

Populism Fuels Hate Speech and Disinformation: Evidence From Political Discourse on X (Formerly Twitter) in India and Pakistan

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This study discusses the relationship among the various dimensions of populism, hate speech, and disinformation within the political discourse on X (formerly Twitter) in India and Pakistan. Employing manual content analysis, we examined 7,141 posts from both populist and non-populist political leaders in both countries. Our findings reveal a significant correlation among these three challenging concepts, indicating that posts exhibiting higher levels of populism also tend to score higher on both hate speech and disinformation. Although certain aspects of populism, such as a pro-people and anti-elite approach, are not inherently harmful, our study emphasizes that Manicheanism is a problematic concept in political discourses because of its close association with hate speech and disinformation.

Keywords: populism, hate speech, disinformation, X (formerly Twitter), India and Pakistan, political discourse

A considerable amount of research has explored the problematic phenomena of populism, hate speech, and disinformation over the past few decades (Cowan & Hodge, 1996; Mudde, 2007; Papacharissi, 2004; Parekh, 2012; Tsesis, 2002). In these and other studies, researchers have discussed the prevalence and implications of these critical challenges for democracy, ethnic and religious minorities, and society at large. The development of digital technologies and the rise of populist parties in Western countries have renewed academic interest in these three problematic domains (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Hameleers, 2020; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Udupa, Maronikolakis, & Wisiorek, 2023). Although most existing literature addresses these three discourses separately, some scholars have advanced the field by examining the intersections between populism and hate speech (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019; Waisbord, 2020), populism and disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Hameleers, 2023), and hate speech and disinformation (Estellés & Castellví, 2020; Papacharissi, 2004). More importantly, in the context of this study, few studies

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have discussed these three concepts simultaneously (Hameleers, Meer, & Vliegenthart, 2022; Udupa et al., 2023). In these studies, researchers have found that populist discourses contain a significant amount of hate speech often targeting political opponents and vulnerable groups such as Muslims, people of colour, women, and immigrants.

Although the emerging literature on the intersections among populist rhetoric, hate speech, and disinformation has significantly advanced our understanding of this phenomenon, it remains limited in several ways. First, the existing research is predominantly qualitative (Hameleers et al., 2022). Although Hameleers and colleagues (2022) employ a mixed-method approach, their study primarily explored the interactions between incivility and misinformation, with populism not being adequately linked to these dynamics. There is a need for an empirical analysis to examine the extent and forms of populism, hate speech, and disinformation and to investigate associations among these in political discourses.

Second, the existing research has largely concentrated on detecting hate speech and disinformation in the rhetoric of a few well-known hardcore populist leaders (see, for example, Bahador & Kerchner, 2019; Hameleers et al., 2022; Udupa et al., 2023). However, we contend that hardcore populists are not the sole perpetrators of these tactics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that traditional political leaders in India and Pakistan also engage in various forms of populism, hate speech, and disinformation as a strategy to counter the rising influence of hardcore populists in South Asia. If this is indeed the case, it indicates a broader erosion of the political system, with serious implications for democracy and social cohesion. Currently, we do not know much about the scale and characteristics of the information disorder produced by the political leaders in these two countries. In this study, we examine the prevalence of hate speech and disinformation in India and Pakistan and discuss how the populist discourse is different from the non-populist discourse.

Third, a gap in the existing literature is the tendency to treat populism, hate speech, and disinformation as unified concepts without adequately disentangling them (see, for example, Estellés & Castellví, 2020; Hameleers, 2023). We propose an approach that involves breaking down these three concepts and examining the relationships among their individual components. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of information disorder in South Asia, potentially revealing that not all elements of populism are equally detrimental to democracy. While populism is often perceived as a threat to democratic values (see Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Hameleers et al., 2022; Laclau, 2005), certain elements, such as pro-people rhetoric and anti-elitism, can uphold democratic values—especially in postcolonial societies like South Asia, where traditional political parties are often criticized for perpetuating colonial legacies (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024). For instance, the Aam Aadmi Party in India and Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan emphasize decolonizing the political systems in their respective countries, blaming the established political elites for current issues (Zia, 2022). Here, criticism of elites and advocacy for people's rights align with democratic principles. However, these democratic values can be compromised when anti-elitism or pro-people perspectives are used to incite violence or are linked to disinformation. This study expands the existing literature by empirically investigating the extent to which pro-people and anti-elite perspectives are related to hate speech and disinformation. In addition, the third characteristic of populism, known as Manicheism (the division of society into two antagonistic groups), is particularly dangerous because it undermines democratic discourse (Engesser et al., 2017).

