



1. A Study of Misinformation and Media Framing During the 2025 Pahalgam Terror Attack in India

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Abstract

This study systematically examines false information during the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack in India. It analyses media framing patterns during the crisis. The research Uses a Qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis as its methodology. Data sources include viral social media posts, mainstream news coverage, and fact-checking reports. This approach reveals how misleading content spreads during emergencies. The Theoretical framework combines Public Sphere Theory and Media Framing Theory. These theories guided the analysis process. Researchers categorize false content using the information disorder framework. Results show that strategic framing by both mainstream and digital media false content is categorised into misinformation, disinformation, and malformation using the Information Disorder Framework. Findings show that both mainstream and digital media rely on strategic frames like communal targeting, nationalist messaging, security lapses, and media critique, each influencing public perception and polarising audience sentiment. Cross-validation with fact-check platforms confirms a rapid proliferation of false narratives, often surfacing before formal news verification. The findings show that the interaction of information disorder and selective media framing intensifies social division, disrupts democratic discourse, and presents significant challenges for media accountability. The study identifies the instant need for real time fact-checking, enhanced digital literacy and ethical media practises to mitigate the impact of crisis misinformation and sustain the function of the public sphere in digital environments.

Keywords: Digital literacy, Information disorder, Media framing, Misinformation, Pahalgam terror attack, public sphere

1. INTRODUCTION

A worrying aspect of India's digital information ecosystems in the wake of terror attacks is the proliferation of false information. A terror attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, on April 22, 2025, claimed the lives of 26 civilians, most of them Hindu pilgrims, and injured 20 others. The attackers, allegedly affiliated with The Resistance Front (TRF), a Pakistan-based



militant proxy group, reportedly separated victims according to their religious affiliation before opening fire. [1, 2].

Within hours of the incident, Twitter (now X), Instagram, WhatsApp groups and even some prominent mainstream news channels were misleading images, AI-generated visuals, misattributed videos, and communal conspiracy theories. According to a BOOM Live report, over 23% of the organisation's fact-checks between April 22 and May 1, 2025, were cantered on false information about the Pahalgam attack, specifically AI-generated photographs and misleading information targeting minority groups [1]. These included deepfake audio-visual content that was created to manipulate religious sentiment, old footage that was misrepresented as recent military retaliation. Some irrelevant images that were circulated as “exclusive” pictures of the incident [3, 4].

In this study, to unpack the nature of misinformation, the Information Disorder Framework by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan [5] Categorizes it into three types: misinformation (false but not intended to harm), disinformation (false and harmful), and malinformation (true but used out of context to harm). This framework helps analyse the range of false and misleading content that appeared online during and after the Pahalgam terror attack, especially in the form of politically motivated remarks and viral, communally charged content. [6]

Thus, the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack assault serves as a case study for understanding how misinformation and media framing work together during crises. This study investigates how these factors combined to distort public understanding, deepen communal fault lines, and challenge the democratic operations of India's media-dominated public sphere.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the crises, Misinformation challenges the democratic role of the public sphere. While Habermas [7] idealised the public sphere as a forum for reasoned debate. researchers like Papacharissi [8] and Chadwick [9] Observe that digital platforms now encourage emotional, polarized discourse. During the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack, this distortion was made clear as social media was flooded with AI-generated images, fabricated communal claims, and old videos shared as real-time proof [10, 11]

According to India Today [12], Pakistani accounts were responsible for more than 75% of the false information spread by hashtags like #IndianFalseFlag. News organizations such as France 24 and ABC News revealed how deepfakes and recycled visuals were used to influence public opinion. The choice of gentler language like “gunmen” instead of “terrorists” was attacked by [13, 14]. Scholars like Entman [15] and Iyengar [16] explain that such framing can shape public understanding and perpetuate conflicting narratives.

Research by Garimella & Eckles [17] And Dash et al. [18] study on political misinformation on WhatsApp and Twitter in India. It shows how powerful users magnify dangerous speech. Meanwhile, the “Information Disorder Framework” by Wardle &



Derakhshan [5] categorizes misinformation into types, helping decode what misinformation that spread during the Pahalgam attack.

Despite this growing body of work, few studies in India have explored at the interplay between digital propaganda, media framing, and disinformation during terrorist acts. Addressing this gap and examining how misinformation undermines public discourse and communal harmony during national crises is made possible by the Pahalgam Terror attack.

