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INTERMEDIA AGENDA-SETTING EFFECTS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA (X) AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA (GEO NEWS AND DAWN) DURING THE 2025 PAHALGAM CONFLICT BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: The Pahalgam conflict (2025) between India and Pakistan in the Kashmir region received immense attention on both traditional and social media platforms. It is generally believed that social media influence the agenda of traditional media during such events. However, empirical evidence for this claim is required. In this study, the researchers apply the intermedia agenda-setting approach to examine whether the social media were able to set the agenda for traditional media or vice versa.

Methodology: A quantitative content analysis was employed to analyse the relevant news stories on one leading TV channel (Geo News), in one newspaper (Dawn), and on social media (X) from April 24 to May 21, 2025. For this purpose, 700 news stories and 3420 X posts were systematically selected. Cross-lagged correlations were performed to examine whether the X posts set the agenda of the news on Geo News and in the Dawn newspaper during the Pahalgam conflict between the two countries.

Findings: The findings reveal that both Geo TV and the Dawn newspaper preceded the debates on the Pahalgam conflict, and X followed the angles and points of discussion. Both the political and military elites mainly resorted to the traditional media to initiate discussions on the various dimensions of the conflict. These debates and discussions were then reported on X, suggesting that traditional media set the agenda for social media in Pakistan.

Contributions: The study makes three contributions. At the theoretical level, it shows that media influence varies with context: in moments of national security crisis, traditional media still command greater authority than their social counterparts. At the methodological level, it develops a comparative framework through which traditional and social media can be examined side by side in strategic communication research. At the practical level, the findings underline that traditional media remain consequential during geopolitical conflicts.

Keywords: Inter-media agenda setting, Kashmir, content analysis, X, traditional media, Pakistan.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

News media have long been regarded as central to shaping what the public considers important (McCombs, 2004). The rapid expansion of social media, however, has altered these agenda-setting dynamics. Traditional news organizations, in their effort to adjust to a transformed media environment, now draw many of their cues from social media platforms (Kim et al., 2024; El-Sherbiny et al., 2023). The dominance that legacy media once enjoyed in setting the agenda has thus come under pressure from the expanding reach of social platforms. A substantial body of scholarship has approached this shift through the lens of intermedia agenda setting, asking how media platforms shape one another's agendas (e.g., Boyle, 2001; Ceron et al., 2016; Dunn, 2005; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Abunahel & Sapna, 2026; Chen et al., 2024; Vonbun et al., 2016; Zhang, 2025). Notably, the bulk of this work has been carried out around elections, when political communication and social media activity reach their height. Election periods certainly merit attention, yet other consequential events — international conflicts and episodes of social disruption among them — have attracted far less scholarly scrutiny. Media dependency tends to increase substantially during such events, making it academically important to examine the relative agenda-setting power of different media platforms.

In this study, we examine the comparative agenda-setting influence of X and traditional media in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack in Kashmir in 2025, an incident that significantly escalated tensions between the two nuclear powers—India and Pakistan, bringing them close to the brink of war**.** The purpose of the study is to investigate the intermedia agenda-setting effect between social media and traditional media. The study focuses on the influence of these media platforms on each other rather than on conflict communication, which is not within the scope of the study. The present study adds a new perspective to the understanding of intermedia agenda-setting effects during times of conflict.

While studies on intermedia agenda-setting are mainly conducted on political issues, we aim to contribute to the literature by examining it in the context of a conflict and security-related issue. This is particularly important because, compared to contributors on social media, elite traditional media organizations are better positioned to access political and military policymakers for credible information. Moreover, political and military elites tend to exercise caution when sharing sensitive or strategic information and therefore often rely on well-established and reputable media organizations for dissemination. At the same time, X has emerged as a highly influential platform among politicians, journalists, activists, and military officials for sharing information and viewpoints. Pakistani traditional media outlets frequently report and amplify information originating from posts on X by these actors. Despite this growing prominence of social media, the findings of the present study indicate that traditional media remained dominant in setting the agenda for social media (X) during the Pahalgam attack.

With the growing importance of social media — approximately 70% of the world's population now uses social media — investigating the power of social media in conflict scenarios warrants particular attention. Beyond testing the often-asserted but insufficiently evidenced perception that social media inform traditional media, this investigation contributes to a more precise understanding of the media ecosystem as a conditional and dynamic system: one in which the direction of intermedia influence depends on issue type, information scarcity, and the credibility demands of the moment, rather than flowing permanently in one direction. There is thus a clear case for assessing the comparative agenda-setting strength of social and traditional media: findings of this kind can guide strategic and political actors, and those responsible for crisis communication, in choosing the most effective channel when conflict erupts. The article is organized as follows. It opens with a short account of the Pahalgam attack and the escalation it triggered between India and Pakistan, and then reviews agenda-setting

theory and the associated literature. The discussion turns next to research on intermedia agenda setting, with particular attention to the influence of social media platforms on the agendas of traditional media, before the methodology and findings of the study are reported.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. First, it provides a brief overview of the key events surrounding the Pahalgam attack that escalated tensions between India and Pakistan. This is followed by a comprehensive review of agenda-setting theory and relevant literature. The article then discusses existing research on intermedia agenda-setting, particularly focusing on how social media platforms influence the agenda of traditional media. Finally, the methodology and results of the study are presented.

1.1 Pahalgam Attack and Its Aftermath

On April 22, 2025, gunmen opened fire at Pahalgam, a tourist destination in Indian-held Kashmir, killing more than 24 people, most of them tourists. New Delhi held Pakistan responsible, and the Indian Prime Minister declared on his X account that "Those behind this heinous act will be brought to justice. They will not be spared." India went on to accuse Pakistan of supporting the attack and, in a far-reaching move, suspended the Indus Waters Treaty — the arrangement that had governed water distribution between the two countries since 1960 and had endured decades of hostile diplomatic relations (Seddon & Ewe, 2025; Reuters, 2025a). In Pakistan, the government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif rejected any involvement in the incident and demanded evidence and an impartial investigation. Tensions between the two archrivals nonetheless deepened, as both states recalled diplomatic staff and cancelled the visas issued to each other's nationals (Al Jazeera, 2025).

On May 8, 2025, India launched military strikes on Pakistan, hitting major cities including Islamabad, Lahore, and Bahawalpur; more than 30 people were killed and considerable damage was inflicted on infrastructure. Pakistan struck back on May 10, 2025, and in the aerial engagements that followed, more than six combat aircraft were reportedly downed by Pakistan. These developments brought the two nuclear-armed neighbours perilously close to all-out war, before intensive international mediation — led by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other states — brought military operations on both sides to a halt (Yadav, 2025; Reuters, 2025b).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 From Agenda Setting To Inter-Media Agenda Setting

The intellectual roots of agenda-setting research reach back to Walter Lippmann's seminal Public Opinion. His observation that the media place "pictures in our heads" has served both as the inspiration for, and an enduring metaphor of, the agenda-setting process (McCombs et al., 1997; McCombs, 2004). A second foundational influence was Bernard C. Cohen's The Press and Foreign Policy, which left a clear imprint on the later work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (Rogers et al., 1993, p. 8). Cohen's celebrated formulation — that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about" — remains a central premise of the field.

