Why did Interstate Disinformation Warfare Pakistan Faced in the Last Two Decades Not Yield Proportionate Results? A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study examines the role of moderating factors in the interstate disinformation warfare Pakistan has faced in the last two decades. The warfare mongers want to shape Pakistani public opinion and international perception to affect government policy in their favor by hitting these targets through media assaults. Although this study majorly involved inductive reasoning, like most qualitative studies, it partly has a validating character. This research comprised a sample of 15 interviewees with diverse backgrounds, including media academicians, journalists, and defense analysts. A purposive sampling method was adopted to recruit participants identified through snowballing. The participants were recruited through the purposive snowballing method. In-depth phenomenological interviewing was employed to collect data per this study's ontological stance and epistemological beliefs. Employing the Thematic Analysis Method, twenty codes were identified from the interview data. These codes were segregated into six nodes based on similarity. The nodes were later clubbed into a theme. Once the data had been arranged hierarchically in Codes, Nodes, and Themes, it was fed into NVivo version 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to compile it graphically and assign visual presentations. All participants viewed affirmatively in line with the Nodes and Child Nodes, and no differing or mitigating remark was received from the participants. So, it is confidently concluded that the research objective has been fully achieved.

Keywords: *interstate disinformation warfare, disinformation impact, public opinion, international perception, warfare impact moderators, phenomenological interviewing*

Introduction

Background

Pakistan enjoys a significant geo-economic and geopolitical position in the region. It establishes a connection between South, West, and Central Asia. The Central Asian nations, being landlocked, require access to export their energy resources and a transit route for trade. Pakistan has the potential to provide these states with a cost-effective passage via Gwadar Port, which could facilitate Pakistan's access to the mineral wealth of Central Asia. Tanoli (2017) maintains that Gwadar is strategically positioned near several crucial maritime pathways connecting the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, Africa, and Europe via the Red Sea. Gwadar Port is approximately 400 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz, serving as the principal conduit for global oil supplies.

Pakistan occupies a crucial position in the Belt and Road Initiative (B.R.I.), emphasizing regional connectivity via economic development and serving as a modern incarnation of the ancient Silk Route that connected Asia with Europe and Africa (Khetran & Saeed, 2017). Hussain and Hussain (2017) assert that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), collaboratively developed by China and Pakistan, constitutes a component of the Belt and Road Initiative (B.R.I.). The project will encompass 3,000 kilometers of road and railway, stretching from the northernmost to the southern regions of Pakistan, linking southwestern China to the Indian Ocean, thereby positioning southern China as the focal point of the Belt and Road Initiative, involving approximately $62 billion, encompassing significant initiatives.

Pakistan had also gained political importance with its northwestern and western borders since the 1970s when the USSR invaded Afghanistan at the invitation of the Afghan government. Pakistan became the frontline state and acquired non-NATO ally status. It was instrumental in opposing the USSR, aided by the U.S.A., and successfully repelled the USSR from Afghanistan (Khan, 2019). The interests of the United States in this region have undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, particularly following the emergence of China as a rival superpower, thereby reestablishing a bipolar world after three decades. The altered circumstances bear significant ramifications for Pakistan (Sindhu, 2021).

Pakistan Faces 5th Generation Warfare

Pakistan's geostrategic importance has also brought problems to it vis-à-vis the regional and global powers. Azad (2020) and Kreft (2008) agree that Pakistan has highly conflicting interests with regional and global powers. Since its creation, Pakistan has faced territorial disputes with India and Afghanistan. The disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir has been a flashpoint, bringing these countries to war more than once. Since 1998, the Pakistan-Indian conflict has acquired a nuclear dimension. Likewise, Khan et al. (2019) maintain that the U.S. has different grievances against Pakistan. According to its terms, it wants a solution to the militancy in the region, especially arising from Afghanistan. It holds Pakistan responsible for its failures and squeezes it with an oft-repeated mantra of "do more." However, Pakistan is no longer an easy target due to its

extraordinary combat capacity in recent decades. As a result, the regional and global powers inimical to Pakistan have resorted to 5th Generation Warfare against it, involving various non-military means and actions, including economic pressures, psychological attacks, disinformation warfare, cyber attacks, and cultural influences. Jaspal (2020) agrees and opines that, unlike in the past, the adversaries are not in a position to arm-twist Pakistan by waging a full-fledged conventional war to toe its choices. Hence, it has no other option but to launch silent and subversive warfare against Pakistan.

Disinformation Warfare is the Main Tool of 5th Generation Warfare (5GW) against Pakistan

The main tool of the 5th Generation Warfare against Pakistan is disinformation through the media. Media is used to build narratives against Pakistan, portraying it as a promoter of terrorism, an unsafe nuclear arsenal holder, and an economically failed state. According to Warrich et al. (2021), during the last few years, international media websites, blogs, and social media forums like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have been projecting Pakistan negatively on one issue or another, collectively building a perception that Pakistan is a failed state. It harbors terrorists and is an unsafe place to live. Such propaganda is aimed at spoiling the image of the country. India's role in this regard is prominent. It has projected Pakistan's nuclear arsenal as unsafe and vulnerable to rogue elements. Disinformation warfare is being used as a tool of coercion against Pakistan to bring about the desired change in its strategic decisions.

Agenda-Setting Theory

This research has tried to view the role of media in contemporary disinformation warfare through the lens of the Agenda Setting Theory postulated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in a seminal study held at Chapel Hills in 1968 and published in 1972 (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Although this study offered limited proof of causation between the media agenda and public opinion, it gave rise to a series of further research work so panel studies, like the Charlotte study by Shaw and McCombs (1977) and three studies by Weaver et al. (2016) in three quite different communities – Lebanon, New Hampshire, Indianapolis, and Indiana. These studies supported the view of the mass media's agenda-setting role.

Media Agenda Against Pakistan is Subject to Moderating Impact

The agenda-setting capacity of the media pitted against Pakistan is subject to moderating factors. As a result, despite much havoc the adversary countries are trying to wreak on Pakistan through their media network-based disinformation, it is believed that they have been unable to achieve their aims substantially. They have not been able to make Pakistan another Yugoslavia, internally disintegrating it socially (Hassan, 2019), nor could they isolate it internationally and make it a pariah (Azad, 2020). Instead, Pakistan has been able to survive these organized media campaigns. Multiple factors have neutralized this disinformation campaign against Pakistan. These factors will

be discussed in the Literature Review. Accordingly, the following were the research questions and objectives:

Table 1

Research Questions	Research Objectives
Research Question 1*:*	**Research Objective 1:**
How does disinformation warfare impact Pakistan in the public, diplomatic, and government arenas, including the compromises Pakistani governments made on strategic fronts?	*To ascertain the impact of disinformation warfare on Pakistan at the public, diplomatic, and government levels, including the compromises Pakistani governments made on its strategic fronts.*
Research Question 2:	**Research Objective 2:**
Does the disinformation warfare against Pakistan go unabated, influencing public opinion, international perceptions, and government policies, or is it subject to certain moderating factors that reduce its impact?	*To examine whether the disinformation warfare Pakistan faces goes unabated, influencing public opinion, international perception, and government policies, or if it is subject to certain moderating factors that reduce its impact.*

Literature Review

5th Generation Warfare (5GW) -- Definition and Description

The 5th Generation Warfare (5GW) is a catchy word involving many forms, means, and strategies. Caliskan and Cramers (2018) say 5th Generation Warfare focuses more on non-military factors, such as information warfare, propaganda, cyber security, and subversive and non-kinetic means. Mansoor (2012) 5th Generation Warfare as the simultaneous use of conventional and irregular forces (insurgents, guerrillas, and terrorists) involving state and non-state actors to attain a political purpose. Schmid (2019) has a similar view and says 5th Generation Warfare (5GW) primarily focuses on a broad spectrum of non-military centers of gravity, including political will, the economy, diplomacy, culture, psychology, legitimacy, morale, etc. Hence, winning 5th Generation Warfare does not necessarily entail a military victory. Wither (2016) offers an inclusive definition of the modern display of 5th Generation Warfare, underlining the techniques used, namely "the use of military and non-military tools. Nilsson et al. (2021) describe the hybrid war phenomenon with multiple terms, like "Asymmetrical Warfare', 'Contactless Warfare,' 'Grey Wars,' 'New

warfare,' 'Next-generation Warfare,' 'Ambiguous Warfare,' 'Irregular Warfare' 'Non-linear Warfare,' 'Full Spectrum Conflict' and 'Unconventional Warfare.'

