

Head is where the Herd is: Effect of Social Conformity on Islamophobia on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the Internet, social media has become one of the primary sources through which people get access to news and form opinions. However, this presents a problem as not all news on social media is verified and is often fake news. The purpose of the study is to explore the role social conformity plays in how people respond to fake news. In the study, participants read a fake Islamophobic news story posted on Facebook and were randomly assigned into two groups. In the Islamophobic condition, respondents read prejudiced comments whereas in the non-Islamophobic condition, they read comments which identified that the story was fake and criticized the post for being prejudiced. The participants then filled out a survey that assessed their attitudes, feelings and behaviours towards the Muslim community. The results revealed that the group exposed to the Islamophobic comments not only had significantly more negative attitudes and feelings towards Muslims but were also significantly more likely to share the fake news story and post Islamophobic comments as compared to the group exposed to non-Islamophobic comments. Thus, findings of the study suggest that exposure to prejudiced information in online spaces has the potential to influence our attitudes.

Keywords: *Social Conformity, Islamophobia, Fake News, Facebook, Prejudice*

Social Media and Fake News

On 6th January 2020, a video of the People protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act at the Gateway of India shouting “Hinduo se Azaadi” went viral on social media. The original tweet garnered close to a whopping 9000 re-tweets. Later, fact-checking agencies revealed that the protestors were in fact screaming “Hindutva se azaadi”. This is no isolated incident. There was also a wave of Islamophobic fake news showing Muslims spitting on fruits, utensils, food and policemen to spread the novel covid-19. The spread of fake news has resulted in disastrous consequences. In fact, violence triggered through such fake news seems to be the norm rather than the exception.

According to Lazer et al., (2018) “Fake news can be defined as fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake news also includes misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false

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information that is purposely spread to deceive people).” (p. 1094). Post-truth world has seen that fake news spreads more easily than real news and misinformation is rampant.

Due to the rise of the Internet in the 21st century, social media became one of the primary sources of news. These social media sites are one of the prime sources of fake news and misinformation and this is a major concern since social media has become one of the main sources through which young people get news (Sveningsson, 2015).

Social Conformity

According to Hogg & Vaughan, (2010) “Social influence is a process whereby attitudes and behaviour are influenced by the real or implied presence of other people” (p. 124). Classic studies by Asch (Asch, 1951) and Sherif (Sherif, 1936) have demonstrated the powerful role that social conformity plays in influencing people’s behaviour. Certain personality characteristics also determine the likelihood to conform. Those who conform tend to have a low self-esteem, a strong desire for social acceptance, low IQ, high anxiety, feelings of insecurity, feelings of inferiority, low group status and an authoritarian personality (Costanzo, 1970; Crutchfield, 1955). Culture also impacts our likelihood to conform and this too is a form of normative social influence. Conformity can occur for a variety of reasons (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Insko, 1985). The first is the normative social influence, which entails changing our behaviour according to the expectation of others and to make it more analogous to their behaviour. Conformity due to normative social influence occurs even in online spaces (Williams and colleagues, 2000). The second cause of conformity is informational social influence, which arises from the desire to be right. This is why we depend on and incline to agree with other people’s opinions.

Latané gave the dynamic social impact theory (1981), which explains the changes in attitudes, behaviours, feelings and cognition that occur due to social influence, and how that depends on the number of people involved, degree of interpersonal interaction and complexity. The model also postulates that an individual is more likely to conform to the attitudes, emotions and behaviour of the majority rather than the minority. The model predicts four steps that will occur during the process of conformity in a social space: (a) clustering of attitudes in social arena; (b) a resulting decrease in diversity due to convergence of attitudes; (c) similarity across the attitudes held by members; and (d) continuing diversity (lack of complete convergence) of attitudes. Computer simulations have provided considerable support for this theory (Nowak & Vallacher, 1998).

