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A content analysis of social media users' reaction to religious disinformation in Bangladesh

Abstract

The present study seeks to explore social media users' reactions to religious disinformation in Bangladesh. Public comments were collected from the relevant Facebook posts related to an online religious disinformation that took place in April 2019 and analyzed following a qualitative content analysis method. The three key findings of this research are: (a) Social media users react to disinformation more emotionally than reasonably; (b) more users show diverse forms of destructive reactions when they encounter disinformation; and (c) although more users have strong reasoning skills, only a few users show constructive reactions after encountering disinformation. These results indicate the presence of *hate spin* that tend to marginalize religious minorities in both social media and society. This study has limitations related to the data analysis and generalization problem of the findings. The research findings would help both academics to understand the multifaceted online religious disinformation and users' engagement with it, and policymakers to take effective measures to control interreligious discontents.

Keywords: Religious disinformation; social media; fake news; reaction; qualitative content analysis; Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the Bangladesh government shut down all public institutions and assemblies including mosques to prevent the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Against this official declaration, many Islamic clerics, popularly known as *Mullah*, *Imam*, *Maulvi*, preached on Facebook and YouTube that the COVID-19 pandemic is a curse only for the infidels, and the Muslims will be exempted from it (Rashid, 2020). This disinformation spread across the country within a few hours. Believing such claims thousands of Muslims occupied the street and protested the government's decision. Such episodes of intentional rumoring and rumor-mongering are taking place around the world irrespective of countries. Disinformation is commonplace in human history, but social media disinformation is a novel phenomenon. Its prime reason is the transformations in the communication system and the benefits that digital media are offering to the people. Consequently, the internet-based media is thriving with its multimodal communication, and traditional media is struggling to survive (Hong, 2012; Lysak et al., 2012; Stassen, 2010): Bangladesh is no exception to this (Fahad, 2014; Mohabat, 2019). The country has 30 million social media users in 2020, which is almost 22% of the total population (Kemp, 2020), and Facebook is the most used social media platform with 94% of

the total social media users (*Social Media*, 2019). The political impact of Facebook in Bangladesh is also remarkable. Recent sociopolitical movements, such as the Shahbag movement in 2013, No-vat on Education movement in 2015, the Quota Reform movement, and the Road Safety movement in 2018, were solely based on Facebook (see Ahmed, 2018; Rahman, 2018). In these cases, social media outshined traditional media, demonstrating its rising power and impact in Bangladesh society.

Disinformation has also gained new momentum worldwide in recent years thanks to the growing popularity of social media. Incidents of disinformation-led-violence is commonplace in South Asian countries as well. However, unlike the rest of the world, most of the disinformation is intertwined with religion. For example, after 2015, India has experienced more than a hundred mob lynchings caused by social media disinformation (Banaji et al., 2019). Banaji et al. (2019) suggest that mounting sociopolitical crises, strategic discrimination against the minorities (mostly against the Muslims), and nourishing the deep-rooted socioreligious superstitions are the main causes of the proliferating social media disinformation and violence in India. The state-sponsored hate campaigns against the Muslim minorities bolsters the *gau-rakshaks* (“cow protectors” or “cow vigilantes”), who leverage WhatsApp disinformation to terrorize and lynch the Muslims (Mukherjee, 2020). In Myanmar, Facebook with 99.4% of the country’s total social media users has become an ideal instrument of disinformation for the Buddhist nationalists mainly against the Muslim population and the Rohingya minorities (The Economist, 2020). Bangladesh’s scenario is almost identical (Al-Zaman, 2019). Around 152 million people of the country are Muslims, which is 90.39% of the total population, meaning most of the netizens are Muslims as well. Recently, the country has become a fertile land of religious disinformation and disinformation-led violence (Bay, 2018). The incidents of online communal disinformation, such as Ramu violence in 2012, Comilla and Pabna violence in 2013, Nasirnagar attack in 2016, Thakurpara attack in 2017, and Bhola violence in 2019, are becoming commonplace, disturbing the social peace and interreligious harmony (see Al-Zaman, 2019; Haque, 2019; Minar & Naher, 2018; Alif & Rahman, 2019). It is to note that social media does not implant the seeds of violence in a society. Rather, the ideology of violence is rooted in society, and social media assists it (Arun, 2015).

