




## Identifying Tools and Means of Interstate Disinformation Warfare against Pakistan: An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

*This study examines the tools and means used by adversaries in interstate disinformation warfare waged against Pakistan. 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 warfare targets, disinformation impact, public opinion, International perception, phenomenological interviewing.

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## 1. Introduction

Pakistan is rich in mineral and energy resources. It connects South Asia with landlocked Central Asia, which requires access to the Indian Ocean via the port of Gwadar and lies near several important water routes that connect Europe, Africa, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Persian Gulf via Red Water. According to Nawaz et al. (2024), Pakistan is well-positioned to take advantage of its strategic location at the intersections of major international trade routes in the face of changing international relations. Likewise, Javaid et al. (2024) believe that Pakistan is the Southeast Asian nation with the best geographic location. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which supports measures to promote infrastructure, commercial, and interpersonal ties with the Central Asian region, is connected by the Gwadar Port. Gwadar's passage can guarantee an oil lifeline to China. According to Khetran and Saeed (2017), Hussain and Hussain (2017), and Raza (2020), Pakistan is a key player in the Belt and Road Initiative (B.R.I.), an extension of the ancient Silk Road that connected Asia to Europe and Africa and focuses on regional connectivity through economic development.

According to authors such as Javaid et al. (2021), China's ports in the South China Sea are 5,615 nautical miles away from African ports, three times the distance from Gwadar. Furthermore, China and other Central Asian nations find Pakistan's ports appealing because of its closeness to the Middle East and Africa. It provides these states with an economical and expedient transit trade route to these areas. Landlocked Central Asian governments can profit from Pakistan's ports, particularly Gwadar, which serves as a route to the Indian Ocean, according to Junaid and Mustafa (2020). It gives them an affordable commercial route to Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Pakistan has indisputable political significance in addition to its economic clout. Khan (2019) concurs, stating that since the USSR invaded Afghanistan in the 1970s at the Afghan government's invitation, Pakistan has grown in political significance due to its northwest and western borders. Pakistan gained non-NATO ally status and assumed the role of the frontline state. With the United States of America's assistance, it was instrumental in driving the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. In reverse mode after 9/11, Pakistan had to accept the battle against terrorism as a frontline state and stopped backing the Taliban administration in Afghanistan. Javaid et al. (2024) support this viewpoint, stating that Pakistan's political significance has increased because the situation in Afghanistan is still unstable.

### 1.1 Pakistan is Subject to 5th Generation Warfare (5GW)

Pakistan's geostrategic significance has also engendered challenges from regional and global powers. Azad (2020) and Kreft (2008) agree that Pakistan possesses significantly divergent interests with regional and global powers. Since its inception, Pakistan has encountered territorial conflicts with India and Afghanistan. The contested region of Jammu and Kashmir has been a catalyst for conflict, leading these nations to engage in warfare multiple times. Since 1998, the Pakistan-India conflict has attained a nuclear aspect. Khan et al. (2019) assert that the United States harbors distinct grievances toward the Pakistan. It seeks a resolution to the

militancy in the region, particularly stemming from Afghanistan. It assigns blame on Pakistan for its shortcomings and pressures it with the frequently reiterated demand to "do more." Nevertheless, Pakistan is no longer a vulnerable target owing to its remarkable fighting capabilities that have developed in recent decades. Consequently, regional and global forces antagonistic to Pakistan have engaged in 5th Generation Warfare (5GW), including diverse non-military strategies such as economic coercion, psychological operations, disinformation campaigns, cyber assaults, and cultural manipulation. Jaspal (2020) concurs, asserting that, unlike in previous eras, opponents cannot coerce Pakistan by initiating a comprehensive conventional conflict to align with their preferences. Consequently, it has no alternative except to initiate covert and insidious warfare against Pakistan.

The primary instrument of the (5GW) against Pakistan is media-based disinformation and negative propaganda. Media is employed to construct narratives against Pakistan, depicting it as a proponent of terrorism, an insecure nuclear weapons possessor, and an economically bankrupt state. Warrich et al. (2021) maintain that in recent years, international media websites, blogs, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have consistently portrayed Pakistan unfavorably on many issues, cumulatively fostering the perception of Pakistan as a failed state. It shelters terrorists and is a dangerous environment for habitation. This propaganda seeks to tarnish the nation's reputation. India's position in this context is significant. It has characterized Pakistan's nuclear stockpile as insecure and susceptible to renegade entities. Disinformation warfare is employed as a coercive instrument against Pakistan to effectuate the necessary alterations in its strategic decisions.

### **1.1.1 Tools and Means Used by the Disinformation Monger States**

The purpose of interstate disinformation warfare Pakistan faces is to influence Pakistani people's opinion and the international community's views against Pakistan, especially the European Union and international bodies, like the UN, against the strategic policies of the Pakistani government aimed to bend those policies in their favor. It led to the systematic and formalized agenda-setting by the adversary countries against Pakistan and using certain tools and means to spread that agenda. Zhong (2021) endorses the mass media's effect on society by setting the agenda of issue priorities, arguing that over time, those issues that are prominent in the media usually become prominent in the minds of those people. Martemucci (2007) calls this mass media's ability to influence human cognition through perception management the agenda-setting role of the mass media, which is an essential ingredient of the 5th Generation Warfare.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore those tools and means areas in Pakistan that the interstate disinformation warfare mongers have been using in the last two decades to disseminate disinformation and propaganda against Pakistan and realize their vested objectives. Accordingly, the following was the research question:

## **1.2 Research Question**

Which tools and means did adversaries use in the disinformation offensives against Pakistan?

