

Religious Misinformation on Facebook During the July–August 2024 Movement in Bangladesh: A Content Analysis of Communal Framing and Identity Manipulation

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Abstract

This paper examines how religious misinformation was disseminated on Facebook and affected it in the politically charged July-August 2024 Movement in Bangladesh. The study examines the use of communal framing, mislabeling of religious identity, and emotional visual materials as strategic means of sparking interreligious conflict on Facebook using a mixed-methods content analysis of 35 confirmed posts. Results indicate that misinformation posts that used communal narratives were used by 63 percent of the posts, and a distortion of religious identities was present in 57 percent of the posts, especially against the Hindu minority. Misinformation virality was also exacerbated by visual manipulation and ambiguity of, particularly when the political protests were at their peak. This paper uses framing theory, social identity theory, and cognitive bias theories to contextualize the emotive and manipulative reactions to misinformation. It ends by concluding that the digital communalism facilitated by Facebook algorithmic structure and socio-political situation in Bangladesh makes a fruitful environment. The study provides policy, educational, and platform-based suggestions to reduce the collective detriments of religious misinformation and demands further research on the region and longitudinally to learn more about the changing trends in the digital misinformation ecosystem in South Asia.

Keywords: Religious misinformation, Communal framing, Identity manipulation, Facebook, Bangladesh, July August Movement, Fact-checking social media content analysis

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Background of the July Uprising

This study uses the term “July Uprising” to refer to the mass protests and subsequent nationwide political unrest that occurred in Bangladesh during July and August 2024. The movement emerged from growing public dissatisfaction with the quota system in government employment and later evolved into a broader political uprising. The events generated widespread public mobilization, political polarization, and intense online engagement.

During this period, social media platforms became major sources of information and communication for citizens seeking updates about rapidly unfolding events. Facebook occupies a dominant position within Bangladesh's digital communication environment. According to DataReportal (2024), Facebook remains one of the most widely used social media platforms in the country. While social media facilitates rapid information sharing, it also creates opportunities for the dissemination of misinformation, particularly during periods of political uncertainty and social crisis (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). During the July Uprising, numerous misleading claims, manipulated images, and recycled videos circulated online, many of which incorporated religious narratives or communal framing. Such misinformation is especially concerning in Bangladesh, where false religious claims disseminated through social media have previously contributed to communal tensions and violence against minority communities (Al-Zaman, 2021a). Therefore, examining religious misinformation during the July Uprising is important for understanding its potential implications for social cohesion and interfaith relations.

1.2 Rationale and Research Gap

Misinformation refers to false or misleading information that is shared regardless of whether there is an intention to deceive (Treen et al., 2020). Religious misinformation specifically involves misleading or false claims related to religious beliefs, identities, practices, symbols, or communities. Research suggests that religious misinformation often generates stronger emotional responses than other forms of misinformation because it is closely connected to individuals' identities and value systems (Al-Zaman, 2021a).

The spread of religious misinformation has attracted growing scholarly attention worldwide, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, when misleading religious narratives influenced public attitudes toward health measures and vaccination (Druckman et al., 2021; Levin, 2020). In Bangladesh, studies have shown that social media platforms can facilitate the circulation of religious misinformation that may intensify communal tensions and reinforce social divisions (Al-Zaman, 2021a; Al-Zaman, 2021b).

Despite the growing literature on misinformation in Bangladesh, limited research has specifically examined how religious misinformation was framed and disseminated on Facebook during the July Uprising of 2024. Most existing studies focus on communal violence, political communication, or health-related misinformation rather than the intersection of religious misinformation and political unrest. This represents a significant research gap because the July Uprising occurred within a sensitive socio-political environment where religious identity remained a powerful social force. Understanding how religious

misinformation was constructed and circulated during this period is therefore necessary to assess its broader implications for communal relations and democratic discourse.

1.3 Research Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this study is to examine the nature, framing, and dissemination of religious misinformation on Facebook during the July Uprising in Bangladesh.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Q1: How was religious misinformation framed and disseminated on Facebook during the July Uprising?

Q2: What were the most common forms of religious misrepresentation?

Q3: What role did visual content and identity mislabeling play in the spread of misinformation?

Q4: What implications did such misinformation have for communal relations in Bangladesh?

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study focuses exclusively on Facebook because it is the most widely used social media platform in Bangladesh and a major site for the circulation of both information and misinformation (DataReportal, 2024). The analysis is limited to fact-checked cases of religious misinformation published between 1 July and 31 August 2024, corresponding to the most active phase of the July Uprising.

The study addresses an important gap in the literature by examining religious misinformation within the specific socio-political and socio-religious context of the July Uprising. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies only on misinformation cases that were verified by fact-checking organizations. Second, the analysis is limited to Facebook and does not include other platforms such as YouTube, X, or WhatsApp. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all forms of online misinformation in Bangladesh.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Religious Misinformation and Communal Conflict

The relationship between religious misinformation and communal conflict can be understood through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines insights from media studies, social psychology, and political sociology. Existing scholarship suggests that misinformation becomes influential not only because it contains false information but also because it shapes how people interpret

events, perceive social groups, and respond to perceived threats (Entman, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of Bangladesh, where religious identity remains an important component of social and political life, these theoretical perspectives provide a useful framework for examining how misinformation contributes to communal tensions during periods of political unrest.

One of the most relevant perspectives for understanding religious misinformation is Framing Theory. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in communication, thereby promoting particular interpretations of events. Misinformation often relies on framing strategies that emphasize conflict, victimhood, and threat perceptions. In the context of communal relations, incidents that are unrelated to religion may be deliberately reframed as attacks on specific religious communities. Such framing influences public understanding by encouraging audiences to interpret events through communal lenses rather than objective evidence (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Therefore, the impact of misinformation depends not only on the accuracy of information but also on how narratives are constructed and presented.