Although episodes of online religious disinformation are ample in Bangladesh, the academic endeavor has failed to properly identify its extent, its impacts on society, and its differences from ordinary rumors. For example, disinformation-led communal violence is addressed as just a rumor-incident (Minar & Naher, 2018). Disinformation is often addressed as a sub-category of fake news as well (Haque, 2019). It hints that disinformation is yet to be considered as a separate concept in academic discourse in Bangladesh. Considering its relevance and importance, the present research aims to understand how social media users interact with religious disinformation, emphasizing their online reactions (i.e., the language they use). The analysis mainly focuses on users’ behavioral expressions through language in discourse.

2. The Concept of *Disinformation*

The definition of disinformation is a contending issue in both philosophy and communication studies. The PHEME Project defines *disinformation* as a type of rumor, along with misinformation, speculation, and controversy (Derczynski et al., 2015). While misinformation is an *honest* mistake, disinformation is nothing but *misleading* information that is intended to deceive people (Fallis, 2014).

Disinformation has three main characteristics: (a) disinformation springs up when the information process is defective (Floridi, 1996); (b) misinformation turns into disinformation when its source is aware of its falsehood (Floridi, 2005) and (c) disinformation is purposefully conveyed to mislead (Floridi, 2011). The last characteristic makes disinformation more similar to lying (Fallis, 2011). Also, Fetzer (2004a) suggests that disinformation is nothing but lying. Fallis (2014) on the other hand postulates that lying and disinforming may not always be the same things as lying without disinforming is very much possible. Rather, he emphasizes the *intention* to deceive others as the most basic indicator of disinformation. Besides, he acknowledges that lying is the most notable type of disinformation. (Fallis, 2014). Fallis (2014, 2015) again comments that it is possible for disinformation to become true, i.e., *true disinformation*. It seems that he emphasizes two things: (a) disinformation is always misleading and intentional, and (b) disinformation and lying are not always positively correlated with each other. The first proposition indicates that the source of disinformation produces it intentionally and disinformation guide the public in the wrong direction. The second proposition indicates that disinformation does not always convey the wrong information to guide the public in the wrong direction, and thus, disinformation and lying would be different at some points. However, if we take the idea of Floridi (2011) for granted that information *must be* true, then disinformation, which is anything but information according to Dretske (1981), might not have truth value: thus, disinformation should be false information. It contradicts the idea of true disinformation.

Fallis (2014) categorizes disinformation into three types: visual disinformation, true disinformation, and side effect disinformation. Referring to Fetzer (2004b), he also states that “unlike lying, disinformation does not have to be a statement” (138), such as visual disinformation (e.g., doctored photographs and videos). However, his concept of *statement* seems narrow since a statement may incorporate not only written or spoken language but also visual language, such as photos and videos. To better understand disinformation, we should focus on an important question: why people believe disinformation? It leads us to the idea that disinformation is a persuasive story.

Individuals communicate with others through stories (Fisher, 1987). A compelling story is an easier way to convince people and make sense of an event. To be convincing and sensible, a story should have rhetorical virtues: ethos, logos, and pathos (Aristotle, 1991). Disinformation often takes the camouflage of persuasive stories to persuade its targets. However, Difonzo & Bordia (2006) argues that urban legend is more connected to storytelling, while disinformation is more to ambiguous or threatening situations. This view seems incomplete. In Bangladesh, for example, almost every disinformation is accompanied by a compelling story (Al-Zaman, 2019, 2020b). Disinformation stories are intended to guide individuals to alter their viewpoints and engage in different actions.

