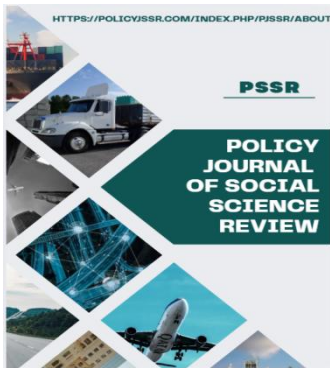


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## SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT AND PEACE: INSIGHTS FROM PAKISTAN AND INDIA

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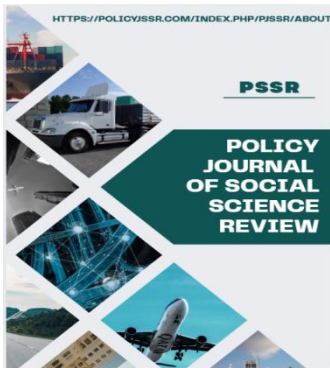
Dr. Bakht Zaman

### ABSTRACT

Social media, particularly the now-popular “X” (formerly known as Twitter), has revolutionized today's conflict communication, blurring the lines between the traditional domain of media and the digital space. This study focuses on the impact of “X” on public opinion in the Pakistan-India crisis that was preceded by the April 2025 incident in Pahalgam. Based on the information warfare theory, the study investigates the creation of narratives, rebuttal of opposing claims, and shaping of domestic and international narratives on the official social media accounts of Pakistan and India. A qualitative research method was adopted for the content analysis of ‘X posts’ shared on official accounts of the two fight parties during a particular time. The findings reveal that social media functioned as a digital battlefield of difficult discourses on nationalism, victimhood, retaliation, and security. The speed at which emotionally charged messages, hashtags, and unverifiable information spread was another way that gave extra fuel to the public sentiment and took up space for diplomatic engagement. The study concludes that although social media may be a helpful tool in communicating during a crisis, it also fosters division and information warfare. It calls for increased fact-checking tools, conflict-sensitive communication strategies, and improved digital literacy programs, among others, to curb the negative impacts of online information warfare. Digital Diplomacy is used for analyzing the information warfare and public opinion surrounding the Pakistan-India relation incident at Pahalgam, using social media like X or Twitter.

**Keywords:** Digital Diplomacy, Information Warfare, Pahalgam Incident, Pakistan-India Relations, Public Opinion, Social Media, X (Twitter).

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## Introduction

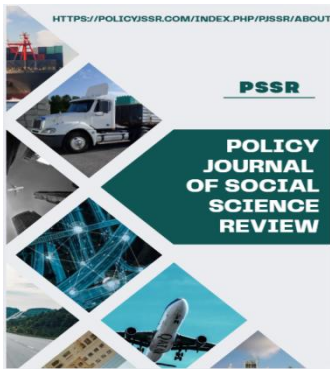
Information creation, distribution and consumption have completely changed in the twenty-first century. Technological innovations, the general access to the internet and the development of social communication platforms have changed the ways in which communications are conducted in societies. Social media like Facebook, “X” (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have emerged as key political communication, public diplomacy, crisis management and conflict reporting tools. Unlike centralized scrutiny tools in traditional media systems, social media allows for real-time communication between governments and institutions, between the media and citizens, or between citizens as well. This alteration has created new prospects for engagement while at the same time introducing challenges linked with misinformation, propaganda, and information warfare. Social media has had a greater impact, especially during times of political unrest, military conflict, and international disagreements. In these cases, digital platforms become the key means of information for citizens who want to receive fast updates and interpretations of upcoming events. Social media has become a tool for governments to communicate policy and build narratives, mobilize support, and shape perceptions at home and abroad. Resultantly, information has

developed as a strategic asset with the ability to affect political scenarios and public opinions to an extent never seen before.

There has been an academic debate about the relationship between media and conflict. Academic interest has been taken in the relationship between media and conflict. Traditional mass media played a vital part in outlining conflicts, constructing national characteristics, and influencing public perceptions during wars in the last century. Today, however, the digital revolution has changed the communication environment, making it possible to interact in the present, to create contents from the users and to share information in a decentralized manner. In today's warfare, information can be transmitted quickly and easily within official institutions, through media outlets, to bloggers, amongst activists, and among the population at large. Thus, narratives develop rapidly, sometimes even before the facts are substantiated by other sources. In this context, misinformation spreads more quickly, people get mobilized emotionally, and strategic communication campaigns are initiated more rapidly.

South Asia is one of the key regions for the research of the relationship between social media and conflict. The region has long suffered from inter-state tensions, conflicts, religious sensitivities and intricate security issues. These rivalries are most enduring

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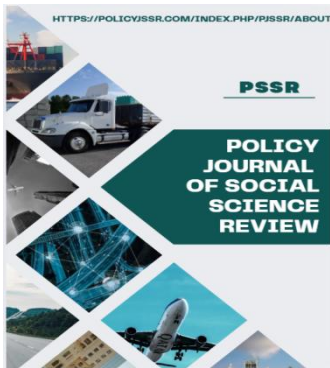
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and important of Pakistan and India. Since they became independent states since 1947, both countries have fought several wars, military stand-offs, diplomatic crises and have had numerous incidents of tensions, especially over the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. In the past these conflicts have been waged through military battles and diplomatic negotiations, but now it appears that digital platforms are also a space of contestation. The case of Pahalgam incident from April 2025 is an important one to look into when it comes to the strategic application of social media during conflict. The attack, which resulted in the deaths of twenty-six tourists in Indian-administered Kashmir, resulted in political and diplomatic consequences. Indian government attributed the attack to the Pakistani-based militant groups and responded in diplomatic, military and communication terms. The Pakistani government denied the claims, denounced the assault and requested a fair international probe. The situation grew more volatile and both sides began to increasingly use their digital communication as a tool to defend their own side, counter arguments, and raise awareness among their own people. During this time, one of the more influential platforms for communications regarding conflict was “X”. The platform was effectively utilized by government bodies, military forces, political parties,

and media to spread their messages and shape public opinion. Official accounts played an important role as actors in shaping the narratives. These accounts used statements, visuals, hashtags and symbolic messages to attempt to shape events in a manner that aligned with national interests and policy agendas. Information warfare is one of the key features of the present day wars. Information warfare involves influencing perceptive processes, opinions and decision making unlike conventional warfare which mainly targets physical targets. It is not just about communicating information, but also how target groups understand and interpret information.