Disinformation as the Major Tool of 5th Generation Warfare (5GW)

An important part of the 5th Generation Warfare is disinformation and propaganda. Deichman (2009) called it the battle of perceptions. Bennett and Livingston (2018) later argued that 5th Generation Warfare is moral and cultural warfare that manipulates perceptions through disinformation and alters the world's context. It involves a systematic disinformation campaign aimed at strategic deceptions. Hellman (2024) aptly maintains that disinformation warfare, unlike conventional combats, does not hit the geographical borders. Instead, it targets soft institutions such as governance and the rule of law, political and social stability, elections, and public trust in the government.

Khawaja (2018) argues that enemies are known and identified in conventional wars. However, in disinformation warfare, the enemies remain hidden. They do not wear uniforms. The sides need to mobilize in conventional war, but no mobilization is needed in disinformation warfare. No deployments are required in disinformation warfare. Instead, it is launched simply through the press of a button. Disinformation warfare cuts across national boundaries, educational backdrops, and cultural outlooks. It makes direct and indirect attacks possible from anywhere around the globe in just a few seconds.

Arquilla & Borer (2007) argues that the task of perception management can be better understood through the Perceived Relative Deprivation (PRD) phenomenon, which is about a feeling of discrimination arising out of a state wherein what one has something compared to what one feels is entitled to and seeks restoration of justice. Abbasi (2020) takes the argument forward and says that in multiethnic federations like Pakistan, the PRD phenomenon is common and easily exploited by hostile elements. The activities of Baluch dissidents and the Pashtun Tahafaz Movement (PTM) in Pakistan are cases of foreign powers' exploitation of the PRD phenomenon.

Understanding Anatomy of Disinformation and Media Warfare Impact through Agenda-Setting Theory

Zakharova and Polonsky (2019) maintain that the process of realization of the term 'media agenda' has been actively pursued by researchers since the middle of the 20th century who worked on mass media influence on social views. McCombs and Shaw (1972) were the first to discover interdependence between the issues highlighted by media and public opinion through statistical correlation analysis of participants' data and media contents. Deichman (2009) called it 5th Generation Warfare – a battle of information that manipulates perceptions through disinformation and alters the world's context. It involves a systematic media agenda-setting and disinformation campaign aimed at strategic deception among the public of the target state. Huhtinen (2008) agrees that media is an effective perception management tool and, hence, the most important instrument of contemporary warfare.

Fuchs (2005) similarly believed that mass media is a land of propaganda warfare. It shapes the public outlook in a direction that aligns with external interests. Zhong (2021) maintains the mass media's effect on society by setting the agenda of issue priorities. The author argues that, over time, those issues that are prominent in the media usually become prominent in the minds of those people. Oji (2024) supports the media's potency to shape public opinion. She maintains that the media shapes the media agenda through a gatekeeper role. It designs, shapes, and filters narratives and stories to make them more acceptable among the target recipients.

Pakistan Faces Disinformation Warfare Challenges from Adversaries

Pakistan faces its strategic interests being affected by the interstate disinformation warfare, including the following:

  a. Allegations of Supporting Terrorism and the Human Rights Violation
  b. Sabotaging the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)
  c. Maligning Pakistan's Nuclear Program to Get it Rollbacked
  d. Restraining the Kashmir Issue
  e. Alleging Pakistan Army Forming a "Deep State" in Pakistan
  f. Promoting Sectarian and Ethnic Divide and Fueling Separatist Movements – The Case of Balochistan

Allegations of Supporting Terrorism and the Human Rights Violation

Studies like Ishfaq (2022), Wilson Centre (2022), Warrick et al. (2021), Azad (2020), Abbasi (2020), Mustafa (2019), Zaki (2014), Hussain and Hussain (2017) have concluded that Pakistan is accused of supporting terrorism and providing safe havens for terrorist organizations. Such allegations were strengthened post-September 11 attacks, resulting in a global war on terror that put Pakistan under the limelight given its proximity to Afghanistan. These allegations helped the adversaries influence international opinion against Pakistan, bringing it to the verge of diplomatic isolation.

Sabotaging the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Nadeem et al (2021). Ahmad et al. (2024), Syed (2020), Jaspal (2020), Bashir (2019), Sehgal (2018), Assadi (2018), and Bokhari (2018) maintain that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has distraught India and its allies. They see this project as a means for China's economic and political domination in south and central Asia. As a result, Pakistan has become the world's top hybrid warfare battleground waged by these allies led by India. This project is a target of international propaganda waged by regional and international countries inimical to Pakistan and China. As a part of this propaganda, the Indian media has been propagating that China is trapping Pakistan into its debt web through this project. As a result, Sindhu (2021), Khan et al. (2019),

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Vol 5 , Issue 1
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Bashir (2019), Jaspal (2020), and Mélange Mag (2018) claim that the Pakistani public may turn against this project.

Maligning Pakistan's Nuclear Program to Get it Rollbacked

Shamim et al. (2024), Azad (2020), Haider et al. (2020), and SIPRI (2018) argue that the Western media and literature forward hypothetical assessments and scenarios to defame Pakistan's nuclear program. It is the main target of Indian propaganda. The Western media refers to Pakistan's nukes as an "Islamic Bomb."

Restraining the Kashmir Issue

Alvi (2023), Iqbal and Ali (2022), Rauf and Asif (2021), Khalid (2021), Kuchay (2020), Ali (2020), Khaliq (2020), Machado et al. (2019), and BBC (2019) argue that India's disinformation and propaganda campaign against Pakistan focuses mainly on maligning Pakistan's stance over India's occupation of Jammu and Kashmir. EU DisinfoLab's disclosure of the large-scale Indian network of fake media houses and bogus NGOs upholds these studies' claims.

Alleging Pakistan Army Forming a "Deep State" in Pakistan

Ahmer (2023), Rehman and Shurong (2021), SRI (2019), and Barany (2009) held that the international media is rife with the point that Pakistan truly runs a deep state pattern of governance wherein the army, intelligence agencies, especially those working under the army, and the like-minded judiciary and bureaucracy undermine the elected government's writ. Dejected politicians also call it a state within the state or a state above the state. It has never let civilian governments strengthen and assert themselves. This fogged image of Pakistan's governance has damaged its diplomatic standing.

Promoting Sectarian and Ethnic Divide and Fueling Separatist Movements – The Case of Balochistan

Nandy (2024), Nadeem et al. (2021), Abbasi (2020), Babar and Mirza (2020), and Khan (2013) claim that the Indian media has poisoned Balochistan society. It shows that Balochistan has been kept undeveloped, intentionally trying to provoke its folks against its own country and its institutions. It operates media channels in Balochi. Thousands of fake photos/videos about Balochistan are shared on social media in a planned and organized way, primarily to influence Pakistan's social media in general and Balochistan's in particular. The scenario promoted by Indian media has compromised Pakistan's state of human rights.

