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Fifth-Generation War vs. War of Narrative through Strategic Communication: Thematic Analysis of Social Media Posts about Pahalgam Attacks

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Fifth-Generation War has gained significant and broader attention in recent years due to its nonstop development. The purpose of the research paper is to critically examine how fifth-generation war, particularly the war of narratives shaped against Pakistan through Indian social media pages, influenced Indian public perception and strategic outcomes surrounding the Pahalgam attack. In this research study, a qualitative methodology was adopted to examine three main themes. Three main core themes are: (1) Pahalgam attack contextualises fifth-generation war; (2) shaping narratives and influencing public opinion; (3) Recommendations for countering narrative-based threats. The core area of data collection was social media, especially Facebook and the social networking site X (formerly Twitter). The data collection period was 1 month. This study consisted of social media posts from the Facebook general population (n = 1162) and X (n = 676). The results of the study show that following the Pahalgam terror attacks, social media was widely used against Pakistan.

Key Words: *Artificial Intelligence, Digital Propaganda, Fifth-Generation War, Information Warfare, Narrative Framing, Pahalgam Attacks, Social Media Discourse, Strategic Communication, Thematic Analysis, War of Narrative.*

INTRODUCTION

Since fifth-generation war is constantly evolving, it lacks a precise definition. It is too complex to be defined in a single sentence. There is no particular way to assess its areas and attributes. The most neglected regions are those that the enemies seek to target[1]. Different people and communities have different definitions of fifth-generation war. Because of shifting historical patterns and ongoing technological advancements, the idea of fifth-generation war has evolved. In terms of national security, fifth-generation war encompasses more intricate elements such as the economy, technology, and information than conventional security threats like direct military attacks[2]. These include the simultaneous military engagement of two nations and the construction of a war-strategic operational framework integrating two war elements: military and information war measures[3]. Propaganda and

[1] McDonald, Matt. "Constructivisms." In *Security Studies*, pp. 52-66. Routledge, 2023.
[2] Srikanth, Divya. "Non-traditional security threats in the 21st century: A review." *International Journal of Development and Conflict* 4, no. 1 (2014): 60-68.
[3] Joyner, Christopher C., and Catherine Lotrionte. "Information warfare as international coercion: Elements of a legal framework." In *The Use of Force in International Law*, pp. 433-473. Routledge, 2017.

information war vectors are typically used in fifth-generation war to achieve strategic goals[4]. The victim country will not be able to comprehend the final objective or purpose, even if the fundamental opponent is known. It is said that the fifth generation of war is a war of information and perception. In the astounding phenomenon known as the fifth-generation war, non-state actors are discontent without any discernible political goals. Via indirect security consequences, fifth-generation war reflects the changing nature of threats, which are thought to be more varied and complex[5]. To create national security policies that address today's issues and safeguard the state's interests in a rapidly changing world, it is now crucial to understand fifth-generation war. Digital engineering, false information, and cyberattacks are examples of indirect military-technical tactics used in fifth-generation battles, also known as information wars, which include contemporary technologies such as artificial intelligence and information systems.

After the Pahalgam terror attack, Indian social media was beastly used against Pakistan, which was forcefully encouraged by the penetration of Indian proxy and are still going strong[6]. Pakistan faces the use of non-kinetic resources, including Indian involvement in disseminating false information on Pakistan[7]. Because of this social media false information, fake news penetration and escalation by Indian Forces, Irtaza Abbas Turi, the son of Zaheer Abbas Turi, was reported to have embraced martyrdom during the escalation of cross-border hostilities in Azad Jammu and Kashmir in May 2025. Irtaza Abbas Turi martyrdom received significant national and international attention and also it was widely portrayed in Pakistani media as a symbol of national courage, bravery and civilian sacrifice amid regional conflict dynamics. The funeral prayers for the young martyr were attended by senior civil and military leadership. This reflected the symbolic and emotional significance attached to the incident within Pakistan's national security and public discourse. The incident intensified public sentiment and reinforced state narratives concerning external aggression, civilian vulnerability, and national sovereignty. In the aftermath of this tragic event, to counter Indian Operation *Sindoor*, Pakistan powerfully initiated Operation *Bunyan al-Marsoos*, presenting it as a strategic and defensive military response aimed at safeguarding territorial integrity and deterring further hostilities. The operation was framed within the broader context of regional instability and evolving security challenges in South Asia by India against Sovereignty of Pakistan.

In most of the time the civilian casualties often become central to the construction of national unity, resistance narratives, and strategic communication by the state and media institutions. There are geopolitical repercussions from the Pahalgam event that go far beyond Indian borders. In South Asia, great-power confrontations among China, the US, and regional players such as Pakistan are becoming increasingly apparent. Terrorist attacks like this complicate diplomatic efforts, polarise public opinion, and heighten the political push for securitised rather than accommodating policies[8]. The national fibre and unity are further damaged because of exploiting vulnerabilities to disengage further. Here is a detailed, structured aim, objectives, and research questions section for research on fifth-generation war and war of narrative through social media.

Aim of the Research Study

In this research study, the main aim is to dig out the following:

[4] Aziz, D. F., Alam, M. K. D. N. K., Mehmood, K., Muhammad, J., & Afzal, S. (2024). Political Propaganda On The Internet: A Systematic Review. *Migration Letters*, *21*, 1077-1088.
[5] Ahrari, M. E. (1997). US Military Strategic Perspectives on the PRC: New Frontiers of Information-Based War. *Asian Survey*, *37*(12), 1163-1180.
[6] Ventre, Daniel. *Information warfare*. John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
[7] Yousaf, Muhammad Noaman, Majid Ali Shah, and Munazza Khalid. "Combating fake news and propaganda: policy approaches for safeguarding media integrity and public trust in Pakistan." *assaj* 2, no. 4 (2024): 524-533.
[8] Jankowicz, Nina. "How to lose the information war." (2020): 1-288.

