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Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications

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The current issue is the second of the tenth volume of the *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications (AJMMC)*, published by the [*Mass Media & Communication Unit*](#) of ATINER.

Gregory T. Papanikos
President
ATINER



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Fake News in Brazil – Bolsonaro Case Study

By Francisca Selidonha Pereira Da Silva,
Marinete Andrião Francischetto^o & João Barreto da Fonseca[•]*

It is well-known that former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro used social media to spread fake news with the assistance of his public official supporters also known as the “hatred cabinet”. This practice started during his campaign and continued throughout his government. This political strategy was guided by a selected group influenced by Olavo de Carvalho and inspired by his far-right thinking. This paper aims to analyze Bolsonaro’s political strategy of using social media to manipulate his followers by applying Carlo Ginzburg’s evidence method. The theoretical reference is based on Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas from the vision of Mauro Wilton and Wilson Gomes, Zygmunt Bauman, Hanna Arendt, Yuval Harari, Pierre Lévy, Gilles Lipovetsky, Georges Balandier, among others. In the post-truth era, Bolsonaro and his supporters continue to disseminate fake news through a giant network in social media - such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook - about many different issues including politics, dictatorship, racism, homophobia, environment, COVID-19 treatment, and vaccines.

Keywords: fake news, social media, public space, digital communication, post-modernity

Introduction

The habit of spreading the so-called fake news¹ has been known since the 6th century, according to historian and professor emeritus of Harvard Robert Darnton, in an interview with journalist Jorge Araújo, published in *Folha de São Paulo*, on 29 de Maio de 2012. According to Darnton in Araújo (2012), 6th-century Byzantine historian Procopius, famous for writing the history of Justinian’s empire, also wrote a secret text, called “Anekdotia”, in which by the spread of “fake news”, he ruined the reputation of Emperor Justinian among others. A very similar dynamic happened in the American presidential campaign in 2016.

For Darnton in Araújo (2012), the main disseminator of fake news, or “semi-fake news” (because the news contained a little bit of truth), was Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), a renowned journalist of the early 16th century whose career began while writing short poems with slander and jokes that were handed out near Piazza Navona in Rome.

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¹False reports of events, written and read on websites Fake news creates significant public confusion about current events. Compare to post-truth. OXFORD DICTIONARIES (2020). Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/fake-news>.

Darnton in Araújo (2012) explains that Aretino's work was "fake news" in the form of poetry, in which he attacked public figures that would pay him not to publish this kind of ancestral 'tweet'². "I think those stories were much more scandalous than those of today. (...) You had this kind of fake news – they were like Facebook posts or tweets³ – circulating everywhere in Paris and London on the eve of the French Revolution and for a good part of the 18th century," says Darnton (Araújo, 2012). However, with the dissemination of social networks, "fake news" began to propagate more easily, since the communication vehicles no longer were the main source of information.

We hypothesize the "hatred cabinet" – the group of the former president of Brazil (2019-2022) Jair Bolsonaro⁴ – used fake news to manipulate his followers on social media by feeding them distorted information and creating communities politically aligned with the far-right president's ideologies.

Another hypothesis to be investigated is related to the transmission of this information that circulates in isolated groups. We understand that "reality bubbles" are formed by people who receive pieces of fake news and accept them without any critical analysis. This process is described by Plato in the Allegory of the Cave, in which prisoners accept the simulacrum as truth because they don't know the reality.

Our main objective is to understand the *modus operandi*⁵ of the ideological group known as the "hatred cabinet", which acted in the dissemination of fake news aiming to favor the political interests of former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. We believe this practice, which was executed by a group influenced by the writer Olavo de Carvalho and his far-right thinking, started during Bolsonaro's political campaign, and continued throughout his government. Carvalho was mentored by the far-right chief strategist for Donald Trump, Steve Bannon⁶. The theoretical framework is based on Pierre Bourdieu, the vision of Mauro Wilton and Wilson Gomes on Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman, Yuval Harari, Georges Balandier, among others. This article intends to analyze those hypotheses through an investigative perspective according to the evidentiary methodology advocated by Ginzburg (2009).

²To post a tweet on Twitter. Tweet. Informal Dictionary (2019). São Paulo, 20 Sep 2019. Available at: <https://www.dicionarioinformal.com.br/tu%C3%ADte/>.

³Content published on a website, post. Meaning of post. Dicio – Online dictionary of the Portuguese language (2009-2023). Available at: <https://www.dicio.com.br/post/>.

⁴Jair Bolsonaro (1955) is an Army reserve captain and former president of Brazil. He was affiliated with the Social Liberal Party (PSL), when he was elected the 38th president of Brazil, for 2019-2022 term, with 55.13% of votes. In 2022 elections, he ran for re-election for PL (Liberal Party) and was defeated by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Frazão (2023). "E-Biography – Jair Bolsonaro." 03 Jan. 2023. Available at: https://www.ebiografia.com/jair_bolsonaro/.

⁵Word of Latin origin. The way in which a person or an institution acts or operates and develops its activities. Michaelis (2003). Portuguese Language Dictionary. Editora Melhoramentos. Available at: <https://michaelis.uol.com.br/busca?id=NyjYa>.

⁶At 68, Bannon is an ideologue of the populist radical new right and was Trump's main strategist. He has already stated that Bolsonaro is a "great hero". UOL (2022). "Former Trump adviser is 'oracle' of the Bolsonaro family: Who is Steve Bannon". <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2022/10/21/quem-e-steve-bannon.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>.

Literature Review

To understand the process of using dramatization resources to legitimize the political actions of Bolsonaro and his political group, we are inspired by the vision of George Balandier. “The great political actor commands the reality through the imaginary. He can keep one scene or another separate, govern them, and produce the spectacle.” (Balandier, 1981, p. 6). Historically, this dramatization resource has been appropriated by autocratic rulers to carry out social control. Balandier (1981, p.6) contextualizes Machiavelli in the intimate relationship between the art of government and the art of the stage. Dramatization techniques are not limited to theatrical performances, as they can also be applied in governing a city.

The prince must behave as a “political actor to gain and retain power. His image will thus be able to correspond to what his subjects wish to find in him” (Balandier, 1981). Machiavelli and Balandier (1981) emphasizes the government in Florence dominated public life without directly participating through institutions and managed to mobilize the people with the support of the arts.

Harmony, in a political setting, could be achieved through staging: “the collective imaginary is projected onto the scene where the lyrical drama unfolds, (...) where everything is in harmony. It produces the illusion.” (Balandier, 1981, p. 7).

Power results from majority rulings, according to Balandier (1981, p. 8), “It depends on art, persuasion, debate, the ability to create effects that favor the identification of the represented with the representative.” He further reports that new techniques, such as media resources, propaganda, and political polls, give even more advantages to what he classifies as “democratic dramaturgy,” as they reinforce appearances and link the fate of those in power to both the quality of their public image and their actions. The State, then, turns into a spectacle. We consider these practices cited by Machiavelli apud Balandier (1981) to be as well as the strategies adopted in post-modernity by Bolsonaro and his political group to engage their public in social networks.

Balandier (1981, p. 9) mentions what he classifies as “political theatricality” is accentuated by the circumstances of certain regimes. He also highlights the practices of many tropical states, such as Brazil, as excessively theatrical: “They set up their scenarios using as a foundation the poverty of the majority of their subjects, they mask uncontrolled powers”. He concludes: “Finally, all political power obtains subordination through theatricalization”. (Balandier, 1981, p. 10).

For Hannah Arendt, where there is a loss of power, there is the temptation to replace it with violent domination (1994, p. 43). According to this perspective, power requires legitimacy to maintain itself and cannot be sustained through violence (Arendt, 2000, pp. 41–44). Balandier (1981, p. 7) argues that the production of images, and the manipulation of symbols presents society and legitimize government positions.

Bolsonaro’s utilization of media seduction strategy also involves drawing upon the works of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who conceptualized symbolic power as the “power to construct through utterance, to make people see and believe, to confirm or transform the vision of the world, and therefore the

action on the world and the world itself.” Symbolic power is defined as predetermined relationship between those who exercise power and those who are subject to it in the structure of the field in which the belief is produced and reproduced (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 14).

For Bourdieu (2005) what makes the power of words and slogans the power to “maintain order or to subvert it is the belief in the legitimacy of words and those who pronounce them, a belief whose production is not within the competence of words.” Bolsonaro’s group uses a symbolic legitimization of fake news to deceive their followers. They accept the information without critically questioning it, assuming it to be truthful, and sharing it in their personal networks.

Bourdieu compares political life with dramatization, like Balandier (1981), and states that the political man derives his political strength from the trust that a group places in him (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 188). He is “connected to his constituents by a sort of national contract united by a magical relationship of identification with those who put all their hopes in him.” (Bourdieu, 2005). Our contention is that it’s the enchanting rapport between the politician and his supporters that drives them to accept the deceptive material aimed at controlling them without questioning its validity.

We believe that during his government, Bolsonaro wanted to make people believe that his speeches and fake news were true, and, he tried to disqualify press vehicles and journalists, claiming he was the target of slander and persecution. Bolsonaro’s group also targeted the ministers of Federal Supreme Court, in particular Minister Alexandre de Moraes who was investigating fake news.

Our argument is that Bolsonaro failed to acknowledge the symbolic influence wielded by mainstream journalists who use social media to propagate false news and create a distorted version of reality. This situation can be compared to Plato’s (2006, pp. 210–212) Allegory of the Cave, where prisoners are trapped in a cave and can only see shadows on the wall, which they mistake for reality. When one of them escapes it takes him some time to grow accustomed to the light of the sun, which represents the source of real knowledge, as he had spent his entire life not knowing his reality was nothing but a replica of the original wisdom. Similarly, Bolsonaro’s followers perceive the fake news circulated on social media as the truth, creating a distorted reality.

With this narrative Plato intends to show the difference between the real world, which he considers the world of ideas and light, and the sensible world, which is illusory and experienced by the prisoners of the cave. For Plato (2006, pp. 210–212), the ascent to upper world means “ascension of the soul to the intelligible world.” He cites the idea of good as “the cause of what it is just and beautiful,” and, in the intelligible world, this idea “is the mistress of truth and intelligence, and it is necessary to see it to be sensible in private and public life.” This allegory demonstrates that Bolsonaro’s followers remain in a “reality bubble” process in which they are under the constant influence of digital militia’s half-truths used to discredit institutions such as the Brazilian Supreme Court and the press.

The very ambiguity of political struggle, which is at the same time a fight for power and privileges, originates from the contradiction that “follows all political undertakings.” (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 210–212).

Martín-Barbero (1995, pp. 46–47) explains the media using the theory of mediations between system/structure and receiver, in which culture and meaning of life are intermediaries. Mediations are processes of social fragmentation that interfere with the receivers’ relationship with the media, which is strengthened when an individual’s family structure is weak.

Martín-Barbero explains the heterogeneity of temporalities by using Gramsci’s concept of hegemony (Rodrigues, 2005) to analyze the dynamics of social domination not as an imposition, but as a process in which the dominant class becomes hegemonic to the extent that it also represents the interests of subordinate classes. The media are hegemonic insofar as appropriate to in a symbolic way of the needs, aspirations, and meanings of life of the receptors.

We believe that modern social media have reduced the influence power of the mainstream press by allowing the common individual to become, in addition to being a receiver, a producer of content. This process of fragmentation and individualization of the postmodern man weakened interpersonal relationships, resulting in liquid interpersonal relationships, according to Zygmunt Bauman in his work “Liquid Modernity” (2001). Bauman explains this dynamic as “a redistribution and relocation of the melting powers of modernity.” (2001, p. 13).

Bauman (2001, p. 15) says that modernity begins when “space and time are separated from the practice of life.” It happens when they cease to be as they were in pre-modern centuries with “aspects intertwined and hardly distinguishable from lived experience.” Thus, what leads us to talk about the “end of history, post-modernity” or to articulate the intuition of a radical change in the human arrangement is “the fact that the long effort to accelerate the speed of movement has reached its natural limit.” (2001, pp. 17–18). He argues it no longer matters “where the caller is – the difference between ‘near’ and ‘distant’ or between ‘wild space’ and ‘civilized’ is about to disappear.”

In “Confidence and Fear in the City” Bauman (2009, p. 45) says the process of forming a coherent idea of community includes “the desire to avoid any real participation.” For the author even when they can feel the bonds that unite them with others, “people do not want to live them because they are afraid to participate, they are afraid of the dangers and challenges that participation implies and they are afraid of suffering.” Therefore, drive towards community of equals is a sign of withdrawal from “the otherness that exists outside, but also from the commitment to internal interaction” (Bauman, 2009, p. 45). Consequently, people “forgot or neglected to learn the skills necessary to live with difference.” (Bauman, 2009, p. 46).

This reflection largely explains the easy adherence of Bolsonaro’s followers and his political group to the digital communities created to disseminate narratives with fake news. In our liquid-modern age, the world around us is “distributed into poorly coordinated fragments, while our existences are sliced into a succession of fragily connected episodes.” (Bauman, 2005, p. 18). For this reason, few of us are “capable of avoiding passing through more than one ‘community of ideas and

principles,' whether genuine or not, well-integrated or ephemeral.” and that being totally or partially ‘dislocated’ “can be an uncomfortable and sometimes disturbing experience.” (Bauman, 2005, p. 18). Therefore, one can complain about all the discomforts, and in “desperation seek redemption (...) in a dream of belonging.” (Bauman, 2005, p. 20).

We believe that Bolsonaro’s group took advantage of this fragmentation and individualism of people to create virtual “reality bubbles” as the prisoners in Plato’s cave in which they are fed fake news. To fully grasp how this process of discourse persuasion takes place it is important to understand the concept of public space and how it moved to the private sphere both in modernity and later in post-modernity.

Public space has now been shifted to the media. Habermas in Gomes (1998) states that “there was no more public space since the means of communication were private companies.” When the public sphere ceased to exist there remained only “public pseudo-sphere, staged and fictitious, whose main characteristic was being dominated by mass communication and culture.” Submission configures the degeneration of modern public sphere.

According to Habermas in Gomes (1998) communication is a process derived from three moments: the systemic world, the world of norms, and the lived world. The systemic world is a capitalist society. The world of norms reproduces the systemic world, and the lived world is what is experienced by people throughout history. “The lived world is colonized by the systemic world”. There is a concealment of the rules of the game, of interests (ideology⁷). What is absent in the whole process is the lived world, in which cultural practices, that are more important than ideology, are located. In this perspective everyday practices are life’s great filters, and they are much more important than social structures.

In this representativeness crisis provoked by the minimal state⁸ which does not supply the basic needs of the citizens, society’s traditional spaces deteriorated. The media is replacing politicians and basic institutions of society, thus becoming a public space for debate. JM Salaün declares “the media is no longer a place of confrontation, of arguments, but a place of symbolization of a society. Every community needs a place to build its image.” (Sousa, 1995, pp. 34–35). Lipovetsky (1989) in *The Empire of the Ephemeral* seeks inspiration in fashion among other senses related to culture to reformulate Habermas’s concept of the public sphere in terms of viewing its end through the domination of the media and culture mass.

Habermas (1984, p. 14) explains public sphere which was more evident to the Greeks as a “kingdom of freedom and continuity,” although he considered it was not exercised by them in the agora⁹ since Athenian society was stratified – foreigners, slaves, and women could not participate. The true public space was

⁷In Marxist conception, ideology (Chauí, 1986) is one of the instruments of class domination and of class struggle. Ideology is one of the means used by dominant to exercise domination, so it is not perceived as such by the dominated.

⁸From 1970s onwards welfare state – State supplying basic social needs – entered a crisis in Europe and the United States. In Brazil, this system was never implemented (Burke, 2002),

⁹Agora according to the New Aurélio Dictionary of the Portuguese Language (Ferreira, 1986) means the square of ancient Greek cities where the market was held, and citizens’ assemblies often met.

exercised in the French cafés of the late Middle Ages when the rising bourgeoisie could match the aristocracy through the power of dialogue and rhetoric. Social differences disappeared at that moment (Habermas, 1984), however, warns of bourgeois interests. In modern times, there is a tendency for the public sphere to decay. “While its sphere expands more and more, its function becomes less and less forceful.” (Habermas, 1984, p. 17).

According to Pierre Lévy, “the appetite for virtual communities finds an ideal of deterritorialized human relations,” and, for this reason, virtual communities are “the engines, the actors” (2001, p. 130). However, he warns that “collective intelligence is more a cause of problems than solutions” (Lévy, 2001, p. 131). The best use we can make of cyberspace is “to synergize the knowledge, the imagination, the spiritual energies of those who are connected to it.” (Lévy, 2001, p. 131). Unfortunately, this is not what we observe in the case study of the inappropriate use of electronic media to spread fake news by Bolsonaro and his political group to manipulate his followers.

Therefore, “cyberculture is simply not controllable because, most of the time, different actors, projects, and interpretations conflict.” (Lévy, 2001). He had already anticipated the use of cyberspace for conflicting activities to society's interests, and the very fact that there is conflict confirms “the open character of the technological development and its social implications”. For Lévy (2001), on a large scale, the development of cyberspace is also “a dispute of competing projects and interests.”

Post-truth and Fake News

Yuval Harari in “21 Lessons for the 21st Century” (2020, p. 276) says anyone talking to you will have their own agenda, therefore “you will never be able to fully believe what they say.” He further explains today we have global problems without having a global community. “Neither Facebook nor nationalism or religion come close to creating community.” According to him “all existing human communities are engaged in advancing their particular interests and not in understanding the global truth” (Harari, 2020, p. 286).

Harari (2020, pp. 287–288) states we are currently “living in a new and frightening era of post-truth and we are surrounded by lies and fiction” and “whichever side you support, it really seems like we are living in a terrible post-truth era.” A superficial analysis of history reveals “propaganda and disinformation are not new and even the habit of denying entire nations and creating fake countries has a long pedigree.” (Harari, 2020, p. 289).

Humans have always lived in the post-truth era. “Homo sapiens¹⁰ is a post-truth species whose power depends on creating fictitious stories and believing in them.” Since the Stone Age “self-reinforcing myths have served to unite human collectives” (Harari, 2020, pp. 289–290).

¹⁰From Latin homo sapiens means “wise man”. A species of hominid from the primate family of which modern man and his ancestors are part; homo rationalis. The human species to which we belong is only 30,000 years old. DICIO – Online Portuguese dictionary (2009-2023). Available at: <https://www.dicio.com.br/homo-sapiens/>.

Harari (2020, p. 290) explains we are the only mammals capable of cooperating with a multitude of strangers because “only we are capable of inventing, spreading and convincing millions of others to believe in fictional narratives.” Bolsonaro and his political group spread fake news on social media to rally their followers. Harari (2020) states that if we all believe in the same fiction “we all obey the same laws and therefore cooperate.”

For millennia much of what was considered a “fact” on human social networks were “narratives about miracles, angels, demons, witches.” Billions of people have believed these narratives for thousands of years as “some fake news lasts forever.” (Harari, 2020). Fiction is among the most effective tools in Humanity’s toolbox, according to Harari (2020, pp. 291–294). “The fact is truth has never been high on the agenda of homo sapiens,” Harari (2020, p. 295). Therefore, in the social media era it can be hard to decide which version of an event is true. In addition to religions and ideologies, corporations also rely on fiction and fake news.

For Harari (2020, p. 296) the power of human cooperation depends on a delicate balance between truth and fiction. He claims that “efficiently organizing large groups requires reliance on some form of mythology”. False stories have an intrinsic advantage over the truth when it comes to bringing people together. (Harari, 2020, pp. 297–298). Truth and power can only go together to a certain extent because sooner or later they will go their separate ways (Harari, 2020, p. 299). As humans, we often prioritize power over truth. (Harari, 2020, p. 300).

