MIGRANTS AND MISINFORMATION:
Key themes in Nigeria, Bangladesh and Malaysia

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1. Introduction

While rhetoric and propaganda have long been core features of public discourse, the prevalence and velocity of false information, or misinformation, has accelerated in the 21st century. With the emergence of digital media as our main forum for the exchange of ideas, and the resulting collision of free expression with a business model built on capturing and maintaining user attention,[1] it has become increasingly difficult to untangle truth from untruth. The problem is compounded by the fact that "bad information" spreads more quickly than "good information",[2] and existing research has developed a theory of how false narratives begin "to take on the heightened status of a plausible reality within a community as pseudoknowledge".[3]

This epistemic crisis, which is a symptom and a cause of fractures in civil society, has the potential to heighten pre-existing prejudices against migrant communities. The meeting of misinformation and migration has generated much attention in highly developed Western democracies, with notable recent examples including former United States' President Donald Trump's provocative and harmful remarks about migrants from Latin America[4] and coverage of the 2015–2016 large-scale migration to and through Europe from Turkey.[5]

Recognizing that the current canon of literature on misinformation may be biased toward Western contexts, in this report we collected data from three under-researched countries: Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. While it is important to note that social media conversation is transnational, by prioritizing geographies outside of Northern America, Europe and Australia we hope to contribute to a fuller understanding of how misinformation informs the discussion around migrants, particularly on social media where false narratives travel quickly.

In this paper, we consider the key concepts relevant to misinformation and describe our methodological approach, which includes social network analysis to identify profiles amplifying misinformation and human coding to detect changes in the content and character of false claims. After considering some limitations, we then examine two themes in turn: emigration to developed countries and host attitudes to Rohingya refugees. In these sections, we analyse examples from social media conversations in Nigeria, Bangladesh and Malaysia, to understand the prominence of misinformation in the conversation around migration and the role that it plays in accelerating harmful narratives. We also consider some of the strategic responses that have had varying degrees of success. We end by tying our conclusions together in a short discussion section to reflect on the theoretical link between misinformation and the social discourse around migration, and the need for (a) critical digital behaviour, (b) effective resources to detect and counter misinformation, and (c) supporting interventions from social media companies.

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[1]   Orlowski, 2020.

[2]   Vosoughi et al., 2018

[3]   Introne et al., 2018.

[4]   Fleuriet and Castellano, 2020.

[5]   European Commission, 2019.

2. Methodology

2.1. Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation

Misinformation, or the negligent or accidental spread of falsehood, is distinct from disinformation, that is, purposeful deception. It is also distinct from malinformation, which describes the malign framing of facts for nefarious purposes.[6] These phenomena have a particular salience on social media platforms, which operate on a highly decentralized mode of communication by "enabl[ing] a direct path from producers to consumers of content".[7] This context can have a significant impact on the ease with which users form opinions and shape them into false or misleading narratives.

The ethical implications of characterizing user-generated content as misinformation, disinformation or malinformation are significant, especially since we do not have the resources to fact check every claim discussed in our analysis. However, by looking at the way in which individual comments coalesce into trends on social media we can understand how the confusion of information feeds a broader discourse that gives colour to false or misleading narratives, or "pseudoknowledge",[8] about migrants. For simplicity, in this paper we use misinformation as an umbrella term to capture the various nuances that stem from the broader category of false or misleading claims.

2.2. Research process

Focusing on the time period between 1 January 2020 and 30 September 2020, our analysis explored two thematic case studies through posts and reactions on the most popular social media platforms in the concerned countries.

- Our first case study focused on Nigeria, with the objective to understand how misinformation plays a role in the discussion of emigration, specifically as it relates to news media reporting around the opportunity for Nigerians to travel overseas in light of restrictions introduced by destination countries.
- Our second case study explored users' reactions to public social media content relevant to Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and Bangladesh.

Our data collection is summarized set out in table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of data collection per country

	Nigeria	Malaysia	Bangladesh
Twitter posts	25 733	-	-
Twitter users	15 936	-	-
Facebook posts	-	30	30
Facebook comments	-	600	600

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6   UNESCO, 2018.

7   Del Vicario et al., 2016.

8   Introne et al., 2018.

Regarding Nigeria, our analysis focused on discussions of Nigerian Twitter users concerning the January 2020 travel restrictions taken by the Trump Administration to limit the extent of travel to and from various countries under the pretext of national security.[9] We collected the data using custom search lexicons in English in Meltwater Explore,[10] a social media data aggregator that allows users to isolate relevant social media content by applying keyword searches written using Boolean logic. After exporting 25,733 Tweets discussing the travel restrictions, we processed the resulting mention network of 15,936 user profiles in the mapping tool Gephi,[11] before identifying a list of top network hubs, or amplifiers in the conversation. A qualitative reading of these user profiles allowed us to uncover key posts featuring misinformation, which occurred in the context of a heated debate about what constitutes ethical and unethical journalism in Nigeria. Throughout, we also used CrowdTangle,[12] a social monitoring tool that records the popularity or prominence of online news content on social media.