1. to critically examine how fifth-generation war, particularly the war of narratives shaped against Pakistan through Indian social media pages, influenced Indian public perception and strategic outcomes surrounding the Pahalgam attack

Main Objectives of the Research Study

1. to define and contextualise fifth-generation war with a focus on its narrative and psychological dimensions portrayed by Indian social media against Pakistan

2. to analyse the role of social media platforms in shaping narratives and influencing public opinion related to the Pahalgam attack against Pakistan

3. to provide recommendations for countering narrative-based threats in the digital information war on Pakistani social media

Research Questions

1. How was the Pahalgam attack contextualised as a fifth-generation war with a focus on its narrative and psychological dimensions portrayed by Indian social media against Pakistan?

2. What is the role of social media platforms in shaping narratives and influencing public opinion related to the Pahalgam attack against Pakistan?

3. What were the recommendations for countering narrative-based threats in digital information war by Pakistani social media?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of fifth-generation warfare is on digital communication as a communication weapon and non-kinetic modes of encounter to information perception[9]. Fifth-generation war operates primarily through the manipulation of hidden and blended narratives, disinformation, and psychological influence. It is used to destabilize power institutions, societies and shape public opinion[10]. Scholars such as[11] describe this form of war as an invisible battle fought in the cognitive and digital domains of society. Within Indo-Pak context, fifth-generation war has become a salient tool of governance. Digital platforms are significantly and increasingly employed to construct anti state narratives that serve strategic and ideological purposes. Social media platforms like Facebook and X has revolutionized communication patterns. These are offering powerful tools for anti-state narrative propagation. Digital and social media ecosystems have become fertile grounds for disinformation cascades[12]. These platforms are spreading rapidly false and exaggerated information to influence public sentiment and state policy directions. Social media has emerged as a crucial ground for the amplification of nationalistic rhetoric of opposing state perspectives[13].

Many studies have publicized that harmonized campaigns on Indian proxy social media pages are portraying Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism. They are using selective framing and emotionally charged

[9] Qureshi, Z. (2021). *Cognitive warfare and digital propaganda in South Asia.* Defence Journal of Pakistan, 6(2), 91–107.
[10] Liles, S., Reinhardt, W., & Welch, D. (2019). *Fifth-generation warfare and the future of information conflict.* Journal of Strategic Studies, 42(4), 542–560.
[11] Hoffman, F. G. (2007). *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars.* Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.
[12] Alam, M. K., Fazail, A., Nasir, M. M. H., & Afzal, S. Islamic Concept of Fifth-Generation War: Critical Analysis based on Islamophobia and Neoliberalism Media.
[13] Raza, S., & Khan, F. (2022). *Information warfare and Indo-Pak social media narratives.* Asian Journal of Political Communication, 12(1), 65–84.

content to influence domestic and international perceptions of adversaries[14]. Research scholars are examining social media and state security. It highlights that state narrative is not confined to state apparatuses alone but it involves a broad network of online influencers and digital activists[15]. This practice aligns with Noam Chomsky and Herman's Propaganda Model (1988). Media systems often functions as instruments of ideological control. It is filtering information in ways that serve dominant political and economic interests[16]. On the other hand, McCombs and Shaw's explain how the media influence not what people think, but what they think about. Using fifth-generation war perspective, these theories provide critical insights into how social media platforms act as tools for shaping public perception and consciousness in foreign policy narratives.

Following the Pahalgam attack, Indian digital, and national media discourse often exhibits patterns of blame attribution direct toward Pakistan. Majority of trends are observed in previous crises like Pulwama. Using rapid propagation of emotionally evocative content, some online social media narratives are not only consolidate domestic unity but also justify strategic posturing. Social media coverage of such events frequently relies on nationalist framing. These framings are constructing Pakistan as an enemy to support for coercive measures. The amplification of these narratives on social media further intensifies their reach and emotional impact. According to Indian notion, these narratives are creating echo chambers that validate pre-existing biases and erode opportunities for peace discourse[17]. The implications of such digital media hostility extend beyond perception management. It is affecting diplomatic relations and regional stability in region. Sustained exposure to anti-Pakistan narratives on Indian social media contributes to cognitive and psychological polarization[18]. It is shaping collective memory and national identity in confrontational terms. Fifth-generation war exceeds propaganda manipulation. It operates as strategic tool for long-term psychological influence. After Pahalgam attack, majority of digital aftermath exemplify how contemporary conflicts are fought through hashtags, memes, and viral posts. Existing researches underscores the urgent need for counter-narrative mechanisms. This empirical research, therefore, contributes to the growing body of fifth-generation war related literature by critically examining how Indian social media platforms constructed and amplified anti-Pakistan narratives during Pahalgam attacks.

The two pillars of framing are psychological and social. Emphasis framing is the term used to describe the social strategy that emphasises some facts over others. A media frame is the central organising idea for news content that provides context and suggests what the issue is through selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. A created model of framing comprises four processes: elites and journalists as audiences; frame construction; frame setting; and individual-level consequences of audience frames. Frame setting describes how media frames shape audience frames; individual-level effects of audience frames refer to the relationship between audience frames and individual-level outcomes; and, finally, frames may influence journalists and elites as audiences and cognitive misers. Fifth-generation war was a hypothetical reaction to emerging forms of terrorism, such as the 9/11 and Pahalgam attacks. It suggested that certain super-empowered people and non-state actors might seriously threaten powerful countries by utilising weaponised commercial technology. It is compared to moral and cultural war fought by manipulating perceptions and altering the context in which the world is perceived, according

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[15] Nissen, T. E. (2015). *The weaponization of social media: Characteristics of contemporary conflicts.* Royal Danish Defence College.
[16] Alam, M. K., Aziz, F., & Rahmat, S. Book Review, Manufacturing Consent: United States Control on Main Stream Media (Propaganda Model Perspective).
[17] Joshi, S. (2023). *Echo chambers and nationalism: The role of Indian social media in foreign policy narratives.* Media Asia, 50(1), 25–39.
[18] Ahmad, R., & Yousaf, T. (2023). *Digital geopolitics and perception warfare in South Asia.* Journal of Media and Security Studies, 5(2), 145–162.

to specific theories of war[19]. Fifth-generation war is an asymmetric war that uses cyberattacks, deception, and information technology to incite instability within a nation rather than traditional military might[20].