Social Influence on Social Media

Conformity is not just restricted to the offline world; it significantly affects people’s behaviour on the Internet as well. According to the social identity model of de-individuation effects given by Postmes and colleagues (2000), the Internet makes people more predisposed to group norms because it leads to depersonalization, and hence, people tend to regard themselves and others as being members of groups and not individuals especially when their group identity is made salient; in such online spaces, where cues from the environment are reduced, people are quick to form group norms (Postmes et al., 2000). People on social media sites start resembling their friends due to social influence and become increasingly similar to them (Crandall et al., 2008). They then also prefer to interact with people who are similar to them. A research conducted by Tidwell and Walther (2002) on the effects of computer-mediated-communication have revealed that normative influences can be stronger in online spaces as compared to face-to-face communication.

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People attach great importance to the opinion of others on social media and it is one of the main ways through which they shape their attitudes, beliefs and opinions about the various happenings across the world. Conformity to other users' online behaviour has been demonstrated even when individuals respond to fake news. Colliander (2019) conducted a study in which three groups: two experimental and one control group were shown the same Facebook post containing fake news and comments from other users. In the first group, participants were shown the post where other users had left supportive comments. In the second group, participants were shown the post where other users had left comments identifying the news as fake and in the control group participants were shown the same post with comments both identifying news as fake and condemning the poster of the fake news. The results revealed that participants in the condition in which other users criticized the fake news article were less likely to share the fake news article and make supportive comments on it as opposed to participants in the condition who were exposed to supportive comments on the Facebook post. This study also importantly found that a disclaimer identifying the news as fake was not as effective on the participant's likelihood of sharing the fake news and making positive comments on it as compared to comments of other users criticizing the post. This shows the impact that social influence plays on the behaviour of the individual.

Influence of Social Norms on Prejudice Expression

Social influence processes like conformity have numerous advantages such as lending predictability to social situations; it is the reason why most people obey rules and laws.

However, conformity has also been tied to spread of communal and anti-social sentiments. As individuals become a part of a group, they start conforming and identifying strongly with group norms. Identifying with a group makes us feel like we belong and hence is valuable for our self-concept. This involves evaluating one's group or the in-group favourably and viewing the out-group negatively. This is the basis for prejudice and results in forming stereotypes about the community. According to Hogg and Reid (2006) not fitting in with the social norm may cause individuals to feel socially isolated. This can be one major reason for abiding by group norms. Social norms function as a guide and indicate the socially acceptable way of responding to the members of the group (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005) which gives rise to the possibility that an individual's prejudiced attitudes may in fact reflect the group's prejudiced attitudes and this has been proven in research (Plant & Devine, 1998). Other upsetting effects of conformity include the prevalence of rape myths and increased acceptance for it by men (Bohner et al., 2006), gender disparity and glass ceiling for women (Eagly, 2007). Various studies have demonstrated the role that social influence plays in fostering prejudiced attitudes towards a group in online spaces by establishing social norms (Hsueh, M., Yogeewaran, K., & Malinen, S., 2015).

Islamophobia, Social Media, and Social Conformity

In its most basic sense, Islamophobia can be understood as an irrational fear and hatred against people who practice Islam. In its extreme sense, it invokes the demonization of the followers of Islam. However, there is no consensus about the exact meaning of the term. Etienne Dinet was the first person to coin the term Islamophobia in 1922 (Cesari, 2006). Many claim that 'Islamophobia' is a new term for racism (Love, 2009). However, there are criticisms regarding the term as well. According to the English translation of a French weekly (Hirsi Ali et al., 2006), there is no need for the term Islamophobia because it "confuses criticism of Islam as a religion and stigmatization of those who believe in it."

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The most widely accepted definition of Islamophobia was given by the Runnymede trust (1997), according to which “Islamophobia is any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.” The definition equated Islamophobia with closed (vs. open) views of Islam (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997).