In this study, our goal is to analyze the relationships among the key elements of populism, hate speech, and disinformation. We question whether these three concepts—populism, hate speech, and disinformation—can be analyzed along a spectrum of intensity. Specifically, we explore whether weaker forms of populism correspond to milder forms of hate speech and disinformation, whereas stronger forms lead to more extreme versions of these phenomena. If this correlation holds true, it could help develop criteria for predicting the dangers associated with various types of populism. Our study contributes to the literature by empirically assessing whether Manichean populism, in particular, is more likely to include significant levels of hate speech and disinformation compared with other facets of populism, thereby posing greater risks to society.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: First, we provide a brief overview of the prevalence of populism in India and Pakistan to offer a context. This is followed by an in-depth discussion on populism, hate speech, and disinformation, drawing from a wide range of sources. We then explore the nexus among populism, hate speech, and disinformation, reviewing existing studies and identifying theoretical gaps. The research questions and hypotheses are embedded in the literature review. The research methods and findings are discussed next. We conclude by highlighting the contributions of the study.

Populism in India and Pakistan

Both India and Pakistan have experienced a wave of populism for quite some time. In India, the ascent to power of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has reshaped the political landscape of the country. The Modi government's emphasis on Hindu nationalism and an anti-minority, anti-establishment rhetoric has appealed to a broad cross-section of the population (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024; Udupa et al., 2023). Similarly, in Pakistan, Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI) came to power with a populist agenda, promising to combat elite corruption, improve governance, and address the concerns of the common people (Hussain, Abbas, & Sheikh, 2022). Imran Khan's charismatic leadership and promises of a New Pakistan have resonated with a large segment of the population (Alam, 2020).

While both the leaders of BJP and PTI apply all the attributes of populism in their rhetoric, which qualify them as hardcore populists (Alam, 2020; Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024), the more traditional political parties, wary of the electoral success of opposition, are adopting various populist strategies to garner support from voters (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024). For example, the leaders of the second largest party in India (Congress Party) and the second largest party in Pakistan (Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz) are increasingly resorting to emotional appeals against conservative populists and trying to unify with the common people (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Hussain et al., 2022).

The impact and implications of populism in these countries have been subjects of debate among scholars and policymakers, given the increasing incidents of hate against women and religious minorities, massive disinformation practices, and challenges to democratic institutions (Udupa et al., 2023; Zia, 2022). In India, for example, the Modi government has faced accusations of hate crimes fuelled by outright disinformation targeting religious and ethnic minorities, human rights activists, and critical journalists (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024). Similarly, during Imran Khan's regime in Pakistan, hate incidents against

religious minorities, opposition political leaders, civil society activists, and media personnel reached new heights (Li, Hussain, Barkat, & Bostan, 2023; Zia, 2022). With his ouster, the combined opposition parties proved to be even more revengeful by imprisoning him and hundreds of his supporters without any legal charges and imposing additional curbs on media freedom (Hussain, Bostan, & Qaisarani, 2024).

Literature Review: Populism, Hate Speech, and Disinformation

Populism is usually defined as a political ideology that calls for the mobilization of the ordinary people against perceived elite groups (Hameleers, 2020; Vasist, Chatterjee, & Krishnan, 2023). According to Tumber and Waisbord (2021):

Populism presents a binary view of politics as neatly and essentially divided in two camps—the popular and the elites/anti-popular. Populism draws arbitrary and firm distinctions between these two camps and presents itself as the true representation “the people.” It is ideologically empty, flexible, and omnivorous. It sponges up right-wing and left-wing ideologies plus myriad narratives and policies along the ideological spectrum. (p. 9)

These explanations closely align with the definition provided by political scientist Mudde (2007), who describes populism as an “ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (p. 543).

However, hate speech is defined as speech, or any form of expression, that seeks to encourage, or can reinforce, hate against an individual or a group of people because of a common characteristic or a group to which they belong (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019; Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Markov & Đorđević, 2023). The United Nations defines it as any form of expression, communication, or conduct that offends or threatens individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or occupation (United Nations, 2023). The definition of hate speech given by Parekh (2012) is generally considered to be more comprehensive. Parekh (2012) states:

Hate speech is directed against a specified or easily identifiable individual or, more commonly, a group of individuals based on an arbitrary or normatively irrelevant feature; second, it stigmatizes the target group by implicitly or explicitly ascribing to it qualities widely regarded as undesirable; and third, it casts the target group . . . as an undesirable presence and a legitimate object of hostility. (p. 41)

Disinformation refers to the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or misleading information, often with a political, social, or economic agenda, to manipulate the perceptions, beliefs, and actions of individuals or the public (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The objective is to sow confusion among the public and reinforce opposition against the out-group even to the detriment of harming them (Banaji & Bhat, 2022).

Nexus Among Populism, Hate Speech, and Disinformation

Populism thrives on the exploitation of grievances and the manipulation of emotions, creating a fertile ground for the proliferation of disinformation and the normalization of hate speech in society (Mudde, 2007). Populist leaders, with their charismatic personalities and persuasive rhetoric, often tap into the deep-seated frustrations and anxieties of a disillusioned populace (Hameleers, 2023). They capitalize on the real or perceived grievances of their followers, presenting themselves as the sole voice of the people against a corrupt and detached establishment. By employing simplistic narratives that common people can understand, these leaders create a powerful bond with their supporters, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity (Cowan & Hodge, 1996; Waisbord, 2020).