Disinformation as a story may shift individuals from a rational-world paradigm to a narrative-world paradigm (Griffin, 2011). The rational-world paradigm primarily considers

humans as essentially rational, who make decisions based on the *arguments*. On the contrary, the narrative-world paradigm addresses people as essentially storytellers, who make decisions based on (good) *reasons* (Fisher, 1985). Unlike the rational-world view, the narrative-world view, which may include disinformation, sees the world as a set of stories (Griffin, 2011): emotion plays an important role in stories. The persuasiveness of disinformation is thus based on the coherence and apparent fidelity of its story, and the emotional appeal it can make. Also, individuals tend to accept stories that match his/her prior set of beliefs and values (Jameson, 2001). Therefore, the criterion of a successful disinformation is that it should be a compelling and carefully constructed story that is somehow related to public belief and values. Important to note that rumor, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are used interchangeably in scholarly writings (Duffy et al., 2019; Jr et al., 2018; Muigai, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In recent years, besides information, social media has become a good source of disinformation as well. Increased consumption of unverified information from various social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, makes the users more susceptible to disinformation (Newman, 2011; Newman et al., 2013; Shearer & Gottfried, 2017; Turcotte et al., 2015).

3. Social Media Users' Reaction to Disinformation

How individuals perceive and respond to disinformation? In the rumor transmission theory, Buckner (1965) identifies three positions that individuals take after encountering disinformation. The *critical* set suggests that some individuals have more intelligence and experience so they can evaluate information, identify deceptive facts, and exclude that before transmitting it to others. In the *uncritical* set, individuals do the opposite mainly due to their self-interest, lack of knowledge, and/or experience regarding the information. In the *transmission* set, however, an individual's critical ability is thought to be irrelevant as s/he only transmit disinformation to others. The nature of transmission and response to disinformation thus depend on which *set* the individual takes (Roedelein, 2006). Transmission of disinformation usually follows two different patterns. First, disinformation is transmitted from individual to individual serially in a series of single interactions: it is called *chain* transmission. Second, in the *network* transmission, many individuals get disinformation from a *single* source (Buckner, 1965). In the digital age, network transmission of disinformation becomes more commonplace thanks to the growing popularity of online communication and digital information consumption. Therefore, understanding users' online communication behavior is imperative.

Several researches explored how people react to misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Mookherjee (2019) categorized public reactions to misinformation into three broad types: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. Affective reaction deals with what misinformation causes to people's feelings, and cognitive reaction deals with the idea that "exposure to misinformation does not only affect our emotions but it also affects our cognition and style of thinking" (Mookherjee, 2019, p. 15). In contrast, behavioral reaction indicates that misinformation changes our behavioral patterns and how we act: it may prompt undesirable behavior as well, such as aggressiveness and avoidance.

Like the present study, a few previous studies also dealt with the behavioral aspect of people's reaction to disinformation. For example, Grande-Allen et al. (2020) observed that people usually do four things when they encounter fake news on online platforms: "Some outright ignored it, some took it at face value, some investigated whether it was true, and some were suspicious of it but then chose to ignore it." In another similar study, Tandoc et al. (2020) explored that most social media users either ignore or offer no corrections to disinformation unless it is strongly relevant to themselves and/or people they are related to. In most cases, users are largely incapable to distinguish information and disinformation and transmit it. Its reason could be that the novelty in misinformation attracts users more often, so they likely to transmit misinformation twice more than true information (as cited in Mookherjee, 2019). Similarly, Verdizada (2017) shows social media content with false information gets more attention from the users than the true information. Kumar et al. (2016) shows the human capability of detecting disinformation is weaker than an automated classifier. Like the findings of Tandoc et al. (2020) and Kumar et al. (2016), this study also hints at users' less capability of identifying disinformation. On the other hand, Altay et al. (2020) inferred that very few people share misinformation as it may hurt their reputation. However, this inference fails to distinguish between knowingly and unknowingly sharing.

Although these studies focused on users' misinformation sharing behavior, none of them discusses their analytical skills, reasoning capabilities, and/or emotional expressions. Why some users believe disinformation and some do not? This may be because of their unequal reasoning skills. Reasoning skills are based on three basic components: "the available information, the cognitive information brought to bear, and generated inference" (Kurtz et al., 1999, p. 145). That means, the users with strong reasoning skills would present relevant information, operationalize their cognition, and make an inference, whereas users with weak reasoning skills are possibly unable to perform one or more of these actions.

