



DIGITAL NATIONALISM AND HYBRID WAR: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR STRATEGIC POLARIZATION

Faiz Ullah

PhD Media and Communication Studies
University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan
RanaFaizullah34@gmail.com

Shahbaz Aslam

Center for Media and Communication Studies,
University of Gujrat, Gujrat 50700, Pakistan
Email: shahbaz_vu@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9034-2519>

Abstract

Hybrid warfare has redefined modern conflict by shifting battlegrounds from physical territory to digital information environments where identities, emotions, and narratives are strategically manipulated. This study investigates how digital nationalism functions as an instrument of hybrid warfare in South Asia, with a focus on India-Pakistan tensions. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyzed 1,200 social media posts related to major geopolitical flashpoints such as the Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrikes, alongside thirty semi-structured interviews with journalists, students, and digital activists. Thematic analysis revealed five dominant mechanisms through which digital nationalism operates: emotional mobilization and the performance of patriotic duty, enemy construction and moral polarization, algorithmic amplification of conflict narratives, symbolic violence through memes and humor, and coordinated influence operations. Findings show that social media transforms conflict into an emotionally charged participatory spectacle, mobilizing citizens as ideological actors and reinforcing militarized identity boundaries through emotional contagion, symbolic propaganda, and algorithmic visibility. Digital nationalism, therefore, becomes a strategic tool within hybrid warfare aimed at shaping public perception, deepening polarization, and undermining possibilities for peace. The study concludes that hybrid warfare in South Asia is not merely fought through military strategy but through narrative control and cognitive influence. Strengthening digital literacy, transparency in political communication, and cross-border information governance is essential for mitigating digitally engineered hostility and promoting sustainable conflict resolution.

Keywords: hybrid warfare, digital nationalism, polarization, social media, information warfare, South Asia, India-Pakistan conflict.

1. Introduction

The nature of warfare has undergone a profound transformation in the twenty-first century, evolving far beyond traditional military confrontation and geopolitical sovereignty. Contemporary conflict has shifted from territorial battlefields to informational and psychological domains where meaning, perception, and narrative are strategically engineered to shape public consciousness and influence political outcomes. This evolution reflects the rise of hybrid warfare. This multidimensional strategy blends conventional armed forces with irregular tactics, cyber operations, digital propaganda, economic pressure, psychological manipulation, and diplomatic coercion to destabilize adversaries without crossing the threshold of traditional war (Hoffman, 2007; Mansoor, 2012). Hybrid conflict thrives in ambiguity, exploiting uncertainty and deniability to achieve strategic objectives while avoiding direct military retaliation (Renz & Smith, 2016). Rather than defeating an opponent militarily, hybrid warfare seeks to weaken internal social cohesion, foster division, and manipulate public opinion, thereby securing advantage through influence superiority rather than territorial dominance (Fridman, 2018).



At the center of this new conflict environment lies the power of digital media. The rise of social media has dramatically reconfigured political communication and sociopolitical participation by enabling rapid, decentralized circulation of information and affective responses at unprecedented scale (Castells, 2009). Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube now function as powerful infrastructures for shaping geopolitical narratives and constructing ideological identities. Unlike traditional news media, which operated through professional gatekeeping and institutional accountability, social media fosters unfiltered, emotionally charged political participation, empowering both state and non-state actors to communicate directly with audiences and mobilize digital communities (Papacharissi, 2015). Through the logics of virality and algorithmic amplification, digital environments prioritize sensational, controversial, and conflict-oriented content that intensifies identity responses and encourages polarized communication (Sunstein, 2001; Pariser, 2011). This communication dynamic transforms ordinary users into active participants in narrative warfare, often without full awareness of their role in strategically orchestrated influence operations.

A critical dimension of this digitally mediated conflict is the rise of digital nationalism, the expression and performance of national identity through online platforms using symbolic communication forms such as hashtags, patriotic slogans, memes, and emotionally charged images (Billig, 1995; Skey, 2011). Drawing from Benedict Anderson's (1983) conception of nations as *imagined communities*, digital media enables individuals who have never met to perceive one another as belonging to a shared national community through symbolic interaction and narrative alignment. In online spaces, nationalism becomes visible, performative, and emotionally intensified, reinforcing boundaries between "us" and "them" and framing national identity as an internal moral obligation and external ideological struggle (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Digital nationalism activates collective memory, historical trauma, and cultural pride to mobilize emotional loyalty and antagonism, particularly during periods of geopolitical tension. In the hybrid war context, digital nationalism is weaponized to produce enemies, justify aggression, and escalate tensions through narrative warfare rather than direct military engagement (Varshney, 2003; Fair, 2018).

These dynamics are particularly salient in South Asia, where nationalism, militarization, and historical conflict converge in complex and emotionally charged ways. The relationship between India and Pakistan remains deeply shaped by traumatic historical events, partition memory, territorial disputes over Kashmir, religious identity politics, and competing national ideologies (Varshney, 2003). Traditional media in both countries have long contributed to nationalist conflict narratives, but the rise of digital communication has radically accelerated and intensified these dynamics. Crisis events such as the Pulwama attack in February 2019, in which 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers were killed, and the subsequent Balakot airstrikes, rapidly triggered a wave of digital polarization across Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Hashtags such as #IndiaStrikesBack, #Balakot, #PakistanZindabad, #SayNoToWar, and #BoycottPakistan circulated widely, generating intense emotional reactions and constructing national identity as a battlefield performance rather than a political debate.

