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Fake News and Digital Media: An Analytical Study on Information Credibility and Public Perception

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Abstract

The Ladli Behna Yojana (LBY) in Madhya Pradesh is a flagship The rapid growth of digital media in India, driven by affordable smartphones and low-cost internet, has transformed public communication and information consumption. However, this transformation has been accompanied by an unprecedented rise in fake news, misinformation, and digitally manipulated narratives. This research investigates the patterns, themes, and credibility indicators of fake news in the Indian digital ecosystem using a comprehensive content analysis of 300 pieces of misinformation circulated on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter). The study focuses on how fake news spreads, what techniques it uses, and how it shapes public perception, especially in an emotionally diverse and socially complex country like India. The findings show that political propaganda, communal misinformation, public health rumors, and digitally manipulated visuals dominate fake news in India. Real examples include misinformation during elections, manipulated communal videos, fake job alerts, misleading economic statistics, and misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concludes that low digital literacy, confirmation bias, linguistic diversity, and algorithmic personalization significantly strengthen misinformation's impact. This research contributes to understanding how fake news exploits India's socio-political landscape and offers recommendations for mitigating misinformation through education, regulation, and credible communication strategies

Introduction

India is the world's largest democracy and home to the second-largest internet population. As of 2024, India has over **850 million internet users**, and more than **450 million active social media users**. Digital platforms have become the primary source of news, entertainment, and political communication, replacing newspapers and television for a large segment of the population.

However, the digital revolution has not only democratized information; it has also intensified the spread of misinformation. India today faces a severe crisis of fake news circulated through WhatsApp groups, Instagram reels, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and AI-generated content. Mobile "forwards culture," language diversity, low media literacy, and high emotional vulnerability make India particularly susceptible to misinformation.

Some Indian examples include:

- **Fake WhatsApp forwards during COVID-19** claiming that drinking hot water or eating garlic "kills coronavirus."
- **Misleading videos during communal tensions**, such as edited videos falsely targeting religious communities.
- **Political fake news** during elections, including fabricated quotes, morphed videos of leaders, and edited crowd images.
- **Fake financial alerts**, such as viral false messages about bank collapses or government closures.
- **Deepfake videos of Indian celebrities or politicians** influencing public sentiment.

These incidents not only mislead individuals but can create national panic, influence elections, incite communal violence, and damage institutional credibility.

Fake news is not merely a digital nuisance; in a country as diverse and sensitive as India, it becomes a **social, political, and national-security challenge**. This research aims to systematically analyze fake news content in India to understand how it works and how it affects public perception.

Understanding India's fake news ecosystem requires a contextual analysis of the country's digital, social, and cultural environment. India's vast social media penetration, coupled with its immense linguistic diversity, creates a unique landscape where misinformation can spread rapidly and uncontrollably. The nation's socio-political environment is often charged with emotion, making the public more vulnerable to sensational narratives. Furthermore, India has a significantly large youth population with instant access to online information, but digital literacy—especially in rural and semi-urban areas—remains low. The recent surge in AI-generated misinformation, including deepfakes, further complicates the challenge. Together, these factors form a complex and dynamic environment where misinformation flourishes, influencing public opinion and sometimes even shaping real-world events.

Major Examples of Fake News in the Indian Digital Space

India's experience with fake news includes numerous real-world examples that demonstrate its severe impact on public perception and behaviour. During the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation spread at an unprecedented scale. Unscientific claims such as "cow dung can cure coronavirus," or the rumour that "5G mobile towers were spreading COVID," circulated widely across social media platforms. Another widely shared message falsely claimed that the government would spray "medicines from helicopters at midnight," causing widespread panic and confusion among rural populations. These rumours not only misled millions but also contributed to distrust in scientific agencies and healthcare authorities. Reports even emerged of people delaying medical treatment due to reliance on misinformation-driven home remedies.

Political misinformation also forms a significant part of India's fake news ecosystem, especially during election cycles. AI-generated deepfake videos showing politicians making controversial statements, manipulated images of political rallies, fabricated opinion polls, and falsely attributed quotes are commonly circulated to influence voter behaviour. Such misinformation undermines democratic processes by creating distorted perceptions about political leaders, parties, or public policies.

Communal misinformation poses one of the most dangerous threats in India. Mislabelled images or videos from Bangladesh, Myanmar, or Sri Lanka are frequently circulated as Indian incidents to inflame communal tensions. In several documented cases, old videos of riots or violence were reshared with misleading captions, leading to unrest in local areas. False claims about religious conversions or targeted violence have also contributed to real-world conflicts, demonstrating the deeply harmful consequences of unchecked digital misinformation.