Agenda-setting has since grown into one of the most productive and closely studied research traditions in the field of media effects. At its core lies the transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda, examined at two levels of analysis. First-level agenda setting concerns the prominence of objects — political topics, public figures, candidates, organizations, and events — in media coverage. Second-level agenda setting, by contrast, concerns the salience of attributes: the ways in which the media frame and characterize those objects and issues (McCombs, 2004). Research at the second level captures the attitudinal and perceptual consequences of coverage, demonstrating that the media shape

not only what audiences think about but also how they think about it (McCombs, 2004). The two levels combine to give a clearer picture of how media can garner support for some issues while sideling others.

The foundational empirical work pertaining to Agenda setting effects was conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in which it was hypothesized that media played a key role in setting the agenda for the 1968 U.S Presidential election campaign. The study took place in Chapel Hill and had followed a Gallup-style survey method where, for two weeks, 100 participants were interviewed. The questions centered around the key issues that participants had found to be salient. The objective was to examine the relationship between media and the perceived issues among the populace. Furthermore, they also employed a content analysis method to study newspapers as well as nightly newscasts. From the interview-based study, 15 issue categories were found. A broader analysis between media and public agenda revealed a high correlation for issues present in the media agenda. These research endeavors led to emergence of methodological approaches for examining agenda setting effects which were later adopted by scholars.In later work examining the evolution of agenda-setting theory, McCombs (2004) introduced the concept of agenda building, which addresses the critical question of who sets the media agenda. Earlier research by Cobb and Elder (1971) had also examined how public policy issues emerge and which actors play central roles in shaping the policy agenda. Their agenda-building perspective suggests that national-level issues evolve through a process in which concerns move from individual and group interests to broader collective agendas. They went on to contend that political parties and the media serve as principal catalysts, elevating issues from matters of individual concern to institutional and systemic agendas. Building on this line of inquiry, scholars began to examine the processes through which media organizations themselves influence one another's agendas. This line of research led to the development of intermedia agenda-setting, which explores how different media platforms influence and shape each other's news agendas. Agenda-setting research focuses on how the media set the public agenda on key issues through media coverage (Weaver & Elliott, 1985). However, a debate soon emerged: if the media set the public agenda, then who sets the media agenda? A new domain of research was introduced within traditional agenda-setting theory to expand its scope and address this question. This area of research is termed intermedia agenda setting — the agenda-setting power of different media platforms over one another. Scholars (Dearing et al., 1996; Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991) identified three reasons why intermedia agenda setting takes place: first, news organizations tend to learn the importance and priority of an issue from other news outlets; second, it upholds news norms within the journalistic community; and third, it reflects news competition in media markets. Of these explanations, we find the competition-driven account the most persuasive in contemporary media environments, where the economics of attention compel outlets to monitor and mirror one another; the norm-based explanation, by contrast, appears increasingly strained in a fragmented digital ecosystem where a shared journalistic community can no longer be assumed. Initial studies highlighted that elite newspapers tended to influence the agendas of local newspapers; subsequently, television news was found to influence newspapers. With the arrival of social media, early studies found that traditional media influenced social media; however, later studies found that social media influence traditional media. The majority of these studies were conducted in the domain of political communication, where the influence of social media is evident, as political parties and political actors make heavy use of social media platforms, rather than traditional media tools, to propagate their agendas.

2.2 Intermedia Agenda Setting

Intermedia agenda-setting explains how one media platform can act as a source of influence on the agenda of another media platform. Accordingly, scholars have examined the intermedia

agenda-setting hypothesis, which posits that the agenda of one media outlet can shape or influence the agenda of another (Lee et al., 2005). Early research on intermedia agenda-setting primarily focused on the relationship between news wire services and newspapers. One of the earliest studies was conducted by White (1950), who examined the news selection behaviour of a Midwestern wire editor, commonly referred to as *Mr. Gates*. The study showed how editors' decisions shaped which news content was selected and circulated. Hirsch (1977) later observed that editors' patterns of news adoption often mirrored those of the wire services without their being aware of it, pointing to a heavy dependence on such sources. In a comparable vein, Gold and Simmons (1965) set the coverage of 24 Iowa daily newspapers against Associated Press (AP) feeds and found little difference between wire-supplied content and what the papers printed, together with a strong correlation in the kinds of stories carried across newspapers. Taken together, these early investigations documented the movement of agendas between media sources and laid the groundwork for later research on intermedia agenda-setting processes.

Scholarship pertaining to studying inter-media agenda setting effects between newspapers and broadcast media revealed that smaller papers as well as broadcast follow the agenda coverage of elite newspapers. The pattern for U.S papers was similar where New York Times revealed to be influential in determining agenda of other outlets (Gilberg et al., 1980). Same was observed in the media coverage of drug issue, where New York Times's agenda was influencing agendas of Los Angles Times and Washington Post (Danielian & Reese, 1989). Furthermore, New York Time's coverage of drug issue also led to boost in the issue's coverage by broadcast media (Danielian & Reese, 1989; Wang, 2015; Baumann et al., 2017).

Moreover, numerous studies on intermedia agenda-setting have largely remained within the domain of politics, primarily examining how news media influence political power dynamics. A smaller number of studies have also explored the role of political advertising in shaping intermedia agenda-setting processes. For instance, during the 1990 Texas gubernatorial election, scholars found that the agenda of election coverage in newspapers and television news programs was significantly influenced by political advertising. Roberts and McCombs (1994) demonstrated that the agenda promoted through political advertising affected the coverage priorities of both newspapers and television news programs. Similarly, Lopez-Escobar et al. (1998) conducted a study on intermedia agenda-setting during a Spanish election and found that the coverage agendas of television and newspapers were also influenced by political advertising. The study reproduced the pattern reported by Roberts and McCombs (1994), pointing to comparable intermedia agenda-setting effects across distinct political contexts. On this evidence, political advertising can meaningfully shape the news agendas of traditional media in more than one country, the United States and Spain among them.

With the arrival of social networking sites, scholars began to study the intermedia agenda-setting influence between traditional and social media. Some of these studies have continued to examine which media platform is the influencer and which is being influenced, focusing exclusively on comparisons between the traditional media and the social media (Chen et al., 2024; Lim, 2006; Messner & DiStaso, 2008).

2.3 Agenda Setting Influence Between Traditional and Social Media

Previous studies have identified intermedia agenda-setting effects between national and local news media, concluding that elite national news organizations often set the agenda for other media outlets (Danielian & Reese, 1989). With the emergence of social networking sites in the early 21st century, a new line of intermedia agenda-setting research began to develop. Scholars started examining the agenda-setting relationships among news organizations in their online formats (e.g., Lim, 2006), the interaction between traditional media (offline) and social media platforms (e.g., Luo, 2014), and the agenda-setting influence of news organizations on blogs

(Boumans et al., 2018; Sweetser et al., 2008; Wallsten, 2007). As social media platforms gained widespread popularity, scholarly interest in this area intensified. Media researchers increasingly sought to examine whether the agenda-setting power had shifted from traditional media to social media, or whether traditional media still retained its dominant role in shaping public and media agendas.