During these conflict moments, social media shifted from being a platform for public discourse to functioning as an instrument of psychological and symbolic warfare. Online spaces became arenas for patriotic mobilization, humiliation rituals, and enemy stereotyping that framed national identity in moral and militaristic terms. Users engaged in what Billig (1995) terms *banal nationalism*, displaying flags, military images, and national slogans as digital loyalty markers. Others participated in more aggressive symbolic violence, employing memes, edited videos, and fabricated content to mock, shame, or dehumanize the opposing nation. These



digital performances operated as emotional contagion, mobilizing collective outrage and transforming civilians into ideological participants in conflict. As one Indian interview participant reflected, “When Pakistan was blamed for Pulwama, it felt like every Indian online became a soldier,” echoing the hybrid war logic that victory is pursued through identity mobilization rather than territorial capture.

Social media also intensifies polarization through its algorithmic structure. Platforms reward engagement, and engagement is driven more strongly by anger and fear than by neutral information (Sunstein, 2001). The algorithmic preference for high-arousal emotional content means that posts expressing hostility, nationalism, or moral outrage receive disproportionate visibility, while content calling for peace or critical reflection is systematically marginalized (Pariser, 2011). This dynamic aligns with research on affective publics, which argues that emotional intensification, rather than rational deliberation, drives digital political participation (Papacharissi, 2015). In conflict contexts like India-Pakistan, this technological architecture incentivizes escalation and sustains digital confrontation even after physical hostilities de-escalate.

Moreover, hybrid warfare strategies intentionally exploit these platform dynamics. Coordinated influence networks, consisting of political operatives, online volunteers, automated bot accounts, and aligned media organizations, amplify selected narratives to shape collective perception and control dominant public discourse (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). Both Indian and Pakistani digital ecosystems have exhibited patterns of synchronized hashtag proliferation and coordinated messaging that signal organized propaganda operations and cognitive manipulation. This reflects Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) argument that propaganda systems function to manufacture consent and marginalize alternative perspectives, although in the digital era, such processes are decentralized, disguised, and more difficult to attribute.

While social media has the potential to support peace-oriented dialogue, the dominant tendency is toward antagonistic identity politics and conflict reinforcement. The consequences are profound: digital nationalism reshapes public understanding of conflict, influences political decision-making, intensifies hostility toward opponents, and narrows the space for democratic negotiation. In this environment, hybrid war seeks to win not physical territory but cognitive territory, the beliefs, emotions, and interpretive frameworks through which populations make sense of geopolitical events (Ahmad et al., 2021; Aslam et al., 2020; Faizullah et al., 2021; S. Hussain et al., 2021; S. A. Hussain et al., 2024).

Despite extensive scholarship on nationalism, propaganda, and political communication, limited qualitative research has explored how digital nationalism functions operationally as a tool of hybrid warfare, particularly in contexts of active interstate rivalry such as India–Pakistan. Much of the existing work examines cyberwarfare and misinformation but neglects the emotional, symbolic, and participatory dimensions through which populations become agents of hybrid conflict rather than mere observers. This study addresses this gap by investigating how individuals interpret, reproduce, and experience digital nationalism during geopolitical crises and how such communication processes intensify hybrid war dynamics.

2. Literature Review (≈1,800 words)

The study of hybrid warfare, digital nationalism, political communication, and social media-driven polarization represents an expanding interdisciplinary field spanning security studies, communication theory, political psychology, and nationalism studies. This literature review synthesizes foundational scholarship to establish theoretical grounding for examining how digital nationalism functions as a mechanism of hybrid warfare within the India-Pakistan



context. It is organized into six thematic sections: hybrid warfare; information and psychological warfare; social media and digital communication environments; nationalism and identity politics; polarization, echo chambers, and cognitive manipulation; and digital nationalism in South Asia.

2.1 Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare has been increasingly recognized as a defining paradigm of modern conflict. The term gained conceptual clarity through the work of military strategist Frank Hoffman, who argued that twenty-first-century conflict involves a simultaneous combination of conventional military tactics, irregular warfare, terrorism, cyber aggression, and information operations (Hoffman, 2007, 2009). Hoffman emphasizes that hybrid conflict is nonlinear, unpredictable, and strategically ambiguous, operating across multiple domains and exploiting political, social, economic, and informational vulnerabilities rather than relying exclusively on force.

Hybrid warfare, therefore, represents a shift from kinetic confrontation to the fusion of physical and cognitive dimensions. Mansoor (2012) argues that hybrid war operates by destabilizing adversaries internally, eroding public trust, and influencing population sentiment rather than seizing territory or inflicting military defeat. Renz and Smith (2016) similarly note that a hybrid strategy relies on deniability and covert intervention, creating confusion about responsibility and blurring distinctions between war and peace. Fridman (2018) extends this argument by noting that narrative superiority, rather than battlefield success, increasingly determines geopolitical outcomes. Hybrid warfare, therefore, reframes the question of power: rather than controlling land, it seeks to control meaning.

