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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN THE AGE OF MISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to find out about the strategies used in the dissemination of misinformation and fake news in the digital age by using the critical discourse analysis (Henceforth CDA) by Wodak, (2015) and the socio-cognitive approach of van Dijk (2008). A methodology marker of the research was the demonstrated utilization of a mixed corpus-linguistic and critical discourse analytic qualitative research method to explicate the linguistic properties, discursive devices, and social-contextual features at play. Research data were gathered from the different social media platforms featuring the viral misinformation cases.This research found that misinformation regularly employs emotional language, ambiguous syntactic structures, and persuasive devices, and familiar discourse strategies identified involved selective framing, decontextualization, or circular argumentation. Beyond the linguistic strategies, the research analyses the role of the platform algorithms, echo chambers, and cultural biases in the spread of misinformation. What this investigation adds to the literature on misinformation is a discourse-analytical synthesis, an account of the possible interventions to address misinformation, and a focus on how critical media literacy is important. This was deemed noteworthy by the researchers as it presents an innovative perspective about how linguistic choices, discourse strategies, and socio-technical networks are interconnected in the spreading of misinformation in the context of contemporary societies. The findings from this research speak to the researchers' call for attention from policymakers, educators, and media professionals to intervene and counter misinformation in contemporary society.

1. Introduction

In the digital world disrupted by misinformation and fake news, and the associated challenges which it presents in public discourse and democratic life, recognizing misinformation is ever more difficult. Misinformation disseminates quickly, in large quantities, across different digital platforms; often the speed at which misinformation is spread exceeds the speed at which accurate information can spread. Factors such as cognitive biases, echo chambers, and a lack of trust in traditional information sources contribute to the ongoing flow of misinformation. In the online space, the distinction between fact and fiction is disappearing, and an argument has been made that we have now entered a post-truth era in which feelings and opinions are more influential in creating public opinion. In the digital age, misinformation has a wide range of repercussions that are significant, and have meaningful relationships to public health, civilization and democracy.

A plethora of scholarship in other fields has sought to comprehend how the economy of fake news and disinformation operates. Discourse analysis is particularly relevant, as it offers a methodological approach to analyzing how language constructs social realities, especially around digital misinformation. This paper will utilize CDA as an analytic approach to explore how the language and rhetorical strategies involved in the production and circulation of fake news and misinformation within digital spaces are mediated.

The objectives of the project are toidentify and document key linguistic and discoursal features that underpin the production of disinformation narratives across various digital platforms, examine the role of social and contextual factors in the production and circulation of disinformation narratives, and determine the interconnectedness of linguistic choices, argumentative structures, contextual features and rhetorical strategies in constructing disinformation narratives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Discourse analysis: Theories and approaches

Discourse studies is an interdisciplinary subject in which language use is researched in all kinds of social contexts from equally diverse theoretical and methodological points of view. However, Fairclough (2013: 3) defines discourse studies as research of language related to power and ideology, which examines how language is used to hide power relationships in discourse. Van Dijk (2008) reiterates that language regulates cognitive models of the world and society, and establishes the relationship of discourse, cognition, and society by putting

mental models forward as the mediating factors connecting social orders and discourse orders.

Wodak and Meyer (2016) explain that critical discourse studies (CDS) as an interdisciplinary research field that is problem-oriented and focused on the relationship between language and social practice. They argue CDS is useful for researching how language constructs social inequalities. Also worth mentioning is Gee's (2014: 8) idea of "big D" discourse in which discourse is not just about language but is also about ways of acting, ways of interacting, ways of valuing, believing, and using lots of different kinds of objects and technologies. All of these different approaches seek to understand how language constructs and is constructed by social worlds; Blommaert (2005) emerges from this discussion as a proponent of globalizing discourse analysis and of discourse studies' need to connect to and include contemporary socio-linguistics and linguistic anthropology to understand better the complex means of contemporary discourse.

2.2. Misinformation and fake news: Definitions and impact

Misinformation and fake news have become two of the most divisive words in today's digital society over the last few years. The definitions and use of these terms vary in how they are fashioned and used. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017: 5) construct misinformation as false information shared without harmful intent, and disinformation as false information generated and shared with harmful intent. The acknowledgment of these differences is important for establishing effective interventions to address the problemof online misinformation. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017: 213) posit that fake news are news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers. They also emphasize deliberateness as a central feature of fake news.

The effects of misinformation and fake news on society are extensive and complicated. Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news travels faster, farther and deeper than true news on Twitter, which has implications for molding public opinion, and decision-making processes. Lewandowsky et al. (2017) connect the persistence of misinformation to cognitive biases, in addition to a trust reduction in traditional sources of information. Moreover, as Tandoc et al. (2018: 138) state, fake news has become a floating signifier,it could refer to anything from sensational politics, propaganda, fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and partisan media. This overlapping understanding of fake news makes it problematic to understand what fake news involves and how to solve it. Misinformation, perhaps due to its ubiquity, can represent a significant threat to democratic processes, public health

interventions and social cohesion all of which have political implications (Bradshaw & Howard,2017).

2.3. Previous studies on discourse analysis in media and digital communication

Over the past decade, discourse analysis has increasingly become relevant through a variety of research within media and digital communications studies scholarship offering critical insights into how communication is being produced and circulated in the digital age. For example, research by Van Dijk (2013) on discourse and racism in the press serves to highlight how CDA can reveal the ideological logic of news media and the ways in which language can solicit social injustices in news media. Furthermore, Fairclough (2010) in his work on the discourse of New Capitalism highlights how discourse analysis can also provide a way to investigate how economic ideologies can be assimilated into media texts.

