# Social Network Misinformation and Attitudinal Shift: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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**Abstract**

This paper attempts to investigate the extent to which linguistic misinformation via social networking platforms affects an attitudinal shift on the part of Saudis in terms of the social, political, and religious issues propagated by the various social networks. This study delves into the verbal and nonverbal linguistic strategies employed to influence the cognitive background of Saudis as well as their ideological beliefs in a way that targets a shift in their attitudinal behavior, socially, politically, and religiously. The paper analytically covers two linguistic dimensions of using language to influence others, either persuasively or manipulatively: the lexical level, which focuses on the lexical choices of particular words that serve to create a specific attitudinal shift in the recipients' personalities, and the pragmatic level, which constitutes the intended meaning of speakers or writers that lies beyond the surface propositional meaning of the linguistic expression. To achieve its objective, the paper draws on two analytical strands: critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the social cognitive theory (SCT). The paper has three main findings: first, language is a rhetorical device for influencing the public's political, social, and religious views, and, therefore, the rhetorical power of the word significantly contributes to attitudes shift; second, misinformation propagated via social networks influences the attitudinal behavior of recipients, particularly at the social level; and, third, social platforms are ideology conduits via which various meanings targeting attitudes shift are communicated.

**Keywords:** misinformation, social platforms, attitudes shift, manipulation, persuasion, CDA, SCT, Saudis

## 1. Introduction

Social network misinformation, which refers to the spread of inaccurate, incredible, and fake information via various social media platforms, plays an integral part in shaping and reshaping attitudes (Zollmann, 2019). Misinformation, being one type of fake news, not only affects attitudinal shifts but also contributes to forming new ideologies (Vamanu, 2019). Obviously, such a misinformation process is communicated via language, which is a tool of communication whereby people can convey their attitudes and beliefs and can be used for maintaining interpersonal relationships and also for specific purposes. Among the miscellaneous functions of using language is to utilize it to achieve ideological purposes (Fairclough, 1995). These ideologies sometimes target the public's illumination, and at other times, they aim at achieving a manipulative goal (Fowler, 1991). The use of language, therefore, has ideological purposes. Among the uses of language to target ideological functions is its employment in the communication of misinformation through various social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc. (Lukasik et al., 2015; Guo & Vargo, 2020). Obviously, the communication process via the different social networking platforms is entirely based on language, either verbally or nonverbally (Ha et al., 2021). This communication process manifests itself at various linguistic levels: at the level of the word (i.e., lexically-based dimension), the level of the compositional meaning (i.e., semantically-based dimension), the level of the sentence structure (i.e., syntactically-based dimension), and the level of the invisible meaning (i.e., pragmatically-based dimension). On social network platforms, these different levels of linguistics are employed to achieve certain goals pertinent to the ideological background of language users (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). This paper, therefore, is an attempt to investigate the way in which linguistic misinformation communicated via social media platforms affects a shift in Saudis' attitudes, politically, socially, and religiously. The paper delves into the linguistic strategies that are employed to influence the cognitive paradigms and ideological beliefs of Saudis in a way that targets a shift in their social, political, and religious attitudes.

The paper analytically covers two linguistic dimensions of using language to propagate misinformation: the lexical level, which focuses on the lexical choices of particular words that serve to create a specific attitudinal shift in the recipients' personalities; and the pragmatic level, which constitutes the intended meaning of speakers or writers that lies beyond the surface propositional meaning of the linguistic expression. To achieve its objective, the paper draws on two analytical frameworks: critical discourse analysis (CDA) as discussed by van Dijk (2014) and Fairclough (2011), among others; and the social cognitive theory (SCT) of mass communication as introduced and

developed in the writings of the Canadian-born American psychologist Albert Bandura (2009). Whereas CDA is mainly concerned with revealing the covert relations of power, ideology, and dominance in discourse (Fairclough, 2011; van Dijk, 2014), the SCT supports the blending of social and cognitive factors to clarify the extent to which the two types of factors (i.e., social and cognitive) are incorporated to delineate the attitudinal behaviors of individuals. The application of the two adopted theoretical frameworks, therefore, serves to explore the impact of social media misinformation on shaping the social, political, and religious attitudes of Saudis.

The significance of the current study lies in its attempt to tackle a social problem proliferated in Saudi society, as it explores the way in which Saudis' attitudes concerning the various political, social, and religious issues can be influenced by the different linguistic strategies of misinformation propagated in the various social networks. The paper, thus, serves to significantly contribute to the linguistic studies targeting the relationship between language and society, as it discusses a crucial phenomenon that has prevailed in recent years, namely, social network misinformation as a crucial factor that shapes the social, political, and religious attitudes of recipients. The study also highlights the necessity of incorporating linguistic approaches into the analysis of social phenomena with the intention of clarifying the way in which language has a crucial role to play in exposing societal problems.

