



SHAPING THE MUSLIM NARRATIVE: WHATSAPP CAMPAIGNS, ISLAMIC UNITY, AND PUBLIC OPINION ON THE IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT IN KARACHI

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Abstract:

This qualitative study investigates how WhatsApp campaigns influence public opinion about the Iran-Israel conflict among residents of Karachi. Using a phenomenological approach, 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with WhatsApp users from diverse sectarian and socio-political backgrounds. The study reveals that WhatsApp functions as a powerful ideological tool, not only as a communication platform. Thematic analysis of the interviews identified five key themes: (1) emotional framing and fear-based messaging, where war-related content provokes strong emotions to drive engagement; (2) sectarian interpretations, showing how users understand the conflict through religious affiliations; (3) trust in the source over content, indicating relational credibility outweighs factual accuracy; (4) passive engagement, where users consume but rarely challenge misinformation; and (5) awareness of propaganda alongside a lack of media literacy, reflecting users' inability to critically assess or counter misleading narratives.

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These findings highlight that WhatsApp campaigns are shaping localized understandings of international conflict, often reinforcing existing ideological divides. The study contributes to digital media and conflict research by emphasizing the role of digital messaging platforms in shaping political consciousness. It concludes with a recommendation to invest in digital media literacy, inter-sector dialogue, and the creation of fact based counter-narratives to combat misinformation in digitally networked societies.

Keywords: Iran Israel, War, Conflict, Karachi, Whatsapp, Public Opinion

Introduction

In the digital era, social media applications have become significant platforms for information exchange, public discourse, and opinion shaping. Among these platforms, WhatsApp stands out as a widely used private communication tool, especially in countries like Pakistan, where over 45 million users actively engage with the app for both social and informational purposes (Statista, 2023). This communication revolution has drastically altered how individuals consume, interpret, and share news, particularly during times of conflict and war.

The Iran-Israel conflict, with its far-reaching geopolitical implications, is not only contested on the battlefield but also within the realm of digital communication. In cities like Karachi, where political awareness intersects with sectarian sensitivities and a vibrant digital culture, WhatsApp serves as a critical medium through which war narratives are disseminated and contested (Ahmed, 2021). Messages often carry emotionally charged content, ranging from religious interpretations to political framing, which influences public perception and mobilizes opinion (Al-Qazwini & Haider, 2020).

In contrast to traditional media, WhatsApp is supported by closed communities of trust, including friends, family, and community groups, which makes information more personal and believable (Arnaudo, 2017). Nonetheless, it is also the source of misinformation and disinformation and can control stories and strengthen echo chambers, particularly during geopolitical crises (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Amid the jousts involving Iran and Israel, it was found that WhatsApp campaigns in Karachi promote heavily polarising material, defending sectarian affiliations and political inclinations (Nafees & Shah, 2022). Whether by cherry picking video fragments, the stylized infographics, or audio messages shared by religious or political authorities, the users receive information that is, as a rule, miscontextualized, unverified, or insensitive to different opinions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Consumption of such contexts is not simply the end of fiction, but it means consumption through a local sociocultural prism, so it is crucial to know how the target audience is likely to consume and experience such fiction.

In this project, a qualitative design is utilized to understand the construction and mobilization of war narratives through WhatsApp campaigns, and its impact in constructing the opinion of people towards the Iran- Israel conflict in Karachi. The proposed study intends to unearth how these campaigns communicate their message, the kind of theme that tends to prevail, and how local users interpret, internalize, and even challenge it using the in-depth interviews and the thematic analysis. With the increase in the role of digital micro-communications in the development of geopolitical consciousness particularly in conflict-prone or ideologically sensitive societies, the study will help understand further about digital war propaganda, development of the opinion of the people and role of WhatsApp as a tool of communication in politics of urban Pakistan.

Research Objectives

- RO1: To explore how Iran Israel war content sharing on WhatsApp is shaping the public opinion of people in Karachi
- RO2: To find out how people interpret the Iran-Israel conflict from a sectarian perspective
- RO3: To illustrate the trust and credibility of content shared on WhatsApp on the Israel conflict

Research Questions

- RQ1: How Iran Israel war content sharing on WhatsApp affecting the public opinion of Karachi?

