



Media Narratives and Public Perception during Cross-Border Tensions: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and India

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how media narratives about the Indian and Pakistani military tensions across the border carry on to affect public perception, using the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis as a case study. The research design is a mixed method combining content analysis of 200 news articles and survey responses from 600 people in both countries reveals how mainstream media coverage of this conflict is dominated and shaped by the prevalent pattern from conflict oriented framing, aggressive tone and emotionally charged language. The results indicate a significant media reliance on or prioritization of state aligned sources such as military and political elites, at the expense of civilian voices and peace promoting perspectives, across both Indian and Pakistani media. An analysis of the audience survey reveals that public sentiment is shaped extensively by these narratives, promoting skepticism of the other nation and bolstering support for military solutions over diplomacy. In addition, the research shows how digital platforms like Twitter and YouTube have begun helping to reinforce discourses of nationalism. These results emphasize the role of ethical, conflict sensitive journalism in these conflicts and suggest that current media practice is exacerbating the cycle as opposed to fostering a resolution. This research contributes to the literature on media, nationalism and conflict by offering a comparative and empirical approach to how two historically adverse states shape and distribute war narratives.

Keywords: India-Pakistan Conflict, Media Framing, Public Perception, Pulwama-Balakot, Emotional Language, Digital Media, Nationalism, War Journalism, Peace Journalism, Cross-Border Tensions

Introduction

India and Pakistan's often fraught relationship has been marked by an almost perpetual cycle of conflict, mistrust and sporadic diplomacy. Since they are two nuclear neighbors with shared colonial heritage and deeply entrenched national identities, their interactions are often fraught with intense public and media discourse and there are often spillovers into the latter, especially during cross border tensions (Ganguly, 2016). National media outlets have extensively reported on these conflicts, generally serving as both source and vehicle for state narratives (Siraj, 2008; Thussu, 2002), whether by territorial disputes (like over Kashmir) or in reaction to terrorist attacks and subsequent military operation. The media does not just report the events, but also interprets, frames and sometimes amplifies them, so in this regard the media becomes an important actor in determining how the public understand [sic] and the national discourse (Entman, 1993). Much has been written in the communication and political science literature about the role of media in conflict zones. According to Entman's (1993) framing theory, the concept of media outlets purposefully selecting which aspects of perceived reality is given precedence in communication through the process of priming in order to further promote a given interpretation of events holds useful to learn how it works. Lastly, for India and Pakistan, media tends to have a nationalistic tone in reporting conflict by portraying 'the other' as the aggressor and boosting demands of reprisal or backing for the military (Dutt & Bhaskaran, 2019; Yousaf, 2018). Commercialism and influences of politics add fuel to this tendency. In India, since large media conglomerates are privately owned and often tie to political power structures, their coverage in the aftermath of incidents such as the 2019 Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrikes has been sensationalist and pro-government (Thussu, 2019; Chatterji et al., 2020). Conversely, in Pakistan, the military's informal control of the media narratives reinforces patriotic, patriotic and defensive themes and dissent or alternative viewpoint is side-lined (Zia & Syedah, 2015).

Media narratives that have such an effect have an impact on public opinion. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue for the agenda-setting role of media and repeated exposure to particular issues (especially framed in emotive, nationalistic language) can cause these issues to receive greater salience in the public's mind. Such framing plays out during India-Pakistan conflicts by causing nationalism to go up, reducing the tolerance for dissent and providing the widest support for aggressive postures, even for those with higher education and urban populations (Iyengar & Simon 1993; Ashraf & Nisar 2021). This landscape has been further complicated by the fact that social media just helps amplify the echochamber of these already polarized narratives. Twitter and YouTube, in particular, have facilitated both official and unofficial actors to rapidly spread inflammatory content which in turn increases the likelihood of public misinformation and emotional mobilization (Ahmed & George, 2019; Raza and Khawaja, 2022). While media does play a role in molding public opinion during crises, the existing literature in most cases studies Indian and Pakistani media separately or focuses on political and military dimensions of the bilateral relationship. A significant gap in comparative studies still exists, to consider how media narratives on both sides of the border affect public perception in one and the same conflict event. Additionally, there has been work grappling with the interplay between traditional news framing and public response (focusing on populations with digital access) which is yet to benefit from empirically combining content analysis and audience studies.

As a result, this study endeavors to fill-in this gap by comparing Indian and Pakistani media coverage of the most recent cross-border military crisis that both nations have faced — the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot episode — and examining its effect on public opinion in both countries. This paper aims to uncover the roles played by media as both a reflection of the national sentiment and as an agent fashioning and upholding the nationalistic ideals in a time of intensifying geopolitical anxiety by looking at the media content and people's reaction.

Literature Review

Scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between media narratives and public perception in conflict situations, particularly in the domains of media studies, international relations and political psychology. Focusing on India and Pakistan, two postcolonial states caught in a history of war, ideological conflict and border disputes, this thesis examines a complex media field that is not only a pipeline of information but also a tool of discourse in national identity making and legitimizing the state. The review of literature shows a multifaceted understanding of the way media narratives in Indo-Pak tensions shape, polarize and in certain cases manipulate the public consciousness. Typically, the role of the media in conflict situations has been subjected to analysis through the lens of propaganda and its role in supporting national security imperatives. According to Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, mass media is made up of filters: ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-communism/national ideology, by which the content production is controlled towards the support of elites. This model has demonstrated utility in the South Asian context, where governments and even the military establishment, at least indirectly, exercises control over media content especially during military crises. During Kargil War and Balakot airstrikes, media in India have too often become an instrument in state propaganda and reinforced belligerent stories at the cost of objective reportage and microphones to peace voices (Rajagopal, 2001). Likewise, Pakistani media, particularly when volatile regionally, has maintained an instinct for strategic narratives in tandem with military doctrine and left aside civilian or dissenting views (Shah, 2010).