Four research questions are attempted to be answered in the current study. These are as follows:

RQ1. What are the different linguistic strategies employed to communicate misinformation on social networks to influence the social, political, and religious attitudes of Saudis?

RQ2. To what extent are Saudi social, political, and religious attitudes affected by social networking misinformation?

RQ3. What is the most representative linguistic level through which misinformation is propagated on the different social networks?

RQ4. To what extent are CDA and SCT incorporated to explore the impact of misinformation on shaping the attitudinal behavior of the Saudis at the social, political, and religious levels? These research questions constitute further ancillary questions that are also sought to be answered in this article. These are as follows:

(i) How do lexical choices on social networks influence Saudis' political, social, and religious attitudes?

(ii) Can Saudis decipher the intended meaning despite the various misinformation strategies employed by social networking platforms?

The answers to the abovementioned research questions constitute the objectives of the current study: first, to probe the extent to which different misinformation strategies employed on social networks influence Saudis' political, social, and religious attitudes; second, to demonstrate the most representative linguistic level through which misinformation is propagated on the different social networks; and, third, to highlight the role of both verbal and nonverbal strategies of misinformation on social networks.

The remainder of this article presents the literature review of the study in Section 2, wherein four topics are presented and reviewed: (i) social networks and information communication; (ii) Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT); (iii) critical discourse analysis (CDA); and (iv) some previous studies relevant to the topic at hand. Section 3 is the methodology of the study, in which the analytical stages followed in this paper and the data collection and description procedures are provided. In Section 4, the paper displays the results of the study, which constitute (i) the demographic data of the participants, including the distribution of respondents according to gender, age, nationality, education level, and work; (ii) the usage percentage of social platforms among participants; (iii) the questionnaire; and (iv) the interview. Section 5 demonstrates the discussion of the obtained results by alluding to whether these results correlate with or deviate from the results reported in previous literature. Section 6 presents the conclusion of the paper, which is entailed by some recommendations for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review provides theoretical preliminaries on four topics: (i) social networks and information communication; (ii) Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT); (iii) critical discourse analysis (CDA); and (iv) some previous studies relevant to the topic at hand.

### 2.1 Social Networks and Information Communication

With the growth of social media as easy channels of communication that are available to everyone at any place in the world, it becomes so easy for misinformation propagators to find fertile soil wherein they can propagate lies and rumors (Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2018; Weeks & Zúñiga, 2021). Obviously, people all over the world can easily establish strong communicative connections thanks to social media, which in turn allows any user to report, share, or spread any information. As a result, accessing information through social media becomes a simple task that can be done at any time (de la Garza, 2020). The credibility and trustworthiness of the information obtained from these social networks are always a mounting concern. From the social media stage, rumors and misinformation arise, as do facts. These rumors find their way easily towards the members of society, no matter what their denominations and beliefs are, to occupy a space in their thinking and even to shape and/or reshape their cognitive background or unit of knowledge (van Dijk, 2014) towards the topics that are publically discussed and propagated for on these digital sites, which often deal with thorny issues that occupy public opinion, not only at the international level but at the local level as well (Arias, 2019).

It is noteworthy to mention that the various ways we adopt to live and work are continuously being redefined and revolutionized by information and communication technologies (ICTs). According to Goyanes et al. (2021), the potential significance of ICT in shaping and reshaping individuals' attitudes cannot be ignored or marginalized. Social media platforms, being the most influential representation of ICT, not only dominate a great part of people's lives but also direct their everyday activities. The exponential growth of social media platforms

and their very fast ability to reach a large audience have accentuated their significance as mis/information carriers. Social networks have provided us with new means of communication, and this has had a profound effect on people's daily lives to the extent that such digital platforms have broadened people's horizons globally and united individuals with shared interests. Consequently, the public's behavior and attitudes shift more as they experiment with technology, particularly social networks. In the same vein, Angus et al. (2008) and Singh et al. (2020) argue that people's everyday lives have been significantly impacted by the new communication channels that social media has brought forth. Social networking has brought like-minded people together and expanded people's worldwide perspectives. However, society and human conduct have also been impacted by social media. As we use technology more, especially social media, our behavior changes more. The amount of time people spend on social media in their daily lives has increased to the extent that it is progressively altering their behavior in terms of the different aspects of life.

*2.2 Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory*

The social cognitive theory (SCT) was introduced and developed in the writings of the Canadian-born American psychologist Albert Bandura (2009). It is a psychologically-based theory that explains the way through which members of society enact numerous human resources, including the acquisition and adoption of information and knowledge. The main concern of this theory is learning processes and the interaction between various factors therein (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1977) stated that the SCT was primarily based on and derived from his previous social learning theory, and that he developed the old theory into the SCT to incorporate both the social and cognitive dimensions within the framework of the new theory. This has subsequently been emphasized by Bandura's (2009) argument that one of the distinctive features of the SCT is the complementary interaction between social and cognitive factors as basic determinants under the theoretical umbrella of the theory. According to Bandura (2009), interaction occurs between three sets of factors: (i) between the cognitive and personal factors, including beliefs, goals, and values; (ii) between the environmental factors; and (ii) between the behavioral factors. He proceeds to explain that personal factors decide the way individuals shape and reinforce actions noticed in the surrounding environment, which in turn facilitates the process of determining the exhibited behaviors initiated in certain learning situations on the part of individuals.