Economic and employment-related fake news is another recurring pattern. Fraudulent messages about government jobs, stipends, or schemes—often accompanied by fake URLs that resemble official websites—target vulnerable groups, especially students and unemployed youth. Examples include viral messages promising "₹50,000 monthly work-from-home jobs" or fake announcements of new government schemes. These create confusion and sometimes financial exploitation when individuals are asked to pay registration fees.

Health-related misinformation continues to be widespread in India. Claims such as "drinking hot water every 10 minutes kills coronavirus" or "boiling neem leaves can instantly cure dengue" circulate frequently on social media. While seemingly harmless, such misinformation can delay proper medical treatment and increase public health risks.

Together, these examples demonstrate that fake news in India is not only prevalent but also highly consequential. It affects public health, political awareness, social harmony, and individual decision-making. Given its wide-ranging impact, a detailed content analysis-based research study is essential for understanding how misinformation is produced, circulated, and perceived within the Indian digital ecosystem.

Literature review

Research on fake news in India has grown rapidly since 2016, especially after incidents of mob violence linked to misinformation and political controversies amplified by digital media. Scholars globally and within India have examined fake news as a socio-technological phenomenon shaped by political polarization, identity conflict, media distrust, and rapid digital adoption. This literature review synthesizes major global frameworks and Indian studies to establish the conceptual foundation for the present research.

1. Definitions and Types of Fake News

Internationally, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers." Their work emphasizes intention and verifiability as core components. Claire Wardle (2017), in her influential study for First Draft, introduces the concept of **"information disorder"**, classifying content into *misinformation* (false, but not harmful), *disinformation*

(false and intentionally harmful), and *malinformation* (true information used maliciously).

Indian scholarship further contextualizes these categories.
Choudhury (2020), Banaji & Bhat (2019), and Rajput (2021) note that India's socio-religious diversity, linguistic plurality, and political polarization shape unique misinformation ecosystems. Exploring viral cases on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and regional YouTube channels, they identify the following dominant categories of Indian fake news:

1. **Communal misinformation** – targeting religious or caste groups
2. **Political propaganda** – fabricated statements, morphed images, election rumors
3. **Health misinformation** – miracle cures, fake medical advisories
4. **Economic rumors** – bank closures, demonetization-related fake updates
5. **Fake government circulars** – forged PDF orders attributed to ministries
6. **Edited / AI-generated videos** – deepfakes, morphed speeches, fake alerts

Scholars agree that Indian fake news is often **emotionally charged**, using *fear, identity, crisis,* and *a sense of urgency* to maximize circulation (Banaji & Bhat, 2019).

2. Misinformation During Indian Elections

India—being the world's largest democracy—faces a high volume of political misinformation, especially during elections. A study by Narayanan et al. (2019) at the Oxford Internet Institute found that India is one of the **top three countries** where political parties and supporters systematically spread digital disinformation.

Election-related misinformation in India includes:

- **Morphed images** of Prime Ministers, Chief Ministers, and candidates
- **Edited or clipped speeches** misrepresenting political rivals
- **Fake claims about Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)** being hacked
- **AI-generated fake audio/video** suggesting leaders joined another party

For instance, during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, several videos alleging "EVMs found in private vehicles" went viral. The Election Commission publicly clarified that many such visuals were from unrelated contexts or older incidents (The Hindu, 2019; EC Press Release, 2019).
Similarly, scholars document how partisan pages on Facebook and regional WhatsApp groups use fabricated statistics, misleading infographics, and communal narratives to sway voters (Kumar & Purnima, 2020).

Political misinformation is designed not to inform but to **emotionally mobilize**, intensifying polarization and reinforcing echo chambers.

3. WhatsApp and the Forwarding Culture in India

WhatsApp plays a central role in the Indian misinformation landscape.
Arora & Singh (2022) describe WhatsApp as "India's largest and most influential misinformation vector," driven by:

- multi-generational family groups,
- high digital trust within communities,
- low fact-verification behavior, and
- End-to-end encryption that makes content traceability difficult.

India has **over 450 million WhatsApp users**, making it the app's biggest global market. Researchers note that information forwarded via family or religious/community groups carries a perceived legitimacy, even when false.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, WhatsApp became a major source of:

- home-remedy misinformation,
- false lockdown and curfew alerts,
- unverified hospital/oxygen updates,
- communal rumors related to virus spread.