According to this definition, “the eight main criteria of Islamophobia are views of Islam as (1) monolithic, (2) separate from and (3) inferior to Western cultures. Islam is seen as (4) “an enemy” and as (5) a manipulative political ideology. Criticism of the West is (6) a priori rejected, (7) discrimination against Muslims is justified, and (8) Islamophobia is seen as natural.” (Imhoff & Recker, p. 812). The present study ascribed to this definition of Islamophobia given by Imhoff and Recker (2012).

Islamophobia has unfortunately increased staggeringly after the 9/11 attacks. So widespread is the phenomenon that some people feel no qualms about openly declaring their prejudice against Islam and feel that it is even justifiable. It is not just limited to the real world but extends to the virtual world as well. Online Islamophobia is often disguised as jokes or banter and this makes it difficult to identify and under-researched. Many of these blogs and websites engage in expanding and popularizing an anti-Muslim narrative using the cover of freedom of expression. Such blogs and sites then attract users who post comments on such blogs that have a deeply entrenched anti-Muslim account (Awan, 2014). It is extremely dangerous when something as divisive as Islamophobia becomes a norm, as more and more people might contribute to the rise of Islamophobia due to conformity.

Research Questions

1. Can the nature of comments on a fake Islamophobic news story influence people’s attitudes towards the Muslim community?
2. Can the nature of comments on a fake Islamophobic news story influence the comments that the participants themselves make about the news story?
3. Can the nature of comments on the fake Islamophobic news story influence the participant's decision to share the news story?
4. Can the nature of comments on a fake Islamophobic news story influence people’s feelings towards the Muslim community?

Hypotheses

- H1.** After exposure to a fake Islamophobic news story, people in the non- Islamophobic comment condition will have a significantly less negative attitude towards Muslims, relative to the Islamophobic comments condition.
- H2.** After exposure to a fake Islamophobic news story people in the non- Islamophobic comment condition, are more likely to make critical comments regarding the fake news story themselves, than after exposure to the fake news story with user comments supportive of the content.
- H3.** After exposure to a fake Islamophobic news story people in the non- Islamophobic comment condition, are less likely to share the fake news, as compared to people in the Islamophobic comment condition.
- H4.** After exposure to a fake Islamophobic news story with non-Islamophobic comments, people are likely to have less negative feelings towards Muslims as compared to the people in the Islamophobic comments condition.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

252 participants were identified through convenience sampling. Out of these, 30 individuals were removed from the study on the basis of the exclusion criteria (Table 1). Finally, 222 participants (114 females and 108 males) aged 18-54 years were selected for the study.

Table 1 Exclusion Criteria

Criteria for exclusion

1. > 18years of age
2. Muslim
3. Has a rating of 1 or 2 on the measure assessing familiarity with Facebook
4. Has failed the manipulation check

The participants were assigned to two conditions: Islamophobic and Non- Islamophobic, through random assignment. The age, gender, educational qualifications and religion of the participants have been provided in Table 2. The two groups were matched on the basis of age, gender, educational qualifications and religion in order to reduce the influence of these variables.

Table 2 Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	Islamophobic Condition		Non-Islamophobic Condition		χ^2	p
	N	%	N	%		
Age						
18-20	7	3.2	9	4.1	.27	.872
20-30	84	37.8	82	36.9		
> 30	20	9	20	9		
Gender						
Female	54	24.3	60	27	.65	.42
Male	57	25.7	51	23		
Educational qualification						
Pursuing graduation/Graduate	88	39.6	88	39.6	.00	1.000
Pursuing post-graduation/Postgraduate	23	10.4	23	10.4		
Religious Beliefs						
Hinduism	91	41	97	43.7	1.25	.263
Others	20	9	14	6.3		

Design

Between group survey design was used for the study. The participants were randomly assigned to the two conditions: Islamophobic and non-Islamophobic conditions, after which the participants were assessed on the dependent variables of the study.

