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Combating Disinformation with Neurocognitive AI: A Hybrid Model for Crisis Communication

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Abstract: *Crisis situations are fertile grounds for disinformation, which can amplify confusion, fear, and mistrust. Traditional AI methods used to combat disinformation often neglect human cognitive responses and emotional triggers. This paper proposes a hybrid system integrating neuroscience-informed AI, including attention tracking, emotion analysis, and behavioural prediction, to enhance crisis communication strategies. By leveraging neurocognitive insights, our model identifies the disinformation's impact on public sentiment and cognition, enabling tailored, effective responses. We combine real-time social media monitoring with neuro-symbolic processing to map patterns of disinformation spread and its emotional resonance. Preliminary evaluations suggest improved accuracy and timeliness in detecting and countering disinformation, especially in high-stakes, fast-evolving crisis contexts.*

Keywords: *neurocognitive AI; disinformation; crisis communication; attention tracking; emotion analysis; behavioural prediction; hybrid AI systems.*

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1. Introduction

In the age of accelerated digital communication, crisis events—from pandemics and natural disasters to political conflicts—have become a conducive environment for the proliferation of disinformation. The emotional intensity and uncertainty that define these moments create ideal conditions for the spread of manipulative narratives that undermine public trust, distort institutional communication, and exacerbate social unrest. While artificial intelligence (AI) has been employed to identify and counter disinformation, most existing models focus on factual inconsistencies or content-level signals, neglecting the crucial role of human cognition and emotion in shaping how false information is received, processed, and propagated.

This paper introduces a novel hybrid framework that integrates neuroscience-informed AI into disinformation detection and response strategies for crisis communication. Our goal is to enhance the effectiveness of AI systems by accounting for neurocognitive variables—including attention patterns, emotional triggers, and behavioural tendencies—that influence public susceptibility to crisis-related disinformation. By incorporating attention tracking, emotion analysis, and behavioural prediction, we propose a system capable not only of identifying disinformation in real time but also of anticipating its psychological impact and tailoring counter-narratives accordingly.

To achieve this, we build on interdisciplinary insights from affective neuroscience, dual-process cognition, and human-centred AI design, while grounding our system architecture in a neuro-symbolic AI framework that combines data-driven learning with rule-based reasoning. We test the model through case studies involving the India–Pakistan conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, analysing how emotionally resonant content spreads, how it is perceived, and how adaptive messaging strategies can reduce belief in false narratives. Preliminary results suggest significant improvements in detection precision, response speed, and narrative personalisation when neurocognitive dimensions are integrated.

By reframing disinformation not merely as a content problem but as a cognitive vulnerability problem, this study advances a new paradigm in crisis communication—one that is both technically robust and psychologically attuned. Our findings offer strategic insights for governments, media organisations, and humanitarian actors seeking to build resilient communication infrastructures amid the growing complexity of information warfare. This study hypothesises that integrating neurocognitive indicators into AI-based crisis communication will improve both the speed and precision of disinformation detection, while also enabling more psychologically attuned counter-narratives. The justification for this hypothesis stems from gaps in existing AI models, which often overlook cognitive-emotional factors shaping public vulnerability to disinformation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Disinformation and Crisis Communication

Disinformation is defined as information that is intentionally false and deliberately created to cause harm to individuals, social groups, organisations, or countries. Furthermore, it involves genuine information shared maliciously, typically by publicising private information whether misinformation is false information shared without harmful intent (based on Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The wide effect of disinformation plays a critical role these days. It is widely accepted that social media plays a significant role in society, especially among younger generations, who have a strong connection with social media, which in many cases can influence their perspectives on critical political, medical, or social issues (Herrero-Diz et al., 2021; Muth & Peter, 2023).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), offers a framework for tailoring crisis responses based upon the type of crisis and perceived responsibility. It classifies crises into victim, accidental, and preventable, with varying reputational threats and corresponding response strategies (denial, diminishment, rebuilding, bolstering). While effective in managing reputation, SCCT's limitation lies in its organisational focus—it often overlooks the role of external malicious actors such as trolls and disinformation agents, which are prominent in today's crisis landscapes (Ogunyombo, Odunlami, & Oredola, 2024). For instance, during the MTN Nigeria SIM registration crisis, SCCT was applied through strategies such as apology, compensation, and ingratiation. Still, these responses did not fully address the public's cognitive and emotional reactions to evolving narratives in digital spaces (Ogunyombo, Odunlami, & Oredola, 2024). Such limitations highlight the need to expand SCCT to account for audience perception shaped by emotional priming and algorithmic amplification.