Fifth-generation war is covert and challenging to identify. It frequently does not directly involve state actors but instead uses non-state organisations or individuals who possess the capacity to sway public opinion and the political system through digital propaganda and psychological war[21]. The realm of war has entered a new phase, driven by rapid technological advancement and the globalisation of information. Conventional war, which depended on direct combat, has evolved into more intricate and multifaceted war. The idea of fifth-generation war becomes a more obscure and unpredictable danger in this setting.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of framing effects in social media has received the majority of scholarly attention in framing research, whereas the construction of frames in social media has received less attention[22]. Framing is central concept in mass communication theories and media studies that explains how information is presented to shape selected audience interpretation and perception. Framing is involved in the selection of certain aspects of reality and it makes them more salient in a communicating text. It promotes particular problem definition and moral evaluation[23]. Using fifth-generation warfare, framing becomes a powerful instrument for constructing state and anti-state narratives that influence cognition and emotion of core dimensions of perception manipulation. In contemporary usage of media plate forms, the frames are not only constructed by traditional media institutions but are actively produced and reproduced by social media handlers, and influencers. In the case of the Pahalgam attack, the construction of frames on Indian social media platforms reflected the broader dynamics of social media manipulated narrative[24]. These narratives are broadly aimed at shaping national and public opinion against Pakistan. After Pahalgam attacks, dominant frames emerged that portrayed Pakistan as the perpetrator and supporter of cross-border terrorism.

This terror sponsorship frame was very quickly reinforced through selective use of language and repetition of emotionally resonant symbols. These discursive patterns also correspond with the blame frame. This frame is identified in crisis communication studies. Blame frame actors strategically assign responsibility to external entities to foster policy responses[25]. Indian state sponsored social media actors effectively mobilized public sentiment and legitimized hardline diplomatic stances[26]. The framing process during the Pahalgam incident also demonstrated the role of episodic frame. It is focusing on the emotional immediacy of the Pahalgam attack and individual victims. This approach heightened emotional responses such as anger and nationalism against Pakistan[27]. The episodic framing of the Pahalgam attack thus transformed the event into a moral narrative of victimhood and justice. It further

[19] Kim, Woosang, and Bruce Bueno De Mesquita. "How perceptions influence the risk of war." *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1995): 51-65.
[20] Krishnan, Armin. "Fifth Generation Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, and Gray Zone Conflict." *Journal of Strategic Security* 15, no. 4 (2022): 14-31.
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[22] D'Angelo, Paul. "Framing: media frames." *The international encyclopedia of media effects* 2 (2017): 634-644.
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[27] Güran, M. S., & Özarslan, H. (2022). Framing theory in the age of social media. *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, (48), 446-457.

encourages collective identity formation and the perception of Pakistan as a constant threat. It is also unclear which frame analysis principles may be applied to violent war situations. The study of social media has also long been neglected in communication studies and mass communication research[28]. These schemas are mental, stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals' information processing[29]. Prominent academics later refined the first framing theory, which sought to establish well-defined, shared concepts related to framing. It has been demonstrated that audience perceptions and attitudes about news events are significantly impacted by media framing. Furthermore, framing in fifth-generation war is closely linked to the propaganda model, where powerful political and media institutions filter information in ways that sustain dominant ideological agendas[30]. Though the consequences of framing in social media have received considerable scholarly attention, little is known about how and why these frames are created throughout the production process. By examining the creation of war-specific frames within the framework of violent war, this study seeks to advance the topic of framing in social media, by examining the following issue[31]. This research aims to learn more about how was the Pahalgam attack contextualize fifth-generation war with focus on its narrative and psychological dimensions portrayed by Indian social media against Pakistan, illuminate the frames that are employed during violent wars. The process and the impacts of framing at the person level have been the subject of most communication research.

METHODOLOGY

Using social media, the research approach for this study is to critically examine how the Pahalgam attack was contextualised as a fifth-generation war. Role of social media platforms was critically analysed by shaping narratives and influencing public opinion related to the Pahalgam attack against Pakistan. Between April 20, 2025, and May 19, 2025, the Indian and Pakistani public's use of social media reached its peak. To comprehend the meanings, themes, and subtleties underlying the theme of fifth-generation war within the framework of Pakistan's political and military struggle, this study used a qualitative research approach based on thematic analysis, framed by social media engagement, because it enables a thorough investigation of the social, cultural, and psychological facets of fifth-generation war and information consumption, with particular emphasis[32]. Qualitative research understands and documents the current reality by collecting experiences and interactions, since these evolve and serve several functions. However, the process of finding, examining, and interpreting meaningful patterns in qualitative data is called thematic analysis. Given the focus on positivism in positive psychology, it is not unexpected that qualitative researchers in this field frequently choose variants of thematic analysis designed for use within post-positivist frameworks that emphasise coding reliability[33].

