THE RHETORIC OF DISINFORMATION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF IMRAN KHAN'S PERSUASIVE STRATEGIES AGAINST SOCIAL MEDIA FAKE NEWS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Social media significantly impacts all aspects of life, including social, political, religious, and educational spheres. It facilitates public discourse and shapes public opinion, dramatically influencing the political landscape. The rise of social media has enabled politicians to connect directly with the public. The aim of this study is to explore political disinformation on social media and how Pakistani politicians, specifically Imran Khan, address it. This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on a speech by Imran Khan regarding "Social Media and Fake News," identifying the persuasive strategies he uses to convince the audience about the negative impacts and dangers of fake news. The study utilizes Aristotle's modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—as the theoretical lens to deconstruct the rhetorical strategies employed. Furthermore, the study examines the potential contribution of his persuasive strategies to public understanding of disinformation and its impacts on democracy and the civil-military power balance. The findings provide insight into the crucial role of political rhetoric in the digital age and the necessity of evaluating online information.
Keywords: *Social media, political disinformation, Critical Discourse Analysis, rhetoric, civil-military relations.*

1. Introduction

Social media serves as a vital platform for connection, information sharing, and receiving political, cultural, and religious news. It is now a key channel for politicians to convey campaign messages and mobilize support during elections. Political speeches disseminated via social media profoundly **shape public opinion** and drive public discourse (Happer & Philo, 2013).

In Pakistan, political discussion has become a dominant topic for millions of social media users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Politicians are extensively adopting social media, bypassing traditional media to interact directly with their audience (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). However, the use of political messaging on social media has simultaneously amplified concerns about **misinformation and fake news**.

The propagation of fake news and disinformation poses a significant threat to **national stability, unity, and democracy** by raising fear and distrust, particularly between **civilian and military powers** (Allcott & Gentile, 2019). This type of disinformation erodes public trust in key institutions, potentially leading to social conflict and negative societal consequences (Martens et al., 2018). Given this risk, politicians have a responsibility to raise awareness and help the public distinguish between authentic and false information.

The aim of this study is to explore the prevalence of social media political disinformation and analyze how it is addressed by Pakistani politicians, focusing specifically on **Imran Khan**. The research employs **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** on a selected speech by Imran Khan titled **"Social Media and Fake News"** to identify the persuasive strategies he

employs. By applying **Aristotle's modes of persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos**, the study seeks to understand how these strategies are constructed and utilized to convince the audience about the dangers of disinformation. Ultimately, this research examines the contributions of Khan's rhetorical strategies to the public discourse on disinformation and its implications for democracy and the civil-military balance of power.

1.1 Research Objectives

The present study intends to:

1. **Explore** the persuasive strategies used by Imran Khan in his discourse on disinformation and fake news on social media.
2. **Investigate** the potential influence of his persuasive strategies on public opinion regarding fake news and disinformation in Pakistan.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What rhetorical strategies (ethos, pathos, logos) are used by Imran Khan when addressing disinformation and fake news on social media?
2. How is public opinion potentially influenced by his rhetoric concerning fake news and disinformation in Pakistan?

1.3 Rationale and Contribution of the Study

This study is crucial due to the rapid propagation of fake news and disinformation on social media in Pakistan, which poses growing threats to **democracy, national security, and stability** (Allcott & Gentile, 2019). It contributes to public awareness by highlighting the reality of fake news and disinformation (Shu et al., 2017). By analyzing how a prominent politician shapes public opinion through social media, the study enhances our understanding of the complex dynamics between **social media, politics, and disinformation** in Pakistan.

Contribution to the Field:

This research makes a significant contribution by employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) alongside the Aristotelian framework on a politician's speech from the Global South. It provides a unique lens for understanding how persuasive rhetoric is operationalized to address the modern phenomenon of digital disinformation in a specific political context like Pakistan. Furthermore, the findings offer practical insights for media literacy initiatives and policymakers seeking to mitigate the harmful impacts of fake news on democracy and civil-military relations.

1.4 Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations:

This study is delimited to the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of only one speech by Imran Khan that specifically addresses social media disinformation and its effects. It does not analyze non-political areas or their impacts on social media.