## **1.3 Research Objective**

To ascertain the tools and means the adversaries use in the disinformation offensive against Pakistan.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 The 5th Generation Warfare Concept**

5th Generation Warfare (5GW) encompasses various forms, methods, and strategies. Caliskan and Cramers (2018) assert that hybrid warfare emphasizes non-military elements, including information warfare, propaganda, cybersecurity, and subversive, non-kinetic methods. Mansoor (2012) characterized 5GW as the employment of both conventional and irregular forces, including insurgents, guerrillas, and terrorists, by state and non-state actors to achieve a political objective. Schmid (2019) articulates a comparable perspective, asserting that 5GW predominantly emphasizes a wide array of non-military centers of gravity, such as political will, the economy, diplomacy, culture, psychology, legitimacy, and morale. Therefore, securing 5GW does not inherently imply a military triumph. Wither (2016) provides a comprehensive definition of the contemporary manifestation of 5GW, emphasizing the employed techniques, specifically "the use of military and non-military tools." Nilsson et al. (2021) characterize the hybrid war phenomenon using various terms, including "Asymmetrical Warfare," "Sixth Generation Warfare," "Contactless Warfare," "Grey Wars," "New Warfare," "Next-generation Warfare," "Ambiguous Warfare," "Irregular Warfare," "Non-linear Warfare," "Full Spectrum Conflict," and "Unconventional Warfare."

### **2.2 Disinformation and the 5GW**

Disinformation and propaganda constitute a significant aspect of 5GW. Deichman (2009) referred to it as 5th Generation Warfare, characterized as a battle of perception. Bennett and Livingston (2018) posited that 5th Generation Warfare (5GW) constitutes moral and cultural warfare, which manipulates perceptions via disinformation and modifies the global context. The approach entails a systematic disinformation campaign focused on strategic deceptions rather than isolated instances of false news. Disinformation warfare has recently gained prominence within the military, intelligence community, and business sectors. Some authors, such as Wither (2016), have referred to disinformation as "coercive information," identifying it as a key characteristic of hybrid warfare.

Disinformation is a component of a broader and more complex array of transnational state-led activities within the cyber domain (Galeotti, 2017). Hellman (2024) asserts that disinformation warfare transcends geographical boundaries in contrast to conventional conflicts. It focuses on soft institutions, including governance, the rule of law, political and social stability, elections, and public trust in government. Khawaja (2018) posits that traditional warfare recognizes and defines adversaries. In disinformation warfare, adversaries operate covertly. They do not wear uniforms. Conventional warfare requires the mobilization of forces, whereas disinformation warfare does not necessitate such mobilization. Disinformation warfare does not necessitate deployments. It is initiated merely by pressing a button. Disinformation warfare transcends national borders, educational contexts, and cultural perspectives. It enables both direct and indirect attacks from any location worldwide within a matter of seconds.

Disinformation serves mainly as a mechanism for perception management (Feaver, 2007), aiming to influence public opinion to shield decision-makers from the populace, thus allowing adversaries to manipulate the target audience's mindset. Borer (2007) posits that the concept of perception management is more effectively analyzed through the lens of the Perceived Relative Deprivation (PRD) phenomenon, which pertains to feelings of discrimination stemming from a comparison between one's actual possessions and one's perceived entitlements, leading to a desire for justice restoration. Abbasi (2020) advances the argument, asserting that the PRD phenomenon is prevalent in multiethnic federations such as Pakistan and is readily exploited by antagonistic forces. The actions of Baluch dissidents and the Pashtun Tahafaz Movement (PTM) in Pakistan exemplify the exploitation of the PRD phenomenon by foreign powers.

### **2.3 Interstate Disinformation Warfare against Pakistan**

Pakistan has achieved a notable status in global power dynamics owing to its strategic geopolitical position (Kamboh et al., 2021). Pakistan is significant for the US due to its increasing proximity to China, the US's primary rival, and its geographical connection to Afghanistan, where the threat of Islamist extremism is perceived to be substantial. There is a prevailing perception that Pakistan influences the Taliban in Afghanistan. Additionally, Pakistan shares its western border with Iran, which is an ally of India in opposition to Pakistan. In addition to its geostrategic importance, its nuclear capabilities, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and its ethical position regarding Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir have caused concern for India and its North Atlantic allies. Despite the challenges faced by global powers, particularly India, Pakistan has demonstrated significant resilience militarily, largely due to its nuclear deterrence.

From this viewpoint, India and its allies had no alternative but to engage in covert and subversive warfare against Pakistan, achieving victory without significant costs or bloodshed, which are defining characteristics of conventional warfare. Jaspal (2020) asserts that Pakistan is no longer a soft military target as it was in the past.

Consequently, India and its allies have engaged in fifth- generation warfare (5GW) by exploiting domestic fault lines such as political and economic instability, sectarianism, and societal cleavages to destabilize Pakistan internally. Furthermore, they have utilized diplomatic strategies, disinformation tactics, and propaganda initiatives. Azad (2020) posits that the Western media's involvement in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan is mirrored in Pakistan. Over the past two decades, international media, supported by the U.S., Israel, and India, has made concerted efforts to portray Pakistan negatively, labeling it a failed state, a haven for terrorists, unsafe for habitation, and a threat due to its nuclear program and military forces, as well as its involvement in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

## **2.4 Disinformation Tools & Means Used by Interstate Disinformation Warfare Mongers against Pakistan**

### **2.4.1 The Use of Local Media Houses in Inter-State Adversarial Media Agenda-Setting**

Mitrović (2018) argues that the media houses have attained key importance in the modern-day inter-state war due to the media's strong agenda-setting capacity. They have become established entities in perception management and played decisive roles in election results. The seminal research work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a strong relationship between media support for the candidates and the voting decisions of the voters. On these grounds, many Americans believe in Russia's role in the 2016 United States elections. Khawaja (2018) endorses this point and maintains that the agenda-setting capacity of international media is rapidly increasing. It is also labeled the 'CNN Effect.' President Bush reportedly would say he learns more from CNN than the CIA. Regarding wars, the author views countries that utilize disinformation as a tool of warfare as more successful. She avers that the contemporary media's role is not restricted to covering wars. Instead, it has become a crucial instrument for motivating combat. It is viewed as a state organ on the battlefield and the 'secret weapon' the countries have in their arsenal. If used effectively, media can win wars for nations without fighting them. Likewise,