Research Question 1

How does disinformation warfare impact Pakistan in the public, diplomatic, and government arenas, including the compromises Pakistani governments made on strategic fronts?

Moderating Factors for Media's Agenda-Setting Potential

Multiple factors have neutralized this disinformation campaign against Pakistan. According to Lewendusky (2011), people generally do not heed interstate disinformation war for many reasons. Studies, like McCombs et al. (2014), Lanoszka (2019), Berelson et al. (2009), Meraz (2009), Riaz (2008), Valenzuela and McCombs (2007), etc., have supported the view that agenda-setting does not operate *everywhere,* on *everyone,* and *always*. Lanoszka's (2019) work is very pertinent and of seminal importance. By referring to the Russian campaign targeting the Baltic States and the Crimean annexation in 2014, he argues that the strategic outcomes of disinformation and propaganda are exaggerated. He rejects the linear approach towards the effect of disinformation over the target states' policies in favor of the attacking adversaries.

Based on his discussion, it is concluded that the disinformation campaign must overcome, among other factors, the following moderating factors to achieve its original purpose of shaping the target states' policies.

Moderating Factor One: Individual, Contextual, and Societal Factors

Berelson et al. (2009) refer to the psychological aspect of individuals as a diluting factor for the agenda-setting effect of the mass media. They believe that individuals are not passive receivers of media messages. Instead, they are active users of the mass media and objectively select from the media content to meet their information-related needs. Similarly, Freeland (2012) maintains that while investigating media agenda-setting effects on audiences, their predisposition to certain viewpoints is to be considered. Rogers and Dearing (1988) found that the mass media is not the only source of influence on the public agenda. Instead, social interactions and processes are also among the forces that affect people's judgment about the importance of the issues.

Moderating Factor Two: Pre-existing Prejudices and Ideological Commitments

Another issue concerning the receptivity of disinformation is the preexisting preconceptions, beliefs, and ideological commitments of policymakers and common citizens. Kirshner (2015) agrees and maintains that the average citizen's acceptance of disinformation is determined by ideological commitments, partisan identities, lived experiences, rules of thumb, and conventional wisdom acquired over lifetimes. Likewise, Feaver (2007) argues that we can hardly manipulate the other side into acting based on our choices. Cormac and Aldrich (2018) say the receptivity of disinformation wholly depends upon the cognitive framework of the target audience, which is again determined by their existing ideological framework

Moderating Factor Three: Information Believed to be False is Hardly Accepted

Fever (2007) maintains that blatant disinformation operations are self-limiting. False information works only once. Quoting the example of CNN, he argues how long opponents would trust this channel if convinced that it airs false reports. Dombrowski and Reich (2018) claim that only a quarter of Americans visited the much-hyped websites in the last month of 2016. Those who visited those websites the most were already Trump supporters. Nimmo et al. (2017) reported no impact of Russian disinformation warfare on public opinion in the Baltic States because people of these states doubted Russian disinformation.

Moderating Factor Four: Disinformation May Not be Aimed at the Adversary States

The argument put forward by Pomerantsev (2015) is interesting and intriguing. He maintains that some disinformation campaigns have nothing to do with the other states. Rather, their target is the domestic public, not enemies abroad. Krekó and Enyedi (2018) agree with this argument and maintain that many regimes legitimize their authority by faking non-kinetic wars against outside threats, real or imaginary. Schweller and Pu (2011) concur and posit that disseminating preferred ideologies and narratives targeting adversaries can signify that the state is crusading against the international controlling systems. Disinformation campaigns impress the domestic audience by showing that the regime is fighting its security challenges. Echeverría et al. (2024) agree that actor states often launch disinformation campaigns against the state enemy to appease their own citizens.

Moderating Factor Five: Countermeasures Taken by the Target States

It is argued that the states that receive disinformation must take countermeasures to ward off the impact of disinformation, including enhancing media literacy among the public (Koltay, 2011; Buckingham, 2015; Potter, 2019; European Movement International, 2023; Bulger & Davison, 2018; LeCompte et al., 2017), fact-checking (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Iosifidis (2024; Fatima, 2021; Nadeem & Rehmat, 2023)), verification of the disinformation (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012), building counter-narrative (Lewandowsky et al., 2015; Chan et al., 2017; Jerit, 2008; Briggs & Reve, 2013; Ritzmann, 2017), and engaging the public target of disinformation (Saeed et al., 2020; European Movement International, 2023; Nabeel & Asif, 2019; Zafar, 2017; Dawn, 2016; ISPR, 2018; Khan, 2013).

From the literature reviewed in the preceding section, the following research questions emerge:

 Research Question 2:

Does the disinformation warfare against Pakistan go unabated, influencing public opinion,

international perceptions, and government policies, or is it subject to certain moderating factors

that reduce its impact?

Research Method

Qualitative research methodology was used to carry out this study mainly because it was to derive the meanings from the social phenomenon based on people's information and their lived experiences, which could be realized only through the qualitative framework. Moreover, this study explored in-depth meanings of social phenomena and wields subjective, interpretive, and inductive.

Sampling

A purposive sampling method was adopted to identify and recruit participants through snowballing. This was mainly because only individuals with appropriate knowledge of disinformation and propaganda warfare against Pakistan could provide the relevant data. Previous studies support the use of a purposive sample for this study. Using this method, a sample of 15 participants was set for this study, comprising individuals informed of external disinformation interference in the country.

The participants were identified through snowballing. This was an appropriate sample for a phenomenological study. Participants were shortlisted with a mix of international affairs academicians, international/diplomatic affairs journalists, and defense analysts. Participants with diverse backgrounds were intentionally chosen to complement the data from various aspects of the phenomenon of disinformation and propaganda against Pakistan this study examines. As a result, these informed participants with diverse backgrounds provided realistic data about the phenomenon.

Data Saturation

Because of the nature of the subject, data saturation was reached with about 70% of participants' coverage. As a result, interviews were completed with minimal incremental advantage from further interviewing.

Data Collection Method

In-depth interviewing was employed to collect qualitative data. Under the sub-categories, phenomenological interviews were used for this study. Therefore, open-ended questions were asked in interviews. Originally, the interview question was about the disinformation targets of the adversaries in Pakistan. However, following the spirit of qualitative research, the interview questions were allowed to evolve, giving rise to numerous sub-questions as the interviewing process proceeded.

Thematic Analysis

This study used a specific thematic analysis method for phenomenological studies known as the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method by Moustakas (1994). This process helped organize the data, break it into correct parts (Codes, Nodes, and Themes), and analyze each part to ensure the report's validity. This method involved identifying, describing, and reporting themes discovered

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Vol 5 , Issue 1
January to March 2025

within the data. As part of the thematic analysis process, codes were segregated into nodes and child nodes. These nodes were later clubbed into a Theme.

The Use of NVivo

Once the data had been arranged hierarchically in Codes, Nodes, and Themes, it was fed into NVivo version 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to compile it graphically and assign visual presentations. Although the Codes, Nodes, and Themes were identified manually, the software generated output in the form of data visualizations, including tables, bar charts, hierarchical charts, explore diagrams, word clouds, and word trees.