Why some users react constructively to disinformation while some react destructively? One reason for this could be the difference in emotional attachment to the disinformation: the more the users are attached to disinformation emotionally, the more intense their behavior could be. That means disinformation about sensitive issues and issues of public interests in a particular society may generate more intense and wide reactions. Arun (2015) and Mukherjee (2020) show WhatsApp disinformation incites aggressive behavior among its believers. However, their studies do not present the definitions and characteristics of aggressive behavior and the description of users' immediate (verbal) reactions to online disinformation. Aggressive behavior is nothing but destructive behavior. It has two broader forms: indication of hostility and verbal aggressiveness (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Hostility includes "irritability, negativity, resentment, and suspicion" and verbal aggressiveness includes "character attacks, competence attacks, ridicule, teasing, profanity, attacks on physical appearance, threats, malediction, background attack, and non-verbal behavior, that is raising the middle finger, sticking out the tongue, rolling the eyes" (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 46). Social media users display manifold destructive behavior (Bekiari & Pachi, 2017) due to four primary reasons: psychopathology, disdain for other, social learning of aggression, and deficiency in argumentative skills (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, pp. 46–47). We have already seen that destructive behavior led by social media disinformation (e.g., offline violence and lynching) is commonplace in contemporary South Asia (Al-Zaman, 2020a, 2019, 2020b; Arun,

2015; Banaji et al., 2019; Mukherjee, 2020). It is important to mention that constructive reactions are more related to strong reasoning skills and destructive reactions are more related to weak reasoning skills, although they often overlap.

As we see, previous literature inadequately deals with disinformation from the aspect of users: what are the patterns of users' language, and what it hints about their attitude towards disinformation. Also, religious disinformation occupies little space in previous studies. As a result, it is still unknown how social media users react to religious disinformation. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following question:

RQ: How do social media users react to religious disinformation?

4. Methods

4.1. Case selection

This study dealt with a prominent case of social media disinformation. The incident took place on 4 April 2019 in Narail, a southwestern district of Bangladesh. A Hindu man named Rajkumar allegedly defamed the Prophet (PBUH) in a Facebook post. However, like many previous incidents, this one was also a disinformation to humiliate a Hindu man. A day before the incident, Robiul Ahmid, a local *mullah* wrote on his Facebook profile: "Do you want to harass any Hindu man? Open a Facebook ID using his name and photo, then you defame Islam from that fake ID making him a scapegoat. Afterward, beat him heavily." Ariful Islam, another local *mullah* commented on the post: "I did the same thing once to ostracize a Hindu infidel. Now, I am going to apply the same therapy against Rajkumar very soon." This conversation suggests that Ariful Islam produced the disinformation to humiliate Rajkumar. Without proper verification, this disinformation was widely reported and shared on Facebook. It caused an immediate online outcry that led to an offline crowd, demanding brutal punishment of the accused. This incident of disinformation was selected purposefully due to three reasons. One, it is a well-known disinformation that has strong and explicit evidence (e.g., screenshots of the conversation and Facebook IDs of the *mullahs*), unlike the previous disinformation incidents like Ramu violence and Nasirnagar attack (see Al-Zaman, 2019). Two, originating in social media, this disinformation had offline impacts, i.e., demonstrations. Three, a few national media outlets reported this social media disinformation considering its importance and impacts.

