment remedies**

Similarly, on social media, many solutions to fight corona are available which are not verified but misleading and wrong. Some of them are listed below.

S.NO	Myths about treatment of coronavirus
1	Spraying chlorine or alcohol on the skin kills the virus
2	Antibiotic kills the COVID-19
3	Eating garlic protects from the coronavirus
4	Drinking alcohol reduces the risk
5	Cold weather kills COVID-19
6	Black cumin (Kalonji) can treat Covid-19
7	Treatment through electric current
8	Smokers are safe from Corona
9	Exposing yourself to the sun or temperatures higher than 25C degrees prevents COVID-19.
10	Drinking hot water kill corona
11	Green tea can protect us from Corona
12	Honey can protect us from Corona
13	Muslims are safe due to Ablution five times a day
14	Drugs can save you from corona

**Table 3: Treatment remedies**

As highlighted in table 3, people believe that spraying chlorine or alcohol kills the virus, antibiotics kill the virus, eating garlic and drinking alcohol reduces the risk of catching the virus. Cold weather, eating black cumin, electric current, smoking, exposing yourself to the sun, taking drugs, drinking hot water, honey, and drinking green tea are some other solutions available on social media for fighting coronavirus. Finally, others think that Muslims are by default safe from COVID-19 due to ablution five times a day.

**5. DISCUSSION**

After its outbreak in China, the rest of the world start preparing to control its spread in their countries, such as screaming at airports and later on suspending international flights. However, in a short time, it spread to the rest of the world through traveling and physical contact.

In Pakistan, at the peak, the hospitals were working at their full capacity, they implemented health emergencies, postponed routine operations, and closed OPDs.

Despite this alarming situation, the people of Pakistan did not take the pandemic seriously and believed that this is fake and does not exist. Due to misinformation's people avoid the sops and guidelines provided by health authorities and the government of Pakistan such as wearing a mask, and keeping social distance. Due to this negligence, the situation in Pakistan became more alarming and thousands of people died (Minhas et al., 2020). The government and other responsible institutions need to combat these myths and misleading information by giving information from authentic sources to control the coronavirus pandemic in Pakistan. It is important to apprehend the possible causes of the spread of misinformation. Firstly, Covid-19 is a novel coronavirus. The people of Pakistan have never heard of or suffered such a virus in the recent past. Therefore, people faced a very uncertain and unclear picture. This cognitive blind spot led to conspiracy theories and an ill-informed exchange of medicinal advice. A good number of Pakistani citizens prefer to self-treat. This self-treatment is usually done either through home remedies or over-the-counter medicines (Aslam, 2020). Unfortunately, such behavior is contagious. Self-treatment is not only expressed, it is encouraged and promoted as well. Therefore, in a household or small social unit, the behavior becomes mutual and shared. There were several posts regarding home remedies and uncalled for use of over-the-counter medicines to avoid or treat the infection. Secondly, during the outbreak and subsequent breakdowns when markets were shut down. Several herbal healers and quacks could no longer run their healing centers. They also started their functions online. The sale and purchase of herbs and herbal medicines depended on their promotion on social media. Several fliers, brochures, videos, testimonials, vlogs, DIYs (do it yourself) videos, statuses, posts were created and circulated on Facebook and YouTube. This promotion and circulation promptly convinced people who were already practicing self-medication and preferred herbal medicines over allopathic medicines.

### **Recommendations**

Following are the recommendations:

1. The Government must introduce a robust 360-degree media campaign to neutralize myths and misinformation about Covid-19. To do that, Government can form teams of common citizens and use them as Ambassadors of Vaccines to spread and share authentic information on social media platforms.
2. The Government can penalize the spreaders of Covid-19 misinformers through identification in the court of law.
3. The Government can introduce an incentive plan for the people who get vaccinated and motivate others to do the same. The incentives can be free medical tests, subsidized transport fares, etc.

### **Conclusion**

Social media played an important role in fighting the COVID-19 virus in Pakistan. Many pieces of information are available on social media regarding the following sops such as wearing a mask, keeping social distance, and avoiding gatherings. However, on the other side, social media

is full of rumors and misinformation due to which people avoid following the sops and guidelines of the health authorities.

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