Few studies explore misinformation during health crises (Al-Zaman, 2021), elections [17], and communal violence [18]. there is a dearth of integrated research that examines the combined effect of media framing, public sphere theory, and misinformation typology on public discourse and communal harmony during terror incidents. Studies on media framing and information disorder exist separately, but provide a comprehensive examination of how media narratives and disinformation affect public opinion during national emergencies. This study addresses this gap by offering a structured analysis of how misinformation and media narratives shape public opinion national crisis.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Public Sphere Theory [7] and Media Framing Theory [15] to examine critically how misinformation and narrative construction occurred during the 2025 Pahalgam terror incident. Public Sphere Theory is chosen to know how digital platforms, which ought to facilitate democratic and rational discourse, turn into emotionally charged and fractured areas during crisis. It contributes to examining how the existence of misinformation undermines the democratic role of the media and well-informed public discourse. Media Framing Theory is relevant as it enables the examination of how different news sources and social media accounts selectively highlighted communal, political, or nationalistic aspects of the attack, thereby influencing public perception. both theories together provide a strong framework to explore how media narratives and false information distort public understanding and influence societal response during terror-related incidents in India.

3. Objectives

Informed by the theoretical framework and literature review, this study pursued the following specific objectives:

- a) To identify and categorize the forms of misinformation circulated during the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack using the Information Disorder Framework.
- b) To examine how digital and mainstream media framed the event, focusing on thematic and narrative patterns.
- c) To assess the impact of misinformation and media framing on public discourse and communal sentiment in the immediate aftermath of the attack.



4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the nature and influence of misinformation and media framing during the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack. ¹Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed to examine how language, imagery, and narrative choices reflected underlying ideologies, power relations, and social consequences during the crisis.

4.1 Sampling Strategy

A ²Purposive sampling approach was used to select content relevant to the research objectives. The sample comprised:

- I. 50 viral social media posts from Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram shared between April and May 2025. Selection was based on virality (high engagement rates), relevance to the Pahalgam incident, and potential misinformation indicators.
- II. 10 mainstream news articles from English- and Hindi-language outlets, including *The Times of India*, *Indian Express*, and *Dainik Bhaskar*.
- III. Five fact-checking reports from credible platforms (*Alt News*, *BOOM Live*, *Factly*, *The Quint*, and *Newschecker*).

4.2 Data Analysis

Data were manually coded thematically, followed by categorization using the Information Disorder Framework (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) to classify misinformation as misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation. CDA techniques were applied to identify recurring frames, narrative patterns, and linguistic devices. Triangulation was employed by cross-referencing findings from social media, news media, and fact-checking reports to enhance validity.

5. Findings and Discussion

This chapter describes the use of thematic coding and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse data gathered from mainstream news stories, social media platforms, and fact-checking websites. The objective was to analyse media framing of the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack and spot trends of disinformation.

5.1 Classification of Misinformation

Through Wardle & Derakhshan's typology framework (2017), The 50 viral social media messages were into three categories: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Below is a summary of the findings:

¹ Critical Discourse Analysis explores how language reflects and reinforces power relations in society (Fairclough, 1995).

² Purposive sampling allows researchers to select data-rich cases relevant to the research objective (Palinkas et al., 2015).

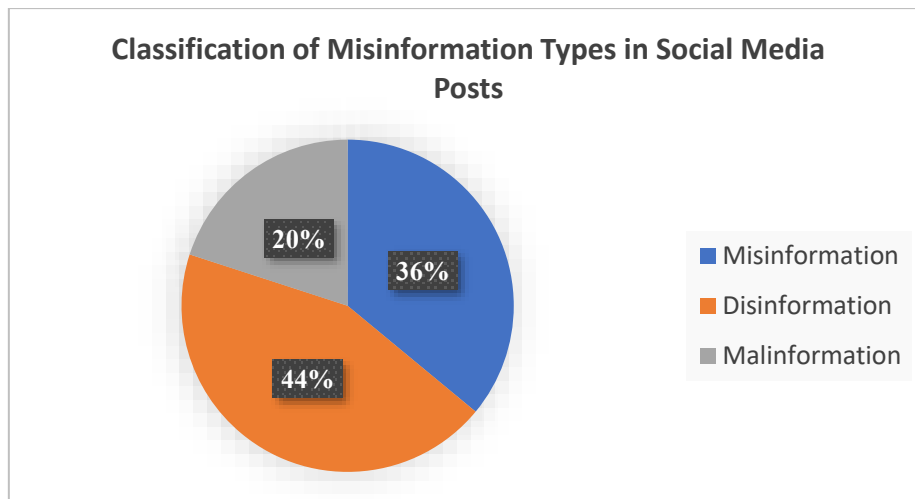


Figure 1 Categorisation of misinformation in viral social media posts (May 2025)

In Figure 1 Categorisation of misinformation in viral social media posts (May 2025), we can see that Disinformation was the most dominant category, often appearing in the form of AI-generated images, doctored videos, or misattributed quotes that promoted communal or anti-state sentiments.