Methodology

The research uses the evidentiary method developed by the Italian theorist Carlo Ginzburg (2009) based on studies carried out at the end of the 19th century by Giovanni Morelli. Morelli’s objective was to identify forgeries of famous paintings by analyzing negligible characteristics such as the earlobes, the nails, and the shape of the hands and feet (Ginzburg, 2009, pp. 143–144). Morelli’s books are unusual when compared to other art historians because they have illustrations of previously mentioned details which can identify a certain artist just like a criminal is identified by his fingerprints. “Any art museum studied by Morelli immediately acquires the aspect of a criminal museum” (Ginzburg, 2009, pp. 143–144).

Castelnuovo in Ginzburg (2009) correlates Morelli’s evidentiary method to that attributed to Sherlock Holmes by his creator Arthur Conan Doyle. “An art connoisseur is comparable to a detective who discovers the author of the crime (art forgery) by using evidence imperceptible to most people.”

For Ginzburg (2009) modern psychology would be on Morelli’s side because our unconscious gestures reveal our character more than actions or words. Freud according to Ginzburg referred to the method used by Morelli in his essay “The Moses of Michelangelo” (1914). Freud and Ginzburg (2009) states his method is closely related to the medical psychoanalysis technique. Evidentialism is used by doctors to identify diseases by the study of symptoms, and it originated thousands of years ago when early humans tracked their prey (Ginzburg, 2009, p. 154).

In-Deep Investigation Methodology Applied to the Study

To avoid being tracked by Artificial Intelligence algorithms when we did the search results in order to be impartial in this study, we selected carefully among thousands of articles available at internet and google website only articles written by professional journalists from well-known and reliable sources as press vehicles, newspapers, TV Networks, blogs and websites, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Official Brazilian Federal Congress website and scientific articles published by professors and researchers from well-known universities in Brazil.

Thus, the articles were divided in three different categories: from journalists hired by different press vehicles, NGOs, official sources as the Federal Congress website and professors, students and researchers of universities who published articles in scientific publications. Also, for the study were selected nine articles from the press and three scientific articles from professors and students at Brazilian Universities and one from the official Brazilian Federal Congress website for the section finds and results and five articles from the press and NGOs for the discussion. These articles were published between the 2018 and 2022 presidential election campaigns as well as during the period Bolsonaro was president of Brazil (2019-2022). The analysis took place from December 18th, 2022, to March 18th, 2023.

This evidence methodology from the Social History was applied in this study because we understand the journalists and the researchers are careful and search for the truth looking in details in their investigation that sometimes are not visible to everyone when they want to write their stories or scientific articles. Of course, this was just a small study and it was difficult to extend it to a larger and longer study due to limitation of time. Although this issue needs deeper studies in future due to its relevance.

Results

When performing an online search on December 18, 2022, for “Bolsonaro and fake news” there were 20,600,000 results¹¹. Therefore, we will analyze some selected cases of fake news published on social networks by Bolsonaro’s “hatred cabinet,” stories written by journalists, and scientific articles published by renowned academic institutions.

According to Bourdieu (2005, p. 26), “journalists, roughly speaking, are interested in the exceptional, they are interested in what ruptures with the ordinary.” It is important to point out in contemporary times television, radio, and printed newspapers have migrated to electronic media, although the newsmaking process, its filters, and criteria remain the same (Wolf, 1999, pp. 177–249).

¹¹Google. Search for Bolsonaro and the fake news. Available at: https://www.google.com/search?q=fake+news+de+Bolsonaro&rlz=1C1GCEU_pt-BRBR907BR907&oq=fake+news+de+ Bolsonaro &aqs=chrome..69i57j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

There are different approaches to fake news topic such as the scientific article “Fake news, truth, and lies from the perspective of Jair Bolsonaro on Twitter” by Viscardi (2020). In the article, the author analyzes how Jair Bolsonaro uses the words ‘fake news’, ‘lie’ and ‘truth’ on his official Twitter account both as a candidate during the 2018 campaign and as president-elect of Brazil to understand how Bolsonaro fits these elements into his speech, decoding the strategies in the construction of his message.

In the article of Maranhão et al. (2018), the authors analyze how the production of fake news boosted Jair Messias Bolsonaro’s (Social Liberal Party-PSL) presidential campaign culminating in his victory in the 2nd round of the 2018 elections. Through bibliographic-documentary research they demonstrate how his campaign used discursive strategies that associated the candidate with the defense of the “traditional Brazilian family” through opposition to “gay kit” and “gender ideology.” The analogy of “reality bubble” caused by Bolsonaro’s fake news and Plato’s (2006) cave was also analyzed by Lemos et al. (2022).

Google search also found several links to reports released by the press reflecting the dissemination of fake news by Bolsonaro and his political group. An article on the Electoral Sentinel website with the title “Bolsonaro’s Fake News about Lula ending MEI goes viral – Fake versions of PT’s speech had 500,000 interactions on Facebook,” by Barbosa et al. (2022). The report was made in collaboration between Public Agency NGO (Agência Pública Ong), Radar to Facts NGO (Radar Aos Fatos), and Journalism Nucleous Blog (Núcleo Jornalismo) for the coverage of the 2022 elections. These organizations are specialized in tracking and denounce fake news. The report informs a tweet by Jair Bolsonaro on October 29, 2022, helped “making the main theme of his supporters’ social networks a speech taken out of context by his opponent Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva about MEIs (individual micro-entrepreneurs).” According to the article a survey by Radar to Facts NGO (Radar Aos Fatos Ong) shows lies and attacks related to subject totaled more than 500,000 interactions on Facebook between October 28 and 30, 2022.

An article published on November 6, 2022, on the Estado de Minas newspaper website with the title “From Moraes imprisonment to Lady Gaga: check out Bolsonaroist groups’ fake news,” by journalist Ana Mendonça discusses the 2022 presidential elections. The report informs several of Bolsonaro’s supporters dissatisfied with his defeat and victory of President-elect Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT) have been meeting in front of military barracks across the country to ask for military intervention.

In addition, several different pieces of fake news are circulating among Bolsonaroist groups. One of these theories is the singer Lady Gaga in fact is an employee of the International Criminal Court of Hague. A fake picture in which Gaga (Figure 1) appears to be in a videoconference with Jair Bolsonaro went viral on Twitter. The message says Stefani Germanotta - the singer’s real name, who is supposedly the “Prime Minister of the Hague Court” - would be analyzing a fraudulent election in Brazil.

Figure 1. Use of a Photo of Lady Gaga in Fake News on Twitter



According to the messages “a federal intervention will take place to recheck votes from ballot boxes” after 72 hours of mobilization by Bolsonaro followers’ groups. The report highlights the non-existence of the “prime minister” position in the International Criminal Court and it is wrong to say Article 142 of the Constitution allows for federal intervention in Brazil.

Another situation cited by the report is the circulation of a video on social media in which supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro (PL) react to false news of the arrest of the President of the Federal Supreme Court (STF), Minister Alexandre de Moraes. The recording was made by Cid Martins of Gaúcha Radio. In the images, which were replaced by a warning of fake news¹² (Figure 2), supporters heard of the arrest of the minister for a flagrant offense and celebrated Moraes’ arrest.

¹²Cid Martins, Rádio Gaúcha Video about Celebration of Minister of Supreme Court Alexandre de Moraes. Available at: <https://s1.dmcn.net/v/UMBjr1ZOPfqUzoH8A/x360>.

Figure 2. Image is replaced by the Fake News Warning



Also, a screenshot of a report broadcast by Ponta Negra TV, an affiliate of SBT Network in Rio Grande do Norte, has been facing repercussions on social media. The image shows an elderly man holding a sign in an anti-democratic demonstration which contests pretend to be the result of the presidential election. In the poster, he wrote ‘Federal Intervention on November 2, 2022, in Natal City in the State of Rio Grande do Norte (RN), Brazil,’ in Portuguese it is ‘Intervenção Federal 02/11/2022 Natal/RN — Brasil,’ but what really caught people’s attention was the way he translated the message into English “Federal intervention already,” followed by the date and the name of the city Natal that means “Christmas” in a literal translation from Portuguese to English (Figure 3). With the poster he had the intention to make people believe Bolsonaro had won the election, what was fake.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Fake News on TV Ponta Negra/SBT



These reports on fake news dispersed by Bolsonaro’s supporters show how important journalists’ work as the defenders of the truth and society’s interests are to communication vehicles. Gramsci in Resende (Rodrigues, 2005, p. 38) states that every man is an intellectual, but not everyone plays this role in society. An example of an organic intellectual in the Gramscian conception is the journalist who opposes the traditional intellectual. “The journalist can also play an organic role by contributing to changing society or even to maintaining the current hegemony.”

On May 31, 2020, in an article published on the BOL website, based on information from Estadão News Agency of State of São Paulo Newspaper, with the title “The biggest fake news is the ‘hatred cabinet’ says Bolsonaro after Federal Police operation,” Bolsonaro attacks the press, denying the existence of a

group of allies who participate in a network of attacks on social media. According to the report, the former president's son Carlos Bolsonaro, who is the councilor of Rio de Janeiro, is the commander of the 'hatred cabinet'. The group's performance is the subject of an investigation by the Supreme Court (STF), which investigates threats, offenses, and the dissemination of fake news against members of the Court and their families. A Supreme Court (STF) minister ordered searches and seizures of Bolsonarist businessmen and bloggers, defining the 'hatred cabinet' as a "criminal association".

"Hatred cabinet and presidential advisors are cited in Moraes' decision on an operation against fake news" was published on May 27, 2020, by *Diário de Pernambuco* (State of Pernambuco Daily Newspaper), based on information from the *Folha Press News Agency* of the *Folha de São Paulo Newspaper*. The article mentions one of the reports which were transcribed in STF decision to carry out search and seizure operations is by Heitor Freire (PSL-CE), who directly mentions advisors to the President as main members of so-called 'Hatred Cabinet', which specializes in producing and distributing fake news against various authorities, personalities and even members of the Federal Supreme Court. This cabinet coordinates the propagation of false or aggressive messages, counting on the interconnected action of many pages on social networks.

According to STF Minister Alexandre de Moraes, the 'hatred cabinet' is "a criminal association dedicated to the dissemination of false news, offensive attacks on various people, authorities, and institutions, among them, the Federal Supreme Court." The Minister informed the messages have "flagrant content of hate, subversion of order, and encouragement to break institutional and democratic normality".

Bolsonaro's former ally, Federal Congresswoman Joice Hasselmann, in testimony to the Fake News CPMI (Federal Congress Investigation Commission), reported the use of robots to leverage hashtags for BRL 20k per tweet on Twitter. Hasselmann not only revealed the scheme for distributing fake news but also how the group raised funds in an article written by José Carlos de Oliveira for the House of Representatives website on 12 April 2019 named "Joice Hasselmann reports 'militia' and 'hatred cabinet' in the distribution of fake news."

According to Oliveira (2019), the Congresswoman confirmed the existence of a "digital militia" that spreads threats and attacks on the reputation of critics of the Bolsonaro government. She also identified congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro (PSL-SP) and councilor of Rio de Janeiro, Carlos Bolsonaro, along with other state representatives and their advisors, as the leaders of what she called a "criminal organization".

In the report, Hasselmann, cited by Oliveira (2019), exposed the use of closed social media groups, especially on Instagram and Signal, by the "militia". "They select one person, and that person is attacked. They hide behind profiles like 'Ódio do Bem - Good Hate', 'Isentões - Exempts', and 'Left Dex'." The congresswoman, in Oliveira's article (2019), revealed to investigation the 'Ódio do Bem' profile had recently attacked 'Lava Jato' Car Wash Operation to protect Senator Flávio Bolsonaro. According to Hasselmann, these groups aim to "attack those considered traitors". Another profile used in this strategy, as per Hasselmann, is 'BolsoFeios'

(in English means Ugly Bolsonaroist), managed by an advisor to Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro.

Hasselmann revealed that a plan was in place to produce a meme or a specific publication every day to destroy reputations. The attacks targeted government officials. Twitter was also used as an instrument by the so-called “militia”, with bots making profiles go viral. ‘Botometer’ data presented by Hasselmann showed that out of Jair Bolsonaro’s Twitter account with 5.4 million followers, over 1.4 million were robots, and out of Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro’s 1.7 million followers, 468,000 were robots. Hasselmann suggested these attacks were financed by public money. Hasselmann’s testimony before the Congress Investigation Commission (CPMI) investigating fake news confirmed robots were used to promote and spread fake news on social media in favor of Bolsonaro’s supporters. The article identified the names of some groups created for this purpose and the possible use of BRL 500,000 in public funds to finance the scheme.

On October 20, 2021, an article titled “Bolsonaro is ‘leader and spokesperson’ for ‘fake news’ in the country, says final report of the Pandemic CPI.” was published in the newspaper *El País* by Joana Oliveira. According to the article, the final report of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission (Pandemic CPI) concluded Bolsonaro and his sons lead a hidden and complex organization that spreads false news in Brazil, aggravating COVID-19 pandemic through disinformation campaign using fake news. The report accuses public agents of criminal conduct and highlights Bolsonaro’s responsibility for encouraging disobedience of lockdown,¹³ use of chloroquine, and discouraging use of masks in public places.

The CPI identified that not only public media “omit themselves in their mission to combat rumors and disinformation, but they also actively participated in the process of creating and distributing fake news”. The report indicates that disinformation campaigns were initiated on Facebook with posts made by fake accounts and then digital influencers were hired to disseminate this information. Many of these influencers were paid by agencies hired by the Special Secretariat for Communication (Secom), in expenses that added up to more than four million reais.

The report concludes that these publications are evidence of the practice of the criminal offense of inciting the crime of non-compliance with a sanitary norm. Furthermore, Bolsonaro declared that the vaccine against COVID-19 would cause “death, disability, anomaly”, and on November 26, 2020, he said he would not take the vaccine and urged people not to receive it either, because they would be “harming themselves”.

On July 8, 2020, Facebook removed 73 accounts associated with the offices of Jair Bolsonaro and his sons Flávio Bolsonaro and Eduardo Bolsonaro, who promoted political attacks and hate speech. 35 Facebook and 38 Instagram

¹³Lockdown” means confinement or total closure. It designates a more radical measure for social distancing, a kind of total blockade for people to stay at home. Federal Health Council (2020) – Ministry of Health. Federal Government. “What is lockdown?”. Brasília, May 11, 2020. Available at: <https://conselho.saude.gov.br/ultimas-noticias-cns/1165-lockdown-e-isolamento-social-serao-tema-de-encontro-online-do-cns-oops-and-fiocruz-this-wednesday>.

accounts were removed, according to the article “Facebook removes fake accounts linked to Bolsonaro’s office,” published by ‘Meio & Mensagem’ Media & Message Magazine based on information from Reuters News Agency.

Figure 4. Example of Page Removed by Facebook Because of False News



In this Reuters News Agency (2020) article was revealed that individuals attempted to conceal their identities, but Facebook’s investigation uncovered links to the Bolsonaro family. At least one Instagram account had over 917k followers, and more than 880k followers on Facebook. Facebook stated that the network consisted of “various clusters of activity that relied on one or more fake and duplicate accounts to create fictional personas that impersonated media outlets and reporters”.

On June 4, 2022, a report titled “Bolsonaro gave seven false or distorted information per day in 2021, indicates ‘Aos Fatos’ Radar to Facts.” In a June 4, 2022, report titled “Bolsonaro gave seven false or distorted information per day in 2021, indicates Aos Fatos”, journalist Guilherme Mendes revealed that President Jair Bolsonaro made a significant number of false or distorted statements in recent years.

According to the Radar to Facts Agency cited by Mendes (2022), Bolsonaro made 606 false or distorted statements in 2019 (an average of 1.6 per day), 1592 false statements in 2020 (4.36 per day), and 2516 false statements in 2021 (6.9 per day). More than half of these false statements were about COVID-19, with a total of 2183 since the start of the pandemic.

The president also made false or distorted claims about the Brazilian economy and elections, including Brazil created a greater number of formal jobs in 2021 compared to 2020, that it is impossible to audit votes, which has been proven false, and emphasizing his support for the reinstatement of printed voting.

Discussion

Several influencers and websites specialize in analyzing fake news on the internet, not only to clarifying false information but also to attract more traffic and followers on social media. This role is also played by the mainstream press, with

specialized columns dedicated to fact-checking social media content and reporting fake news. The UOL website¹⁴ is an example of such a platform.

However, due to the crucial role of journalists and media outlets in exposing fake news, President Bolsonaro has been attacking the press and journalists. On June 7, 2022, UOL published an article titled “On Press Freedom Day, Bolsonaro suggests closing Brazilian media,” by journalist Beatriz Gomes (2022). According to the report, President Bolsonaro (PL) once again attacked the Brazilian media when World Press Freedom Day was celebrated. The statement was made during the “Brazil for Life and Family” event at the Planalto Palace, where Bolsonaro defended Fernando Francischini (União Brasil-PR Party), a convicted state representative who had claimed ballot boxes were rigged to prevent votes for Bolsonaro.

In the video available on YouTube¹⁵, not only did Bolsonaro attack the press but also the TSE (Superior Electoral Court) and electronic voting machines. He admitted to making similar fraudulent claims about the electronic voting machines as the convicted congressman, claimed there is no criminal offense for spreading fake news, and accused the press, especially Globo Network and Folha de São Paulo Newspaper, of being a “factory of fake news”.

This incident is like a previous incident where, according to an article published by R7 website on December 18, 2020, President Bolsonaro attacked the press during the ceremony of Completion of the Training Course for Military Police Officers of Rio de Janeiro. In the report, entitled “The biggest fake news factory is in the mainstream press,” by Marcelino (2020), Bolsonaro declared that “the biggest fake news factory is in the mainstream press, this is a shame for the world”.

On June 6, 2022, Correio Braziliense reported that journalist Lucas Neiva from Congresso em Foco (Congress in Focus) Website was threatened with death after publishing an article exposing a fake news production scheme intended to benefit President Bolsonaro during 2022 election campaign. The article “Reporter is threatened after denouncing pro-Bolsonaro fake news scheme,” by Martins, informs the scheme involved users of the anonymous forum Imageboard, who were willing to pay for the creation of false content to go viral. As a result, Lucas Neiva received numerous threats and had his personal data leaked, and the Congresso em Foco website was taken down by a hacker attack for nine hours on 5 June 2022. The Union of Journalists of the Federal District and the National Federation of Journalists issued a statement of support for Lucas Neiva and condemned the increasing attacks on Brazilian journalists, with 430 attacks recorded in 2021, the highest number since the 1990s.

In response to the attacks on journalists, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) raised Brazil's ranking in the press freedom index, moving the country to 110th position out of 180 nations surveyed. RSF used a new method to develop a classification, based on five indicators - political context, legislative framework,

¹⁴UOL ‘Confere’ Check (2022). UOL news online. Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/confe/re/>.

¹⁵YouTube Channel (2022). “Bolsonaro attacks press and STF after the 2nd Panel upholds the impeachment of Congressman Francischini.” Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWhxWL66lw&t=12s>.

economic context, sociocultural context, and security. According to the article “RSF considers Brazil a ‘problematic’ country due to fake news and Bolsonaro’s attacks on the press,” by Abd (2022) from the Associated Press, Brazil’s media scenario remains marked by a strong concentration of private initiatives and interference from government, especially after the arrival of Jair Bolsonaro to power in 2018. The president mobilizes armies of supporters on social networks to discredit the media, being presented as an enemy of State, in a strategy aimed at discrediting the independent work of journalists.

