

## Digital Deception and Agenda Setting: A Qualitative Analysis of Fake News, False Narratives and Misinformation in TLP'S Aqsa March on Social Media

Muhammad Waqas Awan <sup>a</sup> Muhammad Shahid <sup>b</sup> Asif Ismail <sup>c</sup> Madeha Fasahat <sup>d</sup>

**Abstract:** The undertaken research explored the perpetuation of fake news and misinformation trends as strategic tools of agenda setting and negative propaganda in digital political landscape of Pakistan analyzing social media content in the recent Al Aqsa march of TLP. The study has adopted qualitative research design to interpret the emotional narratives, misinformation, online trends in the light of agenda setting and framing theories. The study adopted qualitative research design for content analysis of viral Facebook and X posts during protest to identify key patterns of digital agenda setting, narrative construction, religious framing and emotional mobilization through fake news, disinformation and misinformation. The findings concluded that misinformation was not limited merely to distorted images and facts yet they were part of strategic AI powered campaigns of computational propaganda by multiple sides. All the stakeholders used digital spaces for propagation of false narratives to frame themselves as victims in order to gain public support. The information vacuum and weaponization of digital spaces intensified the situation which later on turned into a volatile law and order situation.

**Keywords:** Fake News, TLP, Agenda Setting, Framing, Religious Cues, AI-Powered Computational Propaganda, False Narratives

### Introduction

The power of digital media has revolutionized the social activism and transformed the traditional ways of organization and mobilization of political movements. Political movements and issues in contemporary era get instant public attention, coverage and consideration due to power of social media (Jena, 2025). The information regarding such events set popular trends making them talk of the town and shape public opinions due to the viral information content even before any official statements or communication by credible sources reach public. TLP's recent Al Aqsa march has presented the evidence of this reality when it stirred the whole system due to its digital coverage.

Pakistan plunged into severe internal disruption amid massive protests by TLP against Israel. In the protest the fake news based on misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and false narratives spread like fire when truth was outweighed by information bias and confusion. TLP organized a religious movement "AL Aqsa March" in October 2025 in order to condemn latest Pakistan's support to Trump mediated unfair agreement of Gaza ceasefire (Mahmood, 2025). Facebook and X became virtual battlefields where narratives in the form of doctored images, quotations and videos created a situation of chaos for even those who were not direct stakeholder of affected of this march. In the protest the fake news based on misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and false narratives spread like fire when truth was outweighed by information bias and confusion.

Asghar and Azeem (2025) reported that twin cities braced TLP protest which later on turned into an intense law and order situation. The volatile situation of counter narratives when at one side people were praising and sympathizing TLP for their religious struggle as Jihaadi whereas at the same time the other side of consumers were considering them as extremists and threat for law and order. The reason behind

<sup>a</sup> PhD Scholar, Riphah Institute of Media Sciences, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>b</sup> Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities (FSSH, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>c</sup> MS Scholar, Riphah Institute of Media Sciences, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>d</sup> MS Scholar, Riphah Institute of Media Sciences, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

this polarization was the storm of fake news and manipulative content of social media which inflamed, confused and manipulated people.

The religious narratives intensified the situation whereas each side the TLP, government and police tried to play victims and used false narratives to frame their official stance and gain sympathies from public. Punjab government arrested more than 100 suspected social media activists of TLP and banned almost 75 accounts to counter the extreme narratives and fake news circulated by TLP on Al Aqsa march (Dawn, 2025).

Hussain (2025) reported that due to Al Aqsa March TLP had to face a violent crackdown by government as they were declared “Religious Extremist party” by Punjab government. CM Punjab clearly declared that anyone involved in recent TLP’s violent protests in any form shall face serious actions as per Anti-Terrorism Act (AL Jazeera, October 17, 2025). This strict government stance is evidence that government had to face tough situation due to the fake news stories and violent law and order situation due to the protest and one of the most influential factors behind this protest were digital media power of TLP where they successfully played a victim and gained public sympathies at mass level. TLP gave harsh time to government and police to counter their social media campaign to that intense level that government also had to frame issues using false narratives and set public agenda in their favor with manipulative strategies.