Benkler (2006) found that the cost of content creation and distribution on social networking sites is lower than that of traditional media, consequently allowing a bottom-up mode of communication to flourish. Similarly, another study suggested that social networking sites provide free access to the creation, distribution, and consumption of information, which is eroding the elite-based tradition of established news organizations (Woodly, 2007). With its rapid rise and growing omnipresence, several studies found that the micro-blogging platform X gave momentum to the dissemination of information, the formation of ideas, and the sharing of personal views (Clavio & Kian, 2010). For instance, Newman (2009) found that user-generated content such as images and videos on X frequently made their way onto television news and, likewise, onto the front pages of newspapers. Consequently, the boundaries of modern journalism have been redefined by a new form of opinionated micro-blogging (i.e., X). A study conducted on the 2010 Netherlands national elections found that politicians who frequently used social networking sites such as X and YouTube received comparatively more votes than those who relied on traditional media (Effing et al., 2011). The scholars found that the dominant agenda-setting power of traditional media is being challenged, and in many instances replaced, by social media (Ceron et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2024).

Newman et al. (2012, p. 6) pointed out that the traditional mainstream media, also described as the Fourth Estate, are enhancing their role in the production and distribution of news by using social media. They argued that a rising "Fifth Estate" is forming a collaboration with traditional media "as each build on and responds to the other in this new news ecology". Meanwhile, Meraz (2011) found that the dominance of traditional elite media in influencing the interpretation of issues within the networked political environment is diminishing.

Scholars have also documented the growing influence of digital platforms and user-generated content in shaping the agendas of traditional media. For instance, Messner and Garrison (2011) found that blogs were frequently used as sources by traditional media outlets, indicating that blogs could influence the news agendas of mainstream media organizations. Vonbun et al. (2016) likewise found that online news platforms have gained considerable weight in shaping the coverage agendas of traditional news media. In Austria's multimedia news environment, they suggest, the long-standing hierarchy in which print media acted as the dominant agenda setter is gradually giving way, with online outlets assuming a more prominent role. In a different setting, Wu et al. (2013) traced the intermedia influence of blogs on mainstream media — television and newspapers alike — after the 2011 high-speed train accident in China, and showed that blogs did much to define the issue agendas that traditional outlets subsequently covered. Austrian evidence similarly indicates that online news media shaped the issue agendas of tabloid newspapers, underscoring the expanding role of digital media in contemporary news ecosystems (Vonbun et al., 2016). Groshek and Clough Groshek (2013), examining issue prominence across CNN, The New York Times, Facebook, and Twitter, likewise documented marked differences in issue salience from one platform to another.

While topics such as politics, crime, business, and culture received greater prominence in the coverage of CNN, The New York Times, and Facebook, Twitter tended to emphasize sports and cultural oddities, reflecting the distinct content dynamics and audience engagement patterns of different media platforms.

Valenzuela et al. (2017), while examining the agenda-setting influence between X and television channels on disaster news, found that X showed greater agenda-setting power over

television channels than the reverse pattern. Similarly, Harder et al. (2017) found that social media platforms greatly affect media outlets that publish less frequently, and that media actors using X have considerably more agenda-setting power than others. Kaigwa (2017) suggested that journalists now consider X part of their beat and frequently use it for news surveillance. Likewise, Chu and Fletcher (2014) acknowledge that social media actors propel stories that set the agenda for mainstream media. Vargo and Guo (2016) found that traditional media and social media follow each other in making reporting decisions. However, the new media landscape poses several challenges to agenda-setting theory, particularly with respect to the direction of influence. Intermedia agenda-setting research in the Western context has presented broad evidence that elite newspapers remain a major force in setting the agendas of other newspapers and broadcast media. With the arrival of the internet, scholars began to study the intermedia agenda-setting effects between traditional and online/social media/blogs (Lim, 2006; Luo, 2014; Sweetser et al., 2008; Wallsten, 2007). Initial studies indicated that traditional media was influencing social media and blogs (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Vargo, 2010). However, later studies revealed that this influence became bidirectional, with both media types influencing each other (Conway et al., 2015; Groshek & Clough Groshek, 2013; Guo & Vargo, 2015; Messner & Garrison, 2011; Newman et al., 2012; Rogstad, 2016). Vonbun et al. (2016) found that online news media platforms have become more influential in setting the coverage agendas of traditional news media. Their findings indicate that the agenda-setting function is gradually reversing. The scholars found that social media platforms greatly affect media outlets that publish less frequently, and that X has considerably more agenda-setting power than others (Abunahel & Sapna, 2026; Harder et al., 2017). Kermani et al. (2025) found that political environments also impact intermedia agenda-setting, where an environment of repression decouples the agendas of traditional and social media.

Research spanning four decades has further expanded the scope of these two levels of agenda-setting, from the public agenda to the factors shaping the media agenda (Golan, 2006). “The influence that mass media agendas have on each other” is referred to as intermedia agenda-setting (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998, p. 225). In this sense, intermedia agenda-setting theory posits the likely transfer of salience from one platform to another. From the various explanations of agenda-setting theory, we conclude that the key independent variable in agenda-setting research is media salience (Kiousis, 2004). The media salience variable can be examined through three main elements proposed by Kiousis (2004): attention, prominence, and valence. Attention is generally “gauged by the sheer volume of stories or space dedicated to topics” in the media (Kiousis, 2004, p. 74); Prominence means that the importance of issues is communicated through “the positioning of a story within a media text” (Kiousis, 2004, p. 74). The valence indicates “effective elements of news” (Kiousis, 2004, p. 75). Kiousis (2004, p.74) has advocated for the attention approach as it “has been valuable for measuring salience” for inter-media agenda setting research at different levels and through different platforms.

This convergence of “technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organizational forms” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 4) has rendered the media more fluid, thus forming the contemporary news media landscape. Although intermedia agenda-setting revolves around transferring salience, much like agenda-setting theory, it differs from it in several ways. Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2008) identified three main differences between traditional agenda-setting theory and intermedia agenda-setting theory: (1) agenda-setting theory deals with “individuals” and “personal priorities,” while intermedia agenda-setting theory deals with “institutions/organizations”; (2) when the focus of the media is on setting the public agenda for individuals, it is called “attitudinal,” but when salience is transferred between mediums, it becomes a “behavioral process”; and (3) it can therefore be safely assumed that agenda-setting is usually “an unconscious process”, whereas intermedia agenda-setting is “a deliberate action”.

Moreover, for current research on intermedia agenda-setting effects between social media and mainstream traditional media, agenda-setting theory appears applicable and appropriate for identifying issue agendas. As the researchers are investigating the salience of issue agendas, agenda-setting theory is highly relevant to this study because Kiousis (2004) denotes that measuring salience is valuable for intermedia agenda-setting research at different levels and through different media platforms. Intermedia agenda-setting effects revolve around the transfer of salience of issues and agendas across different media platforms. Similarly, the core assumption of agenda-setting theory illustrates the transmission of salience, or an agenda, from one group to another. Agenda-setting theory is thus helpful in identifying the key issues regarding agendas across the selected media platforms.

Nevertheless, with the arrival of social media and other online platforms, intermedia agenda-setting dynamics have notably changed (Harder et al., 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2017). Social media outlets such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter now allow people to consume, produce, and share content, which has transformed the media environment into a more participatory field, where both non-elite and elite outlets can be influenced by publicly driven content and the subsequent discussions taking place on online platforms (Zhang et al., 2022).

