



Spread of misinformation on social media during the U.P. election and its impact on voters' behaviour

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Abstract:

The emergence of social media as a predominant medium for political discourse has significantly altered India's electoral landscape. One-third of the global population is linked through social media, a popular media platform, which is a fact known to all. The top three social media platforms in the world are Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. With the help of Facebook, politics becomes easy as the latter can have an online presence to get the target audience. This study examines the nature, dissemination, and impact of misinformation on voter behavior during the Uttar Pradesh election. It looks at how sites like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter use false or misleading information to shape public perceptions and influence election results. Using a Quantitative research approach, the research combines surveys of 72 voters across Uttar Pradesh. The study identifies the types of misinformation prevalent during the elections, the demographic groups most affected, and the mechanisms through which misinformation spreads, including viral memes, fake news stories, and misleading videos.



Keywords: Social Media, Uttar Pradesh, Election, Misinformation, Fake News, Political Communication.

Introduction:

Newer media channels have emerged as a result of technological advancements, and the logic of network and social media has reinforced traditional media logic. The transition from top-down to horizontal and interactive communication patterns is just one way that these developments have affected political communication.

Social media has significantly transformed political communication and the way people receive and utilize information during elections. Direct communication between political actors and voters is now possible through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, which present unmatched chances for mobilization and outreach. But there are also serious drawbacks to this digital revolution, such as the spread of false information.

With the proliferation of social networks and the immediacy of communication, the direct relationship between leaders and citizens revolutionised political communication. Electoral campaigns have nothing in common with those of yesteryear. For some years now, social networks have been dictating certain partisan strategies to attract voters, mobilise the electorate, and win the competitive fight for the vote. In short, they define democracy in the sense given by Schumpeter. (Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, 1942)

Social media provides an unprecedented opportunity for political engagement, but it also poses ethical and regulatory concerns. Social media firms have more accountability due to the potential for misuse, including propagating false information and divisiveness. Governments and regulatory agencies are exploring regulations to ensure social media platforms promote democratic discourse without compromising election integrity. As social media evolves, it's important to establish a balance between its benefits and challenges in shaping political communication.



Social Media- Social media is a platform that is becoming quite popular these days due to its easy, to, use features. People are enabled to be in contact with each other over the globe by social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc.

Simply put, the whole earth is only one finger tap away, and this is all due to social media. The present generation is one of the most intensive users of social media.

From Facebook and Instagram to X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, more than 5 billion people use social media, equal to roughly 62% of the world's population.¹ (<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report>) In early 2024, 94.7% of users accessed chat and messaging apps and websites, followed closely by social platforms, with 94.3% of users.² (<https://www.gwi.com/reports/global-media-landscape>)

Types of social media

Facebook- Facebook is a free social networking Web platform that promotes and facilitates interaction between friends, family, and colleagues. With nearly 3 billion monthly users, Facebook is inarguably the largest and most popular social media platform in the world. While that level of proliferation ensures that at least some of your audience will regularly use this platform and take in your content, Facebook has developed a somewhat negative reputation among younger users who are increasingly turning to alternative sites.

Twitter- As described on its own website, Twitter.com, is "an online social networking service that enables users to send and read short 140-character messages called tweets". Besides short comments, web links can also be shared along with images. However, a long piece of text is obviously out of the question. In this way, it is very effective for news to be spread quickly, but it is not so great for detailed discussions.

Twitter has become a popular tool to use when you want to share the news as soon as possible, to read short content, and to have real-time communication with your audience. Pictures and videos are usually the best way to introduce your business to new people. But, if you are up, to, date with the latest trends and can quickly grasp the spirit of the time, a timely or humorous tweet can work miracles.



WhatsApp- It is one of the most popular mobile apps, mainly designed to provide an instant messaging service on smartphones. Communicating different kinds of texts and multimedia messages between users or groups, it utilizes internet services. In February 2016, the number of its users worldwide had exceeded one billion. The impact of WhatsApp on our lives, culture, and society is increasing. Besides, it is becoming a widely used business tool for marketing and a popular instrument for advertising in politics. Such a development has also fascinated the researchers who, as a result, decided to engage themselves in studying the effects and the various consequences of WhatsApp usage on the users' social and personal lives.

Political Communication- Political communication is the method by which information about governance, public policy, political concepts, and public affairs is generated, shared, and interpreted among various political entities and the populace. It is crucial for molding public perceptions, swaying voter choices, and sustaining the interaction between the government and its citizens. Such communication is visible in various media, embracing not only conventional means, for instance, newspapers, television, and radio, but also modern ways like social networking and official pages. Politicians, parties, governments, the press, and the public are the main characters in this drama, using talks, the electoral process, commercials, debates, and reporting to communicate their ideas. The primary roles of political communication are to keep citizens informed about governmental actions, influence voters during elections, establish public priorities, frame issues in specific ways, and encourage political engagement. In democratic systems, it promotes transparency and accountability, allowing citizens to make well-informed choices. Nonetheless, issues such as misinformation, biased media coverage, propaganda, and increasing political division can impair its effectiveness. In summary, political communication is fundamental to democratic participation, linking individuals with political mechanisms and enabling them to engage constructively in shaping their government.

Election- Elections are the means by which inhabitants select the people who will govern them or the decision that will be made regarding a certain matter. Voting is the way in which citizens



take part in elections. Elections are the primary means of political engagement in a democratic system. The election results dictate the political leadership that will set the political direction for the duration of the term. Additionally, elections constitute the most powerful instrument for voters to hold their leaders responsible, as voters have the capacity to transfer power to different parties or candidates if they are not content with the political leadership.