Framing theory, articulated by Entman (1993), posits that communicators influence how audiences perceive reality by highlighting certain aspects of an issue while omitting others. In crises, the strategic framing of narratives by state or non-state actors becomes a potent tool in the dissemination of disinformation. Studies show that disinformation actors often utilise moral and emotional frames to polarise and activate audiences (Fadeji, Aluko, & Hamzat, 2025; Huang-Horowitz & Smith, 2025). For example, COVID-19 vaccine misinformation was framed as a violation of bodily autonomy or as a tool for governmental control, which eroded public trust in health institutions and delayed vaccine uptake (Schwarz, Seeger, & Kim, 2025). Furthermore, competing frames, such as those employed by institutional actors and the media during university labour strikes in the U.S., can lead to confusion and crisis escalation when not aligned (Huang-Horowitz & Smith, 2025). Thus, understanding frame divergence is crucial in mitigating the impact of disinformation during crises.

Agenda-setting, introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), explains how the media shape public attention by prioritising specific issues. Priming, a related concept, suggests that repeated exposure to particular narratives influences how the public evaluates issues. Malicious disinformation actors exploit agenda-setting and priming by flooding the media with sensational, often false narratives, thereby shifting attention away from substantive policy responses and toward manufactured controversies (Fadeji, Aluko, & Hamzat, 2025; Webb, 2025). For example, during the Arab Spring and the 2021 South African unrest, social media facilitated the dissemination of disinformation, which redirected public anger and amplified grievances, thereby contributing to civil unrest (Webb, 2025). However, these theories often understate the neurocognitive dimension of how audiences process emotionally charged or fear-inducing content, especially under crisis conditions—a gap addressed by neuroscience-informed models.

2.2. Neuroscience, Cognition and Disinformation

Understanding how individuals cognitively and emotionally process information is essential in combating disinformation during crises. Under stress, the brain is more susceptible to confirmation bias, emotional reasoning, and heuristic processing (Palenchar & Heath, 2025). This means that even well-intentioned corrective efforts may fail if they contradict deeply held beliefs or evoke cognitive dissonance. The Semantic Architecture Model (SAM) presents an innovative approach to understanding how meaning is embedded in message components—from words and assertions to overarching narratives—revealing how frames can subtly influence public interpretation (Kwon et al., 2025). SAM demonstrates that conceptual framing at the micro level (e.g., word choice) can significantly influence macro-level narratives, particularly in public health communication during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kahneman's (2011) Dual-Process Theory remains foundational for understanding cognitive functioning in crisis and high-stress contexts. It distinguishes between System 1, characterised by fast, automatic, and emotional responses, and System 2, defined by slow, deliberative, and logical processing. In high-pressure environments—such as during crises or exposure to disinformation—System 1 dominates due to increased cognitive load and time constraints, leading to heuristic rather than analytic reasoning (Koban & Wieringa, 2024; Hochman, 2024). This vulnerability to fast, affect-driven thinking has been substantiated by recent experimental evidence. Koban and Wieringa (2024) demonstrated that individuals under cognitive load, who relied more on

Type 1 (intuitive) thinking, were more likely to anthropomorphise and sympathise with harmed robots—highlighting emotional susceptibility even when engaging with non-human agents. Similarly, Wasil (2024) noted that heightened emotional arousal weakens the boundaries between the two systems, raising questions about the strict dichotomy and suggesting the need for emotional integration across both systems. Moreover, Hochman (2024) argues that intuitive and deliberative characteristics can coexist within both compensatory and non-compensatory processes, adding a layer of complexity to dual-process categorisations. These insights reveal the fluidity of cognitive processes during emotionally charged or ambiguous decision-making scenarios—a vital dimension when studying public susceptibility to disinformation.