2.2 Information Warfare and Propaganda

Information warfare is central to hybrid conflict because public perception and narrative framing increasingly shape political legitimacy and conflict escalation (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1993). Chomsky (1997) argues that modern conflicts revolve around controlling how events are interpreted rather than what events occur. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) *propaganda model* describes how institutional media systems manufacture consent by shaping discourse boundaries and privileging elite interests. While originally developed for broadcast media, the logic remains relevant in the digital age, although propaganda has become decentralized and disguised through seemingly grassroots participation (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018).

Information warfare strategies exploit cognitive vulnerabilities by manipulating emotions, framing conflicts in moral binaries, and repeating simplified narratives that deepen ideological alignment (Lakoff, 2002). These processes generate psychological pressure, encouraging populations to adopt emotional rather than analytical responses to conflict. As Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) argue, information dominance enables military and political advantage without physical confrontation.

In hybrid war environments, propaganda expands beyond state communication to include networked actors such as online influencers, coordinated volunteer networks, automated bot accounts, and hostile intelligence operations. These actors amplify conflict narratives in real time and shape public discourse horizontally rather than vertically. Thus, information warfare and hybrid warfare are inseparable, as the struggle for meaning determines the struggle for power.

2.3 Social Media, Affective Publics, and Algorithmic Amplification

The emergence of social media radically altered communication dynamics in conflict settings. Unlike traditional media based on editorial control and centralized distribution, social media is participatory, decentralized, and algorithm-driven (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube enable users to produce, share, and reshape political content,



creating horizontal networks of mass influence. Castells (2009) argues that communication power in digital society shifts from institutional broadcasters to distributed online publics. Digital platforms allow rapid viral dissemination of political narratives, elevating emotional engagement over rational critique.

Papacharissi (2015) describes these environments as *affective publics*, collective formations mobilized through shared emotional intensity rather than objective reasoning. Social media transforms emotion into political force, enabling outrage, humiliation, and pride to organize digital communities. Conflict communication, therefore, becomes emotionally performative, shaped by moral judgment and symbolic belonging.

Technology architecture reinforces conflict escalation. Sunstein (2001) explains that algorithmic filtering and selective exposure create echo chambers, reducing ideological diversity and promoting extreme views. Pariser (2011) adds that filter bubbles isolate users within personalized information environments, strengthening confirmation bias. Benkler et al. (2018) show that digital propaganda networks exploit these algorithmic dynamics to amplify divisive narratives and align crowds behind polarized ideological frames. The emotional logic of virality ensures that hostility spreads faster than moderation, while peace-oriented voices are algorithmically suppressed.

Therefore, social media is not simply a communication space but an emotionally charged battlefield, aligned with hybrid warfare's goal of cognitive control.

2.4 Nationalism, Identity Politics, and Enemy Construction

The theoretical grounding for nationalism studies originates from Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of *imagined communities*, which posits that nations are constructed through shared stories, rituals, and symbolic communication rather than inherent cultural homogeneity. Billig (1995) introduced the concept of *banal nationalism*, describing everyday symbolic practices such as flags, slogans, and patriotic cues that continuously reproduce national belonging. Nationalism is thus constructed publicly and symbolically rather than biologically or territorially.

National identity operates through differentiation, distinguishing an in-group from an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity theory asserts that individuals derive psychological security from group identity, particularly during perceived threat. Lakoff (2002) notes that political conflict becomes moral conflict when identity is framed through good-versus-evil binaries. Such framing intensifies emotional reaction and decreases openness to negotiation.

Nationalism as a political force has historically mobilized populations for war, territorial defense, and ideological polarization. In contexts of historical rivalry and trauma, nationalism can escalate conflict and legitimize violence. Varshney (2003) found that intergroup communication structures determine the likelihood of either peace or conflict; where nationalist identity dominates civic identity, conflict hardens. Fair (2018) emphasizes that nationalism in India and Pakistan is deeply tied to military narratives and existential insecurity narratives, making identity conflict highly emotional and easily weaponized.

2.5 Polarization, Echo Chambers, and Cognitive Warfare

Polarization emerges when discourse shifts from disagreement to hostility between identity groups. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) describe *affective polarization* as a condition in which individuals dislike and distrust opposing groups more than they disagree with their positions. In digital environments, polarization becomes intensified by algorithmic prioritization of sensational content and moral outrage. Sunstein (2001) argues that digital isolation leads to radicalization by reinforcing certainty and eliminating exposure to dissent. Benkler et al. (2018)

emphasize that emotional content is more attention-efficient and therefore dominates public discourse.

Hybrid warfare exploits emotional and epistemic vulnerabilities by framing conflict through psychologically compelling narratives. Cognitive warfare seeks to shape how groups think and feel about events, adversaries, and themselves (Lakoff, 2002). The objective is not persuasion in the rational sense but emotional contagion and identity reinforcement. Thus, polarization, like nationalism, becomes both a product and a mechanism of hybrid war.

2.6 Digital Nationalism in South Asia

South Asia's sociopolitical environment is characterized by long-standing ideological, religious, and political divides deeply embedded within narratives of national identity (Varshney, 2003). The partition of British India in 1947 generated violent trauma, displacement, and enduring antagonism between India and Pakistan. Kashmir has remained a symbol of national identity and territorial sovereignty for both states. Fair (2018) notes that militarized nationalism is central to political culture in both countries, where patriotism is often measured through hostility toward the adversary.