In this study, the authors attempt to explore the role of official “X” accounts of Pakistan and India in information warfare during the Pahalgam crisis. In particular, the study examines the themes, stories, and communication strategies used by state actors in order to manipulate public opinion and affect perceptions. The research focuses on official accounts and aims to gain insight into the strategic use of digital platforms by governments in times of increased tension and conflict. The present research makes several contributions to the current research on the phenomenon of digital conflict communication. It is one of the earliest academic studies of the Pahalgam crisis and its digital aspects. Secondly, it uses

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Information Warfare Theory to gain insights into social media's role as a strategic communication during political conflicts. Third, it provides a comparative analysis of the Pakistani and the Indian official communication, with their similarities and differences brought to light. Lastly, it adds to the ongoing discourse on social media's influence in today's context of war, public opinion, and international relations.

Scholars, policy makers, the media and security analysts have all recognized the growing role of digital platforms in geopolitical conflict, and the dynamics of social media communication in crises are of increasing importance. The results of this research can guide the creation of strategies for promoting responsible communication, combating misinformation and/or mitigating the risks of escalated digital conflict.

### Research Question

The study has found an answer to;

- What was the role of official X (Twitter) handles of Pakistan and India in shaping public opinion during the Pahalgam incident 2025?

### Research Objective

The objective of the research was;

- to analyze the role of official X (Twitter) handles of Pakistan and India in shaping public opinion during the Pahalgam incident 2025

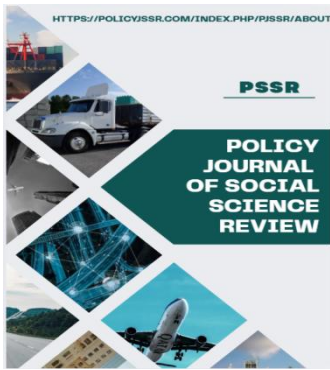
### Literature Review

#### Social Media and Conflict Communication

Social media networks have been the subject of debate regarding the importance of the role they play in the communication process of modern conflicts, which allows for rapid information dissemination and provides a forum for interaction and greater participation of the audience. Digital communication networks provide a space for general discussion and debate of power relations, Castells argued (2015). These platforms are employed by governments and political actors during conflicts to organize proceedings, propagate official narratives, and shape public opinion. Howard and Hussain (2013) state that social media has created new opportunities for political engagement, and has created opportunities for citizens to become directly involved in political engagement. These platforms have also helped to accelerate the dissemination of misinformation and emotionally charged messaging. When it comes to dispute, consumers are often interested in getting results quickly rather than getting facts correct, which can result in the spread of unconfirmed information that can affect public opinion before the facts are confirmed.

The role of social media in conflict communication is not limited to information sharing only. People believe

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that digital platforms these days are a forum where two sides of an argument attempt to claim the narrative. Governments, military, journalists, activists, and citizens all help to construct understandings of events. As a result, social media has become an indispensable part of the modern-day war. How digital communication affects both domestic and international audiences has been proven by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Israel-Gaza conflict, and other regional conflicts. Today, governments are beginning to agree that controlling information can be as significant as military goals. Strategic communication via social media has now become a key component of modern conflict management.

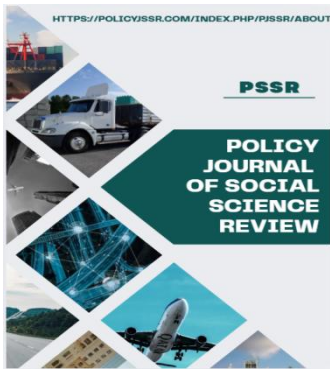
### **Information Warfare in the Digital Age**

The term information warfare was developed from a type of military and strategic studies that explored the importance of information in achieving political and military objectives. Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) presented the concepts of cyberwar and net war, maintaining that in the future, conflicts would be information networks-centered rather than depending only on conventional military engagements, and the same is being witnessed in present-day conflicts. According to information warfare, information is strategically and scientifically employed to manipulate perceptions, opinions, behaviours, and

decision-making. Information warfare does not primarily target physical things, as conventional warfare does, but targets the intellectual environments. The intent is to enhance informational supremacy, which involves shaping the interpretation and reaction of the audience to events and political changes.

Recent research has been focused on the role of social media in modern-day war and how social media is a key strategic communication mechanism in Fifth-Generation Warfare (5GW). In a study by Maqbad et al (2026), social media threads related to the Pahalgam attacks were analyzed using thematic analysis of posts on Facebook and X (Twitter) using posts. Their research showed that social media not only acted as a medium of information sharing, but also as a medium of narrative building and perception building. The research revealed the main themes of strategic framing of narratives, dissemination of propaganda, and impact of digital content on public opinion. The authors claimed that during the crisis, social media was massively used to influence the public opinion, strengthen nationalistic feelings and spread divergent political narratives. These findings are especially important in the context of the present study, as they reveal the dynamics of the digital platforms as spaces of information warfare that are used to shape public attitudes and perceptions by both

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state and non-state actors. In the light of Pakistan-India relations, any such narratives can either heighten and/or defuse the tension by influencing citizens' perception of conflict, peace and nation. Hence, the study offers empirical evidence for exploring the social media as a key enabler in shaping public opinion during bilateral conflicts.

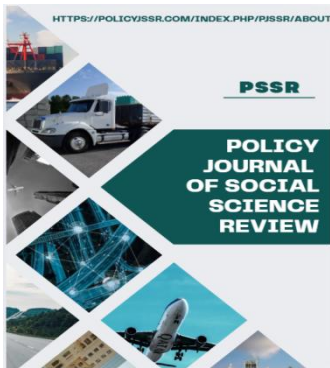
Strategic communication, framing narratives, disinformation campaigns, emotional manipulation, and other cyber operations are all part of information warfare, according to Rid (2020). The activities are designed to influence target audiences and to discredit and challenge other actors. The growth of social media has improved the abilities related to information warfare to a greater extent. Digital platforms facilitate governments and other actors to communicate directly with audiences without depending on conventional media mediators. This direct connection enables political actors to spread messages quickly, react to escalating situations and counter the counter-messages. A networked communication environment makes it easy to spread information and misinformation, write Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018). Information environments can often be polarized, with audiences consuming information that reinforces existing beliefs in highly polarized political situations. This is because it gives strategic communication

campaigns greater effectiveness in deliberately shaping public opinion. The Present-day conflicts are conflicts of perception and of righteousness. Not only does it have difficulties hitting military goals, but states also have a hard time reaching their domestic population, international organizations, foreign governments, and the general public. As a result, information warfare is now a key component of the various aspects of hybrid warfare.