However, social media serve as tools for connecting with people across borders and exchanging war-related information. Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) are separate social media platforms with different user bases and functionality. X is better liked for news consumption and live discussions because of its focus on brief, real-time updates. Facebook, in contrast, is well known for its community-

[28] D'Angelo, Paul, Jack Lule, W. Russell Neuman, Lulu Rodriguez, Daniela V. Dimitrova, and Kevin M. Carragee. "Beyond framing: A forum for framing researchers." *Journalism & mass communication quarterly* 96, no. 1 (2019): 12-30.

[29] Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm." *Journal of communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51-58.

[30] Roslyng, M. M., & Dindler, C. (2023). Media power and politics in framing and discourse theory. *Communication Theory*, *33*(1), 11-20.

[31] Paschyn, C., & Young, A. (2025). Disparate Media Representations of Ukraine's Female and Male Soldiers: Comparing the Ukrainian Government Press vs. International Media Outlets. *Journalism Studies*, 1-20.

[32] Nelson, Thomas E., Rosalee A. Clawson, and Zoe M. Oxley. "Media framing of a civil liberties conflict and its effect on tolerance." *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 3 (1997): 567-583.

[33] Khan, Nosheen Iqbal, Muhammad Kaqbad Alam, and Saba Afzal. "Mosque, Mullah and Use of Social Media: Paradoxical Priorities of Peace and Religious Harmony in Pakistan." *Journal of Arts and Linguistics Studies* 2, no. 4 (2024): 2365-2388.

building and broader social connectedness, which appeal to a wider range of interests. The primary source of data for this study is social media, specifically Facebook and X, where misinformation and disinformation about Pahalgam terror attacks are most commonly shared against the sovereignty of Pakistan. The data collection period was from 20th April to 19th May 2025. Purposive sampling was employed to select the necessary data, which were extensively discussed and disseminated across various social media platforms and pages. Selection criteria included the theme's popularity and its pertinence to the military debate of the moment. Examining how fifth-generation war actors create and spread narratives, including through propaganda, misinformation, and false flags, to sway public opinion and influence decision-making is the focus of the narratives study. Details of data collection for this research study are as follows.

Table 1: Details of Data Collection from Social Media

Selected Media	No. of Posts	Inclusion Criteria	Percentage
Facebook	1265	1162	91.86
X (formerly known as Twitter)	773	676	87.45
Total	**2038**	**1838**	**90.19**

The data above relate to the research study's core theme. The data spans a 30-day period (20th April–29th May 2025), which aligns with the study's emphasis on immediate post-attack coverage of social media content. The number of posts and the selection criteria are shown above. (n = 1265) posts from Facebook were randomly chosen, and (n = 1162) of them met the inclusion requirements. In contrast, a total of (n = 773) posts from X (previously known as Twitter) were chosen, but only (n = 676) of them met the selection criterion. A detailed summary of data collection is explained in Table 1 above:

Table 2: Selected Social Media Sites

Selected Media	Official Pages	No of Posts	Inclusion Criteria	Percentage
Facebook	ISPROfficial1	57	57	100.00
	ShehbazSharif	63	52	82.54
	PTVNewsOfficial	278	257	92.45
	Indian Army. adgpi	380	363	95.53
	Narendramodi	201	174	86.57
	ZeeTvIndia	286	259	90.56
	Total	**1265**	**1162**	**91.27**
Selected Media	**Official Pages**	**No of Posts**	**Inclusion Criteria**	**Percentage**
X (formerly Twitter)	OfficialDGISPR	49	49	100.00
	CMShehbaz	59	51	86.44
	PTVNewsOfficial	230	171	74.35
	Adgpi	121	117	96.69
	Narendramodi	201	189	94.03
	ZeeTV	113	99	87.61
	Total	**773**	**676**	**89.85**

The study's selection of social media content from two platforms, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), is summarised in the table above. The meaning of each column and how to interpret the data are broken down (formerly Twitter) and summarised. 65) Facebook postings examined on the six official pages satisfied the requirements for inclusion in the research. The overall inclusion rate is (91.27%). The study

included (n =676) of the (n = 773) total posts that were evaluated on X, yielding an overall inclusion rate of (87.61%). The majority of official pages, especially those for Modi, the Indian Army, and ISPR, have a high inclusion rate. PTVNewsOfficial on X has the inclusion rate (74.34 %). Compared to X (89.85%), Facebook has a higher total inclusion rate (91.27%). This suggests that Facebook content was more often aligned with the study's objectives and research questions.

ANALYSIS

This chapter analyses how the Pahalgam attack contextualised fifth-generation war with a focus on its narrative and psychological dimensions portrayed by Indian social media against Pakistan. In addition, what is the role of social media platforms in shaping narratives and influencing public opinion related to the Pahalgam attack against Pakistan? By examining data through thematic analysis, we assess the role of social media across various dimensions of fifth-generation war, focusing on the Indian narrative portrayed on social media against Pakistan. Fifth-generation war is often characterised by its non-kinetic nature, relying more on psychological manipulation, disinformation, and cognitive targeting than on conventional military force. Unlike previous generations of war, fifth-generation war operates in the domain of information, culture, and ideology[34]. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) are critical vectors for disseminating narratives across borders[35]. The decentralised nature of these platforms enables both state and non-state actors to compete in the information space. Narratives are framed into three main themes. The following are the main themes of the research study.

1. Pahalgam attack contextualises Fifth-Generation war Narrative;
2. Shaping narratives and influencing public opinion;
3. Recommendations for countering narrative-based threats.