According to Bandura (2009), the ability to intelligibly perceive the various psychological mechanisms pertinent to human behavior through which symbolic communication affects human thinking, affect, and behavior is of great importance given the significant effect that the mass media have on society. A conceptual framework, therefore, is provided by the social cognitive theory to investigate the causes and processes of such effects. Human behavior has frequently been explained by unidirectional causality, which postulates that either internal or external cues may shape and regulate behavior. Social cognitive theory describes psychosocial functioning through triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986). In this transactional view of the self and society, personal factors such as cognitive, emotional, and physical events, behavioral patterns, and environmental happenings all serve as interacting variables that have an effect on one another in both directions. Accordingly, this theory constitutes the assumption that a behavior is always influenced by a combination of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. This is known as triadic reciprocal causation. Personal determinants include one's expectations, knowledge, and attitudes towards an activity. Environmental factors include cultural norms, access, and influence over others, whereas behavioral determinants are skills, self-efficacy, and practice.

Within the scope of media, Bandura (1988) argues that the SCT has a crucial role in demonstrating the extent to which people's behaviors are influenced by what they observe from others' experiences in social life. To clarify, Bandura maintains that the role of mass media has swept the globe. With only a tap of our fingertips, we can readily get news and information from all around the world. When a medium has such high salience, it also has the ability to persuade and compel people by the way it is portrayed. Furthermore, Bandura (2009) explains that the globe has become one global stage thanks to mass media. It has effectively aided in comprehending diverse cultures, keeping us informed about some of the key reformations taking place throughout the world, and helping reach a large demographic while also raising awareness of many social concerns. The propensity of humans to think metaphorically or abstractly makes the media a crucial source of knowledge. The social cognitive theory has broad applications, particularly in the area of mass communication or media. As was already noted, the media plays a crucial role in the way events are portrayed and messages are conveyed. This is a fantastic instrument for bringing about many beneficial changes in society, but it may also have some drawbacks. Here lies the role of the SCT, as it has been used to explain both the intended and unintended consequences of media.

Within the framework of the SCT, individuals are perceived as dependent agents; that is, they are both products of the society where they live and determinants of the social system's production. As such, they have the personal agency to act independently as well as the collective agency to interact communicatively with others. From the collective agency perspective, social networks are very important in SCT as they pave the way for an easy and fast distribution of different behaviors across populations (Bandura, 1988). The SCT also advocates the intermingling of both societal aspects and cognition (Bandura, 1989). Within the context of this study, the SCT attempts to reflect, linguistically, socially, and cognitively, the impact of social network misinformation on the social, political, and religious attitudes of Saudis.

*2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis*

Critical discourse analysis focuses on the way concepts of power, dominance, and hegemony are produced and reproduced by means of linguistic strategies (Fairclough, 2011; van Dijk, 2014). According to Baker and McGlashan (2020), critical discourse analysis (CDA) analyzes language in order to shed light on various social issues with an emphasis on power, particularly those involving abuses of authority, such as discrimination and disempowerment. In addition to analyzing the language in texts, discourse analysts also investigate how texts relate to the larger social context in which they are created and consumed. This approach to language analysis (i.e. critical discourse

analysis) serves to uncover the hidden relations of power by showing the extent to which linguistic strategies are dexterously employed to communicate particular ideologies that lie beyond the propositional meaning of the surface linguistic expressions (van Dijk, 2014). CDA has many analytical frameworks and various theoretical agendas that vary from one genre to another (Khafaga, 2017). That is, the critical analysis of a conversational genre is supposed to be different from the analysis of a narrative genre or the analysis of everyday-occurring conversation. Arguing from this position, CDA also has its own analytical framework when it is applied to the study of media discourse (van Dijk, 1993). Despite the fact that the analysis varies from one discourse genre to another, the basic tenets of CDA remain fixed in all types of analyses and in all genres of discourse. Consequently, in media discourse, CDA's main concern is also the notions of power and ideology and the extent to which these notions are communicated, both verbally and nonverbally, via talk and texts.