Materials

To maximize ecological validity, it was decided that the study should use Islamophobic fake news published by a leading media channel. A search of the Internet was undertaken for known sources of fake news on fact-checking websites such as Alt News and India Today-Fact Check. From the Alt News website, an Islamophobic fake news was selected. The story, run by Times Now in 2017 claimed that the Caliphate had circulated rate cards for conversions of Indian women ranging from 7 lakhs to 1 lakhs. It was also tweeted by Times Now with the hashtag #Caliphateconvertshindus. It was later identified as fake by various media houses including Alt News, Zee News and One India. The tweet was deleted by Times Now, thereafter.

In order to construct Islamophobic and Non-Islamophobic comments, the comments section of related news story were examined. A series of comments were chosen to present differing levels of Islamophobic or Non-Islamophobic comments. However, it was kept in mind that the comments created were not extremist and did not call for violence towards members of any community. This was because we wanted users to believe that it was their peers and not members of any radical group who placed these comments. Ten comments each were identified for the two conditions. A pilot test was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the comments. For the pilot study, five males and five females, who were avid Facebook users and similar in characteristics to the target population of the study were selected through purposive sampling. The respondents in the pilot study were first asked to rate the comments on a Likert scale from 1-5 (with 1 being not at all Islamophobic and 5 being extremely Islamophobic). The participants gave all the comments that were to be used in the Islamophobic condition, a score of 4 (Islamophobic) or 5 (extremely Islamophobic) and the comments to be used in the Non-Islamophobic condition, a score of 1 (Not at all Islamophobic). Secondly, the respondents were asked if the posts created for the respective conditions looked like a real Facebook post. All the students replied in the affirmative. Thus, the comments for the two conditions were deemed to be suitable for use in the study. A Facebook page was created by the researcher for the purpose of the study and the post containing the Islamophobic fake news with the comments were shared on the page. (Appendix I). The photographs of these commenters were blurred.

Measures

Islamophobia was assessed based on Islamophobic Attitude, Islamophobic behaviour, and Islamophobic feelings. The social desirability of the respondents was also assessed. The measures used have been described below and presented in Appendix II.

Islamophobic Attitude

Islamophobic attitude has been measured using the short version of the Scale for Islamoprejudice and Secular Critique of Islam by Imhoff and Recker (2012). The original scale consists of two subscales, one to assess secular critique of Islam and the second to measure Islamoprejudice. For the present study, only the Islamoprejudice subscale has been used because the items of secular critique of Islam sub-scale do not have a statistically significant correlation with the items of prejudice (Imhoff & Recker, 2012). The Islamoprejudice Scale consists of nine items that are designed such that all of them create categories which correspond to the eight criteria of Islamoprejudice which are derived from the definition of Islamophobia that was proposed by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (1997). The internal consistency reliability of the Islamophobic subscale was measured through Cronbach's alpha and was found to be 0.81. Imhoff and Recker (2012) tested the scale by exploring its factorial structure and convergent validity with

explicit prejudice as well as implicit associations between threat and Muslims. The scale has been used in several researches on Islamophobia (Yakubova, 2017; Bruneau et al., 2017).

Islamophobic Feelings

Islamophobic feelings were assessed using the Feelings Thermometer. Respondents were asked to rate their feelings for Muslims using a "temperature" gauge, on which 0 degrees indicated "extremely unfavourable" and 100 degrees, indicated "extremely favourable". Higher score on the feelings thermometer indicate positive feelings towards Muslims and a lower score on this scale indicates negative attitudes towards Muslims. The Feelings thermometer was also used to assess the respondents' feelings towards Sikhs and Hindus. This was done so as to not reveal the objective of the study. Additionally, feelings thermometer for the two other communities presents the respondents with an opportunity to compare their relative feelings towards the communities. The feelings thermometer has been used extensively to assess prejudice in a variety of studies (Verkuyten, 2007; Laflamme, 2018; Yitmen and Verkuyten, 2017).