In a study on social media studies, KhosraviNik and Unger (2016) draw upon critical, social media discourse studies and CDAto examine how technology, discourse and society intersect on digital platforms, indicating that traditional CDA may need to be reconsidered given the multimodal and interactive nature of online communication. Bouvier and Machin (2018: 180) add to the importance of social media critical discourse research by saying that this new field is situated to respond to the distinct set of issues that lead digital communication, such as the role of algorithms and platform affordances that produce and limit digital discourse. In discussion on misinformation, Carlson (2020) uses discourse analysis, and argues that fake news is constructed in addition to being contested, in journalistic metadiscourse by exemplifying through her study the intricate negotiations of authority and credibility that are negotiated in the current digital media context. Collectively, these research projects indicate the agility and analytical potential of discourse analysis to attend to language, media, and society in the digital era.

3. Methodology

3.2. Data collection methods

The primary task in data collection is aggregating a collection of provable misinformation from various online sources which include fact-checking sites, social media platforms, and sources that have recurring problems with the presence of fake or misinformation. The collection of cases is selected purposefully, with the goal of getting a collection that is representative of a wide array of subjects, commensurate with a variety of formats, and a variety of dissemination sources. For cases to be included, they had to meet three criteria: (1) it was identified as false or misleading by a fact-checking site; (2) it had a significant amount

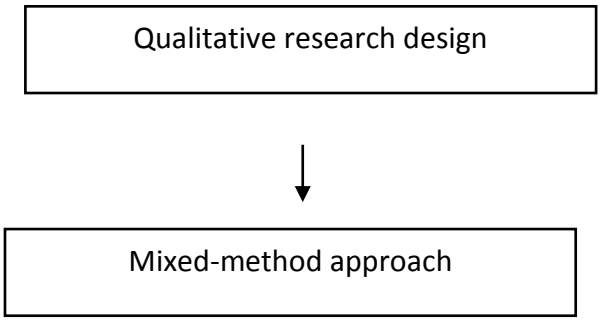
of attention, i.e., views, shares, and comments; and (3) it was contemporaneous with a significant sociopolitical event. All mis- and disinformation will be in English and will be recent to maintain currency; the threshold for current started at five years. Metadata will be kept per item, and that includes such things as publication date, the platform, and metrics associated with attention. The corpus is an anonymized adversarial corpus for ethical and data privacy reasons, and only items that met at least some threshold for spread/misinformation are kept.

Table 1. Source of data

Source	Number	Code
Websites	20	Web
Social media	20	Som
Online outlets	20	Ono

3.1. Research design

To examine how mis- and disinformation occur linguistically and discoursally in conjunction with social-contextual factors, this study used a qualitative research design that is tooled by corpus linguistics (CL) and CDA. The research involved three stages: (1) corpus compilation, (2) linguistic analysis, and (3) CDA for a comprehensive exploration of digital misinformation that moved from micro-linguistic details to macro-discourse patterns. The analysis of the corpus is conducted through phase one using corpus linguistics to detect patterns in the data set. The CDA analysis in phase three allows for a more nuanced analysis of the societal implications of these linguistic particularities. We argue that this method of combining CL and CDA can enhance the reliability and the depth of our findings, thereby providing a nuanced attempt at the discursive construction of digital misinformation.