## Digital Nationalism and Online Identity Construction

Public attitudes have been shaped by nationalism in politics in the past. But digital nationalism has transformed the manner in which nationalistic sentiments are expressed, enhanced, and recruited. The emergence of national identity and feelings of patriotism online has been expressed with the term digital nationalism. Digital nationalism is defined by Mihelj and Jimenez-Martinez (2021) as the manipulation of digital platforms for the purposes of national identity, nationalism, collective identity and national mobilization. Social media is able to help both governments and citizens in representative expressions of patriotism – by means of hashtags, visual imagery, slogans, and narratives. The study provides evidence that digital nationalism gains greater strength in times of international crises and military standoffs. In these

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situations, online groups can come together around the national symbols and narratives that focus on the sense of unity, resilience and collective identity. The expressions are encouraged by governments for strategic reasons as they ensure or bolster public acceptance of government policies and promote social cohesion.

The significance of digital nationalism in the context of conflict communication is highly visible particularly in South Asia. Research on Pak-India relations has found that social media is often used to voice and amplify nationalistic narratives. In times of stress, there can be a lot of patriotic messaging, symbolic competition, and emotional appeals in the online discourse that can mobilize the public. By the same token, Ahmed and Jaidka (2022) claim that digital nationalism is a source of polarization on the internet as different national groups tend to develop outlooks that are polar opposite to each other on the same events. Consequently, social media can help to perpetuate divisions instead of promoting dialogue and understanding. Nationalism is related to digital nationalism, as in the case of information warfare the sense of nation state is frequently an emotional strength in the weapons arsenal. Patriotic, Sacrificial, Sovereignty, and Collective Memory messages, elicit strong emotional reactions,

increased audience participation, and effective message.

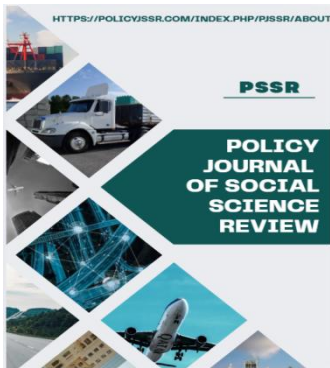
## **Strategic Narratives and Public Opinion Formation**

How to engage audiences, shape public opinion and influence the strategic decision-making process Strategic narratives have taken on an even greater importance in the context of communication and international relations. Strategic narratives are purposeful narratives created by political actors to shape audience perceptions, create political realities, and shape audience behavior. Strategic narratives have been proposed by Miskimmon et al (2017) as a means for actors to make sense of more complex political developments in a manner that allows them to advance their interests and goals. These stories help audiences to understand what happened, to distribute blame, and to work out policy responses. In times of war, a government will use a strategic narrative to justify its actions, to make its actions seem legitimate, and to help it reach its goals with both domestic and foreign audiences. Issues of national security, justice, victimization, and sovereignty are mentioned regularly in the official communications. These themes are intended as a way to orient public perceptions of conflict and to create support for governmental responses. Two key factors of a good strategic narrative are credibility and emotional value. Messages

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that reinforce current beliefs and identities are more likely to be accepted by recipients. Political actors will frequently construct narratives that resonate with collective values, historical memory, and national identity. So in the case of social media, strategic narratives can be spread rapidly and frequently. Digital platforms can help governments to set their own agenda for preferred interpretations and contest counter-narratives at the same time. This is a scenario of intensified struggles for the narration.

## **Social Media Diplomacy and State Communication**

Social media has become a key instrument in the practice of digital diplomacy, contributing to its increasing popularity as a research area. Digital diplomacy is the use of digital technologies and digital platforms to pursue diplomatic goals, reach far-flung audiences and shape global perceptions. Manor (2019) states that social media has revolutionized diplomatic communication as it has made governments directly approach the international public. Formal diplomatic channels and the mass media institutions were important instruments for traditional diplomacy. Digital Diplomacy, on the other hand, enables governments to communicate quickly and openly to its citizens, journalists and policy-makers internationally. So, social media diplomacy is of even greater importance in international conflicts. Governments

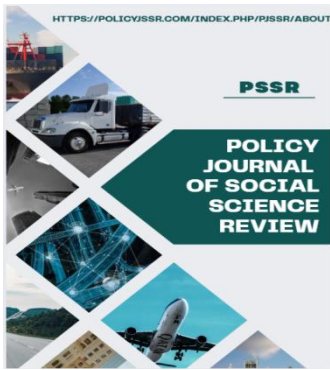
attempt to shape international opinion, secure diplomatic backing and rebut negative portrayals. Digital platforms provide a means for States to directly communicate with countries around the world.

The rise of digital diplomacy is indicative of the changing global communication landscape. The spread and fragmentation of information puts governments in competition with a variety of actors that are vying for attention and on the grounds of credibility. In today's world, digital communication is thus an indispensable part of foreign policy.

## **Pakistan-India Conflicts in the Digital Era**

The Pakistan-India conflict is a specific case that is relevant to the study of social media and conflict communication. Since 1947, the conflict between the two nations has led to several wars, tensions and competing national narratives. There have been several scholars who have analyzed the role of digital media during the major crises between Pakistan and India. The research conducted on the Pulwama-Balakot situation of 2019 revealed that social media was a major aid in shaping the public perception and amplifying the nationalistic sentiments. The narratives of the conflict were actively created by government institutions, political leaders, journalists and citizens. In the course of their research, academics have found that during Pakistan-India crises, digital

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communication is often characterized by high levels of antagonism amounting to accusations, legitimacy and responsibility claims. Both states are challenged in developing favorable interpretations on measures and have competing narratives. The competition can be local as well as international, with international organizations, foreign governments and global media outlets all in attendance. Recent studies indicate that social media has turbocharged the pace and magnitude of story-driven race between Pakistan and India. Hashtags, imagery and emotion are all factors that help political narratives go viral. Meanwhile, misinformation and disinformation frequently make it difficult to build correct perceptions of actions. The Pahalgam crisis of 2025 represents a continuation of these broader trends. The events, however, have occurred in a digital communication age, thus offering a significant chance to analyze the uses of official state communication actors as instruments of strategic communication and information warfare on social media.