Theme 1: *Pahalgam attack contextualises fifth-generation war Narrative*

How the fifth-generation war against Pakistan was extended following the Pahalgam attacks is the conceptualisation of this topic. Since the Pahalgam attacks, Pakistan has been the victim of other attacks as a result of false and misleading information being spread (n = 122). India's attacks on Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir have stimulated online misinformation, with pointless deep fake films (n = 31) purporting to be from the attacks garnering millions of views. Indian social media accounts shared dramatic movies posted on Facebook (n = 141) and X (n = 76) that later proved to be false. The videos claim to show an Indian army installation being struck and a Pakistani fighter jet being shot down in Pakistani territory. Regardless of the material's accuracy, videos depicting natural disasters and war are very appealing, and algorithmic engagement rewards people who share engaging content rather than factual news (n = 49). With over 3 million views in a matter of hours, one of the most-watched videos on X, following the Pahalgam bombing, allegedly showed explosions caused by Indian attacks on Pakistan-administered Kashmir (n = 19). The tape reportedly showed Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip on October 13, 2023, based on a Google search for movie screenshots (n = 3).

Since the event emphasises the threat to regional security and the diplomatic freeze caused by false and misleading information on Pakistan that was disseminated on Indian social media platforms, it is imperative that counterterrorism strategies be re-evaluated and that international engagement be rekindled. Terrorists allegedly associated with Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, who mainly targeted

[34] Juni, M. M. S. A., Sadiq, F., Kareem, J., Alam, M. K., Haider, I., Ashraf, C. A., & Ali, M. M. (2014). The influence of Indian culture on Pakistani society: A case study of Layyah City. *International Journal of Innovation and Applied Studies*, *8*(3), 1120.

[35] Khan, N., Sattar, A., & Zaman, B. (2024). The Dark Side of Social Media and Impact of Fake News on Pakistani Society. *International Journal of Human and Society*, *4*(2), 764-767.

Indian tourists, disrupted the regional equilibrium and rekindled the threat of "cross-border terrorism" against Pakistan. The breakdown of the already fragile diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan would have been the immediate and catastrophic result of the Pahalgam incident. Old grudges were rekindled as India quickly accused terrorists of planning the attack with Pakistani assistance. Within days, both countries withdrew officials, halted diplomatic talks, and blocked visa access. Islamabad responded by suspending the Shimla Agreement, stopping trade, and restricting its airspace to Indian aircraft. At the same time, New Delhi rejected the Indus Waters Treaty, which had long been seen as a pillar of bilateral cooperation.

Two weeks after a deadly terrorist attack on tourists in Indian-administered Kashmir, India has launched a series of attacks on targets in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The Indian military ministry claims that the Operation Sindoor attacks were a component of their promise to hold the Pahalgam attack perpetrators accountable. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said (n = 17) the heinous act of aggression would not go unpunished, according to Pakistan's state media. Pakistan, which has denied any involvement in the event, called the attacks unjustified. The prime minister added that Pakistan had nothing to do with the Pahalgam event and that it was unfairly held responsible. In the initial days after the attack, three different communities were impacted, according to Pakistan. The Pakistani armed forces have hit six targets, according to the DG ISPR. Six Indian planes and one drone were shot down, according to the Pakistani military. Although India has not yet responded to these claims, numerous media outlets and individuals have confirmed them. It stressed that its actions had been targeted, controlled, and non-escalating, and that it had not attacked any military sites in Pakistan. Pakistan's state media denied India's allegation that the attacks were targeting terrorist camps, claiming instead that they were aimed at civilian areas in response to the ground situation in Pakistan. Furthermore, it was asserted that it was a heinous act of violence and the catalyst for the propaganda war on social media. Indian social media operators have weaponised misinformation concerning the Pahalgam tragedy, their tactics, and the serious consequences for India’s national security.

One of the most alarming developments at this time was the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to generate false and hostile information about Pakistan. Pakistani cybercriminals who boasted about breaching Indian military networks, obtaining personal data, and threatening more attacks made the endeavour much more difficult[36]. Even though Indian officials confirmed that no classified data was revealed, the psychological repercussions of such remarks increased a sense of vulnerability and confusion. The Pakistani army destroyed the Indian Brigade headquarters, according to another video that was shared on Facebook on Indian social media accounts and has had about 600,000 views on X (n = 7). Actually, the video, which shows explosions in the background, is from a different movie that was trending on YouTube as early as last month. Analysing Facebook posts, the Pakistani military claimed to have destroyed six warplanes on Wednesday morning local time, a few days after India lost its fighter planes to the PAF's heavy attacks on May 10th (n =11). Many Indian spokespeople and other news outlets, including the BBC and CNN, supported this allegation. Because of the proclamation, several people posted unrelated films that they said showed the destruction of Indian fighter jets. Millions of people have viewed some of these videos (n = 13).

Pakistan expressed a strong and unambiguous stand on Kashmir at a meeting held behind closed doors. Concerned about the deliberate targeting of tourists based on their religion, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members reprimanded Islamabad on Monday, May 5th, for false flag claims following the Pahalgam terror war. The UNSC members, who also underlined the importance of accountability, denounced the Pahalgam terror war. They asserted that the deteriorating ties between Islamabad and New Delhi following the Pahalgam terror war were partly caused by Pakistan's recent missile launches and nuclear bluster. Viral social media posts claim to show India attacking Pakistan and Kashmir, which is under Pakistani control. Other recordings, however, are used out of context and intended to intensify

[36] Idrees, S., & Zaman, B. (2022). Impact of Social Media on Social Values: A Comparative Analysis of the Users and Non-Users. *Pakistan Journal of Media Sciences*, *3*(1), 425-451.

feelings even more. As part of the ongoing "Exercises Indus," Pakistan launched a 120-kilometre-range Fatah Series surface-to-surface missile in a training exercise on Monday. Pakistan said it successfully launched a training launch of the "Abdali Weapon System," a surface-to-surface missile with a range of 450 kilometres. Tensions are rising after Indian attacks in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. India had accused Pakistan two weeks before this occurrence of being behind the April 22 Pahalgam war in the Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir region, which killed 26 people in a well-known tourist resort.