Despite the guarantee of press freedom in Brazil’s 1988 Constitution, the broadcasting and telecommunications structure was deemed old, permissive, and ineffective according to Reporters without Borders (Abd, 2022). RSF notes that the business diversifications of main Brazilian media groups, in response to competition from online platforms, have increased the potential for conflicts of interest and loss of editorial independence. The local press is also increasingly weakened. Furthermore, Brazil remains the second most dangerous country in the region for journalists, with around 30 murdered in the last decade. The most vulnerable are bloggers, radio presenters, and independent journalists who investigate corruption and local politics in small and medium-sized cities. RSF also identified an increase in violence against women journalists.

On October 10, 2022, *Folha de São Paulo* published on its website “TSE takes journalistic content off the air and talks about fake news,” by Pinho and Mandino. The article stated the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) ordered the removal of five journalistic contents released since December 1, 2022, on the eve of the first round of Brazilian election. TSE claimed they contained fake news about former President Lula, including allegations linking him to the case of Celso Daniel, the murdered PT (Worker’s Party) mayor, Nicaraguan dictatorship, PCC criminal faction, and Satanism. The list of contents included an interview with *Jovem Pan*, articles by ‘R7’ news website and ‘O Antagonista’ news website, a reproduction of ‘Jovem Pan’ radio interview, and a post by ‘Gazeta do Povo’ news website on Twitter on another topic.

According to the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper article, specialists are divided on whether this was a correct action against fake news or a threat to press freedom. Bolsonaro’s supporters opposed the measure, citing a risk to press freedom, while TSE President Alexandre de Moraes defended the decision, claiming that “traditional media can also commit fake news”.

These examples illustrate the use of fake news by Bolsonaro and his political group to manipulate supporters with ideological content on social networks, creating a “reality bubble” like Plato’s (2006) Allegory of the Cave in which prisoners lived in illusion, mistaking it for reality or truth.

Conclusions

This article aimed to investigate the use of fake news by Jair Bolsonaro and his political group, known as the “hatred cabinet”, as a political strategy to manipulate his followers and control them through social networks. To do this, we

examined articles published in traditional media outlets, blogs, and fact-checking sites fed by journalists, as well as some scientific articles about Bolsonaro and fake news.

We used the evidentiary methodology of Ginzburg (2009), which seeks answers in traces, clues, and signs, such as prehistoric hunters, doctors analyzing symptoms to treat patients, psychoanalysis looking for the origins of traumas, and journalists investigating events to report them to readers and audiences.

Through this analysis, we verified the existence of a “Hatred Cabinet”, linked to President Jair Bolsonaro and coordinated by his sons, who are also holders of political positions. This group is inspired by the extreme right ideas of the writer Olavo de Carvalho and is responsible for disseminating fake news on various topics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, gay school kits, homophobia, racism, employment rates, political issues, among others.

We were also able to verify the use by Bolsonaro and his political group of artificial intelligence resources (robots) to boost the dissemination of ideological content with fake news to manipulate his supporters and attack his political enemies on social networks, through “digital militias”. This was confirmed by investigations from Federal Police, decisions of TSE (Superior Electoral Court) and STF (Supreme Court), and reports of CPMI (Parliamentary Investigation Commission) of Federal Chamber and National Congress on fake news and COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on analysis of press articles, we concluded these contents with fake news fed a network of followers who were manipulated into believing and accepting this false information as truth (post-truth) due to the symbolic power of the president, as supported by Bourdieu (2005), as well as the power of discourse.

We believe Bolsonaro’s followers were kept in “reality bubbles” on social networks, just like the prisoners in Plato’s cave (2006). This scheme operated successfully during the campaign and in Bolsonaro Government until it was exposed in the National Congress by the CPMI (Parliamentary Investigation Commission) of fake news and COVID-19, which gathered testimonials and evidence against President Jair Bolsonaro’s allies and sons.

Through press reports, we also verified the decisions of TSE (Electoral Court) and STF (Federal Supreme Court) against the dissemination of fake news by the “hatred cabinet” and allies of President Jair Bolsonaro. The reports showed that the president’s enemies and his political group were the targets of cyber-attacks. One of the main targets of so-called “digital militias” was Minister of Supreme Court, Alexandre de Moraes.

In this paper, we have demonstrated there is no public space for free debate, as argued by Habermas (1984; 2002) and Habermas in Gomes (1998), due to the manipulation of a network of interests, as illustrated by the reports analyzed on the activities of the “hatred cabinet” and digital militias in spreading fake news. The public space where the power of dialogue and rhetoric prevailed has been extinguished in post-modernity, and in its place, an addicted and controlled public sphere has emerged, dominated by economic interests (the owners of communication vehicles) and politicians, such as President Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters.

The main contribution of this article is to emphasize the need to develop a critical sense concerning the contents circulating on social networks, to distrust this information, and to seek reputable sources, as Harari (2020, pp. 287–303) recommends in the chapter “Post-truth – Some fake news lasts forever” from “21 Lessons for the 21st Century.” To avoid being brainwashed, Harari (2020, pp. 300–301) suggests recognizing that distinguishing fact from fiction is “a much more difficult problem than we suppose, and we should make even more effort to distinguish fact from fiction.” Harari (2020, p. 301) further states while no politician says, “all the truth and nothing but the truth,” some politicians are better than others. Similarly, “no newspaper is free of biases and errors, but some make an honest effort to discover the truth, while others are a brainwashing machine.”

According to Harari (2020), it is the responsibility of “all of us to invest time and effort to expose our biases and prejudices and to verify our sources of information”. To avoid being brainwashed and to distinguish fact from fiction, Harari (2020) recommends two general rules: paying for reliable information and reading relevant scientific literature on any subject that seems important. Peer-reviewed articles, books published by renowned academic publishers, and professors’ texts are among the recommended sources.

We also recommend consulting specialized websites that verify fake news, such as UOL Check, and columns created by the main press vehicles with the same objective, as well as blogs and websites that verify information, such as Radar Aos Fatos, Agência Pública, ‘Public Agency’, and the Fact Check Agency which were cited in the reports analyzed in this article. Other initiatives to combat fake news, such as “Hearts and Minds” by Bernardo Sorj and Alice Noujaim (2020) and “Surviving on the Networks – Guide of Citizen” by the same authors (Sorj and Noujaim, 2018), are also recommended. These publications are initiatives of the Democratic Platform, created by Fernando Henrique Cardoso Foundation and Edelstein Center for Social Research, to strengthen democratic culture and institutions in Brazil and Latin America.

In conclusion, we have only scratched the surface of this important topic in this paper. We aim to awaken critical thinking and encourage further research on the phenomenon of post-modernity, including fake news and post-truths in the digital environment and social networks, as well as cyber-attacks and digital militias that manipulate and use these tactics as political strategies.

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Pseudo-positive Information and COVID-19: Reasons behind Sharing Fake News (Georgian Social Media Analysis)

By Liana Markariani & Maia Toradze[±]*

A plethora of studies state that a perceptible gap can be observed concerning disinformation influence analysis, which is presented by a lack of research on this phenomenon. In a crisis precipitated by the pandemic disruption, the necessity to scrutinize these topics becomes particularly transparent, as an individual's critical thinking is incapacitated, which leads to a surge in fake news sharing. The article aims to expose and investigate the characteristics of a new, pseudo-positive disposition of false information and the reasons behind its extensive dissemination. By analyzing the original sources of fake news published on "Facebook", conducting an in-depth interview with eight field experts, integrated with a small survey of 204 Georgians, we identify that to overcome the pandemic-induced stress and create an optimistic environment, any positive information that is apprehensible under these conditions becomes effortlessly shareable and consequently, pseudo-positivity is utilized as a manipulator to foment a wave of disinfodemy.

Keywords: disinformation, pseudo-positivity, social media, COVID-19, manipulation, crisis, Facebook, mental health, media psychology

Introduction

The history of misinformation and manipulation spans centuries and has existed in almost every stage of human evolution in varying doses (MacDonald, 2017). However, false information has become exceedingly more active since 2016 (during the US elections) (Dewey, 2016). Disinformation seems to be an ancient art, but technology has taken it to another level - the spread of fake news is facilitated by social networks through automated buttons and viruses (Chesney & Citron, 2018). Information changes/repeats itself so quickly and reaches the consumer that its critical analysis seems impossible (Fazio et al., 2015). The influence the media possesses on the public and the formation of their opinion has increased considerably. People believe the information shared by their acquaintances, friends and liked/subscribed platforms (Murphy, 2017).

The information resource demand and supply model assumes that the typical news consumers have two main characteristics: first – they want to receive reliable information and understand the objective truth about the world; second, the consumers have a demand for news that fits their worldviews and desires (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). In 1977, scientists at Stanford University discovered

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the truth effect, in which a message that a user has already heard or read is more credible than new information (Hasher et al., 1977). Recent studies in the field of psychology have shown that people perceive the true story as what they most often understand or see (Fazio et al., 2015). This indicates that the users depend somewhat on visual manipulators and trust the information or platform they frequently see and share with their friends (Silverman, 2016). In addition, misinformation swiftly leads to racist and intolerant societal actions, instilling hate speech and xenophobia (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). Researchers believe that false information can undermine democracy, either directly or indirectly (Chesney & Citron, 2018).

Sharing helpful content makes social network users believe they are valuable, as they get positive feedback from their friends. Research has also shown a positive correlation between an individual's popularity demand and online self-disclosure (Utz et al., 2012). Thus, social media users may share "sensational" news without verifying the validity of the information. Science also argues that the concept of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) is directly related to the sharing of unverified information (Talwar, 2019, p. 76). A causal link can also be observed between sharing positive information and having a positive attitude (Lambert, 2012). However, scholars also note that pictures with angry expressions or aggressive words attract more attention, but this content does not evoke grateful comments or pleasant feedback (Larsen et al., 2008). Negative information reinforces, while positive information weakens the understanding and discernment of right/wrong content (Trevors & Kendeou, 2020). It should be noted that positive false information does not exist, as the concept of "falseness" itself is considered only negatively, and all its forms deserve unfavorable evaluation. Considering that we examine false information consisting of positive context, we use the term "pseudo-positive false information," which refers to information saturated with false positives. Sharing pseudo-positive false information can also be examined in the same context. Social network users are more likely to share pseudo-positive false information in a crisis because it has a specific benefit. For positive content, they also get positive feedback.

Recently conducted research reveals that during the COVID-19 era, the spread of fake news and its negative impact has significantly increased (Pulido et al., 2020). Medical misinformation is most common in the early stages of a pandemic, accompanied by a message that calls them to action (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020). It has also been proven that due to the wave of fear, tension and panic, a part of the society starts recklessly sharing information (Shimizu, 2020). As the number of shares increases, the social network user is tempted to use unproductive, unfounded and often harmful medications for treatment (Pennycook et al., 2020). Pandemic-induced stress has also led to psychological distress, generalized anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rajkumar, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In emergencies, gratitude and expressions of appreciation are vital and often necessary to maintain a positive mood and to gain hope (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2011).

Despite the adverse effects of spreading false information, it is still unknown why people continue to share false information. The "behavioral aspects of fake news sharing by a social media user" have not been thoroughly examined and a

so-called gap exists (Talwar et al., 2019, p. 73). Newhoff argues that understanding sociological, psychological, and human-tailored methods and theories is necessary to understand why false information is shared (adventently or inadvertently) (Newhoff, 2018). The principal point is that sharing false information may be random, but its creation is mostly purposeful (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

As we ascertain that it is paramount to disseminate verified information during COVID-19, as any misleading news may have an enhanced detrimental effect in a crisis, the article examines the influence of pseudo-positive false information. It identifies the most effective manipulators operating in a pandemic, which leads us to the following hypothesis:

H: In a crisis, social media users share pseudo-positive information to receive positive feedback and emotional benefits.

This is examined by following research questions:

RQ1: What kind of information do social media users prefer in a crisis - positive or negative - and how does the perceived information impact them?

RQ2: Which manipulators are most common during the COVID-19 pandemic and what main functions do they serve?

RQ3: Why did social media users share or like the pseudo-positive fake information?

The study period included 16 months - from February 2020 to May 2021.

Methodology

We selected appropriate research methodology, including quantitative research in the form of a survey, qualitative and quantitative content analysis and in-depth (unstructured) interviews with ten field experts. We developed a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions. The survey was launched on social media as it was necessary to get active social media user responses. The questionnaire was available to almost all regions of Georgia and we received 204 responses from people between 18 and 64. The Participants were given the opportunity to explain their actions, which revealed the main reasons for sharing information and its impact. The survey also identified the main manipulators by which a social media user is deceived.

We used content analysis to study 55 misinformation posts and fake news pieces with pseudo-positive content, reinforcing the survey responses. Unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with field specialists, which included four social media and false information experts, two psychologists and two epidemiologists. The responses supported the trends in other research methods, as the responses fully matched the general results.

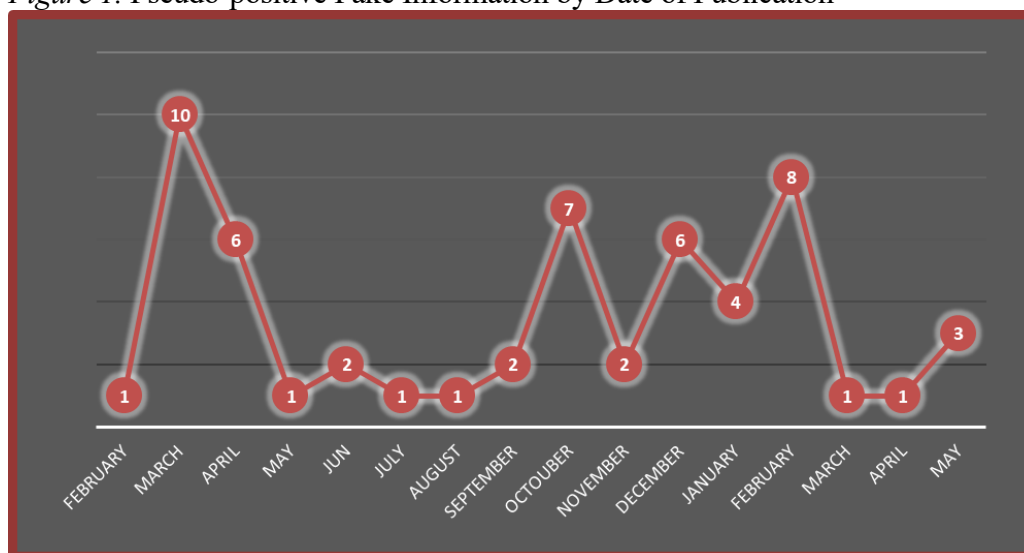
In addition to traditional methods, the research relied on several relevant theories. The research was based on: Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Comparison Theory (SCT), which are widely used in social media research to determine human choice and motivation.

General Quantitative Results

In total, Georgian websites published 55 pseudo-positive false information concerning COVID-19 on Facebook.

The number of pseudo-positive false information grew dynamically as the urgency and relevancy of COVID-19 increased (Figure 1). One of the highest rates was recorded in March 2020, when the first case of infection was recorded in Georgia. The false information increased in September, when “The second wave” began. Dynamic growth of fake publications was evident in December 2020, when the vaccine was developed. It is clear that the spread of pseudo-positive false information intensifies and the flow of falsification significantly grows with the gradual development of events.

Figure 1. Pseudo-positive Fake Information by Date of Publication

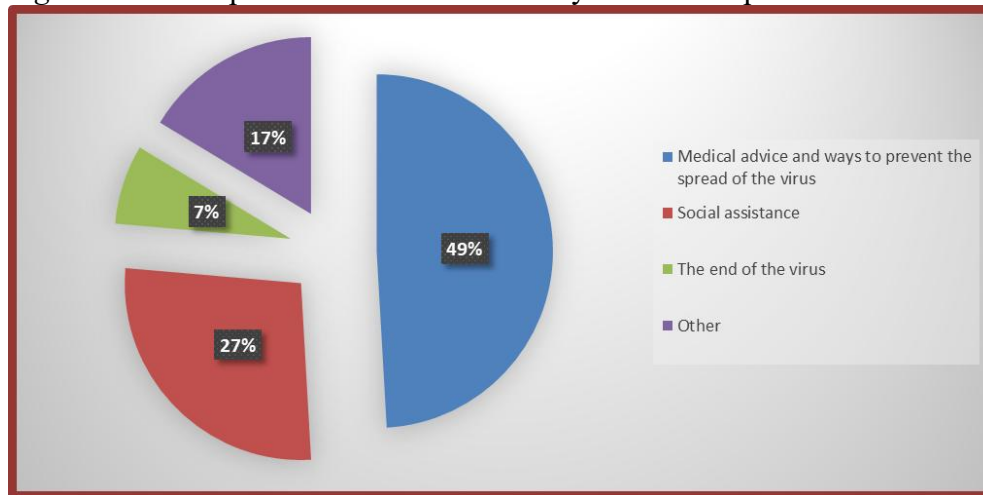


Fake Information by Falsified Topics

To understand the direction in which the pseudo-positive false information was mainly spread, we sorted the publications by falsified topics. As a result of the content analysis, the following areas were identified:

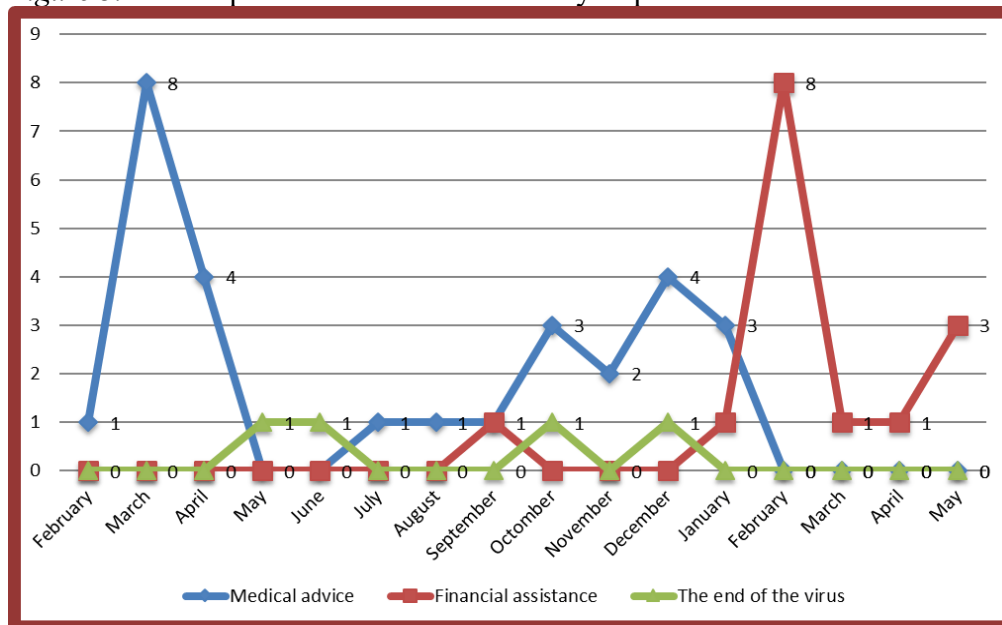
- Medical advice and ways to prevent the spread of the virus - 27
- Social assistance - 15
- The end of the virus - 4
- Other - 9

Figure 2. Pseudo-positive Fake Information by Falsified Topics



The breakdown by the topics shows that 49% of 55 pseudo-positive false information is medical advice, instructions on protecting yourself from the virus and ways to treat it (Figure 2). 27% represents fraudulent social and financial assistance. If we sort fake news topics by publication date, we will get a complete picture of the specific themes and the cause-and-effect relationship of the disseminated information and time.

