

## Digital Platforms And Proliferation Of Conspiracy Theories: The Case Of Malala Yousafzai

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### Abstract

*It is argued that digital media might encourage the dissemination of conspiracies. In this study we investigate the effects of conspiracy theories which are getting popular with the help of digital media and determine if people are believing in these theories or not. For this purpose, we have taken the case of Malala Yousafzai. She is the world youngest and the only peace noble prize winner from Pakistan. Many different conspiracy theories sprung up after she got shot by Taliban and her alleged connection with the CIA. An experimental survey was conducted with a sample of 485 respondents. Among which 173 respondents were shown a video portraying a positive image of Malala as stimulus while 158 respondents were shown a video containing conspiracies about her thus promoted negative image of her. Remaining 154 respondents were a control group with no video stimulus. A survey was administered among all three groups containing both positive and negative statements about Malala Yousafzai. Based on previous literature it was hypothesized that people who watched video containing conspiracy theories about Malala on digital media platforms would believe more on conspiracies about her than others. This experimental survey confirmed that people who watched video containing conspiracies about Malala, expressed more negative feelings towards her. However, these negative feelings against Malala prevailed in all three experimental groups. These results further reinforced our hat Pakistani users of digital media platforms are influenced by conspiracies prevalent on these platforms and watching any positive stimulus did not affect their already held negative views about Malala.*

**Keywords:** Digital Media, Conspiracy Theories, Experimental Survey

### Introduction

Different crises, disastrous happenings and events occurred in history have activated extraordinary conspiracy formulations, and there are a lot of conspiracies in the world related to different issues. These may be based on either truth or falsehood and people may either believe or discredit them.

It is commonly believed among general people, academics and journalists that people are now living in an 'age of conspiracy theories' (Oliver & Wood, 2014) and citizen advocate and endorse the conspiracy theories at large range (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Digital media might encourage the dissemination of conspiracies (Southwell et. al., 2018), but some studies have suggested otherwise (Uscinski et. al., 2018; Klein, Clutton, & Polito, 2018).

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In this study, we want to investigate the effects of conspiracy theories which are getting popular with the help of digital media and determine if people are believing in these theories or not. For this purpose, we have taken the case of Malala Yousafzai. She is the world youngest and the only peace noble prize winner from Pakistan. Different conspiracy theories have been thriving in Pakistani society about how she got shot by Taliban, how she won Nobel peace prize and her alleged connection with American CIA.

Pakistan is already becoming the place where conspiracy theories spread like a wildfire (Basit, 2020). Pakistani Internet consumers are 52.6% of the population (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2022). Around 55.7 million (24.3%) Pakistanis use YouTube as a source of information (Global Media Insight, 2022), while Facebook has 54,471,800 (23.9%) Pakistani users (Internet World Stats, 2022). The penetration of social media platforms is relatively low and its users are literate and often educated, still they may fall victim to conspiracy theories particularly to the videos containing conspiracy theories (Iqbal, 2013). Experience towards conspiracy theories could change the perspective of audiences even though reality was far different from that perspective (Butler et al., 1995; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Mulligan & Habel 2013).

### **Conspiracy Theories and Digital Media**

In a simpler form, conspiracies theories are merely the alternative explanations of ongoing or historical events that challenge the established versions of the events and often accuse any entity like government, secret bodies or even powerful individual of scheming against the ordinary people s (Douglas et al., 2019; Keeley, 1999; March & Springer, 2019; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Uscinski, 2018). With the advent of social media, there has been a surge in conspiracy theories (Uscinski, 2018) about vaccination, climate change, the 9/11 attacks (Mahl et al., 2021), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021).

Digital media significantly contributes to the proliferation of conspiracy theories, influenced by a multitude of factors. Clarke (2007) argued that the Internet might facilitate the speedy expand of more conspiracies, though he further reasoned that Internet might limit or restrict conspiracies since one thousand million prospects of potentiality critical voices and opinions are available to straightaway disapprove conspiracies declarations with proof and evidence. Both Heft (2022) and Mortimer (2017) emphasized the crucial role of digital platforms in fostering the dissemination of misinformation and conspiratorial beliefs. Heft (2022) further underscores the intricate relationship between online communication and the complexities inherent in studying the diffusion of conspiracy theories. Mortimer (2017) delves into the impact of social media networks, drawing parallels between the propagation of conspiracy theories and the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Proliferation of conspiracy theories is associated with the affordances of digital media and popular culture as algorithms may favor the conspirational content because of its potential of higher user engagement (Zhang et. al., 2021).

Conspiracies might influence the attitudes of people, but the degree of influence depends on preexistent beliefs and opinions as well as on social and political circumstances (Uscinski et. al., 2016). A general connection between conspiracies belief system and education has been found (Bogart & Bird, 2003; Goertzel, 1994; Mancosu, Vassallo, & Vezzoni, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Literacy of news media may decrease spread of conspiracy theories (Craft et. al., 2017). On the other hand, scandals of political leaders destroy trust in governments, which turns into the high level of beliefs of conspiracy (Moore, 2018). Pakistan is a country with low literacy rate and its political landscape is rife with political scandals, hence conspiracies are spread quickly here. However, we want to know the effects of conspiracy theories on educated social media users. We hypothesized that people who watch

videos containing conspiracy theories on digital media platforms tend to believe on conspiracies.

### **Methodology**

In order to test the hypothesis, we employed experimental survey. We collected the data from a sample of 485 respondents among which 154 were in control group, 173 in positive group, and 158 respondents were in negative group. There was a positive video as stimulus for positive group and a negative video as stimulus for negative group while there was no stimulus for control group. Respondents were randomly assigned to any three of the groups.