4.2. Sources and collection of data

I collected the data from Facebook, the dominant social media platform in Bangladesh. Total seven Facebook pages: Daily Kaler Kantho, Daily Janakantho, Islam-er Dawat, Islami Chhatra Shibir, Narail-er Alo, and Mufti Abul Kalam Azad Bashir Supporters Group posted seven contents related to this incident. Of these contents, four were videos and three were text-based reports: Each of their information was biased toward the disinformation and none of them disclosed the true information publicly. As this research is designed to analyze users' verbal reactions to the disinformation so only the public comments were analyzed, excluding the

Facebook Reactions (i.e., like, love, wow, care, sad, haha, angry). The seven selected Facebook posts earned 1,339 comments between 4 April to 7 April 2019. At first, I extracted all the comments from the public posts using Netvizz, a widely-used Facebook data extractor (Rieder, 2013), and compiled them in a CSV file. The whole corpus contained raw/unfiltered data, and I randomly selected 457 comments from the corpus, which was 34.13% of the total comments. I excluded the links, stickers, photos, and emoticons from the sample due to their irrelevance to the research question. The final sample was 437. The unit of analysis of this study was the comments. Random sampling is the most reliable sampling for media content, according to Krippendorff (2013). He further suggests that for sampling texts in content analysis, the sample should be more related to the research question than to the accurate representation of the population. From both points of view, the sample was reliable.

4.3. Data analysis and coding technique

After selecting the sample, I coded the data. Two basic types of coding are (a) manifest coding based on selected keywords and phrases, and (b) latent or semantic coding based on semantic themes (Neuman, 2014). Each has its limitations. Therefore, both were applied to code the data. Qualitative analysis requires inductive coding (Given, 2008), while deductive coding is more appropriate for quantitative data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The coding was done manually in Microsoft Office Word and Excel. An intra/interrater reliability test is difficult for a single coder. In such a condition, one way is to repeat the coding in two different times (Time 1 and Time 2) to determine the reliability of the codes (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Following this technique, I coded the data, and the Krippendorff's Alpha value of intra-coder reliability was found substantial. Two notes are important here: (a) While analyzing the data, the religions of the users were listed as well, based on either their Facebook profile name or information from the profile; and (b) for a better understanding of the findings, translated quotes from the dataset were used in some places.

5. Findings

The two themes emerged from the dataset: emotion-driven reactions and reason-based reactions. The first one suggests that users' reaction to disinformation is mainly emotion-driven, while the second one shows that in many cases, users react to disinformation based on reason than emotion. I found 445 instances in the dataset in favor of the themes. Of those, emotion-driven reaction had 276 (62.02%) instances and reason-based reaction had 169 (37.98%) instances. The percentages show that users' emotional reactions are more palpable than their reasoning ability.

5.1. Emotion-driven reactions

While social media users react to disinformation and interact with other users, they express their emotions in various forms that can be categorized into two types: destructive reactions and constructive reactions.

5.1.1. Destructive reaction

A total of 256 instances of destructive reactions are found in the dataset that constitute 92.75% of emotion-driven reactions. Destructive reaction primarily includes four specific expressions: hatred, extreme anger, moderate anger, and frustration. Hatred is the most common destructive reaction that includes vile language, anti-Hindu and anti-Muslim sentiment, demand for brutal punishment, threatening, and xenophobia. Most of the vile language targets the accused as well as the whole Hindu community for “undermining” Islam. In a very few cases, Muslims and Islam are attacked verbally. Some popular words and phrases used frequently to admonish the accused man are *kuttar baccha* (son of a bitch), *khankir pola* (son of a whore), *motherchod* (motherfucker), *malaun* (accursed), and *jaroj* (bastard). For example, “Bring that motherfucker [the accused] and let us bury him.” With this disinformation, anti-religious sentiments also flourish. Many Muslim users who ostensibly consider the four major religions (i.e., Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity) as rivals engage in demeaning them. A very small number of users criticize Islam.

Anger is another common destructive reaction. The language used in such comments hint at the degree of users’ anger. Instances of both extreme and moderate anger are observed in the dataset. I address extreme anger when a comment contains intense expressions, such as *fasi dao* (hang him), *shirocched koro* (behead him), *khun koro* (kill him): “Hang him in an open place.” Besides, moderate anger contains expressions that are not too intense, such as *bichar chai* (we demand justice), *upojukto shashti chai* (we demand proper punishment).