Islamophobic Behaviour

The likelihood of making positive or negative comments on the fake news story was measured by questioning "If you would comment on this post, would your comment be: Mostly in agreement that Muslims are converting Hindu girls" or "Mostly in disagreement that Muslims are converting Hindu Girls". Commenting, "Mostly in agreement that Muslims are converting Hindu girls" indicates an Islamophobic attitude whereas commenting, "Mostly in disagreement that Muslims are converting Hindu Girls" is indicative of a non-Islamophobic attitude. The likelihood to share the post was measured with the item "It is possible that I would share this post on Facebook". Responses were scored on five-point Likert scales (1 = Highly unlikely and 5= Highly likely). Higher scores on this item indicate Islamophobic attitudes.

Social Desirability

A social desirability scale helps provide evidence that the social desirability bias of a respondent is not a major factor in influencing the results obtained. Social desirability in our study was measured using Reynold's Form C of the Marlowe Crowne Scale. The scale has 13 items and is a short form of the Marlowe Crowne Scale consisting of 33 items. The internal consistency reliability of the scale was measured through Cronbach's alpha and was found to be 0.76. This scale is a viable alternative to the Marlowe Crowne Scale as it is brief and easy to administer. Higher scores on this scale are indicative of a socially desirable pattern of responding.

Manipulation Check

To ensure effectiveness of the two conditions of the study, manipulation check was undertaken. Respondents were asked, "Are the comments on the post: Mostly agreeing that Muslims are converting Hindu girls" or "Mostly disagreeing that Muslims are converting Hindu girls". Only respondents who carefully read and correctly identified the comments as "Mostly agreeing that Muslims are converting Hindu girls" in the Islamophobic condition and "Mostly disagreeing that Muslims are converting Hindu girls" in the non-Islamophobic condition were analyzed when testing the hypotheses.

Procedure

All the respondents filled the consent form for the study. The participants were then randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. They were told that the purpose of the study

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was to examine the use of social media in everyday life. Demographic information (age, gender, educational qualifications and religious beliefs) were collected from all the participants. The participants were then asked to carefully go through the news story given in the Facebook post and read the comments on the post. Following this, they completed the self-report measures of the study. At the end of the study, the participants were thanked for their participation. It was made sure that all the participants were debriefed about the true nature of the study and made aware that the news story shared in the post was fake.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (Version 20). First, preliminary information regarding age, gender, educational qualifications and religion were compared to make sure that there was no significant difference across the participants on these dimensions. Following this, data were screened for normality, skewness and assumptions of parametric statistics using the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality. It was found that the data violated assumptions of normality. Hence, Mann-Whitney's U test was used for analysis instead of an Independent samples t test. However, both tests produced similar results. Hence, the t values and the corresponding p-values were reported. A chi-square test was performed to determine if the proportion of people who would comment that they are in agreement that Muslims are converting Hindu girls are more in the Islamophobic condition relative to the non-Islamophobic condition. Thirdly, we conducted Partial correlations which tested the correlation between all the dependent variables, whilst controlling for social desirability.

RESULTS

Keeping in mind that the assumptions of normality were violated for all the variables, Mann-Whitney's U test was used for analysis instead of an Independent samples t test.

However, both tests produced very similar results; accordingly, the t values and the corresponding p-values have been reported in this section.

Table 3 consists of an Independent samples t test for Islamophobic and Non-Islamophobic Conditions on Islamophobic Attitude, Feelings towards Muslims and Sharing Islamophobic post. The results show that the Islamophobic group reports significantly higher Islamophobic Attitude relative to non-Islamophobic group.

Table 3 Independent samples t test for Islamophobic and Non-Islamophobic Conditions on Islamophobic Attitude, Feelings towards Muslims and Sharing Islamophobic post.

Measure	Islamophobic Condition (N=111)		Non-Islamophobic Condition (N=111)		t(220)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Islamophobic Attitude	5.42	2.57	2	1.43	12.22	.000***
Feeling thermometer	42.78	24.12	69.77	17.29	9.58	.000***
Sharing Islamophobic Post	2.92	1.66	1.22	0.73	9.84	.000***

Note. *** $p < 0.001$

A chi-square test was performed to determine if the proportion of people who would comment that they are in agreement that Muslims are converting Hindu girls are more in the

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Islamophobic condition relative to the non-Islamophobic condition. As can be seen from Table 4, the proportion of people who are in agreement that Muslims are converting Hindu girls is significantly higher in the Islamophobic group as compared to the Non-Islamophobic group.