It shows Iranian missile attacks on Israel. The logo of the state-owned Indian news network, which aired the video on October 1, 2024, appears to be an inset of the scene in the right-hand corner of the movie. The second video, which claims to show the damage on the ground in Pakistan, was first posted on X three weeks ago with the hashtag "Crush India." Parents and children are seen running for their lives, coated in dust, and carrying injured people in turbulent scenes. In this video, you may hear children screaming in Arabic, which is not a common language in Pakistan. There are also images of the Russian-built MiG-29 used by the Indian Air Force (IAF), which Pakistan said was shot down last night and which later turned out to be accurate. However, the newspaper "DNA India" and other social media outlets jointly published the same photograph shortly after false information about the Pahalgam attacks was made public. According to these reports, the fighter plane suffered just minor damage and no other injuries when it crashed during a routine flight in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

On both sides of the border, especially in Pakistan, fake films that employ artificial intelligence, recycled combat photos, and made-up narratives spread like wildfire on Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X, igniting fear and bewilderment. One AI-generated fake went viral, garnering millions of views, claiming to show an attack on Rawalpindi Stadium in northern Pakistan. One of the most alarming advances in disinformation during the Pahalgam crisis was the rise of sophisticated deep fakes, often created with AI and featuring superimposed or modified video, audio, or images. In one AI-generated video, Pakistan Army Spokesperson General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhary (DG ISPR) acknowledged the loss of two fighter jets; however, officials have not confirmed this. During the Pahalgam terror attack, misinformation and erroneous content released without intent to deceive, sometimes by ordinary people, were as common as disinformation, the deliberate spread of false information to deceive or harm. Verified people did not just spread disinformation; significant national and international media outlets also propagated unverified news.

Theme 2: *Role of social media platforms in shaping narratives and influencing public opinion.*

Using modern technology, the fight intensified throughout the night of May 7–9. India reported intercepting hundreds of Pakistani drones or missiles on route to its cities, while Pakistan's military claimed to have shot down over 77 Indian drones (n = 122). 25 Drones attacked civilian areas on both sides of the war, including a mosque in Bahawalpur (n = 69), Pakistan, where a child was killed, in what was the first full-scale drone war between two nuclear-armed governments (n = 101). There was a noticeable uptick in artillery and mortar exchanges along the LoC (n = 309). To inflame popular opinion, one side accused the other of striking civilian areas. While Pakistan claimed India struck civilian targets (n =21), Indian media reported that Pakistani attacks had hurt border villages. The phenomenon of fake news cultivation occurs when media professionals use gossip and covert falsehoods to skew facts on essential topics send out unfavourable signals, lower national morale, and undermine public trust in their own institutions. In fifth-generation war, the dissemination of false information and the improper use of contemporary devices and technology have emerged as new avenues for launching hostile agendas against targets. Media memes (n =86) and impostors are used to initiate and fund social media campaigns under this war strategy, which aims to widen the divide and increase public mistrust of their institutions.

In the context of the Pahalgam attacks, many narratives are employed. Social media platforms are crucial for shaping narratives and influencing public opinion due to their broad reach and rapid dissemination of information. They are valuable tools for businesses to advertise their products,

politicians to run for office, and individuals to voice their opinions. The way data is organised, displayed, and disseminated across various social media platforms can significantly shape how people view specific issues, events, and individuals. Furthermore, following the Pahalgam incidents, social media and the media may amplify and activate latent opinions, inspiring people to take action. People who previously had a slight preference for one party or candidate may be persuaded to cast a ballot, give money, or support party organisation in other ways by media attention in the lead-up to an election. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi boldly claimed that his BJP government would create a tourism paradise in addition to making the new Jammu and Kashmir free of terror. However, at the same time, India is engaged in a war on its own territory.

Foreign relations experts and Kashmir observers, however, feel that the past week has revealed serious weaknesses in Modi's Kashmir strategy, which they say appears to be coming to a standstill as Indian troops comb through enormous mountains and forests in an effort to capture the still-at-large attackers. Witnesses claim that victims were selected based on their religious membership. An event sparked panic instantly. Hotels and businesses shut down, and tourists quickly fled Pahalgam. Despite the territory being heavily militarised by Pakistani officials, the event exposed security shortcomings and vulnerabilities. As political hostility grew, public discourse quickly heated up throughout South Asia. Comments on Facebook and X reveal how the population, not just the media or politicians, responded to and interpreted the event. The two countries' public discourses on the Pahalgam incident and each other were very different. Intense nationalist, religious, and geographic wars have caused India and Pakistan. Even though India and Pakistan have fought three wars, including two over Kashmir, anti-India sentiment in Pakistan has grown because of border disputes, diplomatic disputes, and rising nationalist fervour. More than simply India and Pakistan's hostility, the Pahalgam episode has exposed.

This is a growing trend in what academics call vernacular geopolitics, in which ordinary citizens not just politicians determine political meaning. In addition, on sites like Facebook and X, their voices are heard more than ever. The Pahalgam attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir have sparked a new crisis between India and Pakistan. In addition to cross-border firings and accusations, the incident has led to an increase in news restrictions as officials in both countries try to control the narrative after the worst event involving civilians in the disputed area in decades. Press freedom concerns were deemed extremely significant in both countries. India has asked foreign media to employ combative rhetoric that bolsters the Modi administration's narrative. Media outlets such as the BBC, Reuters, and the Associated Press received letters from the External Affairs ministry expressing dissatisfaction with their use of the word militant instead of terrorist in their reporting. Following the Pahalgam attacks on India, the government restricted access to the social media accounts of prominent Pakistani news organisations, such as the social media pages of Dawn News, ARY News, and Geo News, and blocked 16 Pakistani YouTube channels.