CDA also focuses on revealing the different strategies of persuasion and/or manipulation in discourse (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). In this regard, CDA uses various linguistic perspectives of analysis to achieve its theoretical and analytical objectives in terms of uncovering hidden strategies of persuasion and manipulation in discourse. Thus, with the analytical framework of CDA, we can see the employment of the lexical, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic levels of linguistic analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA is especially interested in social and political concerns since it perceives discourse as a social activity (Fairclough, 1995). In any communication act, including the discourse proliferated via social networks, different linguistic strategies are produced, reproduced, practiced, and represented by various power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Discourse structures are performed, verified, legitimized, and reproduced within CDA's analytical framework to uncover these various power relations. According to van Dijk (1996), there are several variations of CDA, each with unique analytical characteristics. Each type of analysis uses certain linguistic and discursive representations. One of the common features of CDA is that it allows the incorporation of various analytical approaches to analyze discourse critically (Khafaga, 2017). This in turn demonstrates the relevance of incorporating both CDA and SCT theoretical principles to offer a sociolinguistic analysis to investigate the extent to which linguistic misinformation via social networking platforms affects the social, political, and religious attitudes of Saudis. The paper delves into the verbal and nonverbal linguistic strategies employed to influence the cognitive background of Saudis as well as their ideological beliefs in a way that targets a shift in their attitudinal behavior, socially, politically, and religiously.

*2.4 Related Studies*

Numerous studies have addressed the impact of social networks on shaping the way individuals and society perceive and respond to critical topics (e.g., Arias , 2019; Guo &Vargo, 2020; Koidl & Matthews, 2017; Mendoza et al., 2010; Weeks, & Zúñiga, 2021), among others. These studies investigated the impact of rumors propagated on social media on people's beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes, as well as on the various aspects of their lives. These effects cover different fields, including social, economic, cultural, political, or otherwise. The current study demonstrates the extent to which linguistic misinformation propagated via social networks impacts the awareness of Saudis in terms of various political, social, and religious issues.

De la Garza (2020) argued that social media offers a window into our communal response to the Coronavirus outbreak and helps shape our reaction, either positively or negatively. Social media, for him, provides a platform for facts as well as lies and misinformation. Such information, either true or false, can easily be attained at one's fingertips. He maintained that social media helps not only ordinary people to communicate with each other but also scientists and other health experts to effectively communicate and exchange opinions concerning any matter. Garza emphasized that at a time when there are some who use social media for white purposes, i.e. for illumination, there are many others who stand ready to spread misinformation through these sites. He further stated that it is a necessity to make sure that what is attained from social media platforms should be verified for authorization and authenticity.

Repoll (2020) postulated that social media can have an effective role in avoiding fear and stigma, as well as a similar yet more dangerous role in increasing fear and worry about Coronavirus. Repoll maintained that social media reformulates people's responses and attitudes towards critical issues as it directs the whole society to adopt one particular viewpoint that may be contrary to reality. Thus, Redpoll also implies that social networks are sites where public opinion and attitudinal behavior are shaped. This, of course, chimes with what this study tries to argue for. In another study, Koidl and Matthews (2017) investigated the impact of social networks, being sites through which ideas and thoughts are circulated among people, on the formulation of attitudes and behavior in times of emergency. This study clarified that misinformation can cause fear and endanger life if it is adopted by an individual in times of crisis. As such, the study highlighted the dangerous role rumors play, particularly in crisis situations. This is because, according to the study, in critical times of crisis, rumors easily penetrate social networks to reach the audience very quickly and everywhere; they appear for a moment, and then they spread, received, and, in many cases, absorbed by the public.

A further study by Lee (2019) emphasized the role of social networks in politics and social movements. This study demonstrated that massive social and political revolutions have already been fueled in part by social media technologies, which have also significantly increased the capacity of ordinary people to confront and alter power structures in society through social networks that may organize and manipulate people. The study further accentuated the fact that online communities are expanding and offering alternate viewpoints and opinions without having to rely on traditional media. The same perspective of showing how social networks contribute effectively to social and political movements as well as shaping both political and social attitudes was also adopted by Lopes (2014) and Lee and Xenos (2019). Furthermore, Rogers and Niederer (2020) emphasized the premise that, since the middle of the nineteenth century, misinformation has been used politically as a slingshot against the free press when it comes to exposing uncomfortable truths, usually for deceptive ends.

Froment et al. (2017) investigated the use of social networks as a communication tool between teachers and students. Their study revealed

that the adoption of social networks as a communication mechanism between them is variable, according to instructors' and students' attitudes toward teacher-student communication through social networks, relying mostly on their impressions of the subject matter. According to the perceptions of students about teacher-student contact through social networks, there are distinct distinctions connected to gender and academic course: Students in higher classes think teacher-student contact on social networks is more suitable than students in lower courses, and male students think it is more appropriate than female students. Huesmann and Taylor (2006) also explored the role of the SCT in deciphering the way human behaviors are affected by social networks. They postulated that the prevalence and impact of violent images via social networks are one of the most active areas of media discourse studies that have been influenced by SCT. They also maintained that the exposure to violent content in videos has been connected to aggressive conduct and discovered that the effect might be effective in reducing the unfavorable outcomes for violent characters in such films.