In his paper "Judith Miller, The New York Times, and the Propaganda Model," Boyd-Barrett (2018) highlights that the media houses have developed more economic and financial stakes than providing the people with healthy journalism. So, they have become more of a business entity than a public service object. As a result, most media houses in the West run agenda-based broadcasts, leading to skewed public perception management. Running the media as a business essentially involves buying out individual journalists for agenda-specific reporting and story writing. This arrangement was vividly made during the Iraq and Afghan wars, wherein the mercenary journalists broadcasted the concocted stories of weapons of mass destruction stashed in Iraq and Al-Qaida taking shelter in Afghanistan. With the help of this media patronage, the U.S. achieved its goals in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Artz (2005) very aptly highlights the role of international media houses in spreading disinformation based on their agenda. He states that international companies control the media. As a result, the media produces spectators rather than cognizant citizens. Therefore, the false beliefs ingrained among the people about daily life and interstate harmony are more precarious than the terrorists or criminals. He further argues that the media has become much more invasive, causing governments to make rapid decisions to ward off its enormous pressure. As a result, these decisions are often erroneous. The author also refers to the agenda-based role of the media houses in national and international politics and argues that they have badly politicized their mega role of electoral coverage. Although the media's moral duty is to disseminate party viewpoints without bias, the media houses have their agenda based on the sponsors' agenda.

Tucker et al. (2018) similarly maintain that business inducements can enhance fake news and fictitious stories of rival states. Bennett and Livingston (2018) referred to the disinformation–amplification–reverberation (DAR) cycle. The media indulges in the DAR cycle to reinforce the disinformation matter at the behest of the sponsors.

#### **2.4.2 Use of Local ‘Agents of Influence’ in Adversarial Inter-State Media Agenda-Setting**

Sirohi (2018) refers to a gathering of Pakistani intelligentsia and activists in the US capital in September 2018. She believes they gathered in the U.S. because they could not get together in their own country. In their huddle, they pushed back against the slow but steady seizure of democracy by the Pakistan Army and the intelligence agencies. They bemoaned Pakistan's tilt towards authoritarianism and the unparalleled restrictions on media and state institutions. They lamented that people were disappearing without a trace, the journalists were tortured, journalists were beaten, and the censorship was so harsh that the people were unaware of what was happening in their country. The army wants only “favorable” news to be reported. Similarly,

ANI (2020) reported that experts and human rights activists gathered at the SAATH forum. Apart from Former ambassador of Pakistan to the US Husain Haqqani, those who attended included former Ambassador Kamran Safi, Editor Rashed Rahman, columnist Mohammad Taqi, former Senator Afrasiab Khattak, Gulalai Ismail, Taha Siddiqui, Marvi Sarmad, and Gui Bukhari. They raised their concerns that the Pakistan Army uses terror groups as foreign and domestic policy tools. They highlighted a nexus between militancy and Pakistan's military, using the nexus to build international pressure. It referred to a message tweeted by the SAATH forum wherein it demanded that the Pakistan Army stop using the militant groups as tools for promoting its own interests at the domestic level and at international levels and not to use the country's western border as its strategic backyard. Hussain Haqqani said in his address that the SAATH forum has become an alternative forum for influencers, which is very much required owing to oppressive regimes in Pakistan.

Cull et al. (2017) concluded that to achieve their purpose, the disinformation strategist would likely work through established and trusted sources of information either in the target state or in a third country, e.g., Voice of America, BBC World Service, etc., or covertly implanting journalists to spread their message – calling them ‘agents of influence.’ These agents of influence may comprise established media houses, NGOs, think tanks, disgruntled groups, and groups of unemployed youths. They are assigned to manipulate social and political narratives, create posts, and disseminate points of view and messages favorable to the sponsor. The sponsor’s narrative is disseminated by individually creating accounts and posting messages under the garb of a fictional figure. Singer and Brooking (2018) believe that most operatives from this category support the ideology of a group that is the target of disinformation and propaganda.

### **2.4.3 Use of Public Relations Networks in Inter-State Adversarial Media Agenda-Setting**

Bennett and Livingston (2018) refer to public relations networks as another tool of inter-state disinformation. These public relations networks use their own media instruments to propagate the news or provide it to the media houses as a matter of mutual arrangement to influence the target audience. Zoch and Molleda (2006) support this view and maintain that public relations practitioners and the media people also work jointly to shape media agendas. Jensen (2016) claims that a historical role of such networks emerged during the 2016 U.S. elections. Russian propaganda easily enmeshed the “alt-right” – a right-wing network supporting Donald Trump in this election. Hillary Clinton was a target of this social media campaign launched by Russia with the help of conservative groups. These groups were easy to engage since they could not accept Hillary Clinton as the first female president of the U.S. Thus, they strongly opposed her candidacy. The campaign launched against her as a presidential candidate carried Russian trolls with a propaganda narrative to build upon and had a network of true believers to spread that narrative.

Faris et al. (2017) argue that right-wing media networks played a role in favor of Donald Trump by setting the conventional media agenda for that election. Likewise, Bennett and Livingston (2018) view bots and trolls as spreading one-sided disinformation to voters, adding another stratum of confusion to in-border propaganda and disinformation orders. The author further claims that

Trump was, in many ways, both a product as well as an assembler of these various networks, traversing the fault lines of the opponents in the pre-and post-election period by interacting with White nationalists, a neo-Nazis, anti-globalist and anti-immigrant networks intermixed with refugees, immigrants, Islam, and terrorists related conversations. Bounegru et al. (2017) maintain that these public relations networks create alternative information systems, which block the mainstream media and deliver the followers with emotionally gratifying ideas and beliefs to organize them around. These networks are usually operated by some states against



the other states.

A prominent example of such a public relations network surfaced in 2019, wherein a widespread Indian network of fake NGOs and think DisinfoLab, an NGO, exposed tanks. The main focus of this disinformation network was to influence the opinion of the United Nations (U.N.) and the European Union (E.U.) against Pakistan. The network was run by the Srivastava Group, a New Delhi-based entity, using hundreds of fake media outlets and the identity of a dead professor to target Pakistan. The report shows that the disinformation network was meant to discredit Pakistan internationally and influence decision-making at the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the European Parliament (Machado et al., 2020).