For Bangladesh and Malaysia, we curated a sample of the top 30 most engaging public Facebook posts, or seed posts. For this step, we used Fanpage Karma,[13] a social media monitoring tool that allows users to extract public Facebook posts based on a limited keyword search. All of the seed posts were exported based on the following criteria: (a) originated in the target countries, (b) mentioned Rohingya, and (c) emerged in the reporting period between January and September 2020, which was broken down into smaller analysis units to allow for comparison over time. The seed posts were generally published by politicians, journalists and news media outlets, and were selected for their high rate of engagement through likes, shares, and comments which suggested a greater degree of interaction among other Facebook users. For each of seed posts, we analysed the top 20 user comments, which were ranked "Most Relevant" according to the Facebook algorithm. The categories applied in this process were identified by inductive coding[14] and included: Attitude, Criminality, Culture and Lifestyle, Health, Legitimacy and Preferential Treatment (see appendix A). Applying this message specification, we monitored the extent to which the various types of false claims about Rohingya were increasing or decreasing in volume. Since we were interested in understanding the balance between hostile and humanitarian reactions in public user comments, we also applied a sentiment analysis through a human interpretation which tagged comments as either positive, neutral, or negative depending on their perspective towards Rohingya refugees. In combination, these steps allowed us to capture the changing tone of public attitudes towards Rohingya as expressed on Facebook, a key social media platform in both Bangladesh and Malaysia.[15] Although human coding is inherently subjective, coding by knowledgeable local analysts was necessary to capture nuance, such as sarcasm and humour, and also to record sentiment with greater accuracy than most available computer-driven sentiment analyses allow. While we would have preferred to include a larger sample in our analysis, time and budget constraints dictated samples of 600 user comments each for Bangladesh and Malaysia. Future analyses might benefit from a larger dataset, however we have endeavoured for our conclusions not to make generalizations beyond the scope of our research.

3. Thematic case sudies

3.1. Emigration: Travel to developed countries

3.1.1. Emigration and the Nigerian rumour mill

Misinformation in traditional media, or "fake news", has long been recognized as a problem in the Nigerian information environment. In 2009, journalist Sola Odunfa observed that "the Nigerian rumour mill [...] is so powerful that it has permeated the conventional media. Many newspapers and magazines publish products of the rumour mill as authentic news".[16] There have since been concerted efforts to tackle the problem: CrossCheck Nigeria, a project driven by the non-profit organization First Draft News, was launched in 2018 "to help the public make sense of what and who to trust online".[17] Furthermore, the BBC hosted the Beyond Fake News summit in Abuja in January 2019.[18] Despite these initiatives, misinformation continues to characterize the information environment in the country, accelerated by the decentralization effect of social media.[19]

In this broader information context, emigration emerged as a common discussion topic in Nigerian social media conversations. This was particularly prominent in light of various restrictions placed on the ability of Nigerians to travel overseas in 2020, which generated widespread claims of sensational reporting in news outlets. The January 2020 travel restrictions declared under the pretext of national security by the Trump administration in the United States of America constitute a representative example of a key driver of conversations on Nigerian social media during the concerned period. Some articles, outlets and public figures were called out by social media users as spreading "fake news" because of their misleading headlines or hyperbolic commentary on the new restrictions. This demonstrates how social media can provide the public with an opportunity to contest media hype and underlines the symbiotic relationship between these two forms of media.[20] In the following section we explore misinformation and user reactions to travel restrictions affecting Nigerian emigration, analysing notable user profiles that amplify misinformation in the conversation network.

3.1.2. Misinformation, amplifiers and critical engagement

We built a list of 15,936 user profiles discussing the 2020 United States' travel restrictions on Twitter between 1 January and 30 September 2020 and mapped the corresponding conversation network using the visualisation tool Gephi. Our intention was to use this controversial media event as a lens through which to examine amplifiers – profiles that are most active in disseminating information throughout the network and seeding conversation among new social media users – to detect any emerging misinformation narratives relevant to the scope of this paper.

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16   Odunfa, 2009.

17   First Draft, 2018.

18   BBC, 2019.

19   Hassan and Hitchen, 2020.

20   Roese, 2018.

The resulting network graph is displayed in figure 1, with top amplifiers measured by in-degree, or the total number of re-tweets/QTs/mentions received by each unique profile, assigned a colour ID. Several of the top network hubs, including @AfricaFactsZone (pink), @BashirAhmaad (yellow) and @womenvoiceNG_ (red), posted neutral reporting or commentary.