## 3. Methodology

In this section, the analytical stages followed in this paper and the data collection and description procedures are provided. It also presents the analytical instruments and the participants of the study.

### 3.1 Data Collection and Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study to collect data and obtain results: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire was composed of 15 statements with five scales: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD). It was designed by means of Google Forms, and it was electronically distributed among participants via WhatsApp groups and participants' e-mails. The statements of the questionnaire revolved around three main dimensions: first, the perception of misinformation on the social networks by Saudis; second, the effect of these misinformation strategies on Saudis' perception of issues related to politics, society, and religion; and third, the most effective strategies influencing the participants' attitudes and beliefs. The questionnaire was verified and checked for validity and reliability by two experts in the field. The interview was composed of six open-ended questions and was also designed to test the attitudinal behavior of Saudis concerning the impact of linguistic misinformation communicated via social networks on Saudis' attitudes. Crucially, adopting both quantitative and qualitative methods helps arrive at credible and certifiable results as well as a comprehensive understanding of the way Saudis perceive linguistic misinformation propagated across the different social platforms. Because the educational level of participants varies from one to another, and to guarantee much credibility, the statements of the questionnaires as well as the questions of the interview were translated into Arabic, the mother tongue of all participants. Also, to guarantee complete understanding of the statements of the questionnaire and the interview, some expressions were explained in simple terms to some of the participants, who did not grasp the meaning of some expressions.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants in this study included 73 Saudi respondents who agreed to share their opinions in both the questionnaire and the interview designed for the purpose of analyzing the Saudi perception of misinformation propagated via social networks. Among the participants, 53 are males and 20 are females, and their age ranges between 17 and 52 years. Participants were selected randomly and came from different occupational and educational backgrounds.

### 3.3 Procedures

The procedural steps adopted in this study incorporated four phases: (i) instrumental method preparation; (ii) circulating questionnaires and conducting interviews; (iii) obtaining results from the collected data; and (iv) discussing the obtained results by comparing and contrasting them to previous studies and related literature. In the preparation stage, an electronic questionnaire consisting of 15 items was designed, and a six-question interview was also listed for participants to obtain their perceptions in terms of the topic addressed. After designing the questionnaire and the interview questions, the second stage started by sending the link to the electronic questionnaire to the WhatsApp groups and also via e-mails to the selected participants. Also, the process of interviewing participants was initiated at this stage, wherein male participants were interviewed face-to-face, whereas female participants were interviewed via phone. In the third phase, results were obtained to be ready for discussion, which constituted the fourth stage of this study. After the four procedural stages, some thematic issues relevant to the perception of misinformation propagated on the various social networks by Saudis were investigated; these were discussed for obtaining particular linguistic indications as well as offering pedagogical implications pertaining to the main objective of the current study.

## 4. Analysis and Results

This part presents the results of the current study in terms of (i) the demographic data of the participants, which include the distribution of respondents according to gender, age, nationality, education level, and work; (ii) the usage percentage of social platforms among participants; (iii) the questionnaire; and (iv) the interview.

### 4.1 Results Pertaining to Respondents' Demographic Data

This subsection provides the demographic data of the respondent participants as demonstrated in the following tables.

Table 1. Demographic data (gender and age)

| Number | Gender | Nationality | Number | Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 53 | male | Saudi | 15 | from 17 to 26 |
| | | | 17 | from 26-37 |
| | | | 21 | from 38-52 |
| 20 | female | Saudi | 6 | from 17 to 26 |
| | | | 11 | from 26-37 |
| | | | 3 | from 38-52 |
| Total | | | 73 participants | |

Table 2. Demographic data (level of education and work)

| Number | Education Level | Number | Work |
|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | PhD, MA holders | 11 | university staff |
| 17 | university graduates | 2 | doctors |
| | | 7 | school teachers |
| | | 5 | employees in various governmental (public) and/or non-governmental (private) organizations/ institutions |
| | | 3 | unemployed |
| 23 | university students | 23 | not working |
| 13 | high school students | 12 | personal work/business |
| | | 1 | unemployed |
| 9 | till grade 9 | 9 | Personal work/business |
| Total | | 73 participants | |

As displayed in Table 1 and Table 2, the demographic data of respondent participants shows that all respondent participants are Saudi, whose age ranges from 17 to 52. Also, the respondent participants occupy a variety of jobs, and a number of them are not working. They also display different levels of education that vary from PhD holders to those who only have high school certificates, as well as those who are uneducated or left school before the high school stage. This indicates that this study includes the predominant ages in using social media platforms and deals with different categories of Saudi people, who have different levels of education and occupy various types of jobs.