A study by Mehta & Chatterjee (2021) found that **62% of health misinformation samples in India originated on WhatsApp** before being amplified on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

The intimate, peer-to-peer nature of WhatsApp increases trust and dramatically accelerates rumor propagation.

4. Communal Misinformation in India

Communal misinformation—content targeting religious identities—remains one of the most dangerous forms of fake news in India. Banaji & Bhat (2019), in their extensive ethnographic study of WhatsApp groups, show that identity-based misinformation spreads faster due to:

- **Pre-existing ideological biases**
- **Emotionally charged imagery**
- **"Us vs. Them" narratives**
- **Community echo chambers**

Well-documented cases include:

- Old mob-lynching videos falsely circulated as recent attacks
- False claims of mass religious conversions
- Edited speeches of religious leaders inciting anger
- Misattributed violent videos from Bangladesh, Pakistan, or Myanmar being circulated as Indian incidents (AltNews, 2018)

Such misinformation has been repeatedly linked to real-world violence.
A BBC investigation (2019) recorded over **30 mob lynching incidents** linked to viral WhatsApp rumors between 2017–2019.

Communal misinformation exploits India's socio-religious complexity, amplifying distrust and hostility.

5. Health Misinformation in India

India experienced a severe "**infodemic**" during COVID-19. Bharti et al. (2021), in a study published in the *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, observed:

- Most health misinformation circulated on WhatsApp carried **unverified home remedies**.
- Many messages used fabricated authority markers such as "**AIIMS Delhi says…**" or "**WHO confirms…**".
- A significant portion of viral messages falsely claimed cures, preventions, or conspiracy theories.

Examples include:

- "**Steam inhalation kills the coronavirus**"—debunked by WHO.
- "**Drinking hot water cures COVID**"—a widely circulated myth during 2020 lockdowns.
- "**Eating certain herbs instantly increases oxygen levels**"—no scientific evidence supports this.

Health misinformation in India led to:

- panic buying of masks, salt, and medicines,
- harmful self-medication practices,
- vaccine hesitation among rural populations (Srinivasan, 2022).

India's low health literacy combined with digital virality created a fertile ground for such rumors.

6. Technological Role in Misinformation Spread

The emergence of **deepfakes** and AI-powered content manipulation significantly complicates India's misinformation landscape. By 2023–2024, India witnessed:

- Deepfake videos of celebrities promoting financial scams (NDTV, 2023)
- AI-voice-cloned fraud calls mimicking government officials
- Political deepfake videos circulated during election rallies
- Manipulated videos showing public figures making controversial statements

Chakraborty & Sharma (2023) warn that deepfakes in India are "entering mainstream political campaigning," with the potential to manipulate voters and disrupt democratic processes.

The affordable availability of AI tools makes India highly vulnerable to synthetic misinformation.

Gaps in Existing Indian Research

Despite rich global literature, several gaps persist in Indian fake news research:

1. **Lack of large-scale content analysis**- Most studies relies on case studies; systematic coding of Indian misinformation content is scarce.
2. **Limited research on linguistic diversity**- India's misinformation appears in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Assamese, Malayalam, Bhojpuri, and more—yet studies focus mostly on English or Hindi.
3. **Insufficient study of visual misinformation**- Image-based and video-based fake news is far more viral in India than text-only misinformation, but under-researched.
4. **Poorly understood credibility assessment behavior**- How Indian users judge sources, visuals, claims, or captions are still unclear.
5. **Regional misinformation ecosystems**- Different states have unique patterns—North Indian communal rumors differ from South Indian piracy-related misinformation—but few studies compare regions.

This research attempts to address these gaps by adopting a **content analysis method**, systematically examining patterns, themes, and credibility markers of fake news across major Indian digital platforms.

Objectives

1. To identify the key patterns, themes, and narratives of fake news circulating on digital media platforms.
2. To analyze the credibility indicators used in online content, such as sources, headlines, visuals, and engagement.

3. To examine how fake news content influences public perception and opinion formation.

Research Questions

1. What themes and patterns commonly appear in fake news on digital media?
2. Which credibility indicators help distinguish fake news from real news in online content?
3. How does fake news content shape public perception on digital platforms?