Figure 1. Nigerian Twitter users discussing 2020 United States' travel restrictions (January–September 2020)
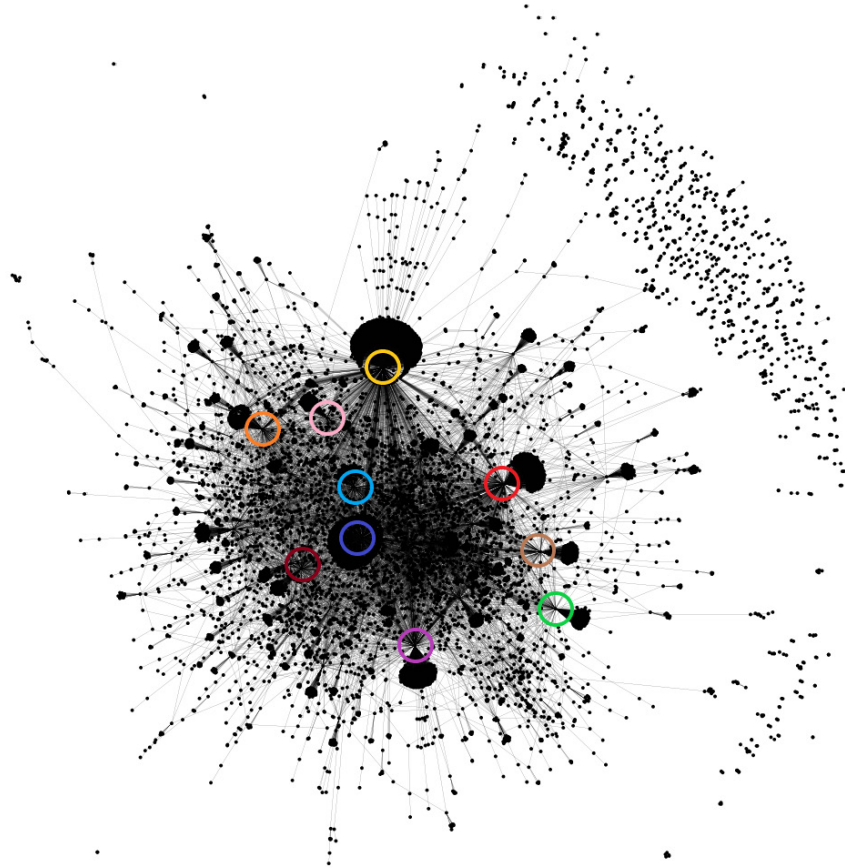
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Former United States' President Donald Trump (green) also featured prominently in the conversation network, perhaps unsurprisingly given that it was his administration that implemented the new restrictions. Others exemplify more critical reactions to the news: @ogundamisi (orange) shared an NBC article questioning why the United States should continue to sell arms to Nigeria, highlighting the Trump administration's alleged hypocrisy in claiming that unchecked violence in the country was a key factor in applying the new restrictions.

Most relevant for this analysis were @cliqik, @renoomokri and @tedhesson. Although they were not among the top influential amplifiers in the network, the discourse around their content contributed to various misinformation narratives emerging in relation to the news of United States' travel restrictions.

–   Highlighted in cyan, @cliqik noted that a previous "ban" on travel between Nigeria and the United States occurred in 1984. Generating almost 4,000 engagements, this content was widely recycled by other Nigerian social media users who used the claim to mount a partisan attack against President Buhari, who was said to have been the Head of State during both restrictions. The 1984 ban was later debunked by Agence France Presse as a false claim.[21]

21   Tijani and Olakoyenikan, 2020.

- In brown, @renoomokri published a Tweet defending United States' travel restrictions as reasonable because Nigeria had "release[d] thousands of 'repentant' Boko Haram members, any of whom could get a US visa and wreak havoc." While there have been reports of Boko Haram militants being pardoned throughout the year,[22] the framing of @renoomokri's post exaggerates any potential risk, contributing to a misleading picture of reality.
- Reuters journalist Ted Hesson (burgundy), who specializes in news involving refugees, highlighted that the new restrictions were only relevant for visas for permanent residency. This clarification contradicts the media spin that was widely applied to characterize the restrictions as an outright ban on travel.[23] Many Nigerians cited Mr Hesson's clarification, demanding that prominent amplifiers, media outlets and politicians "stop spreading lies" about the extent of the restrictions.

This observation fits other examples of social media controversy around real or perceived travel restrictions. An article titled "Germany Announces New Migration Restrictions for Nigerians"[24] has generated over 7,000 Facebook engagements to date according to the browser plug-in CrowdTangle.[25] Published in Punch, which self-describes as the most widely circulated newspaper in Nigeria, the article was heavily criticized on social media for its misleading portrayal of facts. While the title suggests strict new legislation obstructing the ability of Nigerians to migrate to Germany, the actual body of the article is considerably more conciliatory. In a meeting between the Minister of State of the German Federal Chancellery and the Nigerian Federal Commissioner for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, the former noted that, while the criteria set out in the Skills Migration Act must be adhered to, there was a desire to assist Nigerian emigrants who wished to travel to Germany legally and an offer of support with guidance, training and language courses. A comments thread on a post by the official Punch Twitter account sharing the articles showed the spectrum of the social media reaction among Nigerians. While some appeared to accept the premise of the headline, others were extremely vocal about an alleged lack of journalistic integrity, with representative comments including "Read to understand before you comment" and "Bad journalism! Misleading headline!".