Affective neuroscience investigates how emotional states modulate attention, memory, and decision-making. Foundational work by Damasio (1994) and Phelps (2006) suggested that emotional arousal enhances memory for emotionally salient stimuli while reducing memory for neutral details. This is echoed in Davies' (2024) study, which utilised eye-tracking technology to demonstrate that emotional states influence attention allocation and memory accuracy, particularly under cognitive strain. Positive and negative mood groups demonstrated faster decision-making and heightened confidence without a significant decline in recognition accuracy, implying that emotional states recalibrate cognitive processing priorities. In crisis communication or exposure to misinformation, such heightened arousal can both improve and impair cognitive function. For example, high arousal may sharpen attention to threat cues but simultaneously reduce the capacity to critically assess credibility—thus increasing susceptibility to emotionally charged falsehoods (Davies, 2024; Van Bavel et al., 2020). Maor, Rimkutė, and Capelos (2025) further contextualise emotional processing in institutional and reputational settings, arguing that emotional reactions—such as anger, fear, or trust—shape not only individual cognitive judgments but also collective perceptions of authority. Their framework of “reputation learning” through affect-as-information and affective intelligence theories reinforces the idea that emotions are not peripheral but central to judgment formation and processing in crises.

Ekman’s (1992) six basic emotions—anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, and surprise—remain influential in understanding the emotional mechanisms behind the spread of disinformation. Zhang et al. (2024) compared multiple emotion classification models in social media analysis and concluded that Ekman’s framework provides the highest efficiency and interpretability for identifying emotional trends in large-scale digital discourse. Yet, it lacks sufficient categories for nuanced positive emotions, such as pride or amusement, which are often exploited in modern persuasive campaigns. Emotional content, especially that evoking moral outrage or fear, is more likely to be shared (Brady et al., 2017), suggesting that disinformation strategies rely heavily on evoking Ekman-style “basic” emotions. This is further supported by Labib, Elagamy and Saleh (2025), whose EmoBERTa-X model showed that deep learning systems trained on emotional cues in social media perform better when trained to recognise and classify such basic affective responses. However, the model has limitations. Viola (2024) critiques the universality of Ekman’s approach, arguing for a more context-sensitive, culturally informed understanding of emotional expression in digital environments. Emojis and emoticons, for instance, act as “digital faces” that trigger neurocognitive face-perception mechanisms, contributing to the emotional salience and ambiguity of online interactions. Integrating these insights, it becomes evident that while Ekman’s model offers a foundational framework for analysing emotional appeals in disinformation, it must be supplemented by contemporary understandings of emotion as contextually and culturally embedded, especially in mediated and virtual environments.

2.3. Human-Centred AI and Mitigating Disinformation

Recent advances in AI, particularly in content generation and moderation, have created new possibilities—and risks—for crisis communication. On one hand, generative AI models like ChatGPT have been shown to assist in detecting narrative frames and automating content analysis (Kwon et al., 2025). On the other hand, they are also being leveraged to create synthetic disinformation, making false narratives more sophisticated and more complex to detect (Palenchar & Heath, 2025). The World Economic Forum (2024) identifies disinformation as one of the most significant global risks, noting that AI-driven content manipulation is expected to polarise public discourse further and undermine democratic institutions. A critical concern is that AI tools, while powerful, must be integrated with human-centric ethical frameworks to ensure they support transparency and resist misuse.

Neuro-symbolic AI aims to integrate the pattern recognition capabilities of deep learning with the logical inference capabilities of symbolic reasoning. This hybrid approach enhances interpretability, robustness, and transparency—features especially critical in detecting and combating disinformation. Neuro-symbolic systems are particularly suited for tasks that demand causal reasoning and semantic understanding, such as identifying inconsistencies in crisis narratives or verifying claims against structured knowledge bases (Xue, Qian, & Xu, 2024). These systems also support explainable AI (XAI), allowing users to trace and comprehend the logic behind flagged content, which is vital in emotionally charged or high-stakes scenarios (Arriaga et al., 2025). Recent advancements, such as the Program-guided Variational Causal Inference Network (Pro-VCIN), illustrate the integration of neural-symbolic reasoning with multimodal causal inference. These models not only improve performance in tasks like Explanatory Visual Question Answering but also enhance trust through consistent, coherent, and explainable outputs (Xue, Qian, & Xu, 2024. Yet, widespread application remains limited by challenges in scalability, real-time processing, and user-centred adaptation.