In the Asian context, most studies have primarily focused on agenda-setting effects among media, political actors, and the public, while no study has examined intermedia agenda-setting effects between social media and traditional media during periods of conflict. Moreover, the findings of these studies indicate varying strengths and directions of influence among different media platforms (Abunahel & Sapna, 2026; Chen et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2021, 2024; Siraj & Shahzad, 2020; Lee et al., 2005; Luo, 2014; Wang, 2015; Baumann et al., 2017). While the researchers acknowledge the evidence for social media's growing agenda-setting influence in electoral and party-political contexts, but still there is need to investigate the power of media before generalizing this finding into a settled assumption that social media now lead traditional media across all domains. The direction of intermedia influence documented in political communication may well be an artefact of that domain — political actors deliberately bypass journalistic gatekeepers — rather than a property of the media ecosystem as a whole. There is therefore a further need to investigate whether the agenda-setting power of social media extends across all issues. This reasoning directly informs our hypotheses: if social media's influence is domain-contingent, then conflict scenarios — where information is scarce, verification is difficult, and institutional sources regain salience — constitute a critical test case in which the direction of intermedia influence may plausibly reverse. The present study therefore investigates the agenda-setting power of social media over traditional media in conflict-like scenarios; given the immense societal importance of such situations, the study aims to provide empirical evidence on the power of media during times of conflict. Accordingly, the study proposes the following two hypotheses:

H1- There is a likelihood of agenda-setting influence of (a) X coverage at Time 1 on Geo News coverage at Time 2, (b) X coverage at Time 2 on Geo News coverage at Time 3, and (c) X coverage at Time 3 on Geo News coverage at Time 4.
H2- There is a likelihood of agenda-setting influence of (a) X coverage at Time 1 on Dawn coverage at Time 2, (b) X coverage at Time 2 on Dawn coverage at Time 3, and (c) X coverage at Time 3 on Dawn coverage at Time 4.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Studies examining intermedia agenda-setting effects among media platforms have predominantly employed the content analysis method (Chu & Fletcher, 2014; Rogstad, 2016; Su & Borah, 2019). Data for the content analysis were drawn from several sources. News

articles from Dawn were obtained through the LexisNexis database; Geo News television content was compiled manually from the channel's archived broadcasts; and material from X was collected using TrackMyHashtag and TweetDeck.

The media platforms were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) well suited to intermedia agenda-setting research because it permits the deliberate selection of outlets with recognized influence over public discourse. The sample accordingly comprised Dawn, the national English-language newspaper; Geo News, a widely watched national television channel; and the social media platform X. For X, the sampling frame covered content generated under two purposively chosen hashtags tied directly to the Pahalgam attack crisis — #PahalgamAttack and #AllEyesOnPahalgam — which the TrackMyHashtag platform identified as among the most heavily used hashtags originating from Pakistan during the crisis. For Dawn, the frame consisted of the front page, back page, and national pages published on the selected dates within the specified period; for Geo News, it consisted of the 9:00 p.m. prime-time bulletin aired on those dates. For X, every tweet related to the Pahalgam attack that was retweeted fifty times or more under the selected hashtags was retrieved. Subsequently, only tweets in English and Urdu were retained for analysis, while tweets containing images or graphics were excluded from the dataset. For Dawn and Geo News, all news stories related to the Pahalgam attack published or broadcast within the selected time period were retrieved and included in the content analysis.

Systematic sampling was employed, whereby every second item was selected for analysis. After retrieving all relevant news stories and posts related to the Pahalgam attack, every second tweet and news item was included in the final sample. The total number of tweets retrieved from the selected hashtags was 3420, while the number of news stories retrieved from Dawn newspaper was 170 and from Geo News was 530. All X posts and news stories were coded for the purpose of content analysis. This study identified ten topics for the Pahalgam attack crisis to measure intermedia agenda-setting effects on the issue agendas of X, Geo News, and Dawn newspaper. The topics included jingoism, calling for restraint, revenge, mediation, threats of nuclear war, unity, losses, incident, blame game, and glorification. To examine the intermedia agenda-setting effects of X, the newspaper, and the TV channel during the 2025 Pahalgam attack period, posts and stories from the selected media were collected from April 24, 2025, the day of the attack, to May 21, 2025, with a five-day time lag.

When examining agenda-setting effects, the time frame is considered one of the most critical factors (Wanta & Hu, 1994). In the present study, cross-lagged correlation analysis is employed to investigate intermedia agenda-setting influence. Previous studies on intermedia agenda-setting have frequently used cross-correlation methods or cross-lagged panel correlation techniques (Dunn, 2005; Sweetser et al., 2008; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2008). The cross lagged correlation model is a statistical method used to measure how two variables influence each other over a period of time. The variables are measured at different points in time; it requires at least two point in time (T1 and T2) at which to perform the measurement. Furthermore, it require a minimal measurement error to provide accurate results. Assume that X and Y are two variables measured at two time points, Time 1 and Time 2, separated by an adequate time lag. It is proposed that variable X at Time 1 (X1) exerts an effect on variable Y at Time 2 (Y2) and, conversely, that variable Y at Time 1 (Y1) affects variable X at Time 2 (X2). This design yields three sets of correlations, each comprising two pairs (see Figure 3.1). As shown in the figure, the synchronous correlations are those between variables X and Y measured at the same time point (PX1Y1 and PX2Y2). The correlation between the same variables at two different times (PX1X2 and PY1Y2) is called the autocorrelation. Conversely, the cross-lagged correlation is the correlation between variable X and variable Y at different times (PX1Y2 and PY1X2) (Shadish et al., 2002). Synchronous correlations and

autocorrelations are used to determine the Rozelle–Campbell baseline value, using the Rozelle–Campbell baseline formula [(PX1Y1 + PX2Y2)/2]{[(PX1X2)2 + (PY1Y2)2]/2}.

The logic of cross-lagged correlation analysis is as follows. If the hypothesis posits that variable X exerts an effect on variable Y, two conditions must be satisfied. First, the correlation between X (the presumed cause) at Time 1 and Y (the presumed effect) at Time 2 (PX1Y2) must exceed the reverse cross-lagged correlation between Y at Time 1 and X at Time 2 (PY1X2). Second, PX1Y2 must also exceed the Rozelle–Campbell baseline (RCB), while PY1X2 falls below it. When both conditions hold (PX1Y2 > PY1X2 and PX1Y2 > RCB), it can be concluded that X at Time 1 influenced Y at Time 2, with no evidence of influence in the reverse direction (Campbell & Kenny, 1999; Ragas & Kiousis, 2010; Rosenthal, 2015).