While Nigerian social media delivered notable examples of misinformation and false narrative, the reaction to claims around travel restrictions represented a complex picture of user interaction with media claims. These findings resonate with other research which has found that Nigerians are highly likely to report that they have been exposed to misinformation.[26] This critical engagement offers a valuable counterpoint to assumptions about credulous digital activity among social media users in developing countries.[27] In "A Call to Think Broadly about Information Literacy", Marsh and Yang argue that accurate evaluation of source credibility is difficult because the traditional markers of responsible sources have been "hijacked".[28] Nonetheless, in our examples from Nigerian social media, it appears that an organic reaction to misleading headlines, articles and social media posts were at least partly successful in dispelling false narratives and mitigating their spread. As we shall explore in the following sections, there remain significant concerns about how and when social media users share false narratives uncritically, with implications for the role of social media companies and the need for an attitude of healthy scepticism in online behaviour.

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22 Abu-Bashal, 2020.

23 Tijani and Olakoyenikan, 2020.

24 Punch, 2020.

25 See www.crowdtangle.com.

26 Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019.

27 BBC, 2018.

28 Marsh and Yang, 2017.

3.2. Rohingya in Bangladesh and Malaysia

3.2.1. The social media persecution of Rohingya

In our narrative analysis exploring the digital conversation in Bangladesh and Malaysia, we detected some discussion around emigration. The experience of Bangladeshi expatriates working overseas and their reduced capacity to send remittances to support family members at home, for instance, highlighted some claims of misinformation that may warrant further research. Despite these isolated examples, we made the decision to focus on Rohingya refugees for two main reasons.

First, their displacement generated a disproportionate reaction on social media (e.g. in Bangladesh; see figure 2) and was therefore interesting to us given our theoretical concern with the way in which misinformation travels on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. We also reflected that exploring issues related to entry and stay in destination countries, that is, immigration understood in a broad sense as to cover as well displacement, would offer an interesting counterpoint to our focus on emigration in the context of Nigeria, and thereby help to build a balanced view in our thematic analyses.

Figure 2. Immigration and emigration discussion in Bangladesh: Twitter versus online news (January–September 2020)
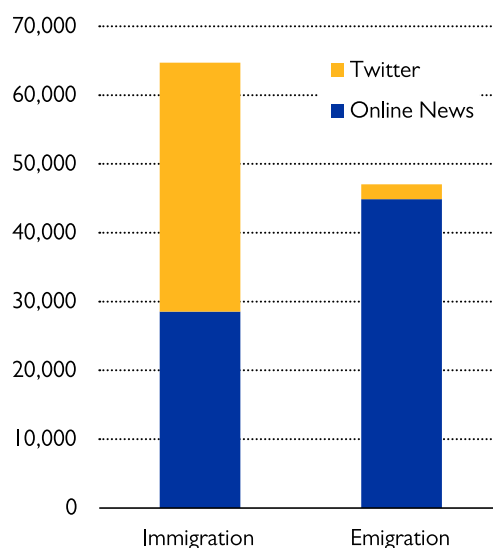
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Second, and most significantly, throughout 2020 there was strong criticism of the role of social media companies, especially Facebook,[29] in accelerating the spread of harmful misinformation about Rohingya, with genocidal consequences in Myanmar according to the United Nations Human Rights Council.[30] Given Bangladesh and Malaysia's proximity to the Rohingya crisis and role as destination countries, we were eager to understand how attitudes towards Rohingya as expressed on social media in these countries might have been influenced and accelerated by false narratives. This was further encouraged by the analyses of local researchers who have flagged the digital environments in both Malaysia and Bangladesh as worrying hosts of misinformation. Echoing Sola Odunfa's critique of the "Nigerian rumour mill", Bangladeshi researchers have highlighted the role of "social media rumours"

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29   Mozur, 2018.

30   United Nations, 2019.

in accelerating negative perspectives on a range of relevant humanitarian topics.[31] With regards to Malaysia, the existing literature has tied the issue directly to the experience of Rohingya refugees. Both news reporting and academic research have identified harmful attitudes towards Rohingya that travel widely on social media, propelled by misinformation.[32]

Certainly, Bangladesh and Malaysia are no different than any country in the internet age; all geographies must confront the problem of misinformation as it manifests online.[33] However, we placed a high value on the research opportunity presented by two comparatively under-researched contexts to build an understanding of misinformation as it relates to Rohingya. In this section, we explore the different claims being made about Rohingya in public Facebook posts and related user comments and reflect on viable responses to misinformation online, before consolidating our findings in a short theoretical discussion to conclude.

3.2.2. Common claims: Preferential treatment, legitimacy and attitude

Before addressing the harmful effects of misinformation on social media in Malaysia and Bangladesh, it is important to stress that the content captured in our samples was not universally hostile towards Rohingya, and in fact many of the opinions were supportive, often out of humanitarian concern. Of the 60 public Facebook posts we designated "seed posts", the majority in both Bangladesh (80%) and Malaysia (77%) were either positive or neutral in their sentiment towards Rohingya (see figure 3). However, reflecting a common assumption that comments threads tend to breed incivility,[34] user comments on our sampled seed posts were significantly more likely to take a negative character: 58 per cent in Bangladesh and 70 per cent in Malaysia. While further research into humanitarian reactions on social media would be interesting, the top priority in this section was to explore the role of misinformation as a catalyst for harmful views, and our analysis reflects that impetus.