Frustration also comes out when users react to disinformation. Their frustrations are mainly related to the law that often lets the individual unpunished who commits blasphemy. According to a user: “Ah! What Muslim state it is where we Muslims need to protest and demand punishment of the infidels.” For some, Bangladesh society is becoming unfavorable for the minorities due to intensifying Muslim-domination, and for others, it is becoming a Hindu-state. Another group is disappointed with the eroding brotherhood among Muslims. They also suspect that the *failure* of Muslim brotherhood is the main reason for the alleged *Hindu-revivalism* in contemporary Bangladesh.

5.1.2. Constructive reaction

Compared to destructive reactions, instances of constructive expressions are relatively scarce in the dataset ($n=20$, 7.25% of expression-driven reaction). Constructive reactions express the words of benevolence, peace, and congruence. It includes two sets of instances. One, users spread the virtues of Islam and Hinduism against the reported disinformation. Two, users urge others not to exemplify this single reported event to generate communal disharmony, rather to take social peace and accord into account. One user commented:

“Bangladesh is a secular country. Therefore, we are living here together, even having different religious faiths. But some criminals take advantage of this in the name of religion and suppress other religions. Being a Muslim does not

mean that you should rebuke other believers. We never should do it irrespective of religion. We should not hurt others' beliefs, and I learn it from Islam.”

Notice that the standpoint of this user is seemingly obscure, but his words express the idea of coexistence. Thus, some users want to bridge the gap between races, religions, and ethnicities through their words. Constructive expressions in this sense are the stark opposite of the destructive expressions.

5.2. Reason-based reactions

Compared to users' emotion-driven reactions, the evidences of their reason-based engagement with disinformation are relatively lower. It primarily indicates the users' lower ability to act reasonably than emotionally. Two types of users are discerned based on their reasoning skills: users with strong reasoning skills and users with weak reasoning skills.

5.2.1. Strong reasoning

The analyses imply that strong reasoning ability is present among many social media users. In support of this statement, 133 instances of strong reasoning skills are found that is 78.70% of reason-based reactions. It primarily indicates that a decent portion of the social media users possesses strong reasoning skills who use constructive language as well. Nevertheless, it does not hint about how these skills are used: against or in favor of the disinformation. In the dataset, I find several users can draw an analogy and inference, can reason critically, and can mock to express denial subtly.

In the first place, many users frequently use analogical inferences while arguing in their comments: Users who explicitly disapprove and who seemingly support the claims of disinformation use analogies and inferences to prove their points. In such comments, the users who disapprove of the disinformation mainly refer to three analogies. First, the present incident is identical to many other disinformation incidents. Previously, such disinformation was produced by Muslim perpetrators to trap the Hindus and Buddhists. Second, the geopolitical ambience of the sub-continent is hostile. They hypothesize that the anti-Hindu sentiment in Bangladesh could be a result of the anti-Muslim sentiment in India. Third, Muslims have a real-life gain if they can evict Hindus from their lands. It mainly refers to the Enemy Property Act 1968. A user commented:

“This time, it is the conspiracy against the Hindus of Narail. It is nothing but an imitation of the Nasirnagar tragedy: no one condemned those people who were behind the scene. But the Hindus had to suffer without committing any crime, had to endure the assault of thousands of beasts [*sic*]. The state is silent too on this issue.”

Notice that this statement refers to a *man-made* crisis that ravaged the Hindu community in Nasirnagar in 2016. This comment, in one way, tries to justify that the present event is disinformation and, in another way, accuses the state and the public for supporting and digesting the disinformation silently. Many users similarly claim that the present disinformation is intended only to perish the Hindu minorities.

On the other hand, (quasi-)supporters of the disinformation infer in some other ways, mainly referring to the blasphemy laws of other countries that set extreme punishment for the guilty. They also try to indicate that the Hindus are much tolerated in Bangladesh, unlike in India where Muslims are tortured repeatedly and hacked to death. One user stated: “I think Hindus are quite safe in our Muslim country [Bangladesh]. See the condition of Muslims in India and India-controlled Kashmir.” This statement covertly supports the disinformation but with more vague reasoning compared to the previous group of users.