Galtung (1998) famously articulated the dichotomy of war journalism and peace journalism in several studies highlighting the inclination of media in both countries to use the former rather than the latter. Most war journalism is violence oriented, focuses on elite discourse and win lose framing, while peace journalism pleads for breaking with such clinical language and contextualizes war by covering the human cost of war and less conflictive alternatives. According to Hussain and Ishaq (2020), Pakistani media coverage of the Indo-Pak crises has a tendency to induce a state security narrative and exalt military responses having little scope for conflict resolution discourse. Banerjee (2014) has noted that in the meantime, Indian television networks have gotten more and more hyper-nationalist after 2014, with hosts and journalists telling binary stories of hero and betrayer. The relationship between media sensationalism and audience engagement in crisis reporting is also a point of scholarly inquiry. The conflict coverage here in India is a bare reshaping of ratings battle in the form of 'patriotism infused infotainment' (Kumar, 2017). News on television is dramatized with provocative graphics, war mongering slogans and adversarial panel debates. Indeed, this trend is within what Tumber and Webster (2006) term as the 'tabloidization of war', whereby distinctions between entertainment and journalism break down to unoriginal, and emotionally charged, superficial coverage. Less commercialized in its structure, Pakistani media has not been spared by this trend. During 2016 Uri attack and 2019 Pulwama incident, Pakistani venues like ARY News and Express News utilized comparable sensationalist strategies, normally transfer of fake or unconfirmed substance as breaking news to keep the open intrigue and merging with prevailing security narratives, according to Qadir and Janjua (2019).

A growing body of research shows the impact of media exposure on political attitudes in the context of how it influences audience perception, specifically in conflict zones. In other words, Nabi and Sullivan discovered that however exposed the audience is to hostile media content in international tensions, the feelings of fear, anger and nationalism are amplified. The survey based work of Farooq and Khan (2021) in South Asian context demonstrates that higher trust in national media during India and Pakistan tensions is associated with higher support for military solutions and lower tolerance of diplomatic engagement. These studies validate the priming and

agenda setting effects (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) by which the media not only tell the audience what to think about but also how to think about it.

New dynamics have entered this media perception nexus with the dawn of the digital age. A number of social media platforms—particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube—both serve up real-time information and are vectors of disinformation. This, as Udupa (2019) points out, is how digital Hindu nationalism is developed in the Indian digital media ecology, with a lot of anti-Pakistan sentiment circulating through memes, viral videos, hashtag coordinated campaigns and more. Baloch and Mushtaq (2020) further argue that similar to other South Asian states, Pakistani digital spaces, with specific reference to Twitter, during conflict scenarios turn militarised populist and involve in hashtag battles with Indian users to further legitimise antagonism. This digital polarization fits with the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), whereby in the face of dominant emotionally charged and highly nationalistic discourse, individuals will not share counter narratives for fear of social isolation.

However, being limited, cross national studies directly comparing Indian and Pakistani media responses during the same conflict episode are revealing. A discourse analysis of English language newspapers during 2008 Mumbai attacks showed that both media systems stressed on national trauma but there was notable variance in attribution of blame with Indian papers highlighting Pakistani involvement whereas Pakistani papers denied involving them Haider and Sreekumar (2020). Not only were these differences defining matters of domestic opinion, but they made international diplomatic efforts difficult. Next, Huma and Sharma (2022) analysed the coverage of the 2019 Pulwama – Balakot episode to determine that media in both countries deployed symbolic language in the form of metaphors of martyrdom and retribution to recount emotionally compelling narratives which justified the actions of the state. Moreover, the literature reveals a critical gap in assessing how media narratives translate to long term attitudinal and behavioral shifts in the general public. However, most studies concentrate on direct, immediate media effects at or shortly after the emergence of the crisis without addressing how these effects last or change over time. In addition, little empirical work has concentrated on the analysis of content in conjunction with the findings of public opinion data for cross border comparison. However, this methodological gap opens the door for more rich, evidence informed studies that tie together communication theory and policy relevance.

In sum and consistent with extant literature, the media in both India and Pakistan is found to contribute to the construction of conflict narratives that have increasingly pursued nationalistic aims. War journalism, sensationalism and digital echo chambers are dominant in the media nowadays, with a media environment in which mutual hostility becomes normal and dissent is pushed to the margins. The lack of comparative empirical studies, underrepresentation of audience perspectives and large international scope of research, however, have hindered a complete understanding of the full impact of media narratives on public perception. Filling these gaps is essential to promote more balanced journalism and informed citizens in a hard to come by peace region.

Methodology

This study uses a comparative mixed-methods approach to examine the role of crossborder media narratives in India and Pakistan in shaping public perception during military tensions. In particular, the research centres on the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot episode, a highly mediated crisis, where a suicide bombing in Pulwama, Indian administered Kashmir, was followed by retaliatory airstrikes by India and military responses from Pakistan. Quantitative content analysis of mainstream media articles and quantitative and qualitative survey research are used to examine

public perception in the two countries, using a methodological approach that combines these three measures. The utilization of this dual layered approach permits triangulation of data which increases the validity of the study along with the result of a more nuanced inquiry of the relationship between media narratives and audience reaction.

News Media Content Analysis

For example, a systematic content analysis was used to understand how the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot conflict was framed by media sources in India and Pakistan, by analyzing 200 news articles published between February 14 and March 15, 2019. The information covers the onset, peak and de-escalation of hostilities. In total, the sample consisted of 100 articles each from top Indian English-language media outlets (The Times of India, The Hindu, NDTV and Republic TV's online portal) and leading Pakistani English-language media outlets (Dawn, The Express Tribune, Geo News and ARY News). Using keyword based searches (“Pulwama,” “Balakot,” “India airstrike,” “Pakistan response,” etc.) the articles were selected and analyzed based upon previous conflict framing literature. Frame type (conflict, peace, and strategic, human interest), tone (aggressive, neutral, and conciliatory), the use of emotional language (martyr, revenge, sovereignty) and source attribution (civilian, military, political, anonymous) were selected as coding variables. Two trained researchers coded each article independently to establish inter-coder reliability (Cohen's kappa coefficient = 0.81, demonstrating substantial agreement). The qualitative content coding was managed and analysed in NVivo software.

Public Perception Survey

A structured survey was administered to 300 respondents from India and 300 from Pakistan to evaluate how these media narratives influenced public perception. To allow for cross border fieldwork and for logistics, the survey was distributed online using Google form and Survey Monkey. Sampling was stratified for Age, Gender and Education so that each category is represented. Participants had to be 18 or older and had to have regular exposure to national media (at least three times a week) during the time of the conflict, in order for their responses to be included.