Figure 3. Sentiment overview: Public Facebook posts versus user comments in Bangladesh and Malaysia (January–September 2020)
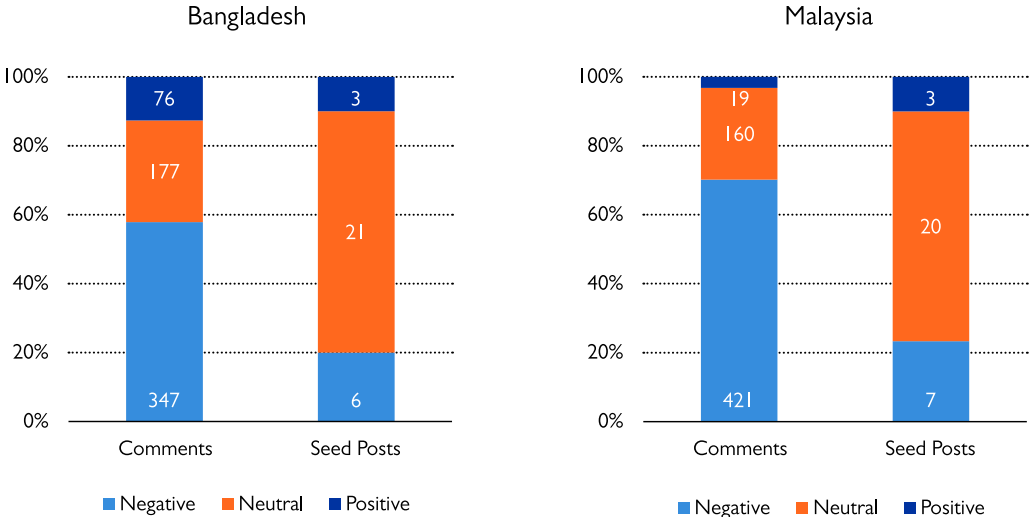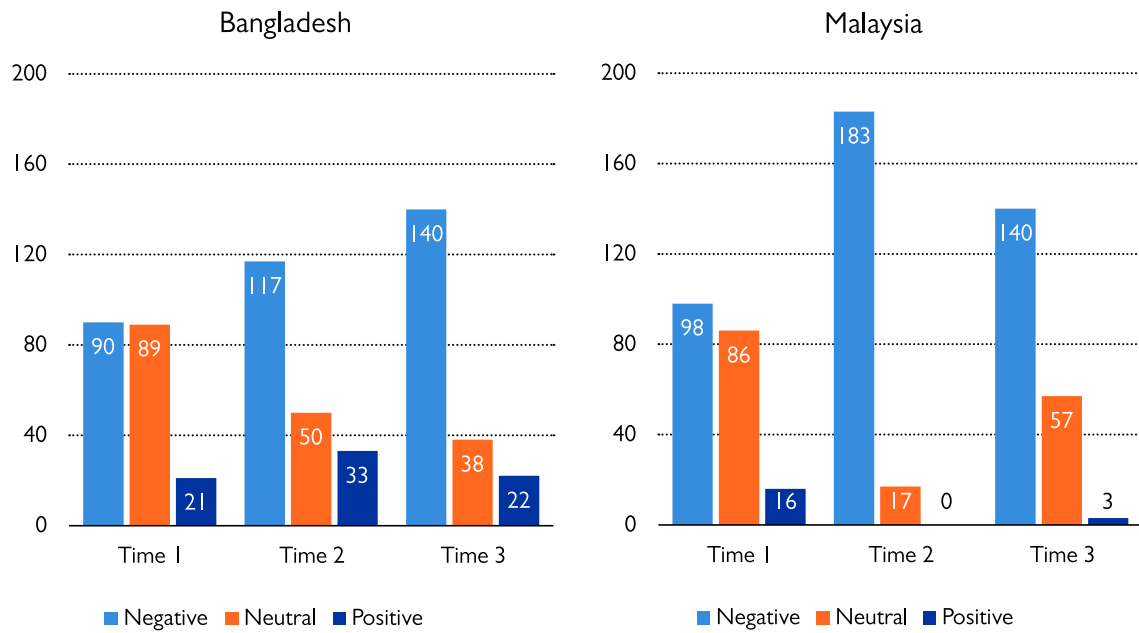

Source: Author's own elaboration.

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[31]   Al-Zaman, 2020.

[32]   Augustin, 2020; Latiff and Ananthalakshmi, 2020; and Zainul, 2020.

[33]   Guanah, 2018.

[34]   Yi-Fan Su et al., 2018.

