

Fake News, Its Spread on Social Media, and Its Impact on Social Cohesion

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite multiple benefits stemming from increasing connectivity of individuals, the proliferation of social media use has come with prominent risks related to the creation and dissemination of fake news.

Aim: The current study aimed to study the social consequences of the spread of fake news on social media platforms. It also considered the role of social media in the spread of fake news and the efficacy of various preventative approaches.

Methodology: The research took on a quantitative approach and sampled experts in the fields of social science, media, and education across multiple universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Results: Social media plays a prominent role in the spread of fake news, which comes with significant social consequences related to the destabilization of social harmony and psychological strain. Most preventative measures considered may only be moderately effective but education and enforcement of strict measures may have been potentially useful.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Fake News, Social Cohesion, Prevention, Misinformation

Introduction

The increased adoption of communication technologies has come with widespread social media use, bringing along significant benefits. Widespread social media use has transformed communication and the sharing of information, a feat that has substantially expanded global connectivity (Özkent, 2022). In turn, the connectivity at a global level brought about by social media has gradually established novel pathways to forge communities and encourage citizens towards political participation (Lin & Kant, 2021). The downside related to social media's proliferation, however, presents itself through the explosion in fake news on the same platforms (Aïmeur et al., 2023). Social media platforms have barely seen notable success in effecting control over fake news spreading,

lacking effective control initiatives (Clayton et al., 2020; Gausen et al., 2021). The result of this is that fake news has grown to become an embedded feature in contemporary online information ecosystems.

The issue of fake news on social media is substantial. Its greatest risk lies in the fact that fake news spreads faster than truthful content and in the low levels of the capacity of individuals to distinguish between real and fake news (Aimeur et al., 2023; Shu et al., 2020). It is further complicated by the involvement of bots, both in the creation and dissemination of fake news (Shu et al., 2020). Such problems associated with fake news, along with difficulty in containing the fake news problems have resulted in the falsehoods posing a risk to society.

One of the risks of fake news on society relates to the threat that it presents to social cohesion. Nonetheless, minimal attention has been given by the existing literature to the social implications of fake news on tangible outcomes such as social cohesion. This gap presents a potential area of exploration that the current study aims to examine. The current study looks to examine social consequences related to the spreading of fake news on social media platforms. Examining subject matter experts, it seeks to explore social media's contributions to fake news spreading and the societal consequences of fake news, along with the potential prevention approaches for curbing how much fake news spreads in society.

The Impact of Fake News on Society

The implications that fake news imparts on society manifest through multiple avenues. For instance, it contributes to the erosion of truth in society, blurring the boundaries between what is true information and what is false (Olan et al., 2024). The blurring of the boundaries between true and false information complicates the differentiation between credible news and misinformation in the general societal context. It also created divisions in how reality is understood across different communities leading to societal fragmentation as conflicting narratives replace what would be a shared understanding (Olan et al., 2024). In the worst case, the normalization of misinformation, or its widespread proliferation, results in an emergence of

competition between fake news and true news. This competition risks the subsequent replacement of what is real with what is fake in public discourse.

Fake news also increases the risk of politics-related manipulation, which threatens democracies and democratic values. Investigations have often demonstrated the application of fake news spread through social media by political actors to influence mass perspectives and discredit opponents to promote their political agenda (Buntić et al., 2020; Elsamni, 2020). These actors have adopted the application of misinformation to shape outcomes of elections and win the public over, with these actions increasing specifically during periods that have ongoing elections scheduled (Elsamni, 2020). However, these actions also risk the emergence of social unrest internally, while also causing international tensions.

A more pertinent effect of fake news on society comes in the form of its implications on public health. Fake news on health, healthcare products, and the healthcare system occasionally spreads online, posing a significant risk to the wellbeing of individuals and the society at large (Buntić et al., 2020). Fake news related to healthcare may also induce a false sense of security, or cause unnecessary panic, with both cases resulting in individuals making decisions that are counterproductive for their wellbeing (Buntić et al., 2020). At its extreme, fake news on healthcare may trigger suspicions towards authority figures in the field of healthcare, resulting in individuals failing to observe healthcare guidelines or comply with healthcare measures to heighten public health risks.

The Dangers of Social Media in Spreading Fake News

Social media presents a real danger in spreading fake news. One of the avenues through which social media platforms present a danger for the spread of fake news comes through the embedded structural and technological features. Social media platforms tend to possess affordances such as easy information accessibility, functions for metavoicing, and network connections, all which work together to increase the cognitive and emotional involvement of users to encourage them to spread information, sometimes fake news (Wu et al., 2025). The open nature of these platforms allows

individuals, mostly non-experts to rapidly publish content, which bots and algorithmic systems further amplify to enable misinformation to increase its reach and persistence across global audiences (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025). The global scale, amount of content, and technologies involved in information sharing also make it difficult to regulate content effectively (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025). Subsequently, this sustains environments wherein misinformation can thrive.