### Research Gap

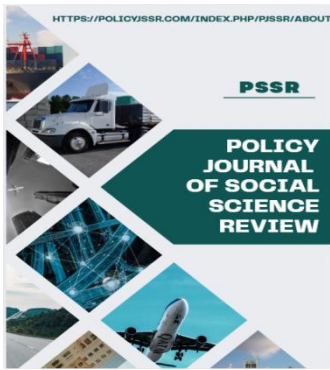
While there have been some existing research studies that have contributed to the understanding of social media, information warfare, and conflict communication, there are still some gaps to be addressed. Second, the majority of the studies are limited to the previous conflicts like that of Pulwama-Balakot

which renders the Pahalgam crisis of 2025 under-researched. Thirdly, the existing literature shows the general social media discourse and not the official state discourse. Very little work has been done on the utilization of social media strategically by government institutions in Pakistan and India during the conflict. The utilization of social media by government institutions strategically during the conflict between Pakistan and India has received limited attention. Fourth, very few studies have comparatively analyzed the official communication of the Pakistan and India in terms of Information Warfare Theory. Past studies tend to focus on either media effects or political communication without a significant focus on the strategic dimensions of digital information competition. This study aims to fill these gaps by performing a thematic analysis of official X accounts of the Pakistani and Indian governments in relation to the Pahalgam crisis. Information Warfare Theory is applied in the study to increase the understanding of how states utilize digital communication for the purposes of public opinion development, narrative construction and the achievement of strategic ends in today's conflicts.

### Theoretical Framework

This study draws from the Information Warfare Theory of Johan Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (1993) which has a well-defined framework to explain the strategic

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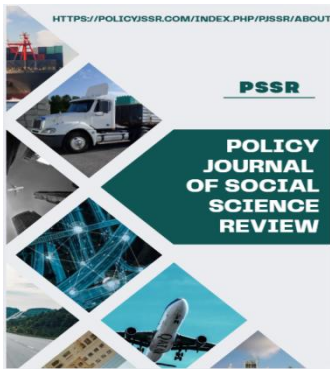
uses of information to shape opinions, attitudes and behaviors in political conflict and military confrontation. The theory has been laying the groundwork for the notion that information is today a strategic asset that is like military, economic or diplomatic power. Today, as communication technologies constantly evolve, conflicts no longer just take place on the physical battlefield; they also play out in the digital realm, encompassing attempts by states to shape public opinion, narratives, and to secure informational victories. The concept of information warfare became a reality in the late 1980s when military experts realized the increasing role information technologies played in national security and warfare. Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) first used the terms "Cyberwar" and "Netwar" to suggest that conflicts in the future would be defined by the battle over information networks as well as through the "traditional" military means. They recommended that getting people to think the way they want and shaping the flow of information may be as critical as winning on the battlefield.

Information Warfare Theory is the strategic use of Information and Communication Technologies to manipulate target audiences, affect the way events are interpreted, and attempt to gain a political or military end. Information warfare differs from conventional war in

that it does not necessarily involve destruction, but instead it aims to impact on the intellectual processes of individuals, their understanding, interpretation, and reaction to information. The ultimate goal is informational dominance, that is, the making of one's own narratives credible or at least more credible than opposing narratives. Libicki (1995) suggests that information warfare has several components such as command and control warfare, intelligence-based warfare, electronic warfare, psychological warfare, hacker warfare, economic information warfare and cyber warfare. The social media has made information warfare more widespread than before, which was mainly centered on military operation and supremacy. Modern governments, military organizations, media outlets and even individual people are engaged in information wars on the internet.

The emergence of social media has basically changed the practice of information warfare. Social media platforms like X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and YouTube allow governments to communicate with their own and international audiences without relying on traditional media outlets. In today's conflicts, social media can be extremely effective for disseminating official information quickly, countering opposition to official narratives, and shaping public opinion, so it's an important space for

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information warfare for state actors. An important premise of Information Warfare Theory is that observation is sometimes more important than reality. Political actors do not just want to spread factual information, they want to influence the way of the event's interpretation. In conflict situations, actors create narratives that explain causes, blame, legitimacy and justification for actions. These stories are carefully crafted to shape viewers' perceptions and mobilize them around certain political agendas. The importance of Information Warfare Theory to the current study is especially noteworthy. The incident in Pahalgam, April 2025, led to serious political and diplomatic tensions between Pakistan and India. In the crisis, the importance of official social media channels for both governments to communicate with their audiences, both domestically and internationally, increased. These reports did not simply describe events, but were involved in shaping narratives of responsibility, legitimacy, security, and nation.

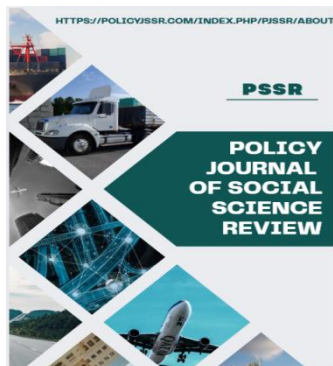
The theory is useful especially in the interpretation of several themes that arose in the data. For example, the common use of nation and nationalistic terminology, imagery, and symbols can be seen as an attempt to rally public opinion and reinforce national identity. Similarly, when assigning responsibility for the attack and contesting the claims of opponents there

are attempts to secure the dominance of the narrative. Emotional language and security related discourse are used in another way to support the idea that information can be utilized to shape public attitudes and opinions. In this study, the basis of study underlying official communications is the Information Warfare Theory. The theory allows the researcher to investigate the way governments are using social media to construct narratives, frame events, mobilize public sentiment and compete for informational supremacy throughout conflict.

## Methodology

The research design was qualitative in nature which was used to analyze the narratives and public opinion of the official social media feeds of Pakistan and India regarding the Pahalgam crisis of 2025. As this study was designed to explore meanings, interpretations, communication patterns, and narration strategies that lie within social media content, rather than numerical relationships between variables, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. The qualitative research allowed for an examination of the framing, interpretation and strategic use of communication messages in the context of specific socio-political contexts. As the main focus of this study is the analysis of the nature and characteristics of official digital communication during a

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geopolitical crisis, a qualitative design was more appropriate in the analysis of the content in detail.