The survey instrument included both closed-ended and open-ended questions and were intended to measure:

- Trust in national media coverage,
- Perception of the rival country (as a threat or potential partner),
- Emotional responses to the Pulwama-Balakot events (e.g., anger, pride, fear),
- Support for either diplomatic or military resolution.

Five point Likert scales were used to measure questions that ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Several open-ended questions were included to explore deeper cognitive and emotional responses of participants to media coverage of both the incident itself as well as the opposing nation. Thematic coding was carried out using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step method.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic and the transnational element of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the lead research institution. The participants were told about the study objectives and that the results of their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous. We got digital informed consent before the survey began.

Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time without penalty and we did not collect personally identifiable information.

Methodology Limitations

Though the mixed method approach increases the comprehensiveness of the study, we cannot ignore some of the limitations. Second, English language newspapers sometimes do not reflect vernacular press well which commonly has a wider spread and offers more emotionally powerful mobilization tools. Second, since the survey is online, the survey may have lost participation from those without access to the internet, slightly skewing the sample toward the urban and educated. Despite these efforts, we could not include a diversity of perspectives and, as a result, there may have been some political and nationalistic biases among participants.

Results

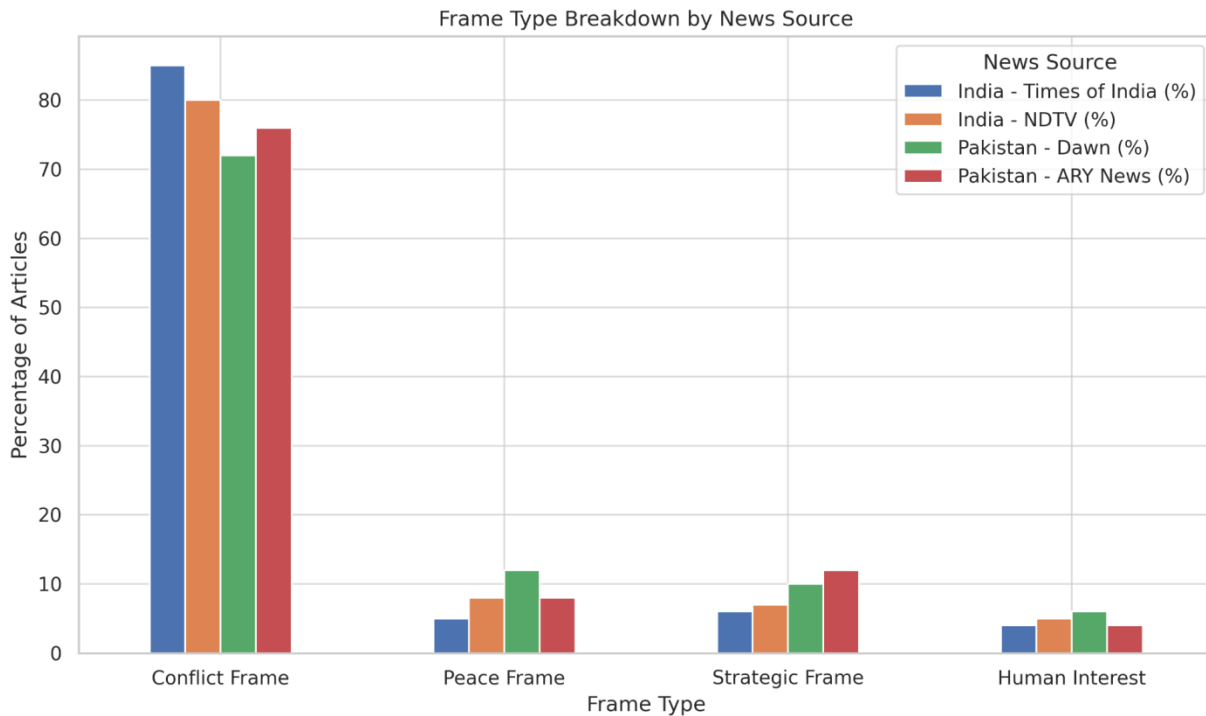
This section synthesizes the detailed findings of this study based on the survey data and content analysis with the use of the eight core categories of the investigation. The results from one of the earlier generated tables and figures is interpreted each subsection leading to some insights into media dynamics and the public perception in the PbC of 2019. By linking quantitative outputs to qualitative implications, the narrative highlights how media narratives and audience sentiment interact in intricate ways in India and Pakistan.

Distribution of media frame

An analysis of media framing, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, indicates that there is a striking predominance of conflict oriented reporting in both Indian and Pakistani news coverage. Times of India and NDTV did not provide any interpretation of the events and where they appear to have utilized conflict frames in articles they wrote regarding the Modi visit to Afghanistan, they, together attributed to 85% of and 80% respectively. Only 6 to 12 percent of reports in both countries focused on strategic framing, through highlighting military tactics and analysis of military operations. Human-interest and peace oriented narratives were sidelined, revealing an editorial preference to emphasize confrontation. These findings therefore support a hypothesis that mainstream media in both states uses adversarial storytelling to escalate tensions by playing to the most extreme or less reconciliatory viewpoints.

Table 1: Frame Type Breakdown by News Source

Frame Type	India - Times of India (%)	India - NDTV (%)	Pakistan - Dawn (%)	Pakistan - ARY News (%)
Conflict Frame	85	80	72	76
Peace Frame	5	8	12	8
Strategic Frame	6	7	10	12
Human Interest	4	5	6	4