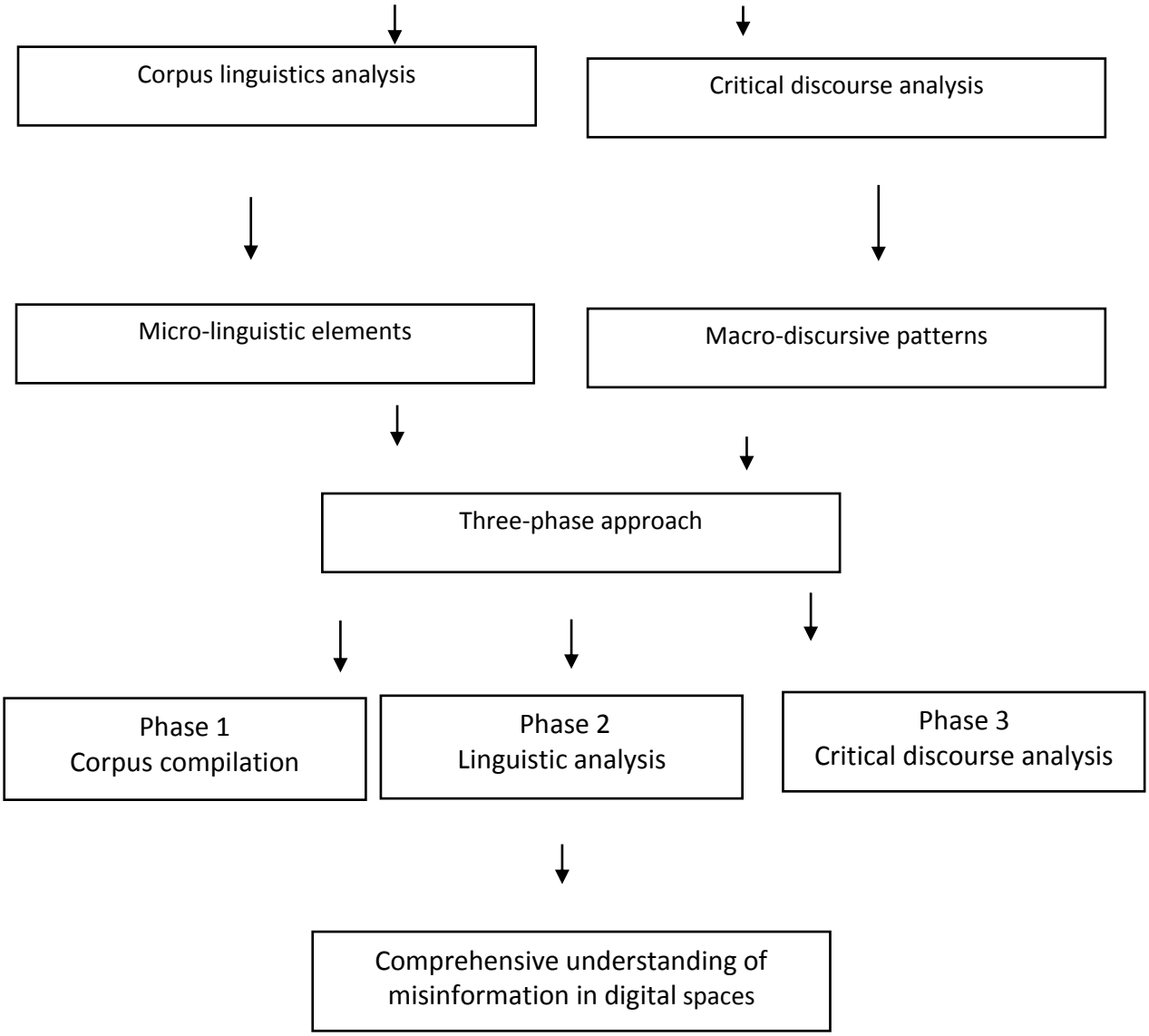


Figure 1. Research design

3.3. Data analysis techniques

This research uses a methodology that spans layers and combines quant and qual methods. Initially, it uses corpus linguistic methods, specifically, methods such as frequency, keyword

and co-location analysis, to identify features and patterns within the corpus. This informs a qualitative phase of analysis that uses a variety of CDAframeworks, specifically drawing on Wodak's (2015) discourse-historical approach and van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive approach. The qualitative analysis of the data addresses considerations including lexical choices and semantic fields, syntactic structures and the implications for readers, rhetorical devices and argumentation strategies, intertextuality and recontextualization, the discursive construction of in-groups and out-groups, and legitimating and delegitimating strategies. In addition, the analysis considers the role of multimodality and platform-specific features in constructing and disseminating misinformation. The triangulation of methods related to quant methods and qual methods is employed to increase the validity and reliability of our findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the discursive practices in the dissemination of digital misinformation.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Linguistic features of misinformation and fake news

The section discussed and defined particular characteristics of language present in altered and false information on a variety of online sites. By analyzing the vocabulary, sentence structures, and methods of persuasion, it aims to describe how language is used for the misinformation and dissemination of altered information.

A summary of these findings was presented in Table 2, which shows the most common lexical features are emotional language, ambiguous terms, and loaded language, with the most frequent linguistic features as complex sentences, passive voice, and nominals. Of the methods of persuasion, appeals to authority, the use of false dilemmas, and ad hominem attacks are the most common. Altogether, alt-sites are using the three types of features of language at the highest frequencies, indicating that misinformation on alt-sites are the most linguistically and potentially most persuasively sophisticated compared to misinformation on social media or television news. These findings suggest that readers need to be especially critical in reading and evaluating the information provided on online sources. Because the sites are manipulating language for various persuasive ends of readers' thinking and feelings.

Table 2. Linguistic features of misinformation and fake news

Linguistic features	Code	Websites	Social media	Online outlets

Lexical choices	Emotional language	EL	150	120	100
	Ambiguous terms	AT	130	110	90
	Loaded words	LW	110	90	80
Syntactic structures	Passive voice	PS	100	80	70
	Complex sentences	CS	140	110	90
	Nominalizations	NOM	120	100	85
Rhetorical devices	Appeal to authority	AA	110	90	75
	False dilemmas)	FD	100	85	70
	Ad hominem attacks	ADA	105	85	75

4.1.1. Lexical choices

Lexical choices are especially important because they help to create implications, frame issues, and persuade. Lexical choices are significant for explaining implications, framing, and persuading, however, this analysis will focus on three main lexical issues: emotional language, ambiguous terms, and loaded words.

The dominant lexical feature of emotional language is most prevalent on websites (150), followed by social media (120), and online news sources (100). This could imply that misinformation attempts to draw the reader in emotionally rather than rationally, trying to snap the audience out of their critical thinking. For example, *shocking revelation* or *terrifying consequences* elicit a strong emotional reaction that can be polarizing, and possibly cause the reader to avoid rational thinking. By not thinking rationally, the reader is more likely to be misled.

The lexical feature of ambiguous terms was more prevalent than other features (130) on websites. This allows the user to interpret something differently, or it could be an ambiguous sentence that is not necessarily false. Phrases such as *some people say* or *experts believe* give the illusion of credibility without actually telling the reader anything verifiable.

The frequency of loaded word use was especially high (110) on websites. This type of language is extremely positive or negative, and loaded words attempt to guide the reader's

thinking by evoking a specific idea or (hopefully) bias. For instance, using *radica*l or *extremist*to label your adversary implies that your argument is already made, without actually making the argument.

When comparing the distribution of the data across platforms, the websites have a higher percentage of all three lexical features, indicating that there may be an active manipulation of complex language when compared to online news or blog outlets. This could be due to the longer form of web writing and the likely, relatively divergent audience for web writing.