One of the key strategies in this regard is to identify out-groups to scapegoat them for the problems that people face by making artificial comparisons and fixing responsibilities (Hameleers et al., 2022; Tsesis, 2002). The populist rhetoric declares opposition political parties or vulnerable groups as their nemeses and encourages their followers to distance themselves from them. In the United States, for example, Donald Trump openly spoke against vulnerable minority groups like Muslims, Black people, and Mexicans (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). Likewise, in India, the populist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has popularized Hindutva, which is militant Hinduism that disregards other religious minorities. In his regime, both Muslims and Christians have faced discrimination and attacks on their lives and properties (Banaji & Bhat, 2022). Similarly, in Pakistan, the populist government of Imran Khan often criticized civil society activists, critical journalists, and his opposition political leaders for working against the interests of the country (Hussain et al., 2022). To provide empirical evidence for the prevalence of populism, hate speech, and disinformation—which Udupa and colleagues (2023) term information disorder in India and Pakistan—we pose a broad research question.

RQ1: To what extent the characteristics of populism, hate speech, and disinformation are present in the digital political discourse in India and Pakistan?

In their pursuit of consolidating power and maintaining a loyal following, populist leaders resort to divisive and inflammatory language targeting out-groups (Mudde, 2007; Vasist et al., 2023). By dehumanizing and vilifying the out-groups, clearly demarcated in their rhetoric, they attempt to reinforce the sense of a unified “us” against a threatening “them” (Papacharissi, 2004; Waisbord, 2020). This marks the beginning of hate speech in political discourse. Hate speech not only fosters an environment of discrimination and marginalization but also perpetuates a cycle of animosity and violence (Estellés & Castellví, 2020; Parekh, 2012). It creates an atmosphere where intolerance and exclusion become socially acceptable, leading to increased polarization in society. Full-blown hate campaigns begin with an “us/them” framing of collective identity. Enlarging and intensifying in-group commitments is often the main strategic objective of hate agents, constructing an out-group as just the other side of the coin (Estellés & Castellví, 2020). While the in-group is essentialized as exceptionally noble and civilized, the out-groups are caricatured as barbaric, alien, or bestial, suggesting that they are not fully entitled to equal citizenship or human rights (Engesser et al., 2017). Next, hate agents scapegoat the other (Tsesis, 2002). They blame the in-group’s genuine grievances and anxieties on the out-group. Research studies and reports by media and rights groups have documented many instances of hate speech in both Western and non-Western countries (Estellés &

Castellví, 2020; Parekh, 2012). Geurkink, Zaslove, Sluiter, and Jacobs (2020), for example, found that populist politicians in Europe spread xenophobic and Islamophobic content and stoked anti-immigrant sentiment. Similarly, in India, for example, Modi's anti-Muslim diatribe desensitized his diehard supporters to the extent that a mere accusation that a few Muslims had sacrificed a cow was enough to burn them alive (Alam, 2020).

Disinformation is another weapon in the arsenal of populist leaders, serving multiple objectives, primarily to discredit political opponents and control the narrative (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). Populism and disinformation have a close affinity (Hameleers, 2020). In examining the central thesis of the populist divide between the "good" people and "corrupt" elites, Hameleers (2020) argued that this division heavily relied on a constant flow of disinformation. Populist politicians make false comparisons and conclusions to support their arguments, bypassing empirical evidence and expert knowledge (Hameleers, 2020). By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, disinformation fuels the populist narrative of a corrupt establishment and the need to dismantle the entire body of critical voices (Bergmann, 2020). Populism typically concentrates power on leaders deemed infallible, and the tendency to build a leadership cult easily leads to narratives that liberally blend facts, faux facts, proven lies, and absolute fantasies. Demagogic leaders often make appeals that validate existing beliefs, identities, and prejudices to solidify popular support against traditional political parties. Since populism believes that their political enemies constantly plot to bring leaders and movements down, it resorts to disinformation as a legitimate means to fight opponents (Engesser et al., 2017; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). However, studies also indicate that many politicians and political parties within the more traditional spectrum are resorting to various forms of populist tactics to attract audiences (Geurkink et al., 2020; Markov & Đorđević, 2023). In the context of India and Pakistan, there is some anecdotal evidence of mainstream political parties adopting populist strategies, including political hate speech and disinformation. Still, we do not expect these tendencies to be more pronounced in the rhetoric of traditional political parties compared with populist parties in these two countries. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Populist leaders engage more in hate speech and disinformation than traditional political leaders in India and Pakistan.