Most previous studies examining intermedia agenda-setting effects have relied on fixed time lags and have not adequately examined the actual temporal dynamics of agenda transfer between media platforms. However, given the competitive nature of the news media environment, it is unrealistic to assume that editors would wait for extended periods before covering an issue that has already received significant attention in another medium. As noted in the literature, it would be naïve to assume that editors would wait for weeks before picking up an issue that received considerable attention in another medium. Consequently, researchers have argued that shorter time lags are more appropriate for studying intermedia agenda-setting processes. (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). With social media, the exchange of information and ideas is more immediate and frequent. As the current study investigates the intermedia agenda-setting effects among X, broadcast media, and newspapers, the researcher adopted a short time lag of five days, considering preliminary analysis and previous research. The time span consists of four equal parts of five days each, with a one-day time lag between all time spans. During the post-Pahalgam attack period, the time spans for X and Geo News TV are as follows: the Time 1 period from April 24 – April 30, the Time 2 period from May 01 – May 07, the Time 3 period from May 08 – May 14, and the Time 4 period from May 15 – May 21, 2025. A similar approach was adopted for the Dawn newspaper during the Pahalgam attack coverage, and the time spans are as follows: the Time 1 period from April 24 – April 30, the Time 2 period from May 01 – May 07, the Time 3 period from May 08 – May 14, and the Time 4 period from May 15 – May 21, 2025. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using **10%** of the collected data. The Cohen's Kappa coefficient was above 0.89, indicating a high level of agreement between coders and demonstrating strong reliability.

4.0 ANALYSIS

H1- There is a likelihood of agenda-setting influence of (a) X coverage at Time 1 on Geo News coverage at Time 2, (b) X coverage at Time 2 on Geo News coverage at Time 3, and (c) X coverage at Time 3 on Geo News coverage at Time 4.

Figure 1 summarizes the results of the cross-lagged correlations between the issue agendas of X and Geo News during the Pahalgam attack in 2025. A negative correlation of -.145 was found between the agendas on X at Time 1 and those on Geo News at Time 2. In contrast, the reverse cross-lagged correlation showed a positive correlation of .404 between the Geo News agendas at Time 1 and the X agendas at Time 2. For intermedia agenda-setting effects of X on Geo News to be supported, the cross-lagged correlation value of X at Time 1 should be greater than the reverse correlation between Geo News at Time 1 and X at Time 2, and should also exceed the value of the Rozelle–Campbell baseline. In this instance, the X correlation value is negative, indicating that the X issue agenda during this time period did not influence the coverage of Geo News. Therefore, the hypothesis is not supported.

-.103

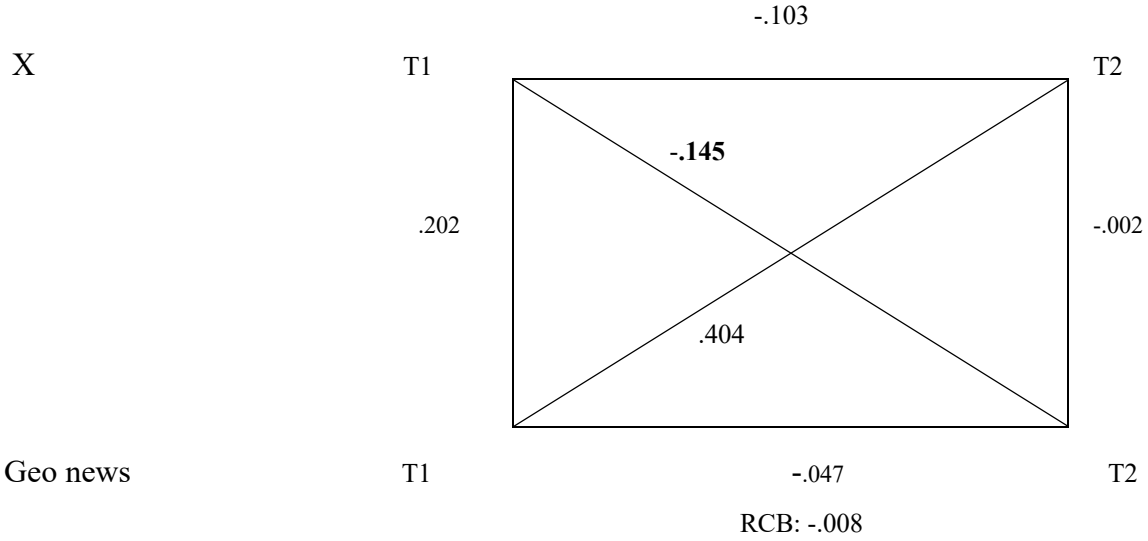

Figure 1: Cross-lagged panel for correlations at Time 1 and Time 2 (X and Geo)

Figure 2 presents the cross-lagged comparison of intermedia agenda-setting influence between the issue agendas of X and Geo News during the Pahalgam attack in Pakistan. The panel results show a correlation of 0.222 between the agendas on X at Time 2 and the agendas of Geo News at Time 3. In contrast, the reverse cross-lagged correlation reveals a stronger and statistically significant correlation of 0.436* between the Geo News agendas at Time 2 and the X agendas at Time 3. For intermedia agenda-setting effects of X on Geo News to hold, the cross-lagged correlation between X at Time 2 and Geo News at Time 3 must exceed both the reverse correlation (Geo News at Time 2 with X at Time 3) and the Rozelle–Campbell baseline value. The Rozelle–Campbell Baseline value is −0.031, which is lower than both correlation values. Since the correlation value of X during this time span is lower than the reversed cross-lagged correlation, this indicates no influence of X agendas on the coverage of Geo News. The hypothesis is therefore not supported in this case.

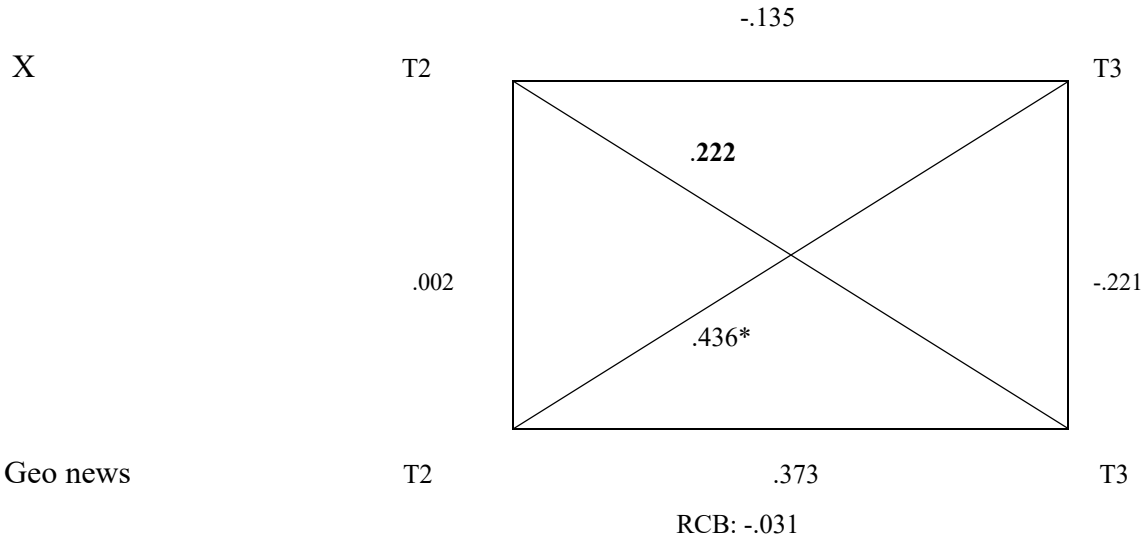

Figure 2: Cross-lagged panel for correlations at Time 2 and Time 3 (X and Geo)

Figure 3 summarizes the results of the cross-lagged correlations between the issue agendas of X and Geo News during the Pahalgam attack. A negative correlation of −0.275 was found between the agendas on X at Time 3 and the agendas covered by Geo News at Time 4. In

contrast, the reverse cross-lagged correlation reveals a strong and statistically significant correlation of 0.519** between the Geo News agendas at Time 3 and the X agendas at Time 4. The Rozelle–Campbell Baseline value is −0.001. Support for an intermedia agenda-setting effect of X on Geo News during this period would require the cross-lagged correlation between the X agenda at Time 3 and the Geo News agenda at Time 4 to exceed both the reverse cross-lagged correlation (Geo News at Time 3 predicting X at Time 4) and the Rozelle–Campbell baseline correlation.