However, framing alone cannot explain why particular misinformation narratives resonate strongly with audiences. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides additional insight by arguing that individuals derive a significant part of their identity from membership in social groups. People tend to favour their own groups while viewing other groups as outsiders, particularly during periods of uncertainty or perceived threat. Religious misinformation frequently exploits these identity boundaries by portraying one community as a victim and another as an aggressor. Consequently, misinformation gains credibility because it reinforces existing group loyalties and collective anxieties rather than because it is factually accurate (Al-Zaman, 2021a).

The effectiveness of such narratives is further explained by cognitive approaches to misinformation. Research on confirmation bias and motivated reasoning demonstrates that individuals are more likely to accept information that aligns with their existing beliefs and identities while rejecting contradictory evidence (Kahan, 2017). Religious misinformation often incorporates emotionally charged language, symbolic imagery, and narratives of persecution that encourage intuitive rather than analytical processing. As a result, emotionally resonant misinformation can spread rapidly even when credible evidence disproves the claims (Druckman et al., 2021). These cognitive mechanisms help explain why misinformation related to religion is often particularly resistant to correction.

The interaction between framing, social identity, and cognitive biases becomes especially significant in societies characterized by communal politics. Brass (2003) argues that communalism in South Asia involves the politicization of religious identities and the construction of antagonistic relationships between communities. Within such environments, misinformation can reinforce “us versus them” narratives and intensify social polarization. Previous studies have shown that misinformation targeting religious minorities often relies on communal framing and identity manipulation to generate fear, hostility, and distrust among audiences (Al-Zaman, 2021b; Mahfuzul et al., 2020).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that religious misinformation should not be viewed merely as a problem of false information. Rather, it is a complex social phenomenon that derives its influence from the interaction between media framing, group identities, cognitive biases, and broader communal dynamics. This integrated framework is particularly relevant for examining the July Uprising of 2024, during which religious misinformation on Facebook frequently employed communal framing, visual manipulation, and identity mislabeling to shape public perceptions and potentially exacerbate intergroup tensions.

2.2 Past Research on Misinformation on Social Media in South Asia

The high development of social media in South Asia has revolutionized communication systems yet has also led to the spread of fake news, especially the times of political instability and religious tension. The spread of misinformation via such platforms as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter has been examined in many works, and the interaction of digital-information processes and socio-political relations in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan is particularly discussed. The section provides a synthesis of the main findings in the recent research on the topic of social media misinformation in South Asia, with particular emphasis on their patterns, drivers, impacts, and attempts to combat false information.

2.2.1 Patterns and Platforms of misinformation

South Asia, having a swelling user base of internet, has a special challenge with the fight against misinformation. Research indicates that Facebook is the most popular source of the misinformation in Bangladesh and India, although WhatsApp encrypted messages are also critical and are frequently used in rural and less digitally literate demographics in political crises (Khan et al., 2021; Mahfuzul et al., 2020). Mahfuzul et al. (2020) cite research that reveals Facebook as the most popular source of this misinformation, often with manipulated images and fake accounts. On the same note, in India, falsehoods

about religious minority groups tend to go viral via WhatsApp groups, fueling communal violence (Narayanan & Rajendran, 2020).

2.2.2 Motives of Misinformation Spread

Misinformation is propagated in South Asia by several socio-political and technological reasons. Low digital literacy and the digital divide indicate a significant number of users cannot carefully evaluate sources of information (Rahman and Islam, 2022). The issues are further aggravated with the help of political polarization and identity politics, which add to the vulnerability of the users to the information that supports the narratives of their community (Chakraborty and Dasgupta, 2021). The general mistrust of mainstream media and governmental sources compels individuals to turn to peer-shared content, most of which does not even undergo verification (Siddiqui, 2023). According to Al-Zaman (2021a), emotional and identity-related stimuli increase the spread of misinformation, particularly when the information depicts the in-group as the victim of the out-group aggression.

2.2.3 Social Cohesion and Violence effects

Survey points to the role of falsehood in widening intercommunal conflicts and violence in South Asia. In Bangladesh, Al-Zaman (2021b) concluded that the spread of misinformation against Hindu minorities in cases of social unrest increased the level of anger and mistrust in the population, which led to cases of harassment and violence. On the same note, Chakraborty and Dasgupta (2021) report several instances in India where religious group news fabrication resulted in mob police and polarization. Misinformation can also be the trigger by causing rumors of attacks or conspiracy, which will increase fear and retaliation (Narayanan and Rajendran, 2020).

2.2.4 Fact-Checking efforts and Countermeasures

Fact-checking organizations have been working harder to disprove the viral misinformation in response to the increasing threat, including Fact-Watch and RumorScanner in Bangladesh and Alt News and Boom Live in India (RumorScanner, 2024). Such bodies employ both manual and automated verification processes and partner with the social media to mark fake content. In spite of such attempts, the magnitude of false information and the rate of its distribution is a big challenge. Research indicates that the effects of misinformation can be reduced by enhancing digital literacy and spreading media ethics and implementing more stringent platform governance (Rahman and Islam, 2022; Siddiqui, 2023).

2.2.5 Research Gaps and Relevance to the Study

The existing literature has made significant contributions to understanding the spread, drivers, and consequences of misinformation in South Asia. Previous studies have demonstrated how social media platforms facilitate the circulation of false information, particularly during periods of political instability, communal tension, and public health crises (Al-Zaman, 2021a; Druckman et al., 2021; Mahfuzul et al., 2020). Research has also highlighted the role of religious narratives in intensifying social polarization and shaping public perceptions of minority communities across the region (Narayanan & Rajendran, 2020; Chakraborty & Dasgupta, 2021).

Despite these contributions, several important gaps remain in the literature. First, most studies focus on misinformation in the context of communal violence, elections, or the COVID-19 pandemic, while limited attention has been given to misinformation during large-scale political uprisings. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how religious misinformation operates within politically volatile environments where social tensions, uncertainty, and information disorder are particularly pronounced. Second, existing research often examines misinformation as a broad phenomenon without specifically analyzing how religious misinformation is framed, visualized, and disseminated through social media platforms. The roles of visual manipulation, communal framing, and identity mislabeling remain underexplored, particularly in the Bangladeshi context.