Misinformation- Misinformation, which is defined as inaccurate or deceptive information disseminated with no intention, has become a major issue in election processes around the globe. In India, a country known for its thriving democracy and large number of digital users, the problem is most noticeable. An appropriate case study to investigate the dynamics of disinformation on social media is the Uttar Pradesh elections, which are among the biggest and most politically consequential elections in India.

Fake News- Fake news is a type of information that has no origin. Fake news is intentionally fabricated information or misleading propaganda that is offered as a bona fide source of news. Currently, numerous kinds of fake news spread like fire and have become the trend on different social media sites. Therefore, it is a difficult task for media workers to handle and confirm the existence of fake news.

Uttar Pradesh- Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in India. Politically, it is of great significance to Indian politics. Politicians, on the other hand, are quite worried about the concentration of political parties in very few areas. By comparing its population with its share of seats in the Lok Sabha, which is 80, the highest among all the states, one can easily grasp the significance of Uttar Pradesh. Delhi is the only UT that has fewer people than Uttar Pradesh. Hence, all political parties are eager to take advantage of the various government schemes. There are various castes, communities, and religions in Uttar Pradesh. The fact that such a large number of different languages are spoken in Uttar Pradesh reflects not only the state's rich cultural heritage but also the socioeconomic disparities.



Related Literature

Lokniti-CSDS (2019, 2022) Lokniti post-poll studies from the 2019 General Elections and 2022 U.P. Assembly Elections found that nearly 30–40% of voters in U.P. were exposed to social media content during the campaign period. These studies establish that WhatsApp and Facebook are primary sources of political information in semi-urban and rural U.P., especially among youth and first-time voters.

Shikhar, Tiwari Sandhya (2024). The function and development of local and regional political parties in Uttar Pradesh are examined in this research, with a focus on their historical development, governance-related consequences, and influence. Unlike national parties, regional political organizations gained significance in India after 1967 as the Congress's power declined. The study examines the primary factors that contributed to the formation of regional parties, as well as their organizational structures, electoral strategies, and policy-making sway. In order to demonstrate how local political movements have affected national politics, the research also examines the region's changing political climate and voting trends.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the channels and platforms used for disseminating misinformation, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter.
- To investigate voter awareness of misinformation and their ability to identify and avoid it.
- To assess the impact of misinformation on voter perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making.

Research Questions

- What are the key characteristics of misinformation dissemination on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter?
- What role does media literacy play in voter awareness and avoidance of misinformation?



- To what extent does misinformation affect voter decisions during elections?

Research Methodology

Research Design- The study uses a quantitative research approach and incorporates quantitative methods to thoroughly understand the nature, spread, and impact of misinformation during the Uttar Pradesh elections.

Sampling- The sample is selected by purposive sampling, which is a non, non-probability sampling technique. A purposive sample is a non, non-probability sample that is selected based on the population characteristics and the study's objective. The sample size of this study is 72 respondents; data were collected from a survey conducted by the researcher individually. The universe of this study was the voters of Lucknow.

Tools- An appropriate tool is very necessary for any study to collect the data without bias. For this study, the researcher used the survey method to collect the data, and the researcher conducted the survey individually with the voters through the questionnaire tool.

Data Collection

The researcher collected the data through the Google Form survey of the voters of Lucknow, and after the collection, the researcher analysed the data. In this study, the researcher took 72 respondents for the study, which was related to political engagement through social media platforms.

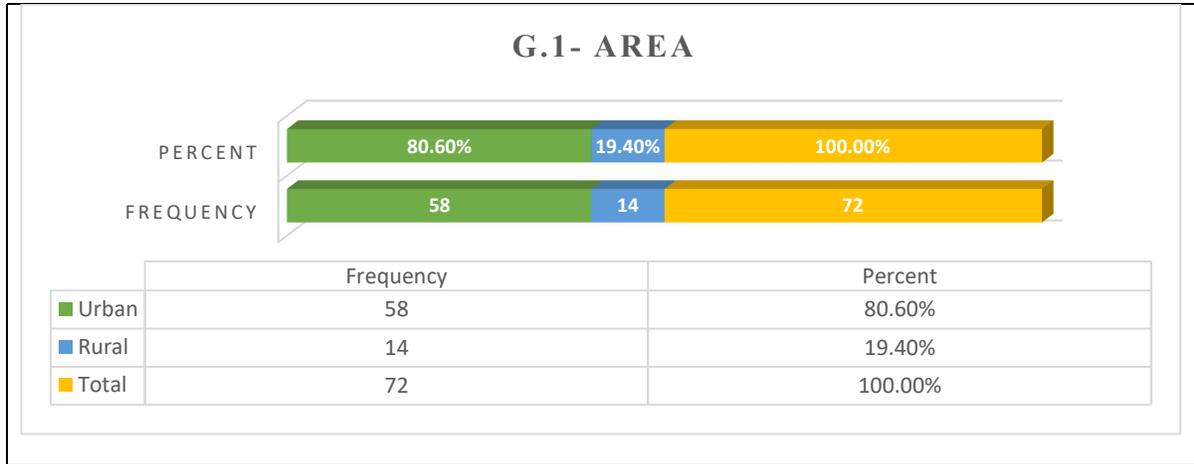
Its Narrative analysis follows: Q= Question I= Interpretation G= Graph