The approach of Thematic Analysis was used as the main method of data analysis. Thematic analysis, a commonly used qualitative research method, is used to find, analyze, and interpret recurrent patterns (themes) in text. Thematic analysis is a systematic method to analyze meaning and detect meaningful patterns within data sets, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The method was chosen due to its ability to analyze dominant discourses, positions, emotions and communication strategies in official social media messages. Moreover, thematic analysis proves to be very suitable for analyses of political communication, conflict stories and online communication. The population comprised all tweets, posts, statements, images and videos posted by official Pakistani and Indian government and military accounts on X (formerly Twitter) regarding the Pahalgam crisis of 2025. This work concentrated on official institutional accounts as the sources of official state narratives and formal channels of communication in the event of political and military crises. The purposive sampling technique was used to choose the relevant content from social media. In qualitative research, when the researcher would like to select data sources that are most relevant to the research objectives, then she or he would use purposive

sampling. The selected official accounts were chosen due to their direct involvement in communicating official positions during the crisis. These accounts were central to disseminating information, reacting to developments, and to public discourse.

## **Pakistan**

1. Government of Pakistan (@GovtofPakistan)
2. Director General Inter-Services Public Relations (@OfficialDGISPR)

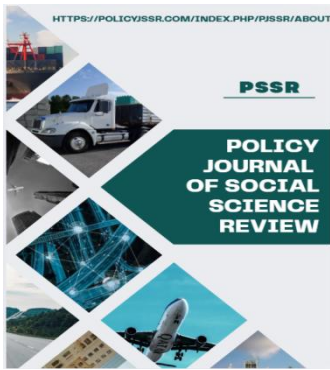
## **India**

1. Press Information Bureau, Government of India (@PIB\_India)
2. Additional Directorate General of Public Information (@adgpi)

These accounts were chosen as the official governmental and military accounts of the two countries during the war.

The content analyzed was between 22 April 2025 and 10 May 2025. It starts from the Pahalgam incident which precipitated the crisis and ends with the declaration of the ceasefire agreement which brought down the military tension existing between Pakistan and India. This period of time was chosen because it covers the most pivotal moments of the war, namely; The initial attack, Political reactions, Diplomatic responses, Military escalation, Public communication campaigns, and Ceasefire announcement

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## Data Collection

The data was directly gathered from the official X of the two State institutions. The researcher manually collected relevant tweets, statements, visual content, hashtags and official announcements made in the period under study. This study examined 100 official communications from 22 April to 10 May 2025. The government of Pakistan and the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) released 35 official press statements, press briefings and media releases, while the selected Pakistani and Indian X (formerly Twitter) accounts published 65 official tweets. However, as access to X was limited in most of the study period, most of the official Pakistani X accounts were not very active until access was restored on 10th May 2025. Hence, there were also official press briefings and statements in order to balance the Pakistan's official communication during the conflict. The data was purposefully selected as relevant to the incident in Pahalgam and the military escalation between India and Pakistan following the incident and was analyzed using thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The following data was gathered:

- Text-based tweets
- Official statements
- Press releases
- Images and infographics
- Video messages

- Hashtag campaigns
- Crisis-related announcements

The collected data included, only content pertaining to the incident at Pahalgam and the ongoing tensions between Pakistan and India were included in the analysis in order to make it relevant. The posts collected were stored and presented in chronological order for systematic review.

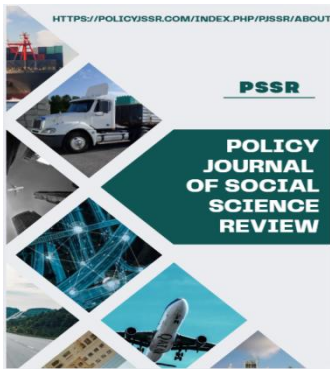
## Unit of Analysis

This study's unit of analysis was the individual social media posts (tweets) by the selected official accounts. Every tweet was considered as an individual message unit and studied regarding its content, Language and wording, Narrative framing, Emotional tone, Visual elements, and Strategic purpose.

## Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis of the collected data was done based on the framework of six steps thematic analysis provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). The following procedures were carried out; Familiarization with Data, Generating Initial Codes, Searching for Themes, Reviewing Themes, Defining and Naming Themes, and Producing the Report. The last step was to interpret the themes identified and connect them to the Information Warfare Theory and available literature concerning social media, conflict communication and public opinion formation.

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## Summary

The study has taken qualitative research design and thematic analysis approach to analyze the role of official Pakistani and Indian X account during the Pahalgam crisis of 2025. Data were collected purposefully from four official state accounts from 22nd April to 10th May 2025. Thematic analysis allowed the identification of dominant narratives and communication strategies that have an impact on public opinion. The methodology offers a solid body of knowledge on the use of SNS as a tool of information warfare and strategic communication in modern inter-state armed conflict.

## Findings and Analysis

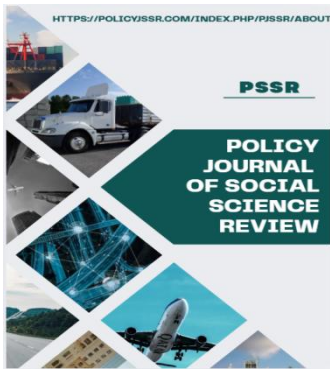
Between April 22 and May 10, 2025, five major themes emerged from the official X (formerly Twitter) posts made by the governmental and military institutions of both Pakistan and India. The themes show how social media served as a communication strategy during the Pahalgam crisis and how information warfare is a major matter of concern in the modern times in inter-state conflicts. The analysis was conducted using a thematic approach to 100 official communication items, which included 65 tweets and 35 official press statements and briefings. During the Pakistan-India conflict 2025, the findings showed that some themes remain constant in the period of digital

nationalism, strategic victimhood, securitization of the crisis, narrative contestation, information warfare and public opinion shaping. The themes combined show how official social media accounts tried to shape public perceptions, call for participation and create the narrative during the crisis.

## Theme 1: Digital Nationalism

Digital nationalism was one of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data. The official discourses of both countries have always been based on patriotic discourse, with much use of national symbols, national unity and sovereignty. These messages were used to strengthen the collective identity and call for public support during a time of heightened tension. After the attack in Pahalgam, the spirit of self-reliance, patriotism and unity was the focus of Indian official statements. The statements noted the country's resolve against terrorism and to secure the national security. The words used painted a picture of India as a unified country facing an external threat. Likewise, Pakistan's official sources spoke of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and the country's resolve to protect itself from aggression, while asserting the country's commitment to peace. National pride and resilience were frequently mentioned, along with Pakistan being a responsible state in accordance with international law.