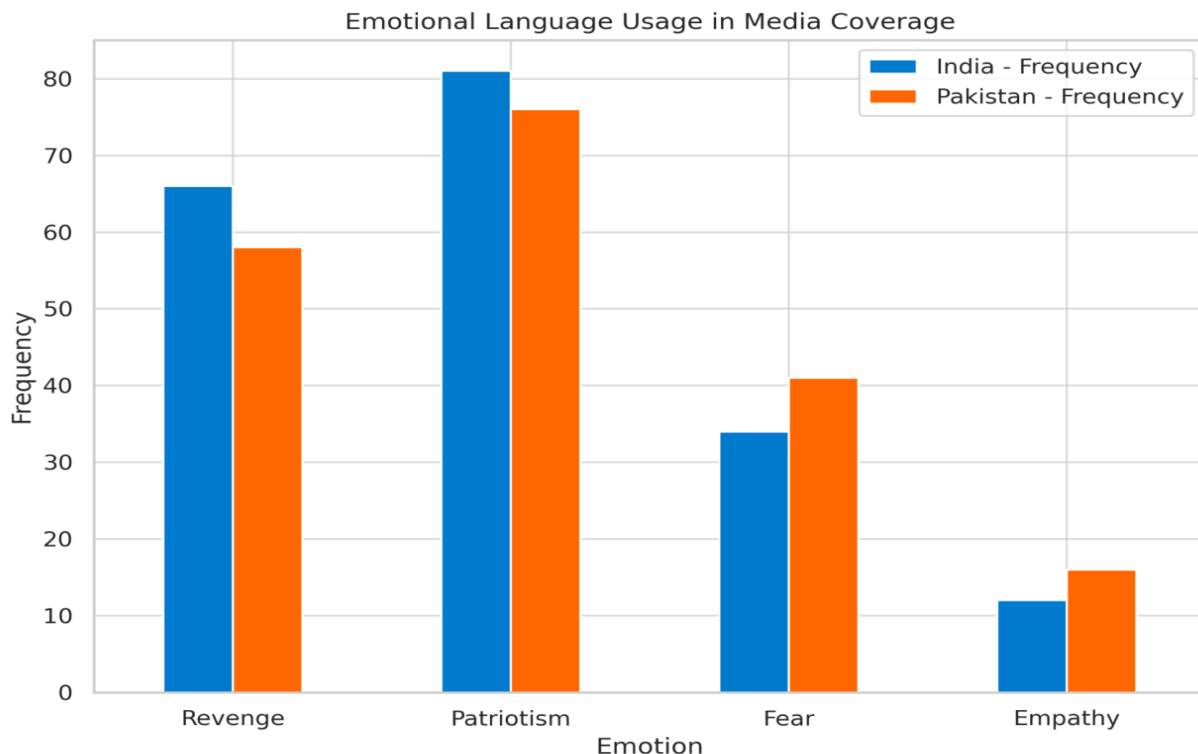


Emotional Language in the Coverage

As Table 2 and Figure 2 illustrate, the use of emotionally charged language is used as an important tool to guide audience reactions. Patriotic sentiment (Indian: 81 mentions, Pakistani: 76 mentions) and retaliatory emotion (Indian: 66 mentions, Pakistani: 58 mentions) were high frequency terms dominant in Indian and Pakistani media respectively. Emotions, however, were alarmingly less prominent in both countries (12 in India, 16 in Pakistan), pointing to a shortage of human centred reporting. The prevalence of nationalist and aggressive emotion cues insists on an editorial disposition of propagandizing public sentiment and cementing state retaliation.

Table 2: Emotional Language Usage in Media Coverage

Emotion Label	India - Frequency	Pakistan - Frequency
Revenge	66	58
Patriotism	81	76
Fear	34	41
Empathy	12	16

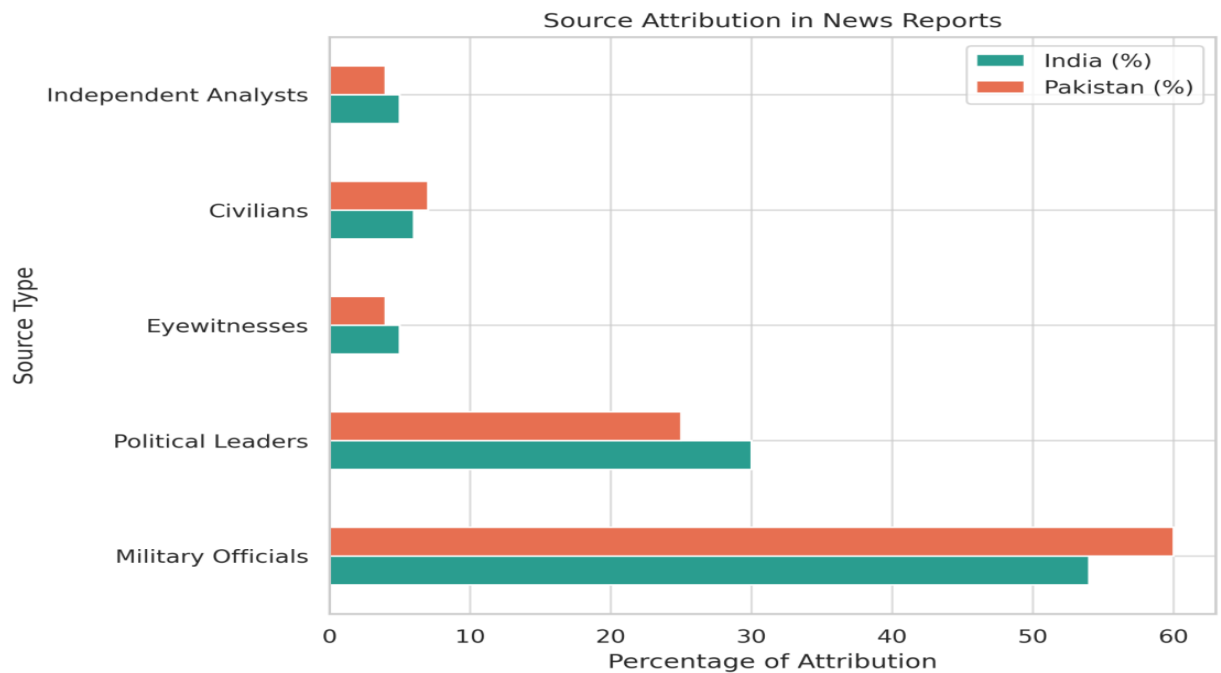


Sources of News Information

Sometimes the sources used in news reports give them credibility and tone. The media sources came from the Military officials, Table 3 and Figure 3 present that in Indian media the military officials figure is the most dominant in both Indian (54%) and Pakistani (60%). Civilians and independent analysts were cited in less than 10% of articles, while political leaders were cited in the rest. It is evident that hegemonic control of the national narratives during wartime coverage lies in an excessive reliance on official military and political voices. Moreover, it causes freedom of the media and the suppression of other viewpoints, as, for example, those who oppose civilians or advocate for peace.