#### **2.4.4 Use of Social Media in Inter-State Adversarial Media Agenda-Setting**

Hussain (2020) from BBC Urdu reported that fake news extensively circulated on Indian social media and websites during October 2020, alleging clashes between the police and army had broken out in Karachi when the army kidnapped the city police chief, resulting in the deaths of many Karachi police officials. Many tanks and armored vehicles were also seen on the streets. A video claiming unrest in the city was also set viral on Twitter. None of it was true. He further maintains that unlike many other Indian sites, which disseminate fake news against Pakistan, this fake news was circulated from several confirmed accounts and seemingly dependable news outlets such as India Today, Zee News, and CNN18. However, it remained unclear who sent the initial tweet. Interestingly, the clash site mentioned in the tweet did not exist in Karachi. A Twitter account, International Herald, circulated a video about this news, with the followers including two ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders. However, the BBC could not ascertain if the video was doctored or filmed in Pakistan.

West (2017) says that social media has emerged as a mighty source of information dissemination by the actor state against the target state, capable of spreading information faster than light. It has made it easy for a wide range of operators to create content in various layouts, including text, videos, photos, memes, etc., and disseminate it globally within seconds. As a result, finding information online through Google, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and newspapers has become abundant. Prier (2017) endorses and says social media is a contemporary tool for obtaining and spreading disinformation and controlling and commanding the trend by the actor states against the target states. It forms a point of infusion for disinformation and propaganda and has become the connection between information operations and warfare. The trend list is a quick way to review the most trodden issues at a given time. Using the automatic “bot” accounts, exotic agents can inject disinformation and propaganda material onto a social media platform.

Similarly, according to Molla (2016), there are three methods used by the actor states for trend commanding on social media: trend creation, trend distribution, and trend hijacking. Trend distribution is relatively simple, requiring the least number of resources. It just employs a message to every trending issue. Sanovich et al. (2018) argue that the diffusion of inter-state disinformation has expanded very fast in the age of social media. Social media's misuse in amplifying disinformation emanates from its technical ability to enhance the magnitude of propagation through automated social media accounts, called 'bots,' to ensure that some reports and stories are more viewed than others. It has grown the power and potential of disinformation beyond the domain of the states, extending it to the hands of private citizens and third-party agents. Pierri et al. (2020) concur and posit that the potency and magnitude of disinformation across borders have augmented manifold in the contemporary era of social media. The enhanced assumption of social media has increased the potency of disinformation extraordinarily.

#### **2.4.5 Use of Movies in Inter-State Propaganda**

Bajwa et al. (2018) maintain that the major language of Indian cinema is Hindi, which is, in fact, a mixture of Hindi and Urdu, so much closer to Urdu, Pakistan's national language. So, the Pakistani audience easily understands Indian films. Furthermore, most Pakistanis like Indian movies due to their captivating stories and elegant characters. So, it remains a fact that most Pakistanis admire Indian movies more than Pakistani movies. Indian movies traditionally offer conventional love stories with tuneful music and eye-catching dancing. It was what the Pakistani viewers liked the Indian movies for. However, over time, Indian movies also started covering Hindu-Muslim religious conflicts like contentious issues and Indi-Pakistan bilateral politics and border and territorial disputes. This trend has now gone up to such a level that it seems impossible for Indians to love their country without being anti-Pakistan simultaneously. Indian propaganda against Pakistan through their movies started at the end of the last century. It started with Shersh, Holiday, BellBottom, and Sooryavanshi movies. The latest movies of this kind were Mission Majnu and Pathan.

Malani (2016) says that Agent Vinod is also one of the anti-Pakistan movies. The movie shows how Lashka-i-Taiba, a religious group working from Pakistan, is preparing to attack India with the help of a colonel. It indicates how the Pakistan Army is allied with extremist religious groups against India. This movie also paints a negative image of ISI, Pakistan's intelligence agency. Ali et al. (2012) argue that categorizing, stereotyping, and labeling Pakistanis and Muslims has become Bollywood's custom. Unlike in the remote past, Bollywood movies frequently cover Hindu-Muslim religious conflicts and India-Pakistan territorial conflicts, especially highlighting the Kashmir issue. Upkar was one of the initial movies Bollywood produced in 1967 against the backdrop of the Indo-Pak war of 1965, wherein Pakistan was directly targeted. Later, a movie with strong anti-Pakistan content, Border, was produced in 1971, known for exhibiting record-breaking across-the-border hatred. This movie is replete with unreal information about the

1971 Indo-Pak war. The chain of producing movies with anti-Pakistan movies has continued since then, and its pace has been enhanced with the advent of the BJP government. Pakistan had no option but to ban more than four such movies in Pakistan since 2006.

#### **2.4.6 Use of Radio Channels as a Disinformation Tool**

Times of Islamabad (2018) and Daily Pakistan (2018) reported that the Pakistani Government, after banning the U.S.-funded Radio Mashal for broadcasting anti-Pakistan programs, is also intending to ban the Radio Deewa, another U.S.-funded radio channel for the same reasons. The dailies further reported that the Pakistan Government has noticed that Radio Mashaal and Radio Deewa continuously air programs that portray a negative image of the country and incite certain ethnicities against the Pakistani state. The main themes of broadcasts of these radio channels were depicting Pakistan as a pivot of terrorism and harbor for militants, publicizing Pakistan being unable to provide security to minorities, and presenting the citizens of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Balochistan, and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as disappointed with the state of Pakistan.

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

**Research Question 2:** Which tools and means did adversaries use in the disinformation offensives against Pakistan?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed qualitative research methodology to derive meanings from social phenomena based on individuals' information and lived experiences, achievable solely through a qualitative framework. It examined the in-depth meanings of social phenomena through subjective, interpretive, and inductive approaches.

A purposive sampling method was utilized to identify and recruit participants via snowball sampling. This was primarily due to the need for individuals with the requisite expertise in disinformation and propaganda warfare against Pakistan to supply the pertinent data. Prior research endorses the utilization of a purposive sample for this investigation. A sample of 15 participants was established for this study, consisting of individuals aware of external disinformation interference in the country.