Table 4 Chi-square for Comments in the Islamophobic and Non-Islamophobic groups.

Comment	Islamophobic Condition (N=111)		Non-Islamophobic Condition (N=111)		χ^2	P
	N	%	N	%		
	In agreement that Muslims are converting Hindu girls	78	35.1	3		
In Disagreement that Muslims are converting Hindu girls	33	14.9	108	48.6		

Note. ***p<0.001

Partial correlations were assessed for the dependent variables, controlling for social desirability and these are shown in Table 5. With the exception of commenting on Facebook posts (dichotomous variable), all other variables were continuous variables, thus Pearson's correlation was assessed. For commenting on Facebook post, the point bi-serial correlations were calculated.

Table 5 Partial Correlations among the Variables whilst Controlling for Social Desirability

Variable	1	2	3	4
1 Islamophobic attitude	-			
2 Feelings towards Muslim	-0.70***	-		
3 Sharing Islamophobic post	0.76***	-0.59***	-	
4 Comment on the post	-0.64***	0.54***	-0.61***	-

Note. *** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

DISCUSSION

Islamophobia plagues the entire world in the twenty-first century and India is no exception. In India, this vile phenomenon has led to widespread bigotry and intolerance which has ultimately led to Muslims being the target of fake news, conspiracy theories and in extreme cases, even violence. For instance, according to a study conducted by IndiaSpend (2017), Muslims were the target of 52% of violence related to bovine issues (2010 to 2017) and made up 84% of 25 Indians that were killed in 60 incidents. Further, 52 percent of the attacks were spawned by rumours. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom too downgraded India to the lowest level in its 2020 report. India now shares the rank with countries like Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia.

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Recently, Islamophobic fake news in India spiked following the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. A number of Islamophobic fake news went viral including a video of Muslims wearing turbans and pretending to be Sikhs while protesting against the Citizenship Amendment act. Other prominent examples of Islamophobic fake news that went viral during this time include allegations against Shaheen Bagh protestors of taking payment to sit for the protest and accusing Muslims of raising slogans demanding India be turned into a Muslim nation. Islamophobic fake news has been implicated in fostering hatred and ultimately leading to communal riots in North-east Delhi (in February 2020) between Hindus and Muslims resulting in widespread bloodshed and destruction of property. More recently, fake news related to Muslims reached an all-time high after a congregation of Tablighi Jamat took place in Nizamuddin and many started displaying symptoms and tested positive for COVID-19. A series of fake news went viral in India, which accused Muslims of deliberately trying to spread the novel coronavirus. Fact checks later revealed that these videos were old, edited or simply taken out of context. However, by then the damage had already been done and Islamophobic hashtags such as #coronajihad had started trending on social media sites.

Social media plays a huge role in fuelling the spread of such fake news. The disturbing aspect of such rampant spread of fake news is that the entire community is targeted and blamed because of the actions of a careless few.

Nowadays, a wide array of online tools such as bots and paid accounts are being used to influence social media users (Gorwa, 2017). Social bots have a huge role to play in the spread of fake news. Bots can increase the speed with which fake news spreads by posing as real accounts by liking and sharing fake news to make it trend. They further manipulate the algorithms and tend to target influential users. People often fall prey to such misinformation spread by bots, often retweeting the fake news (Shao et al., 2017). Another tool used to influence social media users are troll-armies, which are a number of users who are paid to post comments and write articles to achieve an agenda, which is usually malicious. Further, these accounts appear very real, have a distinctive writing style and personalities. This makes these fake accounts very difficult to identify (Gorwa, 2017). A Facebook report, "Information Operations and Facebook," acknowledges the use of fake accounts and bots by both state and non-state actors to influence debates on the platform. Findings of our study indicate that writing and sharing negative comments about a particular community can influence the users who come across such comments.