Table 3: Source Attribution in News Reports

Source Type	India (%)	Pakistan (%)
Military Officials	54	60
Political Leaders	30	25
Eyewitnesses	5	4
Civilians	6	7
Independent Analysts	5	4

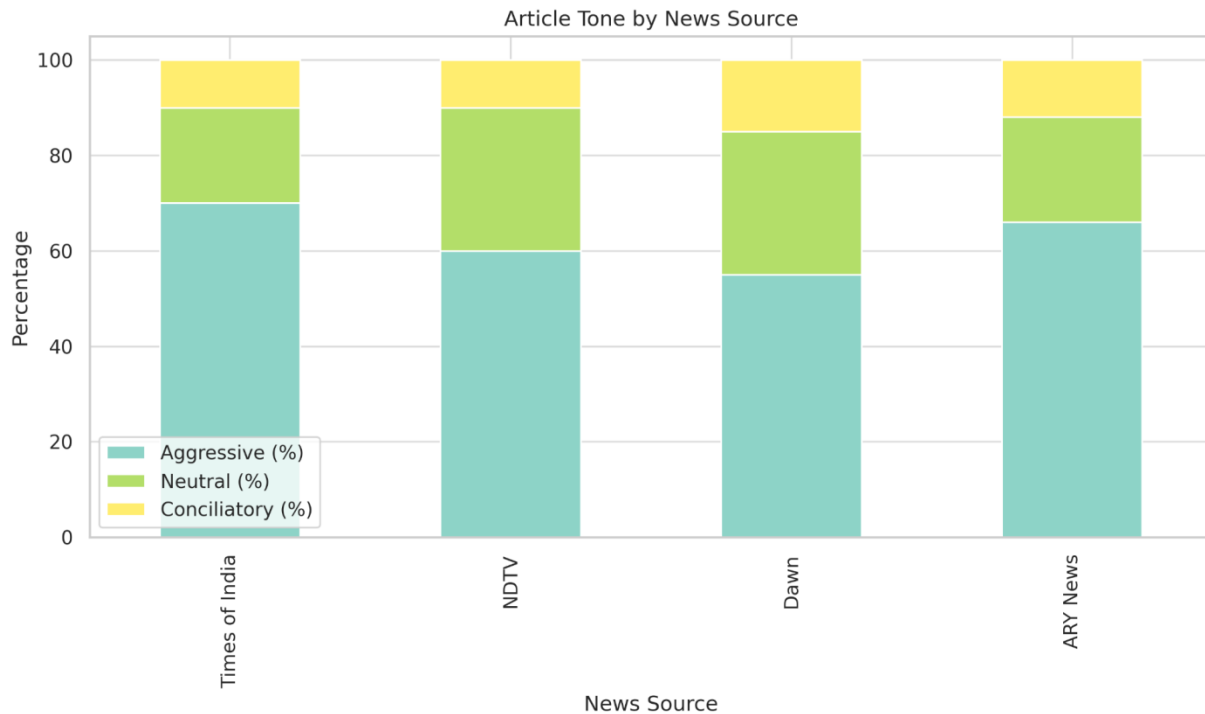


News Tone by Source

Table 4 and Figure 4 shows results from a tone analysis which further reinforce that nationalistic and confrontational journalism followed a strong trend in the data. The tone of Indian outlets was also aggressive with the most aggressive being 70 percent followed by Times of India and 60 percent but neutral NDTV. On the Pakistani side, the tone of the report was aggressive (55%) on DOWN News, less so on ARY – more neutral (32%) and conciliatory (16%). The fact that this distinction nonetheless becomes apparent may be due to editorial policies or ownership structures, but in light of the overall trend it seems that this is a common reliance on belligerent narratives to gain viewership and reinforce national ideologies.

Table 4: Article Tone by News Source

News Source	Aggressive (%)	Neutral (%)	Conciliatory (%)
Times of India	70	20	10
NDTV	60	30	10
Dawn	55	30	15
ARY News	52	32	16