Another avenue through which social media presents the danger of spreading fake news comes through the psychological and behavioral drivers of misinformation that the platforms enable. Social media supports more affective involvement with content, which is characterized by minimized cognitive processing of information to drive misinformation sharing (Wu et al., 2025). The platforms are designed in such a way that they increase the likelihood of users sharing content that evokes strong emotional responses without critically evaluating the accuracy of the information shared. Individuals tend to be more likely to share information when it aligns with their preexisting beliefs, which makes it more likely that they deem the information to be true, and social media platforms tend to confine users in spaces where they are more likely to encounter such information (Buchanan, 2020). Cognitive ability alone fails to be a factor that can prevent the sharing of misinformation and the combination of emotional engagement and fragmented content consumption reduces the capacity of individuals to assess information critically (Wu et al., 2025). The greater the familiarity with the content, the higher the chances that users will share it, and repeated exposure to misinformation further reinforces its credibility among the users to encourage its wider spread.

The Importance of Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is of significant importance to various aspects of life. For one, it serves as a critical foundation for overall wellbeing. It is through social cohesion that diverse groupings can connect to build trust and establish solidarity (AIHW, 2025). On the other hand, these formed connections are capable of benefiting individuals' life satisfaction which then positively

touches their wellbeing. There are studies that have associated high social relationship quality with self-esteem and creativity improvements, besides just possible social mobility and satisfaction with one's job (AIHW, 2025). The quality of social relations also demonstrates links to psychological and physical health, making them potent health determinants. Boas et al. (2025) documents the phenomenon that is the Roseto Effect. This specific phenomenon is characterized by higher attainment of optimal health outcomes among more tightly-knit communities, which then presents social cohesion as a strong social determinant of health.

In addition to potentially positive health outcomes from social cohesion, the construct of social cohesion also supports the maintenance of communities with the capacity for peaceful coexistence, which are also resilient to shocks. Associations between cohesion and peace come about from the potential in social cohesion to bring together diverse individuals (Haq & Anwar, 2026). In amounts that are high enough, social cohesion tends to yield reduced conflicts in communities and, to an extent, deter violence to enhance the safety of their environment (Danquah & Ouattara, 2021). In societies that have high levels of social cohesion, the resilience to external shocks becomes more feasible, with the cohesion placing the communities at a much better position to withstand crises in their economies and even natural disasters (AIHW, 2025). The resilience capacities emerge from the ease in establishing robust support systems. The presence of shared values and a strong sense of belonging that are induced by high levels of social cohesion encourage collective participation in addressing societal challenges, subsequently reinforcing unity during periods of uncertainty (Haq & Anwar, 2026). As such, social cohesion delivers safer communities, swifter recovery from crisis, avenues for collective problem solving, and enduring unity, all benefits that substantially benefit any group of individuals.

Theories of the Dissemination of Rumors in Media

Several theories can be applied to explain how rumors are disseminated in the media. One of these is the uses and gratifications theory (UGT). UGT explains the dissemination of rumors in media to be a function of

individuals actively choosing media to satisfy specific needs such as entertainment or socialization (Apuke & Omar, 2021). The theory shifts the focus from the implications of media dissemination to the function of user agency with regard to content sharing. The theory identifies key gratifications, such as altruism, instant news sharing, self-promotion, and social interaction as some of the key predictors of sharing fake news (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Bakar et al., 2025). It suggests that misinformation spreads since it fulfils a personal and social need rather than being driven merely by the information itself. Aspects such as user satisfaction, trust in an online source, and the frequency of social media use, further reinforce the likelihood that an individual would share misinformation, thereby implying that behavioral engagement patterns in media directly contribute to the propagation of rumors (Bakar et al., 2025). Therefore, based on the theory, reducing misinformation would require the altering of user gratifications, for instance through incentivizing accurate information sharing or minimizing barriers to credible information.

Another theory that can explain the dissemination of rumors in the media is the flow theory. The flow theory explains the dissemination of misinformation using the concept of optimal experience (Obadă, 2019). This concept comes into play when users become deeply immersed in social media activities, which leads to them automatically and less critically evaluating their sharing behaviors. It views the sharing of fake news through the lens of key characteristics of flow, including intense concentration, the loss of self-awareness, and a distorted time perception which lessen individuals' critical thinking (Obadă & Dabija, 2022). Social media environments facilitate attaining the flow state through their interactivity, instant feedback, and content richness, which creates conditions wherein users feel in control and are intrinsically motivated to share information or misinformation (Obadă, 2019; Obadă & Dabija, 2022). Consequently, dissemination of fake news gets to be influenced by experiential factors overriding critical evaluation.

Study Concepts

Fake News

Fake news has broad definitions in literature. Nonetheless, it is most accurately understood as the deliberate presentation of false or misleading information as legitimate news, with the intent of deception. (Gelfert, 2018). The defining feature of fake news is intentional falsehood, as its design is always driven by the intention to manipulate audiences, either through its framing, delivery, or format (Baptista & Gradim, 2022). Fake news achieves its objective mainly through mimicking the appearance of credible news, using headlines and narrative styles that are likely to enhance its believability by making it as similar to the real news as possible (Baptista & Gradim, 2022). However, while the defining characteristic of fake news is clear, the concept remains ambiguous, as it overlaps with other terminologies such as disinformation, propaganda, satire, misinformation, and junk news (Wang, 2020). Regardless, a key distinction of fake news remains its intentionality and purpose to deceive audiences.