Participants were identified using a snowball sampling method. This sample was suitable for phenomenological study. They were selected from a diverse group of international affairs scholars, journalists specializing in international and diplomatic issues, and defense analysts. Participants from varied backgrounds were deliberately

selected to enhance the data concerning different facets of the phenomenon of disinformation and propaganda against Pakistan that this study investigates. Consequently, these knowledgeable participants from varied backgrounds contributed authentic data regarding the phenomenon. Due to the subject's nature, data saturation was achieved with approximately 70% participant coverage. Consequently, interviews were conducted with negligible additional benefit from further interviewing.

To collect data, this study employed in-depth phenomenological interviewing within the sub- categories. Consequently, it comprised open-ended questions. The initial interview questions focused on the disinformation targets of adversaries in Pakistan. Following qualitative research principles, the interview questions were permitted to evolve, resulting in the emergence of various sub-questions throughout the interviewing process.

This research employed the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method, as Moustakas (1994) outlined, a particular thematic analysis approach for phenomenological studies. This process facilitated data organization, segmenting it into appropriate components (Codes, Nodes, and Themes) and analyzing each component to verify the report's validity. This method entailed identifying, describing, and reporting themes found in the data. During the thematic analysis process, codes were organized into nodes and sub-nodes. The nodes were subsequently grouped into a Theme. After organizing the data hierarchically into Codes, Nodes, and Themes, it was input into NVivo version 12, a software designed for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis to generate graphical compilations and visual representations. The identification of Codes, Nodes, and Themes was conducted manually; however, the software produced outputs in various data visualizations, such as tables, bar charts, hierarchical charts, exploratory diagrams, word clouds, and word trees.

#### **4. DATA INTEGRATION AND ANALYSIS**

As part of the data integration process, 14 codes identified from the interview data of 15 participants were consolidated into 6 nodes. These nodes were later clubbed into a Theme. The data was rearranged participant-wise, comprising their contribution in each sub-node, node, and theme. For each participant, the nodes and themes were codified as CxNxTHx, where C is for a Child Node, N is for a Node, and TH is for a Theme, while x denotes the serial number. Accordingly, as shown in Table 1 below, six tools and means were identified as the adversaries used to disseminate disinformation and propaganda against Pakistan. Each was assigned a distinct node.

**Table 1: NVivo-drawn summary of Nodes and Sub/Child Nodes of Theme with an overall coverage of source content coded on Theme**

Themes Title	Coding	Nodes	Overall Coverage of Source Content Coded on the Theme
Tools and Means Used by Adversaries for Disinformation Against Pakistan	N1TH	Using Social Media as a Disinformation Tool	12.02%
	N2TH	Hiring the Media Houses as Tools of Disinformation	13.5%
	N3TH	Using Public Relations Networks as a Disinformation Tool	20.38%
	N4TH	Using Radio Channels to Air Fake News	4.45%
	N5TH	Engaging Agents of Influence as a Tool of Disinformation	11.19%
	N6TH	Using Movies as Propaganda Tool	19.67%

#### 4.1 Using Social Media as a Disinformation Tool

Participants 1, 3, and 14 argued that the Indian disinformation network is very active on social media, spreading its anti-Pakistani content through doctored materials by using trolls and threads. BJP, India's ruling party, is known for using troll-based disinformation to subdue the opposing voice, national or international. The Participants also claimed that some liberal Indian academics, whom they did not name, assert that the government of India employs public relations agencies and influencers on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook to promote its agenda. The Indian government spends millions promoting its "hate agenda." They further averred that the Indian government spreads false material on social media to confuse the public and distract them from local issues. They added that the anti-Pakistan narrative gained traction among the people, especially among groups that respect Mr. Modi's firm stance against Pakistan.

#### 4.2 Hiring the Media Houses as Tools of Disinformation

Participants 2 and 13 believed that the media today is under the power of global corporations. Despite having a moral obligation to provide honest journalism, media outlets acting as profit organizations run their sponsors' agendas. Buying off

individual journalists for agenda-specific reporting and story authoring is how the media is run as a business. In the first decade of the present century, the Pakistani government established commercial media in Pakistan to manage perceptions domestically and internationally. However, there has been no strategy for establishing and upholding a code of conduct for the media. So, Pakistan is now submerged in deep seas due to issuing many media licenses that need checks and balances. Participants also said that the ability of the worldwide media to determine agendas is escalating quickly. Sponsors use media to spread disinformation to realize their goals.

#### **4.3 Using Public Relations Networks as a Tool for Disinformation**

Participants 9, 11, and 12 referred to a huge public relations network operated by India against Pakistan to spread disinformation against it and discredit it in the international eye. The network involved creating or sponsoring NGOs, think tanks, and other organizations that published prejudiced reports on Pakistan and its policies. The websites and online networks designed to disseminate false or misleading news stories looked like genuine and legitimate news sources. They imitated legitimate sources to deceive readers, usually criticizing Pakistan's human rights index and foreign policy. The organization, orderliness, and sophistication of this network signified the determination of its operators. The report (Machado, 2020) shows that the Indian propaganda machine bought hundreds of domains and created fake media outlets to unleash the world's biggest disinformation operations against Pakistan in over a hundred countries. Participants claimed that to operate fake NGOs, the network operators indulged in identity theft, resurrecting and using defunct NGOs. These NGOs were tasked with campaigning, planning anti-Pakistan protests, conducting news conferences, and participating in U.N. side events. At the U.N., they were frequently allowed to speak on behalf of recognized organizations. Participants maintained that the research organization that unearthed the network found its connection with an Indian business organization, Srivastava Group.