A further limitation of previous scholarship is its limited focus on the July Uprising of 2024. Although journalists, fact-checking organizations, and civil society actors documented numerous cases of misleading religious content during the uprising, scholarly research examining these incidents remains scarce. As a result, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the dominant patterns, framing strategies, and communal narratives embedded in religious misinformation circulated during this critical period.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a content analysis of fact-checked Facebook posts related to religious misinformation during the July Uprising in Bangladesh. By focusing on communal framing, visual manipulation, and identity mislabeling, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how misinformation exploits religious identities in times of political unrest. Furthermore, the study extends existing scholarship by linking misinformation research with broader debates on communal relations, social cohesion, and digital communication in Bangladesh.

2.3 Religious Identity and Communal Framing Concepts

Religious identity and communal framing are important concepts for understanding how misinformation exploits existing social divisions and influences public perceptions. Religious identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular religious community, which often shapes attitudes, behaviors, and social interactions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In South Asian societies, where religious diversity intersects with political, cultural, and historical dynamics, identity-based narratives can become powerful tools for mobilization and polarization (Al-Zaman, 2021). Communal framing occurs when events, conflicts, or social issues are presented through the lens of religious group identities, often emphasizing differences between communities and reinforcing “us versus them” perceptions (Entman, 1993). Such framing can intensify communal tensions by attributing blame, victimhood, or responsibility to specific religious groups. During periods of political instability or social unrest, misinformation frequently employs communal framing to provoke emotional reactions, strengthen group-based biases, and amplify intergroup hostility (Barrett, 2014; Nagar & Ashaye, 2022). Consequently, religious identity and communal framing play a central role in the production, dissemination, and impact of religious misinformation, particularly in contexts characterized by social polarization and communal sensitivities.

2.3.1 Religious Identity: Social Dynamics and the Definition

Religious identity is the self-awareness and the identification of a person or a group of people according to religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices (Jenkins, 2008). It can become one of the fundamental signs of social belonging, community, and cultural heritage, particularly in heterogeneous societies such as Bangladesh where Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity can be found (Alam, 2019). The identities of religion are socially contingent and historical, and depend on historical processes, political and social dynamics (Nagel, 1994). In most instances, religious identity comes to the forefront of group distinctions, particularly, where it overlaps with ethnic, linguistic or regional identity (Brubaker, 2004). This salience may provide in-group solidarity and also out-group exclusion which may sometimes grow to communalism which is a form of sectarianism characterized by aggression towards other religious communities (Chakrabarty, 2010).

2.3.2 Communalism and Polarization of religion

Communalism In South Asia, communalism is a politically charged system in which religious identities are brought into play to form new social divisions or even intensify an existing division, and in most instances, communalism is

expressed through violence and discrimination (Jaffrelot, 2007). It succeeds by depicting religious communities as homogenous, hostile strangers, which creates and propagates stereotypes and distrust (Engineer, 1995). The use of communal frames by misinformation often serves to overstate or invent conflicts among religious groups. These frames determine the way in which the audiences make sense of what they observe through emphasizing religious differences, victimization scripts, or even threats of an out-group (Iyengar, 1991). These framing patterns are more likely to reduce complicated social realities into binary oppositions (us vs. them), enhancing emotional appeal and recruiting collective identities (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

2.3.3 Theory of Media Framing and Communal Framing

The media framing theory is built on the speculation that the way media houses bring forth information that they focus on, ignore or analyze, affects the perception and attitude of their audience (Entman, 1993). Frames act as ordering principles that influence thought and action by rendering certain things salient (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). A subdivision of media framing is called communal framing, which represents the process of viewing events or problems in which the religious conflict or tension is in the center (Singh and Mathur, 2020). As an example, a local crime can be presented as a subset of a wider Hindu-Muslim conflict, even though the real root causes are socio-economic or political (Shah, 2017). Framing Commonly used mixed terms in misinformation situations convey emotionally charged words, stereotypical imagery, and the use of selective facts to overstate what they view as threats, and the need to be hostile toward a specific group of people (Al-Zaman, 2021b). The framing may solidify biases and justify excluding attitudes or violence (Mishra and Singh, 2018).

2.3.4 Digital Misinformation and Religious Identity and Communal Framing

Religious identity and communal framing have a dynamic interaction on social media. Religious identity misinformation tends to engage existing biases and fears, and therefore users are more inclined to use and spread content that supports their in-group accounts (Pennycook and Rand, 2019). The visual manipulation, including the mislabeling of religious symbols or distorting the religious affiliations of people, adds to the intensity of communal framing because the information distortion becomes more convincing and emotional (RumorScanner, 2024). Bangladesh research emphasizes misinformation based on religious minorities, in particular, the use of communal framing to portray these minorities as a threat or victim, which contributes to the further polarization of society (Al-Zaman, 2021b; Mahfuzul et al., 2020). This

manipulation usually clouds the true and complicated realities of intercommunal relations but rather propagates simple and polarizing stories.

2.3.5 Implications of the study on Misinformation Research

The importance of religious identity and communal framing to the understanding of the misinformation in South Asian socio-political environment roots in the fact that these are fundamental components of the socio-political environment. It assists in describing why religious misinformation is not only common but also in a special way powerful in causing emotional and collective response, which may have real-life effects. This paper uses these two conceptual frameworks to examine the misinformation in the JulyAugust Movement in Bangladesh where religious identity mislabeling and communal framing was deployed to fuel tensions, with its focus being on the content posted through Facebooks and disproved by fact-checkers.