In populist rhetoric, hate speech and disinformation complement each other. Hameleers and colleagues (2022) explain the linkages between the aims and motives of disinformation and hate speech. They argue that both concepts "involve (des)identification processes in which groups are attacked and ascribed negative traits in a stereotypical way" (Hameleers, 2020, p. 2). While all hate speech is essentially disinformation (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019), agents of disinformation resort to varying levels of hate speech to enhance negative sentiments toward certain out-groups (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Hameleers et al., 2022; Udupa et al., 2023). Hate speech is inherently unfactual because if the claims are based on facts, it would not be hate speech (Hameleers et al., 2022). However, disinformation partly or significantly borrows from hate speech. The more hate speech against the out-groups, the more fabrication and manipulation of information, and hence more disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2022).

Although these are very important arguments for understanding the relationship between hate speech and disinformation within populist discourses, empirical investigation is necessary to substantiate these claims further. Moreover, there remains a lack of clarity about which specific elements of populism

correspond to particular aspects of hate speech and disinformation. As outlined in the methods section, these three complex concepts are composed of various indicators that can be measured along a spectrum of intensity. It would be insightful to determine whether these concepts are horizontally correlated or whether they form diagonal associations without following a clear directional pattern. Specifically, we investigate whether intense indicators of populism, such as Manicheism, are linked with equally intense indicators of hate speech like advocating violence, and intensive forms of disinformation, such as spreading harmful falsehoods. We anticipate such correlations, and thus, we hypothesize the following:

H2: The various indicators (from low to high) of populism, hate speech, and disinformation are significantly related to each other.

As discussed earlier, to examine the complex intersections among populism, hate speech, and disinformation, a productive approach would be to deconstruct these concepts. Evidence from the political environments in India and Pakistan presents a mixed picture, supporting our initial argument that not all forms of populism pose the same level of danger. In postcolonial societies like India and Pakistan, pro-people and anti-elite rhetoric hold democratic value, particularly where colonial institutional structures still prevail and contribute to the marginalization of common people (Zia, 2022). During their tenures as populist prime ministers, Narendra Modi of India and Imran Khan of Pakistan undertook several initiatives, including setting up public secretariats and appearing on live TV weekly to talk directly to the people about their grievances against the government functionaries. These efforts garnered substantial public support for these leaders (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024). On the other hand, both countries have also witnessed escalating levels of polarization and hate crimes in recent years (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Yilmaz et al., 2022). In India, for instance, religious minorities have been subjected to organized violence, with the Modi government playing a supportive role (Thomas, 2023; Udupa et al., 2023). The Indian populist government has deliberately fostered division by pitting Hindus against other religious minorities (Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024). This divisive strategy, grounded in Manicheist views, is particularly concerning because it is driven by the dissemination of false and toxic information. The cases of India and Pakistan are relevant for investigating which form of populism is more dangerous and how strongly it is connected to hate speech and disinformation. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: The Manichean stance is more strongly associated with hate speech and disinformation compared to pro-people and anti-elite stances in the populist discourse in India and Pakistan.

Methodology

Researchers have applied various methods, including computerized content analysis, manual content analysis, and thematic analysis, to investigate the presence and manifestation of hate speech and disinformation in populist discourses. Although computerized content analysis is generally preferred for analyzing social media content, we opted for manual content analysis in this study for two reasons. First, we view hate speech and disinformation as comprising various indicators that need to be reported to fully understand the process of information disorder. Simply recording the presence or absence of these concepts does not provide a complete picture of the gradation of populism. Second, most of the posts were in the national languages of India and Pakistan. Developing uniform computerized codes was problematic because

of contextual factors. We preferred manual coding because it allowed us more time to consider the meanings and contexts when evaluating posts on X.

We analyzed all the posts of the eight accounts on X (formerly Twitter) for a one-year period from the start of September 2022 till the end of August 2023. Of these eight accounts, four belonged to the populist leaders and their political parties, including the X account of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (henceforth BJP) and the account of Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf party (henceforth PTI). Similarly, four accounts, belonging to the traditional political parties including the account of Rahul Gandhi and his Congress party and the account of Maryam Nawaz and her Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (henceforth PMLN), were examined for the prevalence of populism, hate speech, and disinformation tendencies. To be included in the study, the posts should have had at least 500 likes. All posts containing at least one indicator of any of the three variables were included in the coding process.

Data Collection

Index for Measuring Populism

In their content analysis studies, researchers have measured populism in terms of people-centricity, anti-elite rhetoric, and a Manichean outlook (Hameleers, 2020; Mudde, 2007). We adopted this three-indicator index to collect data for the measurement of populism in the X posts of the eight selected accounts in India and Pakistan.