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Responses

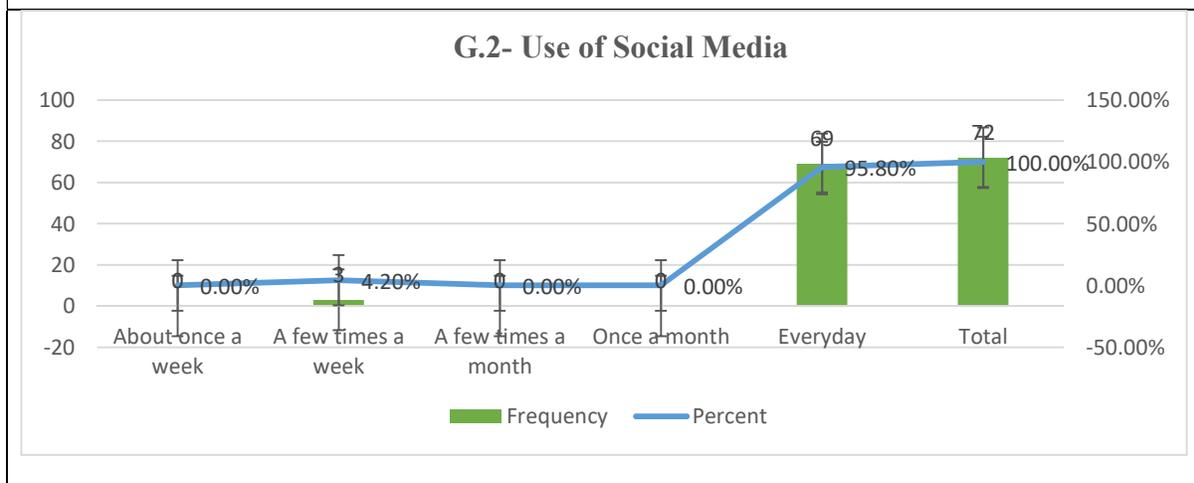
S1. What area, you live in comes under?

II: On this statement, out of 72 respondents (58), 80.6% live in Urban areas, and 14(19.4%) live in Rural areas. The results found that most of the respondents belong to Urban Areas.



S2. Do you use social media?

I2: On this statement, 6 options are given in which out of 72 Respondents 0% use social media About once a week, 3(4.2%) A few times a week, 0% A few times a month, 0% once a month, 69(95.8%) use social media Everyday which means mostly respondents use social media Every day.

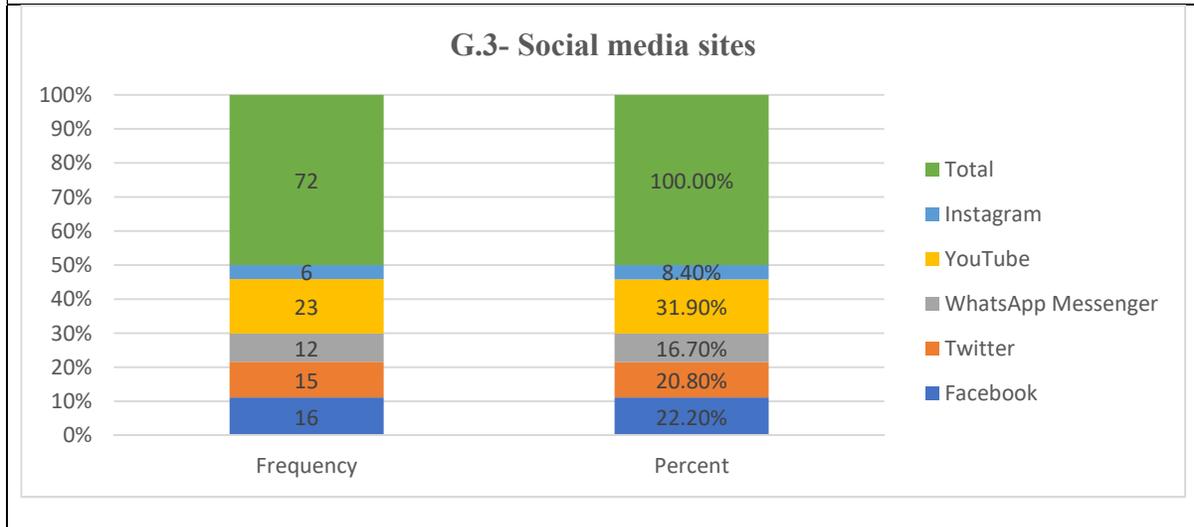


S3. Which social media sites do you use mostly for political information

I3: On this statement, 5 options are given in which out of 72 Respondents 16(22.20%) use Facebook for political information, 15(20.80%) use Twitter for political information, 12(16.70%) use WhatsApp Messenger for political information, 23(32.90%) use YouTube for political information and 6(8.40%) use Instagram for political information which means

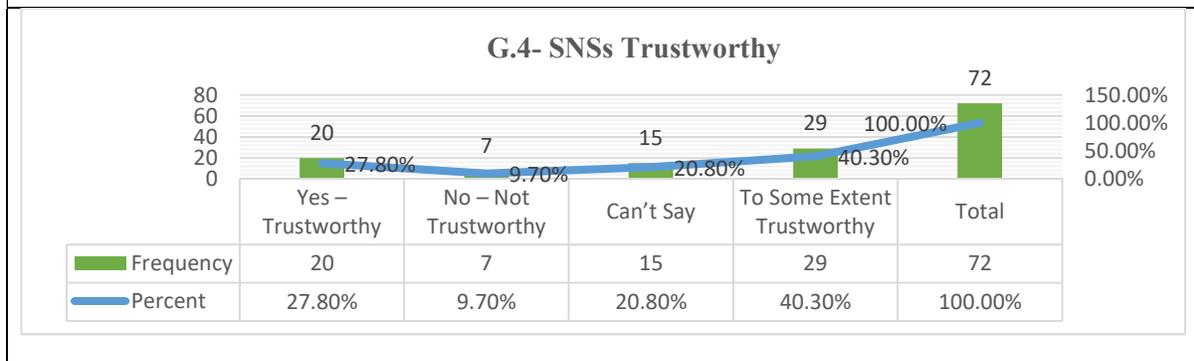


mostly respondents use YouTube for political information.