2.4 Synthesis of Literature and Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that misinformation has become a significant challenge in contemporary digital communication, particularly in societies characterized by political polarization and strong group identities. Previous studies have shown that social media platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of misinformation by exploiting cognitive biases, emotional responses, and existing social divisions (Treen et al., 2020; Kahan, 2017). Theoretical perspectives such as Framing Theory and Social Identity Theory further suggest that misinformation can shape public perceptions by emphasizing particular narratives and reinforcing group-based identities (Entman, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within the South Asian context, these dynamics are often intertwined with communalism, where religious identities become important markers of social and political conflict (Brass, 2003).

Existing empirical research has documented the role of misinformation in fueling communal tensions, political polarization, and violence across Bangladesh, India, and other South Asian countries (Al-Zaman, 2021a; Chakraborty & Dasgupta, 2021; Narayanan & Rajendran, 2020). Studies have highlighted how false claims, manipulated images, and misleading narratives targeting religious communities can intensify distrust and hostility among social groups. Moreover, fact-checking initiatives and digital literacy interventions have been identified as important mechanisms for countering misinformation and reducing its harmful effects (Rahman & Islam, 2022; Siddiqui, 2023).

However, despite the growing body of literature on misinformation, several important gaps remain. Most existing studies focus on misinformation

during communal conflicts, elections, or public health emergencies, while relatively little attention has been given to the role of religious misinformation during major political uprisings. Furthermore, previous research has often examined misinformation as a general phenomenon without systematically analyzing the specific mechanisms through which religious misinformation is constructed and circulated. In particular, the roles of communal framing, visual manipulation, and identity mislabeling remain insufficiently explored in the Bangladeshi context.

A further gap concerns the July Uprising of 2024, a critical socio-political event that generated extensive online communication and information disorder. Although fact-checking organizations documented numerous instances of religious misinformation during this period, scholarly investigations of these cases remain limited. Consequently, there is inadequate understanding of how religious narratives were framed, how religious identities were manipulated, and how such misinformation may have contributed to communal tensions during the uprising.

To address these gaps, the present study examines fact-checked Facebook posts related to religious misinformation during the July Uprising in Bangladesh. By focusing on communal framing, visual manipulation, and identity mislabeling, the study contributes to the existing literature on misinformation and communal relations. It also provides empirical evidence from a politically significant period that has received limited academic attention, thereby enhancing understanding of the relationship between social media misinformation and communal dynamics in Bangladesh.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper will use a mixed-method approach to research by incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods of content analysis to investigate how religious misinformation was disseminated and framed on Facebook during the July-August Movement of 2024 in Bangladesh. Content analysis is a popular technique employed in communication and media studies offering an opportunity to systematically, objectively, and reproducibly study both textual and visual data (Krippendorff, 2018). The qualitative aspect is designed to read between the lines of the latent meanings, ideologies, and narratives of misinformation posts, specifically about the discursivity of religious identities and communal conflicts. This is supplemented by the quantitative part which provides a measure of the prevalence of certain misinformation themes and patterns within a chosen sample (Neuendorf, 2017). The two-fold approach is appropriate as misinformation as a rule works at different levels: at the explicit

level (e.g., the false assertions regarding the religious identity) and at the sub-frames level whereby the audience is influenced in the way they perceive the false assertions (Entman, 1993). This would be an effective way of employing such a method in previous research investigating social media misinformation in a politically sensitive setting (Pennycook and Rand, 2019; Al-Zaman, 2021a).

3.2 Data Sources and Unit of Analysis

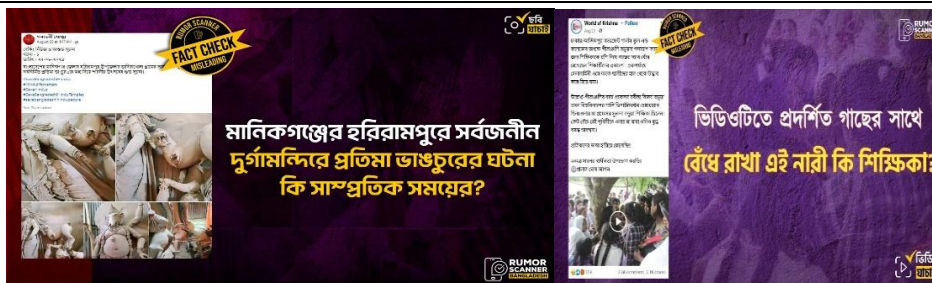
The sources of data to be used in this research were found in the top fact-checking agencies that are active in Bangladesh: Fact-Watch, RumorScanner, and AFP Fact Check (Bangla). These entities selectively detect, examine, and publish on Covid-related misinformation spread on social media, such as on Facebook (RumorScanner, 2024; Fact-Watch, 2024). The main object of study is a single Facebook post, which has been fact-checked and verified by one of these organizations within the timeframe of July 1 to August 31, 2024, and has not been reviewed by any of them at any point in the past. Posts have textual information, videos or pictures, and other metadata (date of posting and likes, comments, and shares). The selected period is associated with the height of the July-August Movement, which is marked by the social unrest and an increase in misinformation against the minority groups, especially the Hindu population (Wikipedia, 2024). The fact-checking posts will also be analyzed, which makes sure that the information about the misinformation confirms and avoids bias due to unproven assertions.

3.3 Sampling Method

The misinformation posts were selected by use of purposive sampling to be analyzed in terms of content. The necessary relevance and depth of analysis is ensured due to this non-probability sampling method, which can focus on posts that suit certain criteria corresponding to the goals of the research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sampling inclusion criteria were:

- i. False or misleading content about religious or professional identity of people. An example would be calling one a Hindu or Muslim when this is not true or claiming the dean or teacher is a professional in a wrong manner.
- ii. The posts which frame the issues within a communal or religious conflict, especially highlighting the Hindu-Muslim issues.
- iii. Publication and debunking of posts between July 1 and August 31, 2024, to get the maximum of the misinformation.



Out of these criteria 35 misinformation posts were selected. Although being relatively small, such a sample is appropriate to include a detailed content analysis that is pertinent to the mixed-method approach and corresponds to the previous research on misinformation in South Asia (Al-Zaman, 2021b; Mahfuzul et al., 2020).