The sentiment breakdown across three time periods (T1 = 1 January 2020 to 31 March 2020; T2 = 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020; T3 = 1 July 2020 to 31 September 2020) of user comments in Bangladesh and Malaysia shows clear trends in each country (see figure 4). In Bangladesh, the proportion of negative user comments increased period on period, from 45 per cent in T1, to 59 per cent in T2, and 70 per cent in T3. Malaysia, on the other hand, recorded a significant surge in T2, when 92 per cent of sampled user comments were negative. It was also notable that there were fewer positive or supportive comments overall in Malaysia – just 1.5 per cent compared to 13 per cent in Bangladesh.

Figure 4. Sentiment breakdown: User comments in Bangladesh and Malaysia (January–September 2020)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Looking beyond sentiment, it was interesting to find that a significant proportion of critical comments in both countries also included an empirical claim about the Rohingya community – 43 per cent for Malaysia and 93.4 per cent for Bangladesh. In order to explore these claims and the manner in which they layered up into broader narratives, we coded the user comments in the sample according to a message specification of claims split by category, which were selected by an inductive process based on our qualitative reading of the samples (see figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Claims in Bangladesh user comments, by category

T1 T2 T3

Category	T1	T2	T3
Attitude	21	17	37
Criminality	41	11	14
Culture and Lifestyle	4	5	7
Health	0	9	2
Legitimacy	54	41	65
Preferential Treatment	11	63	65
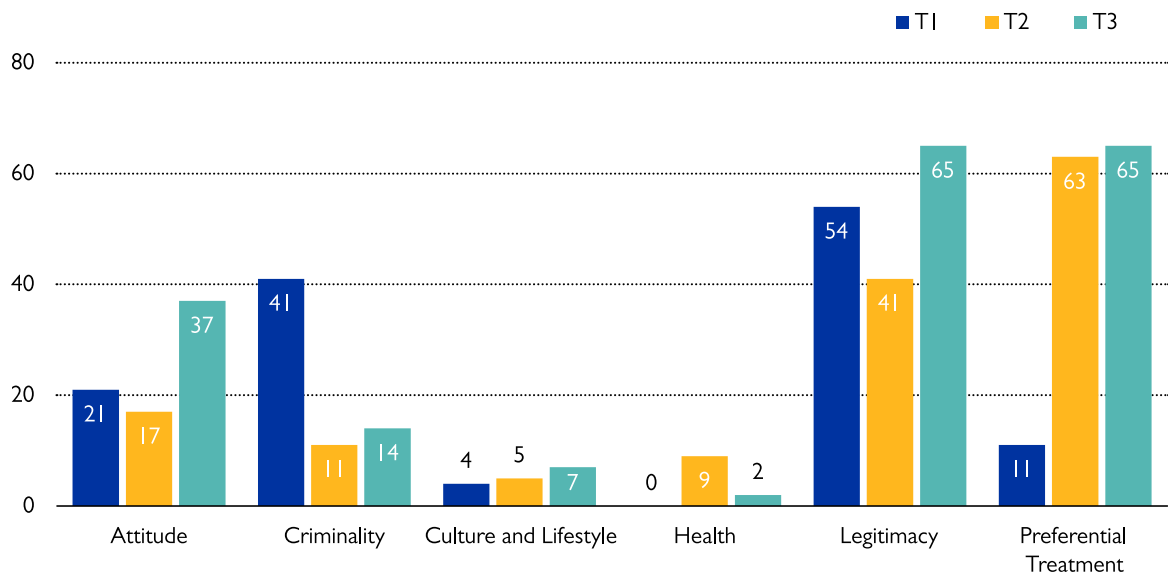
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 6. Claims in Malaysia user comments, by category

T1 T2 T3

Category	T1	T2	T3
Attitude	21	23	21
Criminality	14	13	20
Culture and Lifestyle	19	8	10
Health	11	4	2
Legitimacy	13	24	9
Preferential Treatment	3	19	22

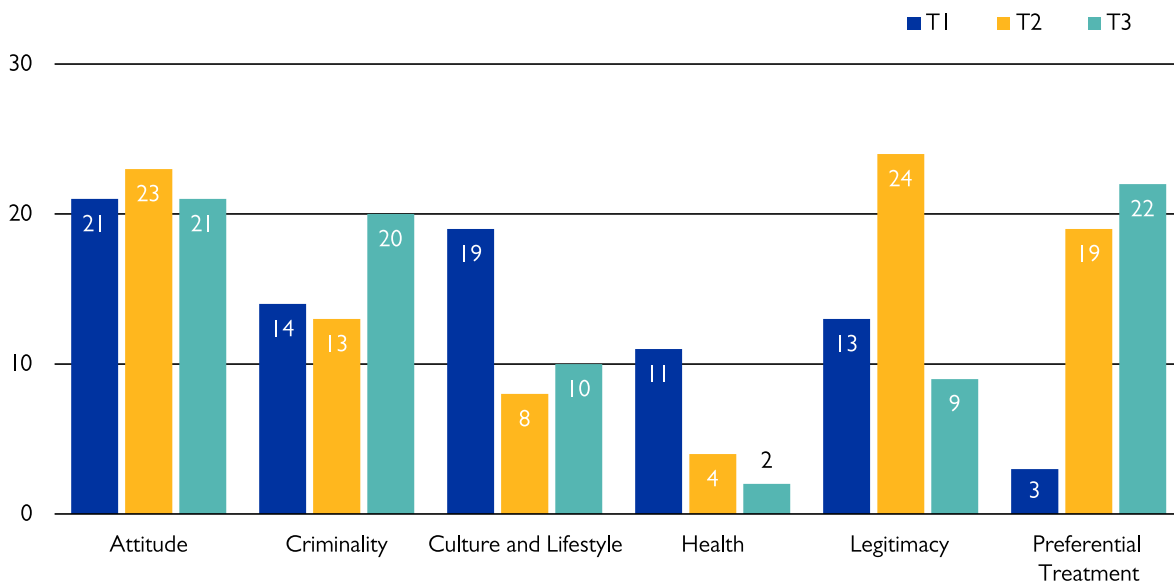*Source*: Author's own elaboration.