The high prevalence of lexical features, which speaks to the ways linguistic bias and representations can be used to enact the principles of sociocognitive in the approach articulated by van Dijk (2008). The high use of congratulatory language, elevating linguistic features and loaded language illustrate the reader or listener's preconceived notions about the news topic area. At the same time, the use of vague language underscores how the information can intend for the reader or listener to make something out of nothing based on what is presented, allowing the reader to create the emotional attachment.

These patterns point to the need for critical media literacy when reading, watching, interpreting online information. Readers and listeners need to have a clear understanding about language representation and be able to identify bias in language. This is where journalists, policy-makers, and educators discuss the media literacy skills in general to ensure that the spread of fake and misleading information doesn't happen in democratic societies.

4.1.2. Syntactic structures

Syntax is crucial as it shapes how misinformation and disinformation are interpreted and understood, thus affecting audience reception. This study specifically focuses on passive voice, complex sentences, and nominalizations, showing that these structures can make it harder to attribute agency, make the interpretation of the text more complicated, and also often use an action to mean a concept, all of which may lend to the ease of propagation for misinformation in that misinformation may find it harder to stickin reader's minds if the text is too simple.

The first data in Table 1 shows here that not all online texts are the same, as there are meaningful differences in the structures that may be seen more or less frequently in online texts. Complex sentences are by far the most common type of structure with 140 appearances in the open web, 110 appearances in social mediaand 90 appearances in online news. The next most common type of structure is nominalizations with, respectively, 120, 100, and 85 occurrences. Passive voice is the least common type of structure overall, but it is, relative to

the other platforms, appears across all three online platforms (100 times on the open web and 80 and 70 times, respectively, in social media and online news).

Not surprisingly, if we compare the distribution of the structures, we see that across the three platforms, the frequencies are the highest in the open web, clearly followed by social media, and lastly, online news. Possibly, this pattern reflects that charitable descriptions more often utilize complex sentence types when conveying a similar message online, likely due to the affordance of increasing mode of long form text with potentially more attentive or motivated audience.

For instance, a complex sentence likely generated from misinformation could say, *While experts argue that the economy is recovering, secret indicators, which mainstream analysts typically overlook, suggest an impending crash that might decimate middle class families*[Web-CS-016].The elements that make complex sentence types more likely laden with consequence or condition clauses also often make it difficult to parse through valid propositional statements, and speculative propositions. The prevalence of syntactic features working to corroborate van Dijk's (2008) sociocognitive model underscoring discourse structure and cognitive engagement. Nominalization is exemplified by the following sentence: *The implementation of new policies has resulted in the marginalization of some social groups*[Som-NOM-014]. The words *implementation* and *marginalization,* for example, of new policies, are nominalized forms of action, which can blur the agent and the responsibility. As a result, nominalizations and complex sentence types do indeed increase cognitive load, which subsequently could impact readers' ability to critically analyze the information presented. An example of a passive construction given is *Millions of dollars were misappropriated from public funds*[Ono-PV-009]. In this sentence, there is no mention of who was responsible for the action of misappropriating the funds so who the sentence is about is not as clear. Thus, the use of passive voice, which muddles agency, also potentially informs reader perceptions about events and responsibilities.

Within these results, the notion underscores the increasing necessity of sophisticated critical literacy skills among readers. The skill to read and deconstruct complex syntactic structures is necessary to understand how information is strategically built to relay a certain mental model of reality based on the changing relationships between language and power (Fairclough, 2013). At a grander scale, the usage of more complex syntax in misinformation reflects the evolving nature of fake news and that misinformation producers might be adapting their linguistic strategies to appear more legitimate or impactful, which consequently changes the strategies required by fact-checkers, educators, and policymakers. By discussing syntax in misinformation, it becomes clear that language is so important in shaping cognition and

relationships, but also the information environment, so there is a strong case for interdisciplinary collaboration to confront the latest incarnation of fake news in the digital era.

4.1.3. Rhetorical devices

The use of rhetoric in the spread of misinformation and fake news facilitates the persuasive aura of falsehoods, plays an important role. This analysis examines three categories of rhetorical devices that are most prevalent in misinformation campaigns: appeals to authority, false dilemmas, and ad hominem attacks. These rhetorical strategies take advantage of cognitive biases and emotional responses to further complicate the ability to think critically and rationally evaluate the information provided.

The distribution of the use of rhetorical devices differs depending on which online platform the misinformation is shared. The most use of appeals to authority are on websites (110), followed by social media (90), and then online outlets (75). False dilemmas have a similar pattern distribution, with 100 for websites, 85 for social media, and 70 for online outlets. This indicates the rhetorical strategies for an appeal to authority and false dilemmas are used more on websites, and the third top issue is ad hominem attacks. Ad hominem attacks are less common than the other two rhetorical strategies, but every bit as important. The total ad hominem attacks across all platforms are websites 105, social media 85, and online outlets 75.