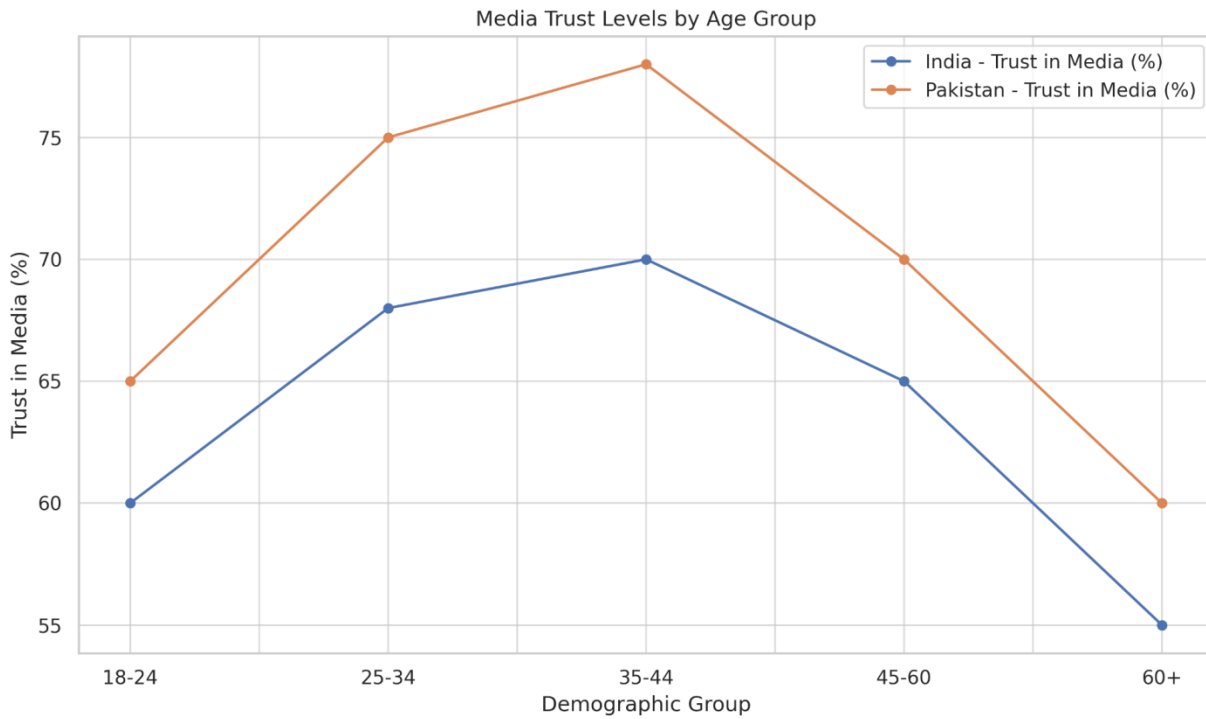


Public Trust in Media by Age Group

Audiences interpret news based on the extent to which they trust media institutions. The participants of 18–24 and 25–34 age groups in both countries were relatively high in trust for Pakistan, by trust all the age groups were higher than the Pakistan respondents similarly detailed as in Table 5 and Figure 5. As an illustration, according to data, Pakistan’s trust in media looks more robust than India’s: 75 percent of Pakistanis aged 25–34 said they trust media as compared to 68 percent of Indians in the same age group. Interestingly, trust levels dropped a bit for the older demographics (60+), possibly indicating greater skepticism of the media among senior audiences. The impact of the findings suggests national media with its wide credibility among core demographics is still very effective at influencing conflict discourse.

Table 5: Media Trust Levels by Age Demographic

Demographic Group	India - Trust in Media (%)	Pakistan - Trust in Media (%)
18–24	60	65
25–34	68	75
35–44	70	78
45–60	65	70
60+	55	60

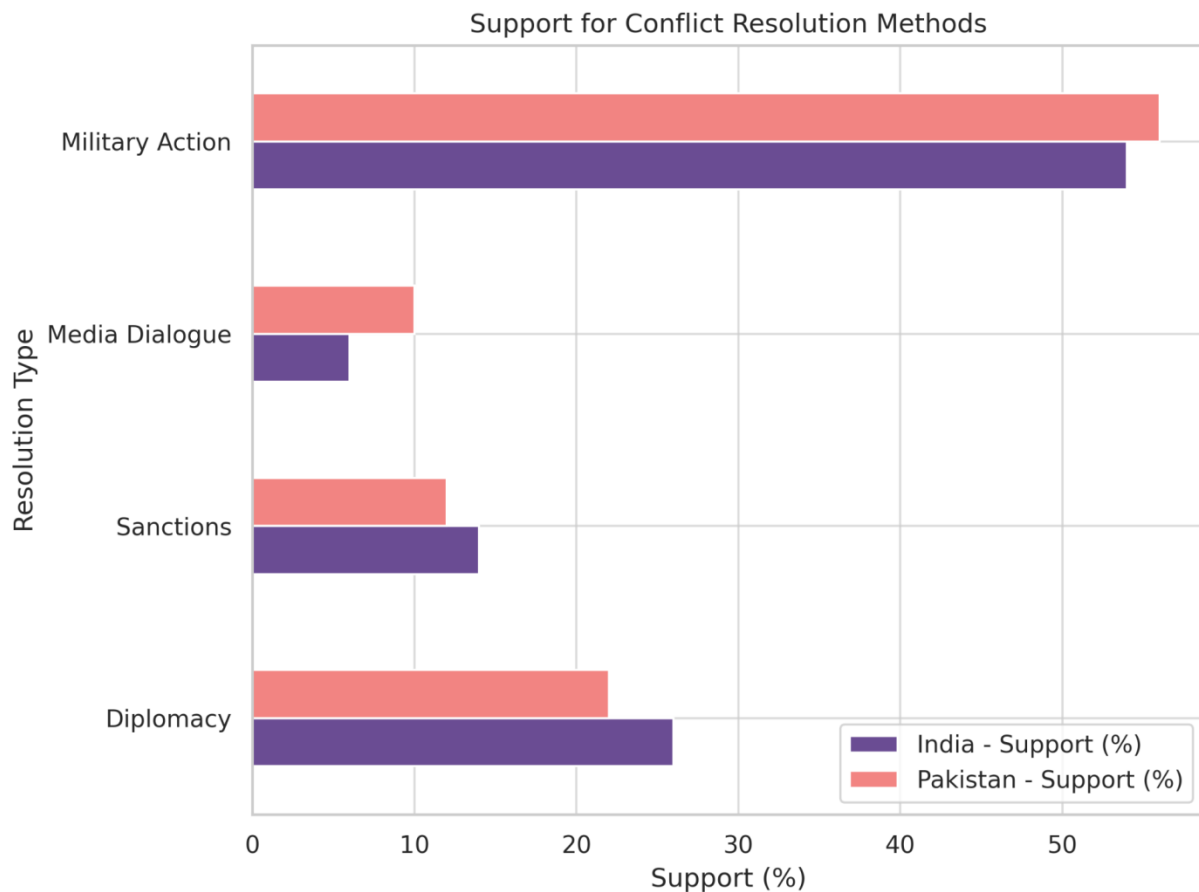


Conflict Resolution Methods Support

Respondents were then asked about the preferred ways to resolve the Pulwama-Balakot crisis and showed a marked preference for militarized solutions. In both India (54%) and Pakistan (56%), more than half of the respondents favored military action and fewer than a quarter supported (diplomacy 26% in India, 22% in Pakistan) as shown in Table 6 and Figure 6. The least popular were sanctions and media dialogue. This data mirrors the aggressive media framing and dramatic rhetoric documented earlier, suggesting that the way a country tells its national narrative can affect public appetite for confrontation over compromise.