People-centrism is the ideological notion that the general populace is inherently virtuous and the sole legitimate source of power. Populist leaders position themselves as the embodiment of the will of the people, emphasizing unrestricted popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2007). Some representative posts in this category include Pakistani politician Maryam Nawaz criticizing her political opponent on X: "You cannot dictate the Awam (people). They know who to choose. They kicked you out from the office" (Nawaz, 2023). Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi posted, "People are tired of Congress corruption. BJP stands committed to fulfill aspirations of the people" (Modi, 2022).

On the other hand, anti-elitism is the belief that political, economic, and intellectual elites are inherently corrupt and self-serving. It contends that a small but powerful and privileged group has manipulated politics for its benefit. According to populists, most politicians prioritize the interests of these wealthy elites, who wield excessive influence on political decisions (Thomas, 2023). For example, the populist Bharatiya Janata Party posted, "Congress is a savior for the corrupt elites. It believes in corruption and commission for rich people. Reject the rich and corrupt" (BJP, 2023a).

Similarly, the Manichean outlook frames politics as a moral struggle between good and evil. This perspective polarizes the struggle, depicting the leader as a divine force emerging to help the people overcome evil and protect the soul of the nation. Populist discourse not only attributes blame but also mystifies the struggle, presenting it as a supernatural battle for the preservation of worthy values or absolute truth (Hameleers, 2020). For example, the official account of the Indian populist party BJP posted, "Congress

is a hereditary party. It has exploited our land for decades. Now it's the time to raise against it. Help us to defeat it. This is a struggle for India" (BJP, 2023c).

Index for Measuring Hate Speech

To measure hate speech, we adopted the index developed by Bahador and Kerchner (2019). It includes a total of six attributes that we computed into three indicators. These include attaching negative action/character, dehumanization/demonization, and calling for violence/death.

The first indicator is portraying the opponents in a negative action or in a negative character. Statements of negative actions challenge the actions/policies of the out-group as outrageous and unacceptable, calling for their poor treatment and alienation (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019). Negative characters refer to verbal insults and abusive language against targeted people. This is worse than negative actions because it suggests that the negativity is an inherent part of the group and less likely to change, whereas actions, being episodic, could be an anomaly not intrinsic to the group's nature. Some representative posts include the official account of Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz reacting to the indictment of an opposition political leader: "A highly trained gang of swindlers & stealers are now in jails" (PMLN, 2022). The BJP posted about Rahul Gandhi, the head of the rival Congress party, "he is shallow minded. Has no idea about governance. He is only good in sycophancy" (BJP, 2023b).

The second indicators for measuring hate speech are dehumanization and demonization. Dehumanization refers to portraying targeted groups as inferior using terms such as pigs, rats, or monkeys. In contrast, demonization involves depicting an enemy as a monstrous or superhuman threat, likening them to robots or diseases like cancer that pose a mortal danger to the in-group's survival (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019). When presented this way, the destruction of the adversary is not only acceptable but also desirable and beneficial for the in-group and its survival (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019). For instance, the populist party PTI posted, "They are behaving like monsters. They should know their actions would meet a strong reaction. We know how to deal with thugs" (PTI, 2023c).

The third category is violence/death. It represents the worst hate speech because it threatens the group members with physical violence (words like hurt, rape, starve, torturing, and mugging are used) or even calls for literal violence that is lethal—literal death and destruction (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019). In a representative post, the PTI account posted, "we will burn their houses. If something happens to IK (Imran Khan), we wont let them live" (PTI, 2023b).

Index for Measuring Disinformation

Finally, we adopted the index from the studies of Hameleers (2023) and Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) to measure disinformation in the posts of eight X accounts. Although these studies distinguish between misinformation and disinformation in terms of intentions, we consider them synonymous because the posts come from their personal and official accounts and hence are intentional. Second, in populist discourses where out-groups are attacked and exposed to incivility and hate speech, all problematic information is disinformation—likely motivated by a political agenda (Hameleers et al.,

2022). The three-indicator index consists of manipulated information, fabricated information, and potentially harmful information.

The first indicator of manipulation includes all posts that manipulate genuine information to deceive people. In this category, not all information is untrue but is contaminated to secure political interests. In one representative post, for example, the PTI official account posted when its supporters staged countrywide riots after the indictment of its leader, "straight firing on the people, Awan injured who is resisting for the country" (PTI, 2023a). The post was liked by tens of thousands of people, although the footage showed police fired in the air to disrupt the rioters.

The second indicator is fabricated content where outright lies are presented. Posts containing such disinformation are not supported by any evidence or facts (Hameleers, 2023; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). For example, Imran Khan posted, "Clearly the arrest claim was mere drama because real intent is to abduct & assassinate me" (Khan, 2023a). This is a fabrication because he was presented in court on corruption charges and later proved guilty.

The third indicator of disinformation is misinformation that has the potential to harm people (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This is evident in posts where out-groups and political opponents are associated with fabricated or manipulated content that can harm their personal safety or professional reputation. For example, Maryam Nawaz posted, "Stop treating Imran like a political leader because he's not. He has been launched & funded to wreck & ruin Pakistan & plunge the nation into pits of misery & despair" (Nawaz, 2022a).