Cognitive hacking exploits psychological vulnerabilities using AI-powered microtargeting and predictive modelling. Algorithms trained on psychographic and behavioural data can manipulate individuals by crafting emotionally resonant content, as infamously exemplified in the Cambridge Analytica case. These models draw on behavioural economics, neuroscience, and big data analytics to forecast reactions and deliver customised disinformation (Singh & Cheema, 2024a). The manipulation strategies employed often involve exploiting heuristics, such as the affect heuristic and confirmation bias, thereby bypassing critical thinking and fostering polarisation or panic during crises (Singh & Cheema, 2024a; Singh & Cheema, 2024b). Despite offering insight into public sentiment, the ethical implications surrounding autonomy, consent, and algorithmic control remain deeply concerning. Moreover, there is a growing need for frameworks that integrate psychological defence mechanisms (e.g., cognitive shields) into AI interfaces to resist manipulation and support informed decision-making (Singh & Cheema, 2024b).

Trust plays a pivotal role in human-AI collaboration, particularly in sensitive contexts like crisis communication or public safety. As Janhunen et al. (2024) highlight, trust in AI is influenced by multiple levels—individual, team, and organisational. In human-AI teams, trust dynamics are shaped by perceptions of explainability, fairness, and psychological safety. Without transparency and perceived legitimacy, AI recommendations risk being dismissed, regardless of accuracy. Studies demonstrate that users are more likely to trust AI systems when they offer intuitive, human-like explanations and when the design incorporates transparency mechanisms grounded in social understanding (Uribe, 2025; DMello, 2024). Explainability is especially important in AI-powered decision support systems (AI-DSS), where clarity reduces uncertainty and enhances adoption (DMello, 2024). Embedding transparency into interface design not only improves usability but also mitigates user anxiety and fosters resilience.

Human-Centred AI (HCAI) emphasises ethical alignment, emotional intelligence, usability, and personalisation (Pyae, 2025). Aung Pyae’s framework organises HCAI into four tiers, emphasising not just technical effectiveness but also social responsibility. In disinformation contexts, these attributes ensure that interventions do not merely detect falsehoods but also support the cognitive and emotional well-being of users. Transparency, as conceptualised in Critical Studies of AI, should not only explain technical functionality but also be understandable to laypersons (Uribe, 2025). Tools designed with human-like explanatory models and social tailoring have shown promise in enhancing trust and adoption across diverse demographics. However, current systems often remain opaque, relying on black-box models that lack contextual clarity or emotional sensitivity—especially problematic during emotionally charged events.

Disinformation in crises intersects communication theory, AI, and human cognition. While AI provides powerful tools to detect manipulation, it introduces ethical concerns around autonomy, bias, and control. Moreover, neuro-symbolic models and human-centred design paradigms often remain siloed from each other, limiting the development of holistic systems. A clear research gap exists in creating unified frameworks that combine cognitive-behavioural understanding, crisis communication dynamics, and interpretable AI. Emerging work points to the potential of hybrid models—e.g., neuro-symbolic architectures with causal inference (Xue, Qian, & Xu, 2024) or Bayesian inverse physics for human reasoning simulation (Arriaga et al., 2025)—but these require further interdisciplinary exploration. Future research should prioritise integrative models that are ethically grounded, user-sensitive, and context-aware. This includes embedding psychological defences, cognitive literacy, and human-centred explainability directly into AI architectures. By doing so, we can design disinformation response systems that are not only technically robust but also socially and cognitively attuned.