As the X cross-lagged correlation value is negative, indicating no influence of X agendas on Geo News during this time span, the hypothesis is therefore not supported.

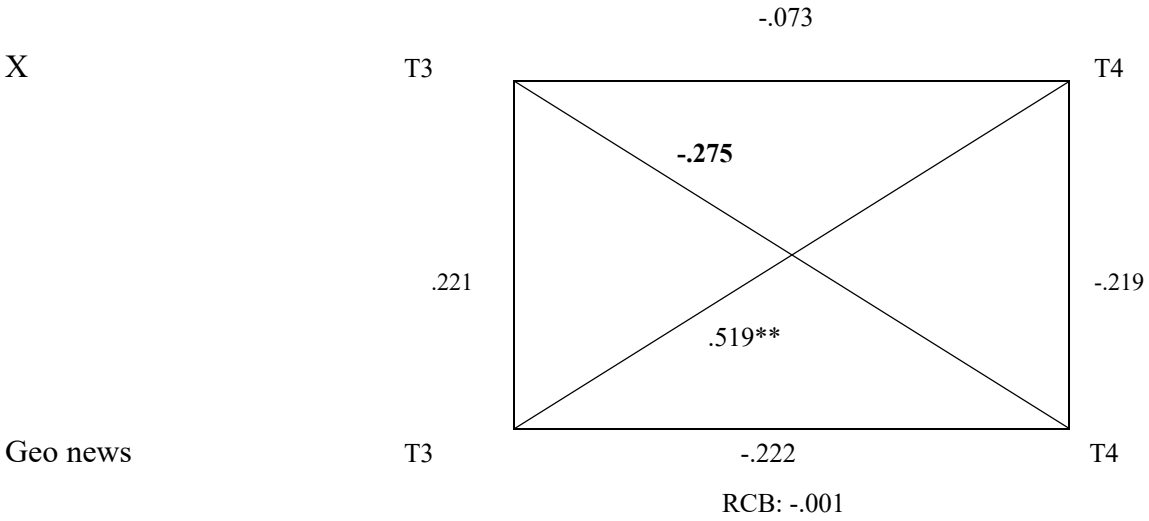

Figure 3: Cross-lagged panel for correlation at Time 3 and Time 4 (X and Geo)

The findings indicate that the social media platform X did not influence the agenda of Geo News during the conflict. Interestingly, the results show that the traditional media platform Geo News coverage influenced the agenda of X during the selected time period. This pattern suggests that while social media may exert agenda-setting influence in political contexts, during strategic or conflict-related situations traditional media may still retain a dominant role in shaping the agenda of social media platforms.

H2- There is a likelihood of agenda-setting influence of (a) X coverage at Time 1 on Dawn coverage at Time 2, (b) X coverage at Time 2 on Dawn coverage at Time 3, and (c) X coverage at Time 3 on Dawn coverage at Time 4.

Figure 4 summarizes the results of the cross-lagged correlations between the issue agendas of X and Dawn at Time 1 and Time 2 during the post-Pahalgam attack period. The results indicate a cross-lagged correlation of −0.034 between the issue agendas posted on X at Time 1 and those covered by Dawn at Time 2. In contrast, the reverse cross-lagged correlation shows a correlation of 0.130 between the Dawn coverage of post-Pahalgam issue agendas at Time 1 and the issue agendas posted on X at Time 2. These results indicate that the X correlation value was negative during this time frame, suggesting no influence of X coverage on Dawn newspaper. Consequently, the hypothesis is not supported.

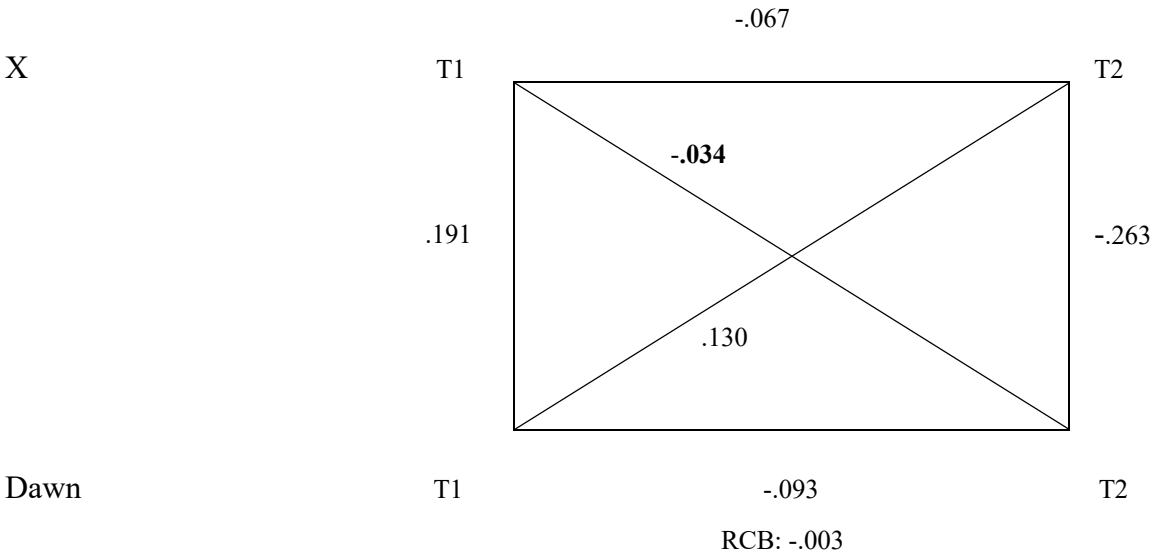

Figure 4: Cross-lagged panel for correlation at Time 1 and Time 2 (X and Dawn)

Figure 5 presents the cross-lagged correlation results of the issue agendas between X and the Dawn newspaper during the Pahalgam attack period. The cross-lagged correlation analysis indicates a negative correlation (−0.085) between the issue agendas posted on X at Time 2 and the Dawn coverage of issue agendas at Time 3, suggesting that X did not influence the coverage of Dawn during this period. The Rozelle–Campbell Baseline value is −0.054, which further indicates that the hypothesis is not supported. However, the reverse cross-lagged correlation shows a positive correlation of 0.308 between the Dawn coverage of the Pahalgam issue at Time 2 and the X posts at Time 3. The results indicate that X coverage did not influence Dawn coverage, and consequently, the hypothesis is not supported.