*4.2 Results Pertaining to the Type and Usage of Social Platforms as Sources of News*

This subsection offers the results related to the different types of social platforms employed by the respondent participants as well as the extent to which these social platforms are used by participants.

Table 3. Usage of social networks as sources of information and news

| Social networks | Percentage of usage by respondents |
|---|---|
| Twitter | 92% |
| Facebook | 76% |
| Snapchat | 43% |
| YouTube | 89% |
| WhatsApp | 98% |
| Instagram | 12% |
| TikTok | 81% |
| Telegram | 7% |
| Messenger/ Linkedin | 4% |

Table 3 demonstrates that there are varieties in the use of the different social platforms. As displayed in the table, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook represent the most popular social platforms used as sources of news among the respondent participants in this study, with a percentage of 98%, 92%, 89%, 81%, and 76%, respectively.

*4.3 Results Pertaining to the Questionnaire*

This subsection displays the results that show the perception of the questionnaire by the respondent participants as is shown in the following table.

Table 4. Participants' response to the questionnaire

| No | Statement | SA | A | N | D | SD | M | Total agreement % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Scales | % | | | | | |
| 1 | I consider social media as information and news source. | 4.11 | 6.85 | 2.74 | 71.23 | 15.07 | 2.14 | 42.8% |
| 2 | Social media platforms frequently spread ideologies. | 9.59 | 65.75 | 17.81 | 4.11 | 2.74 | 3.75 | 75% |
| 3 | I do not trust the information posted on the various social media networks. | 4.11 | 72.6 | 10.96 | 8.22 | 4.11 | 3.64 | 72.8% |

| 4 | Social media misinformation affects my social attitudes. | 15.07 | 67.12 | 9.59 | 5.48 | 2.74 | 3.86 | 77.2% |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Social media misinformation shapes my social decision-making process. | 4.11 | 50.68 | 2.74 | 24.66 | 17.81 | 2.99 | 59.8% |
| 6 | My political attitude is influenced by social media misinformation. | 2.74 | 9.59 | 47.95 | 26.03 | 13.7 | 2.62 | 52.4% |
| 7 | Misinformation on social media has an impact on my religious beliefs. | 0 | 0 | 4.11 | 72.6 | 23.29 | 1.81 | 36.2% |
| 8 | Social networking is just something I do for fun. | 20.55 | 73.97 | 0 | 4.11 | 1.37 | 4.08 | 81.65% |
| 9 | I spend a lot of time on social media. | 12.33 | 36.99 | 19.18 | 17.81 | 13.7 | 3.16 | 63.2% |
| 10 | Misinformation on social media adopts many forms. | 4.11 | 58.9 | 0 | 28.77 | 8.22 | 3.22 | 64.4% |
| 11 | Misinformation on social network platforms has different linguistic manifestations. | 4.11 | 61.64 | 0 | 34.25 | 0 | 3.36 | 67.2% |
| 12 | Lexical choices play an integral part in communicating misinformation. | 2.74 | 69.86 | 0 | 23.29 | 4.11 | 3.44 | 68.8% |
| 13 | Social media misinformation can be communicated verbally and nonverbally. | 17.81 | 78.08 | 0 | 4.11 | 0 | 4.1 | 82% |
| 14 | Social media misinformation affects my ideological beliefs. | 0 | 4.11 | 5.48 | 84.93 | 5.48 | 2.08 | 41.6% |
| 15 | Social media misinformation influences my everyday activities. | 1.37 | 75.34 | 0 | 13.7 | 9.59 | 3.45 | 69% |

Table 4 clarifies both positive and negative attitudes concerning the use of social media platforms as a source of news as well as the extent to which these social networks influence a shift in the Saudis' attitudes in terms of the social, political, and religious aspects. The questionnaire reveals a number of analytical observations. First, despite the fact that the respondents show a total agreement of 69% (M=3.45) that social media misinformation affects their everyday activities, they express a low percentage of agreement 42.8% (M= 2.14) that they get their news from sources other than the numerous social media sites. This result is further accentuated by the high level of agreement in statement No 4 that they use the various social platforms only for amusement 81.65% (M=4.8). Second, although the majority of participants 75% (M=3.75) accentuate that social platforms usually carry specific ideologies that serve the benefit of their users, 72.8% (M=3.64) of them emphasize that they do not trust the news propagated via social networks. Third, concerning the impact of social media misinformation on attitudinal shift, the results of the questionnaire demonstrate that the majority of respondent participants 77.2% (M=3.86) agree that social networks have an effect on shaping their social attitudes. However, 52.4% (M=2.62) of participants agree that their political attitudes are not influenced by the social media misinformation. Fourth, the least percentage of agreement among the questionnaire's statements has been expressed in statements No. 7 and 14, with 36.2% (M=1.81) and 41.6% (M=2.08), respectively, wherein participants express their agreement that social media misinformation did not affect or shift their religious attitudes and ideological beliefs. Fifth, 82% (M=4.1) of respondent participants agree that misinformation propagated via social platforms constitutes the verbal and nonverbal means of discourse topic delivery. Sixth, 67.2% (M=3.36) of the participants also agree that social network misinformation constitutes various linguistic manifestations, and 68.8% (M=3.44) of them clarify that the lexicalization is the most representative tool for communicating misinformation on social networks.