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- RQ2: How people interpret the Iran-Israel conflict in sectarian perspective?
- RQ3: How much people trust the credibility of content shared on WhatsApp on Iran-Israel conflict?

Significance of the Study

In recent years, mobile messaging applications like WhatsApp have transitioned from private interpersonal tools to powerful vectors of political communication, conflict narratives, and public persuasion. This shift is especially pronounced in developing countries such as Pakistan, where digital literacy, affordability of smartphones, and widespread social use of WhatsApp have made it a central medium for information consumption (Kaur & Ahmed, 2021). The significance of this study lies in its timely investigation of how WhatsApp campaigns influence public opinion on an international conflict the Iran-Israel war within a local context, namely Karachi, Pakistan's largest and most politically diverse city.

1. Emerging Digital Public Spheres

Karachi represents a highly fragmented urban society where diverse sectarian, ethnic, and political communities coexist, and where WhatsApp groups often mirror these identity lines (Ahmed, 2021). In this context, WhatsApp is more than just a messaging app; it is a digital public sphere where narratives are shaped, shared, and contested. Unlike public platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, WhatsApp provides semi-private communication loops that foster higher trust among members and encourage more emotionally charged, unfiltered content (Arnaudo, 2017). This study is significant because it sheds light on how digital micro-communities interpret international war narratives, and how this affects public discourse in Pakistan.

2. Understanding Propaganda and Disinformation in Conflict

The Iran-Israel conflict is one of the most complex geopolitical events of our time. It evokes not only political interpretations but also religious and sectarian affiliations especially within predominantly Muslim societies like Pakistan, where ideological loyalties to either Iran or Israel (or their proxies) can become deeply personal. WhatsApp campaigns surrounding the conflict are often infused with religious imagery, martyrdom themes, political framing, and conspiracy theories, which manipulate emotions and reinforce biases (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This study is therefore critical to understanding how misinformation and ideological propaganda

travel through WhatsApp, and how they shape public sentiment in a sensitive and conflict-prone region.

3. Localizing a Global Conflict

The significance also lies in localizing a global phenomenon. Much of the existing scholarship on digital media and conflict focuses on Western contexts or state-sponsored campaigns. However, there is limited empirical research exploring how ordinary citizens in South Asia interpret foreign conflicts through WhatsApp messages, forwarded videos, religious sermons, and political memes. Karachi, with its active civic culture and digital penetration, serves as a valuable site to examine how war is communicated, felt, and interpreted from afar through the digital lens of everyday users (Malik, 2019).

4. Influence on Public Opinion and Social Cohesion

By understanding how war narratives are constructed and disseminated on WhatsApp, the study can help uncover how these narratives influence public opinion, voter behavior, religious discourse, and even inter-group relations. The emotionally polarizing content of the war, when it is couched in the definitive or religiously dictated terms, will result in the church-state tensions, social separation, and the proliferation of radical ideas in a polarized society (Nafees & Shah, 2022). This is particularly relevant in Karachi, where both Sunni and Shia populations actively engage with content related to Iran and its proxies. Understanding these dynamics could inform policies on digital media regulation, civic education, and peacebuilding initiatives.

5. Policy and Media Literacy Implications

As misinformation spreads rapidly on WhatsApp, the study could contribute to digital media literacy efforts in Pakistan. Findings could inform educators, civil society, and policymakers about the narrative strategies used in war-related propaganda, helping develop counter-narratives or educational programs that promote critical thinking. It can also provide valuable insights for WhatsApp itself and other platforms about the ethical responsibilities they carry during international crises (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

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Rationale of the Study

This research is grounded in the increasing relevance of digital communication technologies in shaping how conflicts are perceived, narrated, and emotionally experienced—especially in non-combatant regions. The rationale stems from the convergence of three major factors:

1. WhatsApp as a Political Communication Tool

While much has been written about the role of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in political mobilization, WhatsApp remains understudied, primarily due to its encrypted and private nature. Yet, it has become a dominant platform for political persuasion, rumor propagation, and ideological reinforcement (Papacharissi, 2015). In Karachi, WhatsApp is extensively used by religious groups, political workers, journalists, and ordinary citizens to discuss domestic and international affairs. Unlike open social media platforms, WhatsApp's intimacy and virality make it a unique vector for shaping personal beliefs. Therefore, a focused study on this platform is warranted.