The current study has unfolded the concealed digital approaches, tactics and strategies employed by TLP, government and police to shape public agenda and gain their support by presenting their side of story. The study will play crucial role in strengthening academic understanding and interpretation how digital platforms are now tuning into virtual battlefields where AI powered technologies are used for propagation of false narratives, fake news, misinformation and disinformation for political manipulation. The study also highlighted the sensitive aspect of the issue where religious and emotional cues intensified the situation and turned it into volatile war situation. The study has provided valuable insights for multiple stake holders including the politicians, journalists, fact-checking organizations and public as well.

### Research Objectives

The objectives of the study have focused to critically review and analyze the role of social media in setting agenda, framing events and influencing public perception in recent conflicts of TLP’s March:

**RO1:** To analyze role of social media (Facebook and X) in amplifying fake news and misinformation on sensitive religious and political issues.

**RO2:** To explore how false narratives and fake news were circulated and represented for potential agenda setting during AL Aqsa march.

**RO3:** To analyze how fake news and misinformation were used for framing and agenda setting in order to shape public perception by all stakeholders (TLP, Police, Government).

**RO4:** To identify the major themes, strategies, appeals or ideological patterns employed in these social media posts about protests and March.

### Research Questions

**RQ1:** How does social media (Facebook and X) amplified fake news and misinformation on sensitive religious and political issues in Pakistan?

**RQ2:** How false narratives and fake news were circulated and represented for potential agenda setting during AL Aqsa march?

**RQ3:** How fake news and misinformation were used for framing and agenda setting in order to shape public perception by all stakeholders (TLP, Police, and Government)?

**RQ4:** What were the major themes, strategies, appeals or ideological patterns employed in these social media posts about protests and March?

## Literature Review

Several researchers and scholars have analyzed the role of fake news, misinformation at social media platforms to empower political movements. The following literature has highlighted different aspects of phenomenon under observations which critically analyzed the role of AI technologies, Framing and Agenda setting approaches to shape public perception against opponents through false narratives and manipulation.

Boudana and segev (2024) explored concept of fake news by reviewing 122 representative articles. The semantic networks revealed that political actors, social media platforms and journalists all frame false narratives through fake news at social media. Politicians and social media content creators undermine public trust and use fake news for false accusations and information bias. People with low or no media literacy skill are victims of fake news.

Guran and Ozarslan (2022) critically evaluated application of framing theory in modern era of social media and stated that the hybrid new media system has increased the power of social media platforms particularly X and Facebook. Framing theory presents broader potentials for dynamic research on virtual communities and provides best theoretical support for analysis of complex communication, social interaction in political and commercial spheres.

Fake news and manipulative content in media are not new concepts, but they have incredibly expanded by the rise of social media. Trninic et al (2022) investigated the perceptions of two different generations (youngsters and middle aged) to assess their ability to identify, verify and relate such content. The findings of their qualitative study analyzed that both generations lack basic competence level of media literacy which raises serious concerns that they need proper education and training to learn resistance against fake news.

AI powered technologies such as algorithms have revolutionized the political landscape of Pakistan. AI driven political messages now play powerful role in framing issues through manipulative techniques shaping public political discourses and agendas. These technologies have increased the production and dissemination of deep fake information. The development of regulatory frameworks and ethical AI guidelines have become vital need for resistance against weaponization of digital media platforms for political fake news stories and false agenda setting.

Moravec et al (2019) conducted a behavioral experiment of active social media consumers to review consumption of fake news and analyzed that since fake news on social media platforms have become a pervasive trend in recent years but yet there is a significant and pervasive confirmation bias among users. They believe in news which align with their preconceived political beliefs, and they do not go for any verification even if it is fake at the same time any news which conflicts with their political opinion gets little or no cognitive attention and they rarely believe in them.

Social media platforms have become a powerful source of political communication, agenda setting, narrative construction and news dissemination. Millions of users globally depend on these social media platforms for consumption of latest and updated information at every political issue. Traditionally it was believed that mainstream media sets agenda for people but in contemporary settings when social media has somehow overpowered traditional media it can be observed that social media especially Facebook and X set social agendas for public. The McCombs and Shaw's agenda setting theory justifies why the hot issues of social media become talk of the town (Demirsoy & Karasoc, 2016).

The Tehreek-E-Labaik Pakistan party was actually developed on religious narratives and emerged as strong right wing part after a series of events related to protection of Prophet SAWW's honor and their religious narratives made them popular within few years. Their dedicated spirit to defend the sanctity of Prophet-hood was core reason that helped them gain massive support from general public and influential groups that they emerged as strong powerful group not only at national but international grounds. The

ominous outcome of TLP's powerful escalation in terms of shaping religious narratives for people has become a threat for both civilian and military regimes (Ahmad, 2022).