Data Coding and Reliability Tests

We hired four coders with master's degrees in regional politics. They had a good understanding of the political parties in India and Pakistan and had completed a project on the qualitative analysis of populism in South Asia. We arranged a daylong training for them in the coding scheme. A single coder was required to code the posts of one political leader and his political party; hence, the eight X accounts were coded by the four coders. Initially, they were asked to code 500 posts of a political leader and 500 posts of his political party (hence, a total of 1,000 posts). The authors also coded the same posts through mutual agreement. Cohen's Kappa test was performed to check the inter-coder reliability, and the values were above .07 for the six tests. Two tests on disinformation yielded values of .67 and .64. We discussed the indicators again and coded new posts. In the second attempt, the reliability test yielded .77 and .75 scores, respectively.

Findings

We finalized a total of 7,141 posts related to the indicators in this study. The major contributors include the official account of PTI (17.4%), personal account of Narendra Modi (17.2%), the official account of PMLN (15.6%), Rahul Gandhi (11.6%), official account of BJP (10.1%), Maryam Nawaz (9.6%), Congress party (9.3%), and Imran Khan (9%). Overall, Indian politicians produced slightly more posts (52%) than Pakistani politicians did. Similarly, populist parties produced more posts (56%) than traditional parties. The majority of tweets were about politics (68%) when compared with other topics.

RQ1: To What Extent the Concepts of Populism, Hate Speech, and Disinformation are Present in the Digital Political Discourse in India and Pakistan?

Table 1. Prevalence of Populism, Hate Speech, and Disinformation in the Political Discourse in India and Pakistan.

Category	Country	M (SD)	T test (p value)	Cohen's d
Populism	India	1.32(.89)	.237(.01)	.84
	Pakistan	1.89(.78)		
Hate Speech	India	1.46(.978)	15.2(.01)	.87
	Pakistan	1.87(.759)		
Disinformation	India	1.12(.920)	22.58(.02)	.85
	Pakistan	1.58(.786)		

As shown in Table 1, an independent-sample *t* test was run to determine whether the political leaders of India and Pakistan engaged differently in populism, hate speech, and disinformation on their X accounts. With respect to the strategy of populism, Pakistani politicians ($M = 1.89$, $SD = .78$) resorted to it more than their Indian counterparts ($M = 1.32$, $SD = .89$). This difference is statistically significant ($t = .237$, $p < .01$) with a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = .84$). Similarly, when comparing the hate speech produced by the political leaders of the two countries, Pakistani politicians ($M = 1.87$, $SD = .75$) engaged in this practice more than Indian politicians ($M = 1.46$, $SD = .97$). This difference is statistically significant as well ($t = 15.2$, $p < .01$) with a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = .87$). Finally, in terms of producing disinformation, Pakistani politicians ($M = 1.58$, $SD = .78$) produced more disinformation than their Indian counterparts ($M = 1.12$, $SD = .92$). The statistical test yielded a significant difference between the two categories ($t = 22.58$, $p < .02$) with a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = .85$).

These differences primarily arise from two main factors. First, the prevalence of information disorder is often linked to hardcore populist leaders, who tend to amplify such issues, particularly when they are not in government (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019). Currently, in Pakistan, the populist party PTI, led by the charismatic Imran Khan, is in opposition. To exert pressure on the government and sustain their supporters' enthusiasm, they increasingly resort to producing contentious information.

Second, studies show that disinformation disorder is high in societal discourse during periods of political instability and significant events (Estellés & Castellví, 2020; Hameleers, 2020). Over the past two years, Pakistan has experienced significant political instability. Events such as the removal of the PTI government in April 2022, the establishment of an interim government at the central and provincial levels, delays in conducting elections, the imprisonment of political leaders, and incidents of political violence have kept the political climate very turbulent (Hussain et al., 2024). In contrast, the BJP government in India has maintained a strong grip on the political environment, thereby limiting opportunities for opposition parties to exploit the situation.

H1: Populist Leaders Engage More in Hate Speech and Disinformation as Compared to the Traditional Political Leaders in India and Pakistan**Table 2. Comparison of Populist/Non-Populist In Terms of Engaging in Information Disorder.**

Type of Information Disorder	Type of Political genre	M(SD)	T test (<i>p</i> value)	Cohen's d
Hate Speech	Populist	2.07(.842)	40.53(.001)	.79
	Non-populist	1.31(.742)		
Disinformation	Populist	1.64(.94)	32.03(.001)	.76
	Non-populist	1.02(.66)		

As shown in Table 2, an independent-sample *t* test was run to determine whether the two indicators of information disorder differed from each other in the populist and non-populist discourse. The table shows that populist leaders significantly resorted to hate speech ($M = 2.07$, $SD = .84$) compared with non-populist leaders ($M = 1.31$, $SD = .47$). This difference is statistically significant ($t = 40.53$, $p < .001$) with a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = .79$). Similarly, the table shows that populist leaders produced ($M = 1.64$, $SD = .94$) more posts based on disinformation compared with non-populists ($M = 1.02$, $SD = .66$). The statistical test yielded a significant difference between the two categories ($t = 32.03$, $p < .001$) with a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = .76$).