2. Relevance of the Iran-Israel Conflict in Pakistani Discourse

The Iran-Israel conflict resonates deeply within Pakistani society due to religious symbolism, regional alliances, and ideological narratives. Iran, as a Shia-majority state, is often perceived sympathetically by Pakistan's Shia population, while Israel is viewed by many as a political and religious adversary due to its occupation of Palestinian territories (Al-Qazwini & Haider, 2020). WhatsApp campaigns that frame the conflict in sectarian or religious terms can intensify identity-based divisions in Karachi, making the study of such content not only academically relevant but also socially urgent.

3. Lack of Qualitative Research on WhatsApp and War Narratives

There is a significant research gap in understanding how people interpret, interact with, and emotionally respond to WhatsApp content during war or conflict. Most existing studies rely on quantitative or survey-based data, which may not capture the rich, layered, and contextual ways in which individuals internalize digital war narratives. A qualitative approach, involving

interviews and thematic analysis, allows for a deeper exploration of meaning-making processes. It captures how people in Karachi frame the Iran-Israel conflict, how they evaluate information, and how their perceptions are shaped by WhatsApp content.

4. Contextual Relevance to Karachi's Media Landscape

Karachi's population of over 20 million people includes multiple linguistic, sectarian, and political groups, all of whom consume media in different ways. In such a complex environment, WhatsApp bridges multiple layers of communication from personal to political. This study's rationale is further strengthened by the need to understand how localized media ecosystems adapt and respond to global events through digital technologies. It also raises questions about digital sovereignty, cultural filtering, and the influence of diasporic networks that often shape local conversations through forwarded content.

5. Impact on Future Peace and Policy Initiatives

In an era where narratives can incite violence, polarize communities, or mobilize civic resistance, this study has practical implications. Governments, NGOs, educators, and platform designers need to understand how everyday citizens interpret war through digital messages. By documenting how WhatsApp users in Karachi understand, circulate, and respond to Iran-Israel war content, this research provides a foundation for peace communication strategies, misinformation counter-measures, and digital resilience programs.

6. Theoretical Contribution to Media and Conflict Studies

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital media's role in conflict communication. The findings may be interpreted through theories like Framing Theory, Media Ecology, and Agenda-Setting, as well as Uses and Gratification Theory, which helps explain why users choose to engage with war-related content in certain ways (McQuail, 2010). The unique use of WhatsApp as a micro-medium of propaganda, identity-building, and resistance adds an innovative dimension to existing theoretical models in media and conflict studies.

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Literature Review

1. The Evolution of Political Communication on WhatsApp

In the last decade, political communication has undergone a transformative shift due to the widespread adoption of mobile messaging applications, particularly WhatsApp, originally created to serve the needs of interpersonal communication of individuals, has turned into the political and ideological battleground, and in electoral periods, crises, and wars, users spread the news, opinions, memes, and other pieces of emotionally loaded content (Mohan & Singh, 2020). On the contrary to their open counterparts, Facebook, and Twitter, the end-to-end encryption feature and the closed group nature of WhatsApp allow building a closed digital ecosystem where individual control over privacy and the ease is difficult to supervise but powerful in its effects (Gagliardone et al., 2019). All these offerings give WhatsApp a powerful capability to influence the minds of people towards a given political situation in unstable or ideologically conscious societies.