Data Integration and Analysis

As part of the data integration process, 33 codes identified from the interview data of 15 participants were consolidated into 8 nodes and 11 sub-nodes. These nodes were later clubbed into two Themes. The data was rearranged participant-wise, comprising their contribution in each sub-node, node, and theme. For each participant, the Sub-Nodes, Nodes, and themes were codified as CxNxTHx, where C is for a Child Node, N is for a Node, and TH is for the Themes. Accordingly, the entire data is arranged in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Theme 1: Disinformation Warfare Impact

Participants identified the impact of disinformation warfare on Pakistan in various areas, like Pakistan's diplomatic standing, separatist movements, Kashmir issue, disrepute of Pakistan Army and Intelligence Agencies, etc. Their views are consolidated in Table 1.

NVivo-drawn summary of Nodes of Theme 1 with an overall coverage of source content coded on Theme 1.

Theme No. & Title	Node ID	Node Title	Overall Coverage of Source Content Coded on Theme 1
Theme-1 Disinformation Warfare Impact	N1TH1	Pakistan Feels the Heat of Diplomatic Isolation	15.21%
	N2TH1	Separatist Movements Aggravated	9.33%
	N3TH1	The Case of Right to Self-determination of the Kashmiri People Came to a Standstill	6.00%
	N4TH1	Pakistan Army's Credibility Compromised	12.62%

Pakistan Feels the Heat of Diplomatic Isolation

Participants 2, 8, and 13 maintained that Pakistan faces global isolation because of India's disinformation and propaganda gimmicks. They maintained that Pakistan is marginalizing day by day on diplomatic fronts. They thought disinformation operations had successfully portrayed Pakistan before the international community as a regional advocate of terrorism and characterized it as an unstable and failing state, downgrading its diplomatic standing. They advised the Pakistani decision-makers to think about this.

Separatist Movements Aggravated

Participants 4 and 7 contended that disinformation and propaganda warfare waged by adversary states, especially India, has succeeded in augmenting separatist movements along its western borders. These include the movements in Balochistan led by militants under different titles and the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, which ran in the former federally administered tribal areas (FATA) and is now merged in KPK, Pakistan. The disinformation campaigns, especially run through social media, have played a role in expanding these movements.

The Case of Right to Self-determination of the Kashmiri People Came to a Standstill

Participants 4 and 7, who talked about Kashmir as Pakistan's strategic point, argued that India has resorted to disinformation and propaganda about the Kashmir issue, telling the international community, especially the UN and the EU, that the situation in Kashmir is normal. Most of the Kashmiri people want to live with India, and the uprising is stirred only by a handful of people with the help of Pakistan. Accordingly, India has successfully convinced the international community to a certain extent.

Pakistan Army's Credibility Compromised

Participants 5, 8, and 11 argued that people's trust in state institutions, especially the army and national intelligence agencies, has been compromised due to, among other things, propaganda warfare. It has, in turn, created a vicious circle. Since people's trust in the army and intelligence agencies has already moderated, they have become more receptive to disinformation compared to the past. Participants viewed that disinformation and fake news have enhanced confusion among the public and weakened public confidence in the army and intelligence agencies. As a result, the relationship between the public and these institutions is worsened.

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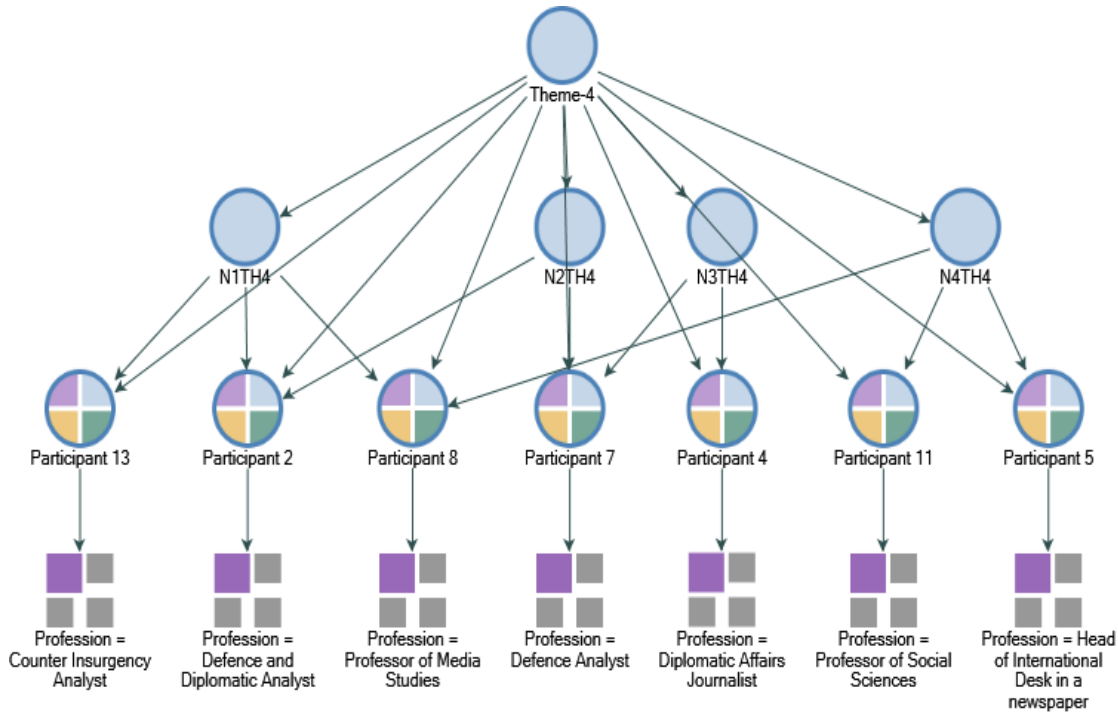
Vol 5 , Issue 1
January to March 2025

Figure 1: An NVivo-drawn explore diagram for Theme 1 showing the interaction between the Theme and Nodes and the participant's contribution to nodes.

Figure 2: NVivo Drawn Annotated Word Tree of Theme 1

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Vol 5 , Issue 1
January to March 2025

Theme 2: Moderators for Disinformation Warfare Impact

Some Participants believed that disinformation and propaganda warfare waged by the opposing states against Pakistan does not go unchecked. Instead, it must overcome certain barriers or moderators to realize the actors' objectives. Participants who spoke on this point underscored various barriers or moderators to external disinformation. Accordingly, these data are arranged in the four areas and twelve sub-areas, as shown in Table 2 below, and were assigned a distinct Node and Sub-Node/Child Node each.

Table 2

NVivo-drawn summary of Nodes and Sub/Child Nodes of Theme 2 with an overall coverage of source content coded on Theme 2.

Theme No. & Title	Node ID	Node Title	Sub-Node/Child Node Title	Overall Coverage of Source Content Coded on Theme 2
Theme-2 Moderators for Disinformation Warfare Impact	**N1TH2**	Moderators for Disinformation Warfare Impact on Public Opinion	**C1N1TH2**-Other Sources of Information **C2N1TH2**-Existing Political and Religious Ideologies **C3N1TH2-** A Weak Disinformation Source Credibility **C4N1TH2-**Disinformation Aims to Get an Advantage at Home	28.6%
	N2TH2	Moderators for Augmenting Effects of Disinformation Warfare on Separatists	**C1N2TH2**-Fact-checking and Exposing Disinformation **C2N2TH2**-Building a Counter-Narrative **C3N2TH2**-Engaging the Public Target of Disinformation	43.04%
	N3TH2	Moderators for Disinformation Impact on Pakistan's State Policy	**C1N3TH5**-CPEC is in Pakistan's National Interest **C2N3TH5**-Kashmir is Pakistan's Jugular Vein	37.84%
	N4TH2	Moderators for Disinformation Warfare Impact on Pakistan	**C1N4TH5**-Pakistan is Too Important to be Isolated **C2N4TH5**-Pakistan's Nuclear Program is Safe	40.46%

Moderators for Disinformation Warfare Impact on Public Opinion

Several participants viewed how certain factors act as moderators against the impact of disinformation warfare at the wider public level. That is why any participant at the public level reports no noticeable impact of disinformation and propaganda. Five factors that act as moderators were identified based on the participants' views. These factors, assigned a distinct Sub/Child Node, are described below with the participants' data.