Figure 3. Pseudo-positive False Information by Topic and Date of Publication



Sorting by the dates revealed that the falsified content changed dramatically as other events occurred (Figure 3). From March to May 2020, the most frequently falsified information was medical advice - how social media users could treat COVID-19 at home and protect themselves from the virus. This topic was relevant throughout most of the study period but decreased from February 2021 until

March, when vaccinations began and the public interest in seeking other ways of treatment was reduced. Consequently, pseudo-positive false information changed its characteristics and subject matter. In the last 4-5 months, fake news about financial assistance significantly increased. This occurrence was related to the growth in unemployment rates as many people lost their jobs and inflation reached its highest point. Thus, manipulations of this message proved to be most influential. Accordingly, we can conclude that the topic of pseudo-positive false information fits the needs of social network users, which can be considered a provocative factor for sharing false information by the user in a particular period.

Indicators and Characteristics of Pseudo-positive False Information

As a result of content analysis, we can formulate the leading indicators and characteristics of pseudo-positive false information.

- Pseudo-positive false information includes one specific idea, which is positively perceived by most of the social media users in the relevant period;
- Pseudo-positive false information has a distinctly "positive" title, in which the used words evoke a positive mood: "good news", "congratulations", "the end of the epidemic", "medicine is found", "vaccine is created", etc.;
- There are frequent cases when the title utilizes the persona/image of a well-known person, who is in a decision-making position and often appears on screen (e.g., a doctor, epidemiologist, etc.);
- Products that the articles refer to as "cures" of the virus are widely accessible, familiar to all and considered to be beneficial in threatening the viral diseases (e.g. lemon, garlic), i.e., the article uses reality, existing knowledge/experience for manipulation;
- The text often uses phrases like: "according to experts", "doctors note that", "a group of researchers found". However, the names of the experts, the title of the research and other detailed data that may help us verify the information are not disclosed;
- The source is cited, but the link is not accurate, does not work and various errors occur when following it;
- The photo is not taken explicitly for this publication; already existing graphics and photos, easily found in various search engines are used;
- The photo enhances and confirms the positive message in the title, and a solid logical connection can be observed between the photo and the title.

Comparative Analysis of Pseudo-positive and Negative False Information

We compared the feedback from sharing negative and pseudo-positive false information (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Pseudo-positive and Negative False Information

Headline	Shares	Likes	Reach	Source
"You will not be infected with COVID if you use this simple method once every three days"	Up to 1000	Up to 13000	Up to 800000	Tvalsazrisi
"You must know that face masks have certain side effects! - Doctor Nona Agdgomelashvili is alarmed: ..."	900	555	33000	Tvalsazrisi
"Inhalation of hot water steam 100 percent kills the coronavirus"	663	3500	Up to 10000	Facebook
"Only those who want to kill themselves will get the vaccine"	52	60	Up to 3000	Facebook
"Walk boldly and greet people, I tell you with 100% confidence that..." - a shocking discovery about the coronavirus"	10	300	200000	football
"What happened to the people who got the coronavirus vaccine"	7	200	7537	football

* Green color indicates - pseudo-positive false information, red - negative

We can state that feedback from social media users is closely related to the degree of falsification (Table 1). Comment analysis reveals that while sharing pseudo-positive false information, the "sharer" receives positive feedback; in the case of negative information - negative feedback. It is also apparent that under negative falsifications, the comments about verifying the source and the absurdity of the article prevail. The latter gives us reason to conclude: Pseudo-positive false information is compelling since the social media user is accustomed to the idea that falsifications are negative. In the instance of pseudo-positive content, the desire for verification decreases as the desire for the article to be accurate surpasses it.

Survey of Social Media (Facebook) Users

A survey was conducted on Facebook. A unique online questionnaire was developed, consisting of 20 open and closed questions. 204 social media users took part in the survey.

During the survey, participants were given the opportunity to choose which false information to share in a crisis. All fake news was taken from online sites, but their authenticity was not disclosed. Participants had to explain their reasoning - why they made the particular choice.

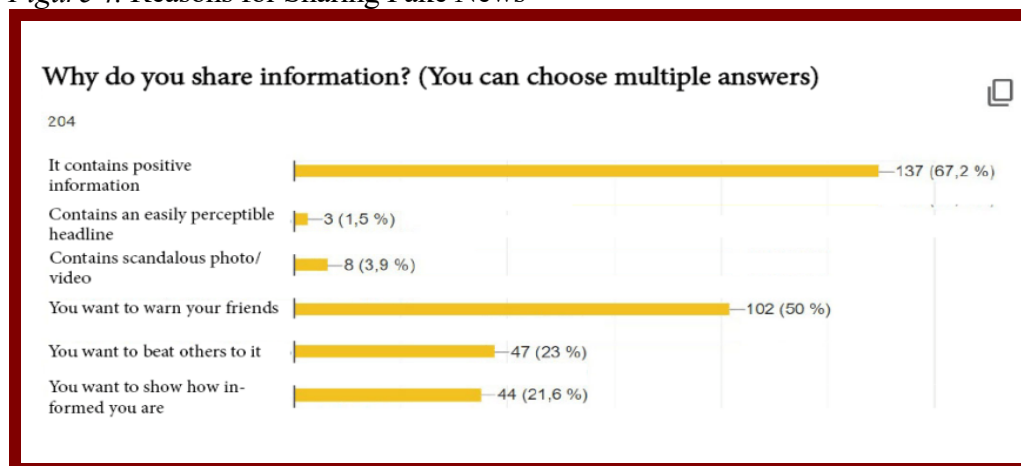
Most social media users (first question - 93%, second question - 86%), given the opportunity to "share" pseudo-positive and negative fake information, choose

to share the former. They express that sharing a positive piece of information is almost always better. This sentiment is more substantiated if the given news is accompanied by a picture of a trustworthy, knowledgeable person in a positive context (in the second case, a photo of Amiran Gamkrelidze - a Georgian immunologist). Those who shared the negative news mentioned that they found the other news more trustworthy. In another question, asking what type of content the social media users would share in a crisis, 97.5% of the respondents answered that they would share a positive one. Furthermore, 92.6% stated that they were reassured by reading positive articles and shared them to provide others with optimistic information.

During the survey, respondents were asked to react to seeing, in one case – a pseudo-positive and in another – negative false information on social media. Overall, pseudo-positive information received more engagement – 12% more shares, 24% more likes and 29% more reactions. Conversely, negative false information obtained more comments, analyzing which elucidates that the excessiveness is prompted by participants' desires to express their skepticism (writing: "This is misinformation", "Of course, this is false information", "It is fake", etc.).

Participants state that their desire to spread positivity is the primary motivation for sharing information (Figure 4). Thus, positivity can be considered a trigger or a manipulator for more active sharing, especially in a stressful environment like a pandemic. Other prevalent reasons can be examined according to the Self-Determination Theory, which demonstrates that positioning and activity on specific platforms are essential for this type of social media users as they consider their Facebook friends the main audience. They share the given information with the audience mentioned above and in response, they have particular expectations from their social media friends, meaning overall feedback - likes, comments, shares, etc. Some respondents who write that they want to beat everyone to it belong to the psychological type defined by the theory of FoMo – Fear of Missing Out (Figure 4). In this case, the key is speed, as there is a fear of "falling behind", which reduces the chances of verifying information and increases reckless sharing.

Figure 4. Reasons for Sharing Fake News



23% of the respondents state that only the title is attractive and intriguing. If we deduce the content analysis results, we can conclude that this type of falsification has more influence, as the manner and the tone are exhibited in the title itself, which is caused by the relevant words. Moreover, since the title and the photo carry a clear message, there is no need to follow the link - the user shares the information based on the "idea" perceived by combining these two components.

Analysis of the In-depth Interviews with Experts

As mentioned, we turned to another form of qualitative research - an unstructured in-depth interview to confirm our hypothesis and answer our research questions. Content analysis and focus groups partially demonstrated the results and impacts of sharing pseudo-positive information. To confirm the theory, we interviewed eight experts, based on their respective fields. We selected four experts in social media and false information, two psychologists and two doctors/TV hosts.

- **The psychology of positive information during a crisis**

During a crisis, people become more vulnerable and their emotions are more accessible to manipulate. Social media experts expressed that even media becomes more polarized at such times. Meanwhile, media psychologists think that, in general, there is a strong positivity bias on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. There might be less positive news during the pandemic, but overall, positive news prevails.

Experts also note that in uncertain situations or in "probable" cases, it is crucial to receive positive information. This often happens during wars or disasters when they do not want to panic and alarm people. However, it can be and is false information, just presented positively. Often, people try to see and capture some positivity. Viktor Frankl wrote about the psychological state of individuals in concentration camps. He observed that those who had a positive outlook - that the war would end soon and kept hope throughout, escaped the bitterness of the camp. Conversely, those with a negative state of mind could not withstand these conditions.

Psychologists believe this is precisely the *modus operandi* of the modern world: during a pandemic, people believe that they must cling to the positive to survive. Social media experts also expressed that the pandemic has modified social media content. The amount of positive content in the form of "life hacks" has increased. These are the pieces of advice that are packaged and adjusted to social media. Naturally, the packaging of false information has also developed in this direction - the demand comes from social media users.

The interviewed doctors highlighted that the answers would have vastly differed if we had discussed the impact of pseudo-positive information without the pandemic. However, when an individual's critical thinking has been debilitated, as this is an extreme situation and puts people in distress, any information accessible to them is automatically shared. When we talk about mass risks, both - negative

and positive - are risky. Experts mention that from an epidemic point of view, it is hazardous to falsify information about regulations, face masks, or whether the vaccine will be helpful or not. It is an attempt to establish a mass movement against the vaccine, as well as regulations, which implies that the risk of the virus spreading further automatically increases and the date when we defeat the disease is longer delayed.

Interviewed psychologists emphasize that, especially when the end of the virus is not discernible, a person accepts and perceives pseudo-positive information better than negative. Even though it is fake, it still gives you a chance to "survive". People in such extreme environments (crisis, war, pandemic) enjoy thinking that everything will be fine, which once again proves that they desire positivity to be more hopeful.

- **Pseudo-positive information and disappointment/panic**

According to psychologists, if a "positive story" is false, those who believe it will panic and be disappointed, eventually leading to a negative impact. This panic will pass on to others and will spread to groups. In frenzy and panic, people tend to make decisions they later analyze and regret. In Georgia, during the pandemic, by the influence of various false information, people started buying unnecessary products, including "curative" drugs. The panic was also visible in other countries, where supermarkets were almost emptied. If we suppose the information that evoked positive feelings was false, panic and frustration will escalate repeatedly. Psychologists argue that disappointment and frustration manifest when you finally realize you have bought a useless product. The more critical the falsified topic is, the more exacerbated the reader will become after discovering that this positive information is fake.

In such cases, we are dealing with panic, which could reach large crowds. Panic is characterized by action. This is why pseudo-positivity is vital simultaneously - it stops society from acting and thinking irrationally. Therefore, this false-positivity is necessary to some extent and could even have a positive effect - mentally strengthening people. However, in most instances, they are plain fabrications, which are harmful. It always depends on the falsified subject matter.

Thus, although false, people sometimes require pseudo-positive information to maintain optimism, which is the main reason for the abundance of pseudo-positive information during a pandemic.

- **False-positive information and medicine**

Most experts share one viewpoint: False-positive information is detrimental to human health as it has no medical basis. They argue that striving for such positive conclusions harms the medical field. At first glance, we could be looking at academic research. However, if the study is in an obsessive pursuit of a distinctly positive result, there are always higher risks of making mistakes while analyzing facts, let alone concluding. This problem is exacerbated when these conclusions are not made by a competent person.

In terms of credibility, there is a hierarchy - what degree of credibility a research has, which is almost never seen in journalistic material. Experts state that 100% reliability is almost non-existent. Our content analysis showed that information regarding medical advice is often accompanied by a source and indicated studies. However, the reliability hierarchy of these studies or other accurate information is not found, which is necessary, according to the specialists. The study may have been conducted, but its reliability rate is 1%. Consequently, pseudo-positive false information often includes a "scientific" source, the credibility of which has not been proven.

As for the impact of pseudo-positive false information on an individual's health, interviewed doctors believe these falsifications are the most influential and dangerous. For example, in April 2020, fake news spread that hot water intake was adequate against COVID-19. Several people (as doctors claim, 13) drank boiling water and were taken to the hospital with internal burns. Media psychologists believe that the impact of the information depends on the users, media literacy, political orientation, fears, beliefs in conspiracy theories, and so on. However, the impacts still hurt these people equally.

- **Reasons behind sharing pseudo-positive false information**

According to psychologists, people who often share different articles act according to one of the principles/effects common in social psychology and sociology: the "self-fulfilling prophecy." This refers to people foretelling optimistic predictions that may or may not happen. But, if it does happen, they state in a self-satisfied manner that: "they said so". This is also a form of emotional fulfillment. One day, someone may say, "I said it would end", "I said it would save us" and "It may happen". Consequently, it is reaffirmed that pseudo-positive false information is shared for particular motives and the need to satisfy specific emotional desires.

At the same time, media psychologists note that some might not carefully read what they heard from their friends, trust them, and reshare it when asked to do so. Others feel threatened by the virus and the information that the virus is not a real threat helps them regulate these negative emotions.

- **FoMo and social networking as the main reasons for sharing**

All the experts on social media, media psychology and fake information argue that it is essential for social media users to present themselves among friends correctly.

According to media psychologists, the information is shared to warn others. Concurrently, people present themselves strategically on social media - usually happy, beautiful, successful. If being competent and informed is central to a person's self-concept, it can explain strategic information sharing. If we observe, all three theories imply this: the strategic and rational selection of information will bring specific emotional benefits to the social media user.

Emotions play an essential role in sharing fake news, which is why people believe and share this type of information. In this case, we can consider the concept of receiving emotional feedback and benefits, thus why a social network user shares positive information with others.

Experts believe that a big part of sharing fake news is to project an identity and receive affirmation from your followers and friends. In a sense, people often post what they think will make them look good to their audience. Therefore, if positive content is important to the audience, the page's author tries to meet this requirement in a crisis to receive the desired comments and feedback. In a crisis, people feel more emboldened to take a hard line in their views because this is what often gets likes and shares. Thus, people share news that validates their views and identity. Therefore, if they are anti-vaxxers and see a story about how dangerous vaccines could be, they will share it. This is not because they found it an interesting article, but because the title alone reinforces their identity and ideas. Social media platforms now have algorithms that detect whether people share content without reading.

Social media can lead to creating echo chambers where people only hear views similar to their own. Social media posts are short, divisive, often oversimplistic and unverified. Social media is a tool. It can be used for good or for bad. Experts indicate that the pandemic has shown how misinformation or unbalanced information can lead to some real-world problems. So, society promotes sharing this type of information for a single purpose - some benefit. Mainly, when it comes to social media, this benefit is the comments, likes and positive feedback.

Conclusion

To summarize, we can candidly state that every research question was thoroughly and adequately answered. The first research question (RQ1: What kind of information do social media users prefer in a crisis - positive or negative - and how does the perceived information impact them?) was answered by the summary of the survey and in-depth interview results. The survey showed that 94% of social media users prefer positive information during a crisis, reinforced by the field experts' professional opinions and various studies - society is inclined to positivity during a crisis.

Concurrently, the survey confirmed that social media users favor positive medical advice, evident in quantitative content analysis, as 49% of the published pseudo-positive information concerns medical advice. Hence, we can conclude that pseudo-positive false information corresponds to social media users' demands.

Social media users' feedback appeared in the comment and share analysis, while the focus group results were the key elements here. The results can be examined in two ways:

1. In the instance of pseudo-positive information, the feedback is positive, which can be considered the main objective of sharing. Nevertheless, the

annulment of this information, i.e., realizing that it is false, disappoints the consumer and exacerbates the crisis.

2. The feedback of the negative false information is always negative, but understanding that this information is false reassures the public.

In-depth interviews and surveys, combined with theories, also revealed what type of impact the false information might have on social media users. According to specialists, particularly doctors, fake medical advice has the potential to cause severe damage to an individual's health, which various examples have proved. Concurrently, the psychologists' opinions and the focus group experiments show that by spreading pseudo-positive false information, the social media user receives positive feedback, including positive emotions, in the form of comments, which can also be considered the main provoking factors for sharing false information. The theories correspond to the same idea - the users choose the content that benefits them (RCT), which ultimately satisfies their desires (UGT) and promotes their strategic activity (SDT) on social media.

As for distinguishing the manipulators (RQ2: Which manipulators are most common during the COVID-19 pandemic and what main functions do they serve?), the answer to this question is unambiguous and was obtained by summarizing every research method. Experts, content analysis and surveys lead us to conclude that the main manipulator is the logical correlation between the headline and the photo - their combined idea. It is noteworthy that the social media users (200 to 156 responses) only share information containing a positive story, which proves that positivity is a non-traditional form of manipulator, but is the most effective tool in a crisis, according to the experts.

At the same time, utilizing photographs and quotes (as a manipulator) of an authoritative figure impacts the public perception of the news and increases the share rates. This was confirmed by comparing pseudo-positive information packaged with this type of picture with a publication not displaying a photograph of a famous person.

The 3rd question is especially crucial (RQ3: Why did social media users share or like the pseudo-positive fake information (did it make them happy, hopeful, or angry?) and is answered by summarizing all used research methods and theories. The first and foremost reason for sharing is the conveyed positivity in the information (this is also confirmed by the answers of 153 out of 200 participants). Content analysis has also shown that positive information shares significantly more than negative information during the study period.

The second objective is hidden behind the activities of social network users on particular platforms. The survey showed that when sharing information to warn their friends (connected to gaining authority in their circle), social media users want to beat everyone to it and display their knowledge, which is closely linked to SDT and FoMo.

The third objective concerns the specific benefit that presents itself through positive feedback, positive evaluation from other social media users and emotional gain, which are related to the RCT and UGT theory: benefits and gratification.

By summarizing the theories and research results, it was unveiled that utilizing a particular name/product in pseudo-positive false information benefits three links (triple benefit principle): the sender/creator of the fake information; the object/person/organization mentioned in the fake information and the social media user.

Therefore, after exploring the answers to the research questions analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data, we can conclude that the first hypothesis we formulated: in a crisis, a social media user shares pseudo-positive information to receive positive feedback and emotional benefits, was confirmed.

As for the second hypothesis, after analyzing the comments, focus group and in-depth interview results, it became apparent that the users shared pseudo-positive information to reinforce their desire - that everything would be fine.

Thus, the second hypothesis, that individuals need pseudo-positive information to maintain optimism, which is the basis of pseudo-positive disinfodemia during a pandemic, has been confirmed.

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The Rise of Clickbait Headlines: A Study on Media Platforms from Bangladesh

By Abdur Rahman & Abdullah Al Mamun[±]*

The purpose of the study is to find out the actual numbers or ratio of clickbait headlines used by specific Bangladeshi media, the reason behind the rise of clickbait headlines in the era of social media, and to disclose the perception of media personnel regarding clickbait headlines and their effect on audiences' credibility. The qualitative method of research has been followed for the research. Content of four top-ranked media of Bangladesh have been analyzed and 12 media personnel from these media outlets have been interviewed. The study revealed a huge presence of clickbait components in each media's content. Factors like getting more clicks to generate money, competition, and audience demand have been identified behind the rise of clickbait headlines in recent times. Media personnel have acknowledged that clickbait headlines have some negative effects on various dimensions, of which, losing audience credibility is notable.

