نشریه علمی-پژوهشی
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راستی‌آزمایی دولتی در بحران؛ چارچوب‌بندی، بلاغت و تعامل کاربران با سکوهای اجتماعی در جریان بحران سال ۲۰۲۵م هند و پاکستان

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چکیده

اطلاعات نادرست و گمراه‌کننده و میانجی‌شده از طریق رسانه‌ها در بحران‌های ملی، چالشی جدی برای دولت‌های امروزی و زیست‌بوم‌های رسانه‌ای است. هم‌زمان با تشدید تنش‌ها میان هند و پاکستان و در پی حملهٔ تروریستی پهلگام در ۲۲ آوریل ۲۰۲۵م، جریان روایت‌های نادرست و گمراه‌کننده در سکوهای رسانه‌های اجتماعی به‌طور چشمگیری افزایش یافت. در واکنش به این وضعیت، واحد راستی‌آزمایی دفتر اطلاع‌رسانی مطبوعاتی هند (PIB: Press Information Bureau) در نقش یکی از بازیگران کلیدی دولتی، از طریق مداخله‌های هماهنگ در فیس‌بوک و ایکس، در مقابله با اطلاعات نادرست نقشی مهم ایفا کرد. در این پژوهش با بهره‌گیری از تحلیل محتوای ترکیبی پست‌های راستی‌آزمایی و منتشرشدهٔ PIB در دورهٔ بحران، در پی پاسخ به این پرسش اصلی بوده‌ایم: واحد راستی‌آزمایی PIB چگونه به اطلاعات نادرست منتشرشده در فیس‌بوک و ایکس طی بحران هند و پاکستان در سال ۲۰۲۵م واکنش نشان داد؟ با اتکا به نظریهٔ چارچوب‌بندی و نظریهٔ ارتباطات موقعیتی بحران، در این مطالعه شیوه‌های ساخت روایت، لحن بلاغی و راهبردهای بصری به‌کارگرفته در ایجاد اعتبار نهادی و کاهش عدم‌قطعیت عمومی را بررسی کرده‌ایم. افزون بر این، شاخص‌های تعامل کاربران در هر سکو، با استفاده از اندازهٔ اثر کلیف (Cliff's delta) تحلیل شده است تا تفاوت‌های واکنش مخاطبان در فیس‌بوک و ایکس ارزیابی شود. یافته‌ها بیانگر اهمیت چارچوب‌بندی راهبردی، اعتباربخشی بصری و شیوه‌های ارتباطی متناسب با ویژگی‌های هر سکو در شکل‌دهی به روایت‌های عمومی و تقویت اعتبار دولت در خلال بحران‌های امنیت ملی بود.

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State-led crisis fact-checking: Framing, rhetoric, and platform engagement during the 2025 India-Pakistan crisis

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Abstract

Mediated misinformation poses a significant challenge to contemporary governments and media ecosystems during national crises. Amid the escalation of India-Pakistan tensions following the Pahalgam terror attack on 22 April 2025 and the subsequent ceasefire on 10 May 2025, social media platforms experienced an intensified circulation of false and misleading narratives. In response, the Fact Checking Unit of India's Press Information Bureau (PIB) emerged as a pivotal state actor in countering misinformation through coordinated interventions on Facebook and X. This study employs a mixed-method content analysis of PIB's fact-checking posts during the crisis period to address the following overarching research question: How did the PIB Fact Checking Unit respond to misinformation disseminated through Facebook and X during the 2025 India–Pakistan crisis? Drawing on Framing Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the analysis examines narrative construction, rhetorical tone, and visual strategies used to establish institutional credibility and mitigate public uncertainty. Platform-specific engagement metrics are further analysed using Cliff's delta to assess variations in audience response across Facebook and X. The findings highlight the significance of strategic framing, visual legitimation, and platform-sensitive communication practices in shaping public narratives and reinforcing state credibility during national security crises.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary era of digital militarization, national security is no longer confined to conventional physical battlefields (Mallick, 2024; Roy, 2024). Warfare has increasingly extended into the digital domain, particularly across social media platforms, where information and misinformation are strategically weaponized (Lele, 2024). During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, social media platforms emerged as active theatres of information warfare, where both state and non-state actors deployed fabricated imagery, manipulated videos, and coordinated disinformation campaigns to shape international public opinion and undermine adversarial morale (Forest, 2023). India has one of the world's largest (over 886 million internet users in 2025) and most rapidly expanding (8% year-on-year growth) digital population. The country also had approximately 491 million social media user identities, making it one of the largest social media markets globally. Among the platforms examined in this study, Facebook had an estimated advertising reach of 384 million users, while X (formerly Twitter) reached approximately 24.1 million users in India in early 2025 (Kemp, 2025). Given the widespread adoption and influence of these platforms on information dissemination and public discourse, social media has become a critical arena where both authentic information and misinformation circulate rapidly during periods of crisis. India witnessed this phenomenon following the terrorist attack in the Pahalgam region of the Kashmir Valley on 22 April 2025, which triggered heightened tensions and a war-like situation between India and Pakistan (Mehmood & Haider, 2025). At a time when public safety and national security were acutely vulnerable, the digital information environment experienced a sharp escalation in the circulation of misinformation across multiple social media platforms (Eriksson Krutrök & Lindgren, 2022).

In response, the Press Information Bureau (PIB), the nodal agency responsible for official communication between the Government of India and the public, activated its Fact Checking Unit to counter false and misleading claims (Das & Tripathi, 2023). Established in November 2019, the PIB Fact Checking Unit is mandated to proactively identify and debunk misinformation related to government policies and national affairs. During the crisis, the unit deployed real-time rebuttals, "*fake vs fact*" infographics, and official clarifications through its verified accounts on Facebook and X (Matey & Moral, 2025; Ribeiro & Zelizer, 2025). PIB utilizes rigorous multi-layer verification (Hudic et al., 2014) procedure using open-source information, technological tools, and direct confirmation from concerned government organisations, and publishes its fact-checks across official social media platforms on matters about government policies, regulations, and national security (Vehale & Goel, 2026).