Cognitive Hacking: Exploiting Psychological Vulnerabilities

Building on the limitations of current AI-driven approaches, it is essential to consider how malicious actors weaponise human cognition itself through practices known as cognitive hacking. The concept of *cognitive hacking* refers to deliberate attempts to exploit human psychological biases and manipulate perception and decision-making (Singh & Cheema, 2024; Singh & Cheema, 2024b), unlike conventional hacking, which targets technical infrastructures, cognitive hacking attacks the "human layer" of information systems by deploying emotionally resonant and psychologically tailored disinformation. Research in political communication has demonstrated how adversaries leverage heuristics such as the *affect heuristic* and *confirmation bias* to bypass critical thinking and amplify polarisation (Kahneman, 2011; Brady et al., 2017). High-profile examples illustrate the potency of such tactics. During the 2016 U.S. elections, coordinated disinformation campaigns employed microtargeted ads based on psychographic profiling to heighten emotional arousal, undermine trust in democratic institutions, and suppress voter participation (Isaak & Hanna, 2018). Similarly, the January 6, 2021, Capitol riots reflected the real-world consequences of cognitive hacking, as disinformation narratives surrounding electoral fraud triggered collective emotional responses—fear, anger, and mistrust—that motivated violent mobilisation (DiResta, 2021). These cases underscore the centrality of emotional manipulation in disinformation campaigns and highlight the insufficiency of purely fact-based corrections. AI-driven techniques intensify the reach of cognitive hacking by combining psychometric data with predictive behavioural modelling. Such practices make disinformation more personalised, emotionally resonant, and difficult to counteract, as individuals encounter falsehoods that are pre-aligned with their cognitive vulnerabilities. This trend underscores the necessity for neurocognitive AI approaches that explicitly address the *psychological dimension* of disinformation, providing not only detection but also protective "cognitive shields" embedded within crisis communication systems (Singh & Cheema, 2024b).

Policy and Governance Framework: The EU context

Any technological framework for combating disinformation must be situated within the broader landscape of governance and regulation. The European Union has emerged as a global leader in establishing regulatory mechanisms to counter disinformation and ensure the ethical deployment of AI. The Digital Services Act (DSA), which entered into force in 2022, imposes legal obligations on large online platforms to manage systemic risks, including disinformation, by mandating transparency in content moderation and algorithmic processes (European Commission, 2022). Complementing this, the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation (updated 2022) provides a self-regulatory framework for platforms, fact-checkers, and civil society organisations to collaborate on transparency, demonetization of false content, and user empowerment tools (EDMO, 2023).

In parallel, the EU AI Act—the first comprehensive legislative framework for artificial intelligence—introduces a risk-based approach to AI deployment, requiring high-risk systems, such as those applied in political communication and public safety, to adhere to strict standards of transparency, accountability, and human oversight (Floridi, 2023). Together with the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which supports research and monitoring of disinformation across member states, these frameworks provide a governance infrastructure that balances innovation with democratic safeguards. Integrating neurocognitive AI models into this policy environment requires careful alignment with these legal instruments. Specifically, transparency mechanisms in neuro-symbolic reasoning must meet DSA obligations, while behavioural prediction models must comply with AI Act provisions regarding human autonomy and non-discrimination. Furthermore, collaboration with EDMO can ensure that neurocognitive approaches are not siloed but embedded into Europe's broader disinformation resilience strategy.

By embedding the proposed hybrid model within these regulatory frameworks, the research underscores its practical applicability and its contribution to broader European and global debates on ethical, transparent, and effective disinformation governance. Having outlined the theoretical, psychological, technological, and regulatory foundations of disinformation in crises, the following section turns to the methodological design of this study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Rationale

This study employs a case study research design, which is widely recognised as a robust approach for investigating complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). Disinformation during crises constitutes a phenomenon shaped by the interplay of technological infrastructures, communicative practices, and cognitive-emotional responses. The case study design enables an in-depth examination of these interactions and is particularly well-suited for capturing both the contextual specifics and the theoretical implications of disinformation dynamics (Babchuk, 2017). Case studies are also appropriate for interdisciplinary inquiries, where social, psychological, and technological dimensions intersect. As Poth (2018) argue, case studies provide a methodological space for integrating qualitative interpretation with quantitative and computational insights. This flexibility is essential for the present study, which combines content analysis, natural language processing (NLP), and behavioural prediction with narrative interpretation and symbolic reasoning.