Social Media

The concept of social media has received notable scholarly attention. According to scholarly literature, the term social media refers to a wide range of internet-based platforms that allow the creation and sharing of content by their users, while also supporting user interactions (Aichner et al., 2021). Social media is distinguished from traditional one-way channels of communication by its reliance on computer-based technologies, which support its information sharing capacities (Türkmen, 2023). Additionally, it also separates itself from earlier media forms in the way it allows interactive engagement between users, who actively participate in the social media ecosystem by generating content, giving feedback, and shaping discourse (Aichner et al., 2021; Türkmen, 2023). As such, audiences on social media do not merely consume information, in the way traditional audiences engaged with information. This participatory nature of the platforms has greatly transformed interactions on social media, both between users and between users and institutions.

Social Cohesion

Lastly, the concept of social cohesion can be understood largely as a state of existence. It is the state of social stability and peace, often grounded in strong social bonds, more so within diverse communities wherein long-standing relationships and shared structures sustain a sense of unity (Kamri et al., 2021). However, besides being a state of existence, social cohesion is also an ongoing process that sees the establishment of common values and a sense of belonging, with the intention of enabling individuals to pursue common interests and collectively overcome challenges (Kamri et al., 2021). Its very essence centers around the capacity of groups to unite with a specific driving factor while connected by a shared emotion and identity (Ibrahim, 2024). Therefore, its key components include active social participation by individuals, community, and trust between individuals (Wicaksono & Darmawan, 2025). These components merge to support cooperation between individuals and to reinforce integration.

Literature Review

On the role of social media in spreading fake news, literature conceptualizes the spread of fake news on these platforms as a product of platform design and user behavior. Studies highlight how the algorithms of these platforms create bubbles in which fake news thrives, often sustained by the selective exposure of users to the news along with biases such as confirmation bias (Zimmer et al., 2019). This framing indicates that the users of the platforms also contribute to the spread of fake news through their online actions such as commenting, liking, reposting, or reacting, especially while the fake news is still confined to their echo chambers (Zimmer et al., 2019). The spread of fake news beyond the echo chambers is further fueled by cognitive biases and emotional reactions such as fear and anger, which motivate them towards disseminating the news (Balan & Sritharan, 2025; Luo, 2025). Individual level psychological factors further influence the dissemination of fake news, and even its creation, in the form of traits and perceptions such as the fear of missing out, self-promotion, and even altruism, which may motivate social media users to share information without verifying its accuracy (Munusamy et al., 2024). Nonetheless, literature also identifies

cognitive limitations and ignorance as key drivers of the spread of fake news on social media by users as they cause individuals to struggle to distinguish between credible and false information in the content-saturated environments that are social media platforms (Munusamy et al., 2024). A significant factor that also enhances the capacity of social media to contribute to the spread of fake news highlighted in literature is the action of automated agents and bots. The use of bots in the spread of fake news is exemplified in the study by Himelein-Wachowiak et al. (2021), who presented how they significantly pushed misinformation about COVID-19 during the pandemic period. The bots came up with fake news and amplified content from other bot accounts to promote conspiracies. Nonetheless, the dynamic that sees false and emotionally charged content attract greater engagement has been deemed the engagement-accuracy paradox (Bonaki et al., 2025). It emerges from an intersection of platform design and human actions to give greater visibility and influence to fake news.

Literature also touches on the implications of the spread of fake news on society. Studies present fake news spreading as a notable societal threat. Yerlikaya & Aslan (2020) explore how spreading of fake news introduces threats to democracies and their processes. They present fake news as having influence over democratic elements such as voter behavior, subsequently shaping outcomes in elections that can cause institutional destabilization. Such notions are backed by Udenze (2021) who highlights how fake news could trigger ethno-religious hostilities or election related clashes. Ognyanova et al. (2020) add on to this point by describing how fake news can also simultaneously erode trust in established media and reinforce belief in political institutions in instances where the ideologies align. However, social media objectively retains the capacity to strengthen or weaken social cohesion based on the patterns of its use in society (Stieglitz & Ross, 2022). If negatively yielded, social media promotes fake news that can destabilize democratic systems and induce social conflicts that build up to significant social destruction. As such, literature widely acknowledges fake news as a

systemic social challenge with implications that impact governance, social stability and collective trust.