Some users also take satirical and anti-fanatic stances in their comments. While the satirical stance tends to deny the opposite view, the anti-fanatic stance tends to reject the communal attitude. Most of the satires implicitly refuse the statement of disinformation along with the statements of those who believe the disinformation. One satire is: “Oh my God! How Rajkumar [the accused] earned so much power to defame the Prophet (PBUH)?” [*Sic*] This statement expresses the user’s wonder and disbelief regarding the disinformation. The question mark in the last sentence implies that *no one* might have that power to defame the Prophet, so people should not unnecessarily display their irrational destructive reactions.

5.2.2. Weak reasoning

The dataset contains only 36 instances of users’ weak reasoning skills, which is 21.30% of the reason-based reaction. The huge gap between the strong and weak analytical skills of social media users is a somewhat positive sign. It might infer that most users have strong reasoning skills, which means they try to reasonably evaluate the disinformation to some extent. Four groups of users have weak reasoning skills: (i) they promptly believe the disinformation without any analysis; (ii) they express doubt about the disinformation; (iii) they try to show some reasoning skills, but fail and end up making no inference or conclusion; (iv) they demean others to establish their viewpoints without presenting any reasonable arguments. First, these users promptly believe and take the disinformation for granted because of their lower analytical ability. They are more susceptible to disinformation. Second, some users do not take any side as they are uncertain about the provided information whether it is true or false. It is because they do not know how to evaluate/examine the (dis)information. Therefore, they find it comfortable to be in a doubtful position. They either vaguely pose questions or request others not to take a stand before verifying the information. One doubtful comment is: “It could be a fake ID, so we should not go for any action at first. We often involve wrongdoing because of our excitement.” As we see, standpoints of such statements are not clear: do such comments support or deny the disinformation? Third, some users attempt to use reasons but fail to reach to any conclusion due to their incompetence in reasoning. They tend to use sober language and demands some actions vaguely based on unsubstantiated reasons. Fourth, the lack of reasoning skills provokes some users to demean others to promote their views. For example: “It [the disinformation] is nothing but the act of hypocrite *mullahs*.” These comments contain instances of weak reasoning. The commenters fail to draw appropriate analogies, inferences, and arguments to support their claims. Thus, their comments, either in favor or against the disinformation, do not help much to explain the disinformation.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Objectives and key findings

This study aimed to find out how social media users react to religious disinformation. Following a quantitative content analysis, the findings show several propensities, but probably the most interesting one is that most users react to disinformation emotionally than reasonably. Previous studies on social media disinformation take only a few factors into account: impacts of disinformation in politics (Broersma & Graham, 2012, 2013; Faris et al., 2017; Posetti & Matthews, 2018); how social media users respond to fake news (Tandoc et al., 2020); online disinformation in enabling communalism (Al-Zaman, 2019); disinformation sharing behavior (Altay et al., 2020; Mookherjee, 2019; Verdizada, 2017); and typology of disinformation (Buckner, 1965; Haque, 2019; Jr et al., 2018). We may also see that most of these researches are impact studies.

The present study produces three novel findings. First, social media users' reactions to religious disinformation can be understood by two different but slightly intersecting sets of reactions: emotion-driven reaction and reason-based reaction. While most users react emotionally to disinformation, some users use their reasoning skills to support or demystify it. It suggests that religious disinformation to many users is like persuasive stories. Historically, storytelling enriches Bangladeshi society and culture, and the emotional appeal of religious stories is not new in the country: from literature to folklore to public discussion, religious stories are everywhere, as well as popular (Chandan et al., 2017; Uddin, 2006). For this reason, it is possible that social media users perceive religious disinformation as a story, and react to it emotionally. Also, their emotional and trust level suggest that religious disinformation matches their prior beliefs (Buckner, 1965; Jameson, 2001; Roেকেlein, 2006), that is, Hindus or Buddhists or Jews could endanger Islam. Emotional attachment to the topic of disinformation also plays a pivotal role here. This could be a reason that religion as a sensitive and interesting issue in Bangladeshi society generates more intense and emotion-driven reactions among social media users. The new wave of Islamic revivalism (Islam & Islam, 2018) could also be responsible for this tendency.