S4. Do you find the SNSs Trustworthy?

I4: On this statement, 4 options are given in which out of 72 Respondents 20(27.8%) says yes, they found SNSs Trustworthy, 7(9.7%) says No they can't find SNSs Trustworthy, 15(20.8%) they can't say that SNSs is Trustworthy, and 29(40.3%) found to some extent found SNSs is Trustworthy which results that mostly respondents found SNSs is Trustworthy



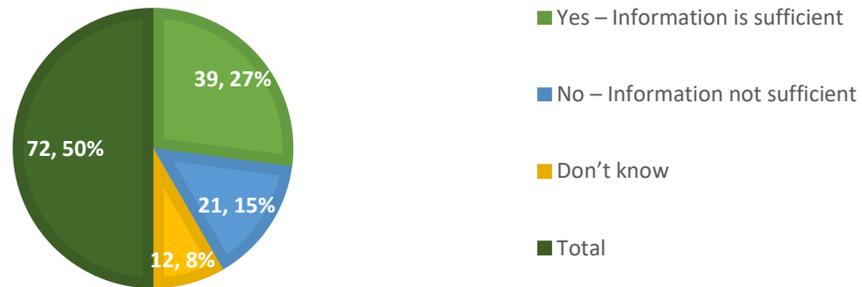
S5. Do you find that SNSs are presenting political information during elections in abundance/ sufficient?

I5: On this statement, 3 options are given in which out of 72 Respondents 39(54.2%) says yes SNSs are presenting political information during elections is abundance/ sufficient,



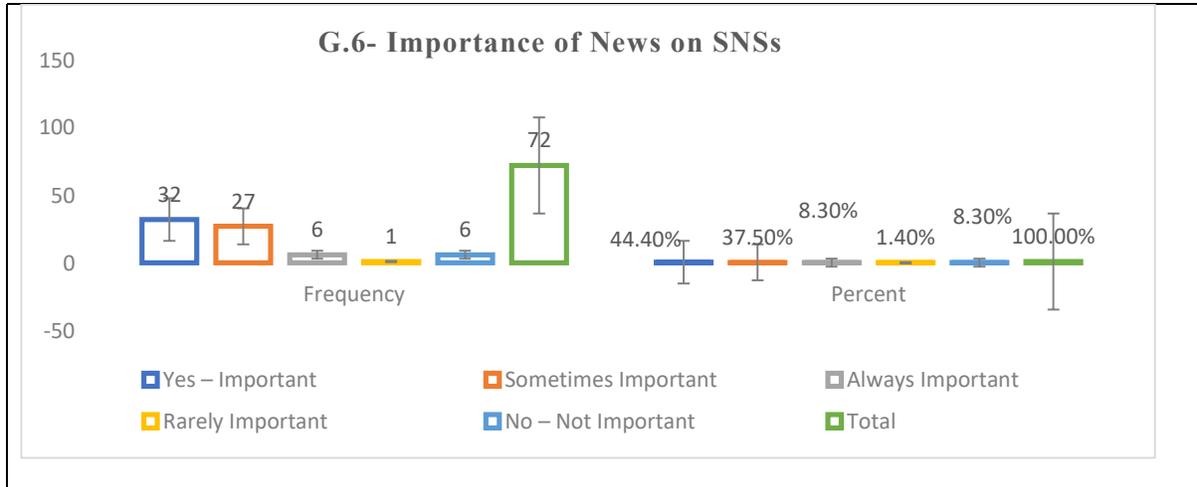
21(29.2%) says No they can't find SNSs are presenting political information during elections is not abundance/ sufficient and 12(16.7%) says don't know that SNSs are presenting political information during elections is abundance/ sufficient or not which results that mostly respondents found SNSs is are presenting political information during elections is abundance/ sufficient.

G.5- SUFFICIENT INFO. ON SNS



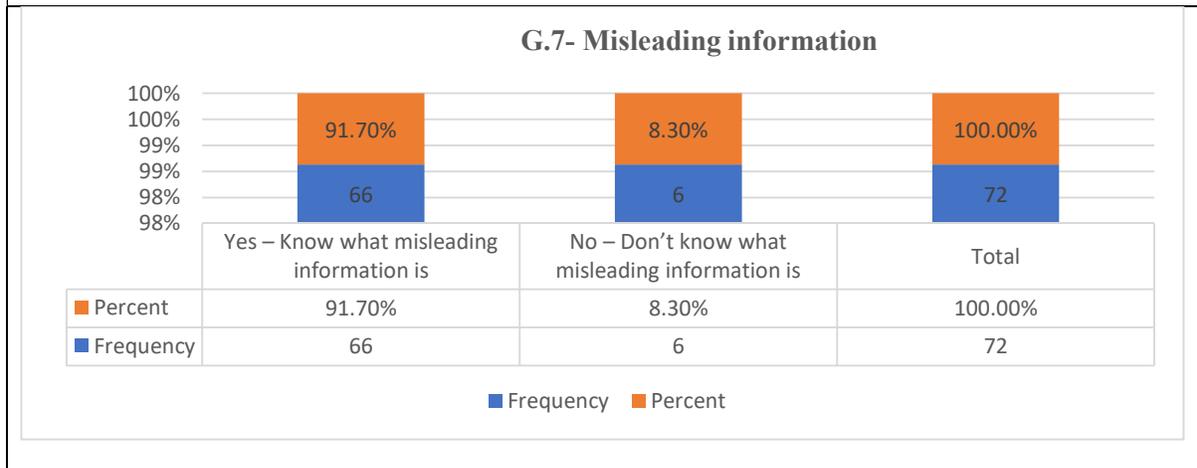
S6. Do you think that political information during elections presented in the news on SNSs is important?