Limitations:

The study is limited by its reliance on textual data from a single context, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The analysis is further constrained by the inherent subjectivity in the interpretation of persuasive strategies. Additionally, while highly effective, the exclusive use of Aristotle's framework (Ethos, Pathos, Logos) may overlook newer or culturally specific rhetorical strategies not captured by the classical model.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
2.1 Theoretical Framework: Rhetoric and Persuasion

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in **classical rhetoric and persuasion**, specifically utilizing **Aristotle's three modes of persuasion:** Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. This framework remains a dominant and effective tool for analyzing political communication, as it deconstructs how a speaker attempts to influence an audience.

1. **Ethos (Credibility):** Refers to the speaker's **character, credibility, and trustworthiness** (Dlugan, 2010).
2. **Pathos (Emotion):** Refers to the **emotional appeal** used to evoke feelings such as anger, hope, or fear (Ting, 2018).
3. **Logos (Logic):** Refers to the use of **logic, reason, evidence, statistics, and arguments** (Aceh, 2019).

While modern critics point to the limitations of Aristotle's model—arguing it may not fully capture the complexity of digital communication or account for non-verbal cues—its focus on the speaker's attempt to establish trust (Ethos), appeal to feeling (Pathos), and employ reason (Logos) makes it an invaluable lens for analyzing the foundational structure of persuasive political discourse on critical issues like disinformation.

2.2 Literature Review

The rapid growth of social media has fundamentally changed communication, enabling politicians to extensively communicate their messages (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Millions of people in Pakistan use social media to share diverse viewpoints on the political scenario (Ahmad, Alvi, & Ittefaq, 2019). However, the unchecked spread of disinformation and fake news on these platforms has raised significant concerns about the integrity of **democratic processes** (Allcott & Gentile, 2019).

Saaida, M. (2023) explored **"The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Discourse and Propaganda,"** finding that social media is a new source of communication for politicians, but that political parties often misuse it to spread misinformation, making it difficult for consumers to discern truth from falsehood. Fortson, A. (2021) confirmed that social media influences opinions through both **logical reasoning and emotional appeal**, stressing that **fact-checking** is necessary to combat disinformation.

Iyengar and Westwood (2015) demonstrated the persuasive power of social media, noting that persuasive strategies can both influence attitudes and reinforce **existing biases and political polarization**. They emphasized that **effective fact-checking initiatives** can mitigate misinformation. Brennen et al. (2022) identified key sources of misinformation (e.g., Gab and YouTube) and concluded that **fact-checking features** can raise public awareness and help users distinguish between fact and fake news.

The literature collectively justifies this study, as it addresses a pervasive issue: the use of political rhetoric on social media to combat or contribute to disinformation, which is crucial for **national security** and **democratic stability**.

3. Research Design and Methodology
3.1 Research Design: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This study employs **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**, which is a qualitative, interpretive method focusing on the relationship between language, power, and ideology. CDA is suitable for analyzing non-numerical textual data, such as a speech transcript, to reveal how social power is exercised and maintained through discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

Unlike generalized qualitative studies that might involve interviews, CDA is specifically used here to deconstruct the **rhetorical strategies and persuasive techniques** embedded in the speech, exposing the underlying ideology regarding disinformation.

The research process involves:

1. **Selection of Text:** A single speech by Imran Khan on "Social Media and Fake News."
2. **Contextual Analysis:** Understanding the political environment (disinformation, civil-military relations) at the time of the speech (September 24, 2021).
3. **Textual Analysis:** Applying Aristotle's framework (Ethos, Pathos, Logos) to identify specific phrases, arguments, and appeals within the text.
4. **Interpretation:** Relating the findings back to the broader socio-political context of disinformation, democracy, and power balance in Pakistan.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Since this study involves the analysis of a publicly delivered and recorded political speech, formal consent from the speaker (Imran Khan) is not required. However, the study adheres to the following ethical principles:

- **Objectivity:** The analysis is conducted as objectively as possible, clearly distinguishing between the speech's content and the researcher's interpretation.
- **Transparency:** The source and context of the speech are explicitly stated, allowing for verification.
- **Non-Maleficence:** The analysis is purely academic and does not intend to harm the reputation of the speaker but rather to understand the mechanics of political communication.

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4. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Findings

The selected speech was delivered by **Imran Khan** during the inauguration ceremony of the Digital Media Development Program (September 24, 2021). The analysis below identifies and discusses specific examples of the persuasive strategies (Ethos, Pathos, Logos) employed, followed by a summary of the key findings.