Second, more users show diverse forms of destructive reactions when they interact with disinformation, which includes hatred, anger, frustration, use of vile language, racial and xenophobic expressions, threat and humiliation, teasing, and malediction. In short, users show hostility and verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009) when they encounter online religious disinformation: though it is a common behavior of social media users (Bekiari & Pachi, 2017). Previous studies (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009) show that such behaviors could have four reasons: psychopathology, disdain for others, social learning of aggression, and deficiency in argumentative skills. The findings show that some users have lack of argumentative skills, and many have disdain for others. However, this study cannot confirm that if the users' destructive behavior is a resultant of psychopathology and social learning of aggression. Instead, from the hate speeches and offense-talking observed in the dataset, the techniques of religious disinformation and its public reactions suggest the presence of *hate spin*, a systematic process of cornering the minorities in

both virtual and real space (George, 2017). We have already discussed with examples that how online communal disinformation leads to unwelcoming offline consequences in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Recently, Bangladesh has become the top country in persecuting religious minorities (Hasnat, 2017), and after 30 years no Hindu will be left in the country if the persecution persists, research suggests (Hasan, 2016). Now more studies should pay attention to the offline impacts of online communal disinformation over religious minorities in Bangladesh.

Third, although more users have strong reasoning skills, only a few of them show constructive reactions after encountering disinformation. Possession of strong reason skills is one of the users' positive traits, though it does not indicate the users' capability to demystify disinformation. Rather, it suggests that more users are capable of evaluating disinformation, choosing a position, drawing analogies and inferences, and presenting evidence and arguments in support of their positions (Kurtz et al., 1999). However, it is not clear that how many users believe disinformation and argue in favor of that. But the findings hint that the users who deny disinformation have more constructive reasoning capability than the users who believe disinformation. The findings also suggest that many users believe disinformation, which may support the findings of Kumar et al. (2016), Verdizada (2017), and Tandoc et al. (2020). Its reason could be, as mentioned earlier, that disinformation as a story satisfies the prior belief and interest of the users, convincing them to believe it: In this case, such users are uncritical or have weak reasoning skills (Buckner, 1965; Jameson, 2001).

Overall, the results show some positive and negative tendencies of social media users' reactions to disinformation. Users' intense destructive reactions mostly against the religious minorities may create religious disharmony in both social media and physical society, throwing them into a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). On the contrary, the constructive reaction is useful for congruence among religious communities, although its instances are limited. Further, users' strong reasoning skills indicate a positive tendency, while weak reasoning skills hint at their cognitive deficiency. There is a possibility that the users with weak reasoning skills may work as a transmitter of disinformation (Buckner, 1965). What is more pressing is that more users tend to react emotionally than reasonably to online disinformation: Emotional users can easily be deceived by the distorted facts of disinformation.

6.2. Limitations and significance

This study has some limitations. First, it mainly focuses on Bangladesh so the result may not be generalized for other countries. Second, weighing Facebook reactions should include not only users' comments but also their emojis, so the textual data (i.e., users' comments) used in this study may not reflect the overall picture. Third, the sample size of this study was relatively smaller than the previous studies on disinformation (e.g., Tandoc et al., 2020). Apart from these limitations, this study has a contribution in the field of internet research. First, it bridges two important fields of research: religious studies and online communication. Also, although online religious disinformation is a pressing issue in Bangladesh, little research has been done so far: the analysis of Facebook comments in the Bangla language is unique in the research arena as well. Therefore, this study would inspire and guide more researchers. Finally, the analysis of social media data using a qualitative content analysis method is relatively novel in the field of

social science and humanities in Bangladesh. Therefore, the present study would be a good addition to the stream of digital research methodology. To forecast its academic and policy value, this study would help academics to understand the important aspects of users' reaction to religious disinformation to consider in future studies. Also, religious intolerance in Bangladesh is mushrooming along with social media communication. Therefore, for better decision-making and protective measures, policymakers need to understand how social media users interact with religious disinformation.

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