Lastly, on the mitigation of the spread of fake news on social media, literature consistently emphasizes on the need for multi-level intervention frameworks. At the individual level, studies point to methods such as prebunking, nudges, and contextualization as potential promising approaches for the reduction of misinformation, even with their effect typically being limited to the individual level (Furutani et al., 2026). Researchers also advance there is potential in methods centered around regulatory frameworks to alter the cost-benefit dynamics of sharing fake news, thereby introducing government involvement in the mitigation of fake news (Liu et al., 2024). Besides the individual and government-related approaches, the studies also promote platform level initiatives such as content moderation and algorithmic adjustments (Liu et al., 2024). Other possible platform level initiatives advanced in the literature include undertaking digital forensics and implementing automated detection systems at a broader scale (Sharma & Khan, 2025). Nonetheless, these studies are keen to emphasize the ineffectiveness of platform level solutions alone in the mitigation of the issue (Sharma & Khan, 2025; Johansson et al., 2022). They advance for multi-stakeholder approaches for the effective mitigation of the fake news issue.

Results of Previous Studies

Literature has previously presented social media as having a notable role in the creation and dissemination of fake news. A past study undertaken by Hasan et al. (2020), for example, exemplified that fame-seeking behaviors displayed by users along with the hunt for engagement constitute a factor underlying the curation and dissemination of fake news. Presenting a different angle, Chauhan et al. (2022) discussed how the dissemination of fake news is also driven by how simple it is to share information online without fact-checking, or with limited confirmation of facts. Albeit the creation and spread of fake news may also be undertaken by accounts that have low credibility as well, Di Domenico et al. (2021) and Shao et al. (2018) present that these accounts make great attempts to mimic legitimate news sources, which

enables them to succeed in their objective. The nature of the social media platforms, particularly related to their networked system further amplify fake news (Chen 2025; Liang et al., 2023). Additionally, users may also not have adequate trust in institutions and official channels, which leads to their gravitation towards fake news. Hence, issues related to users and the platform make social media a prominent avenue for the creation and dissemination of falsehoods. Combined, the inherent structural elements and the human elements give social media a prominent role in the spread of fake news.

The spread of fake news, in turn, comes with significant real-life consequences. Existing literature frames the spread of fake news as a potent national security concern (Belova & Georgieva, 2018; Fadiran, 2024). Research also presents fake news spread through social media as having the significant potential to manipulate public opinion and fuel social unrest, causing social chaos and the disruption of governance (Ali et al., 2021; Darban & Kabbaj, 2023; Rahman & Jahan, 2020; Tariq et al., 2023). The spread of fake news is also associated with psychological implications such as anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue (Claudia, 2022). The overall implications of the spread of fake news on social media manifest in the form of deteriorated social cohesion, exemplified by the disintegration of society and political polarization (Asthana, 2025; Ismail, 2022; Saeed & Khan, 2025). Therefore, the spread of fake news through social media has significant ramifications for both individuals, the broader society, and governance structures.

Research emphasizes that the prevention of fake news on social media is a multi-stage and multi-level process. It highlights how it is integral to establish deterrence from the user level using measures such as education, and the platform level, applying initiatives such as account suspensions and the suppression of material that is viewed to constitute fake news, besides just the governance level, through the adoption of deterrence policies (Nasery et al., 2023). Past studies such as Gimpel et al. (2021) also demonstrate possible efficacy in what the authors term as social norms-based deterrents, which rely on a common understanding of the appropriate social media tendencies.

Effective mitigation of fake news on social media requires collaboration between users, platforms, and intuitions.

Research Questions

Social media use has come with significant risks, such as enabling the spread of fake news. The current study will look to answer the question: *how does the spread of fake news enabled by social media affect social cohesion?* To better answer the primary research question, it will be broken down into three questions;

- What role does social media play in the spread of fake news?
- What are the consequences of the spread of fake news through social media on society?
- What are the preventative measures that can be taken to protect society from fake news?

Study Aims

The primary aim of the current study is to understand how the spread of fake news on social media impacts social cohesion. Along with the primary aim, the study will also seek to understand the role that social media plays in the spread of fake news, the consequences this spread of fake news has on society, and preventative measures that could be pursued to protect society from the spread of fake news on social media.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study sought to gather insights into the effects of fake news circulated through social media on social cohesion. It considered three dimensions: the role of social media in the spread of fake news, the consequences of circulating fake news through social media on social disintegration, and the preventative measures for protecting society from fake news. It gathered insights from a random sample of experts in the field of social science, media, and education based in various universities across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Gathering of insights relied on an online questionnaire that was designed to collect quantitative data on the three

dimensions considered by the current study, to inform on the repercussions of fake news in social media on social cohesion. It was sent to the participants via email links. A quantitative approach was decided on as the best method to facilitate the analysis and processing of data.

Target Population

The current study targeted experts in the fields of social science, media, and education studies across several universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The primary aim was to identify the consequences that the spread of fake news on social media platforms has on social cohesion through gathering insights from this target population. The selection of the sample population from the target population was random, based on convenience sampling. Sampling yielded a number of 378 subject matter experts who would be most suitable for the study owing to their knowledge and background related to the concepts underlying the current study.