3.4 Coding Scheme and Codebook

The deductive codebook was constructed to conduct a systematic study of the misinformation posts based on the available literature on communal misinformation in South Asia and was optimized with the help of an inductive examination of the fact-checking data (Mahfuzul et al., 2020; Al-Zaman, 2021a). The coding scheme was a list of binary items (coded 1 to 0) used to represent both manifest and latent content items.

Table 1: The codes of Binary Items

Code	Description
RELID-MISLABEL	Religious identity mislabeling (e.g., portraying a Hindu individual as Muslim or vice versa)
PROF-MISLABEL	Professional identity mislabeling (e.g., falsely labeling someone as a teacher, dean, or advisor)
TARGET-PERSONAL	The misinformation targets a specific individual rather than an institution or community group
COMMUNAL-FRAMING	Posts frame the content as communal or religious conflict (e.g., Hindu–Muslim tension)
VISUAL-MANIPULATION	Use of misleading, out-of-context, or fabricated images/videos
SOURCE-UNCLEAR	Posts lack credible or verifiable source citation
ENGAGEMENT-LEVEL	Number of likes, comments, and shares, used as a proxy for potential spread and virality

(source: created by author)

The codebook included major aspects of misinformation dissemination such as identity distortion, emotional and communal framing, source credibility,

and audience engagement, which have been demonstrated to be important in the context of South Asian communal tensions (Barrett, 2014; Druckman et al., 2021).

Table 2: viral video purporting

RELID-MISLABEL = 1 (religious misidentification)
COMMUNAL-FRAMING = 1 (communal tension framing)
VISUAL-MANIPULATION = 1 (misleading video content)
SOURCE-UNCLEAR = 1 (no credible source cited)

An example post that disproved a viral video purporting to show the molestation of a Hindu woman in the quota movement (it presented unrelated video footage in India).

3.5 Coding Procedure and Reliability

The primary researcher performed the coding process manually to make sure that it was carefully done in context. All the posts on Facebook were analyzed independently based on the preconceived codebook and then the codes were typed in a structured data matrix through a binary scheme (1 = present, 0 = absent). To enhance the coding reliability, a random selection of a subset of the dataset (20% or 7 posts) was done after a duration of one week to be re-coded. This intercoder reliability test was intended to determine the consistency of code usage in time (Neuendorf, 2017). The Kappa coefficient of Cohen was computed on each of the categories of the code to measure the level of agreement and the result should be greater than 0.75 to be regarded as excellent reliability (Landis and Koch, 1977).



Any differences were brought up and solved by referencing the initial fact-check reports and consensus. Also, unclear posts were checked several times,

particularly those with ambiguous framing or mixed messages, which were compared with the fact-check explanations on the source to make sure that the same points were in place in the coding choices (Al-Zaman, 2021b). The number of the frequency of each category of codes was calculated quantitatively to give an overview of the more common misinformation tactics. They were supplemented by qualitative thematic analysis to find more extensive narrative patterns and the intersections of misinformation targets with the themes of identity and communal conflict.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The present study complies with all ethical criteria that research on social media data and misinformation analysis should have. As the data were gathered solely on publicly accessible fact-checking websites, which also process publicly shared Facebook posts, no face-to-face contact with human subjects took place, and no personal and confidential information access took place (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). To be ethically responsible, the personal information about the participants of a misinformation post has been anonymized or omitted, and their full name or profile photos are not provided in the report to prevent harm or harassment (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). The research considers site policies of service and responsible use of data. Moreover, the study recognizes the sensitivity that may envelop the issues of religious affiliations and group opposition in Bangladesh. Results are reported responsibly to prevent the reinforcement of stereotypes and stigmatization of any group to inform the policy and citizens about the importance of misinformation damage reduction (Barrett, 2014; Druckman et al., 2021).

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Results and Statistics of quantitative coding

The quantitative trends identified through the analysis of Facebook misinformation posts that were confirmed by Bangladeshi fact-checkers (Fact-Watch, RumorScanner) underwent 35 posts (total posts 35), and they demonstrated several important findings that defined the scope and trends of religious misinformation at the time of the July-August Movement of 2024. Each post was coded using the coding scheme as outlined in Chapter 3 and the frequency counts tabulated.

Table 3: The 35 cases of misinformation

63 percent (n=22) employed communal framing, which describes events as a conflict between Hindus and Muslims.
57 percent (n=20) were practicing religious identity mislabeling like falsely

identifying Muslims as Hindus or the other way round.
One in every four (2308) contained professional identity mislabeling in which people were incorrectly called deans, advisors or teachers.
17% (n=6) used visual manipulation which involved the use of misleading or decontextualized images and videos.
26% (n=9) did not have a credible source thus propagating unbelievable information.
20% (n=7) specifically addressed an individual, usually with his or her name or picture.

(Source: prepared by author)

These data validate the prevailing influence of framing based on communal and identity in digital misinformation when political unrest prevails. These trends align with existing literature indicating that misinformation flourishes in polarized socio-political contexts where identity-based politics is prevalent and social divisions are actively exploited (Al-Zaman, 2021; Mahfuzul et al., 2020).