5.2 Thematic Coding of Content

The content was coded into recurring themes to analyse how narratives were constructed:

Table 1 Thematic Coding of Misinformation Narratives

S. No.	Theme	Description	Example Post Content
1.	Communal Targeting	Blaming a specific religious group	“A group celebrating after the attack” (fake video)
2.	Nationalist Messaging	Calls for revenge, hyper-patriotism	“Time to teach Pakistan a lesson.”
3.	Victimhood/Emotion Appeal	AI images of crying children and grieving families (fake/edited)	“Last photo of the martyr couple” (misattributed)
4.	State Failure Narrative	Claims of security lapse, political blame	“Govt. knew but didn’t act” (fact-checked false)

Table 1 Thematic Coding of Misinformation Narratives presents the dominant themes observed in misinformation spread during the 2025 Pahalgam attack. The most common storyline was community targeting, which fuelled online hate and polarisation by incorrectly implicating specific religious communities through false claims and AI-generated images. Nationalist rhetoric was widely used, strengthening us-verse-them narratives through emotive appeals to patriotism and calls for revenge. Another major theme was victimhood and emotional manipulation, where unrelated or edited images of grieving families or injured



individuals were used to intensify public outrage. Lastly, state failure narratives accused authorities of negligence without factual basis, often supported by fake quotes or misleading headlines. These themes reflect the emotional and divisive nature of crisis misinformation, echoing earlier findings by Wardle and Derakhshan [5] on how such storylines are created to provoke strong reactions and influence public perception rapidly.

5.3 Media Framing in News Articles

Mainstream articles were analysed using Entman's framing theory (1993), focusing on: Problem definition, Causal interpretation, Moral evaluation, Treatment recommendation

Table 2 Dominant Frames in Mainstream News Media

S. No.	News Outlet	Dominant Frame	Framing Style	Bias Detected
1.	TOI	Security lapse	Government blamed for failure	Political
2.	Firstpost	National unity	Emotional appeal, martyr focus	Nationalist
3.	Dainik Bhaskar	Communal angle	Implicit religious references	Communal
4.	The Wire	Media criticism	Focus on fake news and narratives	Analytical

Table 2 Dominant Frames in Mainstream News Media reveals that mainstream media organizations employed different framing techniques while reporting the 2025 Pahalgam terror incident. A security lapse frame was highlighted by TOI, which is blaming government inaction. Firstpost was about to nationalist frame, emphasising patriotism and martyrdom. Dainik Bhaskar linked the incident to communal frame, associating the incident with religious take. The Wire used a media critique frame, focusing on false information and the peril of sensationalism. which suggests that media select and emphasize some aspects of incidents to influence audience perception and emotional response.

5.4 Cross-Validation with Fact-Check Reports

To validate and triangulate the findings from social media and news media analysis, this study reviewed five fact-checking reports published by leading Indian platforms: Alt-News [19], BOOM Live [20], Factly [21], The Quint [22], and News-checker [23]. These groups provided insightful and critical debunking of viral posts related to the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack. The cross-validation helped confirm the nature, format, and thematic pattern of misinformation circulating during the incident.

Key Verified Misinformation Cases:



I. AI-Generated Visuals Falsely Attributed to Victims

- AltNews (April 24, 2025) identified six AI-generated photos circulating widely on Twitter and WhatsApp. One picture depicted a crying toddler holding the Indian flag in front of a burning bus, claimed to be from Pahalgam. signs of synthetic production were identified by image forensics.
- An AI-generated image of a woman in grief in front of bodies was flagged by BOOM Live (April 25, 2025) as being from the Nepal earthquake.

II. Recycled Video Clips from Foreign Conflicts

- Factly (April 26, 2025) debunked a viral video of a man with rifles shooting in mountains. The video, which was reused with subtitles connecting it to the Pahalgam incident. It was identified as footage from the Syrian conflict in 2022.
- Newschecker (April 27, 2025) verified that a purported “live footage” of terrorists fleeing was drone footage from a military exercise in Himachal Pradesh in 2021.

III. Fabricated Quotes and Political Statements

- **The Quint WebQoof (April 28, 2025)** exposed a widely circulated statement that was attributed to the union Home minister: *“This was an internal mistake and could have been avoided.”* The minister’s official press conference transcript showed no such comments were made.
- BOOM Live also addressed a fake screenshot of a tweet by Rahul Gandhi. That claimed he criticised the victims rather than the attackers. His verified handle used to post the tweet.