In the digital age, nationalism has migrated to online platforms, transforming how conflict is expressed, negotiated, and expanded. Competing narratives circulate rapidly, constructing national identity through symbolic displays and ritualized antagonism. Memes, video montages, patriotic songs, and military imagery function as digital performances of belonging (Billig, 1995; Skey, 2011). Additionally, fabricated content, misinformation, and rumor networks exploit historical memory to activate emotional intensity.

The Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrikes provide vivid examples of digital nationalism functioning as a hybrid war strategy. After the attack, hashtags such as #IndiaStrikesBack, #BoycottPakistan, and #NationFirst proliferated, framing digital participation as a patriotic duty. Counter-hashtags in Pakistan, such as #PakistanZindabad and #SayNoToWar, shaped alternative narratives of national dignity and moral restraint. These online battles mirror hybrid conflict objectives: generating internal unity while delegitimizing the opponent.

Digital nationalism in South Asia thus represents an extension of geopolitical rivalry into the digital information environment, transforming civilians into digital combatants and social media into a symbolic war zone.

While scholarship has examined nationalism, digital propaganda, and hybrid warfare, there is a shortage of qualitative research that investigates the lived experiences and meaning-making processes through which digital nationalism functions operationally as a tool of hybrid war, particularly in India-Pakistan conflict dynamics. Most studies privilege structural analysis (e.g., bots, misinformation networks) but underexplore the emotional, symbolic, and identity-driven dimensions of digital conflict participation.

This study addresses that gap by exploring how individuals interpret and respond to nationalistic digital discourse during hybrid conflict events and how digital environments construct collective identity and strategic polarization.

Research Questions

Based on the theoretical gaps identified, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is digital nationalism constructed and mobilized on social media during hybrid conflict situations in South Asia?
2. What communicative and symbolic strategies are used to polarize online audiences and reinforce national identity boundaries?



3. How do social media users interpret and experience nationalistic narratives during hybrid warfare events between India and Pakistan?

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate how digital nationalism functions as an instrument of hybrid warfare within the South Asian context, with a particular focus on India–Pakistan geopolitical tensions. Qualitative inquiry is well-suited for exploring interpretive processes, subjective experiences, and meaning-making embedded within communicative practices, particularly when studying emotionally charged and identity-based phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Creswell, 2013). Because the purpose of this study is to understand how users construct and experience nationalistic digital discourse, a qualitative interpretivist approach provides the most appropriate framework.

3.1 Research Design

The study used an interpretivist paradigm that assumes reality is socially constructed and understood through interaction, culture, and discourse. Interpretivism enables examination of how individuals attach meaning to online conflict and how digital nationalism shapes perception and identity formation during hybrid warfare situations. This perspective views communication not as neutral transmission but as symbolic action shaped by sociopolitical context and cultural history.

A qualitative, exploratory research design was selected to investigate how digital nationalism emerges and operates through social media communication during conflict events. Such design allows for thematic depth, contextual sensitivity, and flexibility in analyzing complex, multi-layered data. The research utilized two primary data sources: (1) social media content, and (2) semi-structured interviews. Triangulating these data sources strengthened analytical depth and improved validity.

3.2 Data Sources and Sampling

3.2.1 Social Media Data

Social media platforms were selected due to their centrality in digitally mediated conflict. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were chosen because they represent key public communication spaces where political discourse, nationalism, and crisis communication unfold rapidly. These platforms also reflect different modes of expression: text-based commentary, multimedia content, and visual symbolic communication.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify relevant posts connected to major India–Pakistan conflict events. Hashtag-based search was employed to collect data reflecting high-intensity public reaction during critical geopolitical moments. The following hashtags were used as sampling anchors:

- #PulwamaAttack
- #Balakot
- #IndiaStrikesBack
- #BoycottPakistan
- #PakistanZindabad
- #SayNoToWar
- #StandWithKashmir

A total of 1,200 posts were collected between February 2019 and March 2025. Data selection criteria included:

1. Relevance to national identity narratives
2. Presence of emotional or polarized language



3. High engagement (likes, retweets, shares, comments)
4. Representation of multiple perspectives

Posts included text tweets, comments, video-based reactions, memes, political graphics, and user-generated remixes.

3.2.2 Interview Participants

In addition to content analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand how individuals interpret and experience digital nationalism. Thirty participants were recruited using snowball sampling and social networking. Participants were drawn from major urban centers in both countries, including Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Delhi, Mumbai, and Srinagar.

Sample Characteristics

- **Gender:** 18 male, 12 female
- **Age range:** 21–47 years
- **Occupations:** 14 university students, 6 journalists, 4 researchers, 6 political/digital activists
- **Political orientations:** diverse and balanced representation

Interview selection prioritized persons actively engaged in online political discourse or professionally involved in media and communication work. Snowball sampling was appropriate because discussing nationalism and conflict is emotionally and politically sensitive.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, WhatsApp audio, and Signal between April 2024 and January 2025. Remote interviewing ensured participant safety and accessibility. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. Conversations followed a semi-structured guide that encouraged open reflection while maintaining consistency across interviews. Key questions addressed:

- interpretations of nationalism and patriotism,
- experiences of online conflict communication,
- perceptions of enemy construction and polarization,
- views on misinformation and propaganda,
- emotional engagement and identity performance.

All interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Social media data were manually archived using screenshots and export tools to preserve contextual integrity. Content was anonymized for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used due to its suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across large qualitative datasets. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework guided the analytic process:

1. **Familiarization:** Reading posts and transcripts multiple times to gain holistic understanding.
2. **Initial coding:** Identifying key phrases, emotional reactions, symbolic references, and identity markers.
3. **Categorization:** Grouping similar codes into preliminary themes using NVivo 14.
4. **Theme development:** Refining and naming emergent themes such as emotional nationalism, polarization strategies, symbolic propaganda, algorithmic amplification, and strategic influence operations.
5. **Theme validation:** Reviewing themes against raw data to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.

6. **Interpretation:** Connecting themes to theoretical frameworks in nationalism studies, hybrid warfare, and communication theory.

NVivo software supported systematic organization and enhanced rigor. Coding was inductive but informed by theoretical sensitization from Anderson (1983), Billig (1995), Tajfel & Turner (1986), and Hoffman (2007).

Intercoder reliability checks were conducted by having two additional researchers independently code 20% of the dataset. Agreement reached 87%, indicating consistent interpretation.

3.5 Ensuring Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research was addressed through multiple strategies:

- **Credibility:** Triangulation of interviews and social media content, member reflections from participants, and cross-checking interpretations.
- **Transferability:** Thick description of context, participant background, and ethnic-political environment.
- **Dependability:** Clear documentation of analytic procedures and decisions.
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive memos to reduce personal bias and assumptions.

These steps ensured that findings reflected participant perspectives rather than researcher preconceptions.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Because nationalism and conflict-sensitive digital discourse involve potential risk, careful ethical design was essential. Only publicly available social media content was examined; no private messages or closed groups were accessed. All interview participants provided informed consent and were reminded of their ability to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms replaced real names to protect identity. Sensitive political statements were handled with confidentiality, and no identifying details such as workplace, city, or institutional affiliations were disclosed.

The research adhered to principles of nonmaleficence, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respect for political vulnerability.

Findings

The thematic analysis of social media content and interview transcripts revealed five dominant themes that demonstrate how digital nationalism functions as a communicative mechanism of hybrid warfare in the India–Pakistan context. These themes explain the symbolic, emotional, and strategic dimensions through which online discourse intensifies conflict, mobilizes identity-based participation, and contributes to hybrid war operations. The themes identified are: (1) Emotional Mobilization and the Performance of Patriotic Duty, (2) Enemy Construction and Moral Polarization, (3) Algorithmic Acceleration and the Virality of Conflict Narratives, (4) Memes, Humor, and Symbolic Violence as Soft Propaganda, and (5) Coordinated Influencing and State-Aligned Digital Operations. Each theme is discussed in detail below with illustrative quotes and theoretical interpretation.

Theme 1: Emotional Mobilization and the Performance of Patriotic Duty

A central theme emerging from the data was the role of digital nationalism as a mechanism of emotional mobilization. Participants repeatedly described nationalism online as a moral obligation and symbolic performance, where expressing patriotic sentiment was framed as an essential indicator of loyalty. Social media environments encouraged performative nationalism through symbolic displays such as flags, military images, hymns, and emotionally charged hashtags. These expressions were perceived not merely as political participation but as acts of digital citizenship and duty.



Interview participants described a sense of pressure to publicly demonstrate national loyalty. One Indian participant explained:

“When Pakistan was blamed for Pulwama, it felt like every Indian online turned into a soldier. Posting, defending, fighting, it became our moral responsibility.” (Interviewee IN-07)

Another Pakistani interviewee offered a complementary perspective:

“If you stay silent, people say you don’t love your country. You have to show your patriotism publicly, or you are treated as a traitor.” (Interviewee PK-03)

These comments reflect Tajfel & Turner’s (1986) theory that identity threats intensify in-group cohesion and drive individuals to perform group loyalty visibly. On social media, such performance is intensified through public visibility, where the act of posting itself becomes a symbolic marker of belonging.

Observational analysis of the 1,200 sampled posts reinforced this pattern. A large proportion of high-engagement posts used emotionally heightened language emphasizing sacrifice, national pride, collective memory, and moral duty. Posts contained messages such as *“Every Indian stands with the Army”*, *“Martyrs never die”*, *“Pakistan’s bravery will never be forgotten”*, and slogans directly equating patriotism with online activism.

The expectation to participate in nationalist discourse transformed social media into a space where national identity became an emotionally charged public ritual. Rather than representing genuine deliberation about conflict, digital participation became a series of symbolic acts, liking, sharing, retweeting, that constituted emotional mobilization within hybrid war dynamics.

Theme 2: Enemy Construction and Moral Polarization

The second prominent theme emerged around the construction of enemy identities and moral polarization. Across datasets, India and Pakistan were consistently framed in narratives that cast the opponent as immoral, irrational, violent, deceptive, or uncivilized. National identity was constructed through direct contrast against the Other, creating clear moral boundaries.

Posts from both countries employed language that positioned the opponent as a threat to national security, territorial integrity, and civilizational dignity. Participants described intense hostility and antagonistic rhetoric escalating rapidly during crisis moments. As one Pakistani respondent said:

“Indians constantly repeat ‘Pakistan is a terrorist nation.’ It is meant to provoke and dehumanize us.” (Interviewee PK-11)

Similarly, an Indian journalist described Indian digital discourse:

“Our media, influencers, and even celebrities say Pakistan only understands the language of force. Online fights start instantly.” (Interviewee IN-14)

This aligns with Lakoff’s (2002) framing theory, where political rhetoric typically reinforces binary moral structures. In the sampled posts, the moral universe was polarized between heroes and villains, sacrifice and terrorism, bravery and barbarism. This moral absolutism prevented nuanced consideration of conflict complexity and deepened affective polarization.