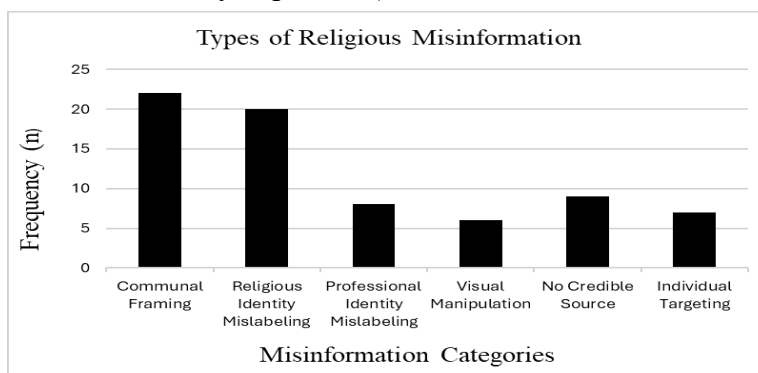


Figure 4.1: Frequency distribution of misinformation characteristics identified in Facebook posts during the July–August Movement (N=35). (Source: Developed by authors)

Percentage Distribution of Misinformation Features

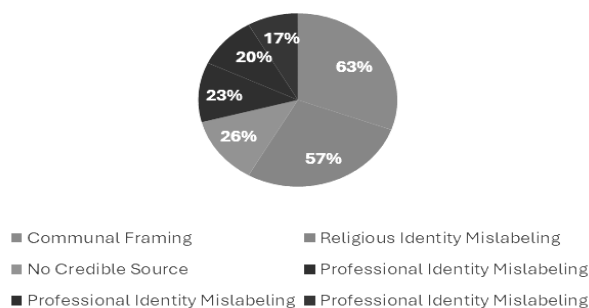


Figure 4.2: Percentage distribution of key misinformation characteristics found in the analyzed Facebook posts (Source: Developed by authors)

4.2 Time Series Trends of Misinformation Spread

The data show that the highest instance of misinformation occurred in the second and third weeks of July 2024, when there was an increase in the number of protests and several offline communal cases. This time effect implies a tendency towards capitalizing on the mood of the people at a time when it was politically sensitive. As an illustration, in mid-July, Fact-Watch (2024) published numerous fact-checks revealing the reuse of ancient Indian and Myanese videos, purporting to demonstrate recent assaults on temples in Bangladesh. It was also during this time that there were the most posts that integrated communal framing with the manipulation of images and that were filled with emotion in order to ignite outrage. According to the records of RumorScanner (2024), this can be explained by the fact that this tendency is still present in Bangladesh at the time of unrest, when old content is actively reused. Such findings resonate with the overall trends across the globe because misinformation spikes during elections, protests, or communal riots (Druckman et al., 2021).

4.3 Qualitative Patterns of Themes

Besides statistical patterns, the qualitative analysis revealed the major narrative patterns in the structure and propagation of religious misinformation:

A. Minority Targeting: The overall motif was the falsification of Hindus as the perpetrators or instigators of violence. This was frequently done by recognizing a Muslim sounding name and linking it with Hindu religious clothes or by claiming that Hindu people were in high position in universities or any other government institution. This resembles the previous results of Al-Zaman (2021), who observed that the purpose of such communal framing is to instill fear and substantiate retaliatory feelings.

B. Emotional Triggering: The posts on misinformation used strong visual and verbal tools, such as the pictures of disbound idols, burning temples, and wounded women. A case in point was a viral video purportedly depicting a Hindu massacre in Bangladesh which was eventually proven to be real footage of Myanmar (RumorScanner, 2024). These images would evade critical examination and elicit instant emotional response.

C. Authority Misuse: Others of the most viral misinformation were statements or actions falsely claimed or attributed to high-profile people, like university deans, bureaucrats or religious scholars. An example is that a few of the posts had charged a renowned academic with silencing Muslim voices in the teaching field without substantiation. This type of false attribution uses the authority of people and gives credibility to false statements (Mahfuzul et al., 2020).

D. Engagement Amplification: The most engaged posts were those that were a combination of visual manipulation and communal framing as compared to those that did not have emotional or identity invocation. These posts on average received almost 190 likes, 50 comments and 40 shares compared to 90 likes and 20 shares on average on less inflammatory posts (Fact-Watch, 2024).



4.4 Misinformation Type Clusters

When the misinformation posts were clustered according to theme and format, three overriding categories were discovered:

- i. **Fabricated Violence Videos:** Those posts were false and purported to demonstrate burning of temples, women harassment or community-level violence. These videos were mostly old or belonged to different countries but were covered in the case of Bangladesh being the latest incidents.
- ii. **Fake Identity Posts:** One more cluster was associated with professional or religious identity fabrication. People were wrongly claimed as being Hindu agents, powerful clerics or educational authorities, with a view to destroying institutional loyalty.
- iii. **Propaganda Scheme Religious Quotations:** This category also featured posts that possessed inflammatory words on religious figures, mostly made up or misquoted. As an example, false quotes were ascribed to thinkers such as Yasir ad-Dowsari to present Islam in a militant manner, which fueled the interfaith hatred (Druckman et al.2021).

4.5 Summary of Key Findings

This content analysis has provided strong grounds to believe that religious misinformation in the July-August Movement was not accidental but well planned and emotional. Key takeaways include:

Most of the posts (63 percent), capitalised on the religious differences via communal framing.

Misinformation in most cases was emotional and visual, intended to spread rapidly and involve emotions.

- i. The minority of Hindu was over-represented and victimized.
- ii. Time postings were made in accordance with unrest in the real world, which increased social tension.

- iii. There is a high demand on algorithmic moderation, integration of fact-checks and digital literacy programs to counter the impacts of such misinformation.

The results support the previous literature on the topic, which highlights the powerful combination of identity politics, emotional manipulation, and media virality in religious misinformation transmission (Barrett, 2014; Nagar and Ashaye, 2022; Levin, 2020). The weak communal fabric of Bangladesh requires action to be taken by policymakers, platforms as well as civil society to reverse such threats online.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Findings Interpretation in terms of Theory and Literature