Nizamani (2022) analyzed TLP's strong foothold in digital ecosystem and stated that TLP strategically employed these platforms to enhance their religious outreach and mobilize mass audiences for their support framed in divine narratives. Their digital reach complimented their street power which strengthened their political stance that they become a threat for government and police. Government tried to counter their social media power by shutting internet in volatile protests, banning their accounts, arresting suspected activists but yet the situation worsened which was quite evident in the recent AL Aqsa TLP protest against Israel in 2025.

The literature review has added scholarly comprehensions for analyzing how digital spaces are now turning into virtual battlefields and providing open spaces for propagation on unverified content. The review highlighted the gap in research focused to interpret use of AI powered technologies in Pakistani politics and raises serious concerns regarding online information biases.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The Agenda setting**

The Agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) have been used to interpret findings of this study. The theory has analyzed how both levels of agenda setting social media platforms

**First-Level Agenda Setting:** The political news stories regarding march and protests were made top trends at social media using hashtags and algorithmic settings to determine salience of issues (Hashtags such as GazaMarch, Martydrom, State brutality was used for first level of agenda setting.

**Second-Level Agenda Setting:** Issues and events were framed using different propaganda and manipulation techniques for religious and state narratives by both sides. Religious, emotional, political, moral, ethical aspects all were inculcated in this episode of political communication and agenda setting.

### **Framing**

Government, police and TLP all used their own narratives to frame issues and events for gaining support from public at their digital handles. They used manipulative tactics to frame events as per their own interests.

### **Research Design**

The study has adopted qualitative content analysis research design for collection and analysis of data to interpret how social media posts of TLP and government were used for agenda setting and framing of events regarding the march.

### **Population and sampling**

All the social media posts shared at X (Twitter) and Facebook Platforms have been considered as population of this study. Since the study specifically focused on social media posts on particular event of AL Aqsa march so to have the more relevant data the study has opted purposive sampling technique to figure out the most relevant, top rated posts which made significant impacts on consumers.

### **Sample of the Study**

The study has selected eight most viral social media posts, memes and news shared at Facebook and X. These posts include false/unverified claims by all stake holders including TLP activists, government and representatives of security forces.

**Table 1**

Identified Fake/Unverified News Items for Content Analysis

Sr no:	Fake news/ Unverified claims	Verdict	Prospective Agenda
1	A viral Facebook post attributed to PML-N Information minister Atta Tarrar justifying killing TLP workers for the sake of Israel's friendship.	The statement was false and a fabricated piece of misinformation circulated on social media aimed for demeaning the political figure and government.	Political demeaning of government and concerned stake holders intended for moral indignation
2	A Viral X post and video with showed people gathered near a water channel claiming that security forces have dumped bodies of TLP workers into canal.	Unverified and misleading news due to lack of any official or credible evidence.	Dehumanization state narratives intended to provoke antagonism against government and police.
3	An extremely offensive post shared on X and Facebook, allegedly attributed to Atta again suggesting that Tarar threatened Saad Rizvi, TLP chief	The image was found to be doctored digitally, a fake news and unequivocally fabricated content.	Immoral claim to fuel anger among public using notion of women character assassination to embark outrage.
4	Multiple viral social media posts of Facebook and X claimed that TLP leader Saad Rizvi had been martyred (shot dead) by police which would lead towards significant concerns.	The death claims were mere a false rumor, unverified and did not have any official confirmation.	Religious and emotional manipulation, framing of martyrdom and heroic idea.
5	Viral posts were circulated regarding catastrophic deaths of TLP workers on social media asserting more than 282 casualties and 1900 injured.	The unverified news presented an exaggerated figure of casualties.	Promoting victimhood image and presenting unjust intensification of crisis.
6	One of the most viral posts shared at both X and Facebook claimed death of TLP leader Ahmad Shah Bkhari.	No official confirmation from either government, police of TLP leadership.	Emotional appeal to present government and police as violent, unjust and protestors as helpless victims.
7	Ms. Azma Bukhari, Minister of Information from Punjab claimed that 1648 policemen were injured during clashes during TLP protests.	The exaggerated figure without any evidence in order to pretend government and security forces as victims.	State agenda to justify aggressive approach against protestors.
8	Mr. Faisal Kamran, Deputy Inspector General Lahore Faisal claimed that more than 60 policemen have got permanent disabilities due to violent attacks of TLP protestors.	The claim was unbelievable and false; no authentic proof or evidence were shared.	Security forces narrative for self- victimization and justify use of force against TLP workers.