Data Collection

Collection of data was undertaken using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to align with the objectives of the current study. The researcher used the feedback from the university professors and experts on the subject matter, who reviewed the questionnaire, to enhance the validity of the questionnaire. The researcher also computed Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the online questionnaire, yielding a value of 0.91. This value indicated an acceptable level of questionnaire reliability. The questionnaire was further refined to improve the language, style, content, and format before being distributed to the study participants. In responding to the questionnaire, study participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the questionnaire items. Responses were provided on a three-point Likert scale for each item.

Data Analysis

Data analysis used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The study collected quantitative data and used the SPSS software to undertake a basic demographic analysis of the data along with the computation of mean response values from the sampled population. They provided their responses as "Agree," "To Some Extent," or "Disagree," and these responses were then assigned corresponding values to compute the mean response rates, and the mean responses for each item were used to rank the items for comparison. The percentage response rates were also computed to establish the proportions of responses for each questionnaire item.

Piloting of the Questionnaire

For piloting, the study questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 21 participants. Piloting supported the clarification of the study's objectives and scope, adopting an in-person session using paper-based questionnaires, which was a slightly different procedure from what was planned for the full study. The researcher collaborated with a team of research assistants during pilot testing to explain to the participants the nature of the study. Piloting was undertaken over a two-hour session, in which the researcher and the assistants distributed the questionnaires, supervised their filling, and collected them from the respondents after completion. Based on the responses, the number and types of questions were modified to enhance data collection.

Results

The Role of Social Media in the Spread of Fake News

Items		Disagree	To some extent	Agree	Mean	SD	Rank	The level
Social media poses a risk in spreading fake news.	Fer	0	80	298	2.79	0.41	1	High
	%	0	21.2	78.8				
The pursuit of fame on social media is a reason for spreading fake news.	Fer	8	106	264	2.68	0.512	2	High
	%	2.1	28	69.8				
Social media platforms do not rely on credible sources.	Fer	2	120	256	2.67	0.482	3	High
	%	0.5	31.7	67.7				
Social media has a social influence in spreading fake news.	Fer	10	118	250	2.63	0.535	4	High
	%	2.6	31.2	66.1				
The difficulty of monitoring social media facilitates the spread of fake news.	Fer	6	138	234	2.6	0.522	5	High
	%	1.6	36.5	61.9				
The weakness of official channels in disseminating accurate information also contributes to the spread of fake news on social media.	Fer	16	178	184	2.44	0.577	6	High
	%	4.2	47.1	48.7				
The overall mean of the role social media play in the spread of fake news.					2.58	0.318	High	

Table 1: Results on the role that social media plays in the spread of fake news

The study inquired from participants how much they deemed social media to contribute to the spread of fake news. The respondents in the current study advanced that they deemed social media as having a prominent role in enabling the spread of fake news ($M=2.58$; $SD=0.318$).

The highest-ranking item affirmed that the participants in the study perceived social media as posing a risk in the spread of fake news ($M=2.79$; $SD=0.41$). The study respondents fully agreed that social media posed a risk in spreading fake news ($n=298$; 78.8%) or only partially agreed ($n=80$; 21.2%). Respondents highly perceived that the pursuit of fame on social media as a reason for spreading fake news, which was the second highest rated item ($M=2.68$; $SD=0.512$). A significant majority agreed fully with this sentiment ($n=264$; 69.8%) while many others partially agreed ($n=106$; 28). Study respondents also perceived that social media did not rely on credible sources

($M=2.67$; $SD=0.482$). Similarly, a significant majority of the respondents fully agreed that social media was not reliant on credible sources ($n=256$; 67.7%), while a notable proportion partially agreed ($n=120$; 31.7%). Respondents felt social media socially influenced the spread of fake news ($M=2.63$; $SD=0.535$). Majority of the respondents fully agreed ($n=250$; 66.1%) and a significant proportion partially agreed ($n=138$; 36.5%).

The lowest ranking items equally had high levels of full or partial agreement. The study respondents deemed it difficult to monitor social media for the spread of fake news ($M=2.60$; $SD=0.522$). Again, an overwhelming majority agreed with this sentiment ($n=234$; 61.9%) while a large proportion partially agreed ($n=138$; 36.5%). Lastly, participants felt that weaknesses in the capacity of official channels to disseminate accurate information contributed to the spread of fake news ($M=2.44$; $SD=0.577$). A fairly equal number of participants either fully ($n=184$; 48.7%) or partially agreed ($n=178$; 47.1) with this sentiment.