2. WhatsApp and Conflict Communication in the Global South

WhatsApp has also been used to create shared meanings and media of collective significations during conflict, which in the Global South has become an informal source of news, because digital literacy is widely uneven, and mainstream media are routinely distrusted (Udupa & Dwyer, 2019). Surveys conducted in India, Nigeria, and Brazil have shown that political players and interest groupings use WhatsApp to disseminate conflictual information, most of which plays up religious, ethnic, or nationalistic moods (Mare, 2020). In case of the 2020 Delhi riots, as an example, hate speech and misinformation through WhatsApp contributed to organizing sectarian violence (Chaturvedi, 2020). Through these studies, a basis of comparison can be made on how such dynamics is likely to be played over in Karachi, a city whose sectarian and political alignment are very pronounced.

3. War Narratives and the Role of Emotion

Among the main characteristics of war discourse in the era of the internet, one may speak about the emotional contextualization of information. Messaging apps usually escalate the feelings of fear, anger, grief, and pride, which are also essential components of maintaining conflict frames (Kraidy, 2016). Textual messages combined with videos, audios, and emotive signs provided in WhatsApp enable users to produce convincing, affective messages. In a study carried by Tufekci (2017) on the social media and protest movements, it was noted that emotional resonance is playing a significant part relative to rational argument in influencing digital public opinion. Karachi is a place where it is not rare to identify users approaching their interaction with political content based on the frames of sectarian or religious affiliation; therefore, the appeal to emotion intrinsic to the WhatsApp war campaigns can be a potent influence in defining the perspectives of the Iran-Israel conflict.

4. Sectarian Identity and Media Consumption in Pakistan

Sectarianism is most influential in defining the interpretation of foreign conflicts in Pakistan. Nasr (2006) argues that the Sunni-Shia rift has mostly affected the political debate particularly in the city of Karachi. Online spaces have emerged as a new platform of the construction of sectarian identities as religious authorities and others post edited materials to support their community in its view of world events. According to the findings of their survey of media consumption in Pakistan, Zubair and Jamil (2022) revealed that Shia-majority neighborhoods of Karachi are focused on WhatsApp users more prone toward media contents, which is friendly to Iran; others were suspicious or ignored it. This points to the important process of mediating the reception of war through sectarian filters which are discussed in the context of this study.

5. Misinformation and Disinformation in Closed Messaging Spaces

The dangers of unstructured misinformation on applications such as WhatsApp have been brought out in increased literature. Unlike open-social media, on which the material can be publicly refuted or substantially discussed, the closed group dynamics of WhatsApp restrict fact-checking of forwarded posts or questioning the content (Donovan & Friedberg, 2019). The study

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that was done during COVID-19 outbreak displayed how health misinformation was rapidly conveyed through WhatsApp in South Asia and caused great confusion and panic (Banaji et al., 2021). The same trends are reflected in the conflict situations, when the manipulated videos or images taken out of context are spread to induce outrage or gathering support. To understand the process of internalization of war narratives, it is therefore important to understand the behaviors of WhatsApp users in Karachi or rather their lack of behavior in verifying the content of the messages.

6. Strategic Use of WhatsApp by Political and Religious Actors

Increasingly, there is growing evidence that the political parties, clerics in religious organizations, and media entrepreneurs are using WhatsApp strategically to influence the discourse within the society. Ghosh (2018) reports that party cadres in India used WhatsApp in the 2019 general elections to manage thousands of groups and spread ideology and disrupt opposition messages. A comparable pattern is also present in Pakistan, in terms of both sectarian societies and political forces of which an enormous number use WhatsApp as a means of mobilizing their members, preaching digitally, or ideologically reinforcing their ideology (Saeed, 2020). The key role of such actors is to build Iran-Israel conflict as a religious issue, a Zionist plot or a geo-political chess game- all, of course, dependent on their client base. The paper contributes to the literature by examining the reception of these strategic discourses by Karachi users, their interpretation and in some cases where they protest against such messages.

7. WhatsApp and Everyday Political Discussion

However, the impact of WhatsApp on the opinion may not be understood without assessment of its role in the daily political discourse. In their ethnographic study, Miller et al. (2016) have discovered that WhatsApp allows the fusion between the personal and political as people interact through the app to have family-related chit-chat and hardcore ideological discussion in the same digital environment. This bilateral application makes it more difficult to receive information about politics discriminating between the deserved and the propaganda not only in relation to a time idem but also during periods when people are highly emotionally excitable such as the time of war. Such dynamics may thrive in the socio-political environment that was prone to unrest,

rumors, and mobilizations, as it is in the case of Karachi. In this research, thus, prior weight is given to the manner in which the war related matter is assimilated as a part of the day to day digital lives of the WhatsApp users.