These findings that populist leaders often engage in hate speech and disinformation are in line with the existing literature in general (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019; Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Udupa et al., 2023; Yilmaz et al., 2022). Populist leaders in Pakistan and India adopt abrasive approaches and openly express hostility toward opposition political groups. For example, the Pakistani populist leader Imran Khan posted, "Many Rangers firing straight into unarmed citizens. This is barbarism and worst terrorism. It's the common people to decide till when we remain in this brutal system" (Khan, 2023b). In this post, the elements of fabrication (firing straight), dehumanization (barbarism), and Manicheanism (people vs. system) are observed, which shows how these parties resort to problematic information.

What stands out in these findings is the significant amount of hate speech and disinformation generated by traditional political leaders. Notably, at least one-third of their posts contained some form of hate speech or disinformation. This underscores the extent to which the political environments in India and Pakistan are poisoned by dangerous rhetoric, with serious implications for democracy, human rights, and social cohesion.

H2: The Various Indicators (From Low to High) Populism, Hate Speech and Disinformation are Significantly Related to Each Other

Table 3. Correlation Between the Indicators of Populism, Hate Speech, and Disinformation.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Negative actions /characters	1								
2. Demonization	.145*	1							
3. Violence/death	-.126**	.222**	1						
4. Fabrication	.611**	.207**	.231**	1					
5. Manipulation	.075**	.417**	.134**	.241**	1				
6. Potential to harm	.272**	.013	.560**	.269*	.022*	1			
7. Pro-people	-.146**	.150**	-.187	.083*	.124*	-.211	1		
8. Anti-elitism	.204**	.102**	-.111**	.328**	.411**	.599**	-.167	1	
9. Manicheanism	.140**	.331**	.695**	.114*	.312**	.656**	.148*	.478**	1

As shown in Table 3, most of the indicators of the three concepts are significantly correlated with each other. For example, negative action/character, which is the first attribute of the speech, is strongly correlated to fabrication (.611**) compared with all other attributes in the study. Similarly, there is a moderate to strong correlation between the use of demonizing language and manipulated information (.417**). In one representative post from the Pakistani political discourse, Maryam Nawaz wrote, "Gen. Bajwa, Gen. Faiz, Saqib Nisar and the list is inexhaustible. There's another list of friends & family, that he fleeced & lived & fed off & then betrayed. Monster doesn't believe in friendship" (Nawaz, 2022b). This post manipulates the facts. In reality, it was General Bajwa, the chief of the Pakistani military, who deceived Imran Khan by forming a coalition of opposition political parties to oust him from the government. Imran Khan remained loyal to General Bajwa until the very end.

Similarly, hateful content containing threats of violence and death is strongly and significantly correlated with the potential to harm (.56**) and Manicheanism (.69**). Likewise, fabrication is moderately correlated with anti-elitism (.328*) and potential to harm (.269*) compared with other categories. Interestingly, manipulated information had a moderate to strong correlation with anti-elitism (.411**) and Manicheanism (.312**). Potentially harmful disinformation is strongly correlated with anti-elitism (.599**) and Manicheanism (.656**). This means that harmful disinformation is mainly directed against opposition parties and systemic forces. Similarly, there is a weak but significant correlation between the pro-people approach and Manicheanism. Finally, there is a moderate to strong correlation between anti-elitism and Manicheanism (.478**).

Overall, the table illustrates a strong correlation between varying levels of hate speech, populism, and disinformation. Although previous research has hinted at this connection, our analysis provides empirical evidence to support this association. Moreover, the significant correlations among the low, medium, and

high levels of these concepts emphasize the need to study them as interconnected processes rather than in binary ways.

H3: The Manichean Stance is More Strongly Associated With Hate Speech and Disinformation Compared to Pro-People and Anti-Elite Stances in the Populist Discourse in India and Pakistan

Table 4. Manicheism as Predictor of Hate Speech and Disinformation.