CDA Analysis

Rhetorical Mode	Statement/Quote (Example)	Analysis and Discussion
Ethos (Credibility)	"My government does not fear the media and judiciary." (Line 35)	**Establishes Trust/Transparency:** Projects confidence and honesty, positioning Khan's government as accountable and respecting democratic values (McCroskey, 2006).
Ethos	"Some people pass their exams because they are talented, but students who keep working hard will get	**Promotes Virtue:** Appeals to an ethical value system of hard work and perseverance over innate

Rhetorical Mode	Statement/Quote (Example)	Analysis and Discussion
	ahead of them later." (Line 29)	talent, cultivating a respected moral image.
Pathos (Emotion)	"[Fake news] is degrading for the country." (Line 45)	**Invokes National Pride/Fear:** Connects misinformation to a threat against national integrity and stability, appealing to the audience's patriotism (Bitzer, 1968).
Pathos	"[But now] we are heading towards making Pakistan like Riyasat-e-Madina [a welfare state]" (Line 115)	**Inspires Hope:** Connects political objectives to a widely revered concept of a just society, creating a sense of shared vision and emotional inspiration.
Logos (Logic)	"You can take a look at the records, and I guarantee you that 70% of the programs are against us." (Line 75)	**Uses Statistics/Evidence:** Employs a specific, although potentially unverifiable, statistic (70%) to frame his claim about media bias as a logical, data-driven fact (Toulmin, 2003).
Logos	"What could be bigger slander than this? That the sitting prime minister had picked AJK's prime minister through numerology." (Line 83)	**Rhetorical Question/Reason:** Challenges the accusation's plausibility, encouraging the audience to use reason to dismiss the claim as illogical or absurd.

Findings

The analysis reveals that Khan effectively integrates Aristotle's modes of persuasion to address social media disinformation:

1. **Ethos (Credibility and Trustworthiness):** Khan builds trust by articulating values of **perseverance** (hard work) and demonstrating **transparency and accountability** (not fearing media/judiciary). This projection of virtue is crucial for validating his message against the perceived moral failing of fake news.
2. **Pathos (Emotional Appeal):** He uses pathos to invoke a collective sense of **national pride and responsibility** by characterizing fake news as "degrading for the country." His appeal to core values like **honesty** and his vision of a **just future** (Riyasat-e-Madina) creates a strong emotional connection, urging the audience to reject misinformation.

3. **Logos (Logical Argumentation):** Khan employs logos through **rational predictions** (fake news will eventually be discredited) and the use of **statistical claims** (70% media bias), positioning his arguments as evidence-based and logical. Rhetorical questions are used to prompt critical thought about his opponents' claims.

The findings highlight the severe impact of disinformation in Pakistan:

- Disinformation threatens **national unity, stability, and democracy**, potentially escalating fear and distrust between civilian and military powers.
- The spread of fake news erodes **public trust** in key institutions, leading to social conflict and political polarization.

Recommendations based on CDA:

To mitigate the spread and impact of fake news, the analysis supports the need for:

- **Public Awareness:** Increasing awareness among the people about misinformation.
- **Fact-Checking:** Implementing effective fact-checking initiatives and providing warnings about false information.
- **Promoting Ethics:** Upholding values of honesty and truthfulness in public discourse.

Khan's strategic use of rhetoric underscores the importance of evaluating information critically in the age of social media.

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5. Conclusion

The **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** of Imran Khan's speech demonstrates how politicians can use persuasive strategies—**ethos, pathos, and logos**—to influence public opinion regarding social media disinformation. By appealing to his credibility, national emotions, and logical reasoning, Khan effectively frames fake news as a serious threat to national integrity, democracy, and public trust. His rhetoric, which emphasizes ethics, values, and patriotic duty, creates a powerful emotional connection, urging his audience to prioritize honesty and reject misinformation.

This study underscores the critical role of social media disinformation in Pakistan's political environment, where it has the potential to destabilize democratic institutions and affect the **civil-military power balance**. Khan's rhetorical approach highlights the need for truth and transparency, aligning himself with the audience's aspirations for trustworthy leadership.

Ultimately, this examination emphasizes the **urgent need for careful and critical evaluation of social media content** by the public. It also provides a foundational analysis for future studies on the use of political rhetoric in the digital age, particularly in navigating the complex relationship between media, power,

and public truth.

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