*4.4 Results Pertaining to the Interview*

This subsection clarifies the attitudinal perception of the respondent participant in terms of the interview as indicated in the following table.

Table 5. Participants' response to the interview

| | Interview question | Positive attitude | % | Cannot decided | % | Negative attitude | % | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | How do you perceive the information posted via the various social networks? | 4 | 36.36 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 63.64 | 11 |
| 2 | To what extent do you trust the information propagated through social media platforms? | 2 | 18.18 | 1 | 9.10 | 8 | 72.72 | 11 |
| 3 | Do you think that misinformation communicated via social media influences your social attitude? | 8 | 72.72 | 2 | 18.18 | 1 | 9.10 | 11 |
| 4 | Do you think that misinformation communicated via social media influences your religious attitude? | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 11 | 100.00 | 11 |
| 5 | Do you think that misinformation communicated via social media influences your political attitude? | 1 | 9.10 | 3 | 27.26 | 7 | 63.64 | 11 |
| 6 | Do you think that social media platforms are ideology carriers? | 8 | 72.72 | 2 | 18.18 | 1 | 9.10 | 11 |

Table 5 shows a variety of attitudinal responses in terms of the impact of the different social networks on the perception of respondents in terms of the various issues related to politics, society, and religion. 7 (63.64%) participants out of 11 express a negative attitude with regard to the extent to which they perceive the information posted via the various social networks, and 8 (72.72%) participants also communicate a negative attitude that they do not totally trust the information channeled via the various social networks. As for whether or not their social, religious, and political attitudes are influenced by social media misinformation, all participants (100%) emphasize that their religious attitudes and beliefs are not affected by the misinformation propagated via social media platforms. Also, 7 (63.64%) participants accentuate the fact that their political attitudes are not influenced by the different types of misinformation communicated via social networks. However,

8 (72.72%) participants have positive attitudes with regard to the interview questions No. 3 and 6, as they emphasize the impact of social network misinformation on shaping and reshaping their social attitudes, as well as agree to the idea that social media platforms are ideology channels through which different ideological meanings are communicated.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the above results, social media platforms represent an influential source of misinformation and fake news. Such a misinformation process targets different purposes: socially, politically, religiously, or otherwise, with the intention of affecting a shift in recipients' and users' attitudes. Due to the abundance of user-generated material on online social media, people can be brought together around shared interests, worldviews, and storylines. This study accentuates the fact that the widespread spread of unconfirmed tales thrives in the World Wide Web environment. Saudi society is no exception; social networks dominate nearly every aspect of Saudis' daily activities and time. The analysis demonstrates how the dialectics of interests alter along with changes in opinions and spontaneous consent in news discourse, which correlates with Jones's (2019) study, in which he discussed the extent to which misinformation and fake news spread during the Gulf War crises via the various social networks in a way that, in his words, weaponizes Twitter in such a period.

Social networks are a crucial source of information, where people from different educational levels and various ages look for the most up-to-date information. However, information propagated and shared on social platforms can be misleading, manipulative, and deceptive. Such a deceptive and manipulative use of language is best decoded by CDA (Fairclough, 2011; van Dijk, 2014) and SCT (Bandura, 1986, 2009), as the two approaches aim to reveal the extent to which hidden strategies of manipulative language as well as their impact on individuals' attitudes can be decoded in discourse. Misinformation is one type of misleading fake news classified by Vamanu (2019), in which certain discursive strategies are utilized to affect others' perceptions in terms of the various aspects of life, including politics, society, and religion, as is discussed in the context of this paper. As the analysis in this article has shown, misinformation displays the rhetorical dimension of power. What is meant here by power is the power of the word. The analysis demonstrated that the persuasive and manipulative power of the word is more influential at the rhetorical dimension of discourse than any other persuasive strategies employed in media discourse (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Khafaga, 2023a).

The results demonstrated that social networks have always been a site for propagating misinformation. This is due to their widespread availability as well as the great advancement in information and communication technologies. The current study accentuates the assumption that social media are ideology conduits that are employed to communicate ideological meanings, either true or fake news, that are always targeted for the benefit of a group, institution, or individual (Oh et al., 2013). Misinformation propagated via the various social platforms addresses different topics, including social, political, religious, etc., and targets different types of people with different ages. Such an ideological process of misinformation also targets a shift in attitudes, which, in turn, underscores the importance of the rhetorical dimension of power in expressing certain ideological ideas and underlines that language tools are the most effective ways of mind control and manipulation when compared to physical ones (Fowler et al., 2018).