Our analysis uncovered false claims in a variety of different categories, ranging from allegations that Rohingya were more likely to transmit COVID-19 and HIV, to reports of higher criminality among the community, and harmful commentary about Rohingya's supposedly poor work ethic. By far the most striking trend across both Bangladesh and Malaysia was a significant increase in the number of claims being made about preferential treatment of Rohingya by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the host Government, and the wider international community. Between T1 and T2, the number of claims regarding preferential treatment rose by 472 per cent in Bangladesh and 533 per cent in Malaysia, with both registering yet further increases into T3. The Bangladesh sample included 39 posts (7% of the sample) in which users expressed frustration that Bangladesh, itself a low-income country, had the responsibility of providing aid and shelter for refugees.

Grievances around the allocation of aid were combined with false claims that Rohingya were seeking to establish their own sovereign state within Bangladesh. This specific assertion featured in 6 per cent of the sample and points to a broader social media narrative around legitimacy and sovereignty; it also represents the interdependence of traditional and social media in the penetration of false narratives into the information environment. A news article with an embedded video purporting to show refugees praying for a Rohingya community leader to become the Prime Minister of Bangladesh has generated almost 62,000 engagements across public Facebook posts.[35] In addition to generating user engagement, the reach of this claim is significant, having been shared by a variety of groups including "We Work to Protect Bangladesh", which boasts more than 2.1 million followers.

In Malaysia, criticism was often directed at the international community and development agencies. The most common claim in our analysis on Malaysia, featured in 3 per cent of the sample, was that the Rohingya community was being overindulged by NGOs. For example, various users expressed the opinion that forged documentation allowed Rohingya refugees to work in the country: "most of them use fake UNHCR cards." There were also numerous allegations that other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were not sufficiently pulling their weight in the accommodating Rohingya refugees, leaving Malaysia overburdened. However, as in Bangladesh, the harmful effect of these types of complaints was accelerated where they occurred in tandem with clear examples of misinformation circulated about the Rohingya community itself. Across the reporting period 65 items (11%) in our sample of social media posts from Malaysia included a claim about the attitude or behaviour of Rohingya refugees, who were regularly depicted as rude, disrespectful or lazy. In a widely repeated example, it was asserted that Rohingya were falsifying their religious identity in order to gain sympathy and exploit the religiosity of Malaysians, which encourages assistance of fellow Muslims.

The reasons behind observable trends around preferential treatment, legitimacy and attitude, and the specific examples that animate them, are a matter of conjecture. As researchers our focus has been on user content as it is presented online, rather than any attempt at a diagnosis of intent. This information is not available to us without offline methods, such as interviews or surveys. Neither is it possible to draw causal links between news reports or public posts and the user comments that they attract. In the communication of ideology, Thompson criticizes approaches that invoke the myth of the passive recipient;[36] the reading of any text (or article, or social media post) is an active, subjective process which is peculiar to the reader. However, given our findings and the context in which they occur, we do feel comfortable speculating on the motivations behind some of the more egregious examples of misinformation.

One such example, which we found to be common in the social media conversation in Bangladesh, was a false analogy drawn between Rohingya and Bangladesh, and Palestinians and Israel. While we stress that this analogy is mistaken and harmful, the fact that this particular type of misinformation was so often replicated, and the manner in which it was invoked, revealed something significant about the impulse to lend credence to false narratives about Rohingya in the countries we sampled. In some examples, social media users warned that Rohingya would seek their own land within Bangladesh "the way Palestinians are in Israel". Numerous others claimed: "we will become like Palestinians in our own country", "it's not too late to be like Palestine", "maybe we have to accept like Palestine, who are helpless in their motherland today". Some social media users in Bangladesh and Malaysia are concerned that their rights and well-being are being contested that support for refugees and care for local populations are contested in a zero-sum equation. The allocation of resources is a commonly debated topic and, as we showed in our sentiment analysis, hostile views are in the minority; many more social media users are likely to reflect on the Rohingya crisis in humanitarian or neutral terms. However,

35   *Jago News 24,* 2020.