The India-Pakistan conflict sequence is selected as the empirical

focus for three reasons: its compressed four-day military intensity generated a high-velocity, bounded misinformation environment ideal for systematic content analysis (Braem et al., 2014). The Pahalgam attack marked a significant shift in South Asia's contemporary security landscape, which amplified geopolitical tensions and strained India-Pakistan relations at a scale sufficient to stress-test state fact-checking at its institutional limits; and the crisis produced a cross-border, AI-generated, platform-differentiated information environment that existing scholarship has not yet examined (Vashishtha et al., 2025). Various studies have underscored the destabilizing power of misinformation in wartime discourse (Chowdhury et al., 2023). However, empirical investigations of government-led fact-checking mechanisms, particularly during national security crises, remain limited. Moreover, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding integrated analyses that combine narrative framing, emotional appeals, and visual rhetoric with user engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares or retweets. Such multidimensional approaches are essential for evaluating the effectiveness of state-verified fact-checking interventions during periods of heightened security risk.

Addressing this gap, the present study analyses the fact-checking activities of the PIB on Facebook and X during the period spanning the Pahalgam attack (22 April 2025) and the ceasefire declaration (10 May 2025). Guided by four research questions:

RQ1: What categories of misinformation were identified by the PIB Fact Checking Unit on Facebook and X during the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor?

RQ2: How did the PIB Fact Checking Unit construct its narrative frames and emotional appeals when debunking misinformation across platforms?

RQ3: What linguistic and visual rhetorical elements, such as language tone, infographic design, and symbolic imagery were employed by the PIB to establish credibility and counter disinformation?

RQ4: How did public engagement with PIB fact-checking posts differ between Facebook and X in terms of likes, comments, shares, retweets, and quote tweets?

By addressing these questions, the paper advances empirical and theoretical contributions to crisis communication and digital governance.

2. Literature review

Early research in the 2010s investigated the epistemology of misinformation, where researchers explored how misinformation differed from error or satire and questioned its political basis (Anderau, 2025; Gilroy-Ware, 2024). Marwick and Lewis (2017) highlighted the

structural uncertainty of truth in digital spaces, where networked participation undermines traditional control over facts. Ruffo et al. (2021) would later formalise notions and typologies of fake news which separated fabrication, parody, and manipulation. Building on this, Marshall et al. (2015) developed the "information disorder" framework, expanding the classification to encompass disinformation as well as misinformation, concepts fundamental for the comprehension of state-level measures.

The U.S. presidential election in 2016 and the British Brexit referendum refocused academic interest on the virality and emotional framing of misinformation (Wheeler, 2021). Barzilai and Chinn (2020) described the "post-truth" era in which emotion often overrides facts. Disinformation in this moment was taking on a more visual, meme-driven form and became much more platform-specific as Twitter and Facebook functioned as central distribution nodes (Yazdizadeh, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic was a defining moment for both misinformation and fact-checking (Burel et al., 2020; Cotter et al., 2022; Krause et al., 2020; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020; Siwakoti et al., 2021; Vinhas & Bastos, 2022). The WHO (World Health Organization) coined the term "infodemic", which means a pandemic is not just a public health issue but also a concern for the credibility of information (Schuetz et al., 2021). In India, it was seen as an epoch of transformation, as the PIB fact-check evolved from a bureaucratic unit housed in an old office space to a 24×7 digital crisis communication desk (Jha & Kumar, 2024). Kanozia et al. (2021) highlighted pandemic misinformation in India, specifically on WhatsApp, noting that unverified news about lockdowns, medicines, and community blaming moved like wildfire. Importantly, those studies didn't just bring to the fore what was in mis- or disinformation, but also the framing and valence of the official correction, dimensions that are directly relevant for our own study (Ecker et al., 2022). Recently, the Russia-Ukraine war has also been a pivotal point for crisis communication and misinformation research. Tejudo (2025) found that both state and non-state actors spread disinformation containing deepfakes and emotional images. AI-generated news is intentionally spread to manipulate the perception of users. For the rapid spread, news and posts with misinformation were shared on platforms including Telegram, TikTok, and X.

The India-Pakistan conflict that forms the backdrop of this study is rooted in one of the most enduring and deeply contested territorial disputes in post-colonial history (Kumar, 2023). The origins of the Kashmir dispute lie in the partition of British India in 1947. This enduring conflict, characterised by overlapping historical, political, and territorial grievances, has periodically manifested through escalatory violence, proxy insurgencies, and full-scale military confrontations for nearly eight decades (Mohan, 2022). On 22 April 2025, an Islamist

terrorist attack by armed militants in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir resulted in the deaths of 26 civilians, making it the deadliest attack on civilians in India since the 2008 Mumbai attacks (Vashishtha et al., 2025). In response, on 7 May 2025, India launched missile and air strikes code-named “Operation Sindoor”, targeting nine sites across Pakistan located as training and camps of United Nations Security Council Consolidated listed terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen, with the Indian government describing these strikes as "focused, measured, and non-escalatory" (Maharani & Walalangi, 2026).

2.1. Research gap

Existing literature has already highlighted that digital media is currently used as a weapon to manipulate the general people. Sharma (2020) analysed digital state responses during the Galwan Valley conflict. Sharma and Pegu (2023) noticed a surge in PIB's fact-check approach to counter Chinese propaganda and how it helped in internal perception-management. Kumar et al. (2024) highlighted similar thoughts in their study; however, previous studies have not included a content or engagement analysis, nor have they explored which specific types of misinformation were being rebutted, how the posts were framed, or how platform users received them. In the same tone, Ahmad (2023) discovered that posts with emotional neutrality and high visual clarity, such as PIB's "fake vs fact" infographics, were likely to be shared, supporting the argument that visual rhetoric is central to public uptake. All these findings underpin this study’s focus on linguistic strategies as well as visual layout in PIB’s crisis communication posts.

2.2. Novelty of this study

Despite increasing academic focus on misinformation during health crises, elections, and social disturbance in India, government-initiated fact-checking during conflict is significantly understudied. The majority of existing studies restrict themselves to around independent fact-checkers, with limited platform-specific engagement strategies (Facebook vs. X), and state-framing of misinformation through images, rhetoric, and emotions remain untouched via the aforementioned analytical approaches. This paper seeks to address these lacunae by employing a systematic mixed-method content analysis of PIB’s counter-misinformation fact-checks surrounding the 2025 Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor. Therefore, this study yields budding research on digital governance, state communication, and information warfare in the Global South.