## Results and Interpretation

The study has critically analyzed the approaches, techniques and strategies employed by all stake holders to frame events in their favor by playing up and playing down the details, facts and figures. The content



analysis of the viral news stories and false narratives used for agenda setting in those digital media messages showed that doctored images and videos were used to frame false narratives. As government shut down the internet a significant information vacuum and state of confusion developed among minds of people as there were lack of verified versions of reality by all sides. The selected sample of news have been declared as fake on the basis of report presented by Fake News Watchdog organization. It is a credible organization which is dedicated to identify, analyze and counter spread of disinformation, misinformation, fake news and false narratives in digital ecosystem.

The study identified five major themes after conducting content analysis of posts which include: “Narrative manipulation, Religious exploitation and emotional mobilization, Political discrediting and character assassination, Information vacuum and credibility crisis and Weaponization of digital platforms for propagation of framed manipulative political messages intended to shape public agendas in their favor and gain mass support.

**Table 2**  
*Thematic Categorization of Major Themes*

1	Narrative manipulation	<b>TLP narrative:</b> Religious and moral legitimacy. TLP framed their narrative religious agendas “Jihaad, Religious obligation” <b>Government and police narrative:</b> The institutional narratives centralized around frames of “National security issue, portraying the issue as threat ”
2	Religious exploitation and emotional mobilization	Death hoaxes, Martyrdom claims by TLP. Justification of mass killings claims of dumping bodies about police and government.
3	Political discrediting and character assassination	Fabricated posts and fake news stories about political opponents from both sides. Immoral sexualized post attributed to politicians and government ministers about Saad Rizvi’s wife.
4	Information vacuum and credibility crisis	Lack of verified and credible information from institutes. Conflicting claims from all stake holders (TLP, Police and Government) given space for propagation of false narratives and fake news stories.
5	Weaponization of digital platforms	Hashtag manipulation, Fake doctored images and videos, Echo chambers

**Discussion and Analysis**

The findings of the study have concluded that fake news regarding the TLP Aqsa March was deeply intertwined with emotional, religious, and political manipulation. Misinformation did not emerge in isolation; it was strategically used to influence how people felt, what they believed, and what they talked about. Government has always tried to portray TLP as religious extremist party and they used this narrative even this time to target TLP and label them as extremist, violent, threatening pressure group not against state but for people as well. TLP’s social media somehow gained public sympathy and government tried to adopt the same emotional approach to play victim in order to justify their crackdowns in response as well.

**Battle of Narratives and Fake News**

There was a battle of narratives as each stakeholder tried to set public agenda in their favor and framed their side of story for shaping public perceptions. Both TLP and state representatives employed several techniques and strategies of fake news and disinformation for self-victimization in order to gain sympathy from public. TLP used religious narratives for gaining public support at the same time state framed their stance according to the lens of national security, law and order situations. Each side deliberately presented themselves as victim. Fake news fueled and intensified this battle by exaggerating the facts, twisting the details and presenting certain aspects of truth with selectivity with techniques of play up and play down.

### **Exploitation of Religious Sentiments and Emotional Mobilization**

One of the easiest targets which can promptly intensify any situation is exploitation of religious sentiments and targeting public emotions with manipulative tactics. Quranic verses and Ahadeeth about jihaad were shared by TLP activists. Death hoaxes and rumors about Saad Rizvi and his key party leaders were circulated at social media platforms with religious labels of martyrdom in divine journey. Numerous posts were shared with religious labels which intensified the situation. Emotional manipulation also shaped the false narratives in this situation as doctored images portraying state actors dumping bodies of TLP protestors were circulated to create emotional panics among people. The emotional pressure of this conflict created an environment of intense confusion for people and affected their ability to detect real truth from fake news.

### **Political Discrediting and Character Assassination**

Political discrediting and character assassination attacks at opponents are one of the most common trends in Pakistani politics. Politicians keep discrediting, questioning credibility and putting their opponents in controversial frames and running strategic computational propaganda against rivals. These propaganda campaigns include fabricated political posts, defamation charges offensive slanders. This political discrediting intensifies in case of character assassination attacks when political rivals attack on personal lives. In case of TLP and government conflicts Saad Rizvi's wife was involved unnecessarily, and several posts were circulated about her which promoted outrage among people and shaped public narratives in their favor of TLP and Saad Rizvi.