#### **4.4 Using Radio Channels to Air Fake News**

Participant 11 stated that the U.S. ran radio channels, Mashal and VOA Deewa, at Afghan borders, airing anti-Pakistan content. These radio channels mainly catered to the Pashto-speaking people around the Afghan border. They propagated lopsided stories with a biased narrative. VOA Deewa operated its website and Facebook page, displaying the contents as if Pakistan was about to collapse. Importantly, the U.S. government had funded both radio channels. AOL Deewa radio's head office was inside the Voice of America headquarters in Washington, DC. The Afghans themselves say these radio channels never took steps to connect the American



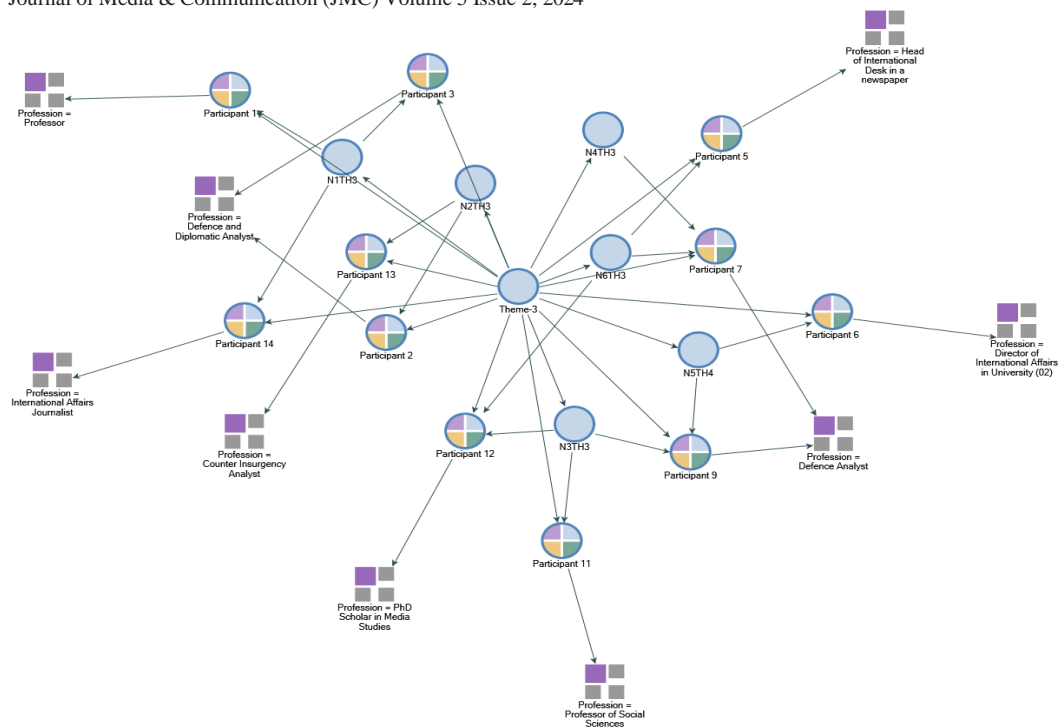
Afghans and Pakhtuns with the Pakhtuns living in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

#### **4.5 Engaging Agents of Influence as a Tool of Disinformation**

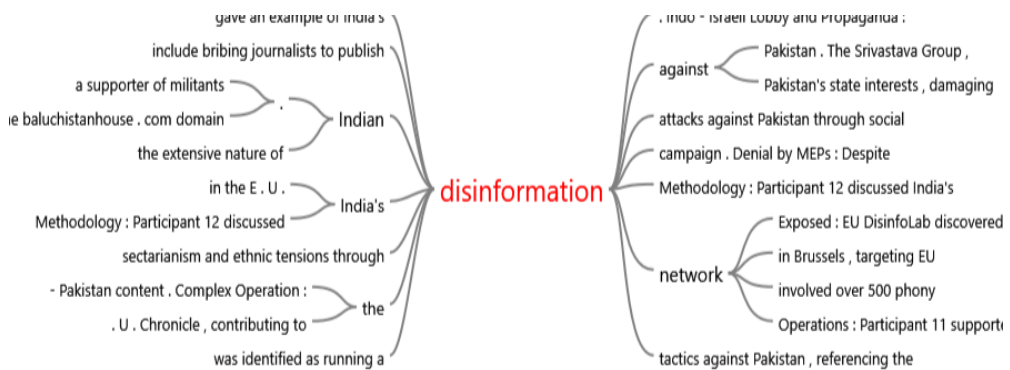
Participants 6 and 9 viewed that the enemy states engage influencers, comprising well-known think tanks, journalists, politicians, and resentful groups with social media following to raise voices against the interests of Pakistan and paint a negative picture before the international community. They are tasked with manipulating social and political narratives and carrying out their operations by developing, uploading, and spreading messages and viewpoints supporting the sponsor. They publish messages online to spread the sponsor's narrative. Participants referred to Husain Haqqani, ex-ambassador to the United States, and his coterie of journalists performing this task for the outside forces. They follow the toes of the outside propagandists and have always misrepresented Pakistan and its military. Participants stated that Hussain Haqqani, as Pakistan's Ambassador, always defended American interests. They said that adversaries also engage well-known NGOs, think tanks, resentful groups, and youth unemployment groups as their agents to promote their agenda. They are tasked with manipulating social and political narratives and carrying out their operations by developing and spreading messages and viewpoints supporting the sponsor.

#### **4.6 Using Movies as a Propaganda Tool**

Participants 5, 7, and 12 viewed that Indian cinema movies are being vastly used to spread propaganda against Pakistan's institutions. Since the Hindi language is closer to Urdu, Pakistan's national language, the Pakistani audience easily understands Indian films. Furthermore, most Pakistanis like Indian movies due to their captivating stories and elegant characters. So, it remains a fact that most Pakistanis admire Indian movies more than Pakistani movies. However, over time, Indian movies also started covering Hindu-Muslim religious conflicts like contentious issues and Indi-Pakistan bilateral politics and border and territorial disputes, especially the Kashmir issue. This trend has now gone up. Participants said that movies have a strong potential to shape the audiences' minds and views. That is why those are being used as propaganda in Hollywood or Bollywood. Indian propaganda against Pakistan through their movies started at the end of the last century. The Bollywood movies typically target the Pakistan Army and Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence Agency.