3. Theoretical framework

To conduct a critical analysis of the framing and dissemination of

content by the PIB fact-checking unit during the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor, this study employs a dual-theoretical approach that integrates Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007). Together, these analytical frameworks provide a multi-dimensional lens to address the linguistic, visual, and strategic aspects of government fact-checking during a national crisis in the digital public space (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019).

3.1. Framing theory

Entman (1993) proposed that communication is inherently selective, containing some elements of perceived reality and excluding others to promote a particular interpretation (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). In crisis communication, framing serves four salient functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and recommending solutions (Pan & Meng, 2016). Framing theory is particularly useful in this study to understand how PIB framed its counter-narratives against viral misinformation during a national security crisis (Avgerou & Madon, 2023). PIB's fact-checking posts were not mere factual corrections; they were navigating crisis management to restore state authority, minimise panic, and enhance cohesion.

3.2. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

In addition to the narrative framing lens, the study is also based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which was developed by Coombs (2007). SCCT provides a classification of strategic responses that organizations can exert in crises according to the reputational threat and the type of event (Ji et al., 2025). Responses such as denial, diminish, rebuild, and bolster are potentially appropriate for managing different levels of crises and public pressures (Agbasiere, 2024).

This dual prism is particularly salient for examining a state-run fact-checking initiative in a democratic yet digitally turbulent context such as India. It permits scrutiny not only of the information itself but of the framing of that information, why it was framed in that way, and what the strategic objectives are that it is trying to achieve in a situation of national crisis (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

This study employs a mixed-method research design by integrating qualitative and quantitative content analysis. This approach is particularly well-suited to understand the counter-misinformation strategies of the PIB fact-checking unit during the Pahalgam attack and

Operation Sindoor. The quantitative section enables systematic approaches for categorizing and quantifying fake news. Furthermore, this analysis reveals cross-platform engagement metrics through three major dimensions, likes shares/retweets, and comments. On the other hand, qualitative analysis enables us to comprehend framing strategies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), precisely, narrative frames, emotional appeals, linguistic, and visual rhetoric employed across posts. This mixed approach assists in exploring both empirical measurement and theoretically grounded interpretation of PIB's crisis communication practices during armed conflict (Guetterman et al., 2019).

4.2. Data collection

Data were collected from publicly available posts published by the PIB fact-checking unit on Facebook and X between 22 April 2025 (Date of Pahalgam attack) and 10 May 2025 (Declaration of ceasefire). This period marks the primary operational window for countering misinformation pertinent to India-Pakistan military tensions. Posts were collected through a systematic manual method and filtered by date range, keywords, and relevant hashtags. Forty posts (n=40) were collected from each platform using purposive sampling, ensuring that each post explicitly addressed a specific misinformation claim. Each of the 80 posts constituted a unit of analysis, encompassing textual content, images or videos, date of publication, and platform-specific engagement metrics.

4.2.1. Coding procedure

The coding phase was conducted through two rigorous phases to maintain academic rigor.

Phase 1. The primary researcher went through all 80 posts and identified recursive themes, content formats, structural patterns, and misinformation formats. Moreover, in this phase, the researcher coded all the posts using inductive coding, where codes emerge from the data without a predetermined list.

Phase 2. Based on the patterns identified in the previous phase, researchers developed a codebook. This contains four dimensions, namely: type of misinformation, narrative frame and emotional appeals, linguistic and visual rhetoric, and platform-specific engagement metrics.

4.3. Data analysis

Every post was individually reviewed to identify the narrative features. Textual content was examined for tone, frames, and rhetorical dimensions, while visual elements were analysed for their symbolism and semiotics. Cliff's delta was employed to tabulate and compare engagement metrics from Facebook and X to estimate platform-specific influences. The procedure adhered to the dimension-subcategory

strategy outlined by Schreier (2012), which ensures both thematic rigor and coding flexibility across a heterogeneous dataset. All Coding records were stored in Microsoft Excel, including categorical information of each post, thematic codes, and engagement data for individual posts.

4.4. Inter-coder reliability

Inter-Coder reliability (Table 1) was established across all five coding categories using Cohen's kappa, with two independent coders analysing a shared subset of posts. Substantial agreement was achieved across all categories, with kappa values ranging from $\kappa = 0.698$ (Visual Strategy) to $\kappa = 0.795$ (Narrative Frame), and a mean $\kappa = 0.736$ across categories, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.61 for substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Cohen's kappa score is calculated from Equation (1).

$$\kappa = \frac{p_0 - p_e}{1 - p_e}, \tag{1}$$

where: P_o: Observed agreement between two coders, P_e: Probability of agreement expected by chance.

Table 1. Inter-coder reliability (Cohen's Kappa)

Coding category	Observed agreement (Po)	Expected agreement (Pe)	Cohen's Kappa (κ)	Interpretation*
Type of misinformation	0.89	0.61	0.717948718	Substantial agreement
Narrative frame	0.91	0.56	0.795454545	Substantial agreement
Emotional appeal	0.88	0.59	0.707317073	Substantial agreement
Rhetorical tone	0.9	0.58	0.761904762	Substantial agreement
Visual strategy	0.87	0.57	0.697674419	Substantial agreement

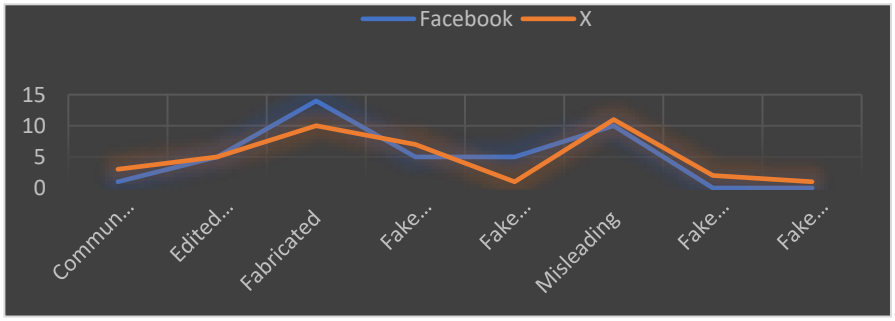
Source: Authors

5. Findings

5.1. Types of misinformation detected on facebook and X (RQ1)

In response to RQ1, content analysis of the 80 sampled posts (n=40 each from Facebook & X) identified eight distinct categories of misinformation addressed by PIB during the crisis window. Fabricated content was the most frequently debunked category overall, accounting for 30.0% of posts (n=24), followed by misleading content at 26.3% (n=21) and fake casualty counts at 15.0% (n=12). Notably, fabricated content was more prevalent on Facebook (n=14, 35.0% of FB posts) than on X (n=10, 25.0% of X posts), while fake casualty counts and

communal rumours were disproportionately addressed on X (n=7 and n=3 respectively) compared to Facebook (n=5 and n=1), suggesting that the two platforms became arenas for debunking qualitatively different misinformation typologies during the same crisis (Figure 1).