Across the data, we see a consistent pattern of sites overall using rhetoric more than the other platforms. This could imply that misinformation presented on websites might have more effective rhetoric, which could be because there are longer texts, which may allow for more complex argumentation. An example of an appeal to authority might be: *Top scientists agree that climate change is a hoax perpetuated by corrupt governments* [Web - AA - 011]; here, an appeal to the authority of scientists is used to present as legitimate an otherwise baseless assertion. A false dilemma might be: *Our borders should be completely closed or the country will have an influx of terrorists* [Som-FD-020]. The discussion is presented as a debate, which is a logical fallacy that fails to recognize the existence of hybrid solutions. An ad hominem attack as we discuss may be *The activist who is lobbying for environmental legislation is just some hippie who is against progress*[Ono-ADA-003]. An ad hominem attack does not refute the merits of the opponent's argument, but challenges their stance or character. This refers to the potential of cognitive processes. It is a further signifier of how the use of rhetorical devices in persuasive discourse can tap into mental models and social representations to influence how the audience will encode the information for later memory

or interpretation. It is also important to note that the frequent use of these strategies is evident in misinformation. They are not entirely synonymous with false information, as they can be present in valid arguments and discourse.

In seeing how much these techniques are used in misinformation, we do begin to see a pattern of how the language is used in misinformation that is likely meant to deceive people by using one or more of these rhetorical devices. Handling the outcome that we have just discussed underscores the necessity of media literacy skills. Viewers need to know what they know about rhetorical devices to critically disassemble them. In other words, it is important to be able to recognize and evaluate rhetorical devices presented in content. This not only speaks to viewers, but also to policy advocates, educational advocates, and journalists. The professionals provide an avenue to foster critical thinking and the support needed for consumers to recognize persuasive strategies in the digital content. In other words, the presence of these rhetorical strategies in misinformation indicates the sophistication of fake news. To combat the scourge of mis/disinformation, it will require a whole-of-society approach. The need for critical discourse analysis, media literacy education and policy in responding to these issues are evident. This will require use of these tools to establish a more robust and discerning information environment.

4.2. Discourse strategies in spreading misinformation

This section will firstly discuss the discourse strategies used to circulate misinformation on sites and platforms located on the internet. The research objective is to identify and compare the frequency of different types of framing techniques, intertextuality types, and types of argumentation patterns used across websites, social media, and online platforms associated with the spread of disinformation or misinformation.In Table 3, there is a synthesis of the principal discourse strategies to spread misinformation on diverse online platforms. There are three main categories that organize the discourse strategies: framing techniques, intertextuality and recontextualization, and argumentation patterns. The table also organizes online platforms into three categories: websites, social media, and online outlets to illustrate how the strategies used to spread misinformation will differ when used in these three platforms.

Table 3. Discourse strategies in spreading misinformation

Discourse strategies	Code	Websites	Social media	Online outlets

Framing techniques	Positive/negative framing	PF/NF	95	120	85
	Selective framing	SF	85	110	75
	Emotional framing	EF	100	140	90
Intertextuality and recontextualization	Intertextual references	IR	80	105	70
	Recontextualization of Events	RE	70	95	65
	Quoting authorities out of context	QOC	60	85	55
Argumentation patterns	Use of logical fallacies	ULF	90	115	80
	Circular reasoning	CR	85	100	75
	Ad hominem attacks	AHT	70	95	65

4.2.1. Framing techniques

The application of framing techniques is crucial in shaping how information is presented and interpreted, especially in relation to misinformation. Framing involves choosing and emphasizing certain aspects of reality in a communication and supporting a particular definition of a problem, causal understanding, moral judgement, and/or course of action. Framing techniques that are implemented can be understood by examining the data in Table 3, which displays that there are multiple forms of framing techniques being implemented across different online platforms.

It is worth noting that emotional framing had the highest quantity of attention on all platforms, specifically on social media (140), website (100), and online outlet (90), which indicates that emotional appeals are particularly popular among individuals who want to engage with their readership and potentially override their cognitive capacity for critical analysis. Positive/negative framing also had a similar distribution of lower quantities throughout but not exactly the same, and selective framing is present, however at a lower rate across all platforms.

Comparing social media to other platforms, social media consistently had the highest amount of every form of framing technique. This is interesting as we constantly consider social media as a platform that is dominated by emotional responses to the content that is being created and shared on there. Nevertheless, websites and online outlets were all using framing techniques, but at different rates, which may speak to different expectations of their audience or content types.

An example is: *Shocking new evidence reveals the devastating impact of government policies on hardworking families* [Som-EF-012], which reveals that emotive language is included in the sentence as a way to invoke an emotional response that would in turn engage a reaction, however, is also a way to overemphasize and/or twist the reader's cognition process toward the objective assessment of the statement. The methods of framing referred to in this work are very consistent with van Dijk's (2008) sociocognitive approach. This approach assumes that mental models are in many ways the central mediating point between discourse and society. Thus, in framing information in a way that is emotionally compelling or narrowly attentive, misinformation creators are in the position to influence the mental representations that people will form to these framed events or issues.

Consistent with van Dijk, the implications for media literacy education, and in public policy development are vast. This highlights the importance of teaching people and providing them the capacity to evaluate the framing of an argument or news story. But it also highlights the need for the people behind the wheel of public policy to consider the ways in which content presentation and algorithmic distribution maybe unwittingly exacerbating the effects of emotionally-framed misinformation.

More broadly, the use of framing in misinformation still raises the complex relationship between our cognitive biases, our emotional reactions and the manner in which we process information in this contemporary media environment. It emphasizes that addressing misinformation will not simply be about a focus on professional fact-checking endeavors but also resilience built into how frames are being manipulated and exploiting our cognitive biases and emotional reactions.

4.2.2. Intertextuality and recontextualization

Intertextuality and recontextualization are key discourse strategies in the spread of misinformation. Intertextuality is when texts refer to or incorporate other texts, while recontextualization is the movement of content from one context to another. That content will often have its meaning and implications changed.