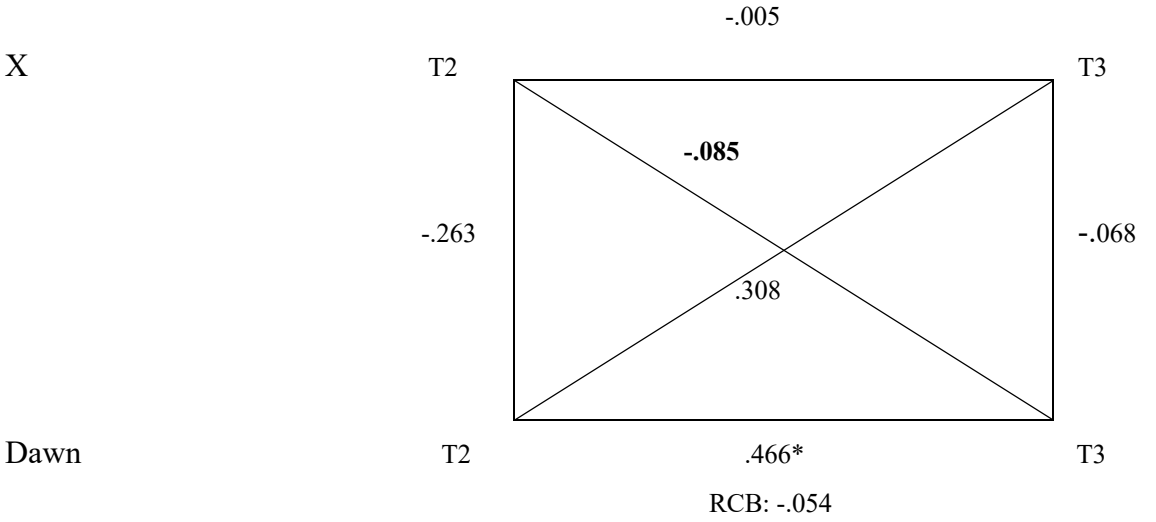

Figure 5: Cross-lagged panel for correlation at Time 2 and Time 3 (X and Dawn)

Figure 6 presents the cross-lagged correlation results of the issue agendas between X and the Dawn newspaper during the Pahalgam attack period. The cross-lagged correlation analysis indicates a negative correlation (−0.063) between the issue agendas posted on X at Time 3 and the Dawn coverage of issue agendas at Time 4, suggesting that X did not influence the coverage of Dawn during this period. The Rozelle–Campbell Baseline value is 0.001, which further indicates that the hypothesis is not supported. However, the reverse cross-lagged correlation

shows a correlation of 0.005 between the Dawn coverage of the Pahalgam issue at Time 3 and the X posts at Time 4. The negative correlation value of X indicates no intermedia agenda-setting influence on Dawn's coverage during this time frame. The hypothesis is therefore not supported during this time span.

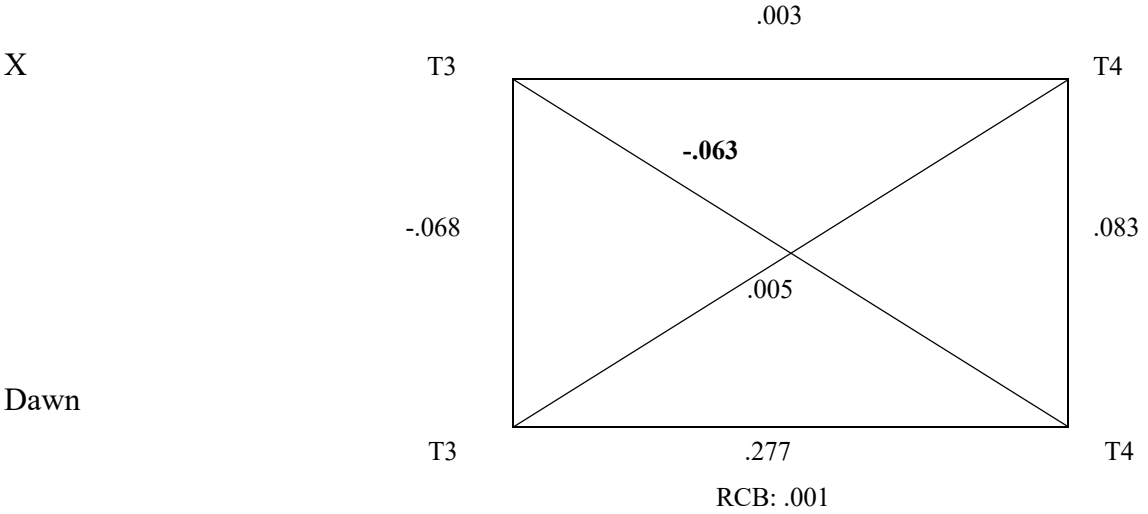

Figure 6: Cross-lagged panel for correlation at Time 3 and Time 4 (X and Dawn)

5.0 DISCUSSION

This study examined the intermedia agenda-setting effects between social media (X) and traditional media (newspaper and television) during the Pahalgam attack crisis in Pakistan, focusing on the first level of agenda-setting. The findings challenge the assumption in prior literature that the agenda-setting function of traditional media is influenced by social media agendas. While much of the literature on intermedia agenda-setting has been situated within the political-electoral context, this study presents a novel approach to analysing intermedia agenda-setting effects during conflicts.

Based on existing literature, it was hypothesized that a unidirectional intermedia agenda-setting relationship would exist between social media and traditional media in the post-Pahalgam attack period (Chen et al., 2024). However, the cross-lagged correlation analysis revealed that five out of the six panels demonstrated an intermedia agenda-setting influence of traditional media (newspaper and TV channel) on social media (X). In the remaining panel, the findings indicated a bidirectional influence between X and the television channel. These findings contrast with much of the recent scholarship, which has primarily examined political and electoral contexts, where scholars have found that social media tends to influence the agenda of traditional media (Abunahel & Sapna, 2026; Chen et al., 2024; Harder et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2012; Rogstad, 2016; Wang, 2015; Zhang, 2025; Baumann et al., 2017).

However, the findings of the study indicate that during the Pahalgam attack, social media did not influence the agenda of traditional media; rather, traditional media influenced the agenda of social media. Specifically, the results show that the issue agendas presented by X did not influence the coverage of Geo News and Dawn. Overall, the results suggest that social media was not successful in setting the agenda for traditional media in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack. These findings open an important debate, suggesting that the agenda-setting power of media may depend more on the nature of the issue than on the type of media platform itself. The results indicate that intermedia agenda-setting effects are shaped by the characteristics of the issue as well as by how agenda builders or elites strategically use different media platforms. In the context of strategic or conflict-related issues, elites may prefer