Nowadays a significant number of people use social media to gain knowledge about the various happenings of the world and social media plays a key role in shaping their attitudes, behaviours and beliefs. Social conformity affects the behaviour of people in the online sphere as well. People often also use social media to form an opinion on something about which they have little knowledge. This process, through informational social conformity, has the power to shape and manipulate people's attitudes and opinions in any way (Reagle, 2015). Social conformity due to normative influence may also occur in an unconscious way such as following the rules, etiquettes and behaviours of the real world on social media (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). Additionally, according to the social identity model of de-individuation effects (Spear & Postmes, 1995), people on the Internet have more exposure to group norms because of depersonalization and hence people see themselves as member of groups rather than as individuals and this is even more likely when environmental cues are reduced and group identity is made salient (Postmes et al., 2000). This may result in the creation of echo chambers and amplification of the beliefs of a group.

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Another theory, which can help us comprehend the process involved in the amplification of group norms and creation of echo chambers, is the Dynamic Social Impact Theory given by Latané (1981). This theory predicts the four steps that will occur during the process of conformity in a social space: (a) huddling of attitudes in a social sphere; (b) a resulting decrease in diversity because of convergence of attitudes; (c) similarity in attitudes of members (d) and continuing diversity (lack of complete convergence) of attitudes. This model holds true even in online spaces. Latané and L'Herrou (1996) conducted a study in which 192 participants in an electronic communication study sent and received email messages from their neighbors. Analysis of the cases found that most people reorganized their views over time to be in the majority and hence were impacted by social influence.

However, some resisted and held onto their views even when faced with a united opposition. Hence, the findings were in accordance with the dynamic social impact theory, which posits that most people will change their opinions to match with the local majority but there will continue to be some diversity of opinion. Applying this theory to the results of our study, the presence of people with extreme and hateful ideologies on social media has a great impact on opinions and views of other social media users. These people form groups that are characterized by in-group homogeneity, which leads to group polarization resulting in the formation of echo chambers (Edwards, 2013). Having support from other like-minded people causes them to become more confident in voicing out hateful and extremist ideas (Schackmuth, 2018). Even more harmful is the intertwining of fake news and hateful comments. This is particularly prevalent on social media sites. When fake news, due to widespread re-sharing, is combined with hateful comments, there is an amplification of group norms due to deindividuation and it results in the formation of echo chambers where hateful comments become the norm.

When the belief in question is a stereotypical one, polarization of opinions can have very dangerous consequences. The worrying aspect is that this process of social conformity can be used by anti-social elements to polarize people against certain communities by making hateful comments. With the advancement of technology, the style of dissemination of propaganda has also evolved but its purpose remains the same i.e. creating conflict and hatred between communities. The spread of such propaganda is also especially rapid through the Internet and before such hateful comments can be identified and removed, the damage has often already been done, the news re-shared exponentially. Even if fake news is identified, it might do more harm than good to debunk it. This happens because of the familiarity bias.

People tend to remember the core statement of the news but they are likely to forget the context in which they heard the news. So while they remember the key headline of the news, they might not remember that it was recognized as fake news. This occurs even if the news has a low likelihood of being true (Pennycook et al., 2018). Hence, even though reading news online has its advantages such as easy availability, virtually no cost and faster availability of news, it also makes the spread of misinformation and hateful ideologies much easier.

The results of our study revealed that reading polarizing and Islamophobic comments on articles shared on social media influence people's attitudes towards Muslims. The people exposed to Islamophobic and non-Islamophobic condition differed significantly with respect to their attitudes, behaviours and feelings towards the Muslim community despite the fact that they did not know or interact with any of the commenters on the post. This indicates

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that social conformity plays a role in people's behaviour in not just real life but also on social media. This finding has been confirmed in several studies and other studies have in addition reported that such changes in attitudes are unconscious and persist even in the offline sphere (Colliander, 2019; Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019; Hsuet et al., 2015). This is a very significant finding because it shows the potential that social media has to harbor a change not only in people's attitudes but also their behaviours.