	Manicheism		Anti-elitism		Pro-people	
	B	<i>B</i>	B	<i>B</i>	B	<i>B</i>
Constant	.179		.241		.267	
Hate Speech	.463	.414**	.149	.106	.252	.147
Disinformation	.336	.347**	.283	.094	.197	.074
	F 43.075 <i>P</i> < .001		F 67.324 <i>P</i> > .05		F 98.46 <i>P</i> > .05	
	R ² .43		R ² .10		R ² .002	

Table 4 shows the three separate linear regressions that were run to determine which form of populism (Manicheanism, anti-elite and pro-people attitudes) more usefully predicted hate speech and disinformation. The first model of Manicheanism is statistically significant (F 43.075 *P* < .001), explaining the substantial variance in hate speech and disinformation (43%). The second model of anti-elitism (F 67.324 *P* > .05) and the third model of pro-people (F 98.46 *P* > .05) were not significant. Overall, the table shows that Manicheanism significantly predicts hate speech and disinformation, while both anti-elitism and pro-people approaches do not result in any significant predictions.

These unique findings suggest that Manichean populism is primarily based on hate speech and disinformation, making it a dangerous notion because it identifies an enemy group and then unleashes hateful and false information against it. For example, in a Hindi language post, populist BJP wrote, "The shameful remarks about our valiant heroes by Rahul Gandhi are extremely dangerous. He is a security risk and working against the wishes of the people" (BJP, 2022). However, a pro-people and anti-elite approach can benefit public discourse if not tainted with hate speech and disinformation. For example, the official account of PTI posted, "We are working for the people. People's needs should be the top priority. We are overwhelmed by the public trust" (PTI, 2023d). This pro-people approach is a legal democratic discourse.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal interesting intersections among the traits of populism, hate speech, and disinformation. Compared with the traditional political parties, populist parties and their leaders increasingly resorted to various forms of hate speech and disinformation to criticize their opponents. Studies suggest populist leaders resort to hateful content to scapegoat certain societal groups (Bahador & Kerchner, 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). As discussed by scholars, the key convergent point in the three concepts is the division of society into two camps or at least declaring a particular group responsible for all the problems without presenting facts to substantiate their claims (Vasist et al., 2023;

Waisbord, 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2022). In this study, we found that the political parties mainly categorized political opposition parties as their nemeses. To win the argument in the court of the public, they fabricate available information and associate the opposite group with negative attributes. Furthermore, the extent of hate speech and disinformation depends on the political context. Pakistani politicians produced more disinformation and hateful content than Indian politicians because of the prevalence of political instability in the country.

The findings of this study add to the existing scholarship by empirically correlating various levels of populism, hate speech, and disinformation. At the foundational level, the attributes of pro-people rhetoric, negative attributes, and fabrication are correlated in political discourses. Similarly, at the middle and high levels, the attributes of populism, hate speech, and disinformation strongly correspond to each other. This underscores the importance of examining problematic information as a process rather than through a binary present/absent model.

This study provides valuable theoretical insights into the intersection of populism, hate speech, and disinformation. While the core arguments in Western scholarship are relevant in the South Asian context, as both India and Pakistan, former British colonies, have largely retained political structures that significantly influence their sociocultural environments. The populist political debates in these countries are not entirely different from those in the West. Typically, opposition political parties bear the brunt of populist wrath and are subjected to hate and disinformation campaigns. The intensity of vilification increases when populists are challenged by vulnerable groups, such as women and religious and ethnic minorities. However, there are exceptions. Not all forms of populism are equally harmful. While Manichean rhetoric is associated with hate speech and disinformation, a pro-people and anti-elite approach is not inherently dangerous and may even be beneficial in certain contexts. For example, populist parties in India and Pakistan have integrated many previously marginalized groups into mainstream politics and abolished some colonial-era rules and regulations that gave substantial powers to civil and political elites. Therefore, it is essential to examine this nexus as a process and identify its problematic aspects rather than make broad assumptions.

In addition, traditional political parties in India and Pakistan resort to hateful and misleading information to counter populists. This is a dangerous trend that poisons the entire political environment, including the media and communication sectors, and has serious implications for society. One contributing factor is the weak institutional framework in South Asia, which struggles to hold populists accountable. In response to populist pressures, traditional parties have adopted a tit-for-tat approach, further deepening societal polarization.

Furthermore, Indian populism differs from Pakistani populism in one significant way. Indian populism has an ideological facet, with populist leaders envisioning a Hindu state that competes with world powers. This insurgent populism frequently uses cultural tropes to connect people with the past, and its validation comes from strong Indian nationalism, embedding the nuances of hate speech and disinformation in Hindu majoritarianism. In contrast, Pakistani populism exhibits traces of reactionary discourse focused on contemporary political issues. Its validation comes from the personal charisma of the leader, with the issues of hate speech and disinformation being personalized and devoid of symbolic significance.

This study has certain limitations. First, we used manual coding because of the bilingual nature of the posts on X, which may have affected the rigor of our analysis. Second, although we attempted to code the three concepts at both the language and veracity levels, we could not guarantee the intentions behind these messages. We also examined the replies and clarifications posted by politicians for more accurate coding, but there is still the possibility of missing some nuances. We invite future studies to investigate the associations between different gradations of these concepts to better theorize this juncture.

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