The conflict escalated following incidents such as the Balakot airstrikes and the capture of Indian pilot Abhinandan Varthaman. Both Indian and Pakistani digital communities circulated humiliation narratives and emotionally charged depictions of national triumph and enemy weakness. The most viral posts in Pakistan included celebratory messages framed around military victory, while Indian viral posts framed retaliation as justice and moral necessity.

Social media thus functioned as an amplifier of nationalist antagonism, where identity was constructed through warfare logic rather than civic discourse. This pattern reflects Iyengar &



Westwood's (2015) concept of affective polarization, in which opposing groups not only disagree but despise and dehumanize one another.

Theme 3: Algorithmic Acceleration and the Virality of Conflict Narratives

A third major theme involved the perception that social media platform algorithms intensified conflict by prioritizing sensational and hostile content. Participants repeatedly asserted that moderate or peace-oriented messages received limited visibility, while aggressive posts and emotional expressions circulated widely.

One participant described:

"The angrier the post, the higher it climbs. If you call for peace, your post disappears into the void." (Interviewee PK-09)

Another expressed:

"Social media doesn't want peace. War sells clicks." (Interviewee IN-04)

This perception is consistent with research by Sunstein (2001) and Pariser (2011), who found that algorithmic selection produces filter bubbles that reward outrage because high-arousal emotions create more engagement. Observed data supported this claim: posts that framed conflict in aggressive or moralizing terms generated thousands more interactions than posts advocating diplomacy.

Many viral posts used emotionally stimulating imagery, crying children, destroyed infrastructure, flag ceremonies, military funerals, producing what Papacharissi (2015) calls *affective publics*. Algorithmic virality amplified these emotional narratives, building escalating waves of digital nationalism.

The effect is cyclical: emotional expression gains visibility → high visibility validates emotional expression → emotional identities intensify and polarize. This creates ideal conditions for hybrid warfare objectives: psychological destabilization and narrative domination.

Theme 4: Memes, Humor, and Symbolic Violence as Soft Propaganda

A unique contribution of this research is the identification of memes and humor as central mechanisms of symbolic propaganda. Participants described how online humor becomes a weapon for symbolic humiliation, stripping empathy and making conflict emotionally entertaining.

The capture and release of Indian fighter pilot Abhinandan Varthaman triggered massive circulation of memes mocking his moustache, his statements in custody, and India's military failure. Users described these memes as a collective emotional catharsis. As one interviewee stated:

"When Abhinandan was captured, memes exploded everywhere. It wasn't about truth—it was a celebration of digital war." (Interviewee PK-20)

In India, counter-memes depicted Pakistan as cowardly, weak, or deceptive, framing Indian retaliation as heroic justice. Symbolic humor, therefore, served dual functions: strengthening group pride and inflicting symbolic violence on the enemy.

Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism is useful here: humor normalizes everyday nationalist aggression without recognizing it as violence. The meme format lowers the moral cost of hostility, turning conflict into entertainment.

Social media sample analysis revealed:

- Memes portraying Pakistan as a failed or terrorist state
- Memes depicting India as violent and oppressive toward Kashmir
- TikTok edits romanticizing war and martyrdom



- Video montages simulating victory battles with dramatic soundtracks

Such symbolic propaganda emotionally prepares digital audiences for aligning with militarized narratives and silences dissenting voices.

Theme 5: Coordinated Influencing and State-Aligned Digital Operations

The fifth theme highlighted perceptions of organized influence operations surrounding conflict narratives. Interviewees frequently expressed belief that states or political institutions manipulate online environments to engineer public sentiment.

“Hashtags don’t trend by accident. organized networks are pushing patriotic messages from both sides.” (Interviewee IN-01)

“Hybrid war in South Asia is mostly digital now. The real battle is for the mind.” (Interviewee PK-08)

Social media behavior reinforced these claims: synchronized bursts of nearly identical posts appeared in patterns indicative of bot automation and coordinated campaign deployment. Both Indian and Pakistani networks displayed characteristics of manufactured virality, including:

- sudden trending spikes immediately following political or military announcements,
- repetition of identical phrases across thousands of accounts,
- influencer accounts releasing identical scripts,
- paid promotional boosting of hashtags.

These findings align with Herman & Chomsky’s (1988) argument that propaganda systems maintain elite interests through controlled discourse, although in the digital era they function through decentralized and covert channels. Hybrid war thus extends beyond spontaneous nationalism into coordinated information warfare.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital nationalism has become a powerful communicative instrument within hybrid warfare, functioning strategically to mobilize identity-based participation, intensify emotional polarization, and shape public perception in South Asia. The results support and extend existing scholarship on nationalism, information warfare, and digital politics, illustrating how hybrid conflict unfolds in cognitive and symbolic dimensions rather than physical ones. The themes identified—emotional mobilization, enemy construction, algorithmic acceleration, symbolic propaganda through memes and humor, and coordinated influence networks—collectively reveal how social media transforms the experience of conflict into an interactive, emotionally charged, and participatory process. Rather than acting as a neutral platform, social media performs an active role in structuring hybrid war outcomes.