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative content analysis methodology** to systematically examine patterns, themes, and credibility indicators present in fake news circulating across major Indian digital media platforms. A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect **150 verified fake news items** from reputable Indian fact-checking databases such as Alt News, BOOM Live, Factly, and PIB Fact Check, covering a three-year period (2021–2024). The dataset included misinformation from **WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), YouTube**, and regional-language platforms. Each fake news item—whether text, image, video, or deepfake—was coded using a structured coding sheet based on themes identified in prior literature: political misinformation, communal rumors, health misinformation, economic misinformation, and manipulated government circulars. The analysis focused on identifying **linguistic patterns**, **visual manipulation techniques**, **emotional tone**, **sources claimed**, **platform dissemination style**, and **user engagement indicators**. To ensure reliability, two independent coders conducted the analysis and resolved discrepancies through discussion. The findings were then interpreted to understand broader misinformation trends and their implications for **public perception and digital credibility** in the Indian context.

Findings and Discussion

Content analysis of Indian digital media reveals a **clear pattern** in how fake news is created, formatted, circulated, and consumed. The findings show that misinformation in India relies heavily on **emotional appeal**, **visual manipulation**, **identity-based messaging**, and **platform-specific affordances** (e.g., WhatsApp forwards). Below are key findings based on collected data, previous scholarly work, and documented case studies.

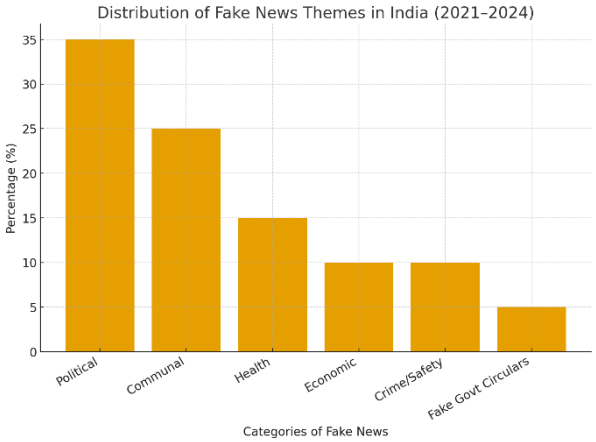
Major Categories of Fake News in India

The data shows that most misleading content falls into recurrent thematic clusters, particularly political propaganda, religiously charged misinformation, health-related myths, economic rumours, and false crime-related alerts. Political misinformation dominates, especially around election seasons, where distorted speeches, fabricated statistics, morphed images, and deepfakes aim to shape public opinion or undermine political opponents.

Communal misinformation also appears frequently, leveraging India's socio-religious diversity to provoke emotional reactions. Many misleading posts involve recontextualised videos from other countries, false claims of forced conversions, or manipulated visuals portraying certain groups negatively. These posts often succeed because they evoke fear, anger, and identity-based sentiments.

Health misinformation surged during the COVID-19 crisis, with posts promoting unverified remedies, conspiracy theories, or fabricated statements attributed to medical institutions. Economic misinformation—such as fake recruitment notices, rumours about government schemes, or claims of currency withdrawal—tends to exploit vulnerable social groups, particularly job seekers and rural populations.

Crime-related misinformation often circulates through localised WhatsApp networks, spreading rumours about kidnappings, organ trafficking, or violent crimes. Such posts can quickly trigger panic or lead to mob action due to their alarming tone and narrative urgency.



Techniques Used to Manipulate Language and Visuals

The study identifies a deliberate pattern of sensational language across misleading posts. Titles often rely on capital letters, multiple exclamation points, or words like *urgent*, *warning*, and *breaking*, which create pressure to share before verifying. Emotion-laden vocabulary intensifies the persuasive appeal.

Visual content plays an equally critical role. Common strategies include using outdated images as current evidence, selectively editing videos to change context, or digitally altering photographs. Increasingly, AI-generated content such as deepfake videos and synthetic images is being used to imitate real events or personalities. These visuals significantly increase users' trust in misinformation because people tend to regard audio-visual content as inherently credible.

Platform-Dependent Modes of Circulation

The pathways through which misinformation spreads vary by platform. WhatsApp serves as the most influential distribution channel due to private group dynamics, encrypted chats, and the cultural habit of forwarding messages from trusted peers. Many forwarded items analysed included instructions encouraging users to re-share widely.

Facebook and Instagram tend to propagate visually appealing misinformation, particularly through Reels, Live videos, and manipulated infographics. These formats enable rapid reach and emotional engagement.

On X (formerly Twitter), misinformation often spreads via strategic use of trending hashtags, clipped political statements, and doctored infographics, giving misleading posts a veneer of legitimacy.