### **Information Vacuum and Credibility Crisis**

Digital spaces provide fast modes of information but yet in TLP protests case there was abundance of information vacuum and credibility crisis. Because Pakistani digital spaces lack proper lie detection mechanisms due to which there was gap in dissemination of credible information. There was a credibility crisis as internet was shut down and people were not provided by authentic and credible information by responsible authorities by both government and TLP sides. Viral fake news stories and misinformation based posts filled information vacuums negatively were circulated at social media which created a hoax of anxiety, suspicion and rumors.

### **Weaponization of Digital Media Platforms**

Digital platforms were used for weaponization and manipulation exploiting these spaces and public trust of social media users. Facebook viral posts, Twitter hashtags, doctored images and videos were used by social media users to manipulate public perceptions on this sensitive issue. These viral fake news stories created an environment of panic and anxiety among people, exaggerated false claims and rumors became source of fear and hyper emotional states. People feared life security of their family members involved in protests.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study have implicated valuable insights regarding dissemination of authentic and credible information at digital spaces. The TLP and government conflicts highlighted that there is an immediate need for strengthening crisis communication to curtail threats of misinformation and fake news to prevent propagation of misinformation, disinformation and information vacuums. Initiatives must be taken for building digital literacy programs and training for social media users. Social networking sites also need to improve their security mechanism to enhance accountability and credibility of their platforms. All the stakeholders must come forward for promotion of responsible sharing of content and avoid exploiting religious frames for their vested interests.

## References

- Ahmad, R. (2022). Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: An emerging right-wing threat to Pakistan's democracy. *Atlantic Council*. Retrieved from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/tehreek-e-labbaik-pakistan-an-emerging-right-wing-threat/>
- Asghar, M. & Azeem, M. (2025). Twin cities brace for TLP protest. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1947839>
- Boudana, S., & Segev, E. (2024). Fake News Makes the News: Definitions and Framing of Fake News in Mainstream Media. *Journalism Practice*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2379898>
- Dawn. (November 21, 2025). Inflammatory posts: over 100 social media activists held across Punjab. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1950835>
- Demirsoy, A., & Karakoç, E. (2016). Contribution of social media to agenda setting approach. *Atatürk İletişim Dergisi*, (10), 137–147.
- Güran, M. S., & Özarslan, H. (2022). Framing Theory in the Age of Social Media. *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*(48), 446–457. <https://doi.org/10.52642/susbed.1142562>
- Hashmat, S., Ahmad, E., & Gulzar, S. The Transformation of Political Communication through Artificial Intelligence: A Review of Pakistan's Digital Political Landscape. *Policy. Research Journal*, 3(4). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15201423>
- Hussain, A. (October 17, 2025). What's behind Pakistan's latest crackdown on religious party TLP? Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/17/whats-behind-pakistans-latest-crackdown-on-religious-party-tlp>
- Jena, N. (2025). Social Media Activism and Its Influence on Political Movements: A Comparative Analysis of Global Protests. *The Journal of International Social Research*. 18 (120). <https://www.sosyalarastirmalar.com/articles/social-media-activism-and-its-influence-on-political-movements-a-comparative-analysis-of-global-protests-1102268.html>
- Mahmood, (2025). Violent Anti-Israel Protests Undermine Pakistan's Diplomatic Success. *The Media Line*. <https://themedialine.org/by-region/violent-anti-israel-protests-undermine-pakistans-diplomatic-success/>
- Moravec, P. L., Minas, R. K., & Dennis, A. R. (2019). Fake News on Social Media: People Believe What They Want to Believe When it Makes No Sense At All. *MIS Quarterly*, 43(4), 1343–1360, A1–A13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26848107>
- Nizamani, U. (2022). The TLP, Social Media, and Recurring Cycles of Violence. *Domestic Politics*. South Asian Voices. <https://southasianvoices.org/the-tlp-social-media-and-recurring-cycles-of-violence/>
- Trninić, D., Kuprešanin Vukelić, A., & Bokan, J. (2022). Perception of “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content in Digital Media—A Generational Approach. *Societies*, 12(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12010003>