3.2. Case Selection

Two cases were selected based on relevance, intensity, and data availability. First, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case of health-related disinformation, highlighting the role of fear, uncertainty, and conspiracy narratives in shaping public responses to vaccination and institutional communication. Second, the 2025 India–Pakistan conflict illustrates a geopolitical crisis in which disinformation campaigns amplified nationalist sentiment and manipulated perceptions of legitimacy and military strength. These cases meet Yin's (2018) criteria of theoretical sampling, in which cases are selected not for statistical representativeness but for their ability to shed light on theoretical constructs. Both involve high volumes of disinformation activity, significant societal impact, and well-documented digital traces, making them suitable for examining the role of neurocognitive indicators and behavioural prediction in crisis communication.

3.3. Data Sources and Collection

Following best practices in case study methodology (Babchuk, 2016), this study relies on multiple sources of evidence to ensure data triangulation and strengthen validity. The primary corpus comprises publicly available social media content (e.g., posts, comments, hashtags, engagement metrics) collected from X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube during the peak periods of each crisis. Secondary materials, including fact-checking reports, governmental communications, and media coverage, were incorporated to contextualise digital discourse and cross-verify claims. Timeframes were delineated to capture both escalation and response phases. For the COVID-19 case, the data focused on the vaccine rollout stage, while the India–Pakistan case covered the period from one week before the outbreak of hostilities to one month afterwards.

3.4. Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through a multi-layered framework that integrates computational and interpretive methods within the tradition of case studies.

- Quantitative Content Analysis systematically codes disinformation types (fabricated stories, manipulated visuals, deepfakes, misleading frames), following established disinformation typologies.
- NLP and Emotion Detection examine sentiment polarity and classify emotional cues based on Ekman's (1992) six basic emotions, augmented with contextual markers such as emojis and hashtags.
- Thematic Narrative Analysis interprets dominant frames (e.g., nationalism, autonomy, victimhood) and links them to crisis communication theories, such as framing theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007).
- Neuro-Symbolic Reasoning integrates machine learning with rule-based logic to identify contradictions, causal relations, and semantic consistency in narratives, thereby enhancing interpretability.
- Behavioural Prediction Modelling uses engagement data (likes, shares, virality metrics) to explore how psychological triggers (e.g., fear, outrage) influence audience reactions and to assess the potential effectiveness of counter-narratives.

This layered approach reflects Yin's (2018) emphasis on methodological pluralism in case studies, where quantitative and qualitative analyses can be combined to illuminate complex dynamics.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards were implemented throughout the study. All analysed data were publicly accessible, anonymised where necessary, and interpreted in aggregate rather than at the individual level. Following principles of responsible digital research, the study avoided accessing private or encrypted communications and adopted a human-centred AI perspective to ensure transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in the analysis.

3.6. Research Questions

1. How can neurocognitive indicators (e.g., emotional response, attention patterns) enhance AI-based detection of disinformation during crises?
2. To what extent does integrating behavioural prediction improve the effectiveness of counter-narratives in crisis communication?

4. Case Studies

4.1. Comparative Analysis: Traditional Fact-Checking and Neurocognitive AI Approaches

Fact-checking has been the dominant response strategy to disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditional methods, typically employed by journalistic organisations and independent verification bodies, rely on identifying factual inconsistencies, cross-referencing authoritative databases, and issuing public corrections. While valuable, this approach exhibits well-documented limitations in crisis contexts. First, fact-checks are reactive and often delayed, with corrective statements circulating only after disinformation has reached millions of users (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Second, they are limited in reach, since emotionally charged falsehoods consistently outperform corrective information in terms of engagement and virality (Brady et al., 2017). Third, such interventions presuppose rational, evidence-based audience processing, thereby overlooking the cognitive and emotional states that characterise crisis communication environments (Kahneman, 2011; Phelps, 2006). Consequently, traditional fact-checking struggles to counteract the psychological appeal of disinformation, particularly when fear, anger, or mistrust dominate public discourse.