8. Audience Reception Theory in Digital Media

Audience reception theory has changed to encompass the interactive and participatory characteristic of digital media. However, users are not emerging as mere recipients of the media but re-construct them in their own social, ideological, cultural backgrounds by reinterpretation, localization and even challenging media messages (Livingstone & Das, 2013). When dealing with war stories on WhatsApp, trust in a sender, community values, and the attitudes that people hold politically affect the meaning-making process. The theoretical lens is essential to the qualitative research scope of the study that aims at discovering how individuals in Karachi interpret the Iran-Israel conflict as framed using WhatsApp campaigns. It leads to the Hall (1980) encoding/decoding model configured in the context of the digital message.

9. Geo-Political Imaginaries and Diasporic Influence

Messages shared on WhatsApp about foreign conflicts often carry geo-political imaginaries, visions of global power, resistance, and oppression—that reflect not only the conflict itself but also diasporic anxieties, religious aspirations, and postcolonial critiques. According to Karim (2003), diasporic communities often create and circulate transnational narratives that resist dominant Western media frames. These imaginaries are visible in Pakistan's reception of Middle Eastern conflicts, especially among Shia communities that view Iran as a symbolic protector. Many WhatsApp messages in Karachi draw upon Pan-Islamic rhetoric and symbolic representations of martyrdom and resistance. This literature helps situate the WhatsApp discourse on the Iran-Israel war within broader ideological and religious imaginaries.

10. Implications for Peace and Conflict Resolution

Finally, several scholars have emphasized the role of digital literacy and peace communication in mitigating the harmful effects of digital propaganda (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). While messaging apps can be tools for hate and division, they can also be repurposed for counter-

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narratives, interfaith dialogue, and civic education. Studies from Colombia and Sri Lanka have shown how grassroots organizations used WhatsApp to build trust and reduce misinformation during peace negotiations (Waldman et al., 2021). This literature underscores the transformative potential of WhatsApp if used with intention and responsibility. The current study contributes to this dialogue by examining not only how war narratives are received but also how users reflect on, challenge, or disengage from conflict-based propaganda.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how WhatsApp campaigns shape public opinion about the Iran-Israel conflict among users in Karachi. The reason of qualitative approach selection was providing an in-depth insight on the perceptions, meanings and interpretations that people will have on the message they receive and transmit. Whereas in quantitative research the object of investigation is some statistical pattern, qualitative research is interested in rich and narrative data that may become a source of investigating how individuals frame and react to the digital war narratives in their social and cultural backgrounds.

2. Research Approach

The personal experiences of the participants relating to exposure to WhatsApp content were captured using a phenomenological approach. This method can be used to study how people socialise information, the feelings they use to analyse information as well as how they use it to build and inform their ideas and their chats in their online societies. Dwelling on subjective experiences, this paper attempted to unveil the processes of war narratives internalization, contestation, or reformulation by their users.

3. Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were the most common type of collecting data. 50 interviews were conducted of WhatsApp users in Karachi, 25 were from Sunni sects and 25 Shia's were interviewed to find how they come to encounter, interpret and respond to content about the

conflict between Iran and Israel. The interviews were held on the 30-45 minutes and were done either in Urdu or English, according to the participants. The reason behind selecting semi-structured interview as the method is that it allows freedom in digging deeper into responses of the participants and yet it provides the same structure to all interviews. The questions concerned:

- The type of Iran-Israel-related content received on WhatsApp
- Emotional and ideological responses to such content
- Trust in the sources of messages
- Participation in forwarding or discussing war-related content
- Awareness of misinformation and propaganda tactics
- Perceived influence of WhatsApp narratives on their opinions

4. Sampling Method

The study used a convenience sampling technique. Participants were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate, which is a common approach in exploratory qualitative research. The sample included a diverse group of individuals in terms of age, gender, sectarian identity, and educational background, representing different neighborhoods of Karachi.