India's coverage of defence-related activity is also somewhat restricted. It is hardly surprising that the Modi administration is trying to control the narrative in international media, given its history of punishing Indians who disagree with its policies. Indian coverage has portrayed Pakistan as the primary aggressor and adversary, and TV conversations following the Pahalgam attacks frequently feature patriotic music, scathing remarks, and emotionally heated language. Pakistani social media pages and posts have mostly portrayed India as the aggressor and Pakistan as the victim, while also emphasising the military's purported preparedness and restraint. Pakistan has responded in unison, with the general public and political elite supporting the military's war with India. Pakistani authorities had already tightened control over mainstream and social media before the attacks in Kashmir in an effort to stifle dissent. Rights organisations and media outlets often accuse PM Shehbaz Sharif's government and the military establishment of suppressing free speech in the country. The nuclear-armed rivals came perilously close to war as India launched attacks on Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and a parallel media war quickly sprang up. In essence, rather than occurring in a remote area, the Pahalgam event was a significant security breach overseen by India (n = 31).

The situation has deteriorated since the BJP-led current Indian government took office. Human rights violations, communication disruptions, arbitrary detentions, curfews, and military policing have all grown widespread. Fighting terrorism is not the goal of the battle in Kashmir. This profession is characterised by the systematic denial of agency and dignity to the whole population. In its rush to control the narrative, India not only damages its reputation outside but also imperils regional peace and social cohesion at home. Tragedy followed by anti-Pakistan rhetoric that has been sanitised for global consumption and amplified by social media is unsustainable. It shapes public opinion, creates paranoia, and sows the seeds of lasting hostility. Pakistani social media accounts, particularly those on X (formerly Twitter), were inundated with coordinated attempts to mock the tragedy and criticise the Indian government after the Pahalgam terror attacks. Hashtags like #IndianFalseFlag, #PahalgamDramaExposed, and #ModiExposed swiftly appeared in thousands of posts, attempting to portray the attack as a staged event orchestrated by India itself. Furthermore, how the world perceives the narratives that are prevalent on internet platforms might influence India's internal security. If propaganda succeeds in casting doubt on the facts of the war or on India's response, diplomatic efforts to hold the perpetrators and their supporters accountable may be impeded. India's social and economic stability has significantly suffered due to the compounding effects of these factors.

Theme 3: *Recommendations for countering narrative-based threats in digital information war.*

Many mass communication researchers believe that disinformation is a major problem for democracy worldwide. Many politicians are seeking brief, efficient ways to prevent individuals from embracing and disseminating erroneous views that undermine democratic debate and might incite hazardous or violent behaviour. However, it has been challenging to identify, quantify, and comprehend misinformation, let alone combat it. It's critical to focus on enhancing social resilience through a multifaceted strategy to combat narrative-based challenges in the digital information war. This entails increasing awareness, fostering media literacy, and providing reliable information to refute misinformation. Leaders often struggle to have an impact and are unaware of how little is known about the efficacy of policies that are frequently suggested by experts, even when they are clear about their goals for combating misinformation. Additionally, policymakers may obsess over certain aspects of the misinformation problem, such as artificial intelligence and social media. Through recommendation algorithms that amplify and promote false content, social media sites contribute to the spread of misinformation in several ways. However, many different online and offline factors coexist with and interact with digital platforms.

It might be challenging to differentiate such initiatives from conventional political campaigning, such as counter-messaging campaigns that contend with erroneous ideas on a narrative and psychological level through storytelling or emotional appeals. In accordance with international law, especially international human rights legislation, the international community should think about creating efficient strategies to combat terrorist recruiting, provocation, and propaganda, including online. The distinction between conventional media sources and social media platforms has gotten hazier in the present digital era. Presumably, social media networks, Facebook and X, have outperformed their original branding to become strong competitors to broadcast and streaming media in terms of user engagement. Social media has become a frequent source of news for adults. This development represents cultural shift in how the public consumes, interprets, and values information, as well as evidence of the platform's viral popularity. The ramifications of Facebook and X content include their transformation from social networks into powerful media platforms, especially given how Indian social media outlets have exploited them to spread false information following the Pahalgam incidents. This change has significant global ramifications.

Facebook and X have an impact on public debate and opinion formation comparable to that of traditional media outlets, particularly among younger demographics, as they become the primary information sources for large portions of the population. State actors that want to foment strife and influence public opinion have taken notice of this development. Facebook and X were the focus of the Pahalgam event, which is representative of a strategy realignment towards platforms that demand high

user engagement and have the capacity to spread misinformation widely on Indian social media. By incorporating false information into the platform's content ecosystem, it is taking advantage of Facebook and X users' compulsive consumption habits, as well as the platforms' content-push algorithms, to spread narratives intended to erode public confidence in military institutions, sway public opinion on terror-related issues, and weaken social cohesion. The attack on Pahalgam was a turning point in both Indian and Pakistani history, where existence was at stake, and there was no clear option. Both nations are currently dealing with a new form of war that targets our society's very thinking and takes place online rather than on conventional battlefields. The goal of this cognitive war, which is being fought using false information, falsehoods, and social media propaganda, is to erode their cohesiveness, trust, and democratic principles rather than to demolish their infrastructure. By exploiting the weaknesses of the digital age to sow division and disorder, both enemies are dedicated to weakening the country.