Across our text our analysis in Table 3 shows some interesting patterns across platforms. Intertextual references are most common on social media (105), followed by websites (80), and online outlets (70). Recontextualizing events show a similar distribution pattern, with the most on social media (95), then websites (70), and online outlets (65). Quoting authorities out of context is a less frequent occurrence, but we see a similar distribution of that across these platforms, with the highest on social media (85), then websites (60), and online outlets (55).

If we compare the analysis across platforms, we can see that social media consistently use these strategies more frequently. This makes sense given the nature of social media, where content is shared and then remixed or recontextualized. In social media posts content is often very short which may explain the abundance of references and quoting of authorities to convey complex ideas in a quick manner.

An example of an intertextual reference being used in misinformation might be something like *As Shakespeare said, All the world's a stage*, and *climate scientists are simply actors in the grand theatrics* [Som-IR-007]. It involves a literary reference to give added weight to a baseless conspiracy theory. A recontextualization could be real images or video footage falsely presented with misleading captions or captions in an altered context. For example, a photo of a politician at a charity event might be shared with the caption, *Caught partying while the country suffers*!(Web-RE-0013). This is particularly impactful as it leverages the existing credibility or emotional resonance.

The result is that the misinformation in the picture might seem more plausible or resonant by referencing something we know - texts, events, people. This connects with van Dijk's sociocognitive conceptualization, where discourse is thought of as the intersection of our shared knowledge or sociocognition. The centrality of these processes underscores the notable and alarming need for media literacy that is critical. There needs to be a literacy for the user to read a headline, understand entirely if it is out of context, or see if an authority figure has been misconstrued. The expectation is bigger than current events literacy; the reader needs to know how a digital media that is manipulated implies folded fabric.

To point back at theory, this finding nods its head at Fairclough's notion that intertextuality is a primary site of ideological work in a discourse or that how texts nod to, are recontextualized, or reframed might craft perceptions or belief. In a crypto conversation around misinformation studies, this data pushes us to argue beyond checking something off a list or teaching media literacy. It's not just about finding the buggy claim. It is about giving a reader the literacy to know, question and think critically about the complex interplay of the

intertextual references, recontextualizations, contextual shifts, which are hallmarks of modern misinformation.

4.2.3. Argumentation patterns

The migration of false information on digital platforms, such as social networking sites, websites, and online newsrooms relies on argumentation patterns. Arguments on these platforms are broadly defined. Argumentation includes logical fallacies, circular reasoning, and ad hominem attacks that attempt to shape the orientation of a reader and block critical thought.

While Table 3 shows these three argumentation patterns across digital platforms, these are not mutually exclusive. Logical fallacies are used slightly more, with social media having 115 instances, websites having 90 instances, and online outlets having 80 instances. Circular reasoning articulations follow a parallel trend with usage on social media, foundational websites, and online outlets at a rate of 100, 85, and 75 instances. Ad hominem attacks are also frequent across social media postings with 95 instances, websites with 70 instances, and online outlets with 65 instances.

In comparing these results, the evidence confirms that most fallacious arguments are happening on social media. Both the rapid sharing of information and low content moderation on social media platforms are reasons for its high appropriation of fallacious arguments. This and a quality level of argumentation across digital platforms, the web and online news outlets are platforms for false information, but to a lesser extent than social media sites.

For example, one instance of a common logical fallacy in false information is the statement, *If we allow stricter gun laws, it's only a matter of time before the government confiscates all firearms* [ULF-SM-016]. This fallacy is a complete red herring, where one uses an extreme or unlikely scenario with the sole purpose of making the audience feel fear. Often one sees a circular reasoning present in self-referencing claims like, *this conspiracy theory has to be true, because if the mainstream media was not controlled by elites they would cover it. The fact that they are not leads me to believe that they are trying to hide the truth*[CR-WEB-019]. It appears that this argument is designed to create a closed loop of logic, which does not allow for other forms of perspectives. Other times an argument may use an ad hominem attack on the person or group making the argument, in order to discredit the opposing voice. For instance, [*Dr. Smith's vaccine research cannot be trusted, because he received funding from a pharmaceutical company*][AHT-ONO-008].

This type of argument is an attempt to shift the argument from the substance of the argument to the perceived character flaws in the people making the arguments. Both forms of argumentation fit within van Dijk's (2008) sociocognitive model of argument, which looks at the argumentation from the standpoint of the discourse that structures the agent's representations in the social world of the agent. These examples help to demonstrate how discourse structures can shape cognitive models and how we represent our social reality in our social world. The presentational of these argumentative practices illustrates the nuanced mode of operation of today's misinformation campaigns. They are adept at taking advantage of cognitive biases and emotions in order to prevent people from making logical evaluations to information.

From a CDAperspective these findings would show that there needs to be a renewed emphasis on digital literacy. Empowering individuals with the ability to recognize and deconstruct faulty arguments remains one of the best ways to unpack these issues and to work towards a society which is better able to understand more and more.

In addition, it might be worth considering some interventions from platform providers or policymakers designed to identify or provide context to indicate manipulations relevant to arguments that could be so misleading or deceptive. Since this type of argumentation is used so widely in misinformation campaigns, there should be a broader approach to literacy, policy, and technology interventions to rethink how we argue in order to make a more critically engaged and resilient public.