I6: On this statement, 5 options are given on Likert scale type in which out of 72 Respondents 32(44.4%) says yes SNSs are presenting political information during elections is important, 27(37.5%) says sometimes SNSs are presenting political information during elections is important, 6(8.3%) says always SNSs are presenting political information during elections is important, 1(1.4%) says rarely SNSs are presenting political information during elections is important and 6(8.3%) says no SNSs are presenting political information during elections is not important which results that mostly respondents found SNSs is are presenting political information during elections is important.



S7. Do you understand what misleading information is?

I7: On this statement, 2 options are given, in which out of 72 Respondents, 66(91.7%) say yes, they know what misleading information is, and 6(8.3%) say no, they don't know what misleading information is, which means that mostly respondents know what misleading information is.

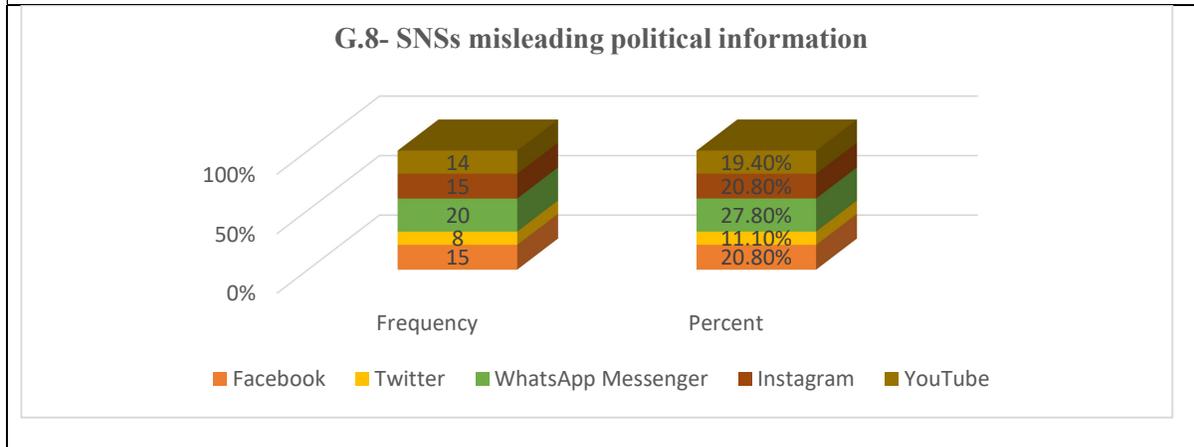


S8. Out of below mentioned SNSs, which one do you think presents misleading political information during elections the most?

I8: On this statement, 5 options are given in which out of 72 Respondents 15(20.8%) choose Facebook presents misleading political information during elections most,

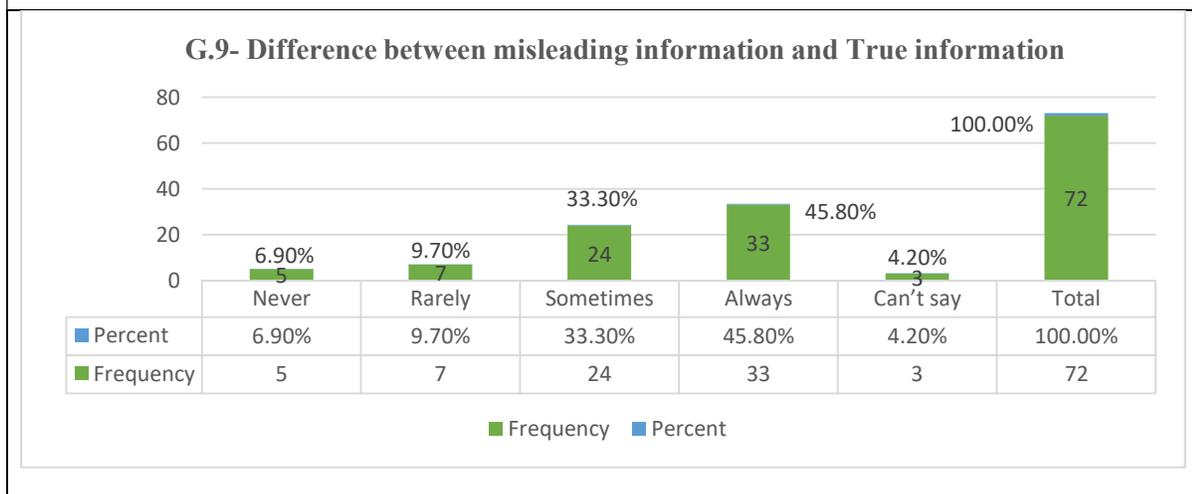


8(11.1%) choose Twitter, 20(20.8%) choose WhatsApp Messenger, 15(20.8%) choose Instagram and 14(19.4%) choose YouTube which results that WhatsApp Messenger presents misleading political information during elections most.



S9. Do you analyze the difference between misleading information and True information on the SNSs you follow?