Keywords: clickbait, social media, competition, credibility, Facebook

Introduction

Media's struggle to attract audiences on digital platforms with numerous below-standard content is a remarkable thing in recent years. Mainstream media, especially print media has been under pressure from falling sales and advertising revenue and increased competition (Palau-Sampio, 2016). Currently, print media across the world are witnessing a severe drop in their circulation. The newspaper circulation fell from over 63 million to less than 28 million per day in the USA between 1984 and 2018. The advertising revenues fell from a high of nearly \$50 billion to \$14 billion between 2005 and 2018. In 2006, a total of 74,000 journalists, editors, photographers, and associated staff worked in US newsrooms while the figure had virtually halved to 38,000 in 2018 (Spillane et al., 2020). In the meantime, the Internet has become a dominant medium of communication. Following this, the concept of online news portals has become very popular across the world. To get the most updated information and news, audiences' dependency on online news portals or media websites increased instead of mainstream media (Bazaco et al., 2019). As a result, media owners and personnel shifted their minds and started investing more in their websites and apps, providing their news for free, rather than selling it in print editions. There is extreme pressure on journalists

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to attract readers to their articles with catchy headlines to get more clicks. As a result, the journalists started practicing clickbait headlines to lure readers to click on the linked article.

Clickbait headlines can be defined as a type of catchy headline that attracts readers to click on them and link to accompanying articles. These headlines are typically hyperlinked to the respective articles and shared on news websites and social media platforms like Facebook to reach more audiences (Agrawal, 2016). Notably, these headlines are intentionally made to lure more social media users to share these contents on their profiles. Many renowned news organizations have already begun to publish increasing amounts of sensational, exaggerated, and celebrity-focused content. In such a situation, media outlets are not very much concerned about the impact of these types of clickbait headlines on the audiences' credibility (Nolan, 2017). How the audiences or readers react to these headlines is not the prime concern of the media. Media owners and personnel, however, focused more on making sensational content to attract more audiences on their social media pages and websites. Instead of being concerned about audience perception, they highlighted designing these sorts of content.

Considering the matter, this study is designed to find out the ratio of these clickbait headlines shared by a media outlet on the Facebook platform at a specific time and to disclose the reason behind the rise of clickbait headlines in recent times. Another aim of the study is to unearth the perception of Bangladeshi media personnel about the effect of clickbait headlines on the trustworthiness of the audience.

Background of the Study

Compared to the previous decade, the current media environment is different as it is experiencing a severe drop in the circulation of print newspapers. Readers nowadays depend more on online to get news and current information to keep themselves updated (Salman et al., 2011). Following the rise of various social media, the number of readers, who looked for newspapers or traditional media, gradually decreased in recent times. Newspaper subscriptions are decreasing, because consumers are realizing they can read the same content online for free (Everett, 2011). Instead of reading newspapers, magazines, or articles, they preferred to read web pages. Readers mostly visit the websites of the media outlets as almost all the media have their respective websites. Search engines like Google are now so powerful that media tycoons believe that it has been forcing the newspaper industry to death's door (Mahmud, 2009). Media nowadays has started practising a new form of journalism with the help of modern technology which can be called media convergence. Besides, readers used to visit the social media platforms of these media outlets because it seems easier for them as they spend most of their time on social media. Here, the link between the readers and these websites has been subtly made by social media. In the economic context, the methods to disseminate information online are also changing in recent times. The number of readers who visit news media websites through search engines is

decreasing while there is an increase in the number of users who reach news through social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, mainly through news media pages (Bazaco et al., 2019). A little under half (48%) of US adults say they get news from social media often or sometimes, a 5% decline compared with 2020, according to a survey by Pew Research Center. About 31% of US adults say they get news regularly on Facebook, while about one in five Americans (22%) say they regularly get news on YouTube. Twitter and Instagram are regular news sources for 13% and 11% of Americans, respectively (Walker and Matsa, 2021).

The number of social media users is increasing daily across the world, Bangladesh, however, is not an exception. According to The Digital Report, a report published in February 2021 by global media company We Are Social, the total number of social media users in Bangladesh is now 45 million while 9 million of them joined social platforms between 2020 and 2021. The report revealed that the number of social media users is equivalent to 27.2% of the total population of the country (The Digital Report, 2021). Besides, there were 52,820,000 Facebook users in Bangladesh as of August 2021, which accounted for 30.6% of the country's entire population, as per NapoleonCat, a Polish-based social media management platform. Following the rise of social media users, Bangladeshi media houses are focusing on social media more to grab the attention of more users. The number of followers on Bangladeshi social media pages of media outlets indicates the dependency of people on social media to get information from the mainstream media. As of September 2021, Prothom Alo has more than 17 million followers on their verified Facebook page while the number is over 7 million for Kaler Kantho, 7 million for Daily Jugantor, 2 million for Daily Ittefaq, 2 million for Samakal, 1 million for Daily Manab Zamin, 3 million for The Daily Star and 1 million for Dhaka Tribune. The number of followers on the Facebook pages of television channels is even higher than the newspapers. Popular television channel NTV has more than 16 million followers on their official Facebook page while over 13 million people follow RTV, 11 million people follow Somoy TV, 8 million people follow Jamuna Television, 7 million people follow Ekattor TV, 4 million people follow Channel 24 and 4 million people follow DBC news. Apart from newspaper and television channels, several online news portals have millions of followers on their official Facebook page. More than 9 million people follow bdnews24.com on their official Facebook pages, the number is over 5 million for Daily Bangladesh, 4 million for jagonews24.com, 4 million for banglanews24.com, 4 million for Bangla Tribune, and 2 million for Dhaka Post.

All these numbers of followers on different official Facebook pages of media outlets indicate how much Bangladeshi people are dependent on social media especially on Facebook pages to keep themselves updated. Following the interest of the users on social media, all the mainstream Bangladeshi media outlets have started prioritizing social media platforms more for the last few years. New analytical software tools have been used to monitor the preferences of their audience. A separate section has been appointed to monitor these things which work to identify what type of photos, headlines, themes, and frames are the most attractive. Following the report provided by the section, they aimed to provide news, content, headlines, and photos following the preferences of their audience

(Bazaco et al., 2019). These things guide the media to practice a poor form of journalism that is viral journalism. The practice of viral journalism affects news selection and production processes considering the preferences of social network users. Besides, the media use tricky headlines that force the user into clicking, making videos that are specifically edited for dissemination on Facebook. Nowadays the core intention of media is to spread or disseminate their content, news, and videos by their social media followers rather than providing accurate, objective, and unbiased news to their audience. As the circulation of newspapers decreased in recent times, they took this new strategy as an alternative to it. Along with the other media outlets across the world, this new trend of practicing 'clickbait' headlines is now very common in Bangladeshi media. Journalists nowadays are more intent on enticing their audiences with these types of clickbait headlines.

Literature Review

The term 'clickbait' was coined in 2006 by Jay Beiger who used it in a blog post of his. The term was simply a combination of the word 'click' referring to clicking on a thumbnail or link and then 'bait' as in baiting viewers like a fish on a hook. A decade later it officially became a part of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the vocabulary of every modern technology user (Karadanaian, 2021). However, many believe that the rise of clickbait journalism started in times of the short attention span of the audience during the Internet age. But this idea is wrong as clickbait's history goes back to the 19th century. Even in the 1800s, a form of this term and tactic was used when yellow journalists would use sensational news and exaggerated headlines for the audience to serve specific purposes (Newitz, 2014). In the nineteenth century, newspapers were fighting for circulation numbers the same way social media sites compete for unique visitors in recent times. Joseph Pulitzer's New York World and William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal were engaged in a circulation war in the mid-1880s. After one point, the two newspapers had neck-to-neck sales. In a bid to surpass the other, they started over-dramatizing the news. Pulitzer introduced a popular comic strip in his newspaper to boost its circulation. He patronized the adventures of a kid, which later came to be known as the 'yellow' kid, as it wore an oversized yellow nightshirt. With the help of the yellow kid, they started sensationalizing stories and discrediting the leads of other newspapers (Vig, 2021). That was the first step forward to mislead the audience with exaggerated headlines and sensational news.

A headline is the title of a newspaper story, printed or placed in large letters at the top of the story. Headlines, in a traditional sense, can be defined as short, riveting synopses of their corresponding news items seeking to perform two functions: to summarize the story and to attract attention to the full-text article (Ifantidou, 2008). With a minimum of words, headlines aim at getting the attention of readers. The shape, structure, and choice of words in the headlines play a crucial role in attracting readers and thus influencing their choice of articles. The function of the headline of a news article has changed. Previously, the primary function of a

headline was to give the reader, who was scanning the newspaper, a clear understanding of what the article was about (Dijk, 1988). However, since many headlines are not read within the context of a newspaper anymore, the function of the headline has shifted. The headline, being one of the primary ways to attract the readers' attention, should above all make the reader curious as to what the article is about so that it lures the reader into opening the article (Chen et al., 2015). Headlines that provide content-based information, are mostly used to grab the attention of the audience. Nowadays, attention-grabbing clickbait headlines are very common tools for journalists to seek the attention of the audience in the era of social media. Headlines and body of news reports have become particularly discursive in new journalism's writing styles. The readers' experience of online news media today is a type of trickery. Firstly, the reader is directed by an overwhelming headline and then they encounter irrelevant content (Paksoy, 2014). Nowadays, a headline is often the primary way of getting a potential reader interested in an article. This has led to something known as clickbait. Clickbait can be seen as a specific style of writing that aims at inducing the inquisitiveness of the reader and to bait that reader into clicking and opening the article (Kuiken et al., 2017). Catchy headlines that lure readers to click on them and link to accompanying articles are called 'clickbait'. The term is commonly used in a negative light to describe headlines that are sensationalized, and upon clicking, one is redirected to misleading, unsatisfactory, or advertisement-like content (Kaushal and Vemuri, 2021). Clickbait links in social media are exaggerated headlines whose main motive is to mislead the reader to click on them. They create a nuisance in the online experience by creating a lure towards poor content (Agrawal, 2016). Curtis (2020) showed that viral content can bring financial profit by gaining additional traffic, growing an audience base, and/or generating 'clickbait' that translates into increasing financial value via their social media profiles (Danga, 2021).

Social media or social network sites can be described as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Among all the social media sites existing nowadays, Facebook is a giant with billions of users. According to eBIZ MBA, Facebook has a total of 2,200,000,000 unique monthly visitors as of September 1, 2021. Every organization, including media outlets, has an official Facebook page. It seems almost impossible to get a larger amount of audience at a time without the Facebook community in recent times. As a result, all the media outlets serve their audience with different social media pages, especially Facebook. According to the Spanish Association for Media Research in 2016, a total of 56.5 percent of Spanish Internet users used social networks to inform themselves which is 10.7 percent more than in 2013 (Bazaco et al., 2019). Additionally, numerous studies have found the involvement of social media nowadays in promoting clickbait headlines.

The term credibility is stated in many dimensions, including believability, reliability, accuracy, trust, objectivity, fairness, and so on. Credibility is defined in terms of perceptions of the media, characteristics of persuasive sources, message

structure, and content. While no conclusive definition of credibility exists, most literature agrees that two key factors of credibility include expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953). As more people use the mass media as their main source of information, the media must maintain the credibility of what they present to the public (Lee, 1978). Here, credibility is equally important for the effectiveness of democratic processes such as the formation of public opinion, elections, and public diplomacy (Tsftati, 2003). Credibility as it relates to media has been broken into three distinct, but related areas: source credibility, message credibility, and medium credibility (Kiousis 2001). The credibility factor is very important in this era of social media as everyone now shares information on their profile first and later it becomes news on any mainstream media. It would be great to have any previous study on online news and credibility factors to examine Bangladesh's perspective to support this study. However, no such study has been found while a 2014 study on television news in Bangladesh and perceived credibility examined the theoretical and empirical relationship between market-oriented journalism and the credibility of television news.

As the practice of clickbait headlines is not a new one, there are several studies related to clickbait headlines and their impact on the audience in various dimensions across the world. Television news in Bangladesh: intersection of market-oriented journalism and perceived credibility; Social Media, Fake News, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Sketching the Case of Southeast Asia; can fake headlines rescue journalism? The irrelevancy between headline and content in online journalism; these studies are found in Bangladesh and the South East Asian perspective which make the study more pertinent. Additionally, studies like clickbait as a strategy of viral journalism; clickbait and their effect on perceptions of journalistic credibility and quality; clickbait headlines and journalism credibility in Sub-Saharan Africa; relationships between clickbait headlines and trustworthiness; clickbait – trust and credibility of digital news; have been done so far in this field. In every study, clickbait is represented as a negative form of journalism. A trio of researchers from the University of Mississippi and the University of Oklahoma have analyzed 1.67 million Facebook posts that had been posted by a total of 153 media organizations. They developed a 'clickbait detection model', and tried to figure out whether mainstream media or unreliable media used clickbait more often (Murphy, 2018). The study stated that both mainstream and unreliable media use clickbait regularly and that it grew in prevalence between 2014 and 2016. A total of 19.46 percent of headlines were clickbait in 2014 while the number was 23.73 percent in 2015 and 25.27 percent in 2016 (Uddin Rony et al., 2017).

Research Question

Aiming to find out the actual numbers or ratio of clickbait headlines used by these media, the reason behind the rise of clickbait headlines in the era of social media, and to disclose the Bangladeshi media personnel's perception of audiences' credibility, this paper particularly formulated some questions which include:

RQ1. What is the number of clickbait headlines on selected media's official Facebook page in a specific period?

RQ2. Why are mainstream media using clickbait headlines instead of conventional headlines?

RQ3. Is money the only factor that guides the media to use clickbait headlines?

RQ4. What do media personnel think about audiences' credibility following the rise of clickbait headlines?

Methodology and Sampling

The qualitative method of research has been followed for the research. More specifically, the taxonomic qualitative method was used for conducting the study. Taxonomies are classified structures that organize elements into categories based on their relationships and similarities. Content published on the Facebook pages of the selected media has been scrutinized to examine the number of clickbait headlines. These large sets of data have been analyzed by using classification methods on similarities of the variables. In addition, several interviews with concerned media have been conducted to understand their intention of using clickbait headlines and their effects on audience credibility.

Content shared on social media platforms mainly on Facebook by four top-ranked mainstream media in Bangladesh has been analyzed first. According to the latest ranking on Alexa, the top four media outlets in Bangladesh include Prothom Alo, Jagonews24.com, Dhaka Post, and Bangla Tribune. Content of seven days shared on the Facebook pages of these four media has been analyzed through various aspects in terms of defining clickbait headlines. Following the analysis, several interviews were conducted to disclose the perception of media personnel about audiences' credibility. The interview also aimed to find out the media's agenda as well agenda or intention behind the rise of clickbait headlines in the era of social media. A total of 12 interviews of Editors, Head of News, News Editors, Head of Social Media, SEO Manager, Digital Marketing Manager, Social Media Executive, and Social Media Manager have been conducted on these four media (Table 1). These hour-long open-ended interviews were conducted both in-person and online. Few questions on content analysis were structured while the other questions were open-ended and the media personnel were free to share their perception on the issue. Three interviewees aimed to be anonymous, as a result, their names were not disclosed. The findings of the study have been mentioned following the summary of the key points of the interview about the research questions.

Table 1. Lists of Interviewees

SL	Name of the Interviewee	Designation	Organization
1	Mr. X	Head of Online	Prothom Alo
2	Asif Aziz	Additional News Editor	Jagonews24.com
3	Mohiuddin Sarker	Editor	Dhaka Post
4	Masood Kamal	Head of News	Bangla Tribune
5	Mehedi Hasan	Senior Moderator, SMI	Prothom Alo
6	Ayon	Senior Executive, Social Media	Jagonews24.com
7	Rejaur Rahman Russell	Manger, Digital Marketing	Dhaka Post
8	Md Shahinuzzaman	Manager, SEO	Bangla Tribune
9	Mr. Y	Moderator, SMI	Prothom Alo
10	Mr. Z	Social Media Executive	Jagonews24.com
11	Aminul Islam Roman	Social Media Executive	Dhaka Post
12	Emran Hossain	Social Media Manager	Bangla Tribune

Data Representation

First of all, content analysis is performed on content shared on the Facebook platform by the top four mainstream media in Bangladesh. According to the latest ranking on Alexa, a tool that ranks websites based on the users' daily time on the site, page views per visitor, and traffic, four top-ranked mainstream media of Bangladesh have been selected for the study. These four media include Prothom Alo, Jagonews24.com, Dhaka Post, and Bangla Tribune. Content shared in a total of seven days from 23rd January 2022 to 29th January 2022 on the official Facebook page of all these media have been analyzed based on some aspects. The first thing aimed to identify through the content analysis is to reveal the number of clickbait headlines used by the media. Some criteria have been fixed following the literature review to define a headline as a clickbait headline. These criteria are:

Exaggeration: Exaggeration can take different forms, such as the alteration of correlational statements into causal statements, change in explicitness and directness of included advice, or twisting of important experimental facts (Patro et al., 2018). Clickbait headlines are often modified to appear more negative than the actual article, exaggerate main points, or over-emphasize conflicts to attract more readers (Ecker et al., 2014). Most of the time, journalists exaggerate an incident and make some content having no relation between the headline and the body of the news.

Sensational Word: Sensational headlines are headlines that grip people's attention and generate reader interest. Conventional abstractive headline generation methods, unlike human writers, do not optimize for maximal reader attention (Xu et al., 2019). By using sensational and misleading headlines, especially on social media platforms, clickbait has the objective of attracting and determining online users to click on a given link to generate website traffic (Zhang and Clough, 2020). Journalists tactically place a sensational word in the headline which is irrelevant to the context. These sensational words have been used in the headlines to get more clicks.

Celebrity Focused: The term celebrity alludes to a person who is known to the general society for their accomplishments in zones other than that of the item class supported. It can be for example an actor, an entertainer, a performer, a

singer, a sports figure, and others (Friedman and Friedman, 1979). Several news stories have been published by the media having zero news value. Prioritizing the 'prominence' factor of the celebrity, hundreds of news have been published to get more clicks.

Question Marked Headlines: Question-based headlines are another type of clickbait headline designed to create uncertainty by posing a question about the information contained in a news story. Recent media headlines that are grammatically interrogative are perceived as confusing and less informative (Poole, 2021). Question-marked headlines consisting of WH-questions create inquisitiveness among the audience and that interest guides readers to click on the link to know what has been stated there.

Quote Used as a Headline: Journalists are using a new and unique form of quoting which not only reproduces the quote exactly but also offers substantial other levels of potentially newsworthy information such as the level of public support for the statement, the amount of debate it has stimulated, and the politician's photo (Dumitrescu and Ross, 2021). Clickbait headlines often use forward-referring expressions, reverse narrative, and hyperbolic language to arouse curiosity and entice the reader to click (Blom and Hansen, 2015). Journalists selected a catchy, funny, or awkward statement from an entire conversation to quote in the headline. Usage of the quotes as headlines is not a new thing, but today's media uses it as a weapon to get more clicks. Quotes are used in the headlines tactically to encourage the audience to click on the respective links.

Alongside this, another objective of content analysis is to keep a close eye on which bit, clickbait headlines are used most. These might be national, international, entertainment, sports, or anything else. The analysis aims to find out the ratio of using clickbait headlines in different bits. The final purpose of the analysis is to observe the audiences' reactions or comments on news with clickbait headlines on their Facebook page. This may help to get an idea on the ground of acceptance level from the audience.

Prothom Alo

Since 1998, Prothom Alo has been one of the leading and largest circulated newspapers in Bangladesh. According to the National Media Survey 2018, Prothom Alo has more than 6.6 million daily readerships online. The online portal of Prothom Alo is the most visited Bangla website in the world, as per the Alexa Ranking. Around 17 million people follow Prothom Alo's official Facebook page alongside their websites and newspapers. The number indicates that the Facebook platform is a great source of readers for Prothom Alo. As a result, this media outlet designed and created content for the Facebook platform following some special strategies. They have some separate policies for making content for these social media platforms (Tables 2-4).