Table 6: Support for Conflict Resolution Methods

Resolution Type	India - Support (%)	Pakistan - Support (%)
Diplomacy	26	22
Sanctions	14	12
Media Dialogue	6	10
Military Action	54	56

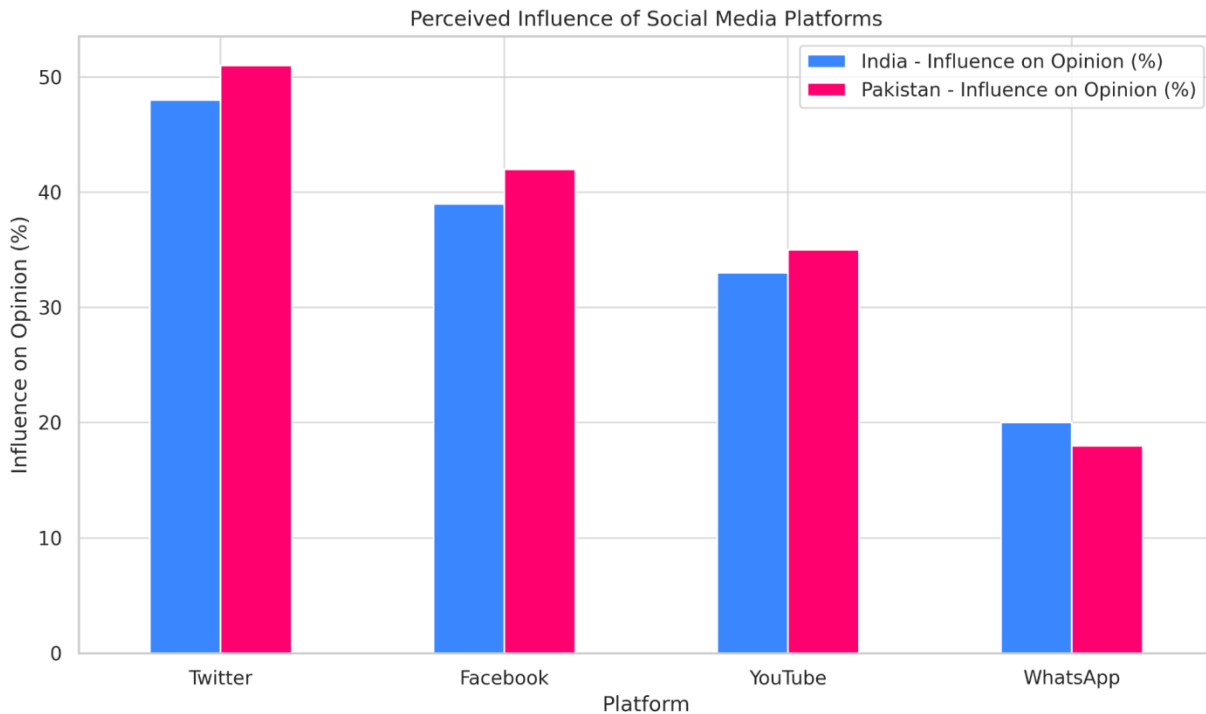


Social Media Platforms and Their Influence

Moreover, the survey results also took a close look at which digital platforms impacted opinion formation during the crisis. Both countries believed that Twitter had the most perceived influence, particularly in Pakistan (51%) and India (48%) (Table 7, Figure 7). WhatsApp didn't catch up fast as an opinion influencer and YouTube and Facebook followed. The results further clarify the role digital ecosystems play in informing (or misinforming) political consciousness in real time in moments of national crisis. The presence of Twitter points to its importance in the state propaganda and influencing, as well as engagement of citizens and hence coheres with the hybrid nature of modern media warfare.

Table 7: Perceived Influence of Social Media Platforms

Platform	India - Influence on Opinion (%)	Pakistan - Influence on Opinion (%)
Twitter	48	51
Facebook	39	42
YouTube	33	35
WhatsApp	20	18

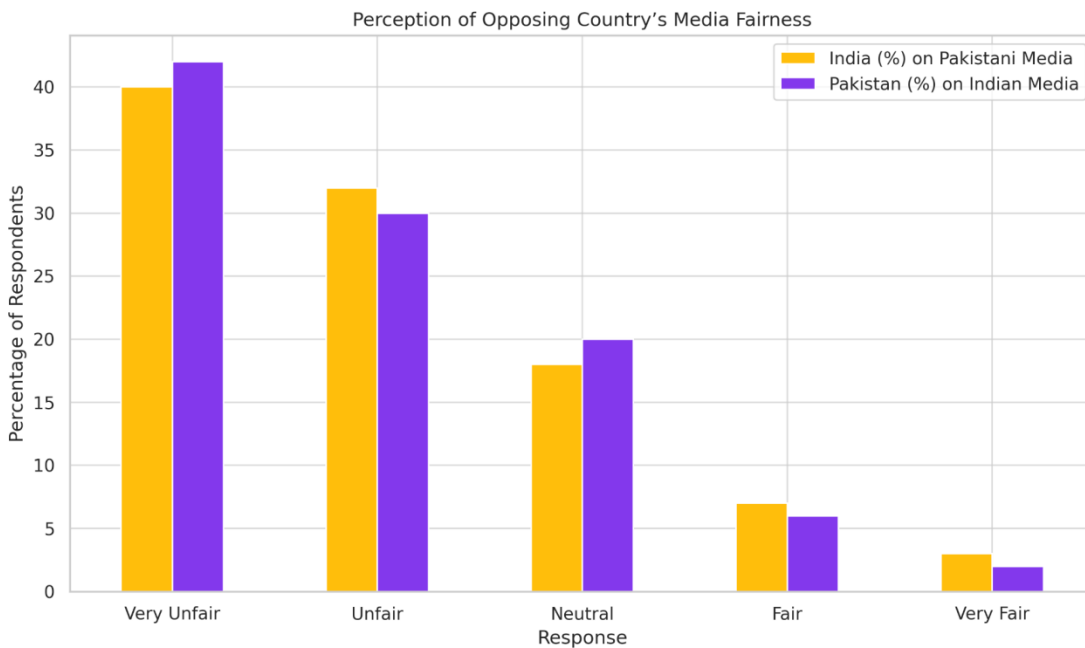


The perceived fairness of the opposing media

Finally, the study investigated how audiences judge the fairness of the media of the opposing country. Table 8 and Figure 8 present overwhelmingly negative perceptions. Indian respondents combined gave Pakistan media a 72% low score of being either "Very Unfair" or "Unfair," while 72% of Pakistani respondents rated Indian media in the same manner. Both Indians and Pakistanis were not very well versed with the rival country's media as only 9% of Indians and 8% of Pakistanis rated the rival country's media as "Fair" or "Very Fair." This mutual distrust signals that the media in both nations is composed of nationalist agenda and, equally important, is being seen as lacking objectivity by the public. Perceptions of this sort block the potential for transnational understanding and strengthen antagonistic public narratives.