Social Consequences of the Spread of Fake News through Social Media

Items		Disagree	To Some Extent	Agree	Mean	SD	Rank	The level
Fake news threatens social security.	Fer	10	110	258	2.66	0.529	1	High
	%	2.6	29.1	68.3				
Social media contributes to social unrest.	Fer	6	142	230	2.59	0.524	2	High
	%	1.6	37.6	60.8				
Fake news leads to social chaos.	Fer	18	128	232	2.57	0.585	3	High
	%	4.8	33.9	61.4				
Fake news has psychological and social consequences.	Fer	12	162	204	2.51	0.561	4	High
	%	3.2	42.9	54.0				
Fake news leads to social disintegration.	Fer	42	206	130	2.23	0.635	5	Middle
	%	11.1	54.5	34.4				
Fake news leads to a lack of trust and distorted awareness.	Fer	46	228	104	2.15	0.613	6	Middle
	%	12.2	60.3	27.5				
The overall mean of the social consequences of fake news spread through social media.					2.40	0.418	High	

Table 2: Results on the social consequences of the spread of fake news through social media

The study also inquired into the social consequences of the spread of fake news through social media. Respondents deemed that the spread of fake news through social media had significant social consequences ($M=2.40$; $SD=0.148$).

The highest-ranking social implication of the spread of fake news through social media was on social security ($M=2.66$; $SD=0.529$). Majority of the respondents fully agreed that fake news threatens social security ($n=258$; 68.3%), while a notable proportion deemed so to some extent ($n=110$; 29.1%). The effects on social unrest ranked second ($M=2.59$; $SD=0.524$). Under this item, a majority of the respondents fully agreed that social media contributed to social unrest ($n=230$; 60.8%), while another notable proportion only deemed it to contribute to social unrest to some extent ($n=142$; 37.6%). The implications on social chaos ranked third ($M=2.57$; $SD=0.585$), with a majority of the study respondents fully agreeing that fake news led to social chaos ($n=232$; 61.4%). A notable proportion only partially deemed it to have such an effect ($n=128$; 33.9%). Ranking fourth ($M=2.51$; $SD=0.561$), fake news was also deemed to have psychological consequences with over half of the respondents fully agreeing with this sentiment ($n=204$; 54.0%). A notable proportion only partially agreed ($n=162$; 42.9%).

The lowest ranking two items saw higher levels of uncertainty among the respondents. At fifth was social disintegration ($M=2.23$; $SD=0.635$) whereby the majority of the respondents only deemed fake news to lead to social disintegration to some extent ($n=206$; 54.5%). Slightly over a third fully agreed that fake news contributed to social disintegration ($n=130$; 34.4%). Similarly, the majority of the respondents also only partially agreed that fake news led to a lack of trust and distorted awareness ($n=228$; 60.3%), the lowest ranking item ($M=2.15$; $SD=0.613$), while slightly under a third fully agreed it led to a lack of trust and distorted awareness ($n=104$; 27.5%).

Preventative Measures to Protect Society from Fake News

Items		Disagree	To some extent	Agree	Mean	SD	Rank	The level
Raising awareness through education in schools and universities	Fer	10	164	204	2.51	0.552	1	High
	%	2.6	43.4	54.0				
Implementing strict measures to combat the spread of fake news	Fer	22	166	190	2.44	0.604	2	High
	%	5.8	43.9	50.3				
Establishing regulations for the use of social media	Fer	36	226	116	2.21	0.599	3	Middle
	%	9.5	59.8	30.7				
Announcing the unreliability of social media news	Fer	76	208	94	2.05	0.671	4	Middle
	%	20.1	55.0	24.9				
Developing a media plan to clarify the issue of fake news	Fer	98	186	94	1.99	0.715	5	Middle
	%	25.9	49.2	24.9				
The overall mean for the preventive measures to protect society from fake news					2.11	0.470	Middle	

Table 3: Results on the preventive measures to protect society from fake news

The study also inquired into the potential avenues for protecting society from fake news on social media. Respondents only deemed that measures to protect society from fake news on social media could be sufficient to some extent ($M=2.11$; $SD=0.470$).

Raising awareness through education in schools and universities was deemed as the most promising preventative measure, ranking highest of the five considered ($M=2.51$; $SD=0.552$). More than half of the respondents agreed that this was an effective measure ($n=204$; 54%), while a significant proportion deemed the measure to be effective to some extent ($n=164$; 43.4%). The implementation of strict measures to combat the spread of fake news ranked second ($M=2.44$; $SD=0.604$) with half of the respondents agreeing it was a suitable measure ($n=190$; 50.3%). Still, well over a third of the respondents deemed it as a suitable measure to some extent ($n=166$; 43.9%).

The lowest ranking three preventative measures largely saw partial agreement from the respondents. Under the third-ranked preventative measure ($M=2.21$; $SD=0.599$), respondents largely deemed establishing regulations for the use of social media as only preventing fake news to some extent ($n=226$; 59.8%), with less than a third fully agreeing that it would prevent fake news ($n=116$; 30.7%). Announcing the unreliability of social media news was the fourth ranked preventative measure ($M=2.05$; $SD=0.671$), with more than half of the respondents holding the sentiment that it would only work to some extent ($n=208$; 55.0%) and less than a quarter agreeing that it would work ($n=94$; 24.9%). The lowest ranking item was developing a media plan to clarify the issue of fake news ($M=1.99$; $SD=0.715$). It saw close to half hold the sentiment that it would only work to some extent ($n=186$; 49.2%). On the other hand, more than a quarter of the respondents disagreed that it would see success ($n=98$; 25.9%).