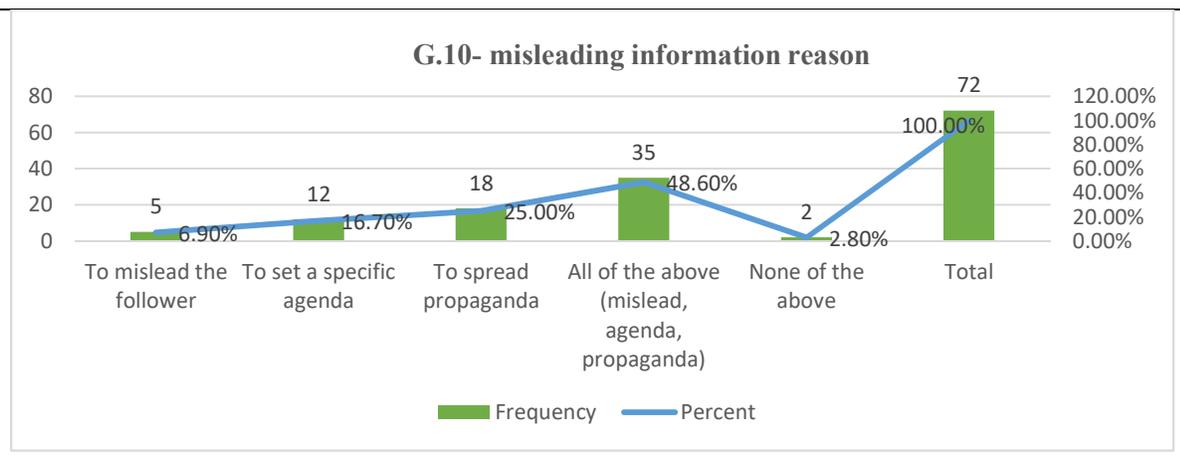
I9: On this statement, 5 options are given on Likert scale type in which out of 72 Respondents 24(33.3%) says sometimes they found difference, 33(45.8%) says always, 7(9.7%) says rarely, 5(6.9%) says never and 3(4.2%) says can't say which results that mostly respondents always found the difference between misleading information and True information on SNSs





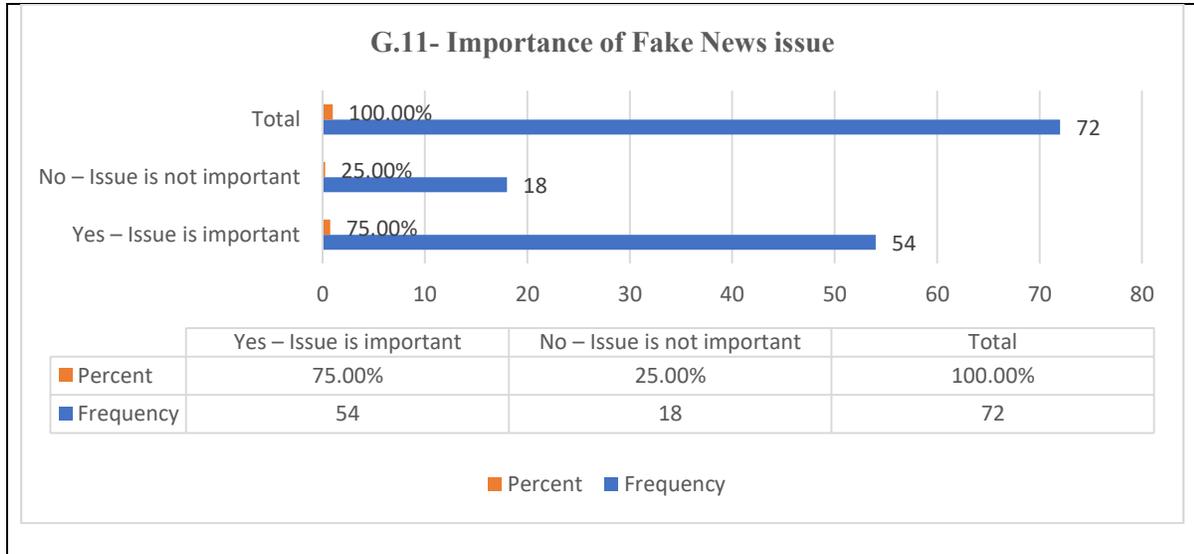
S10. What could be the reason behind misleading information during elections on SNSs?

I10: On this statement, 5 options are given in which out of 72 Respondents 5(6.9%) choose To mislead the follower, 12(16.7%) choose To set a specific agenda, 18(25.0%) choose To spread propaganda, 35(48.6%) choose all the above option in which the reasons are To mislead the follower, To spread propaganda, and to set a specific agenda and 2(2.8%) choose none of the above option in which the reasons are To mislead the follower, To spread propaganda, and to set a specific agenda which results that To mislead the follower, To spread propaganda, and to set a specific agenda could be the reason behind misleading information during elections on SNSs