4.3. Social and contextual factors

The purpose of this section is to delve into the social and contextual factors that impact misinformation and information more broadly when people interact across social media and share ideas and content. This was done by continuing the conversation around platform-specific discourse practices, actor networks, and cultural influences. We hoped to provide a more expansive appreciation for how misinformation and information exist within social-media, online and digital-specific contexts. Social and contextual factors impact the patterns of information sharing we observed in misinformation and information shared on social media, digital and online platforms. Table 4 provides insight into differences in discourse practices, such as features of language (e.g. sentence structure, formality) seen across sites or platforms, diverging actor network patterns and the difference between technically-inclined politically connected authors and journalists that may only be participating for financial means. Additionally, culture and ideology, like the writer's ideology and various local cultural and citizen geographical differences influence the value and production of

misinformation and information by platform. In general, the analysis shows the interconnectedness of the technological, social, and cultural factors in the elaborate misinformation and information system.

Table 4. Social and contextual factors

Social and contextual factors		Code	Websites	Social media	Online outlets
Platform-specific discourse practices	Clear sentence structure	CS	20	25	18
	Formal language	FL	18	22	17
	References	R	15	20	15
Actor networks in misinformation spread	Influence of authors with political ties	IAPT	15	20	18
	Journalists with financial connections	JFC	12	18	15
	Community of commentators	CC	10	17	12
Cultural and ideological influences	Writer's ideology	WI	18	25	20
	Word choice	WC	15	22	18
	Local culture	LC	13	20	17

4.3.1. Platform-specific discourse practices

Each online platform offers avenues for writing, shaping news production, and dissemination in the platform reality. These writing practices around language, text structure, and communicative norms are important to the way false or erroneous content is consumed and circulated.

There are three major writing practices that stand out in the Table 4 data: simple sentences, formal language, and sources. Looking across all three platforms, social network sites have about 25 instances of simple sentences, 22 formal, and 20 sources. Websites include similar

counts and online news have fewest. Given the focus of the case study of the platforms, it is important to point out that social network sites, even though considered informal spaces for sharing and promotion, actually use formal language, and simple sentences in the construction of false information on these platforms more than websites. The individual creating the false information seems to want to use formal language, and echo the way language is structured in relation to other sources of information to construct a message similar to a professional English Majoracademic text.

For instance: *Recent studies have found that climate change is a hoax that has been strategically propagated by misleading entities* [CS-SM-017]. This example contains simple sentences and formal language. The user posting the article could have read this and believed, reading another source, about the hoax. What is more interesting is how much more Twitter and Facebook made use of sources in their writing, compared to the everyday practice of news websites and online news pages.

Citation, even if the blog is fake, or the article that the user read does not cite the research, is very much aligned with van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of news production and the discussion on how news structure shapes the mental tools we use in our reading and interpreting of news, and how this details news credibility. The data presented in this case study contest the prevailing and dominant rhetoric about social media that it is comprised mostly of grammatical errors and incoherent writing. Rather, this study highlights the fact that these users and dissenting fake-news authors are engaging in a particular type of writing that is set up to read like what might be construed as legitimate news that people are reading and sharing.

The analysis suggests a shift in the strategies of misinformation and the need for strategies that are more complex and sophisticated to correspond to the digital literacy and misinformation reality. Furthermore, these practices suggest that by using a CDA lens and understanding of the ways in which communicative practices are framed in a social context can help us understand what Fairclough calls discourse as social practice. If you consider the fabrication of mis/disinformation for the platforms that it moves through in order to adhere to the platform standards -- the language is provided and does provide a way to measure how discourse is both informing and being informed by context.

The widespread impact of this practice and how it has been adopted across platforms, and by media content producers, might lead us to some serious considerations about the impediments to countering this type of misinformation. This points to the fact that the standard indicators of credibility (formal language, citation) are no longer accurate markers of what credibility

can be, and that we need to move toward a much more robust media literacy and digital literacy that leaves behind the superficial deconstruction of language and structure in order to qualify information as true or false.

We'd like to use an understanding of platform remediation to articulate a complex point that misinformation is becoming more complicated by the day and by the various platforms, which makes the detection of and mitigation against misinformation very difficult and underscores the pressure to keep working -- and evolving -- the work we are doing to combat misinformation online.

4.3.2. Actor networks in misinformation spread

Actor networks are an important facilitator of the spread of misinformation on digital platforms. Actor networks are entities, such as authors, journalists, commentators, and connections among the entities, which collectively shape how misinformation is propagated and the effects of specific instances of disinformation. The dynamic relationships that constitute actor networks largely dictate how misinformation will travel and become visible and prominent in the digital spaces.

Table 4 provides an overview of the composition of actor networks across the four platforms. The dominant category of actor network was authors – those with a political connection – on social media platforms (20), followed by online outlets (18) and websites (15). This indicates that those with a political affiliation have a significant impact on the spreading of misinformation through social media. Similarly, journalists with financial connections also took up a large amount of space on social media (18) in comparison to online outlets (15) and websites (12). Commentators also took up a noticeable amount of space on social media (17) compared to online outlets (20) and websites (10).

This data really highlighted the differences between the platforms with a large proportion of networks on social media overall. This could be credited to the ability to share content, the pace of dissemination and the capacity for contagious propagation that social media platforms provide. The data also showed that authors with political affiliations and journalists with financial connections seemed to have more of an influence across all platforms compared to commentators. For example, a key stakeholder in the government will tweet and state incorrectly that *Our political sources have given us the news that the opposition party is planning to put policies into place that will damage the economy* [IAPT-SM-014]. This example depicts how politically and economically ranked individuals can use their privilege to share unverifiable messages.

In connection with van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, we recognize that there are networks of actors at play, contributing to creating possible mental models and social representations. It is through these socially connected actors and possibly paid media players that we understand how people understand and interpret information. This may serve to confirm biases, or create new ones for the target audience.