Positive video contained clips from the interview of Malala Yousafzai given to CNN and the reports of AFP and Dawn News about her. Positive video showed her struggle, patriotism, and her efforts for girl's education in Pakistan in the form of Malala Fund.

Negative video was extracted from different clips available on two Pakistani YouTube channels Infolight and Haqeeqat TV. Clips attempted to prove Malala as a CIA agent. Video also claimed that attack on Malala was totally a pre-planned drama in order to make way for Pakistani Army in Waziristan and for America in Afghanistan.

The questionnaire for the survey asked about the political ideology of the respondents ranging from very conservative to very liberal. For measuring the attitudes towards Malala Yousafzai, we formulated 11 statements with a combination of both positive and negative statements. Positive statements were like, Malala Yousafzai is a pride for Pakistan; Malala was a deserving candidate for Nobel Prize, while examples of negative statements included, Malala is a CIA agent; Attack on Malala was a hoax. We computed all these statement to make an additive scale for the attitude towards Malala. The score of the scale ranged from minimum 11 to maximum 46, where 11 showed negative attitude while 46 characterized positive attitude for Malala.

### **Findings & Discussion**

In this experimental survey 74.8% respondents were between eighteen and twenty five years of age and 63.3% were female. All respondents were literate and 60% had sixteen years of education or above.

In order to test hypothesis, we applied ANOVA to find difference among control, negative and positive stimuli groups on their scores of attitude towards Malala. We did not find any statistically significant difference among three groups for the attitude towards Malala Yousafzai ( $F(2,482) = 2.942, p = 0.54$ ). In this way our research hypothesis was rejected as watching negative video containing conspiracies about Malala Yousafzai did not bring any change in their opinion. On the other hand, the means of control group ( $M = 24.9, SD = 4.07$ ), positive group ( $M = 25.7, SD = 4.18$ ), and negative group ( $M = 26.01, SD = 4.07$ ) showed an overall tendency of negative attitudes towards Malala among all the respondents regardless of their stimuli. Respondents showed negative attitude even if they watched positive video stimulus containing Malala's sacrifices. They considered it an opposite discourse and did not accept it as dominant.

One of the reason for this overwhelming pattern of negative thoughts about Malala may be the feelings of mistrust among Pakistanis about America. In opinion polls, Pakistanis see America as their enemy (Pew Research Center, 2010), hence they do not like those people or personalities who are presented as heroes by US. The other possible reason of negative response in context of Malala Yousafzai, might be her interview in British Vogue in the month of June 2021. This interview coincided with our data collection time. In this interview, she expressed her opinion regarding marriage and most of the Pakistanis found her opinion very controversial. This interview came up as a reinforcement for people who were already having negative perspective about Malala. So in the case of Pakistanis, regardless the type of stimuli, reactions of people on conspiracies was according to their already established mindset which

was influenced not only by digital media platforms but also because of some other individual, cultural and societal factors. Our findings are consistent with the study of Uscinski et. al., 2016 who reported that the influence of conspiracies on the attitudes of people is marginalized due to certain factors including preexistent beliefs and culture , both of which are considered significant. In our case the role of both factors i-e preexisting beliefs ( negative perception about US and Malala) and Social circumstances (Malala’s controversial views on marriage) is proved ,though in a different dimension as presence of these two factors strengthened negative attitude towards Malala. Furthermore, it should also be consider that the positive content shown to the subjects was retrieved from mainstream media whereas the negative videos were taken from digital media. This also highlights the fact of the presence of controversial content on digital media platforms. Previous studies have also highlighted the crucial role of digital platforms in fostering the dissemination of misinformation and conspiratorial beliefs (Heft, 2022; Mortimer, 2017).

Studies in other domains like health communication have also focused on the role of pre existing beliefs on judgment of information (Dong-Seon Chang et al., 2011) and certainty of knowledge and interpretation of controversial issues (CarolAne,1996). These beliefs have also been reported to affect the involvement with message and processing (Van Steenburg, 2021).

The existing belief also cause selective perception which in turn affect the attitude towards controversial theories. Severin and Tankard (1979) quotes Dean, C. Barulund (1970) “ It should be stressed that meaning is something ‘invented’, ‘ assigned’, ‘given’ rather than something “received”.

### **Conclusion**

Our experimental survey confirmed the hypothesis as people who watched video containing conspiracies regarding Malala, expressed more negative feelings towards her. Another significant finding, however, was the absence of positive feelings for Malala in all three groups. It further reinforced our hypotheses that Pakistani users of digital media platforms are influenced by conspiracies prevalent on these platforms and watching any positive stimulus did not affect their preexisting beliefs about Malala. Respondents of positive group also considered the positive feelings about Malala in the video as an opposite discourse. They did not consider it as dominant discourse and did not even try to negotiate it. Respondents may have thought that this was totally against their preexisting beliefs hence, it deserves backlash. Our results also indicate the significance of the news media literacy as it can reduce the effects of conspiracy theories. It also suggests that preexisting beliefs should be taken into consideration while studying conspiracy theories and related phenomenon.

In this study, we have used the case of Malala Yousafzai only. In future, conspiracies related to other topics can be selected to assess the effect of conspiracies theories spread through digital media platforms, because people seem more rigid already in the case of Malala. Moreover, researchers can compare the nationally brewed conspiracies with international conspiracy theories. Future study may benefit with a mixed method approach for analyzing the effects of digitally borne conspiracies theories.

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