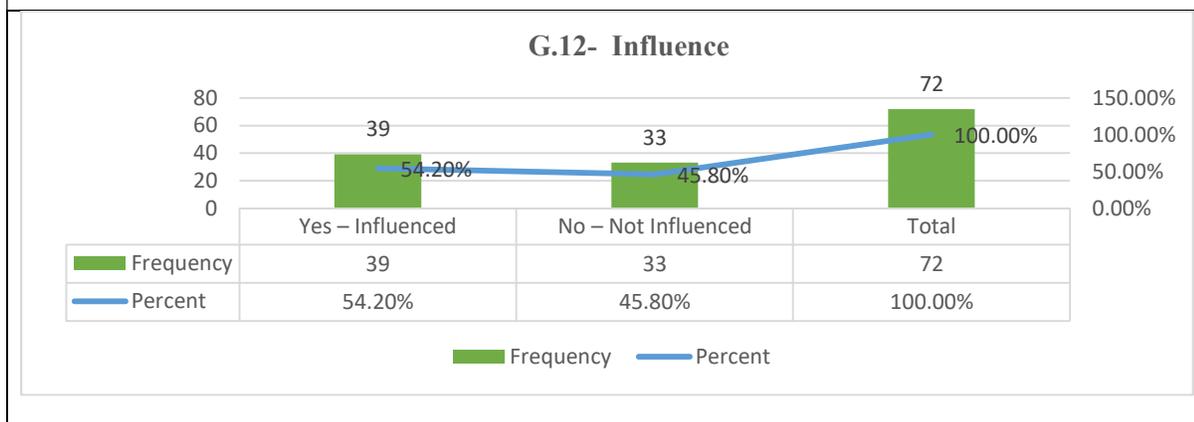
S11. Is the issue of fake news on SNSs important to you?

S11: On this statement, 2 options are given in out of which 72 Respondents, 54(75.0%) say yes issue of fake news on SNSs is important, and 18(25.0%) say no, the issue of fake news on SNSs is important.



S12. Has any misleading political information during elections on SNSs influenced you yet?

I12: On this statement, 2 options are given in which out of 72 Respondents, 39(54.2%) say yes, misleading political information during elections on SNSs influenced them, and 33(45.8%) say no, misleading political information during elections on SNSs does not influence them which resulting in misleading political information during elections on SNSs influencing them.



S13 If yes, then select the nature of influence?

I13 According to S12, where 54.2% (39 individuals) indicated they were affected by misleading political information on social networking sites during elections, S13 examines



the nature of that influence.

The analysis of S13 will concentrate on how misleading information impacted these individuals. For instance, it could reveal alterations in their perceptions, attitudes, voting preferences, or political choices. If participants chose options like “positive change,” “negative change,” or “neutral,” the results would illuminate the degree and direction of the influence.

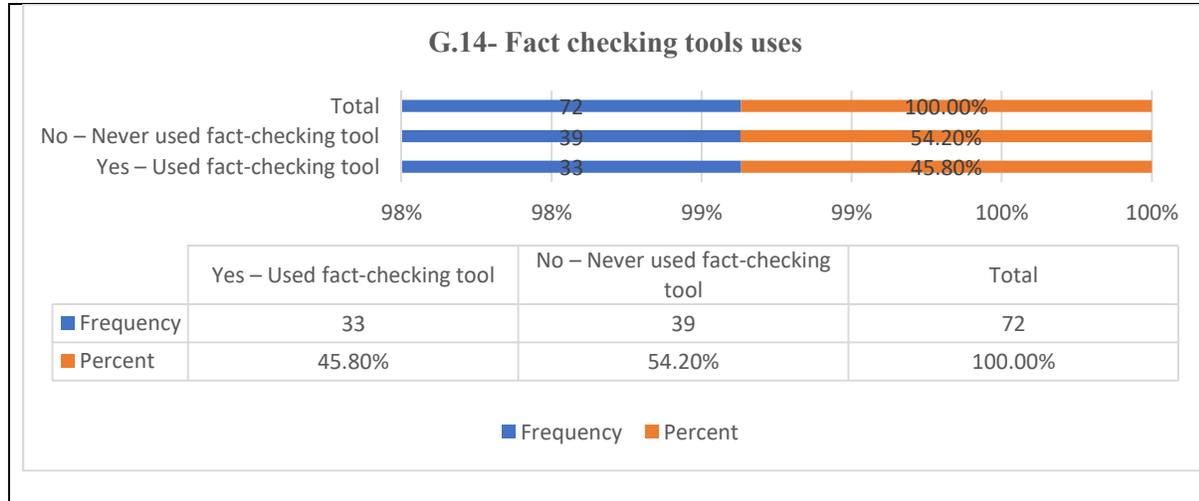
From S12:

- Among the 39 respondents who felt influenced, a notable number might report a negative effect (such as being misled or confused), while others could report a positive or neutral influence if the misleading information resonated with their existing beliefs or did not significantly change their decisions.
- The findings from S13 enable us to grasp the qualitative impact of misleading political content—not merely if it influenced them, but how it shaped their perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making processes.

This results in a considerable portion of respondents having encountered influence from misleading political information on social networking sites. The nature of this influence differs, with a higher likelihood of being neutral or negative, suggesting that misleading content can impact political perceptions and decision-making; however, its intensity and direction rely on individual critical thinking and awareness.

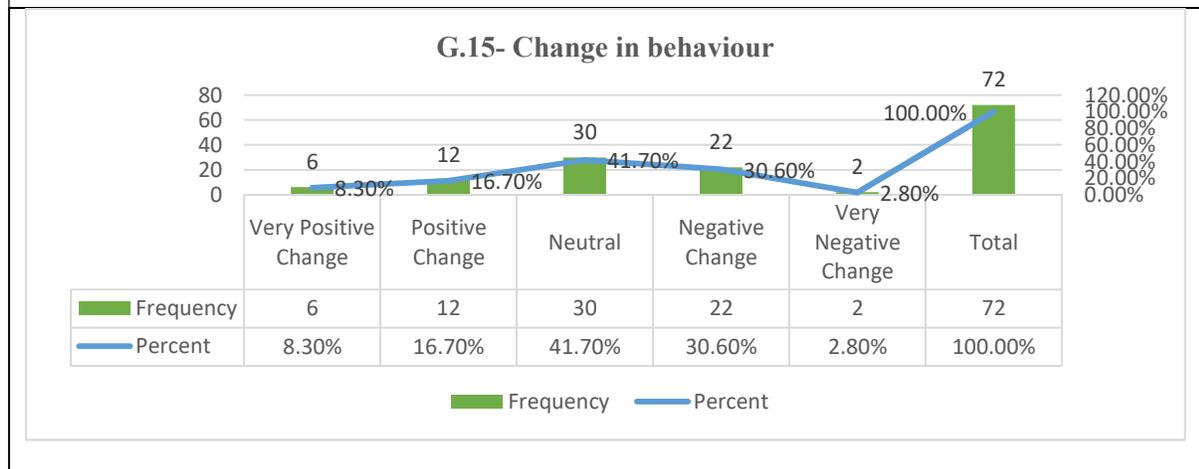
S14. Have you ever used any fact-checking tool to analyze the difference between misleading political information and true information on SNSs