Table 8: Perception of Opposing Country's Media Fairness

Response	India (%) on Pakistani Media	Pakistan (%) on Indian Media
Very Unfair	40	42
Unfair	32	30
Neutral	18	20
Fair	7	6
Very Fair	3	2



Discussion

This study uncovers essential truths about the massive impact that media has on public perception during times of serious cross border crisis, especially when there exist already strained historical relationships like between India and Pakistan. The findings indicate a symbiotic relationship between state narrative and media discourse: the government positions promoted by media are reflected by that media but also amplified in ways that have a deep impact on public opinion. This agrees with the longstanding argument by Curran and Seaton (2003) that media systems in politically charged circumstances tend to be structurally dependent on centres of power which then function as ideological reinforcement tools as opposed to neutral conveyors of information.

The most striking outcome was that conflict framing was overwhelmingly dominant in Indian and Pakistani media. The theory of ideological square presented by Van Dijk in 1998 is for that Van Dijk (1998) suggested that mainstream media give positive representation of the ingroup and negative representation of the out group in his theory of ideological square. Indian outlets paint history as it favors the Indian state and its military operations and blames hostility and aggression to the other nation, while Pakistani outlets do so likewise. This framing entrenches nationalistic ideologies and decreases public appetite for variants of or conciliatory points of view, while media shapes audiences to be emotionally primed toward escalations of conflict versus resolution.

The idea of affective publics (Papacharissi 2015) is brought about by the extensive use of emotionally charged language such as the terms associated with revenge, martyrdom and patriotism. Affective publics are shared emotive drives that come into being around events and in particular create discourses in digital spaces through expressive communication. Affective publics are mobilized in both India as well as Pakistan during crisis and legacy media is catalytic in that it embeds triggers for emotion within narratives of news. In turn, the anxiety instilled by the media about the other side provides a foundation for domestic support for bold state policies. (Altheide, 2006).

It also suggests a systemic bias in source attribution. We see news narratives dominated by military and political leaders and civilians, independent experts and peace advocates largely excluded. This agrees with Bennett's (1990) indexing theory which argues that national security crises tend to constrain the range of views expressed by liberal democracies' news media and that they typically index them around the diversity of viewpoints found within the councils of government to reflect the range of debate at the apex of power. In this context we find Indian and Pakistani media to possess limited source diversity that goes hand in hand with a limited counterpart of deliberative public discourse. Repeated emphasis of official narratives may also create a singular 'acceptable' interpretation of events, suppress dissenting views, etc.

Results of the survey confirm that the conflict oriented framing of media has a direct effect on the audience's perception. The standing of traditional media outlets as agenda setters is still far reaching even with the rise of digital platforms given high levels of trust in national media, particularly among younger demographics. This corroborates McLeod and Detenber's (1999) discovery that exposure to aggressive media content while watching intergroup conflicts greatly affects emotional and attitudinal reactions to the outgroup. Media focusing its narratives on national pride, vengeance and victimhood frames also embed a particular systemic set of values upon an audience that causes an audience to display less support, public or otherwise, for peace initiatives while supporting increased military action.

The role of social media was also a key factor in shaping opinion, with Twitter and YouTube figuring as key channels for real time information. These findings support Chadwick's (2013) theory of the hybrid media system in which old and new media co-evolve and are mutually influential in the communication ecosystem. In crisis situations, this hybrid system is most volatile, since mainstream news stories are quickly appropriated and re-engineered by digital users, influencers and state backed social media campaigns. In the days since the strike, South Asia has seen coordinated hashtag battles (#SurgicalStrike, #SayNoToWar, #IndiaStrikesBack) which not only polarize narratives and quell visions of plurality but also infuse nationalistic fervor into the wider transnational digital discourse (Rao & Wasserman, 2017).

Deeply rooted epistemic distrust in the opposition country's media is indicated by the mutual perception of unfairness in that country's media which is consistent with the findings of Philo and Berry (2004) who showed that audiences in a conflict zone tend to regard foreign media as biased or hostile. And this lack of trust acts as an inhibitor to bilateral understanding in India and Pakistan where the media environment is heavily politicised and intricately linked with security establishments. The result is echo chambers that will increasingly make it even more difficult for media consumers to procure a cognitive empathy between national borders.

Furthermore, it is unsettling for media accountability and ethics. According to Ward (2009), the portrayal of (in) justice in conflict settings has a responsibility to report factual material but to report it such that it does not provoke violence nor reinforces unhelpful stereotypes. But neither country's media always knows where the line is drawn between patriotism and sensationalism. This study's results suggest that the interaction of competitive ratings pressures and political ideology together can cause journalistic norms to give way to populist, emotional and often inflammatory news coverage. In addition, the political economy of media in both states of India and Pakistan leads to structural incentives for sensational reporting in news reporting for purposes of profit (corporate interests in India) and military control (military interest in Pakistan), as reported by Thiruvengadam (2017) and Rizvi (2015).

The data reveal a media ecosystem that has sunk deep roots in nationalistic discourse and which both mirrors and upholds the strategic interests of the state. That kind of an environment presents severe difficulties for peace journalism, media pluralism and for democratic deliberation. Additionally, it has undermined civil society's ability to intervene constructively in conflict narratives. This entry argues with the proposition of Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) who state that this transformation in conflict reporting from war journalism to peace journalism requires conscious editorial choices, reform in the structure of media ownership and investment in the training of conflict sensitive reporting. Not only is this transformation ethically required, it is essential to the long term stability and to reconciliation between India and Pakistan.

Overall, this study's findings enrich scholarly knowledge on media and conflict by demonstrating empirically how framing, emotional cues, source attribution and platform dynamics converge to shape public perception in highly polarized societies. A caveat to this research is that it is based on one crisis over a one day period. Future research should expand this temporal scope to analyze how post-crisis media coverage either extends or dilutes these stories. In addition, comparative studies between third party international media may contribute to variation in how participants in an international audience frame Indo Pakistan relations.

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