Other Sources of Information

Participant 1 contributed to the child node, arguing that the disinformation propagated by the enemy states is not taken at its face value in Pakistan-like societies, which operate on families, groups, and community patterns. Intra-group opinion is weightier in these societies than outside information. So, any disinformation approved by social media creates a useless effect if rejected.

Existing Political and Religious Ideologies

Participants 3, 4, and 5 argued that the public rejects the disinformation that attacks the country's national interests and conflicts with its political and religious ideologies. They believed that people experience cognitive dissonance in response to that disinformation that causes discomfort. Hence, they reject it, at least partially

A Weak Disinformation Source Credibility

Participant 9 contributed to the child node, arguing that faith in outside information depends on the source's credibility. If sources are credible, information is accepted; otherwise, it is rejected. Most of the Pakistani public is less inclined to believe the misinformation if the sources are recognized for propagating misleading information or have a track record of doing so. India is one of them. Since India has repeatedly proved itself wrong, including bragging about the Balakot attacks, the Pakistani public does not believe in the content and intent of the negative information it receives from India.

Disinformation Aims to Get an Advantage at Home

Participant 9 contributed to this sub-node, maintaining that India's disinformation against Pakistan, wherein it enters the rut of the Kashmir issue and Pakistan's nuclear program, etc., is not against Pakistan at all. Instead, it addresses the Indian Public. It is not uncommon that, on many occasions, disinformation against the opposing states is waged only to gain an advantage at home. In the case of India, in the wake of the latest Indian general elections, many such machinations were meant to enhance popular support for the BJP in general elections.

Moderators for Augmenting Effects of Disinformation Warfare on Separatism

Some participants believed that the Pakistani government, army, and intelligence agencies work hard to combat the impact of disinformation campaigns, including the following, which have helped the country mitigate the impact of these campaigns:

Introducing Fact-checking and Exposing Disinformation

Participants 14 and 15 gave their opinions on Pakistan's reaction to the EU DisinfoLab report that exposed India's vast network of fake media outlets and bogus NGOs busy propagating propaganda against Pakistan. They appreciated how the Prime Minister of Pakistan and other officials reacted to the network. These Participants believed that exposing fake news and giving a befitting response to it is certainly a big antidote to fake news.

Building a Counter-Narrative

Participants 3 and 4 believed ISPR's media productions, especially the television drama series, boosted Pakistan's image as a responsible state in front of the country's new generation. The participants also believed that Pakistan should establish media houses that can successfully present Pakistan's narrative worldwide. Presently, Pakistan does not have media houses of this level.

Engaging the Public Target of Disinformation

Participants 6 and 15 believed that the Pakistani government and Pakistan Army took numerous soft counter-insurgency measures that changed the mindset of the Baloch people, especially the youth, and made them less receptive to Indian, Iranian, and Afghan anti-Pakistan disinformation and propaganda. The measures included offering general amnesty, financial assistance, steps for inter-province harmony among the youth, and free education, which have yielded.

Moderators for Disinformation Impact on Pakistan's State Policy

Certain Participants gave their views on the possibilities of Pakistan's compromise over state policies, especially the first-line strategic fronts due to disinformation and propaganda warfare waged by the inimical states. Participants chose to speak about Pakistan's stake in its nuclear program, CPEC, and the Kashmir cause Pakistan has espoused since its inception as below:

CPEC is in Pakistan's National Interest

Participants 1, 4, and 15, who talked about CPEC, generally agreed that CPEC could not maintain its original pace due to the germination of anti-CPEC sentiments in Balochistan due to misleading information imparted to them by the anti-CPEC forces in the region. The flow of Chinese funds was also slowed down because of the reduced pace of the CPEC projects. Participants wondered

how high-level officials from the U.S. and India got directly involved in disinformation communication against CPEC through press conferences and seminars.

Kashmir is Pakistan's Jugular Vein

Participants 4 and 7, who talked about Kashmir as Pakistan's strategic point, argued that Pakistan could not abandon the Kashmir cause because of international pressure, including media warfare. Instead, Pakistan would maintain its commitment to the cause and keep supporting the Kashmiris politically, morally, and diplomatically to realize their right to self-determination per the UN resolutions. They maintained that the Kashmir cause is embedded in Pakistan's ideology.

Moderators for Disinformation Warfare Impact on Pakistan's Diplomatic Standing

Certain Participants believed India had considerably succeeded in isolating Pakistan, at least regionally. However, another view was also available among the Participants, who believed that Pakistan is yet to be isolated the way India wanted due to the following factors:

Pakistan is Too Important to be Isolated

Participants 6, 9, 12, and 15 held the other way and posited that despite fierce negative propaganda and disinformation unleashed by India and other like-minded states to isolate Pakistan diplomatically, they remained unsuccessful. In their view, Pakistan has maintained its clean position at the international level. They further viewed that it is mainly because Pakistan has acted practically by making heavy sacrifices in the fight against terror, which the global community values. Its role in stabilization and reconciliation in Afghanistan is also acknowledged. Its sea and land routes have the potential to interconnect different world regions.