Although the use of convenience sampling can restrict the generalisability aspect of research, it was suitable in this particular research owing to the sensitivity of the research problem, the willingness of the participants to participate in the research, and the none-discrete nature of conducting interviews. Moreover, findings were not intended to be generalized, but to identify patterns and topics in user perceptions and behaviors.

5. Nature and Type of Data

It was based on primary data as primary data was collected directly by recording interviewing the participants. The texts were transcribed in order to analyze the interviews; and any unpresented material in the texts was not presented in order so that the narrative would continue with the actual wordings, tone and the emotional feel of the participants. This first-hand information gave an initial understanding of how users interpret WhatsApp campaign in regard to Iran-Israel conflict.

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6. Data Analysis

The raw transcribed interviews were coded on thematic analysis as a widely used qualitative data analysis method of summarising, examining, and reporting trends within data. The following steps were followed:

1. **Familiarization with the data** – Repeated reading of transcripts to become immersed in the responses.
2. **Initial coding** – Generating initial codes based on recurring ideas, words, and expressions.
3. **Generating themes** – Grouping codes into broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' narratives.
4. **Reviewing and refining themes** – Ensuring that themes accurately reflected the data and were distinct from one another.
5. **Naming and defining themes** – Clearly defining each theme and its relevance to the research objectives.

7. Coding

The interviews were coded after the transcription process and following words were coded. Emotional fear, credibility, conflict, misinformation, religious views, framing, sectarian.

8. Thematic analysis

- **Emotional Framing of Messages**
- **Trust and Credibility of Sources**
- **Sectarian Interpretations of the Conflict**
- **Fear of Misinformation and Propaganda**
- **Role of Influencers and Religious Leaders**
- **Impact on Political and Religious Views**

The coding was conducted manually to ensure consistency and intercoder reliability.

9. Ethical Considerations

The data collection was approved ethically. The participants were disclosed the reason and purpose of the study and were informed of their right to such things as confidentiality and anonymity. Every interview was received with an informed consent which was taken either orally or in a written form. No names, phone numbers, and identifying information were noted or posted in any section of the final report. The participants were free to leave the interview at any time or even after the interview without any penalty.

10. Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged:

- The use of convenience sampling means the findings may not be representative of the entire population of Karachi.
- The sample size, though sufficient for qualitative saturation, cannot generalize to all WhatsApp users or conflict narratives in other regions.
- Responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly when discussing politically or religiously sensitive issues.
- The encrypted and private nature of WhatsApp prevented the direct collection of actual message content, so the analysis relied solely on user descriptions.

Despite these limitations, the research offers a context-rich, grounded understanding of how war narratives on WhatsApp affect public opinion in a city as complex and diverse as Karachi.

Findings and Discussion

1. Emotional Framing and Fear-Based Messaging

Many participants reported that the WhatsApp content they received about the Iran-Israel conflict was highly emotive and fear-inducing. Messages often included disturbing images, martyrdom stories, videos of missile attacks, and religious appeals invoking fear of a wider religious war.

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Several users mentioned receiving forwarded messages such as:

- "This is the sign of the end times."
- "Muslims must unite or face destruction."
- "Look what they are doing to our brothers in Palestine and Iran."

These emotionally charged messages invoked sympathy, outrage, and fear, which shaped their perception of the conflict as not merely geopolitical but also deeply religious and existential. Respondents acknowledged that the emotional intensity of content often overpowered rational analysis, making them more likely to believe and share such narratives without verification.

2. Sectarian Interpretations of the Conflict

Participants from different sectarian backgrounds (particularly Sunni and Shia communities) interpreted the Iran-Israel conflict through the lens of their religious identities. Shia respondents often framed Iran as a symbol of resistance and martyrdom, while some Sunni respondents showed ambivalence or viewed Iran with suspicion, particularly in the context of its regional ambitions.