36   Thompson, 1978.

the clear learning from our research is that negative social media reactions are being accelerated and exacerbated by outright misinformation that contradicts any humanitarian reflex online and therefore warrants a strategic response.

During our initial research, we found a Malaysian fact-checking website that represents efforts to stifle the spread of false narratives on a case-by-case basis. In one example, a video purporting to show violence between Rohingya and locals was found to have been filmed in Indonesia,[37] while a separate video of a Rohingya youth begging for money was actually resurfacing footage that had originally gone viral in 2017.[38] Fact-checking has been recognized as an important tool to influence people's assessment of the truth or falsehood of information, for example in the process of electoral campaigns,[39] although researchers disagree over the format that it should take and are increasingly questioning whether it can ever be 100 per cent effective in the first place.[40] Previous studies have identified a "continued-influence effect", arguing that the power of misinformation persists beyond so-called debunking,[41] and a well-cited paper argues that fact-checking can actually accelerate adherence to false narratives.[42] The fact that a video is outdated or mislabelled may have little impact once the content is out "in the wild", and indeed drawing attention to such content – even to debunk it – may do more harm than good.

This "backfire effect" has been hotly contested, giving new impetus to explore how fact-checking can contribute to a strategic response to misinformation online.[43] One clear tactic is to appeal to respected sources of information to offer a viable alternative to false narratives: on the topic of Rohingya, for example, the World Migration Report produced by the International Organization of Migration has been cited as clear evidence to debunk false claims about the number of illegal migrants living in India.[44] Further to this, innovative approaches are being trialled by social media companies in moves that recognize the strength of users' critical engagement with digital information, as we described in the case of Nigeria. Twitter has recently launched Birdwatch,[45] which allows users to flag misinformation and add notes to suspect content in a kind of crowd-sourced moderation. Relying on users to self-police may be viewed as cynically shifting responsibility, although a more charitable and optimistic interpretation suggests that tech companies are taking their culpability in the spread of harmful narratives more seriously.

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37   Sebenarnya Malaysia, 2020a.

38   Ibid., 2020b.

39   Fridkin et al., 2015.

40   Ecker et al., 2020.

41   Lewandowsky et al., 2012.

42   Nyhan and Reifler, 2010.

43   Haglin, 2017; and Wood and Porter, 2017.

44   Chowdhury, 2019.

45   Coleman, 2021.

4. Conclusion

The results of our human analysis of content from Malaysia and Bangladesh act as a reminder that social media is often a fairly uncivil environment, where users feel empowered by a degree of anonymity to express opinions that are alienating and harmful. Our findings highlight how user-generated content has a topspin of misinformation that often accelerates anti-immigrant rhetoric. Allegations that Rohingya benefit from disproportionate aid to the detriment of host communities are filtered through specific claims about unwelcome attitudes and behaviours in the community. Combined with false reports about the appropriation of rights and sovereignty, the result is a narrative that represents a social media persecution of Rohingya occurring in tandem with their offline persecution. Our findings resonate with existing studies that describe a misinformation effect resulting in real harm towards Rohingya in these countries. However, we also found that a majority of users express neutral or positive attitudes, despite prominent examples of news reporting that highlights criminality over humanity.

To the extent that false claims remain unchecked by platform moderation, our findings fit with other observations about the culpability of social media platforms in the spread of harmful views, although recent efforts to confront this problem and innovate new solutions are encouraging. Another component in this equation is sensational and hyperbolic reporting, which has become a mainstay of the modern news media, especially when it resurfaces on social media, where attention and clickbait underwrite successful business models. These patterns reaffirm the need for critical digital engagement, which we recognized among social media users in Nigeria, who appear to scrutinize news headlines and reporting. This organic approach seems well-equipped to counter and neutralize misinformation narratives before they get off the ground. Comparisons between Nigeria, Bangladesh and Malaysia can only go so far, and our research shows that Nigeria has its own challenges with false claims. However, the critical thinking often shown with regards to Nigerian emigration is worth cultivating in interaction with digital content more broadly, especially where it can be combined with the strategic use of respected resources in fact-checking efforts.

False claims, which may have some grounding in reality and are therefore difficult to counter, feed broader narratives that have the potential to influence perceptions and self-perceptions of immigrants and emigrants as expressed on social media. Until government and tech company policy catches up with the scope and scale of the problem, critical engagement with online information at the individual level seems likely to remain the first and best line of defence against misinformation.

Appendix A

Message specification applied to user comments on public Facebook posts related to Rohingya in Bangladesh and Malaysia.

Category	Message
Attitude	Critical of hosts Ungrateful Too demanding Work ethic Rude Other/General
Culture/Lifestyle	Religion Dirty/Unhygienic Begging Drug taking/Stimulant use Other/General
Criminality	Theft/Burglary Forged documents Drug dealing Kidnapping Terrorism/Extremism Violence Other/General
Legitimacy	Seeking or establishing political power Seeking or establishing own state or "takeover" Seeking rights/citizenship/passports Other/General
Health	COVID-19 HIV Other/General
Preferential Treatment	NGOs Government International community Other/General

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