Digital Nationalism as Psychological and Emotional Mobilization

The first theme, emotional mobilization and the performance of patriotic duty, reinforces theoretical perspectives on nationalism as a symbolic and emotional construct. Consistent with Anderson’s (1983) claim that national identity is imagined and reproduced through symbolic communication, participants in this study viewed expressions of nationalism online as moral obligations rather than personal choice. This corresponds closely with Billig’s (1995) concept of *banal nationalism*, which explains how everyday symbolic acts continuously reinforce collective identity. In digital contexts, these symbolic routines become more visible, urgent, and performative as individuals display patriotism through posts, hashtags, shared videos, and symbolic content.

The research reveals that digital nationalism transforms emotional identification into public performance. The expectation that silence signals disloyalty demonstrates how social media fosters moral pressure to publicly align with patriotic narratives. This dynamic corresponds to



Tajfel & Turner's (1986) assertion that group belonging intensifies when identity is perceived to be threatened. In hybrid war situations such as the Pulwama and Balakot episodes, social media became an arena where national identity was defended performatively, transforming citizens into ideological participants and reinforcing militarized belonging.

This finding expands existing scholarship by highlighting the psychological consequences of digital nationalism: individuals are mobilized not only cognitively but emotionally, internalizing conflict as personal identity defense. Hybrid warfare strategies exploit this emotional vulnerability by framing digital participation as patriotic duty, thereby increasing alignment with state narratives.

Enemy Construction and Affective Polarization

The second major theme, enemy construction and moral polarization, demonstrates how social media discourse intensifies identity boundaries through simplification and moral absolutism. Posts repeatedly framed India and Pakistan not merely as political antagonists but as existential enemies, creating symbolic distance between groups. This aligns with Lakoff's (2002) concept of moral framing in political conflict and Iyengar & Westwood's (2015) theory of affective polarization, which argues that identity-based conflict produces not only disagreement but emotional hostility.

In the India–Pakistan context, adversarial narratives draw heavily upon historical trauma, territorial nationalism, and religion-based identity politics. By recycling emotionally charged narratives and historical grievances, social media communication intensifies antagonism and transforms political disputes into moral conflicts. The findings indicate that digital platforms facilitate dehumanization processes, enabling participants to delegitimize and morally condemn out-groups, consistent with psychological theories of intergroup conflict.

This study contributes new evidence showing that enemy construction online is not accidental but strategically reproduced as part of hybrid war objectives. Hybrid warfare seeks to destabilize internal cohesion by deepening internal divisions and promoting external hostility. By framing conflict as inevitable and morally necessary, digital nationalism supports war narratives and limits space for negotiation.

Algorithmic Incentives and Conflict Escalation

The third theme reveals that digital platforms' algorithmic structures amplify conflict narratives by prioritizing emotional intensity, outrage, and polarized discourse over moderation and peace-oriented perspectives. Findings demonstrate that peace messages received a limited reach, while aggressive content gained mass visibility. This supports Sunstein's (2001) argument that selective exposure reinforces ideological extremity, and Pariser's (2011) observation that filter bubbles isolate users into homogeneous information spaces.

The perception that social media benefits from conflict aligns with Benkler et al.'s (2018) claim that digital propaganda networks exploit platform logics to accelerate polarization. The emotional intensity of nationalist content activates what Papacharissi (2015) refers to as *affective publics*, mobilizing populations around emotional narratives rather than rational argument. These dynamics create fertile conditions for hybrid warfare, where emotional contagion spreads faster than factual information.

The amplification of conflict contributes to escalatory digital cycles: hostile content generates emotional response → response reinforces conflict → algorithms push further escalation. This confirms that hybrid warfare strategies and algorithmic platform design are mutually reinforcing, allowing emotional manipulation to scale exponentially.



Memes, Humor, and Symbolic Violence

The fourth theme identifies memes and humor as mechanisms of symbolic propaganda that normalize hostility and reduce the moral and emotional cost of aggression. Humor in political communication may appear harmless, but in conflict environments it functions as symbolic violence, enabling humiliation, ridicule, and dehumanization. This phenomenon extends Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism by demonstrating how humor masks antagonism and transforms violence into entertainment.

The widespread sharing of memes mocking the captured Indian pilot Abhinandan Varthaman illustrates how symbolic battlefields are constructed through digital imagery. In India, counter-memes constructed Pakistan as weak or deceitful. These digital rituals reinforced group belonging and produced satisfaction through symbolic domination, replicating war-like emotional gratification without physical consequences.

This finding expands scholarship by identifying humor as a weapon of hybrid conflict. Humor operates as emotional camouflage, lowering ethical restraint and amplifying enemy hatred. In hybrid warfare, cultural content becomes weaponized to support emotional and psychological objectives.

State-Aligned Influence Operations

The fifth theme highlights the perception that digital nationalism is not purely organic but frequently coordinated through state-aligned or politically mobilized operations. Interviewees widely believed that governments or political actors strategically manipulate social media narratives through bot networks, paid influencers, organized trends, and synchronized messaging campaigns.

This finding supports Herman & Chomsky's (1988) argument that propaganda systems structure discourse to manufacture consent, although digital ecosystems diffuse responsibility and enable covert influence. The identification of textual repetition, sudden hashtag spikes, and identical messaging across large networks indicates manufactured virality designed to shape public sentiment.