Pakistan's Nuclear Program is Safe

Participants 8 and 9 claimed that, opposite to the disinformation and propaganda, Pakistan's nuclear program and nuclear weapons are safe. They claimed the organizational frameworks for Pakistan's nuclear program's security are based on internationally accepted standards. The national regulatory and operational frameworks incorporate these security precautions and procedures, creating the world's largest and most advanced nuclear infrastructure. Participants further claimed that Pakistan's nuclear program's safety had been endorsed by the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), a usually unbiased and impartial international nuclear security organization. NIT has ranked Pakistan above India in its safety and security capacity of nuclear assets, Participants maintained. Participants also contended that Pakistan has zero theft or loss record compared to India and even the U.S., where theft and loss of enriched uranium or even nukes had happened.
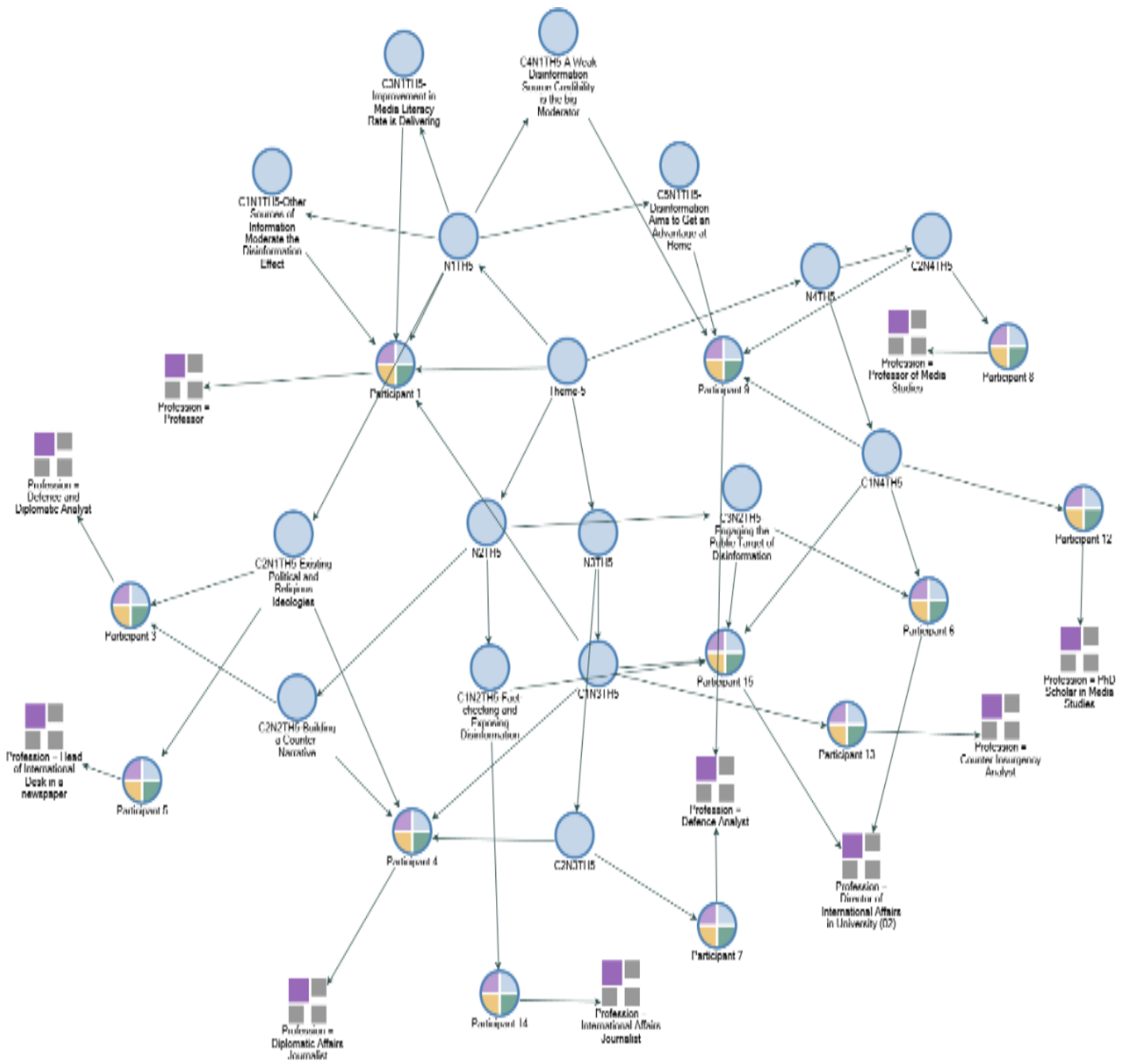
Figure 3: An NVivo-drawn explore diagram for Theme 2, showing the interaction between Theme, Nodes, and Sub/Child Nodes and the participant's contribution to the nodes.
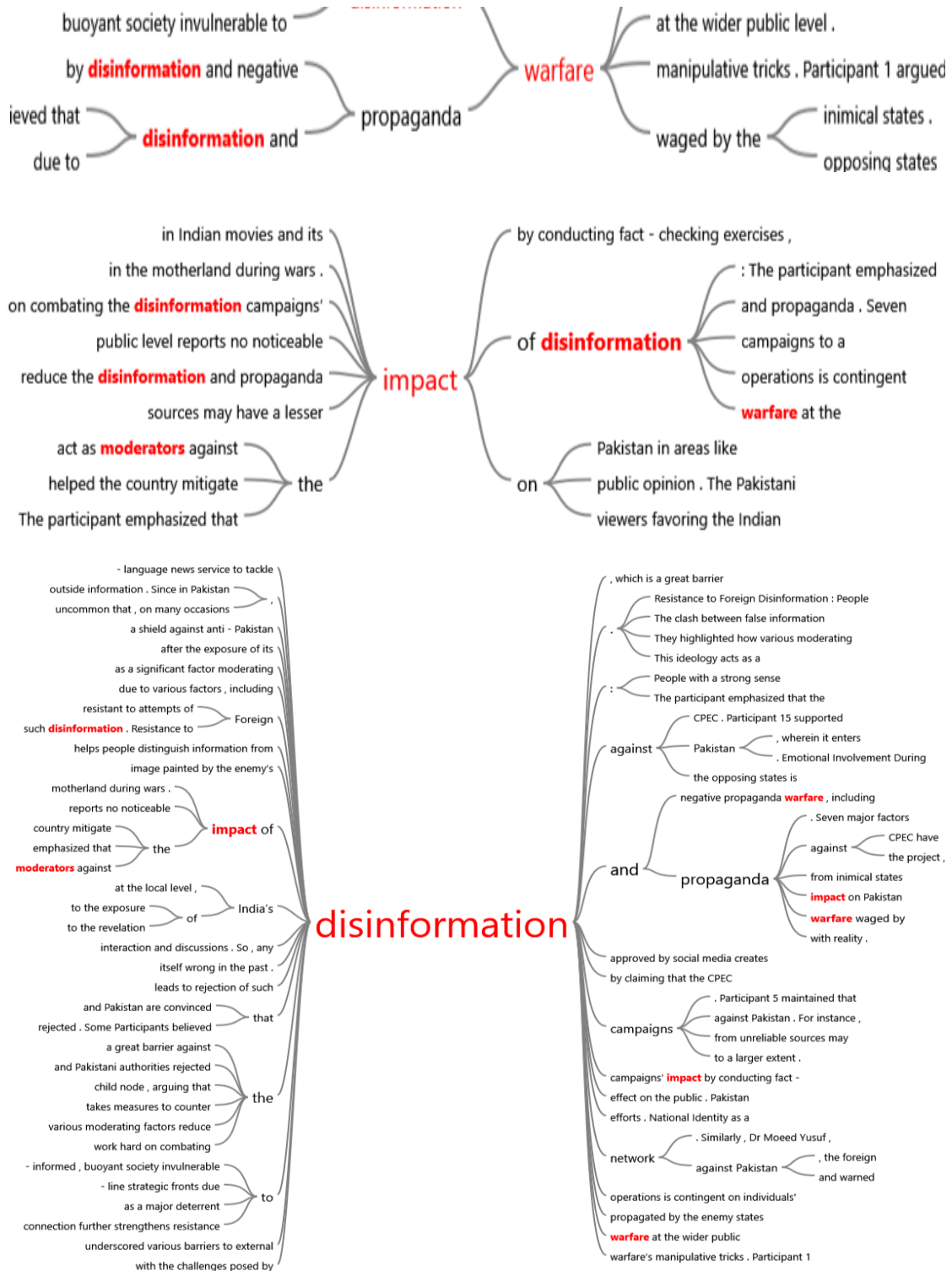
Figure 4: NVivo-drawn Annotated Word Tree of Theme 2

Discussion and Conclusion

The discussion involves the core of this study. It deals with its primary objectives: identifying disinformation warfare's impact on the recipients (Theme 1) and understanding the extent to which disinformation impact is diluted and mitigated by various moderating factors (Theme 2). The discussion will involve juxtaposing the impacts with the moderators to conclude the net impact, as shown in Tables 3a and 3b. Theme 1, "Disinformation Warfare Impact," comprised four Nodes, which have been rearranged in Tables 3a and 3b vis-à-vis the disinformation recipients and targets. Likewise, Theme 2, "Moderators for Disinformation Warfare Impact," comprised four Nodes and thirteen Sub/Child Nodes, which have also been rearranged in Tables 3a and 3b vis-à-vis the disinformation recipients and targets.