Chapter 4 findings indicated that religious misinformation during the July–August Movement in Bangladesh was crafted and spread-out using Facebook. The patterns reinforce major assumptions of the framing theory and the agenda-setting theory. The framing theory (Entman, 1993) refers to the way in which media chooses some of the perceived reality and exposes it to be more salient. Underlying information posts in the current research were the frequent depictions of normal incidences (fires, resignations, altercations in the streets) as religiously inspired, thus encouraging communal discourses. As an example, the situation when a market fire that happened due to an electrical short-circuit was presented as an assault on the Hindu shops, shows how communal framing can be used to misguide the audiences. In the same manner, false usage of pictures and videos of external Bangladesh supports visual framing techniques in which the source of the media was of less significance compared to its symbolic application to create outrage. Such practices go in line with what Goffman (1974) termed as schemata of interpretation frameworks that shape a situation of how audiences perceive the events. The same is applicable to the agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The virality and repetitions of these posts meant that community-related stories were given a greater level of attention at a politically charged time. These misinformation campaigns turned the discussion on religiosity into an inter-religious one by flooding the digital space with emotionally charged and false religious-related information even though the initial protests themselves were secular in nature. The results are also reminiscent of the study by Al-Zaman (2021a) who observed that Bangladeshi users respond to the religious misinformation emotionally. The tendencies of evoking emotions in particular images of destroyed temples or raped women confirm the assertion that misinformation in Bangladesh is meant to evoke intense affective reactions. This emotional response in its turn creates the algorithmic presence of such content, which adds to its virality potential (Bakir

and McStay, 2018). In addition, the control over professional identities (e.g., calling a person a Hindu principal or a pro-Islamic administrator) is an aspect of the identity-politics narrative that is presented in South Asian literature (Sengupta, 2020; Udupa, 2019). These strategies make abstract political matters personalized, they become identity-based disputes, a common strategy in polarizing societies.

5.2 Implications in Bangladesh Social Cohesion and Media Policy

The implications of the findings are dire to the social cohesion of Bangladesh country whose communal tensions history has been marked at this point despite the officially secular constitution. The systematic attack on Hindu people and organizations referring to them as false religious attempts creates fear and suspicion among groups. According to Mahfuzul et al. (2020), religious misinformation is prevalent and powerful not only in Bangladesh, but also has a strong influence based on the emotional and symbolic value that religion brings to the general population space. Such information distortion undermines interfaith peace, promotes vigilantism, and undermines the confidence of masses not only in the minority groups but also in the institutions of the state. Through rumors of religious attacks during July-August Movement, localized panic, forced resignation of teachers and mass digital defamation campaign occurred. This is not just online speech, but these actions have offline effects that widen sectarian divides. Policy-wise, this finding highlights the need to implement extensive media literacy programs. Rural youth who constitute a big portion of the population of Facebook users in Bangladesh are especially vulnerable to religious fake news (Dismlab, 2024). Agencies, civil society, and educational institutions should work together to create awareness on how misinformation works, particularly in a communal level. Besides, digital platform governance policies should be revised. It was argued that the Digital Security Act in Bangladesh suppresses freedom of expression rather than guarding citizens against any harm. It is required to shift its focus to regulatory systems where platforms are held responsible to misinformation alongside protection of rights. As an example, the platforms can be required to label or restrict distribution of posts that are flagged by proven fact-checkers like Fact-Watch and RumorScanner.

5.3 Social Media Role in Dynamics of Misinformation

Facebook plays a central role in misinformation of religion. In Bangladesh, Facebook is the most used social media with above 84 percent of internet users having accounts with Facebook (Wikipedia, 2024). The algorithm on the platform rewards engagement likes, comments, shares that have the inherent benefit of favoring sensational or emotionally charged content. With this kind of

dynamics on platforms, according to Bakir and McStay (2018), misinformation is not an accident, but it is an emergent aspect of the digital ecosystem. We have found that the posts with emotional images and those falsely describing events (such as violence or religious desecration) attracted more interest. This indicates that the design of the platform favors controversial content, particularly when users are set to be outraged during politically unstable seasons. Existing moderation processes of Facebook are not enough to curb the flow of communal fake news. Manual moderation is insufficient in the context of Bangali, whereas automated moderation is not as sensitive as it needs to be (Udupa and Dattatreyan, 2022). Collaborations with fact-checkers on the local level are an improvement, but they should be formalized and reinforced by algorithmic adjustments, which will prioritize harmful content less. Moreover, the fact that such content is amplified by politically driven pages and influencers means that the use of the Facebook architecture is being organized. The findings are in line with international study that reveals the rising usage of digital platforms in terms of information warfare in polarized democracies (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019).

5.4 Limitations of the Study

Although the given research is a thorough content analysis of religious misinformation in the context of an important protest movement, it is not devoid of limitations. To start with, the research used only posts that were refuted by fact-checking sources. This is necessary to guarantee credibility; however, it can also leave out some forms of misinformation that cannot be detected by fact-checkers or shared in closed communities. Second, there is a narrow scope of the research to Facebook. Although Facebook is the most widespread one, religious misinformation has found its way to other platforms, including YouTube, WhatsApp, and Tik Tok. The addition of the platform to include a broader range of studies might be incorporated in the future. Third, the systematic and reliability-confirmed coding process is still limited to human interpretation. Subjective bias might have led to some such themes or codes being ignored. Also, the engagement figures were determined through the available data and might not be a complete representation of the virality, particularly of the content that was later deleted by the platforms. Fourth, the research is confined to the period of July–August 2024. Although this time was chosen as the most active in the political sphere, misinformation is not a seasonal phenomenon. Longitudinal studies may be used to assist in comprehending routine patterns and long-time influences. And finally, the paper fails to consider the perception of the audience. Although we have the types of misinformation that were disseminated, we do not understand how the audience received, believed, or acted. Audience surveys or interviews would be a welcome addition to any future research and could enhance the knowledge of

the effects of misinformation. This chapter has explained the research results in terms of theoretical perspectives and literature. It highlighted how religious misinformation has weakened social cohesion, how digital platforms have contributed to the spread thereof, and policy loopholes have helped popularize such misinformation. The weaknesses of the research were admitted, and the opportunities to conduct further research were mentioned. Overall, the investment in the current study is that the collaborative, context-specific responses to religious misinformation in the digital space of Bangladesh are highly urgent.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Overview of Research findings