IV. False Identification of Victims and Attackers

- A post that went viral implied a communal motive by claiming that the couple killed in the attack were interfaith. However, AltNews confirmed through official statements and family interviews that the couple belonged to the same religious background, debunking the communal narrative.
- Another viral post named the alleged attackers with photos, which turned out to be images of Kashmiri civilians arrested in unrelated incidents in 2023, misused out of context.

Table 3 Summary of Fact-Check Findings

S. No.	Fact-Checking Platform	Type of False Claim Debunked	No. of Major Debunks	Nature of Misinformation
1.	AltNews	AI-generated visuals, misidentified victims	6	Disinformation, Malinformation
2.	BOOM Live	Deepfake images, fake tweets	4	Disinformation



3.	Factly	Old videos misused as current attack footage	3	Malinformation
4.	The Quint WebQoof	Fake political quotes	2	Disinformation
5.	Newschecker	Misattributed visuals of attackers	2	Misinformation

Key Insights:

- Over 60% of the viral misinformation in the first 72 hours involved visual manipulation (AI images or reused video clips).
- Political misinformation was used to target of both ruling and opposition leaders, highlighting the weaponisation of public sentiment for political gain.
- Communal angles were often falsely constructed using misattributed identities, contributing to rising tensions online.

This cross-validation confirmed that misinformation around the Pahalgam attack was not only widespread but strategically crafted, with many claims appearing within 2–4 hours of the initial news breaking. The speed, visual nature, and emotional appeal of this content contributed to rapid public spread before formal news verification could catch up.

6. Discussion

This study examined how misinformation and media framing affected public perception during the 2025 Pahalgam terror incident in India. We found a distinct pattern of carefully crafted narratives that suited political, emotional, and collective interest by examining viral social media posts, news articles, and fact-check reports. Within hours of the attack, social media sites acted as rapid accelerators of misinformation, recycled videos, and communal rumours. The most prevalent category was Disinformation (44%) which confirms [5] claim that intentionally harmful and misleading content during crises. These posts not only misled the public perception but also contributed to an emotionally charged and polarised digital environment.

Even if Mainstream media was more cautious than social media, biased framing was nonetheless there. While Some media promoted nationalism and victimisation. while others framed the incident as a threat to the community or failure of the government. Entman [15] explains that media framing significantly affects public sentiment and discourse during crises. Who points out that media framing chooses a particular aspect of reality to prioritize.

According to Habermas' (1989) theory, the public sphere should ideally support democratic and logical discourse. However, our findings accord with Papacharisi (2010), who argued that the digital public sphere is becoming more fragmented and emotional. In the case of Pahalgam, misinformation and selective framing exacerbated polarisation and anxiety among the



populace, disrupted indignation for deliberation. Although they played a crucial corrective role, fact-checking platforms were not as widely used as false content. The fact that misinformation correction is time-sensitive means that even after websites like AltNews and BOOM Live debunked several viral claims, the initial harm to public perception had already been done (Al-Zaman, 2021).

7. Conclusion and Implications

Social media sites, which are frequently emotive and unregulated. The analysis reveals that a large portion of the content was not accidental but purposefully created disinformation meant to provoke communal conflicts, spread fear, or push advanced political narratives. AI-generated images, recycled videos from previous conflicts, and fabricated quotations proliferated online. Simultaneously, the mainstream media's influence on public perception was questioned. News organizations presented the event through different angles, some of them focusing on victimization and nationalism, while others questioned the readiness of the government or quietly supported communal ideologies. These media frames actively impacted public opinion, emotional reactions in addition to merely informing the audiences.

The consequences were especially detrimental to the public sphere's democratic function. The information environment became fragmented and reactive rather than encouraging logical discussions. Informed discussion gave way to outrage, polarisation, and identity-based worries. Even though fact-checking platforms stepped in, their fixes frequently came too late to undo the initial impact of the viral content.

This study emphasizes how selective media framing and disinformation do not work alone during crises; rather, they interact, support one another, and influence public consciousness in powerful ways. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for journalism and policy-making but also for safeguarding democratic debate. Public media literacy, platform accountability, and media ethics require immediate attention as India continues to negotiate a complicated digital future.

7.1 Limitations and Future Recommendations

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and short sample size, which focuses on very few social media posts, news articles, and fact-checks. It does not include audience surveys or interviews, which could enable us to get deeper insight into public reception and interpretation. Additionally, the fast-paced nature of misinformation makes it difficult to capture the full scale of viral content in the present time. For future research, scholars should think about employing mixed-method approaches, including audience perception studies, automated content tracking, or network analysis to trace how false narratives spread. Comparative studies across multiple terror events or international cases could also enhance understanding of patterns in information disorder. Greater collaboration with media watchdogs and tech platforms is recommended to support real-time research and policy responses.

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