Sectarian perspectives of Shia and Sunni

- Shia respondents said, *"Iran is the only country standing up for Muslims. They are our hope."*
- Sunni participants remarked, *"This war is making the unity among muslims; Regardless of their sectarian background, to stand up for the muslim Brotherhood."*

WhatsApp groups affiliated with sectarian communities were often ideologically curated, meaning the same event was narrated similarly.

3. Trust in Source and Credibility of Information

A majority of participants admitted they trusted information forwarded by close friends, family, religious scholars, or community leaders. They emphasized that "who sent the message" was more important than "what the message said."

For instance, if a message came from a local cleric or a group run by a religious figure, users were less likely to question its authenticity. Some respondents stated:

- "If my uncle sent it, I don't think he would forward false news."
- "Our scholar always tells us to follow truth. His audio messages guide us."

This finding highlights the relational trust model on WhatsApp, where credibility is socially embedded rather than factually verified. However, this also made users more vulnerable to unverified or propagandist content disguised as religious or moral truth.

4. Passive Engagement and Selective Sharing

Not all users actively engaged in forwarding war-related content. Many practiced passive consumption reading or listening to messages but choosing not to comment or share. However, when asked why they didn't question or challenge the content, users cited fear of conflict, group norms, or lack of confidence.

One participant explained:

- "In our family group, if I say this video is fake, people might think I'm anti-Islam."

Others said they shared content only when it felt "necessary" or "aligned with their beliefs." This selective sharing suggests a filtering mechanism based not on facts but on emotional and ideological alignment.

Thus, while misinformation was not always accepted, it was rarely contested either allowing war narratives to circulate unchallenged in most cases.

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5. Awareness of Propaganda but Lack of Media Literacy

Interestingly, many participants—especially younger or more educated users—acknowledged that some WhatsApp content about the Iran-Israel war appeared to be propaganda or religious manipulation. Some users used terms like "Jazbati messages" (emotional messages) or "sectarian propaganda."

Yet despite this awareness, most lacked the skills or tools to verify the content or explain it to others. Few were aware of fact-checking websites or digital literacy resources. One participant said:

- "I know some videos are fake. But how do I prove it? It's easier to stay quiet."

This theme suggests that while media awareness is growing, there remains a significant gap in digital literacy especially in understanding how to critically evaluate and verify forwarded content. This gap contributes to the unchecked spread of conflict narratives, even among skeptical users.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to explore the influence of WhatsApp campaigns in influencing public opinion over the conflict between Iran and Israel on users in Karachi. The data was collected from 50 participants through semi-structured interviews reveals the patterns of acceptance, interpretation, and exchange of digital stories of conflict. The observations indicate that WhatsApp is not just a messaging application; it is an effective ideological platform, on which emotion-filled and frequently unverified information is accepted, shared, and discussed in closed groups. There are five important themes identified after the analysis. To begin with, the appeal to emotion and use of fear messages occupy a pivotal position of user engagement with their messages being focused around evoking fear, grief, outrage, and the portrayal of the conflict in rather religiously or morally based messages. Second, the perceptions of sectarian interpretations also play a vital role in understanding the differences as Shia and Sunni users interpret the same material, depending on their religious associations. Third, credibility is determined by the source than the accuracy of a post, individuals give belief to messages posted by religious or family leaders without considering accuracy. The fourth theme is passive participation whereby consumers tend to consume but not ask or share touchy contents out of fear of public outrage.

Lastly, the fifth theme indicates the expanding understanding of propaganda, although there is a general scarcity of media literacy to allow users to confirm or question the misinformation. The analysis comes to a realization that the positioning WhatsApp has in influencing the way the residents of Karachi perceive the war between Iran and Israel is seen as not only a political issue but also a concern that is relegated as a domestic condition of morality and sectarian problem. The platform facilitates the dissemination of the ideologically constructed narratives which in many cases reinforce the pre-established lines. As a solution, the research suggests that digital literacy in digital media needs strengthening, including inter-sect dialoguing, and that a more balanced and enlightened understanding of everyone in the digital world needs to be built through the creation of fact-based counter-narratives.

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