CONCLUSION

Following the Pahalgam terror attacks, this study examines and reflects on new aspects of the strategic balance of the social media war of narratives and its ramifications between India and Pakistan. Pakistan was attacked because of the intensely hostile portrayal of Pakistan in the Indian mainstream media, particularly social media. This false information and propaganda were successfully refuted following ISPR's prompt and responsible response. According to the results, social media users, young people in particular, should be made aware of and given training on how to wage propaganda against Pakistan on social media. In an effort to undermine Pakistan and harm its reputation globally, the adversaries have started social media operations. There have been notable trends in anti-Pakistan propaganda during the last ten years. Pakistan is encountering challenges in its efforts to achieve economic stability. On the global map, Pakistan occupies a critical geopolitical position. Pakistan's adversaries constantly aim to impede the nation's advancement and undermine its positive reputation worldwide. The pernicious act of indoctrination is negatively eroding the nation's valued sovereignty. The country is constantly targeted by the state's foes, who also obstruct national unity. Fifth-generation war strategies and conventional military actions are frequently combined in hybrid war plans. By misusing its own resources and exploiting other trading partners, the nation attempts to avoid economic isolation and international penalties. The advent of fifth-generation war has had a profound effect on Pakistan's security paradigm, posing new risks and difficulties that need a deep understanding of its fundamental components, real-world examples, and implications for national security.

Pakistan's security and response to new security issues following the Pahalgam attacks have been impacted by the fifth-generation war, underscoring the necessity of increased resilience and international cooperation. The fundamental components of fifth-generation war have changed in response to the challenges posed by contemporary war, such as the high cost of conventional war and the spread of nuclear weapons. The region has seen an increase in the usage of modern strategies and tactics such as cyberwar, hybrid war, and information war. These strategies aim to disrupt and eliminate the enemy's operations without resorting to traditional military techniques. According to this view, the fifth-generation war signifies paradigm change in which social media serves as a battlefield for people's hearts and minds as well as a vehicle for communication. The digital environment is increasingly at the centre of national security issues, and the battle of narratives erodes the fundamental trust required for a cohesive society. To protect against the dangers of fifth-generation war, the findings emphasise the need for social media literacy, robust internet governance, and proactive narrative management.

By reducing the chances for international trade, humanitarian cooperation, and communication, this further cements the distrust that permeates South Asian geopolitics. Responses to the Pahalgam war in the future will have to go beyond conventional security measures. Even as more monitoring, information sharing, and military preparedness remain necessary, equal attention must be paid to community healing, mental health rehabilitation, and inclusive political debate. International actors and regional organisations, such as SAARC, should revive confidence-building measures to ensure that counterterrorism efforts do not jeopardise civil liberties or human rights. The incident in April 2025 at

Pahalgam, which killed 26 people in Indian-administered Kashmir, has once again raised the possibility of war between India and Pakistan. The Modi administration swiftly accused militants based in Pakistan without conducting a full investigation and launched several counterattacks. Deportations of Pakistani nationals and cross-border attacks were the outcomes of these punitive acts. The Indus Waters Treaty was also abruptly suspended as a result, which is concerning for Pakistan.

Islamabad denied any role in the war and charged that New Delhi was using the tragedy to further its own political objectives. Once again, the scenario has demonstrated how easily the tenuous peace between these two nuclear-armed powers may be broken. India's efforts to achieve peace have long been hampered by ongoing animosity beyond its borders, mainly from Pakistan. According to Indian media, India has seen many wars, including a lengthy proxy war centred in Kashmir, since gaining independence in 1947. Pakistan switched from conventional war to a three-pronged asymmetric strategy: nuclear deterrence, strategic alliances, and the deployment of non-state actors. The latest instance of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism claimed the lives of defenceless tourists. India unilaterally suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, and Pakistani diplomatic personnel were expelled, as part of India's retaliation. However, the international reaction was subdued, especially from China, the UK and the USA, which avoided denouncing Pakistan while encouraging moderation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research study, it is highly recommended that:-

1. Pakistan should develop comprehensive and broader digital communication and social media strategy to counter narrative-based on the threats emerging from fifth-generation war.

2. The government of Pakistan should collaborate with media regulatory especially PEMRA body and cybersecurity institutions to establish a proactive narrative-monitoring system to identify and respond to misinformation and propaganda disseminated through foreign social media networks.

3. Strategic communication and policy units should be strengthened to engage in real-time fact checking, counter-narratives, and diplomatic digital messaging.

4. Moreover, state media literacy programs should be introduced to educate students especially at university level, journalists, and policymakers about the mechanisms of information war and disinformation campaigns.

5. Strict counter, check, and balance should be imposed on psychological manipulation of university students on social media.

6. A centralized media analysis cell could be developed at national level to evaluate the framing of media contents in foreign narratives and to design evidence-based communication strategies.

7. Partnerships with social media companies and literary festivals should be pursued to ensure the swift removal of false and fake information.

8. Final but not least, it is also highly recommended that academia and research institutions conduct continuous monitoring of cross-border digital interactions to provide policy insights for national security

9. Finally, promoting regional peace and harmony narratives and confidence-building narrative in digital diplomacy can help in reducing hostility and mitigate the influence of adversarial fifth-generation warf tactics.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To preserve each participant's rights, privacy, and dignity, this study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards. The following moral actions are performed during, after and before data collections:

1. All participants received comprehensive information regarding the goals, methods, and extent of the study. Before any data collection, all participants provided written consent, and participation was voluntary.

2. All participants' information was kept private. When analysing and reporting the data, personal identifiers were removed or anonymised. The study team was the only one with secure access to the data.

3. Participants were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the research at any time without incurring any fees or adverse consequences.

4. The information gathered was only utilised for this study's scholarly objectives. Without further authorisation, no portion of the data will be utilised for commercial purposes or shared with the public.

5. Throughout the research procedure, participants' cultural norms, values, and religious beliefs were respected. To guarantee cultural appropriateness, special attention was paid to language and interaction.

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Authors' Contributions

Muhammad Kaqbad Alam: Study Concept and Design,

Muhammad Majid Hamid Nasir: Critical revision of the manuscript for important information

Dr. Bakht Zaman: Acquisition of data, Study supervision, Analysis and interpretation of data, Drafting of the manuscript,

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