Table 2. To find out the Total Daily Shared Contents on the Official Facebook Page of Prothom Alo and Examine the Number of Clickbait Headlines and Finally Get a Percentage of it

Date	Total Contents	Contents with Clickbait Headlines	Percentage
23 rd January	79	13	16.45%
24 th January	97	14	14.43%
25 th January	85	17	20.00%
26 th January	90	27	30.00%
27 th January	91	28	30.77%
28 th January	81	17	20.98%
29 th January	94	12	12.77%

Table 3. To find out the Criteria of Clickbait Headlines, Prothom Alo Used on their Facebook Page to Grab the Attention of the Audience

Date	Clickbait Headlines				
	Exaggeration	Sensational Word	Celebrity Focused	Question Marked	Quote as Headline
23 rd January	1	1	3	8	0
24 th January	1	0	0	11	2
25 th January	0	0	3	11	3
26 th January	0	0	1	22	4
27 th January	1	0	3	22	2
28 th January	0	0	2	14	1
29 th January	0	0	0	11	1

Table 4. To Examine the Numbers of the Contents Specifically Each Bit Prothom Alo Uses Clickbait Headlines

Date	Clickbait Headlines					
	National	International	Entertainment	Sports	Lifestyle	Others
23 rd January	7	0	1	1	0	4
24 th January	6	2	2	2	1	1
25 th January	5	2	5	0	1	4
26 th January	8	3	5	0	3	8
27 th January	7	3	3	3	2	10
28 th January	3	2	5	0	3	4
29 th January	1	1	2	1	3	4

Jagonews24

According to the Alexa Ranking, Jagonews24 is the second-ranked media outlet in Bangladesh. It is one of the most popular and reliable online news portals. Jagonews24 was launched in 2014 and since then it has become a great source of online news for Bangladeshi audiences. Alongside its position in the Alexa Ranking, Jagonews24 has over 4 million followers on its official Facebook page and this huge community is one of the most important factors for them to get connected with their audience (Tables 5-7).

Table 5. To find out the Total Daily Shared Contents on the Official Facebook Page of Jagonews24 to Examine the Number of Clickbait Headlines and Finally Get a Percentage of it

Date	Total Contents	Contents with Clickbait Headlines	Percentage
23 rd January	259	18	6.95%
24 th January	260	18	6.92%
25 th January	272	15	5.51%
26 th January	255	11	4.31%
27 th January	247	13	5.26%
28 th January	219	12	5.48%
29 th January	244	12	4.92%

Table 6. To find out the Criteria of Clickbait Headlines, Jagonews24 used on their Facebook Page to Grab the Attention of the Audience

Date	Clickbait Headlines				
	Exaggeration	Sensational Word	Celebrity Focused	Question Marked	Quote as Headline
23 rd January	0	0	1	16	1
24 th January	2	0	1	15	0
25 th January	1	0	1	13	0
26 th January	0	0	3	8	0
27 th January	0	1	2	9	1
28 th January	3	0	1	8	0
29 th January	0	0	1	9	2

Table 7. To Examine the Numbers of the Contents Specifically Each Bit Jagonews24 uses Clickbait Headlines

Date	Clickbait Headlines					
	National	International	Entertainment	Sports	Lifestyle	Others
23 rd January	1	3	6	1	3	4
24 th January	3	0	5	1	4	5
25 th January	2	2	1	0	3	7
26 th January	2	1	4	0	2	2
27 th January	3	1	3	1	1	4
28 th January	1	0	6	0	0	5
29 th January	2	2	3	0	1	4

Dhaka Post

Dhaka Post is comparatively new among all the media outlets selected for the study as it started in 2021. It has gained tremendous success in attracting audiences and has become one of the most popular online news portals in Bangladesh within a very short time. As per the Alexa Ranking, Dhaka Post ranked in three. Dhaka Post has nearly 3 million followers on its official Facebook page. As a result, the Facebook page became the most important weapon for Dhaka Post to grab more audience (Tables 8-10).

Table 8. To find out the Total Daily Shared Contents on the Official Facebook Page of Dhaka Post to Examine the Number of Clickbait Headlines and Finally Get a Percentage of it

Date	Total Contents	Contents with Clickbait Headlines	Percentage
23 rd January	214	18	8.42%
24 th January	213	10	4.69%
25 th January	228	15	6.56%
26 th January	220	11	5.00%
27 th January	205	7	3.41%
28 th January	178	10	5.62%
29 th January	183	10	5.46%

Table 9. To find out the Criteria of Clickbait Headlines, Dhaka Post used on their Facebook Page to Grab the Attention of the Audience

Date	Clickbait Headlines				
	Exaggeration	Sensational Word	Celebrity Focused	Question Marked	Quote as Headline
23 rd January	1	0	2	12	3
24 th January	3	1	2	4	0
25 th January	4	0	0	11	0
26 th January	0	0	1	10	0
27 th January	0	0	2	5	0
28 th January	1	0	0	8	1
29 th January	0	1	0	8	1

Table 10. To Examine the Numbers of the Contents Specifically each Bit Dhaka Post uses Clickbait Headlines

Date	Clickbait Headlines					
	National	International	Entertainment	Sports	Lifestyle	Others
23 rd January	2	0	8	2	2	4
24 th January	0	0	6	1	2	1
25 th January	0	0	5	4	2	4

26 th January	0	1	4	2	2	2
27 th January	0	0	3	1	2	1
28 th January	0	1	6	0	1	2
29 th January	2	0	2	1	2	3

Bangla Tribune

Bangla Tribune has been one of the most popular and reliable online news portals for so long among all the Bangladeshi portals. Bangla Tribune started its journey in 2014 and throughout the time after launching, it became a very popular and credible source of online news and content for the Bangladeshi audience. According to the Alexa Ranking, it is ranked among the top four media outlets in Bangladesh. Bangla Tribune has a great number of followers on its official Facebook page. The number is nearly 4 million and it is one of the most important platforms for them to get connected with readers (Tables 11-13).

Table 11. To find out the Total Daily Shared Contents on the Official Facebook Page of Bangla Tribune to Examine the Number of Clickbait Headlines and finally get a Percentage of it

Date	Total Contents	Contents with Clickbait Headlines	Percentage
23 rd January	175	8	4.57%
24 th January	188	5	2.66%
25 th January	175	8	4.57%
26 th January	160	12	7.5%
27 th January	166	16	9.64%
28 th January	149	9	6.04%
29 th January	152	6	3.95%

Table 12. To find out the Criteria of Clickbait Headlines, Bangla Tribune used its Facebook Page to Grab the Attention of the Audience

Date	Clickbait Headlines				
	Exaggeration	Sensational Word	Celebrity Focused	Question Marked	Quote as Headline
23 rd January	0	0	0	8	0
24 th January	0	0	0	5	0
25 th January	0	1	1	5	1
26 th January	0	1	1	6	4
27 th January	0	0	2	11	3
28 th January	0	0	2	7	0
29 th January	0	0	0	6	0

Table 13. To Examine the Numbers of the Contents Specifically each Bit Bangla Tribune uses Clickbait Headlines

Date	Clickbait Headlines					
	National	International	Entertainment	Sports	Lifestyle	Others
23 rd January	4	0	1	1	2	0
24 th January	2	0	0	1	0	2
25 th January	1	1	2	2	1	1
26 th January	5	0	2	2	2	1
27 th January	4	2	2	3	3	2
28 th January	2	1	3	2	1	0
29 th January	2	0	1	2	1	0

Research Findings

RF1: In response to the first research question for the study, the final number or percentage of clickbait headlines in these four media's Facebook pages during this period is given in Table 14.

Table 14. To Highlight the Overall Ratio of Clickbait Headlines by the Media in that Period

Media	Total Contents	Clickbait Contents	Overall Percentage
Prothom Alo	617	128	20.75%
JagoNews24	1756	99	5.63%
Dhaka Post	1441	81	5.62%
Bangla Tribune	1165	64	5.49%

Prothom Alo

The analysis revealed that Prothom Alo shared some classified content on their Facebook page instead of sharing all the content published on that day. The media outlet shared content considering the demand of the audience on the social media platforms. The clickbait headline content percentage on Prothom Alo's Facebook page indicated how the journalists of the media lure the audiences with clickbait headlines. Especially, Prothom Alo prioritizes sharing content having clickbait headlines instead of content having conventional headlines on social media platforms. Prothom Alo mostly focused on question-marked headlines as over 80 percent of the clickbait headlines had this component during this period. Most of its question-marked headlines consist of how, when, where, what, which, and different queries. The practice of using question sign (?) in the headlines has become very common in Prothom Alo. Alongside the question-marked headlines,

celebrity-focused content and quotes as a headline are also used in greater numbers. Prothom Alo shared a series of content regarding Bangladeshi actress Pori Moni's wedding and Indian actress Katrina Kaif's honeymoon during this time. It shared a huge number of content regarding the Bangladesh Film Artists' Association election with catchy, funny, or awkward quotes in the headlines. However, the presence of other criteria like exaggeration and sensational words in headlines is comparatively little in Prothom Alo's shared content on the Facebook platform.

JagoNews24

The analysis of Facebook content over seven days revealed that JagoNews24 shared almost all of its content published in a day on the Facebook page. Jago News has no particular designed content to share on the Facebook platform like Prothom Alo. As JagoNews24 shared all of its published content on Facebook, the percentage of clickbait content is lower for the media compared to the previous one. JagoNews24 mostly used question-marked headlines among the study's criteria of clickbait headlines. In that period of 7 days, around 80 percent of JagoNews24's clickbait content is designed with question-marked headlines. Like Prothom Alo, they tried to create curiosity among the audiences with the practice of using question sign (?) in the headlines. The analysis exposed that JagoNews24 picked religious, travel, lifestyle, and entertainment-based content for making question-marked headlines. The practice of exaggeration in the headlines has been found in the contents shared by JagoNews24. They picked entertainment and trendy issues to exaggerate in the headlines to attract more audiences. However, the tendency to use sensational words in the headlines is comparatively low in number by JagoNews24. It also maintained a balance while creating celebrity-focused content. Though JagoNews24 always went for trendy issues, the presence of catchy, funny, or awkward quotes in the headline is not huge in numbers. Events like Bangladeshi actress Pori Moni's wedding, Indian actress Katrina Kaif's honeymoon, and Bangladesh Film Artists' Association election have also been highlighted vastly by Jago News like Prothom Alo. They picked these events as an opportunity to grab more audiences. They exaggerated these events to entice the audience to click on its contents. The presence of clickbait headlines has been found in every bit of JagoNews24, including national, international, entertainment, sports, lifestyle, and other sections. However, most of the clickbait content of JagoNews24 on its Facebook page has been found in the entertainment and lifestyle section.

Dhaka Post

The analysis revealed that Dhaka Post shared all of its content published in a day on its Facebook page. It doesn't have any specifically designed content to share on the Facebook page like JagoNews24. Dhaka Post mostly focused on question-marked headlines as around 80 percent of the clickbait headlines used by Dhaka Post had the component. This media intended to create inquisitiveness

among the audiences with these headlines. Most of Dhaka Post's question-marked headlines are based on lifestyle and entertainment content. The exaggeration factor in headlines has got priority in Dhaka Post's content on the Facebook platform. The numbers of celebrity-focused content and quotes as headlines are comparatively less in Dhaka Post's content. However, Dhaka Post shared several contents related to Bangladeshi actress Pori Moni's wedding and Indian actress Katrina Kaif's honeymoon in that period. Like Prothom Alo, Dhaka Post shared numerous contents regarding the Bangladesh Film Artistes' Association election. All of their content regarding the election is relevant but they used catchy, funny, or awkward statements by the artists or candidates of the election to quote in the headline. The presence of clickbait headlines has been found in Dhaka Post's every bit while entertainment got the highest priority.

Bangla Tribune

The analysis revealed that Bangla Tribune shared all of its content published in a day on Facebook. Like JageNews24 and Dhaka Post, Bangla Tribune doesn't have any specifically designed content to share on Facebook. Bangla Tribune mostly focused on question-marked headlines among the criteria of clickbait headlines. In that period of analysis, around 90 percent of Bangla Tribune's clickbait content is designed with question-marked headlines. Bangla Tribune picked the banking sector, Islamic banking, bank interest, and economic and business content for making question-marked headlines. The exaggeration in the headlines was not found in Bangla Tribune's content and it refrained from using sensational words in the headlines as well. Alongside the question-marked headlines, celebrity-focused content and using quotes as a headline are two other dominant criteria found in Bangla Tribune's content. The presence of clickbait headlines has been found in national, entertainment, sports, and lifestyle bits.

RF2: One of the major purposes of the study is to find out the reason behind the rise of clickbait headlines in the era of social media. Instead of conventional headlines, the media used clickbait headlines more in recent times, especially in social media. Several interviews with the media personnel from the selected media for the study revealed some key factors behind the rise of clickbait headlines. These reasons include:

Technical Advancement: The first and foremost target of every media is to claim the top-listed position in the Google search engine. The top position in Google search has been determined considering various factors, including search, page view individual readers' presence on the site, and so on. Clickbait headlines helped to get more clicks and visits on the website which is very much efficient in raising the page views of the website. More clicks will place the media at the top of the Google search which helps them to get more advertisements. Click generates the traffic, revenue, and advertisement impression of the media.

Financial Advancement: The media started the practice of clickbait headlines as more clicks means more money. Almost all the media are looking for profit with

clickbait content. It is very difficult to get clicks and audience engagement with the conventional practice of journalism. There are several media outlets across the country and new media outlets are launching regularly. In these circumstances, all the media shared the same content on the social media platform at the same time. Clickbait headlines are the easiest way to tempt the audience to click on the content.

News considered a 'Commodity': Nowadays news is considered a 'commodity'. Like other business products, the main target of all the media is to sell their news to the respective readers. As more sales means more profit, the clickbait headlines have risen in recent times. In the era of social media, news is like the product for every media outlet and the media are the business organization. Every business organization aims to generate profit by selling their product, the media outlets are not an exception here in this context. By hook or by crook, the media tried to sell their product. This concept of selling news is also responsible for the rise of clickbait headlines.

Positive Clickbait: Media developed a concept that it takes no time to get the attention of the audience with clickbait components in the headlines. This is vastly responsible for the rise of clickbait headlines. According to media outlets, clickbait headlines are used in positive manners which are taken as a part of the marketing strategy. As a result, media outlets use clickbait components on important news sectors, including national, international, and politics. They termed this as 'positive clickbait'. As engagement is the prime concern for media outlets, they positively practice clickbait headlines to get more audience.

RF3: Following the interviews with the media personnel, the author identified that money is not the lone factor that guided the media outlets practicing so many clickbait headlines in the era of social media. The study revealed that excluding money, few things guided the media to use clickbait headlines. These things are:

Competition: In this current era of social media, competition to reach more audiences in a shorter time is the main motive of the media. Every media served the same information at a time. With the help of social media platforms like Facebook, it became available in the feed of every user's device within a very short time. To compete with others, media served content with clickbait components to differentiate content from others. To win the competition of attracting more audiences to click, the information has been exaggerated with sensational words or phrases in the headlines. Media's competition with each other to sell more news encouraged the practice of using clickbait headlines.

To grab the attention of more readers: Media are looking for more readers to get more clicks on their links. As a result, they designed clickbait content to engage all sorts of audiences. They provide a variety of news angles on certain information. According to different media personnel, readers decide in just 3 seconds what to read or not. So, the media have to provide something to grab the readers' attention in these three seconds. Three seconds is a very short time and when the media designed content considering the attention span of the audience, the presence of clickbait components is very much expected in the content's headline.

Audience Demand: The main intention of every media is to serve the audience with different types of content. All the information, news, and content of the media are designed following the audiences' demands and interests. As per the media personnel, the audience mostly liked clickbait content instead of conventional or quality content. The likes, comments, shares, and engagement of clickbait content on social media platforms are far more than the conventional content. As the media are always looking for more engagement by the audience, they designed clickbait content as well as headlines.

Creating Brand Value: Media considered the practice of clickbait headlines as an establishment of their identity. They tried to introduce something unique for a simple event and kept the practice in progress as a branding of the individual organization. The concept of creating a separate brand is true for every media, according to their representatives. Everybody wants to deliver something in a unique way to attract the audience. To prove oneself different from others, the clickbait headlines have been used.

RF4: The study revealed that Bangladeshi media personnel are cognizant of the fall of audiences' credibility following the rise of clickbait headlines in the era of social media. The interview with the representatives of these media outlets indicated that sensational headlines and incomplete news have some negative effects on various dimensions including audience credibility. The media personnel admitted that by generating 'clickbait' content, media got additional traffic and financial value by creating an audience base on their social media platforms. According to media personnel, it is possible to create a sensation and get some instant readers with sensational and clickbait content. As a result, the media prioritized clickbait headlines for quick sensation which destroyed the acceptability of the media among the audience in the long run. The media personnel blamed clickbait headlines for the fall of audience credibility and mentioned that no media can sustain for long with the continuous practice of clickbait and sensational headlines. If the readers don't get the information for which they clicked, the acceptance level of the portal will be decreased. Media that are only dependent on these sensational and clickbait headlines have no everlasting readers or followers due to the lack of trustworthiness. However, they acknowledged that making additional traffic and financial value should not be the only goal of a media as media has some specific role to play for society.

Additional Findings & Discussion

Apart from the research question-based findings, a few additional findings have amplified the strength of the study. This study summarizes the entire findings of the interviews which came up with some unique and significant discoveries.

AF1: *Media don't have any specific agenda behind the rise of clickbait headlines in recent times.* Media personnel claimed that there is neither any specific agenda nor any religious or political desire behind the rise of clickbait headlines, though

all the media across the world have some specific agenda to serve while addressing or establishing something new.

AF2: *The Media took the 'negative news value' into consideration while publishing reports regarding some film celebrities of Bangladesh.* According to the journalists, many of the film industry celebrities have negative news values. As people are interested in their news, media are bound to share their stories. To keep pace with the situation, they are promoting some celebrities by using the term 'negative news value' which enlarges the number of celebrity-focused content.

AF3: *The Social Media department of every media is under huge pressure to increase the readers and page views at any cost.* Whatever the scenario is, they have to maintain a real-time visitor to the website. As a result, they used sensational and irrelevant words in the caption to create hype among the audiences. They are not thinking about the long-term consequences, they are just doing their job to lure mass people to click on their link.

AF4: *The belief or trust of audiences in media is at death's door following the rise of clickbait headlines.* The social media followers of these media outlets deliberately expressed their anger and frustration over the media for this type of trickery. The comment section of these media's Facebook pages indicates the audiences' disbelief over media due to such process of being directed by an alluring headline and then encountering unrelated content. However, the media personnel don't agree to take the social media comments seriously. According to their perception, most of the social media comments are motivated, unorganized, and unconstructed.

The study discovered the 'culture of fear' among the media personnel which guided the rise of clickbait headlines. The world is mostly ruled by autocratic governments and in this region, there is no such environment for practicing good forms of journalism. The pressure from the government, owners, and advertisers keeps the journalists away from good practice of journalism. There is no such environment for doing an investigative report against any corrupt government officials or powerful political leaders. The number of journalist harassment, detentions, and deaths is increasing gradually and it established a 'culture of fear' in society. The Digital Security Act 2018 is another impediment for journalists which abstained them from doing serious reporting. As media personnel are facing impediments in doing investigative or in-depth reporting on a large scale, they keep themselves busy with the poor form of journalism. And they depend more on clickbait headlines for the overall earning of their media outlet as well. In this context, the 'culture of fear' existing in society is also tremendously responsible for the rise of clickbait headlines.