Discussion of the Results

On the role of social media in the spread of fake news. Respondents in the current study deemed social media as presenting the risk of the spread of fake news. These findings align with the literature which indicates these platforms structurally facilitate rapid and unfiltered dissemination of information (Chauhan et al., 2022). Research advances that the immediacy of sharing news-worthy information coupled with a lack of fact-checking mechanisms, constitutes the core mechanism driving the spread of fake news. Still on the role of social media in spreading fake news, respondents deemed the pursuit of fame on social media as a primary reason for the spread of fake news. These sentiments were also supported in Hasan et al. (2020), in the discussion of how fame-seeking attitudes influenced the perceptions of COVID-19 during the pandemic period through the spread of fake news. Such insights suggest that the spread of misinformation on social media is both structurally and behaviorally motivated.

Respondents in the current study also deemed that social media did not rely on credible sources, which contributed to its role in the spread of fake news. Nonetheless, studies did not fully support these sentiments. Research

refined the issue of credibility by highlighting how social media offers a platform to manipulate or mimic credibility instead (Di Domenico et al., 2021). In this case, fake news creators use processes such as mimicking legitimate sources and presenting content in the same form as authentic news to fabricate legitimacy. Such content is then further amplified via bots that significantly spread content from low-credibility sources (Shao et al., 2018). Still on the role of social media on the spread of fake news, respondents deemed that these platforms socially influenced the spread of fake news. These sentiments are supported in literature, which highlights that the features of social networks such as user-generation of content, the social networks, and algorithms establish the foundation for the spread of fake news (Chen, 2025; Liang et al., 2023). Literature thus presents the spread of fake news on social media as systemic rather than incidental.

Respondents also deemed it difficult to monitor social media for the spread of fake news, which heightens the role of social media in spreading fake news. Sastrosubroto and Pratama (2019) supported these sentiments by highlighting how the scale of content on the platforms, evasion tactics used by fake news posters such as foreign IPs and domains, and time lag in detection tend to complicate monitoring the emergence and spread of fake news. De Oliviera et al. (2021) adds to these sentiments by pointing out how humans are often not capable of differentiating between true and false news, which further complicates the monitoring of the platforms for fake news. Additionally, weaknesses in the capacities of official channels to disseminate accurate information further complicate the distinction between fake and real news. These weaknesses often result in low levels of trust in official channels, subsequently pushing consumers towards alternative, low credibility sources (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024). Combined with the study findings, the participants' sentiments show that spread of fake news is driven by more than platform design.

With regards to the findings on the social implications of the spread of fake news, research conclusively supported the sentiments held by the respondents. Respondents in the current study deemed the spread of fake

news through social media as a security risk, which aligned with the literature framing fake news as a national security concern (Belova & Georgieva, 2018; Fadiran, 2024). Studies also linked the spread of fake news through social media to social unrest, supporting the views of the study's respondents. Darban and Kabbaj (2023) pointed out how social media can be used to manipulate public opinions and undermine peace by sowing distrust among groups, while Rahman and Jahan (2020) provided the example of Bangladesh, where fake news spread through Facebook was used to disrupt social harmony. Studies also presented social chaos as a downstream effect of the spread of fake news through social media, supporting the sentiments held by study participants. Participants' sentiments aligned with the literature showing that fake news undermines state functionality and coordination through causing policy disruptions, governance challenges, and public confusion, which subsequently introduces social chaos (Ali et al., 2021). Similarly, the psychological implications of the spread of fake news as pointed out by the study participants were strongly supported by literature, with Claudia (2022) confirming the effects of the spread of fake news on anxiety, depression, fatigue, reduced institutional trust, and overall behavior. Literature thus narrowed down the social consequences of the spread of fake news to the individual level, showing how the repercussions on society can be felt at the individual level.

The study participants were, nonetheless, uncertain of the risks of the spread of fake news on social disintegration. However, studies such as Asthana (2025) and Ismail (2022) presented that fake news on social media promotes polarization and the erosion of cohesion. Participants were also uncertain of whether fake news reduced trust and distorted awareness. However, Saeed and Khan (2025) pointed out how fake news on social media promotes the growth of partisan beliefs and promotes mistrust between the society and news outlets.

On the preventative measures to protect society from fake news, the study respondents deemed a majority of the measures as ineffective, other than raising awareness on fake news and the implementation of strict

measures. Research strongly supports the view that raising awareness on fake news on social media can prevent the issue and endorses the implementation of laws that impose deterrents and platform-level controls (Nasery et al., 2023). Nonetheless, while respondents were skeptical of regulatory efficacy, literature explicitly supports regulatory frameworks as critical tools for preventing the spread of fake news on social media (Nasery et al., 2023). Findings reveal that respondents shared a preference for education and enforcement, and had a skepticism towards regulation and communication strategies, but literature suggests that effective prevention of fake news on social media depends on integrated multidisciplinary approaches that incorporate education, regulation, enforcement, and even communication strategies.