Source: Authors

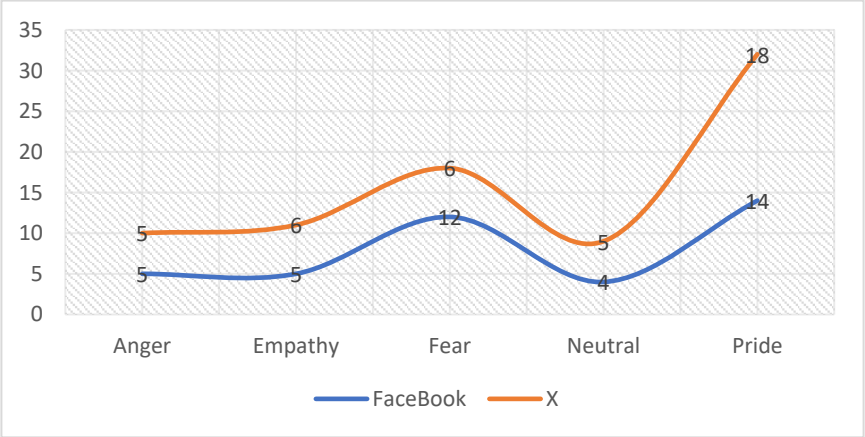
Figure 1. Types of misinformation detected on Facebook and X (From 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)

Visual misinformation demonstrated notable consistency across platforms, though with distinct stylistic responses. On X, PIB relied heavily on emblematic warning visuals designed for rapid recognition and disruption of false narratives, whereas Facebook posts emphasized didactic infographics aimed at enhancing informational comprehension. Communal rumours and fabricated international reactions were episodic but strategically significant, peaking particularly on X between 1 and 5 May, and appearing less prominently on Facebook. Overall, the findings indicate that X functioned primarily as a real-time vector for misinformation dissemination, while Facebook served as a comparatively slower but more enduring space for clarification, reassurance, and narrative stabilization.

5.2. Narrative frames and emotional appeals employed by PIB (RQ2)

The narrative framing was sharply differentiated by platform. Denial framing dominated Facebook, accounting for 40.0% of posts (n=16), compared to only 10.0% on X (n=4). Conversely, nationalist framing was used exclusively on X, appearing in 32.5% of X posts (n=13) and in not a single Facebook post (0.0%, n=0), the starkest platform asymmetry in the dataset. Clarification framing was also more prevalent on Facebook (35.0%, n=14) than on X (15.0%, n=6), while caution framing was somewhat more frequent on X (30.0%, n=12) than on Facebook (22.5%, n=9). This confirms that PIB's framing strategy was not applied uniformly but was systematically calibrated to platform-specific communicative logics. These patterns suggest a platform-differentiated communicative strategy. On X, the PIB favoured assertive, immediate, and discursively interventionist framing suited to the platform's fast-paced and interaction-driven environment.

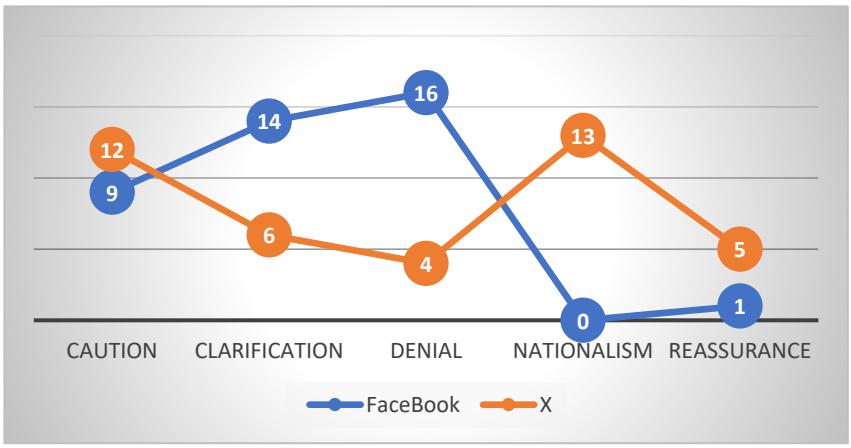
Facebook, in contrast, was used to deliver sustained clarification and explanatory messaging designed to consolidate understanding over time (Figure 2).



Source: Authors

Figure 2. Narrative frame employed by PIB to counter fake news (From 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)

Regarding emotional appeals, pride was the dominant register on both platforms but more pronounced on X (45.0%, n=18) than Facebook (35.0%, n=14). Fear was considerably more prevalent on Facebook (30.0%, n=12) than X (15.0%, n=6), consistent with Facebook's role in cautionary, advisory-style clarification. Anger appeared with equal frequency on both platforms (12.5%, n=5 each), reflecting its selective and platform-independent deployment in rebutting fabricated foreign-attributed claims. This suggests that emotional appeals functioned as critical rhetorical reinforcements within these frames. Neutrality and pride were the most frequently employed emotional tones, aligning closely with clarification and nationalist frames to project institutional credibility and state confidence. Empathy and fear were strategically invoked in public-facing advisories addressing communal rumours and sensitive security updates, fostering vigilance while mitigating panic. Anger, though comparatively infrequent, appeared in responses to misleading foreign accusations or fabricated international statements, reinforcing the legitimacy and firmness of official denials. Collectively, these emotional configurations illustrate the PIB's calibrated use of affect to balance institutional authority with emotional resonance within a highly mediatised crisis environment (Figure 3).