Conclusion

The study comes up with a surprising finding that the most popular and top-ranked media in Bangladesh secured the top position in terms of using clickbait headlines on social media platforms in a specific timeline. The availability of

clickbait components is found in every media selected for the study. Interestingly, the representatives of these media are cognizant of the situation and they have some preparation for the last stage of losing audiences' credibility. Media have an intention to balance the situation by serving both clickbait and objective content at the last stage of losing audience credibility. Though the 'culture of fear' among the media personnel keeps them abstained from the quality practice of journalism, the media should be concerned about regaining their credibility. Media personnel stated that it is quite possible to grab the attention of the audience and earn the expected financial value with proper practice of journalism and standard headlines but it takes time. This will be a time-consuming process, but the media will get an everlasting audience through such practice. The audiences' comments on social media platforms indicated that the belief or trust of audiences in media is at death's door. Social media comments could never be an index to measure the audiences' credibility, however, the media need to take into consideration this issue as well.

Recommendations & Areas of Future Study

The rise of clickbait headlines in recent times is not a good indication for the journalism sector of Bangladesh. An alternative to clickbait headlines should have to be introduced to keep the flow of income alive. Additionally, the importance of good practice in journalism has to be presented positively. New incentives and awards should be introduced that make the journalists confident in doing investigative or in-depth reporting. When most of the media concentrate on the good practice of journalism, poor practices like clickbait headlines will be decreased automatically. Most importantly, the environment for good practice of journalism has to be ensured for the journalists. The pressure from the government, owners, and advertisers has to be reduced. The freedom of the press has to be ensured.

This study doesn't conduct any survey or interview of the audiences to know their perceptions. All of their reactions are being measured by previous studies. However, direct interaction with the audience would provide a better understanding of their trustworthiness in media. Further study would be focused on examining the condition of credibility of the audience through direct interaction. Besides, interesting facts may be revealed upon further study as to why readers demand clickbait-oriented content instead of standard content.

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The Affordance of Visibility in the Social Media Videos of LGBT Nonprofits in Lebanon: (In)Visibilities, Representativity and Socio-Political Engagement

*By Antoine Badaoui**

LGBT nonprofit organizations in Lebanon use social media videos to foreground the rights of sexual minorities in a society that institutionalizes homophobia. Employing content and thematic analysis to study twelve of these videos within the Lebanese sociopolitical context, I examine how the organizations enact the online affordance of visibility to transgress local hegemonic discourses and claim representativity and political rights. Engaging in politics online comes with the fear of offline homophobia. Lebanese LGBT nonprofits have therefore adopted strategies to mitigate offline persecution, including the invisibility of individuals within the visibility of the collective. They have also engaged in Pan-Arab activism and relied on local Arabic terms for sexual minorities to create a more nuanced activism for the Arab region than found in transnational LGBT activism.

Keywords: LGBT, Lebanon, nonprofits, social media, visibility

Introduction

In this article, I provide an in-depth analysis of the social media affordance of visibility of Lebanese LGBT nonprofits. Social media affordances refer to the different ways in which social media users employ and socially engage with specific features of these technologies (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). The affordance of visibility links to the presence of individuals and organizations on media platforms (Yang and Kent, 2014) and the ease of locating information online (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). In a queer context, visibility is essential for fighting the symbolic annihilation of LGBT people (De Ridder and Van Bauwel, 2015) and for claiming political representation (Sender, 2012). For LGBT populations, the politics of visibility may appear through narratives of self-disclosure, a process that social media can facilitate (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015; also see Hanckel et al., 2019). This places LGBT individuals under scrutiny by intended and unintended audiences alike (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015) and heightens the risk of an involuntary coming out online with potentially negative consequences (Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019) in the offline world (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015). Consequently, LGBT people engage in online strategies to avoid inadvertent disclosure and to mitigate the risks involved in being identified as non-heterosexual (Albury & Byron, 2016).

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In Lebanon, where social norms and structures are often hostile to LGBT people, Moussawi (2020) finds that the notion of LGBT visibility in the country challenges what he describes as “the dominant Euro-American binary of LGBT visibility and invisibility,” where visibility is a measure of freedom and progress (p.134). He shows how queer people negotiate and decide their visibility by evaluating their environment and assessing the risks of visibility to avoid vulnerabilities (Moussawi, 2020). Further, Moussawi (2020) contends that what is visible must possess a shared meaning for people. As a political statement, therefore, LGBT visibility needs to convey a message to society.

In their online work with LGBT people in Lebanon, Lebanese LGBT nonprofits must adapt their strategies and align them to the needs of their target population, notably regarding visibility. Until now there is no literature covering the social media affordances of these organizations. In this research, I employ content and thematic analysis to study twelve of these nonprofits’ videos to answer the question: how Lebanese LGBT organizations enact and engage with the affordance of visibility in their social media videos? As my data show, LGBT nonprofits have employed online visibility to engage in national politics and in the transnational discourse on LGBT rights as human rights. They address Lebanese social norms and assert that homosexualities are authentic to the Arab region. Nevertheless, engaging in a politics of online visibility comes with the fear of offline homophobia. The Lebanese LGBT nonprofits have thus adopted strategies to mitigate offline persecution such as the invisibility of individuals within the visibility of the collective. They have also engaged in Pan-Arab activism and relied heavily on local Arabic sexual minorities terms, which I explain below, to create an activism that is more nuanced for the Arab region than transnational LGBT activism.

Literature Review

Online Visibility

Treem and Leonardi (2013) connected social media visibility to the level of effort that people with internet access require to track down information about someone else. For this to be possible, such information needs to be public. This is an action social media allow as they permit their users to create content for broadcast to a potential audience (Boyd, 2011), prompting Yang and Kent’s (2014) definition of visibility as “the public presence of an individual or organization in the media” (p.563). Putting oneself and one’s actions on social media to be seen by others is essential for LGBT people to claim political representation and find communities to belong (Sender, 2012).

Such visibility can also be beneficial to nonprofits. Yang and Kent (2014) linked social media visibility to the frequency with which social media users discuss individual or organizational matters and argued that organizational trust improves with increased daily interactions between organization and audience. Social media allow nonprofits to boost their daily interactions (Uldam, 2017), not

only enhancing the potential for visibility but also freeing it from spatial and temporal constraints (see Thompson, 2005). This freedom allows nonprofits to disseminate issues of concern to their stakeholders in real time and reach their audience regardless of geographical boundaries (Housley et al., 2018).

LGBT activism benefits from this flexible visibility as it can respond swiftly to homophobia and shed light on the issues faced by the LGBT community, moving it from invisibility to visibility (Venzo and Hess, 2013). LGBT organizations thus counter the effect of symbolic annihilation. The latter is inflicted by the traditional media's promotion of dominant culturally-rooted discourses on social norms and power relations (Gerbner, 1972) favoring heteronormativity. This is significant in Lebanon because, despite increased coverage of gender and sexuality topics on traditional media (El Rahi, 2016), the national mainstream media, particularly TV, do not allow the kind of space that social media can provide for sexual minorities. On the contrary, LGBT issues are mainly addressed in comedy shows ridiculing homosexuality, and in talk shows adopting a moralistic and admonitory tone (El Rahi, 2016), which keeps homosexuality confined within a dominant heteronormative discourse.

Social media visibility allows sexual minorities to circumvent social, economic, and political censorship in the offline world, as Friedman (2007) found in a Latin American context. In the process, social media users make their online behavior visible to others (Treem and Leonardi, 2013), incarnating what Thompson (2005) called "the society of self-disclosure," where they reveal aspects of their personal lives and make them available for the many regardless of their geolocation. For LGBT people, this opportunity for self-disclosure and engagement in a politics of visibility is a political statement (Hanckel et al., 2019). Moreover, the potential for wide visibility affords them the possibility of community building and knowledge sharing, although it also creates challenges. These challenges are aggravated by the fact that the intended public of a social media content is not always the actual audience, which may also be invisible and unknown (Boyd, 2011). This means that tailored content does not always meet its objectives and can cause problems with family, friends, and peers (Boyd, 2011).

Here, Duguay (2016) refers to "context collision," an involuntary coming out to an online audience with whom a certain sexual identity had already been determined online or offline. Context collisions often unsettle social interactions and can jeopardize the safety of LGBT individuals (Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019). LGBT people "must consciously navigate the emergence and disclosure of their identity" (Fox and Ralston, 2016, p. 635), therefore, and reflect on how they wish to be perceived online (Cooper and Dzara, 2010). Identity management has emerged as a concept to address these issues and minimize the risks of visibility (Hanckel et al., 2019) while taking into consideration social stigma and discrimination, including ways to avoid the latter by exploiting social media features (Duguay, 2016). Through privacy settings, social media permit users to control their degree of online visibility (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). Privacy features, however, are not always simple to navigate (Duguay, 2016). Moreover, social media repeatedly change their privacy policies, adding to the complexity of these features and leaving sexual minorities in a vulnerable position (MacAulay and Moldes, 2017).

This complexity sometimes causes sexual identity traits to be shared involuntarily, even when LGBT individuals take extra precautions to control the flow of information on social media (Duguay, 2016). Maintaining complete anonymity online is extremely difficult since this is contingent on third party connections and non-changing privacy policies (Hanckel et al., 2019). The inability to fully control the flow of online personal information thus raises the question of surveillance on social media. Facebook's real name policy, for instance, allows different parties, such as marketers and government agencies, to recognize LGBT people and collect their personal data without their consent (MacAulay and Moldes, 2017). Similarly, while social media can empower activists by giving them the visibility needed to enact social change, they also expose them to new forms of governmental surveillance (Uldam, 2017). This is worrying for sexual minorities in Lebanon where same-sex relations are punishable by law (Makarem, 2011).

The Local Context

In his work with Lebanese gay men on a dating website, Gagné (2012) found that the gaze of others lies at the center of the self-representation of these men, whose online visible subjectivity is contingent on how their peers perceive them and on sociocultural notions of masculinity and manhood. These contingencies often reflect intersections between global culture and local practices of self-representation (McCormick, 2006; Merabet, 2014). Moreover, in building their online identity, Lebanese gay men "reiterate their Lebanese and Arab identity... [a process that recalls] the impact of colonization within Lebanon and ties users to sociopolitical relations and colonial imaginaries of ethnicity and nation" (Gagné, 2012, p.128). This further illustrates the complexity of sexual identity constructs for sexual minorities in Lebanon. The online and offline worlds become decisive factors in the formation of queer identity in the country and in the way that Lebanese gay men determine their online visibility (Gagné, 2012). Likewise, the existing social and political homophobia in Lebanon constrains their online visibility (Gagné, 2012).

In Lebanon, there is strong social pressure on sexual minorities to conform to heteronormative societal frameworks and established concepts of gender (Merabet, 2006). People usually grow up in a family environment where family members perceive themselves and are perceived by others as extensions of each other; indeed, family connections are necessary for successful social existence and the formation of selfhood (Joseph, 1993). People – LGBT persons are no exception – are rarely considered independent individuals and need to belong to a religion (Joseph, 1997), a fact consolidated by what Mikdashi (2018) calls "sextarianism," the intersection of sex and sect defining which Lebanese citizens have which rights in matters of personal status. For example, a Lebanese man who is Maronite cannot file for divorce, unlike a Lebanese Muslim man. A Lebanese woman cannot pass her nationality on to her children or her husband, regardless of her religion.

Lebanese LGBT people may also become victims of systemic and legal discrimination. Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code states that "any sexual

intercourse contrary to the order of nature” is punishable by imprisonment of up to one year, a provision that has been used by Lebanese authorities to persecute those who engage in same-sex relations (Lebanon: Same-sex relations not illegal 2018). Social pressure and institutionalized discrimination thus force many LGBT individuals to seek safety in invisibility and in conformity to social norms (Merabet, 2006). Additionally, many LGBT individuals in the Arab world, raised to believe that homosexuality is Western, struggle to construct a subjectivity that reconciles their sexuality with their cultural and religious belonging (Beirne and Habib, 2012).

This identity struggle foregrounds a debate over local versus Western gay subjectivities. Massad (2007) critiques what he calls the Gay International, a term used to describe Western gay rights organizations and their self-assigned mission to save LGBT people across the world. He condemns their agenda of imposing a Western binary, gay versus straight, on Arab and Muslim societies (Massad, 2007). In Massad’s (2007) view, using a Western-produced knowledge in the Arab context leads to state and religious oppression of those who engage in same-sex intercourse.

On the other side, Abukhalil (1993) demonstrated that homosexuality is not a Western import. He underscored that a “pure homosexual identity” existed in Arab/Islamic culture and that self-declared lesbian and gay people enjoyed a tolerance that was denied for centuries to homosexuals in the West (Abukhalil, 1993, p. 33). Furthermore, in the pre-colonial Arab world, there was no legislation punishing homosexuality (Beirne and Habib, 2012). The colonial administration introduced laws criminalizing same-sex intercourse (Pullen, 2012), such as in Lebanon where Article 534 stemmed from Vichy legislation during the French mandate (Makarem, 2011). Also, while anti-homosexual elements existed in the East earlier in history, as Abukhalil (1993) showed, these did not constitute an ideology until after colonization, when colonial heteronormativity, according to Binnie (2004), reinforced homophobia.

Today, however, many LGBT people in the Arab world turn to the West for a solution to the homophobia prevalent in their societies (Pullen, 2012). They regard international LGBT organizations as a support network ensuring their safety while advocating for gay rights in their countries. This encouragement of Western entities to play a safeguarding role can fuel anti-gay/anti-Western sentiment in the modern Arab world, given the colonial history. Often under the pretext of protecting authentic cultural traditions and religious values (Long, 2005), Arab states resist any form of normalization of homosexuality and dismiss gayness as alien and as an extension of colonialism. In this context, Abukhalil (1993) demonstrated that the term *shudhūdh jinsī*, meaning sexual perversion, was never used in Arab/Islamic history and that it was the modern Arab state that introduced the term to refer to homosexuality. In parallel, HIV/AIDS became associated with homosexuality and was attributed to a Western/Zionist conspiracy (Abukhalil, 1993). Consequently, Arab LGBT people are the targets of a double condemnation: being immoral and betraying their nation (Abukhalil, 1993).

That said, speaking of contemporary pure homosexual identities is impractical. Sexual minorities’ identities around the world influence each other in multidirectional flows of ideas, leading to the proliferation of hybrid gay subjectivities (Oswin, 2006). Locally, Mourad (2013) argues that when Lebanese LGBT people refer to

themselves using English transnational identities, such as gay and lesbian, these identities bear local meanings of sexualities and are influenced by local cultures. Thus, queer Arab sexualities encompass local sociopolitical realities and need to be explored beyond the rigid dichotomy of West versus East (Al-Samman and El-Ariss, 2013).

Method

For this research, I analyzed videos (Table 1) published on Facebook by the four Lebanese LGBT organizations working directly with LGBT people: the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality in the Middle East and North Africa (AFE-MENA), Helem, Mosaic, and Proud Lebanon. To select the video sample, I adopted the guidelines of content analysis (see Neuendorf, 2017) and divided the sampling process into two stages. First, I determined the population, defined by Neuendorf (2017) as “the set of units to which the researcher wishes to generalize their findings” (p. 112). In this study, the set of units is the organizations’ videos. Second, I chose a smaller representative sample from within the population. A smaller sample enabled me to spend more time analyzing the videos and to achieve an in-depth understanding of my research question.

Sampling Strategy

I looked at two sampling units: the platform on which the videos are posted and the date of the posting. The platform I chose is Facebook since it had the highest rate of interactivity with the organizations’ stakeholders. In 2016, for example, Mosaic posted a video on its Facebook page and YouTube channel simultaneously. As of October 2021, the video had gathered over 38,000 views on Facebook and only 581 views on YouTube. This pattern was repeated across all the organizations. As for the date of posting the videos, I adopted a cross-sectional approach examining an event at one point in time (Neuendorf, 2017), spanning from 2016 to 2019. This period covers a time of high visibility for sexual minorities in Lebanon with two Prides events organized in 2017 and 2018, politicians campaigning for LGBT rights during the 2018 elections, and courts ruling in favor of LGBT individuals. In addition to these two sampling units, I decided on an exposure-based population for my video analysis. An exposure-based population contains the messages that are the most consumed by receivers (Neuendorf, 2017). I therefore chose three of the most viewed videos posted by each of the four organizations on their Facebook between 2016 and 2019. This set the population of my study to twelve videos (Table 1). The language used in these videos is Arabic. English subtitles were frequently available.

Table 1. The Video Sample

Organization	Video title	Video label in this article
AFE-MENA	Elections 2018	Vid.A1
	No longer alone 2	Vid.A2
	<i>Kull al-’alwān</i>	Vid.A3
Helem	<i>Min sijin lasijjān</i>	Vid.H1
	<i>Munāhaḍa</i>	Vid.H2
	Social experiment	Vid.H3
Mosaic	Diaries of a trans refugee	Vid.M1
	<i>Niḍāl lil’afḍal</i>	Vid.M2
	In just one day	Vid.M3
Proud Lebanon	<i>Chū bta’mil</i>	Vid.P1
	<i>Khalaṣ</i>	Vid.P2
	What Will You Do	Vid.P3

Analysis

I examined the communication content in the twelve videos (Table 1) by investigating the diverse ways in which the messages were transmitted, such as scripts, speech, and written text (Neuendorf, 2017). I integrated thematic analysis to interpret the meaning of my findings (Green et al., 2015) by defining recurrent themes related to my research (Braun and Clarke, 2006) such as politics, social structures and safety. I employed a constructionist thematic analysis seeking to understand the sociocultural contexts giving meaning to the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and investigated the underlying Lebanese sociopolitical structures and discourses influencing the work of LGBT organizations. To do this, I contextualized my data in the literature on Lebanon. For guidance in defining the key recurrent themes, I also used the literature on the affordance of visibility. I adopted a theoretical thematic analysis rooted in the existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Nonetheless, I also remained open to new insights that might provide more depth to the analysis.

Arabic LGBT Terms

Henceforth, in my endeavors to contextualize my findings in their local culture, I use the Arabic *mujtama’ al-mīm/’ayn* terms. These terms, which I list below (Table 2), refer to sexual minorities in the Arab world. *Mujtama’ al-mīm/’ayn* organizations in Lebanon adopted these terms in their videos after Arab activists had created them in order not to resort to the transnational LGBT categories or pejorative Arabic words. Initially all these terms started with the letter M of the Arabic alphabet called *mīm*. Hence, the umbrella term *mujtama’ al-mīm*, meaning community M. At a later stage, the term *’ābir al-jandar* and *’ābirat al-jandar*, starting with the letter *’ayn*, replaced the original term used to refer to transgender people. This was a grassroots change where *’ābirī al-jandar* and *’ābirāt al-jandar*, which can be translated as “transgender people,” dropped the old term and adopted the new term, which they deemed more representative of themselves. The umbrella term then shifted to *mujtama’ al-mīm/’ayn* to incorporate

the first letter of the new term. This change suggests that *mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn* terms are dynamic and changing and that there is space for further terminological evolutions to occur. In this vein, the executive director of Helem, Tarek Zeidan, emphasized in an interview I conducted with him that Arabic terms of *mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn* should not be used without recalling the fact that there are non-Arab peoples in the Arab region, such as the Kurds and the Amazigh, who have their own languages. Additionally, sexual minorities in the various Arab countries can use local terms that are not equally known in all Arab societies.