established traditional media outlets to disseminate their messages in order to avoid misinterpretation or unnecessary escalation of tensions. The findings further imply that the agenda-setting influence of social media may be more prominent in political contexts, particularly during elections or political campaigns, when political actors and parties actively utilize social media platforms. In such circumstances, social media often generates a large volume of information, narratives, and breaking developments that may subsequently influence traditional media coverage. With the growing importance of social media — approximately 70% of the world's population now uses social media — investigating the power of social media in conflict scenarios warrants particular attention. Beyond testing the often-asserted but insufficiently evidenced perception that social media inform traditional media, this investigation contributes to a more precise understanding of the media ecosystem as a conditional and dynamic system: one in which the direction of intermedia influence depends on issue type, information scarcity, and the credibility demands of the moment, rather than flowing permanently in one directioThese results open a consequential line of debate: the agenda-setting power of a medium may rest less on the type of platform than on the character of the issue at stake. The findings indicate that intermedia agenda-setting effects are conditioned both by issue characteristics and by the strategic choices of agenda builders and elites in deploying different platforms. Where strategic or conflict-related issues are concerned, elites may turn to established traditional outlets to carry their messages, minimizing the risk of misinterpretation or unintended escalation. By implication, the agenda-setting weight of social media is likely to be greatest in political settings — elections and campaigns above all — when political actors and parties are most active on these platforms and generate a continuous stream of information, narratives, and breaking developments that traditional media may then take up. Given that roughly 70% of the world’s population now uses social media, the power of these platforms in conflict scenarios deserves close examination. Rather than simply testing the frequently asserted but thinly evidenced claim that social media set the agenda for traditional media, the study advances a more precise picture of the media ecosystem as conditional and dynamic — one in which the direction of intermedia influence turns on issue type, the scarcity of information, and the credibility demands of the moment, rather than running permanently in one direction.There is a growing need to examine the relative agenda-setting power of media platforms (social media and traditional media), as such evidence can help strategic and political actors, as well as crisis communicators, employ the appropriate medium effectively in conflict situations.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates the limits of the powers of social media to lead the traditional media. On critical issues such as war communication, traditional media are still favored by the policy elites, as these outlets preserve official confidentiality. Because the authorities hold the most important information about the conduct of the war at such times, other channels of information, including social media, rely on traditional media for information. The military and political elites are thus able to influence even the social media platforms through their control over the traditional platforms. In this study, the traditional media consistently led the issue agendas, with X largely following the coverage. The findings therefore extend intermedia agenda-setting theory beyond the electoral and political contexts in which it has predominantly been tested, and underscore that the direction of intermedia influence is contingent on the nature of the issue at stake.

7.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited in the following ways. Firstly, it examined only two traditional media platforms such as print outlet (an English-language daily newspaper) and broadcast outlet. Therefore, the conclusions drawn regarding intermedia agenda-setting effects between mainstream media and social media cannot be generalized to other media organizations. Future research should consider including a broader range of mainstream media outlets, such as Urdu-language newspapers, the web editions of print media, and multiple national television channels. Secondly, this study focused on only one social media platform (Twitter/X).

Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the context of this platform and cannot be generalized to other platforms. Future studies should expand the scope by examining additional social media platforms, such as blogs, Facebook, Instagram, and other emerging digital communication channels. Another limitation relates to the demographic characteristics of the Twitter sample, which could not be controlled. As a result, there is a possibility that the sample may be somewhat biased due to the overrepresentation of users with particular perspectives or affiliations related to the stakeholders examined in the study.

A final limitation concerns method: the study is exclusively quantitative, resting on content analysis alone. Complementing this design with qualitative approaches would allow a richer account of the underlying processes through which agendas take shape.

Future research may benefit from employing surveys, in-depth interviews, or expert consultations with editors, journalists, and social media practitioners to better understand editorial decision-making and the mechanisms through which both traditional and social media actors influence agenda-setting processes.

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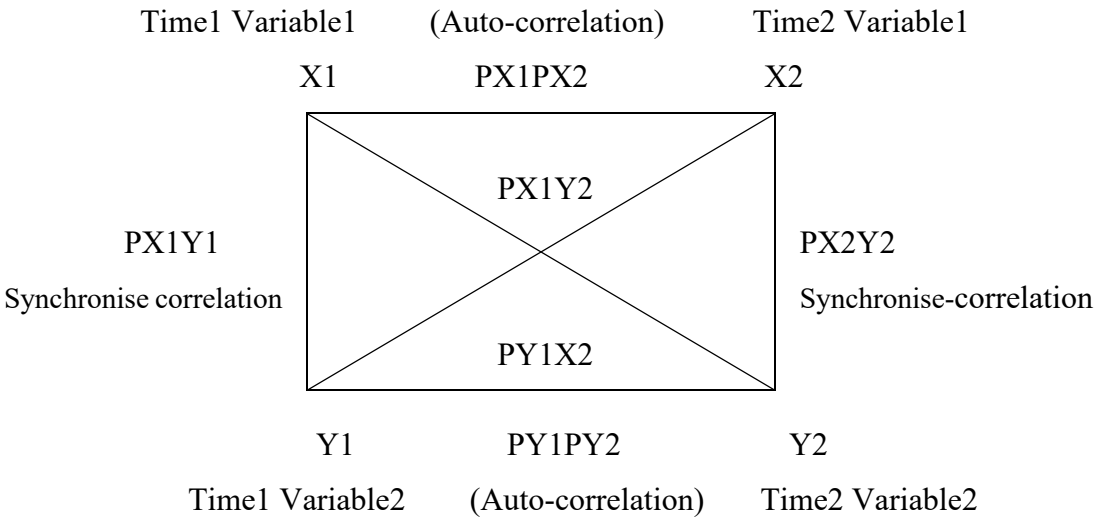
ANNEX A



PX1Y2 & PY1X2 are cross-lagged correlations.
Figure 3.1: Crossed lagged correlations panel

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ANNEX B

Code sheet
Pahalgam Attack 2025 (Issue categories)
Code categories

	Categories	Rules	Codes
ID Number			
X Dawn Geo News			1 2 3
Topics	**Jingoism**	A tweet and story will be coded as 'Jingoism' if they contain information on the cut and thrust and glory of war, nationalism, super-patriotism, attacks on Pakistan, Kashmir as an integral part of India, Azad Kashmir, strikes, etc.	Present-1 Absent-0
	Calling for Restraints	A tweet and story will be coded as 'calling for restraints' frame if they contain information regarding statements from the Pakistani government, politicians, activists, or civil society calling for peace, etc.	Present-1 Absent-0
	Revenge	A tweet and story will be coded as 'revenge' frame if they contain information regarding statements from the Pakistani government or politicians calling for a response to Indian jingoism, etc.	Present-1 Absent-0
	Mediation	A tweet and story will be coded as 'Mediation' if they contain information regarding statements regarding reconciliation and opposition to war hysteria from the international community, Indian politicians, activists, and civil society;	Present-1 Absent-0
	Threats of Nuclear War	A tweet and story will be coded as 'Threats of Nuclear war' if they contain information regarding possible Nuclear war,	Present-1 Absent-0
	Unity	A tweet or story will be coded as 'Unity' if it contains information regarding a call for united action against terrorist or terror incidents taking place in both India and Pakistan.	Present-1 Absent-0
	Losses	A tweet and story will be coded as 'losses' if they contain information regarding the deaths of civilians and security officials at the borders, and infrastructure damage.	Present-1 Absent-0
	Incident	A story or tweet will be coded as 'incident' if it contains information about scattered events of the Pahalgam attack, such as economic impact, etc.	Present-1 Absent-0
	Blame game	A tweet or story will be coded as 'blame game' if it contains information regarding accusation from both India and Pakistan against each other.	Present-1 Absent-0
	Glorification	A story and tweet will be coded as 'glorification' if they contain information on capabilities of armed forces, defender of nation, etc.	Present-1 Absent-0