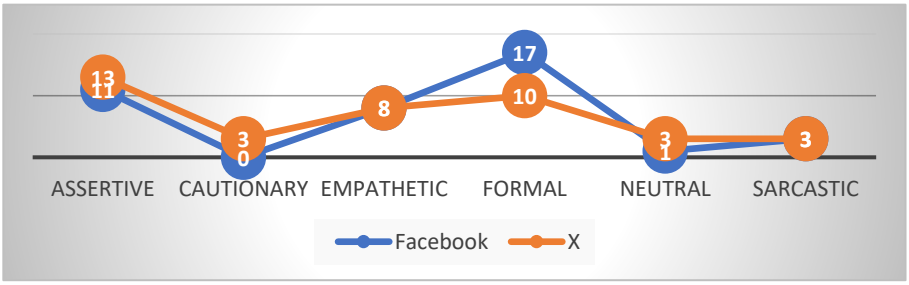


Source: Authors

Figure 3. emotional appeals Employed by PIB (From 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)

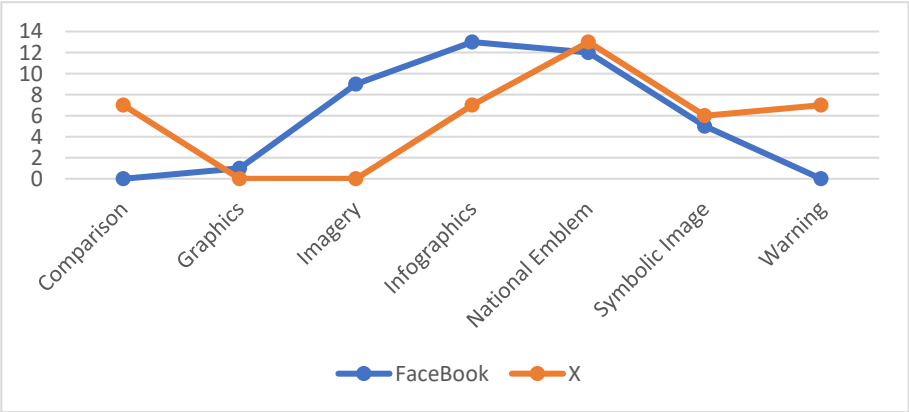
5.3. Linguistic and visual rhetoric for credibility construction (RQ3)

In response to RQ3, rhetorical tone (Figure 4) also varied by platform: a formal register dominated Facebook posts (42.5%, n=17) compared to X (25.0%, n=10), while assertive tone was marginally more common on X (32.5%, n=13) than Facebook (27.5%, n=11). Cautionary tone appeared exclusively on X (7.5%, n=3; 0.0% on Facebook). Visual strategy showed comparable differentiation: infographics and symbolic imagery were the dominant visual modalities on Facebook (35.0% each, n=14), whereas warning graphics and comparison cards, absent from Facebook (0.0%, n=0), appeared on 17.5% of X posts each (n=7), confirming that disruptive, attention-arresting visual formats were reserved for X's faster-paced discursive environment (Figure 5).



Source: Author

Figure 4. Language used to make fact-checked information more credible (From 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)



Source: Author

Figure 5. Visual rhetoric for credibility construction (From 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)

5.4. Representative examples of misinformation and corrective response

To render the platform-differentiated patterns reported above more concrete, four representative cases are presented below. Screenshots are reproduced from PIB Fact Check's official, publicly accessible social media accounts for scholarly illustrative purposes, with original post URLs retained in the corresponding entries of the coded dataset.

Figure 6 illustrates a representative X post from 7 May 2025, addressing a claim circulated by pro-Pakistan accounts alleging that the Pakistan Air Force had targeted Srinagar airbase. PIB's response identified the circulating video as old footage from unrelated sectarian clashes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2024. The post combines a denial frame with a comparison-card visual format. Figure 7 corresponds directly to Post No. 74 in the coded dataset, published on X on 9 May 2025 under the hashtag #IndianpostDestroyed. The claim, alleging that an Indian Army post had been destroyed by Pakistani forces with over fifty casualties, was explicitly labelled a staged, coordinated propaganda campaign. PIB's response was coded as Nationalism/Pride/Assertive with a Warning Graphic visual, illustrating how nationalist framing on X functioned simultaneously as factual correction and as an assertion of institutional and military credibility.

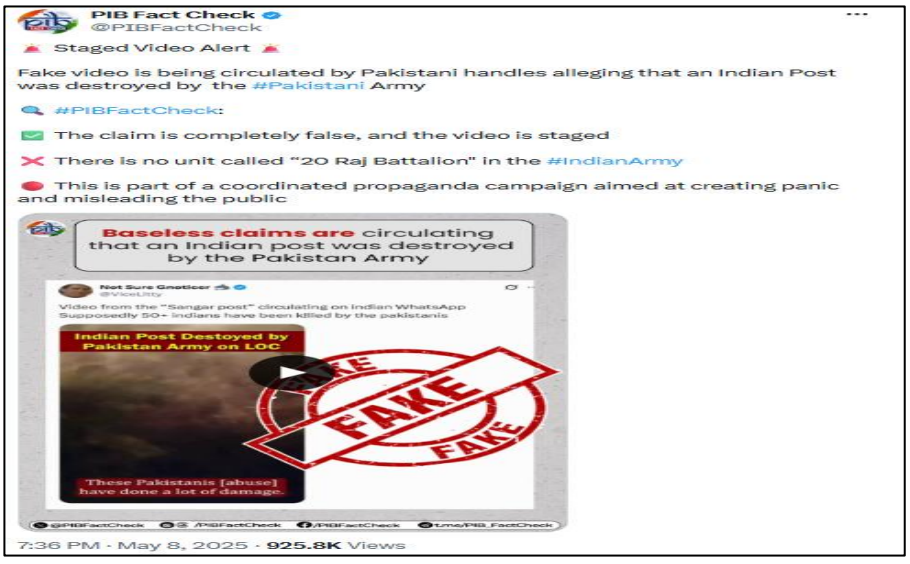
Figure 8 illustrates a Facebook post from 10 May 2025 responding to claims, attributed to a purported Reuters report, that three Indian Air Force jets had crashed in separate locations in the Himalayan region. PIB's response clarified with a formal tone and infographic visual strategy and identified the circulating image as outdated, dating to 2016, and linked directly to a verifying news source. Figure 9 presents a Facebook post addressing an impostor account falsely attributed to National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, which circulated alarmist claims about an imminent Pakistani cyber-attack and urged users to avoid answering calls from unknown numbers. PIB's response explicitly denied the account's authenticity and issued a public advisory

cautioning citizens against engaging with impostor profiles. This example illustrates the cautionary-advisory rhetorical mode identified among the coded categories, in which risk-communication language was paired with a clear instructional remedy.