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Nationalistic imagery, flags, military symbols and nationalist slogans with emotional connotations added to the nationalist narratives. These communication strategies were very emotional and engaged social media audiences, resulting in higher levels of public support for official positions. Information Warfare Theory: Digital nationalism can be seen as a way to reinforce in-group unity and improve the receptivity of people to the state narratives. The appeal to patriotism and national identity establishes a feeling link between citizens and official positions on policy.

**Analysis:** The results reveal that both countries have used nationalism as an information resource in a strategic manner. Instead of passing on information, official reports presented the crisis in terms of narratives that were more about collective identity, thus prompting citizens to think of the events in a nationalistic way.

## **Theme 2: Strategic Victimhood**

Strategic victimhood was the other significant theme detected in the data. Both official accounts were Pakistani and Indian making their respective countries look victims of injustice, aggression or misinformation. Indian communication used the attack on Pahalgam as an example of the tragedy of terrorism against innocent civilians. Official accounts highlighted the tragedy of the loss of life, the national mourning and the need for action against

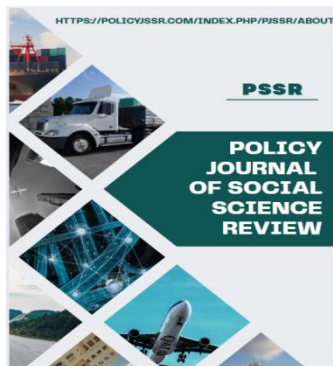
those responsible for the attack. These messages provided the legitimacy to future political and security responses. In contrast, Pakistani sources emphasized Pakistan as being the victim of baseless allegations and inflammatory comments. The allegations of the linkages that were being made between the Pakistan and the attack were repeatedly denied by the officials, and they were pleading for impartial investigations. There was a great deal of emphasis on the importance of peace and the issues of regional stability were raised.

**Analysis:** Both the narrators of the 'victim' story were trying to claim moral superiority and international sympathy. Each side wanted to legitimate its policy responses and challenge the credibility of its opponents' claims through their portrayal as victims.

## **Theme Three: Securitization of the Crisis**

Securitization was the third theme identified. The situation was officially described throughout the conflict as a national security threat that needed attention and action, and was presented in this way with great frequency. The presence of the term "terrorism" and that of national defense, border security and military preparedness were consistently emphasised in the official accounts of the Indian government. The Pahalgam incident was often likened to other security issues and the government's efforts to safeguard citizens were emphasised. The

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official communication in Pakistan also was security-oriented. Military preparedness, defense, and safeguarding national interests and sovereignty were emphasized. Meanwhile, Pakistani officials stressed the possible repercussions of the escalation and urged Pakistanis to be restrained. The security discourse made the crisis a national security issue. The framing process allowed governments to rationalize political decisions, military arrangements, and diplomatic initiatives.

**Analysis:** Securitization of discourse: model information warfare strategy. Governments make issues seem existential, thus making the populace more willing to accept unusual measures and to support state actions. The results show that both countries have created security narrative to influence the perception of the crisis by the public. These stories simplified the situation by focusing on the national survival and defense.

#### **Theme Four: Narrative Contestation**

One of the interesting observations was that the official accounts of Pakistan and India were in extremely fierce competition to be heard as the definitive story. Both sides questioned the views and arguments of the other and presented their own interpretations of events. The attacks had been blamed by Indian accounts on Pakistanis connected with the terror group and the following actions were considered justifiable counter-terrorism measures. The

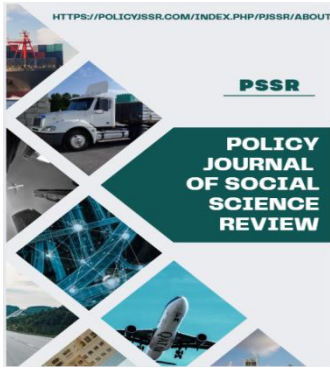
stories were focused on responsibility and justice. However, official Pakistani sources out rightly rejected the allegations and blamed India's claims as politically motivated. The official communication highlighted the lack of evidence and called for independent investigations. This story battle was not just about facts. Both governments were looking to shape the message of the crisis for audiences, its impact and meaning. This led to social media becoming a platform for competing realities: they were built and promoted.

**Analysis:** Narrative contestation is one of the key aspects of information warfare. In modern conflicts the struggle is not just for territory and resources, but for meaning and interpretation. The results lend to the conclusion that social media is a space of narratives contestation. Both governments went to great lengths to try and create informational dominance and shape public opinion via repetition and framing.

#### **Theme Five: Information Warfare and Public Opinion Shaping**

At the end, the predominant theme found was information warfare. The analysis indicated that the official social media communication was not just used for disseminating routine information, but also for strategic ends related to perception management and public opinion. In both countries, "X" accounts used communication strategies that were aimed at changing the attitudes of the audience.

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These strategies included; The selection of information to be presented, Emotional appeals, Symbolic messaging, Hashtag campaigns, Nationalistic rhetoric, and Strategic framing.

Official communication was frequently accompanied by visual imagery, videos, imagery of military forces and symbolic representations designed to support key messages. This kind of content helped build audience engagement and boosted the impact of official narratives. The findings also highlighted the issue of attempting to rebut the counter-narratives through 'rapid response' and 'coordinated communication'. Information was shared in real-time with governments having the ability to respond rapidly to events and control the narrative as it unfolded.

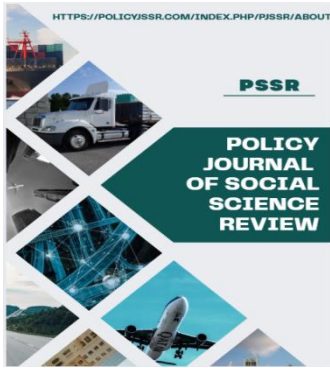
**Analysis:** Results were highly favorable to the basic tenets of Information Warfare Theory. The information was not simply a tool for communication but an instrument to shape perceptions and drive the political agenda.

Official social media channels became instruments of information warfare, manipulating the interpretation of events, public moods and narratives. The crisis showed that today's interstate disputes have become the arena of a digital fight for public opinion in addition to the diplomatic and military one.