This network of actors in misinformation prompts questions of governance upon platforms and media literacies. Given socio-cognitive studies suggest that while social media platforms allow for diversity in contents, they may also lead to the rapid dissemination of misinformation through influential networks, and it seems that enhanced fact checking and transparency into sources and intentions of those sharing information are necessary. In this case, we learn that there is a power balance in the digital information space that needs to be understood.

The presence of socio-cognitive actors and financially incentivized narrators in misinformation campaigns brings to light the inequality in society and how the privileged can affect public opinion. In sum, understanding the networks of actors in the dissemination of misinformation means we can appropriately address misinformation. I propose that researchers, in further investigations, should do additional work to understand networks and consider how to interrupt networks in the idea that may hamper the spread of misinformation while also trying to ensure that freedom of expression; and diverse dialogues continue in this space.

4.3.3. Cultural and ideological influences

The formation and distribution of misinformation on digital platforms are strongly influenced by cultural and ideological implications. Within cultural and ideological implications include the writer's ideological motivations, choice of words that indicate cultural preferences, and the cultural localization of sense.

I will discuss some key situated patterns in Table 4. The writer's ideology was noted most commonly on social media (25), trailed by online outlets (20) and websites (18). Word choice was also most similar to social media with the highest frequency (22), followed by online outlets (n=18), and websites (15). The cultural localization of interpretation follows a similar pattern, with the highest tendency on social media (20), trailed by online outlets (17) and websites (13).

In comparing these findings, we see that social media consistently has the highest frequency of cultural and ideological implications. This could result from the characteristics of social

media, and the personal and communal expressions that are frequently present in the content and the social space of social media, which thereby allows for ideological and local cultural contexts to play a significant role in discourses.

For example, consider the following statement: *Our traditional values are under attack by the liberal agenda pushing for radical changes in our education system* [WI-SM-006]. In this sentence, the statement illustrates a conservative ideological perspective, and with the use of loaded words and framing, this person has created a discursive representation of this issue as a conflict between tradition and change. Using van Dijk's socio-cognitive context, we think of the writer's mind models and the discursive representation of the message that is built on some type of ideological belief. The use of specific words in this statement, such as *under attack* and *radical changes*, invokes particular schemas for the audience and potentially reinforce existing ideological divides in the use of these word choices. The cultural and ideological practices of users are consistently woven in with issues of language and social cognition in the processes of misinformation in digital spaces.

In this article, I challenge the notion that misinformation is primarily about inaccurate facts. Instead, I draw attention to the place of deeply held belief systems and cultural frameworks in how we come to understand and know truth. What this data ultimately indicates is the necessity of expanding what it means to contend with misinformation beyond simple fact-checking toward considering misinformation and the broader sociocultural contexts of misinformation while putting these practices in conversation with the principles of CDA. Fairclough explains discourse as socially constitutive and socially shaped.

The data we draw on provides further support for this view, revealing how misinformation reproduces as well as reflects existing social arrangements and power dynamics, with what appears as a prevailing outcome in these video platforms as to the significance of cultural or ideological factors. The implications extend beyond the scholarly and applied. Therefore, misinformation necessitates more than a fact-checking exercise, and instead is about the cultural and ideological matters of some groups in society to be exposed to, and to believe, misinformed and/or disinformation.

Best addressed by media literacy initiatives that hold workshops and provide tools that encourage critical thinking and self-reflexivity, of which we leverage in this study. In conclusion, the consistent influence of cultural and ideological factors in digital spaces reinforces the need for complex and context specific approaches to study and address misinformation, ideally through interdisciplinary perspective across linguistics, sociology,

psychology, and media studies to work toward more expansive and longer-term strategies to cultivate a digitally resilient and critically engaged public sphere.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on examining the linguistic features, discourse strategies, and social-contextual factors relevant to the spread of misinformation across digital platforms. Core findings underlined that misinformation frequently uses emotional language, vague terms, and syntactic complexity to mask who the speaker is and what is being said. In terms of discourse strategies, we noticed patterns of selective framing, appeals to authority, and circular reasoning, to a very high frequency. The analysis sought to disentangle how misinformation is produced and disseminated online by examining platform-specific practices, actor networks, and cultural context. Our analysis pointed explicitly to social media platforms as having a significant role in the spread of misinformation, and we noted that formal language and citation were used to bolster credibility.

The extensive implications of these findings revolve around the cause for action against misinformation. Specifically, we suggest that there is a need for more nuanced digital literacy that gets beyond naïve fact-checking to develop skillsets of critical thinking to see through persuasion and rhetoric, as well as identify logical fallacies. There also needs to be a series of interventions by platforms and policy-makers to flag manipulative argumentation and provide context in which a piece of news is taken up. We ultimately could rely on cross-disciplinary collaboration between linguists, computer scientists, and social scientists to develop better methods of detection and mitigate misinformation that accounts for the *arms race* nature of misinformation evolution.

Despite valuable insights, this study has consequential constraints. By looking into only English-language content, this study potentially misses the cultural and linguistic variations in misinformation practices globally. While this work could be further improved by collecting multilingual datasets and cross-cultural comparisons, more interdisciplinary studies could track the evolution of misinformation strategies over time, and consequently, how manipulative reasoning strategies could evolve over time, given the interventions in place. In addition, there is a need to know more about different demographic groups in how they engage or spread misinformation, and the comparison of intervention form and content. As technology and the information landscape changes, research is needed for an adaptive response to emerging challenges in the fight against digital misinformation.

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