**Figure 1: An NVivo-drawn explore diagram for the Theme shows the Theme-Node interaction and the participant's contribution to the Nodes.**



**Figure 2. NVivo-drawn Annotated Word Tree of the Theme**

## 5. DISCUSSION

Discussion involves whether the research objectives have been realized. It analyzes and explores the meaning of the data and identifies its importance and relevance to the research objectives. To interpret data, this section is Structure around the research objectives, and the theme identified during the data analysis is aligned with them. 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. The theme-node-contributing participant orientation for the Research Objective is given in Table 2.

**Table 2: The Theme-Node-Participants Orientation for Research Objective**

Theme	Nodes	Sub/Child Nodes	Contributing Participants
Tools and Means of Disinformation Warfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using Social Media as a Disinformation Tool</li> </ul>	---	Participants 1, 3 and 14
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hiring the Media Houses as Tools of Disinformation</li> </ul>	---	Participants 2 and 13
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using Public Relations Networks as a Disinformation Tool</li> </ul>	---	Participants 9, 11, and 12
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using Radio Channels as a Disinformation Tool</li> </ul>	---	Participants 11
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engaging the Agents of Influence as a Disinformation Tool</li> </ul>	---	Participants 6 and 9
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using Movies as a Propaganda Tool</li> </ul>	---	Participants 5, 7, and 12

### 5.1 Using Social Media as a Disinformation Tool

Hussain (2020), Azad (2020), West (2017), Prier (2017), Sanovich et al. (2018), Huhtinen (2008), Korybko (2017), and Zadorožna & Butuc (2024) supported the views of Participants 1, 3, and 14. These participants held that the adversaries, especially India, have made a flagrant misuse of social media to spread disinformation against Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan and its erstwhile federally administered areas (FATA). They use trolls to amplify the trends falsely created. Hussain (2020) from BBC Urdu reported that fake news extensively circulated on Indian social media and websites during October 2020, alleging clashes between the police and army had broken out in Karachi, resulting in the deaths of many Karachi police officials. A video claiming unrest in the city was also set viral on Twitter. None of it was true. He further maintains that unlike

many other Indian sites, which disseminate fake news against Pakistan, this fake news was circulated from several confirmed accounts and seemingly dependable news outlets. Azad (2020) believes that in 2020, around 519 million people in India were using social media. Many are prone to receive fake news and disinformation from the Indian government, spreading solely for political reasons. For instance, following the Pulwama attack in February 2019, the Indian government vigorously spread fake news to its public.

West (2017) says that social media has emerged as a mighty source of information dissemination by the actor states against the target states, capable of spreading information faster than light. It has made it easy for a wide range of operators to create content in various layouts, including text, videos, photos, memes, etc., and disseminate it globally within seconds. Prier (2017) endorses and says social media is a contemporary tool for obtaining and spreading disinformation and controlling and commanding the trend by the actor states against the target states. Sanovich et al. (2018) argue that the diffusion of inter-state disinformation has expanded very fast in the age of social media. Social media's misuse in amplifying disinformation emanates from its technical ability to enhance the magnitude of propagation through automated social media accounts, called 'bots,' to ensure that some reports and stories are more viewed than others. Zadorožna & Butuc (2024) maintain that fabricated information is spread quickly through numerous means, including the official channels, like the Russian ministries, subordinate media, politicians, etc., pushing it into the minds of Internet users through bot-operated social media. Over this, it employs fake accounts, fudged data, fabricated videos, and manipulated algorithms.

## **5.2 Hiring the Media Houses as Tools of Disinformation**

Mitrović (2018), Khawaja (2018), Boyd-Barrett (2018), Artz (2005), Pfaltzgraff (1997), and Tucker et al. (2018) support the views of Participants 2 and 13. These participants argued that the anti-Pakistan forces engage journalists, newspaper editors, etc., to publish false or misleading information and influence newspapers, radio stations, and T.V. channels to spread biased and false stories. India, the USA, and Israel heavily fund a media segment in Pakistan, which is the most potent and deadly tool for shaping public opinion. Mitrović (2018) argues that the media houses have attained key importance in the modern-day war of tug among the rival states due to the media's strong agenda-setting capacity. They have become established entities in perception management and played decisive roles in countries' election results. Khawaja (2018) endorses this point and maintains that the agenda-setting capacity of international media is rapidly increasing. It is also labeled the 'CNN Effect.' Boyd-Barrett (2018) highlights that, ironically, the media houses have developed a more economic and financial stakes instead of providing

people with healthy journalism. This arrangement was vividly made during the Iraq and Afghan wars, wherein the mercenary journalists broadcasted the concocted stories of weapons of mass destruction stashed in Iraq and Al-Qaida taking shelter in Afghanistan. With the help of this media patronage, the U.S. achieved its goals in Iraq and Afghanistan. Artz (2005) states that international companies control the media. As a result, the international media produces spectators rather than cognizant citizens. Therefore, the false beliefs ingrained among the people about daily life and interstate harmony are more precarious than the terrorists or criminals. Tucker et al. (2018) similarly maintain that business inducements can cause the further spread of unconfirmed and fictitious stories of the rival states.

### **5.3 Using Public Relations Networks as a Disinformation Tool**

Machado et al. (2020), Hussain and Menon (2019), Carmichael and Hussain (2019), Bennett and Livingston (2018), Zoch and Molleda (2006), and Jensen (2016) support the views of Participants 9, 11, and 12. These participants mainly referred to the DisinfoLab's discovery of a huge web of bogus media outlets and NGOs designed to disrepute Pakistan globally and influence the UN and European Parliament in decision-making. DisinfoLab unearthed a huge network of fake online media houses and bogus NGOs engaged in pro-India and anti-Pakistan content publishing. Machado et al. (2020) referred to a widespread Indian network of fake websites, NGOs, and think tanks exposed in 2019 by DisinfoLab, an NGO. The focus of this disinformation network was to influence the opinion of the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) against Pakistan. The Srivastava Group, a new Delhi-based entity, ran the network using hundreds of fake media outlets. The report shows that the disinformation network was meant to discredit Pakistan internationally and influence decision-making at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the European Parliament. Carmichael and Hussain (2019) claim that the European Union's keeping mum against the mega disinformation scandal and offering direct support by some of the MEPs give credence to the stance that India enjoys full support from the US and the European Union in pushing Pakistan against the wall through the non-kinetic tactics.