## Discussion

The outcomes of this research indicate that social media has grown to be more than just a communication tool, but it is also a strategic platform where states can try to create perceptions, influence public opinion and create a dominant narrative in conflict situations. Official accounts of both Pakistani and Indian government have been analyzed in relation to the Pahalgam crisis and it has been seen that the mechanism of digital communication played a vital role in the modern information warfare. Both governments used nationalism, victimhood narratives, security discourse, and alternative accounts of events to appeal to both domestic and international audiences to further their domestic and international goals. Results indicate that the central premise of Information Warfare Theory, which suggests that information has become a strategic resource that can affect political decisions and public opinion, holds true. Official social media accounts were not just delivering information on happenings during the crisis, but were also engaged in building realities, providing interpretations, and shaping the audience understanding of the conflict. This is another affirmation of Arquilla and Ronfeldt's (1993) contention that modern warfare is more and more a contest for informational as well as military and diplomatic superiority.

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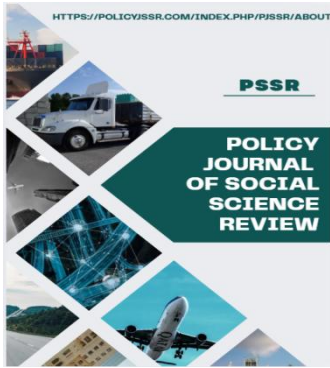
One of the most important findings relates to the strength of the digital nationalism in official communication. Patriotic language, national symbols and sovereignty and resilience were used in both Pakistani and Indian institutions consistently. The results confirm the results of Mihelj & Jimenez-Martinez (2021), who state that digital platforms have become significant areas for expression and affirmation of national identities. Nationalism is a great mobilization force, which during a conflict can help to consolidate public acceptance of government measures and to tighten ties between people. Nationalism as an instrument of psychological influence is understood within the Information Warfare Theory. Governments can draw on collective identities and emotional attachments to boost the receptivity of the audience to the government's preferred narrative. The results show that both states took advantage of a nationalistic discourse to establish emotional linkages between the citizens and the official policy responses.

These are examples of communication strategies that demonstrate how increasingly identity-based information warfare is being used instead of just factual argumentation. The strategic victimhood as a leading theme further accentuates the persuasive aspects of the official communication during the crisis. Both Pakistan and India tried to make themselves seem the victims of injustice,

aggression or misinformation. The Indian communication focused on the pain and the damage that was done in the attack in Pahalgam and said that the reaction was a measure taken to bring about justice and security. But Pakistani communications were consumed with their image of Pakistan being a victim of unfounded allegations and political vendetta. The results are in line with previous research in the field of strategic narratives and conflict communication. Political actors often use victimhood narratives to establish legitimacy and moral authority (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017). The victimhood narrative helps governments make policy choices, and at the same time undermines the credibility of policy opponents. This present study illustrates how both countries used such narratives to manipulate perceptions of responsibility and accountability in respective ways. Strategic victimhood is not just a domestic political issue. In today's wars, governments have to fight for international recognition and support. States make themselves appear victims in order to gain sympathy from global audiences and to increase the sense of the legitimacy of their actions.

The findings thus provide a glimpse into the operation of official social media communication both domestically and internationally. Another key discovery is related to the securitization of a discourse

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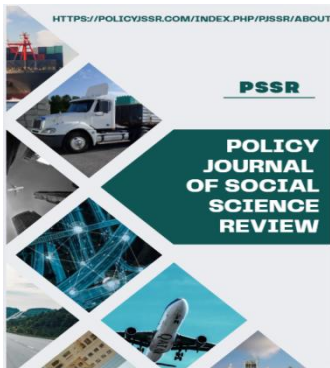
in the midst of a crisis. Pakistani and Indian narratives focused on the aspect of national security. The analyzed content included many references to terrorism, sovereignty, military preparedness and defense capabilities. The pattern is consistent with the one securitization scholars identified as the politicization of politics to issues of existential importance and the need for exceptional actions. The results align with prior studies suggesting that government use of narratives during a crisis to help garner public support for policy decisions. Political actors make events appear as threats to the nation's survival, which in turn makes people more willing to accept extraordinary measures. In terms of the Information Warfare Theory, securitization acts like a framing tool which helps audiences understand threats and analyze governmental responses. During the Pahalgam crisis, the extensive usage of the security discourse shows how the digital platforms enable the rapid spread of threat stories. Governments could reach citizens directly through their official social media accounts, avoiding the need to rely on the traditional media institutions. This direct communication helped state actors to influence public perception and to define preferred interpretations of events. It is probable that the one most important theme of this study is narrative contestation.

The results show that social media was a space which was contested and in which conflicting realities were constantly produced, questioned and promulgated. The official Pakistani and Indian narratives had essentially different narratives about the crisis; its causes, responsibilities, and implications. Both sides sought to construct a narrative, to establish one side's preferred interpretation and to discredit the other's interpretation. This discovery aligns with Castells' (2015) notion that power in the digital age relies more and more on shaping communication networks and shaping the construction of meaning. The battle for the narrative that was seen during the Pahalgam crisis, represents the wider shifts in global communication where information itself is a game of strategy. The results also reveal that social media have changed the pace and intensity of the narrative competition. Social media communication is more immediate and ongoing than traditional diplomatic communication, which can come through formal channels and take longer. The immediacy can be an opportunity for quick story building, but can also lead to polarization and escalation. The general concept of information warfare is the most solid basis to support the theoretical frame for this study. According to Information Warfare Theory, conflicts today are not just about the control of territory and military force, but

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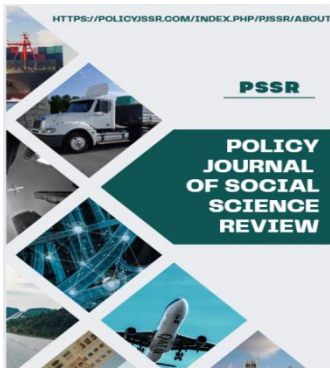


also about changing perception. The results suggest that the official Pakistani and Indian narratives were involved in such activities and used strategic communication methods which arguably shape the public perception of the crisis. Such observations align with the claims made by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) that networked communication environments can be used to strategically spread out narratives and ideology. Governments have the capacity to reach out directly to a large audience, which allows them to set the agenda for public discourse without relying on the traditional gatekeepers. As a result, social media has become a key weapon in the arsenal of modern information warfare. The results also build on the expanding body of research on digital diplomacy. Governments are increasingly turning to social media as tools for public diplomacy and international communication, according to Manor (2019). The present study demonstrates that digital diplomacy and information warfare are often closely interconnected. In the Pahalgam crisis, official narratives acted as tools of both diplomacy and public relations management and as a means of competing stories. This intersection highlights the growing confusion in modern international affairs between diplomacy, political communication and information warfare. The study has a number of

theoretical contributions. First, it builds on Information Warfare Theory by showing how communication on official social media platforms is used as a tool of narrative control in inter-state conflicts. Second, it helps to the development of the scholarship on digital nationalism by demonstrating the manipulation of national identity in official communication. Thirdly, it deepens the concept of digital diplomacy by providing insight into how governments use social media beyond just communication to strategic influence and perception management.