I14: On this statement, 2 options are given out of 72 Respondents. 39 (54.2%) choose no, and 33 (45.8%) choose yes, resulting in most people never using any fact-checking tool to analyze the difference between misleading political information and true information on SNSs.



S15. Due to misleading political information on social media networks, do you find any change in your perception, attitude, and decision-making?

I15: On this statement, 5 options are given on Likert scale type in which out of 72 Respondents 12(16.7%) choose positive change, 6(8.3%) choose very positive change, 22(30.6%) choose negative change, 2(2.8%) choose very negative change and 30(41.7%) choose neutral which results that most of the people are neutral about the change.



Result

Demographics and Social Media Usage



- Among 72 respondents, 80.6% (58 respondents) reside in urban areas, while 19.4% (14 respondents) live in rural settings, reflecting a largely urban demographic.
- In terms of social media engagement, 95.8% (69 respondents) access social media daily, indicating a high level of activity on these platforms.

Social Media Platforms for Political Information

- YouTube is the most frequently utilized platform for acquiring political information at 32.1%, followed by Facebook at 22.6%, Twitter at 20.2%, WhatsApp at 16.1%, and Instagram at 8.9%.

Trust in social media (SNSs)

- A total of 40.3% (29 respondents) perceive SNSs as somewhat trustworthy, 27.8% (20 respondents) fully trust them, and 20.8% (15 respondents) express uncertainty, demonstrating a moderate level of trust among users.

Political Information During Elections

- About 54.2% (39 respondents) believe that SNSs provide a wealth of political information during elections, while 29.2% (21 respondents) disagree, and 16.7% (12 respondents) remain uncertain.
- When asked about its significance, 44.4% (32 respondents) find political information on SNSs important, 37.5% (27 respondents) view it as sometimes important, and 8.3% (6 respondents) always consider it important, indicating that the majority of respondents value political content during election periods.

Awareness of Misleading Information

- An impressive 91.7% (66 respondents) are aware of what constitutes misleading information.
- When queried about which SNSs disseminate the most misleading political content, WhatsApp (20.8%) ranks first, followed by Facebook (20.8%), Instagram (20.8%), YouTube (19.4%), and Twitter (11.1%).



- A large number of respondents (45.8%) consistently differentiate between misleading and factual information, while 33.3% do so occasionally, showcasing a high degree of awareness and critical assessment.

Reasons behind Misleading Information

- According to 48.6% (35 respondents), misleading political messaging is attributed to motives such as confusing followers, spreading propaganda, and promoting particular agendas.

Impact of Misleading Political Information

- A significant 75% (54 respondents) regard the problem of fake news on SNSs as important.
- Over half, specifically 54.2% (39 respondents), report having been swayed by misleading political information.
- Nevertheless, 54.2% (39 respondents) have never utilized fact-checking tools, indicating limited efforts to rectify misinformation.
- In terms of impact on perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making, 41.7% (30 respondents) noted a neutral change, while 30.6% (22 respondents) experienced a negative effect, and 25% reported either positive or very positive changes, suggesting that most individuals remain neutral, though a considerable number experience adverse outcomes.

Conclusion

The survey highlights that respondents are mainly urban dwellers who are very active on social media, with YouTube identified as the leading source for political information. While there exists a moderate trust level in SNSs, a majority perceive the widespread occurrence of misleading information during elections, especially on WhatsApp. Generally, respondents are conscious of distinguishing between accurate and misleading information, though practices for fact-checking are limited, indicating a shortfall in effectively addressing misinformation. Misleading political content does have an impact—more than half report being influenced—but



most participants show a neutral shift in perception, emphasizing that while misinformation is acknowledged, its behavioral consequences are somewhat tempered by critical scrutiny. The results highlight the necessity for fostering media literacy, critical thinking, and the use of fact-checking resources among social media users to facilitate informed political choices.

Limitation of the Study

This study conveys important facts about how fake news has an impact on the U.P. elections, but still, there is a need to consider its shortcomings. The discoveries are limited to a small and geographically concentrated sample of 72 respondents, who were only from Lucknow; thus, the extent to which these findings can be applied to the whole U.P. voters' population is undecided. Besides that, the sample was heavily skewed towards the city, as more than 80% of the participants were from urban areas, so a considerable number of rural households are likely to have remained unnoticed in terms of both the consumption and influence of misinformation. The dependence on respondents' self-assessment via questionnaires also leaves open the chance of bias, as the respondents might have given socially desirable answers regarding their skills in recognizing misinformation or the extent to which it influenced their behavior. In addition, as a cross-sectional study, it only reflects people's views at the moment, and therefore, it is unable to follow the changes in the impact of misinformation over time or determine the cause-and-effect relationships, only associations. The drawbacks of the present research call for extensive investigation with more locations and demographic variety next time.

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