Bennett and Livingston (2018) advance another source of implementation in the inter-state adversarial media agenda setting – public relations networks. These public relations networks use their own media instruments to propagate the news or provide it to the media houses as a matter of mutual arrangement to influence the target audience. Zoch and Molleda (2006) support this view and maintain that public relations practitioners and the media people also work jointly to shape the media agendas. Jensen (2016) claims that the historical role of such networks

emerged during the 2016 U.S. elections. Russian propaganda easily enmeshed the “alt-right” – a right-wing network supporting Donald Trump in this election. Hillary Clinton was a target of this social media campaign launched by Russia with the help of conservative groups.

#### **5.4 The Use of Radio Channels to Air Fake News**

Participant 11 stated that the U.S. ran radio channels, Mashal and VOA Deewa, at Afghan borders, airing anti-Pakistan content. These radio channels mainly cater to the Pashto-speaking people around the Afghan border and are operated by the Voice of America. Times of Islamabad (2018) and Daily Pakistan (2018) support Participant 11’s view. Times of Islamabad (2018) and Daily Pakistan (2018) reported that the Pakistani Government, after banning the U.S.-funded Radio Mashal for broadcasting anti-Pakistan programs, is also intending to ban the Radio Deewa, another U.S.-funded radio channel for the same reasons. The dailies further reported that the Pakistan Government has noticed that Radio Mashaal and Radio Deewa continuously air programs that portray a negative image of the country and incite certain ethnicities against the Pakistani state. The main themes of broadcasts of these radio channels were depicting Pakistan as a pivot of terrorism and harbor for militants, publicizing Pakistan as being unable to provide security to minorities. These channels presented the citizens of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan, and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as disappointed with the state of Pakistan.

#### **5.5 Engaging the Agents of Influence as a Disinformation Tool**

Sirohi (2018), ANI (2020), Cull et al. (2017), and Singer and Brooking (2018) support Participants 6 and 9’s views, who held that adversaries recruit influential individuals in Pakistan, such as journalists, politicians, other high-profile personalities, or even organizations, including NGOs, to act as their agents. Although called liberal and progressive, they promote their own socioeconomic agendas by maligning Pakistan using various platforms. Sirohi (2018) refers to a gathering of Pakistani intelligentsia and activists in the US capital in September 2018. In their huddle, they pushed back against the seizure of democracy by the Pakistan Army and the intelligence agencies. They lamented that people were disappearing without a trace, the journalists were tortured, journalists were beaten, and the censorship was so harsh that the people were unaware of what was happening in their country. ANI (2020) reported that experts and human rights activists gathered in London under the SAATH forum. Apart from Former ambassador of Pakistan to the US Husain Haqqani, those who attended included former Ambassador Kamran Safi, Editor Rashed Rahman, columnist Mohammad Taqi, former Senators Afrasiab Khattak, Gulalai Ismail, Taha Siddiqui, Marvi



Sarmad, and Gui Bukhari. They raised their concerns that the Pakistan Army uses terror groups as foreign and domestic policy tools. They highlighted a nexus between militancy and Pakistan's military, using the nexus to build international pressure. Cull et al. (2017) concluded that to achieve their purpose, the disinformation strategists would likely work through established sources of information either in the target state or in a third country or covertly implanting 'agents of influence' to spread their message. These agents of influence may comprise established media houses, NGOs, think tanks, disgruntled groups, and groups of unemployed youths. They are assigned to manipulate social and political narratives, create posts, and disseminate points of view and messages favorable to the sponsor.

### **5.6 Using Movies as Propaganda Tool**

Bajwa et al. (2018), Malani (2016), and Ali et al. (2012) support the views of Participants 5, 7, and 12, who maintained that in the past, Bollywood has produced many movies with anti-Pakistan content. Categorizing, stereotyping, and labeling Pakistanis and Muslims has become Bollywood's custom. They vehemently call Pakistan, its army, and its agencies the sponsors and supporters of terrorism. The pace of producing movies with anti-Pakistan content has enhanced with the advent of the BJP government. Bajwa et al. (2018) maintain that Indian movies traditionally offer conventional love stories with tuneful music and eye-catching dancing. It was what the Pakistani viewers liked the Indian movies for. However, over time, Indian movies also started covering Hindu-Muslim religious conflicts and Indi-Pakistan bilateral politics and border disputes. This trend has now gone up to such a level that it seems impossible for Indians to love their country without being anti-Pakistan simultaneously. Ali et al. (2012) argue that categorizing, stereotyping, and labeling Pakistanis and Muslims has become Bollywood's custom. Unlike in the remote past, Bollywood movies frequently cover Hindu-Muslim religious conflicts and India-Pakistan territorial conflicts, especially highlighting the Kashmir issue. The Bollywood movies typically target Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency and the Pakistan Army.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Almost every Participant gave his view about the tools and means used by the adversaries in disinformation warfare against Pakistan. There was an agreement among the Participants that the opponents have used multiple tools and means to spread disinformation, which have evolved in utility and efficiency with time. These tools and means jointly build media agendas and systematically build disinformation campaigns to sway public opinion in the target state and pursue their geostrategic goals. However, they agreed that social media is the latest, most

effective, and most efficient mode of disinformation propagation used against Pakistan, especially by India. They also agreed that other internet-based disinformation tools, like public relations networks and blogs, have also been exceedingly used by India against Pakistan. Participants referred to a huge network comprising hundreds of fake media outlets operated by India in Brussels for many years. It was unearthed in 2019-20. Participants gave views about other tools and means of disinformation and propaganda, including hiring local and international media houses, engaging the local agents of influence, using cinema movies, etc. All participants viewed affirmatively in line with the Nodes, and no differing or mitigating remark was received from the participants. Ultimately, this study identified six tools and means of inter-state disinformation the actor states use against Pakistan. So, it is established that the Research Objective, 'To ascertain the tools and means the adversaries use in the disinformation offensive against Pakistan.' has been wholly fulfilled.

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