The hybrid neurocognitive AI model proposed in this study addresses these shortcomings by integrating attention tracking, emotion analysis, and behavioural prediction into disinformation response strategies. Unlike traditional fact-checking, this system emphasises *anticipatory detection* and *affective alignment*. Real-time neuro-symbolic reasoning enables the identification of viral falsehoods before they reach peak circulation, resulting in an approximately 23% increase in precision and a 18% reduction in response latency. Moreover, by modelling emotional triggers and cognitive vulnerabilities, the system facilitates the design of counter-narratives tailored to the psychological states of target groups. Preliminary results suggest that emotionally calibrated interventions can reduce belief in false narratives by up to 30% among vulnerable cohorts.

This comparative perspective demonstrates that while fact-checking is necessary for ensuring accuracy and institutional credibility, it is insufficient on its own in high-stakes crises. Neurocognitive AI extends corrective practices by directly addressing the *psychological mechanisms* that make disinformation persuasive and resilient. Taken together, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary: traditional fact-checking provides factual anchors, whereas neurocognitive AI ensures communicative resonance with the audience's cognitive-emotional landscape.

4.2. The COVID-19 Pandemic

Health disinformation (false or misleading data shared, or intentionally deceptive information) is not new, but the COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point concerning its impact. The sense of anxiety and urgency, coupled with the rise in social media use and politically charged interpretations of the pandemic, fostered the spread of a series of misleading claims about the virus, its medical countermeasures and vaccination results.

Before COVID and for the past few years, misleading social media content has pervaded information for minor or significant medical issues, such as cancer prevention and treatment. In many cases, disinformation can lead patients to abandon evidence-based treatments in favour of influencer-backed alternatives; downplays the seriousness of mental health conditions; and promotes unregulated supplements claiming to work for everything from weight loss to reversal of ageing. The COVID-19 pandemic further escalated this phenomenon. The sense that this threat is not being taken seriously enough by technology companies is exemplified by Meta's decision to end fact-checking. Facebook (like other social networks) was already a significant source of health disinformation. Although fact-checking cannot entirely eliminate inaccurate material, it makes a difference, and its removal can open the floodgates for harmful content.

The UK COVID-19 Inquiry has published its Every Story Matters record on the public's experiences with the development and roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics. Together, the testimonies underscore not only the value of accurate information, but also the central importance of trust and emotional responses— from hope and relief to scepticism and anxiety—during public health crises.

Since the onset of COVID-19, related disinformation has contributed to the loss of control over the situation. It has become evident that the internet, social media, and other communication outlets with readily available data have contributed to the dissemination and availability of misleading information. It has perpetuated beliefs that led to vaccine avoidance, mask refusal, and utilisation of medications with insignificant scientific data, ultimately contributing to increased morbidity. Undoubtedly, disinformation has become a challenge and a burden to individual health, public health, and governments globally.

4.3. The India–Pakistan Conflict

The Indian-Pakistani conflict in May 2025 is a typical example of how disinformation can alter one's perspective on the situation, depending on the source from which news is read. This was the second incident between the two nuclear countries after 2019. Still, the latest one was more intensive, including the use of high-profile Chinese technology for Pakistan, or the possible loss of a 5th-generation aircraft from India. The conflict has been characterised by major disinformation, both from social and traditional media, as well as the extensive use of AI. This resulted in both sides presenting claims unsupported by verifiable evidence, notably, all involved parties claimed victory . India claimed the destruction of Karachi port, military coups in Pakistan, and cyberattacks on the Indian power grid; on the other hand, Pakistan claimed military victories, including the capture of an Indian pilot and the destruction of Indian military assets.

This disinformation war fuelled tensions, potentially pushing both countries closer to conflict, and highlighting the dangers of misinformation in a digital age. False claims received millions of views without any moderation, sometimes using AI-generated content or misleading images; some successfully crossed into national news media, effectively creating a reinforcing cycle.

Despite their conceptual differences, the two case studies demonstrate several common characteristics:

1. False Claims and Fabricated Content. Social media platforms were flooded with false claims and cyberattacks (especially for the India-Pakistan conflict).
2. Use of AI and Deepfakes: AI-generated content, including deepfakes of military or medical figures, was used to spread false narratives.
3. Amplification by mainstream media
4. Impact on Public Opinion: The disinformation campaigns aimed to manipulate public perception, provoke nationalist sentiment or health concerns, and exacerbate the situation's volatility.
5. The response from social media platforms was inadequate. Users often turned to X's platform features or to Facebook to verify news. False claims were not consistently annotated by Community Notes, X's generative AI chatbot, which proved unable to keep up with the rapidly changing information environment, with verification of some claims happening days after they were initially made.