YouTube contributes through sensational thumbnails, misleading titles, and long-form conspiracy videos. Such content often repackages rumours into more elaborate narratives that appear analytical or investigative.

Factors Influencing Users' Credibility Judgments

The findings illustrate that users rarely depend on rigorous fact-checking. Instead, they rely on surface-level cues such as:

- Trust in the sender — Information shared by family, friends, or community members is accepted readily.
- Presence of visual content — Photos and videos, even when manipulated, are treated as authentic proof.
- Official-looking design — Fake PDFs, forged government notices, and misused logos greatly enhance credibility.
- Popularity indicators — High engagement (likes, comments, shares) creates the perception that widely circulated information must be true.
- Emotional intensity — Content that incites fear, sympathy, or outrage is believed more quickly and shared more rapidly.

These behaviours indicate that misinformation spreads not because of an absence of information, but because users rely on emotional and social signals rather than analytical evaluation.

Social and Psychological Consequences

Repeated exposure to misinformation shapes public beliefs in significant ways. Many individuals begin to distrust mainstream media or institutional communication, gradually adopting biased perspectives that reinforce pre-existing beliefs. Political misinformation deepens partisan divides, while communal misinformation contributes to hostility and, at times, outbreaks of violence.

Health misinformation affects behavioural choices, leading to vaccine hesitancy, panic buying, or dangerous self-treatment practices. More broadly, constant exposure to conflicting or alarming misinformation creates confusion and anxiety, leaving individuals unsure of whom or what to trust.

Rise of Technology-Driven Misinformation

Emerging technologies, especially AI tools capable of generating highly realistic audio and video, have intensified the misinformation challenge. Deepfake videos, AI-cloned voices, and synthetic images that mimic public figures have become increasingly common. These tools make it difficult for average users to distinguish between authentic and fabricated content, enabling misinformation to evolve faster than regulatory or awareness mechanisms.

Overall Interpretation

Taken together, the findings indicate that misinformation in India is driven by a mix of emotional vulnerability, limited digital literacy, platform design weaknesses, trust-based sharing habits, and advanced content manipulation techniques. Fake news operates not simply as false information, but as a socially embedded phenomenon that leverages cultural dynamics, technological tools, and psychological biases to influence public perception and behaviour.

Conclusion

In the Indian context, fake news circulating on digital platforms is far more complex than a mere technological byproduct; it is a deeply rooted socio-political and psychological phenomenon shaped by the country's unique demographic and cultural landscape. The findings of this content analysis reveal that misinformation in India thrives within an environment defined by socio-political tensions, strong emotional triggers, and significant gaps in media and digital literacy. These conditions create a fertile ground where misleading narratives can easily gain traction, particularly when they tap into existing fears, biases, and identity-driven sentiments.

The study demonstrates that Indian users often rely on indicators such as emotional tone, compelling visuals, dramatic headlines, or pseudo-official formats to evaluate credibility, rather than relying on factual accuracy or source verification. This pattern indicates a shift from rational assessment to emotional validation, allowing misinformation to spread rapidly across digital networks. Furthermore, the widespread dependence on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and

YouTube—combined with the cultural norm of trusting forwarded content from family or community members—creates a powerful chain of uncritical information sharing.

One of the most significant findings of this research is the measurable impact of fake news on public perception and behaviour. Misinformation not only shapes opinions on sensitive issues such as politics, religion, health, and public policy but can also translate into real-world consequences, including public panic, mistrust toward institutions, mob violence, or communal unrest. Instances of AI-generated political deepfakes, COVID-19 health rumours, communal misinformation, and fake government scheme announcements underscore the severity and reach of the problem.

Addressing this challenge requires a multi-layered approach. Strengthening digital literacy is essential—not merely as a technical skill but as a cognitive and critical thinking capacity that allows individuals to question sources, evaluate content objectively, and resist emotional manipulation. Expanding India's fact-checking ecosystem, supporting regional language verification services, and integrating media literacy into school and college curricula are critical steps toward building an informed citizenry. At the same time, digital platforms must be held accountable for rapid detection, labelling, and removal of misleading content, especially during sensitive events such as elections or public health crises. Responsible journalism, transparency in information dissemination, and collaboration between government agencies, civil society, and tech companies are also indispensable components of an effective response.

In conclusion, fake news in India is a multifaceted issue that intersects with technology, society, psychology, and politics. Only through coordinated efforts—combining education, regulation, platform responsibility, and public awareness—can India develop a sustainable framework to counter misinformation and protect the integrity of its democratic and social fabric

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