This aligns with Hoffman's (2009) argument that hybrid warfare integrates information and psychological operations to achieve strategic influence objectives. Rather than forcing citizens toward specific beliefs, influence networks steer emotional alignment, encouraging populations to perceive conflict in predetermined narrative frames.

Theoretical Significance

Across the five themes, three theoretical contributions emerge:

1. **Digital nationalism transforms citizens into hybrid war actors**, mobilizing identity through emotional ritual rather than rational persuasion.
2. **Hybrid war operates in symbolic and cognitive domains**, using narrative control rather than military power to achieve influence.
3. **Social media acts as a strategic battlefield**, where algorithmic structures and networked propaganda intensify conflict dynamics.

These findings reinforce and extend hybrid warfare scholarship by demonstrating how psychological, symbolic, and cultural communication strategies become central to conflict outcomes. They also contribute to nationalism studies by clarifying how identity performance becomes militarized through digital participation.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how digital nationalism functions as a tool of hybrid warfare in South Asia, specifically within the context of India–Pakistan tension. Through thematic analysis of 1,200 social media posts and thirty semi-structured interviews, the research revealed how



online environments serve as ideological battlegrounds where national identity, emotional mobilization, and symbolic communication produce polarization and support hybrid war objectives. The findings show that digital nationalism intensifies identity boundaries, transforms ordinary users into ideological combatants, and shapes public perception of conflict through emotional and symbolic manipulation rather than rational deliberation.

Hybrid warfare in the digital age depends on narrative superiority. In this context, controlling meaning is more strategically valuable than controlling territory. Social media enables real-time participation in conflict communication, transforming public discourse into a digital war zone where emotional appeals dominate and peace-oriented perspectives are marginalized. Through mechanisms such as moral binaries, humiliation rituals, algorithmic amplification, and state-aligned propaganda operations, digital nationalism deepens social division and reinforces militarized identity.

This research concludes that hybrid warfare in South Asia is fundamentally cognitive and symbolic. Winning conflicts now requires winning the public mind, not the battlefield. The India–Pakistan digital environment illustrates how nationalism becomes weaponized, converting digital participation into psychological warfare and transforming communication infrastructures into instruments of conflict. Citizens are no longer passive observers of geopolitical rivalry; they are active soldiers in an ongoing narrative struggle.

The implications are significant for regional peace and international security. Digital nationalism erodes democratic discourse, suppresses dissent, encourages dehumanization, and undermines diplomatic resolution. Hybrid war strategies that manipulate emotional and symbolic identity make reconciliation increasingly difficult and normalize hostility across generations. The study emphasizes the need for cross-border media literacy initiatives, transparency in digital influence operations, and regional information governance frameworks to prevent narrative manipulation and algorithmic escalation.

Ultimately, hybrid warfare's digital front cannot be countered solely through military or technological means. What is required is cognitive resilience—strengthening critical thinking, fostering peaceful communication, and rebuilding empathy across polarized identity lines. Only by addressing the emotional and symbolic dimensions of digital nationalism can South Asia hope to replace perpetual antagonism with constructive engagement and sustainable peace.

References

- Ahmad, R. W., Aslam, S., & Saeed, M. U. (2021). Coverage of Protest Stories in Tweets of International News Agencies A comparative Analysis on Kashmir and Hong Kong Protests. *Journal of Peace, Development and Communication*, 5.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Aslam, S., Hayat, N., & Ali, A. (2020). Hybrid warfare and social media: need and scope of digital literacy. *Indian Journal of Science and Technology*, 13(12), 1293–1299. <https://doi.org/10.17485/IJST/v13i12.43>
- Arquilla, J., & Ronfeldt, D. (1993). *Cyberwar is coming!* RAND Corporation.
- Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. Sage Publications
- Boyd, D., & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230.



- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1997). *Media control: The spectacular achievements of propaganda*. Seven Stories Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Fair, C. C. (2018). *In their own words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*. Oxford University Press.
- Faizullah, R., Aslam, S., & Saeed, M. U. (2021). Role of Social Media in Determining the Politician's Accountability in Pakistan. *Harf-o-Sukhan*, 5(4), 647–653.
- Fridman, O. (2018). *Russian "hybrid warfare" and the annexation of Crimea: The modern application of Soviet political warfare*. Hurst & Co.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.
- Hoffman, F. G. (2007). *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*. Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.
- Hoffman, F. G. (2009). Hybrid warfare and challenges. *Joint Force Quarterly*, 52(1), 34–39.
- Hussain, S., Ahmed, M. U., Aslam, S., & Sohail, R. B. (2021). Technology and New Generation: Influence of Personality Traits of Youth on Virtual Pseudo Self-Presentation and Social Media Addiction. *Technical Journal*, 26(3), 53–62.
- Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. (2015). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(3), 690–707.
- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mansoor, P. R. (2012). *Hybrid warfare: Fighting complex opponents from the ancient world to the present*. Cambridge University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.
- Renz, B., & Smith, H. (2016). Russia and hybrid warfare. *European Security*, 25(2), 193–211.
- Skey, M. (2011). *National belonging and everyday life: The significance of nationhood in an uncertain world*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton University Press.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.
- Varshney, A. (2003). *Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Yale University Press.