The findings of our study revealed that fake and divisive news can do much harm in society. While it may seem worrisome that someone can affect our opinions without even directly interacting with us, this finding can also be used to reduce bigotry and intolerance and foster positive change in individuals by promoting comments that criticize posts having discriminatory content and promote peace and equality. It also points out the responsibility that users of social media have in ensuring that they be responsible while sharing their views on such sensitive topics and not be passive recipients or consumers of the information they see online. Hence, it's important that perpetrators of fake news and hateful posts on social media be identified so as to stop online Islamophobia from becoming a norm. Hateful speeches or posts should also be identified and removed at the earliest before phenomenon such as group-think can occur through social conformity processes.

Implications

Previous researches have found that social conformity can influence prejudice expression against many communities through normative influences. Our study is unique in replicating the findings for online social platform like Facebook. Our study demonstrates the role that social conformity plays in online spaces and how that can influence the attitude and feelings of people who come across such prejudicial comments. Social conformity affects the behaviour of people in online spaces by influencing the comments that they make and the posts that they share. An interesting observation is that in the present study, people chose to conform to the comments they read in their respective conditions in spite of the anonymity of the people posting the comments and the anonymity of the respondents themselves. It is important to understand that divisive and prejudiced comments in online spaces can have real life implications; they can influence people to hold negative attitudes and feelings towards certain communities thereby sanctioning and normalizing violence against them. Social media users should be encouraged to debunk fake news online and check the veracity of news they see online before sharing it so that they can try to limit its spread. They should also be encouraged to report hateful and xenophobic comments online and try to reduce bigotry and intolerance by promoting comments that oppose discriminatory news stories, comments and opinions. Thus, certain extremist groups to spread hatred in society can use social media but at the same time social media users have the potential to limit the spread of fake and divisive news. The study also implicates the responsibility that social media users have in ensuring that they are not passive recipients of the information they see online but instead actively process it. Social media platforms too have a responsibility to recognize and block users who engage in posting divisive and hateful comments. The government should also formulate and strictly implement policies, which can help identify and punish cyber harassment and bullying so as to ensure safe and peaceful online spaces.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study has certain limitations, which may be addressed in follow-up studies. Firstly, a sample of 222 participants was selected through convenience sampling. Subsequent studies should use a larger sample and a more representative sampling technique so as to be able to generalize the findings more accurately.

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One of the key limitations of our study was the absence of a control group, the score of which could be used to compare the score of the Islamophobic and non-Islamophobic comment condition groups. Future researches should employ a control group to compare the scores of the two groups with it. Due to paucity of time, we could not employ a pre-test to check for prior attitudes of people towards Muslims. Future researchers can use a pre-test to match the two groups so that the respondents are balanced in their attitudes and feelings towards the community. They can also test whether the changes in attitudes, behaviours and feelings regarding the community in question are stable and for how long these effects last. In addition, it is important to investigate how exposure to Islamophobic comments and fake news can impact people's behavior in real world.

Another limitation, which reduces the ecological validity of the study, is the presence of only non-Islamophobic comments in one condition and only Islamophobic comments in the other because social media typically includes mixed comments. Future researchers can also study the effect of a strong dissenting minority on the attitude, behaviour and feelings of the respondents.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to understand the effect of nature of comments (Islamophobic vs non-Islamophobic) on a fake Islamophobic news story on the participant's attitudes, feelings and behaviour towards Muslims. The results of the study demonstrated that the group exposed to the Islamophobic comment condition had significantly more negative attitudes and feelings towards Muslims as compared to the group exposed to non-Islamophobic comment condition. The participants of the group exposed to the Islamophobic comment condition were significantly more likely to share the fake news story and post Islamophobic comments on it as compared to the participants of the non-Islamophobic comment condition. This demonstrates the important role that social conformity plays in prejudice expression in online spaces.

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Conflict of Interest

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