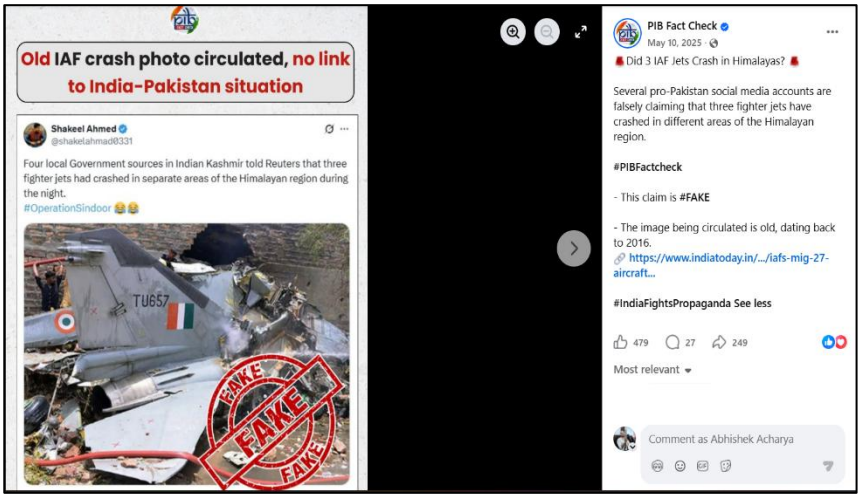
Source: https://x.com/PIBFactCheck/status/1919916769403134126

Figure 6. PIB Fact check response (X, 7 May 2025) debunking a fabricated claim that the Pakistan Air Force had targeted Srinagar airbase, using a nationalist frame with a national emblem visual and formal-assertive tone (593.6K views)



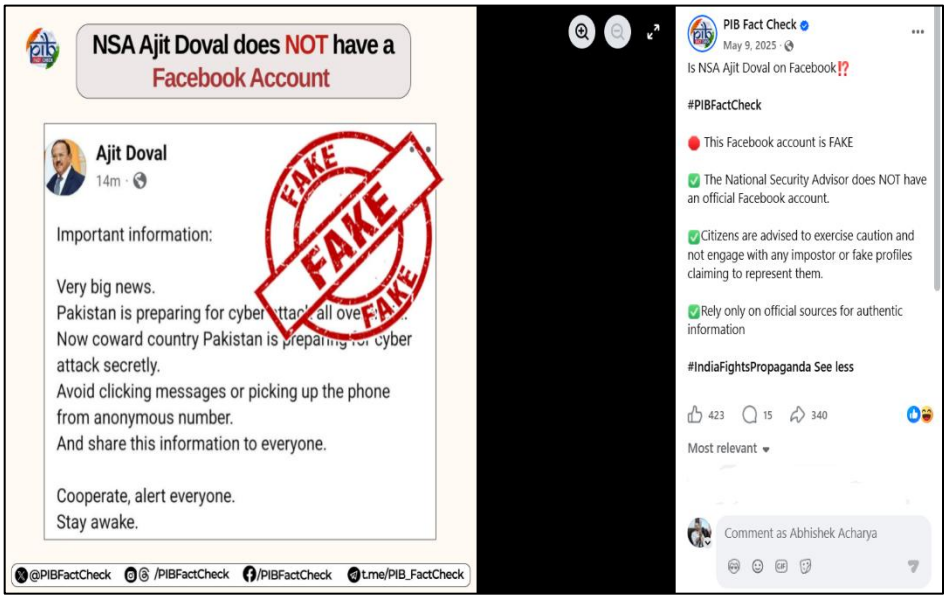
Source: https://x.com/PIBFactCheck/status/1920563445700890909

Figure 7. PIB Fact check response (X, 8 May 2025) debunking a staged video falsely claiming an Indian Army post was destroyed, using a nationalist frame with pride-inflected emotional register, warning-graphic visual, and assertive tone



Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1003848548598602&set=pb.100069203980051.-2207520000

Figure 8. PIB fact check response (Facebook, 10 May 2025) debunking a fabricated claim that three IAF jets had crashed in the Himalayan region, using a clarification frame, formal tone, and infographic visual strategy (479 likes, 27 comments, 249 shares)



Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1003332565316867&set=pb.100069203980051.-2207520000

Figure 9. PIB fact check response (Facebook, 9 May 2025) debunking a fake impersonation account falsely attributed to National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, using a denial frame, an advisory-cautionary tone, and a warning visual (423 likes, 15 comments, 340 shares)

5.5. Engagement patterns: Facebook vs. X (RQ4)

In response to RQ4, engagement metrics revealed substantial

asymmetry between platforms. Mean likes on X (M= 1995.3, SD= 1740.4, Mdn= 1400) were approximately seventeen times higher than on Facebook (M= 116.6, SD= 107.2, Mdn= 76.0). Comments followed a similar pattern, with X posts receiving a mean of 33.0 comments (SD= 35.3) compared to 4.3 on Facebook (SD= 5.4), and shares showed the widest gap in absolute terms, with X posts averaging 955.0 shares/retweets (SD= 714.4) against 65.0 on Facebook (SD= 77.9).

Cliff's delta analysis (Table 2) confirmed these differences were not only statistically meaningful but practically large in magnitude across all three engagement dimensions: likes (δ= 0.99), shares/retweets (δ= 0.97), and comments (δ= 0.87), all substantially exceeding the conventional threshold of δ= 0.474 for a large effect (Romano et al., 2006). These results provide robust confirmation that X functioned as the primary high-velocity arena of public engagement with PIB's corrective content during the crisis, while Facebook served a comparatively lower-volume but sustained clarificatory function.