The results obtained from the questionnaire displayed different viewpoints concerning the impact of social media misinformation on Saudis' attitudes. It is analytically demonstrated that Saudi people use various social platforms extensively, but this use is, in most cases, for amusement. Despite the fact that the respondent participants agree that social networks are ideology carriers, they also express their agreement that only their social and societal attitudes can be influenced by the misinformation communicated via these social media channels. The majority of the participants agree that such an impact on religious and political attitudes is very slight. This, in turn, accentuates the assumption that Saudis are usually influenced by the type of misinformation that addresses issues related to social and societal topics rather than those addressing issues that are ideologically or religiously oriented.

The analysis further clarified that the majority of respondent participants agree with the assumption that social network misinformation is propagated via different types of communication, verbally and nonverbally, constituting both the lexical and pragmatic levels of analysis (Wilson & Walsh, 1996). They, therefore, agree that misinformation is communicated at both the level of the word (lexically based dimension) and the level of the utterance (pragmatically based dimension). However, they emphasize that the lexical level is the most representative level via which misinformation is conveyed on social media platforms. This, in turn, accentuates the importance of lexis in mind and attitude shift, as well as the ideological weight of words over other linguistic tools in the process of misinformation propagation on social networks. This goes in conformity with many previous studies, such as Khafaga (2023b), Khafaga and Shaalan (2020), and Barkho (2021), who emphasize the effectiveness of the word as ideology carriers, particularly their employment as social media persuasion and social media manipulation strategies.

The results obtained from the interview showed that the negative attitude concerning the extent to which participants perceive the information posted via the various social networks is consistent with the same results obtained from the questionnaire. In both cases, the respondent participants express their agreement that they do not trust the information communicated via social networks. This negative attitudinal perception indicates a contradictory viewpoint in terms of the use of social platforms. That is, in light of this study and within the Saudi context, despite the high level of agreement among respondent participants that they frequently use social media platforms, they at the same time emphasize that these social networks affect only their social attitudes. Other results of the interview also correlate with those obtained from the questionnaire, including the positive attitude that social media platforms are ideology carriers that target specific purposes that always serve the benefit of the misinformation propagator. Also, the results of both the interview and the questionnaire are complementary in terms of the high level of agreement that social network misinformation can cause a shift in social attitudes but cannot

affect the recipients' religious and political ones.

The study also accentuates the theoretical and analytical incorporation of both critical discourse analysis (CDA) and social cognitive theory (SCT) in deciphering attitudinal behavior concerning any social phenomenon. This incorporation offers new insights into a deeper understanding of the way various theoretical and analytical approaches can be applied to the investigation of the impact of social media misinformation on shaping and/or reshaping attitudes.

This study has a number of limitations. First, the causal relationship between the attitudinal perception of social media platforms and the results obtained in this study cannot be generalized because this study was conducted within a specific period of time. The differences in settings and contexts may result in different outcomes. Second, the respondent participants were between the ages of 17 and 52 and from the middle region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Other ages less than 17 and above 52, as well as other regions of the Kingdom, were not included here. Consequently, the sample cannot be said to be totally representative. Therefore, further wide-scope studies are sought to delve into the relationship between social media misinformation and attitude shift in Saudi Arabia.

## 6. Conclusion

By drawing on social cognitive theory (SCT) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study provided a sociolinguistic analysis to approach the perception of Saudis towards the linguistic misinformation propagated via social media platforms. The paper demonstrated that social media platforms represent an effective conduit for linguistic misinformation targeting an attitudinal shift on the recipients' part. The paper has shown the extent to which social media misinformation and fake news influence the social, political, and religious attitudes of Saudis. It is analytically evidenced in this study that social platforms occupy a great part in Saudis' everyday activities. Despite the fact that the results of the paper demonstrated that social media misinformation significantly affects the social attitudes of Saudis, it was analytically evidenced that political and religious attitudes are not influenced to the same degree as social attitudes by social media misinformation. Further, regardless of the fact that the qualitative and quantitative results reported in this study indicated that misinformation propagated via social networks is manifested in various linguistic strategies at the lexical and pragmatic levels of analysis, lexicalization is the most representative strategy employed on social networks to propagate misinformation.

For future research, this study has a number of recommendations. First, it recommends an intensive study with the help of computational linguistics to investigate the effectiveness of social media news in political propaganda. Second, the paper also recommends the application of SCT and CDA, together with computational linguistics, to decode strategies of persuasion and/or manipulation proliferated on social media platforms and the way they affect the personality dimensions of social media users. Third, in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings, the paper recommends the investigation of the use of social media in EFL learning and teaching and the extent to which this role fosters the proliferation of distance and online learning. These recommended studies might reveal results that are similar and/or different from those approached in the current study.

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