Table 3a comprises moderators with ambivalent to low effectiveness, which means the impact of disinformation in those cases was high. On the other hand, Table 3b consists of moderators with significant effectiveness, which means the impact of disinformation in those cases was low. Therefore, the focus of the discussion will be on Table 3b, examining the moderating factors that were so effective that they did not allow the impact to happen. More importantly, the review of the research objective's realization also involved juxtaposing the interview data against the past studies from the literature review chapter to find whether the findings of this study endorse or differ from those studies.

Table 3a

Disinformation Impact-Moderators Orientation for Low to Ambivalent Moderator Effectiveness

Disinformation Recipients	Disinformation Targets (The areas of potential disinformation impact)	Disinformation Impact on Recipients	Impact Moderators	Moderators' Effectiveness
International Community and Bodies	• Alleging Pakistan for Supporting Terrorism • Calling Pakistan's Antiterrorism Operations Human Rights Violation	• Pakistan Feels the Heat of Diplomatic Isolation	• Pakistan is too Important to be Isolated Diplomatically.	Ambivalent
	• Kashmir is a Dead Issue. Normalcy has been Restored in Kasmir.	• The Case of the Right to Self-determination of the Kashmiri People Came to a Standstill	• Kashmiri People have Yet to be Given the Right to Self-Determination through a Plebiscite.	Low
Separatists	• Fueling Separatist Movements	• Separatist Movements Aggravated	• Fact-checking and Exposing Disinformation • Building a Counter-Narrative • Engaging the Public Target of Disinformation	Low
General Public	• Alleging Pakistan Army and Intelligence Agencies Acting as Deep State in Pakistan	• Pakistan Army's Credibility Compromised	• Building a Counter-Narrative by ISPR	Low

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ISSN (Print): 2790-7716, *ISSN (Online): 2790-7724*

Vol 5   , Issue 1
January to March 2025

Table 3b

Disinformation (Potential) Impact-Moderators Orientation for Significant Moderator Effectiveness

Disinformation Recipients	Disinformation Focus/Targets (The areas of potential disinformation impact)	(Potential) Impact on Recipients	Impact Moderators	Moderators' Effectiveness
International Community and Bodies	• Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal is Vulnerable to Theft and Misuse • Pakistan's Nuclear Program Technology is Vulnerable to Proliferation	• Pakistan's Nuclear Program would have been Banned	• Pakistan's Nuclear Program, Arsenals, and Technology are Safe	Significant
General Public	• China's Debt Trap Theory Regarding CPEC	Pakistani Public would have Turned against CPEC	• Other Sources of Information than Disinformation • A Weak Disinformation Source Credibility • Disinformation aims to Get an Advantage at Home	Significant
Government of Pakistan (Directly or through Public Opinion)	• Winding up CPEC • To Abandon the Kashmir Cause	• Pakistan Would have Withdrawn from the CPEC • Pakistan Would have Abandoned the Kashmir Cause	• CPEC is in Pakistan's National Interest • Kashmir is Pakistan's Jugular Vein	Significant Significant

Illustration of Table 3b

(Potential) Impact 1: Pakistan's Nuclear Program Would Have been Banned

The (Potential) Impact-Moderators orientation for the (Potential) Impact 4 is given in Table 4.

Table 4

The Disinformation Target-Moderators orientation for Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal is Vulnerable to Theft and Misuse, and Pakistan's Nuclear Technology is Vulnerable to Proliferation.

Disinformation Recipients	Disinformation Focus/Targets	(Potential) Impact on Recipients	Impact Moderators	Moderators' Effectiveness
International Community and Bodies	• Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenals are Vulnerable to Theft and Misuse • Pakistan's Nuclear Program Technology is Vulnerable to Proliferation	Pakistan's Nuclear Program Would have been Banned	Pakistan's Nuclear Program and Arsenals are Safe	Significant

Participants 1, 2, 3, and 7 contributed to this potential impact. They believed that Pakistan's nuclear program was the biggest irritant for India and Israel. Disarming Pakistan with its nuclear weapons is their priority. They allege that Pakistan's nuclear security apparatus is insecure and unreliable by concocting improbable scenarios highlighting the fragility of Pakistani nuclear weapons and the "possibility" of them falling into the hands of al-Qaeda. They also call Pakistan's nukes an "Islamic Bomb." The Western fake think tanks called it a theft product of Dr. Khan and declared it the act of the wider Islamic nation rather than an individual act. Ishfaq (2022), Wilson Centre (2022), Warrick et al. (2021), Azad (2020), Abbasi (2020), Mustafa (2019), Zaki (2014), Hussain and Hussain (2017) supported these views.

Moderators for (Potential) Impact 1

Participants 8 and 9 argued that Pakistan's nuclear program and arsenals are safe. They maintained that Pakistan had taken strong initiatives to ensure the security of its nuclear arms based on U.S. nuclear security practices, comprising physical security, workforce reliability programs, procedural and technical safeguards, and secrecy and deception. It is endorsed by NTI, ranking Pakistan at 33 compared to India's 38. In the U.S., even six nuclear bombs were lost on the way

to the U.S. and were never found. One such occurrence happened in 1996 when a tanker dropped four B-28 thermonuclear bombs near the fishing community of Palomares. The NTI's 2020 report hailed Pakistan as the most improved state in the material loss and theft ranking, progressively enhancing the security measures. Noor (2023), Khan (2019), Azad (2023), NTI (2020), and The Express Tribune (2020) supported the views of

(Potential) Impact 2: Pakistani Public Would Have Turned Against CPEC

The (Potential) Impact-Moderators orientation for the (Potential) Impact 2 is given in Table 5.

Table 5

The Disinformation Target-Moderators Orientation for China's Debt Trap Theory Regarding CPEC

Disinformation Recipients	Disinformation Focus/Targets	(Potential) Impact on Recipients	Impact Moderators	Moderators' Effectiveness
General Public	China's Debt Trap Theory Regarding CPEC	Pakistani Public Would Have Turned Against CPEC	• Other Sources of Information • A Weak Disinformation Source Credibility • Disinformation aims to Get an Advantage at Home	Significant

Participant 3 contributed to the idea of this potential impact. He said that the adversaries spread the myth that Pakistan would fall victim to China's debt trap and become a colony. Another far-fetched fear is that importing the machinery for the CPEC projects would enhance the import bill, increasing the trade deficit. However, the reality is that Pakistan's trade balance would not be affected by the Chinese funding behind the import of machinery for industry projects. It is propaganda only. The CPEC loans are open, transparent, inclusive, and development-oriented. These long-term loans have the lowest interest rate, easy repayment conditions, and rescheduling provisions. The total CPEC loan is $5.8 billion, making 5.3 percent of Pakistan's total foreign loans. Nadeem et al. (2021), Ahmad et al. (2024), Syed (2020), Jaspal (2020), Jaspal (2020), Bashir (2019), Sehgal (2018), Assadi (2018), and Bokhari (2018) support Participant 3's view.

Moderators for (Potential) Impact 2

Other Sources of Information

Participant 1 contributed to this moderator. He argued that the disinformation propagated by the enemy states should be taken at its face value in Pakistan-like societies, which operate on families, groups, and community patterns. Intra-group opinion is weightier in these societies than outside information. Since in Pakistan, disinformation and propaganda from inimical states are, as a whole, abhorred and less believed in, its effect is much diluted during intra-group interaction and discussions. So, any disinformation approved by social media creates a useless effect if rejected. Rogers and Dearing (1988), Manaf et al. (2017), and Jiang (2014) support Participant 1's views.