Table 2. Engagement metrics of Facebook and X (From 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)

Metric	Mean (Facebook)	Mean(X)	Cliffs delta(δ)
Likes	116.50	1995.30	-0.99
Comment	4.325	33.00	-0.87
Share/Retweet	65.025	954.95	-0.97

Source: Authors

Given that the threshold for a large effect is -0.474, the observed values indicate a strong and consistent platform effect. These findings suggest that users on X engaged far more robustly with PIB fact-checking content during the crisis, underscoring the platform's heightened capacity for amplification and interaction in moments of national security concern. The results clearly point to the presence of platform-specific engagement dynamics, even under conditions of heightened public risk and uncertainty.

Beyond aggregate engagement differences, platform effects varied systematically across narrative frames, visual strategies, and content formats. Posts employing denial and clarification frames consistently generated the highest engagement on X, particularly when combined with comparison cards and warning graphics. These formats enabled rapid cognitive processing and facilitated immediate distinction between false and verified claims, aligning with the platform's real-time discursive environment. On Facebook, engagement was comparatively higher for posts structured around clarification and reassurance, especially when accompanied by infographic-based visuals. These posts accumulated interaction over longer durations, suggesting that Facebook users engaged more deeply with explanatory

and didactic content formats. Text-only posts on both platforms received significantly lower engagement, underscoring the importance of visual mediation in crisis fact-checking (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparative analysis of narrative frames, visual strategies, and content formats (From 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025)

Dimension	Facebook	X
Dominant narrative frame	Clarification, reassurance	Denial, caution, nationalism
High-engagement visuals	Infographics, national emblem	Warning graphics, comparison cards
Low-engagement formats	Text-only posts	Text-only posts
Engagement pattern	Gradual, sustained	Immediate, high-intensity

Source: Author

5.6. Critical discourse of frame and emotion dynamics

A closer examination of frame-emotion combinations reveal how emotional modulation amplified the effectiveness of PIB's messaging. Neutral emotional appeals, when paired with clarification frames, functioned as credibility anchors, particularly on Facebook, reinforcing perceptions of objectivity and institutional reliability. Pride-based appeals, often embedded within nationalist frames, performed notably well on X, where they resonated with collective identity narratives during periods of heightened cross-border tension. Fear and empathy appeals were selectively deployed in posts addressing communal rumours and casualty misinformation. These combinations proved effective in generating caution without escalating panic, particularly when conveyed through advisory language and symbolic imagery. Anger, though sparingly used, was strategically aligned with denial frames in response to misleading foreign claims, enhancing message firmness and perceived legitimacy.

6. Discussion

This study set out to examine how a state-led fact-checking institution responds to digitally mediated misinformation during a national security crisis, drawing theoretically on Framing and SCCT (Anansaringkarn & Neo, 2021; Dumbre, 2025). The findings largely support and extend the core assumptions of both frameworks, while also revealing important contextual adaptations required in digitally networked and platform-differentiated environments (Dairova, 2025). Recent scholarship on governmental fact-checking similarly shows that state-run correction practices often do more than merely verify claims; they also help sustain particular public meanings of risk, legitimacy, and threat (Mahl et al., 2026).

Framing Theory posits that actors select and emphasize certain aspects of reality in order to define problems, diagnose causes, make

moral evaluations, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). The empirical findings strongly support this theoretical proposition. The PIB Fact Checking Unit consistently employed clarification and denial frames to define misinformation as a threat to public order and national security, diagnose its origins as false or manipulated digital content, and propose factual correction as the appropriate remedy. The dominance of clarification framing, especially on Facebook, aligns with recent evidence that confirmation-oriented fact-checks can reduce negative affect and improve engagement with corrective messages (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). Denial framing is more prominent on X, where it served a complementary function by decisively rejecting false claims in real time, reflecting the platform's accelerated news cycle and adversarial discursive culture. Nationalist framing further extends Framing Theory by demonstrating how state actors embed factual correction within collective identity narratives during security crises. Recent research on state fact-checking suggests that official correction practices can be deeply entangled with political communication goals, especially when misinformation is treated as a threat to social order or national stability (Mahl et al., 2026). These frames are therefore not merely informational, but also symbolic, mobilizing affective attachments to reinforce message legitimacy.

Extending Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this study indicates strong alignment between crisis type, attribution of responsibility, and response strategy to protect organizational reputation. The findings largely support SCCT's core logic, but also indicate the need for theoretical extension when applied to state-led fact-checking during national security crises. Unlike corporate crises, misinformation crises are externally generated and diffuse, with responsibility often attributed to anonymous or foreign actors. In this context, PIB's reliance on denies and instructive strategies aligns with SCCT's recommendation for low-responsibility crises, where the organization positions itself as a corrective authority rather than a culpable actor (Coombs, 2007). The use of advisory and cautionary messaging during rumour spikes reflects SCCT's emphasis on instructing publics to reduce harm. However, the findings also suggest that SCCT underestimates the role of platform affordances and emotional calibration. PIB's differentiated strategies across Facebook and X indicate that crisis responses are not uniform, but must be adapted to platform-specific interaction logics (Souto et al., 2024; Cotter et al., 2022). This observation supports recent critiques that SCCT requires contextual enrichment to remain applicable in algorithm-driven communication environments.

Contrary to the assumption that effective fact-checking should remain emotionally neutral, the findings demonstrate that PIB employed calibrated emotional appeals as strategic moderators of framing effectiveness. Neutrality and pride emerged as dominant

emotional tones, reinforcing authority and institutional confidence without escalating panic. This supports broader work showing that emotion is not external to framing but central to how corrective messages are interpreted and acted upon (Krause et al., 2020). The selective use of fear and empathy in posts addressing communal rumours and casualty misinformation reflects a risk-aware communication strategy consistent with SCCT's harm-reduction logic. Importantly, fear was not deployed sensationally, but as a cautionary signal, encouraging vigilance rather than alarm. The limited but strategic use of anger in rebutting fabricated foreign claims further illustrates how emotional appeals were aligned with denial frames to assert sovereignty and legitimacy. These findings challenge binary distinctions between rational information and emotion, suggesting instead that state credibility in crisis contexts is co-produced through affectively disciplined communication.