Table 2. Arabic Sexual Minorities Terms

Arabic term (The masculine plural also serves for mixed-gender groups.)	English translation
<i>Mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn</i>	LGBT community
<i>Mithlī</i> (plural: <i>mithliyyīn</i>)	Gay
<i>Mithliyya</i> (plural: <i>mithliyyāt</i>)	Lesbian
<i>Muzdawij al-muyūl al-jinsiyya/muzdawijat al-muyūl al-jinsiyya</i> (plural: <i>muzdawijī al-muyūl al-jinsiyya/muzdawijāt al-muyūl al-jinsiyya</i>)	Bisexual (masculine/feminine)
<i>ʿābir al-jandar/ʿābirat al-jandar</i> (plural: <i>ʿābirī al-jandar/ʿābirāt al-jandar</i>)	Transgender (masculine/feminine)

The Findings

F1: Engagement in National Politics

In their videos, AFE-MENA, Helem, and Mosaic tackled institutionalized homophobia and Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code that criminalizes same-sex intercourse. In the run-up to the Lebanese parliamentary elections in May 2018, AFE-MENA posted a series of short videos, around 20 seconds each. In Vid.A1, a *mithlī* says:

Article 534 of the penal code is used to criminalize same-sex relationships. This means I can be put in prison simply for loving another man. This year, some electoral candidates are calling to abolish this law and to ensure bodily rights for the LGBT community. To find out who these candidates are, visit our website: www.afemena.org/elections

The video participant mentions the institutionalized homophobia that could lead to his imprisonment. AFE-MENA made visible an issue of concern to *mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn* and attempted to transform it into a common cause by using inclusive wording such as “rights for the LGBT community.” Furthermore, “rights for the LGBT community” challenges the hegemonic Lebanese political and judicial system’s privileging of heteronormativity and depriving of *mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn* of their rights. AFE-MENA also invited Lebanese *mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn* to visit its elections webpage and urged them to vote for the candidates who defend their cause. Through Vid.A1, the organization brought the discourse

on the rights of sexual minorities into mainstream politics in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. At the same time, by launching its call to action, AFE-MENA endeavored to gather support around mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn causes and suggest solutions to achieve social change.

Mosaic also addressed Article 534. In Vid.M3, a woman, via a voiceover, told her story of being attacked in the street for being a 'ābirat al-jandar. She said: "why should I feel scared to report to the police? Because the law does not protect me." Simultaneously, the number "534" appeared on the screen. Hence, Mosaic also brought attention to the fear that mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn feel when they need to report violence against them to the police.

Similarly, Helem highlighted the dynamic of mistrust and fear among mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn towards the Lebanese police. The organization conducted a video-taped social experiment for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT). In this experiment, a participant highlighted the fact that calling the police to protect mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn would have a counter-effect. The participant said: "the police will see they [mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn] are guilty."

In another attempt to include mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn issues within the broader political discussion in the country, Helem compared the problems sexual minorities face with the political mismanagement of Lebanon. In Vid.H1, the organization showed two individuals from mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn being subjected to a discriminatory gaze on the street. A voiceover makes prejudiced declarations such as "take her, she'll straighten up," referring to a mithliyya, and "he takes it... how gross," referring to a mithlī. Vid.H1 then showed photos of an electricity plant, the 2017 garbage collection crisis in Beirut, and polluted rivers in the city, accompanied by the following text in Arabic and English: "2017: Electricity cuts crisis with no solution. Garbage in Lebanon, and environmental crisis. 80% of Beirut's water contains faeces bacteria." A voiceover then adds: "None of these shook you, my looks did?! From one prison to another, don't be the jailor." "Don't be the jailor" can be read as a call to action for citizens not to discriminate against mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn.

Article 534 and explicit references to national politics were not present in the Proud Lebanon videos I analyzed. The organization did, however, publish videos relating to IDAHOT. Below, I argue that IDAHOT reflects the engagement of Lebanese organizations in transnational LGBT politics.

F2: IDAHOT and Rights Discourse

IDAHOT is internationally celebrated on 17 May to commemorate the World Health Organization (WHO) removing homosexuality from its International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems on the same day in 1990 (APA, 2011). By publishing IDAHOT-related videos on their social media, Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn organizations made this internationally celebrated event visible locally. They engaged online in transnational LGBT politics and participated in transnational LGBT activism in the attempt to achieve rights for mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn.

The rights discourse was explicitly present in four of the videos I analyzed. In Vid.M2, highlighting the work of Mosaic with ‘ābirī al-jandar, especially ‘ābirāt al-jandar as the most marginalized population, the organization’s social assistant explained that Mosaic builds the skills and capacities of its target population to enable them to face the society, become familiar with their rights, and learn to defend them. In addition, Charbel Maydaa, the founder and director of Mosaic, argued that LGBT rights form part of the broader spectrum of human rights, advocating for other humanitarian nonprofits to consider LGBT rights while conducting their work. He said: “other human rights organizations should take into consideration the LGBTQIA community.” This call parallels Kollman and Waites’s (2009) argument that, inspired by Euro-American LGBT activism, human rights have become an important vehicle internationally for the rights of sexual minorities. In Vid.M1, a ‘ābirāt al-jandar declared that she will not lose hope despite the dire situation experienced by ‘ābirī al-jandar in the country. “Why would I lose hope in other people, people who exist and who are fighting for their rights?” she said.

As for Helem, the organization created Vid.H2 for IDAHOT 2018. The whole video revolves around the rhetoric of rights. It features a group of young people desperately looking for something in their room. An older lady enters and the following conversation takes place:

Mum: what are you searching for?

Girl: mum, our rights are lost.

Mum: your rights aren’t lost. Your rights are with them.

Voiceover: our rights aren’t lost. It’s time to bring them back.

“Our rights are lost” refers to the Lebanese connotation of the expression signaling an unfair treatment and the absence of a protector. In the reply “your rights are with them,” “them” refers to policymakers in the country. Using “our” and “your” is yet another example of the organizations’ attempts to create and foster a sense of shared causes for mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn. The declaration “it’s time to bring them back” may be read as a call to action and an invitation to challenge the prevalent heteronormative system.

In addition to the videos of the organizations, in 2017 Proud Lebanon invited mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn to create short videos and submit them for screening during IDAHOT celebrations that year. As well as engaging mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn in the organization’s activities and its political endeavors, this strategy gave visibility to the daily life challenges of Lebanese sexual minorities from their own perspective. Many of these challenges are ingrained in Lebanese social norms and structures.

F3: Social Norms and Structures

As indicated above, Proud Lebanon invited its target population to submit videos for screening during IDAHOT 2017. In Vid.P2, a participant said:

Enough. I will tell her everything. I look at her and think of her reaction [...] We lost my father last year. I am the only man in the family [...] As they say, I am now the man of the house. Maybe I am not the man my mother wants me to be [...] I do not

want to be selfish, but I do not want to lie to her. How do I tell her I will never get married? That I will never give her grandsons?

This excerpt illustrates the struggles of a *mithlī* when thinking of disclosing his sexuality to his mother. These struggles are embedded in social and family traditions. Being “the man of the house” comes with social expectations in Lebanon. It invokes manhood and the gender-based role of getting married to a woman and having children. This excerpt also recalls the need to be accepted in one’s own family, which is something that may or may not happen, as I discuss below.

Another participant in Proud Lebanon’s initiative highlighted the prejudices *mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn* face in Lebanese society. Vid.P3 played a voiceover of people answering the question “what will you do if your kid is homosexual?” The answers reflected various prejudices and heteronormative attitudes. Some people believed homosexuality to be a disease requiring treatment: “I try everything to see how I can treat her,” “this is a disease and there is nothing that can be done.” Some feared that the child would acquire a bad reputation and facing social discrimination: “what about people gossiping?” “he will have a dirty reputation.” Other parental statements included tendencies to disown their homosexual son or daughter and even expressed violent reactions: “I would hate him,” “I would disown her immediately,” “my reaction would be tough.” Other people saw homosexuality as unnatural and unacceptable in the Arab region. They also questioned the authenticity of love between two people of the same sex: “I do not expect a man to love another man, especially in our region, our environment,” “this is completely unnatural. What love is this? This is a lie. It is impossible for a man to love another man.”

The idea that homosexuality is alien to Arab society resurfaced in the social experiment conducted by Helem for IDAHOT 2018. In this experiment, a *mithliyya* couple, both Helem activists, held hands on purpose in a street café. A man passing by told them: “for public decency, release her hand. This behavior is unacceptable in our Lebanese society. We are not in Europe here.” This intervention stresses the theory that homosexuality and a queer lifestyle are Western imports, as I develop in F4 below.

However, it is important to stress that not all reactions towards homosexuality were negative. In Vid.P3, some people drew on the strong family connections existing in Lebanese society (see Joseph, 1993; 1994) and declared that they would love their homosexual son, daughter or sibling no matter what their sexual orientation was: “his mother has the obligation to love him as he is,” “I would accept my son and would be open to him more,” “I would stand by her, after all she is my sister.” Some underlined the freewill of *mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn* family members: “the relationship would remain the same. This is their life, and they are free [to do what they want] with it,” “if I could accept it or not, I do not know; but I cannot bother her, after all this is her life.” And some people expressed a feeling of solidarity: “after all he is human,” “I would stand by him, because people would distance themselves from him and hate him.”

Mujtamaʿ al-mīm/ʿayn activists from various parts of the Arab world tackled these family dynamics in Vid.A2, addressing the deep-rooted myths and

misconceptions they face in their societies. They answered questions such as “when will you get married?” and “who is the man in the [same sex] relationship?” They challenged the assertion that “it is impossible for parents in the Arab world to accept their mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn children.” While activists agreed some parents do not accept homosexuality for religious reasons or due to social concerns, they refuted the idea that parental non-acceptance of mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn children is universal. A ‘ābirat al-jandar declared: “my mother and I are very friendly with each other. She accepts me and I accept her.” A mithlī highlighted the positive change in his mother’s attitude towards homosexuality: “when I first told my mother, she fainted. She was depressed for a long time. But then she started meeting my friends and understanding who we are... she saw that we’re just normal people.” In their analysis of documentaries on mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn in the Middle East, Beirne and Habib (2012) confirmed these findings and emphasized that some Middle Eastern families accept their children among mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn while others do not. Acceptance can stem from the strong family relationships or what Joseph (1993; 1994; 1997) called connectivity, where family members see themselves as extensions of each other. Rejection, on the other hand, may be motivated by Lebanese sociopolitical structures and the pervasive idea that homosexualities are not Arab (Beirne and Habib, 2012).

F4: LGBT Identities: A Western Import?

Activists in Vid.A2 described the widespread argument that LGBT identities are Western as “provocative” and “an accusation that we face every day.” They denied homosexuality is a Western import and highlighted the fact that a homosexual lifestyle existed hundreds of years ago in the Arab world. As one activist from Lebanon said: “I remember in school; the teacher gave us the poetry book of Abu Nuwas¹⁶ as an assignment. If Abu Nuwas was courting young men 600 or 700 years ago...” Likewise, a ‘ābirat al-jandar from Algeria stressed that her country was “open-minded” before French colonialism, and that manifestations of homosexuality and men living as women were normal. She declared “homophobia and transphobia came about during French colonialism.” In exploring this point, AFE-MENA brought together activists from different Arab countries to challenge the idea – or the myth, as they called it in the video – that LGBT identities are a Western import. They pointed out how “anyone who is different from the norm has to be accused of something.” Furthermore, the protagonists in Vid.A2, coming from different parts of the Arab world, highlighted the similar daily struggles of Arab mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn. This common adversity encouraged the creation of common Arab strategies in the fight against homophobia. A clear example of these shared strategies is the coming together of Arab activists to create non-pejorative Arabic terms (Table 2) to refer to mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn without the need to resort to the transnational LGBT acronym and categories (Naharnet, 2018; Mourad, 2013). As explained earlier in this article, this lexicon is a step towards rooting the activism of mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn in their specific geopolitical and sociocultural contexts (Moussawi, 2015). It constitutes a

¹⁶Abu Nuwas was an Arab poet born in the eighth century.

cornerstone strategy in the pan-Arab action for the rights of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn, as shown by its consistent use by the participants in these videos. Hence, mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn activists from the Middle East and North Africa challenged dominant discourses on homosexuality as alien to the Arab world and paved the way for Arab sexual minorities to claim their belonging to local communities and to affirm mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn identities away from the accusation of Westernization. Nonetheless, engaging in a politics of visibility to (re)normalize the existence of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn in the Middle East and North Africa does not always align with the needs of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn themselves, as I explain in F6.

On another level, pan-Arab networking raises the question of the representativity of the diverse mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn appearing in the videos. Besides representing various Arab nationalities, the differences among the cast in the films also includes other forms of diversity, as I discuss in the following section.

F5: Representativity

Various Arab nationalities were represented in Vid.A2, which stressed the organization's investment in pan-Arab networking. In the video, there was also a diversification of sexualities, visible too in other organizations' videos. Helem's films included mithliyyīn, mithliyyāt and 'ābirī al-jandar, Proud Lebanon's videos featured a mithlī and a mithliyya, while Mosaic's videos focused on 'ābirī al-jandar from various Arab nationalities.

Furthermore, Mosaic, Proud Lebanon, and AFE-MENA all featured mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn in their videos, who did not show their face on the camera. This evokes invisibility as a strategy to maintain one's privacy and safety, as I discuss next.

F6: Invisibilities

In the absence of full control over one's online audience (Boyd, 2011; Duguay, 2016), the risk of context collision and of jeopardizing already established relationships with friends and families, who may not necessarily know about the social media user's non-normative sexuality, becomes real (Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019). Many Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn are thus mindful of remaining invisible to escape offline discrimination and institutionalized homophobia (Gagné, 2012; McCormick, 2006; Merabet, 2006). Remaining invisible may entail the user not including a photo on their internet profile (Gagné, 2012) and not showing their face in the videos by turning their back to the camera or showing only the lower part of the face.

Safety concerns were not exclusive to Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn. They also extended to other Arab nationalities. In Vid.A2, activists from the Middle East and North Africa regions addressed the question of whether one has "to be 'out' in order to be a member of the LGBT community." They stressed that coming out is not a requirement for belonging to the community, as this would involve safety concerns. As one Tunisian activist stated: "it [coming out] is not necessary. Personal safety is the most important thing for us." A 'ābirat al-jandar

from Egypt declared that she can be arrested in her country simply for being who she is. She replied to a question from her colleague about why she was not showing her face on camera by saying:

[...] It would not be a good idea to show my face. Egypt is not a place where I can announce my identity [...] I can be arrested. My own neighbors can discriminate against me... I can be physically assaulted.

Similarly, an individual from mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn in the Gulf decided not to show their face and chose to be identified as "anonymous." They said: "You can't imagine the number of people I know who were pressured to come out of the closet at a young age [...] they faced huge problems [...] became homeless."

The two activists from Egypt and the Gulf raised the issue of social discrimination and physical violence that may result from visibility. These topics also surfaced in Mosaic's videos. In Vid.M2, the organization took live shots of the participants in a training workshop but took care not to reveal their faces. The organization wanted to maintain the anonymity of the participants, especially given that, according to a statement in the video, 99 percent of 'ābirī al-jandar in Lebanon have been victims of violence. In Vid.M3, a 'ābirat al-jandar talked about her experience of being assaulted without appearing on camera, saying: "they followed me and started telling me mean and bad words [...] I wake up after 15 minutes with my head bleeding." Hence, invisibility is at times a must for mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn to escape discrimination and violence. In this vein, one activist in Vid.A2 invited mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn to evaluate their situation and environment before self-disclosing. He highlighted the differences existing among Arab societies, saying: "personally, I don't think it's necessary to reveal yourself and 'come out' to everyone because the societies we live in are not all the same. Lebanon is not like Morocco, or Saudi Arabia or other countries." Another participant in the video highlighted the importance of financial independence before coming out. Financial security can help empower mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn if they want to become more visible. This independence can mitigate the familial and social consequences of queer visibility and reduce the risk of homelessness. Legal consequences, however, may not be so easily mitigated. Moussawi (2020) links visibility to state power and its capacity to mark and prosecute those whose visibility is perceived to disrupt social norms.

These dynamics thus invoke conditioned visibility and careful self-disclosure. For Moussawi (2020), queer visibility unsettles normativity and social boundaries in Lebanon and can raise safety concerns. Mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn thus adjust their level of visibility in accordance with whom and where they are visible (Moussawi, 2020). Likewise, they need to assess their online visibility and its consequences, something of which Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn nonprofits are mindful. Filipović (2019) argued in a Serbian context that invisibility provides other ways for the LGBT population to exist outside the transnational LGBT human rights discourse and identities. The latter, Puar (2013) found, favor visibility. Similarly, I found that the online invisibility afforded by the organizations in Lebanon to Lebanese and Arab mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn offered a potential for local and differentiated ways of being. While, through their videos, the nonprofits ensured a

collective visibility for mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn to transgress hegemonic discourses and claim representativity and political rights, they also allowed for an individual invisibility. They enabled invisible and anonymous mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn to take part in the endeavors to ameliorate their situation without necessarily adhering to transnational activism.

Conclusion

The Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn nonprofits enact the affordance of visibility in their social media videos while observing the peculiarities of the Lebanese and Arab sociopolitical context. At times, they also interact with transnational LGBT activism. My study provides new insights on how the organizations engage in this process as until now there was no literature covering the social media affordances of Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn nonprofits.

Online, the organizations engaged in national politics and endeavored to make visible mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn issues and bring them into mainstream politics. They reflected in their videos (Table 1) the social and political trends in the country, such as the politically instigated garbage crises in 2017. Previous literature showed that Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn organizations engage in local politics such as the endeavors to abolish article 534 of the Lebanese penal code. This research argues that, through social media visibility, the organizations continue to disrupt the political system. The research also reveals that the nonprofits brought their social media activism to a new political level, that of trying to influence the outcome of parliamentary elections by encouraging mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn, publicly through social media videos, to vote for candidates who support their cause. They also criticized the police handling of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn matters and highlighted the mistrust between sexual minorities and the security forces who are supposed to protect their rights. In this vein, they brought forward in their videos the rhetoric of sexual minorities' rights which aligns with transnational LGBT activism. That said, the organizations endeavored to create a local and a pan-Arab activism that is more tuned to the peculiarities of the Arab society.

Featuring activists from various Arab countries in the videos contributed to the localized pan-Arab activism. In these videos, many mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn individuals showed their faces on the camera. Others, however, decided to remain unidentifiable for fear of offline homophobia. The latter is provoked by the existing socio-political structures in Lebanon favouring patriarchy and heteronormativity and suggesting that sexual minorities are not native to the Arab world but a Western import. The activists in the videos refuted vehemently this claim.

The findings of this research parallel previous literature on mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn's activism in Lebanon suggesting the Lebanese organisations implemented their offline activism in alignment with the transnational LGBT movement but with consideration to local peculiarities (see Moussawi, 2015). That said, this research brings a new layer by showing how the organisations navigate,

on social media, the frontiers of transnational LGBT and local mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn activism. Considering the fear of homophobia that social media visibility can cause, the Lebanese organizations developed a culturally sensitive online strategy. They afforded a collective mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn visibility to transgress homophobic structures while maintaining the space for individual invisibility to ensure the safety of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn persons. Furthermore, this research reveals a robust trend in investing in finding and using Arabic sexual minorities terms (Table 2) on social media. This trend forms part of the endeavours to ingrain mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn activism in the Arab culture. Previous literature explained how the term mujtama' al-mīm came to be (See Moussawi, 2015; Mourad, 2013). This article contributes to the understanding of how the term evolved to become mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn and underlines the importance of recognizing that this term may be ever changing to include words that are more representative of the people who use them.

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