Existing Political and Religious Ideologies

Participants 3, 4, and 5 contributed to this moderator. They maintained that people feel uncomfortable when presented with knowledge that conflicts with their beliefs. Participant 3 referred to research conducted at the University of Gujrat, Pakistan, regarding Indian movies' negative portrayal of Pakistan and their effect on the viewers in favor of the Indian stance. 70% of the respondents thought Indian movies were contorted and overstated, with exaggerated facts when negatively portraying Pakistan and its institutions. Participant 4 referred to a special report submitted to the United States Institute of Peace in November 2022 that concluded that many respondents believed in false or unconfirmed information that portrayed Pakistan positively and discarded the truth with an adverse feeling toward Kirshner (2015), Feaver (2007), Cormac and Aldrich (2018), Hermann (2017), Rathbun et al. (2016), Becker (1996), and Lanoszka (2019) support the views of Participants 3, 4, and 5.

A Weak Disinformation Source Reliability

Participant 9 contributed to this moderator, arguing that faith in outside information depends on the source's credibility. If sources are credible, information is accepted; otherwise, it is rejected. Most of the Pakistani public is less inclined to believe the misinformation if the sources are recognized for propagating misleading information or have a track record of doing so. India is one of them. Since India has repeatedly proved itself wrong, including bragging about the Balakot attacks, the Pakistani public does not believe in the content and intent of the negative information it receives from India. Fever (2007), Valenzuela and McCombs (2007), and Riaz (2008) support Participant 9's views.

Disinformation Aims to Get Advantage at Home

Participant 9 contributed to this moderator, maintaining that at the local level, India's disinformation against Pakistan, wherein it enters the rut of the Kashmir issue and Pakistan's nuclear program, etc., is not against Pakistan at all. Instead, it addresses the Indian Public. It is

not uncommon that, on many occasions, disinformation against the opposing states is waged only to gain an advantage at home. In the case of India, in the wake of the latest Indian general elections, many such machinations were meant to enhance popular support for the BJP in general elections. Pomerantsev (2015), Krekó and Enyedi (2018), Schweller and Pu (2011), Lanoszka (2019), and Echeverría et al. (2024) support Participant 11's views.

(Potential) Impact 3: Pakistan Would Have Withdrawn from CPEC

The (Potential) Impact-Moderator orientation for the (Potential) Impact 3 is given in Table 6.

Table 6

The Disinformation Target-Moderators Orientation for Winding Up CPEC

Disinformation Recipients	Disinformation Focus/Targets	(Potential) Impact on Recipients	Impact Moderators	Moderators' Effectiveness
Government of Pakistan (Directly or through Public Opinion)	Winding up CPEC	Pakistan Would Have Withdrawn from CPEC	CPEC is in Pakistan's National Interest	Significant

Participants 1, 4, and 15 contributed to this idea of a potential disinformation warfare impact. They maintained that CPEC is frightening for Pakistan's adversaries. To the U.S., any project that enhances Chinese regional and international influence is unacceptable. To obstruct the CPEC, India established a terrorist operation in Balochistan under the command of Kulbhushan Yadav, a commander in the Indian Navy. The U.S. sees the BRI as China's tool of global dominance. Accordingly, with the support of the United States, the Modi administration has used hybrid warfare to sabotage CPEC, including consistently spreading anti-CPEC misinformation. India is aiding the Baloch separatists in their efforts to undermine the CPEC projects by engaging in provocative actions in Balochistan, particularly in areas adjacent to the projects. Sindhu (2021), Khan et al. (2019), Bashir (2019), Jaspal (2020), and Mélange Mag (2018) support this view.

Moderator for (Potential) Impact 3

Participants 1, 4, and 15 also showed the other side of the picture. They argued that although the CPEC has faced tough challenges in the last ten years, China-Pakistan relations are unlikely to have a U-turn as both countries have more relations than CPEC only. It is only one slice of the China-Pakistan relationship. They further maintained that Chinese and Pakistani authorities

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Vol 5 , Issue 1
January to March 2025

rejected the disinformation by claiming that the CPEC is a win-win partnership to improve Pakistan's economic situation. It aims to help the locals and provide them with job opportunities. It will also focus on agriculture and socioeconomic development to create more jobs for Pakistani workers. The CPEC is a win-win partnership that will improve Pakistan's economic situation. In short, the CPEC is here to stay. Khan et al. (2019), Bashir (2019), Jaspal (2020), Syed (2020), and Bokhari (2018) supported the views of Participants 1, 4, and 15.

(Potential) Impact 4: Pakistan Would Have Abandoned the Kashmir Cause

The (Potential) Impact-Moderators orientation for the (Potential) Impact 4 is given in Table 7.

Table 7

The Disinformation Target-Moderators Orientation for Abandon the Kashmir Cause

Disinformation Recipients	Disinformation Focus/Targets	(Potential) Impact on Recipients	Impact Moderators	Moderators' Effectiveness
Government of Pakistan (Directly or through Public Opinion)	To Abandon the Kashmir Cause	Pakistan Would Have Abandoned the Kashmir Cause	Kashmir is Pakistan's Jugular Vein	Significant

Participants 4 and 7 contributed to this idea. They argued that India's false news game has been badly exposed by a European NGO, DisinfoLab, that unearthed a huge network of false media houses and NGOs operating in Brussels to defame Pakistan, isolate it diplomatically, and firm its grip over the occupied Kashmir. There is no gainsaying that India has been successful in getting the issue suppressed with the help of the U.S., Israel, and some European states. India has also been able to influence certain influential individuals in the U.S. Congress and Senate and in the European Union parliament who lobby for India against the Kashmiri people's and Pakistan's stance. Although Pakistan has tried its best to convince the international community that the people of Kashmir yet have to secure their right to self-determination, it could not succeed in putting any pressure on India. Iqbal and Alvi (2023), Iqbal and Ali (2022), Rauf and Asif (2021), Khalid (2021), Kuchay (2020), Ali (2020), Khaliq (2020), Machado et al. (2019), and BBC (2019) supported this view.

Moderator for (Potential) Impact 4

Participants 4 and 7 also portrayed the other side of the picture. They held that Pakistan would not withdraw from strategic ambitions, including the Kashmir cause. Quaid-e-Azam, the founder of

Pakistan, had called Kashmir Pakistan's jugular vein so the enemy could not seize it. The then-prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, said before the UN that Kashmir relates to Pakistan in blood, flesh, culture, geography, and history. Then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, said we have set off a diplomatic campaign to acquaint the world community with the infringement of Kashmir's constitutional status. It remains so until resolved according to the UN resolutions. Rauf and Asif (2021), Khalid (2021), and Ali (2020) support the views of Participants 4 and 7.

Conclusion

Under this section, Research Objectives 1 and 2 have been accumulatively addressed. Research Objective 1 is related to ascertaining the effects of disinformation warfare on Pakistan at the public, diplomatic, and strategic levels. Research Objective 2 is related to examining the moderators for the impact of disinformation. Accordingly, it was a natural requirement to answer both research objectives by juxtaposing the impact of disinformation warfare with that of the respective moderator. This study identified eight impacts that disinformation recipients could have developed based on the targets or the focus areas. Out of these potential impacts, four did not happen because of the significant effectiveness of the moderators. Of the remaining four potential impacts, the moderators' effectiveness was ambivalent against one and low against three potential impacts. Thirteen moderators were identified against eight impacts, which either nixed or diluted them. So, this study identified enough disinformation warfare impacts on the recipients and an even larger number of moderators. Hence, Research Objectives 1 and 2 are fully realized.

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