This paper explored the issue of religious misinformation going viral on Facebook in the July-August 2024 movement in Bangladesh. The study revealed the manipulative aspect of religious identities and the instigation of communal tension through the content analysis of 35 fact-checked misinformation posts conducted by the researchers through mixed methods. These results showed that there were five critical patterns: To start with, the quantitative coding analysis revealed that communal framing (63%) and mislabeling of religious identity (57) in these posts were the most prevalent strategies. The stereotypes and the communal suspicion were strengthened by numerous posts that falsely claimed that Hindu people were Muslims or the other way around. The absence of reliable sources (26) and visual manipulation (17) were also reasons why these stories became viral and emotional. Second, time series revealed a steep rise in misinformation in politically sensitive weeks of July when the protests peaked, and the press was under blackout. The patterns indicate that the misinformation was not disseminated in random fashion but was rather timely to carry out the exploitation of social instability. Third, the qualitative thematic trends depicted the misinformation emotional engineering. The violent imagery, religious iconography, and false statements of authority like false statements of authority were used by posts to drive panic and resentment. The confusion of the identity of teachers and civil servants and the re-contextualization of foreign videos helped to enhance the feeling of communal weakness. Fourth, there were groups of fake news in the form of fake videos, false identity statements, and misquoted religious statements. These strategies compounded the minority community targeting and created a myth of systematic religious violence. Lastly, the findings were related to the existing literature and theories and in particular, the framing theory, the agenda-setting theory, and the psychology of misinformation. In this regard, the misrepresentation of religion was revealed to

have a deep penetration into the social-political reality of Bangladesh and is a wider trend of digital communalism.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 For Policymakers

- i. **Impose laws on digital misinformation:** The government needs to update and enforce laws on online misinformation, particularly when it is a threat of disunity in the country or it leads to violence against religious minorities. This also involves giving power to the agencies such as the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to collaborate with the social media and civil society.
- ii. **Create a National Plan of Religious Harmony on the Internet:** An integrated national plan to combine the work of education, law enforcement, and interfaith dialogue in the Internet is essential. There should be special consideration of the misinformation and its effects on the perceptions at the time of protest or when the situation is unstable and political.
- iii. **Set up rapid response misinformation task forces:** These teams ought to be able to spot and refute viral misinformation in real-time, working together with fact-checking agencies such as Fact-Watch, RumorScanner and AFP Fact Check Bangla.

6.2.2 For Media Practitioners

- i. **Enhance journalistic checks and balances:** Media outlets must invest in digital literacy training courses to aid journalists and editors in detecting and combating falsified news and especially the ones that have communal triggers.
- ii. **Become an inclusive newsroom:** Newsrooms can no longer, inadvertently or intentionally, prioritize and emphasize unverified religious assertions in their editorial work. The reporting and staffing of the religious minorities should also be represented more to guarantee a variety of viewpoints.
- iii. **Form collaborations with fact-checkers:** Media houses can create working relationships with local fact-checking firms to co-publish instances of rapid debunks and public awareness campaigns.

6.2.3 To the Civil Society and the Education institutions

- i. **Foster digital literacy:** educational institutions such as schools, universities, and non-governmental organizations ought to incorporate digital media literacy into their curriculum, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where the risks of misinformation are the greatest.

- ii. Introduce interfaith community discussions online: The civil society organizations must create online communities where communities can converse and disprove misinformation and develop trust within religious boundaries.
- iii. Empower minority voices online: This can be done by offering safe spaces and avenues that minority groups can use to speak and share their stories to overcome the stereotypical misinformed narratives of power and facilitate a lesser susceptibility to digital hate speech.

6.3 Future Research Recommendation

Although this research is a good starting point to understanding the concept of religious misinformation in a politically unstable country like Bangladesh, there are still several streams that can be studied further:

- i. Misinformation dynamics related to various platforms: Future research may investigate how various social media platforms (e.g., Tik Tok, YouTube, WhatsApp) can contribute to the dissemination of religious misinformation in their own way.
- ii. Audience reception research: This study was concerned with the production and distribution of content. The next round of research ought to focus on how the audiences perceive, internalize or resist the misinformation about religion across contexts (e.g. urban/rural, young/aged, etc.).
- iii. Automated detection models: Continuing the qualitative codebook produced here, the next step might be to train machine learning models to autonomously detect religious misinformation in content across the Bangla-language.
- iv. Comparative studies in the region: A comparison of the July August movement misinformation against other comparable incidents in India, Pakistan, or Myanmar may assist in clarifying the regional trends in digital communalism and state reaction patterns.
- v. Longitudinal studies: A more sustained analysis of misinformation would be beneficial in uncovering changing strategies, actors, and countermeasures particularly with changes in political climates.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study suggest that Facebook may have played a significant role in the circulation of religious misinformation during the July–August 2024 Movement in Bangladesh. The analyzed misinformation posts appeared to be strategically framed and emotionally charged, with many cases involving narratives related to religious identities and minority communities, particularly Hindus. These patterns may reflect broader challenges concerning information

ethics, digital media governance, and the vulnerability of online audiences during periods of political and social unrest. The study further indicates that the combination of communal framing, identity mislabeling, and visual manipulation could contribute to the increased visibility and engagement of misinformation content on social media platforms. While the findings are limited to the analyzed sample, they provide evidence that religious misinformation may reinforce existing social divisions and intensify communal sensitivities in polarized contexts.

Addressing these challenges is likely to require a multi-stakeholder approach involving government institutions, media organizations, civil society actors, fact-checking initiatives, and social media platforms. In addition to technological interventions and content moderation strategies, efforts aimed at improving digital literacy, critical media consumption, and interfaith understanding may help reduce the potential impact of religious misinformation in Bangladesh. Future research could further explore the long-term social consequences of such misinformation and evaluate the effectiveness of different mitigation strategies.

Authors' Declaration

We declare that the submitted manuscript is our original work and has not been published, nor is it under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources have been appropriately cited, and the work is free from plagiarism, falsification, and fabrication. Any use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in preparing this manuscript has been transparently disclosed, and full responsibility for the content rests with the authors.

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