This study also has practical implications. The results show the need to develop a policy that takes social media not just as a communication tool, but as a big part of conflict dynamics. Government must come up with plans for responsible digital communication during crisis without spreading misinformation and polarization or causing escalation. Likewise, social media should enhance tools for promoting transparency and reducing the dissemination of misinformation during times of political tension. To sum up, the results show that the crisis in Pahalgam was a wide-ranging diplomatic and security conflict and also a clash of information in a digital domain. Official social media pages of both Pakistan and India were a major driver in the formation of narratives, popular perception and the competition for the information space. The

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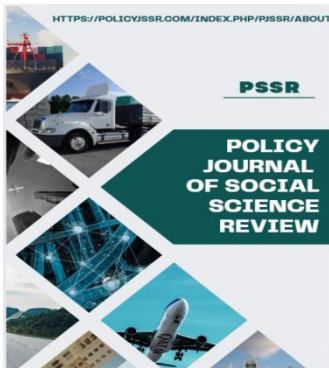
developments mirror other changes such as the modern characteristics of conflict which now involve the fight for perception in addition to the fight for political and military power. The influence of digital communication is growing in tandem with its penetration into the field of information warfare, and the study of the connection between the social media and public opinion will continue to be crucial for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners alike, as they grapple with the challenges of contemporary combat scenarios.

## Conclusion

Social media has changed the way people communicate during today's wars. Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the official social media accounts were very influential in the Pakistan-India Pahalgam crisis in 2025 and played a major role in shaping public opinion. The study revealed that the digital platforms were used as weapons of information warfare, building narratives, and engaging the public in the struggle between the Pakistani and Indian government and military institutions by examining official X (formerly Twitter) communications. The five prevailing themes that emerged from the thematic analysis were Digital Nationalism, Strategic Victimhood, Securitization of the Crisis, Narrative Contestation, and Information Warfare. Themes come together to show

the range of ways in which both states used social media to share information and shape perceptions, to engage the public, to defend policy choices and to contest alternative narratives. Official communication continually demonstrated attempts to control information and influence its interpretation, both within the country and internationally, regarding the crisis. The results of this study validate the key tenets of Information Warfare Theory, that information is now a strategic weapon in contemporary conflicts. Governments used official social media accounts to shape cognitive environments, create legitimacy and win public support. The study also finds that modern warfare is no longer just about military and diplomatic competition, but also about what is considered the “narrative” and “perception” of the conflict. Moreover, the study is a part of the body of literature on digital conflict communication which is expanding. Further, it examines the Pahalgam crisis of 2025 empirically, which is another contribution to the expanding body of research on digital conflict communication. Overall, the study highlights the role of social media in the context of interstate conflicts, and treats these platforms as strategic spaces for the competition for influence and legitimacy among states. Finally, the case of the Pahalgam crisis is a prime example of how information warfare has become an

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integral component of the present-day international arena. With new digital communication technologies in the making, governments will have ever more opportunities to manipulate public opinion and achieve strategic goals via social media outlets. This is why the dynamics of conflict and the understanding of them is important for policy makers, scholars of communication, the media and security practitioners to understand in navigating the complexities of the modern arena of conflict.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the results of the study:

During a crisis, government agencies should make verified and evidence based information available as a priority. Responsible communication can ensure that there is no miscommunication, diminish public anxiety, and foster informed public dialogue.

Communication departments in military institutions need to adopt communication strategies that are conflict sensitive and find a balance between the requirements for national security and accurate and transparent information sharing. Excessive inflammatory language need not be used in strategic communication that might add to escalation.

Digital platforms, like X, can enhance the tools to detect misinformation, manipulated information, and coordinated

disinformation efforts during political tension. Better fact-checking processes and fact-checking tools for content verification can help reduce the dissemination of misinformation.

Media outlets and journalists should always confirm information from social media before publishing. More focus should be given to conflict-sensitive reporting and professional fact checking practices.

Digital media literacy initiatives at universities and other educational institutions should be encouraged to help citizens develop the competencies to critically interpret information, and detect misinformation in digital spaces.

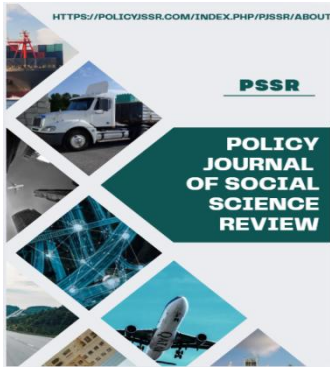
Social media is a major part of national security and conflict management, and that should be acknowledged by the policymakers. Digital communication tools need to be part of a wider diplomatic and crisis management processes.

Pakistan and India should facilitate initiatives and communication channels in the digital world that facilitate dialogue, de-escalate misinformation, and peaceful conflict resolution.

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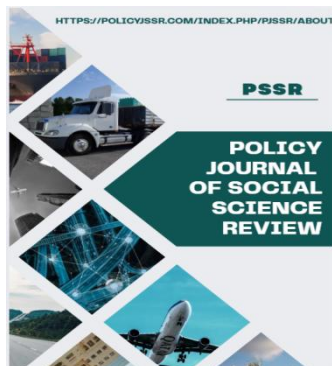


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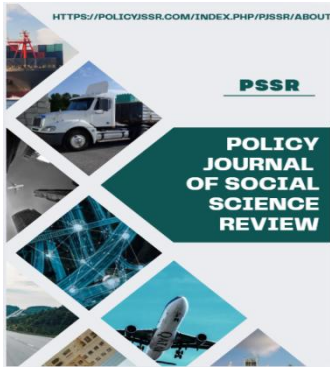
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