The prominence of visual strategies such as infographics, warning graphics, comparison cards, and national symbols underscores the material dimension of framing. Visual rhetoric functioned as a shortcut to trust, enabling rapid recognition of official content amid information overload. Recent studies of fact-checking and misinformation detection likewise emphasize that framing operates through both linguistic and visual structures, not through text alone (Sharma & Pegu, 2023). Platform-specific visual differentiation further reinforces this argument. Facebook's reliance on detailed infographics aligns with its role as a space for slower, interpretive engagement, while X's use of warning graphics and comparison cards reflects the need for immediacy and disruption in fast-moving discursive environments. These findings suggest that credibility construction in digital crises is inseparable from visual standardization and symbolic consistency.

However, this positioning invites closer scrutiny, since PIB consistently presents itself as a neutral corrective authority even as the findings reveal the systematic embedding of nationalist symbolism and pride-based affect within its corrective messaging. Drawing on Entman's proposition that framing is inherently selective, privileging certain interpretations while excluding others (Entman, 1993), this apparent contradiction may be read not as deliberate deception but as evidence that corrective and identity-reinforcing functions operated simultaneously within PIB's communicative practice. Such a pattern complicates any straightforward claim to neutrality and suggests that state-led fact-checking during security crises is inseparable from the symbolic assertion of national authority (Sharma & Pegu, 2023).

The stark engagement asymmetry between Facebook and X, as evidenced by Cliff's delta analysis, highlights the limitations of platform-agnostic crisis communication models. X's significantly higher engagement across likes, comments, and retweets confirms its role as a high-velocity arena for information contestation during crises.

Facebook, while less interactive, served as a stabilizing space for sustained clarification. These results partially challenge SCCT's implicit assumption of homogeneous publics, instead supporting emerging scholarship that views crisis communication as platform-contingent and algorithmically mediated.

Effective state-led fact-checking, therefore, requires not only message consistency, but also strategic variation across platforms. Taken together, the findings validate the combined use of Framing Theory and SCCT while also demonstrating their complementary limitations. Framing Theory is strongly supported in explaining narrative, emotional, and visual construction of meaning, whereas SCCT is partially supported but requires adaptation to account for platform affordances, engagement dynamics, and the symbolic role of the state. The study thus proposes a refined conceptual understanding of state-led fact-checking as a hybrid communicative practice. Simultaneously informational, symbolic, and operating within a fragmented digital ecosystem during moments of national security threat.

7. Conclusion

This study examined state-led fact-checking as a crisis communication strategy during a national security emergency, focusing on the Press Information Bureau's (PIB) interventions on Facebook and X during the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor. By integrating Framing Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the research provides a systematic account of how narrative framing, emotional appeals, linguistic tone, and visual rhetoric were strategically deployed to counter digital misinformation in a highly volatile information environment.

The findings demonstrate that PIB's fact-checking efforts were not merely corrective, but strategically framed to stabilize public meaning and reinforce state credibility. Clarification and denial emerged as the dominant narrative frames, supported by emotionally calibrated appeals primarily of neutrality and pride and standardized visual markers of institutional legitimacy. Platform-specific adaptations were evident: X functioned as a high-velocity arena requiring immediate, assertive interventions, while Facebook facilitated sustained clarification and reassurance. Engagement analysis further confirmed that platform affordances significantly shape public interaction with official fact-checking content during crises. Collectively, the study advances scholarly understanding of state-led crisis communication by empirically demonstrating how government institutions operationalize framing and crisis response strategies in digitally mediated conflicts. It positions state fact-checking as a hybrid communicative practice that combines informational accuracy, symbolic authority, and affective modulation to manage misinformation and public trust during national security crises.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study offers direct guidance

for crisis communication practitioners. State agencies should adopt platform-specific protocols rather than uniform messaging to strengthen public trust and compliance more effectively than one-size-fits-all approaches. While tailored, informative, and instructional messages improve engagement, practitioners should avoid nationalist framing, which risks blending factual correction with political messaging. Furthermore, enhancing collaboration between government fact-checkers, independent verifiers, and digital platforms is crucial for combating misinformation, particularly for Global South states managing large, multilingual populations.

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is limited to two social media platforms, Facebook and X; while influential, these two platforms do not capture the full spectrum of misinformation dynamics in the Indian digital ecosystem.

Second, the study employs a qualitative and comparative content analysis. While this enables in-depth contextual analysis but limits the generalizability of the findings to other crises, countries, or political systems.

Third, engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares serve as proxy indicators of audience response and do not directly measure attitudinal change, belief correction, or long-term trust in government institutions.

Moreover, as the analysis is based on a purposively selected sample of forty posts from each platform, the findings cannot be generalised to the entirety of PIB's social media output beyond the studied crisis window. Being a state institution, the PIB's fact-checking output cannot be assumed entirely neutral in its selection logic and independent of political interests, since the decision regarding which rumours to rebut and which to leave unaddressed may itself reflect institutional or political priorities rather than purely corrective intent. This study examines PIB's published corrective communication and does not extend to claims that circulated but were left unrebutted, which constrains any broader inference about the institution's overall impartiality.

Future research can build upon this study in several important ways. First, comparative cross-national analyses of state-led fact-checking during security crises would help identify how political systems, media environments, and institutional trust shape crisis communication strategies.

Second, expanding platform coverage to include encrypted messaging services and video-sharing platforms would offer a more comprehensive mapping of misinformation flows and countermeasures.

Third, mixed-method approaches that combine content analysis with surveys, experiments, or digital ethnography could more directly assess how fact-checking influences public beliefs, emotional responses, and

trust in state institutions. Longitudinal studies examining the persistence of corrective effects beyond the immediate crisis period would further enhance understanding of the durability of state-led misinformation interventions.

Finally, future scholarship should explore the role of emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence and synthetic media in reshaping both misinformation production and state fact-checking practices. As digital conflicts become increasingly sophisticated, research must continue to refine theoretical models that account for platform affordances, emotional governance, and the evolving nature of information warfare in democratic societies.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Abhishek Acharya: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing.
Riya Sikdar: Validation, Resources, Data curation, Writing, Review & editing.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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