Proposed Preventative Measures to Protect Society from Fake News

Research advances several potential measures that can be useful in protecting society from fake news. At the user level, Gupta et al. (2021) advances the need to promote self-verification behaviors, encouraging individuals to assess information critically before sharing. Fact-checking behaviors allow users to move beyond being passive consumers of news by seeing them actively verify content and be more aware of fake news (Schuetz et al., 2021). Nonetheless, there is a shortcoming in the utility of self-verification as a potential preventative measure, which is the existence of echo chambers, which reduce fact-checking behavior among social media users (Schuetz et al., 2021). Therefore, creating media literacy through awareness campaigns emerges as critical avenue for equipping users with the skills to identify malicious or misleading content within the context of user-generated social media environments (Popescu, 2020). While self-verification is useful at the individual level, initiatives also need to be adopted at the platform level.

Platform-level initiatives employ a combination of technological and community-based mechanisms. They include crowd flagging, third-party fact-checking, human moderation, and the deployment of algorithmic detection systems (Gupta et al., 2022). The architecture of social media platforms, specifically the code can also constitute a useful platform-level approach for

mitigating the spread of fake news. Content selection and recommendation systems determine what users see. Therefore, these systems can subsequently be adjusted to prioritize credible information and suppress fake news to present a powerful structural-level intervention (Verstraete et al., 2022). Individual and platform level interventions can subsequently be combined with social-norm based interventions.

Social norms-based interventions are also promising approaches to mitigate fake news. Promoting and highlighting desirable behaviors, such as reporting fake news, can guide user actions in online environments towards curbing the spread of fake news (Gimpel et al., 2021). The combined use of injunctive norms, what users should do, and descriptive norms, what others are doing, has been demonstrated to produce great improvements in fake news reporting (Gimpel et al., 2021). Nonetheless, caution should be taken when applying these approaches as they may lead to unintended consequences such as the over-reporting of legitimate content.

Conclusion

Social media is a central component in the proliferation of fake news in contemporary times, through enabling rapid, large-scale, and mostly unfiltered information dissemination. Nonetheless, its role in the spread of fake news is not incidental. Rather, it is shaped by features inherent in the design of these platforms, along with behavioral motivations among social media users. The findings of this study indicate that the weaknesses in the information systems, more so those related to the information verification and official communication, tend to intensify the spread of fake news on social media. The consequences of fake news, on the other hand, extend beyond the misinformation itself and manifest in tangible societal disruptions that emerge in the form of threats to social security and the emergence of social chaos. Preventative efforts, in turn, are also only moderately effective, implying that current approaches may be ineffective in addressing the complexity of the issue of fake news in social media. Overall, the study underscores that the spread of fake news on social media constitutes a multifaceted societal challenge, that is embedded within technological

systems and fueled by human behavior along with broader institutional dynamics, to present the potential to significantly impact social cohesion.

Study Contributions

This study provides empirical evidence linking fake news on social media to the deterioration of social cohesion. It strengthens the conceptual connection between misinformation and societal stability. It extends the prevailing literature base by simultaneously examining three dimensions related to the association between social media and fake news, examining the role of the platforms, the societal consequences of fake news spread through social media, and potential prevention measures to mitigate risk. The study derives expert insights from three groups of academics in the fields of social science, media, and education to come up with theoretical perspectives on fake news that are often not captured in studies solely featuring users. Subsequently, its contributions frame the fake news issue as systemic, albeit influenced by elements related to both the technological components of social media platforms and their users. These contributions frame the issue in a way that it expands past platform-related explanations.

Recommendations

The study's findings support the recommendation of media literacy programs, particularly within institutions, to expand awareness of individuals at an early age and equip them with the requisite critical evaluation skills to discern social media content authenticity. Additionally, the findings back the recommendation of the adoption of robust interventions at the platform level that should come through making adjustments to existing algorithms to train them in prioritization of credible sources. Leveraging some social-norms-based strategies also emerges as a potentially useful approach to the mitigation of the spread of fake news on the social media platforms. It would also be prudent to expand fact-checking initiatives and introduce third-party verification and crowd flagging systems to enhance detection and response to fake news. Moreover, it would also be beneficial to strengthen the capacities and responsiveness of official communication channels to mitigate information trust and low levels of trust that sustain misinformation.

Study Limitations

While the current study did make some valuable contributions, it was limited to some extent. One of its limitations was the reliance on a quantitative design, which limited the depth of insight, restricting the ability to explore the perspectives behind the views of the respondents in greater detail. The use of the convenience sampling approach also limited generalizability and may have introduced sampling bias, even though the study targeted subject matter experts. Additionally, generalizability was further limited by the geographically confined nature of the study, which focused on universities in Saudi Arabia. The cross-sectional design adopted also only captures the views of the respondents at a single point in time, which limits the ability to assess any changes in perceptions. Additionally, while the focus on subject matter experts was a valuable approach, the exclusion of general user experiences limited insights into the real-world interactions with fake news on the platforms.

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