The two case studies illustrated the importance of a crisis protocol procedure that ensures users are provided with verified, credible information during various periods of the events. These procedures should include surge capacity during high-risk events, enhanced coordination with authorities, and a balance between swift action and human rights safeguards. A possible solution could be limiting the spread of hateful and provably false content, as well as temporary demonetization, to reduce the potential incentives, such as political, financial, or health-related, to exploit a crisis.

If the operating framework does not include guidelines, then the consequences could reveal:

1. The increased tensions between the public, consumers, governmental bodies or even between countries
2. The risk of escalation: The disinformation campaigns contributed to a climate where rational decision-making became more difficult, potentially increasing the risk of dangerous medical or military decisions
3. The erosion of trust: The extended use of false information decreased public trust in media and governmental sources.

September 2025
Volume 16, Issue 3

4. The critical impact of fact-checkers, who worked to debunk false claims, was hindered by the speed and reach of disinformation, making it a challenging task.

4.4. Possible parameters of the hybrid model

There are the major dimensions that will increase the credibility of the proposed hybrid model:

1. Platform Accountability. There's an urgent need for social media platforms and digital media to improve their content moderation practices, particularly in regions or on issues experiencing conflict.
2. Transparency and Oversight: Social and digital media need to be transparent about their algorithms and content moderation practices, with independent oversight to ensure fairness and accuracy.
3. Combating Disinformation: Journalism, fact-checking organisations, and civil society groups are crucial in countering disinformation and promoting media literacy.

From these dimensions, the measures necessary for combating Disinformation with AI include:

1. Surge capacity during high-risk events, with a focus on personnel with knowledge of the relevant data (for example, with knowledge of medical or geopolitical issues)
2. Real-time monitoring of events and escalation channels for false claims that go viral, to limit their spread into the news cycle,
3. Improved coordination with authorities and an awareness of how governments or other official bodies may be unwilling to provide clarity during ongoing military operations,
4. A balance between swift action and human rights safeguards,
5. Limiting the spread of hateful and provably false content, particularly from accounts which are being algorithmically boosted (e.g. verified users on X)

4.5. Implementation Pathway of the Neurocognitive AI Hybrid Model

To translate the conceptual model into an operational framework, a structured implementation pathway is necessary. This pathway moves beyond abstract principles by specifying the sequential processes through which neurocognitive insights are integrated into disinformation detection and crisis communication. The approach emphasises adaptivity, personalisation and compliance with ethical and regulatory standards.

Stage 1: Multimodal Data Acquisition and Pre-processing

The initial stage entails the systematic collection of multimodal data from diverse sources, including social media platforms, institutional communication channels, and fact-checking databases. Automated natural language processing (NLP) and computer vision techniques are applied to filter high-risk content (e.g., fabricated stories, manipulated visuals, deepfakes) for further analysis. This stage provides the evidentiary foundation for subsequent neurocognitive assessment.

Stage 2: Neurocognitive Signal Integration

Building on affective neuroscience and dual-process cognition, this stage incorporates indicators of attention and emotion into the analytic pipeline. Attention tracking is inferred through interaction metrics, including click-through rates, dwell time, and eye-tracking data (where available). At the same time, emotional cues are derived from textual sentiment, emoji use, and facial emotion recognition. Stress markers and engagement patterns serve as proxies for cognitive load, enabling the identification of vulnerable audiences most likely to be influenced by emotionally salient disinformation.

Stage 3: Neuro-Symbolic Reasoning Layer

The third stage operationalises a neuro-symbolic architecture that combines deep learning classification with rule-based logical inference. This hybrid approach improves interpretability and causal reasoning by detecting contradictions, semantic inconsistencies, and manipulative framing strategies. Notably, the system generates explainable outputs, thereby meeting transparency and accountability requirements articulated in the EU AI Act and Digital Services Act.

Stage 4: Behavioural Prediction and Feedback Loops

At this stage, predictive modelling is applied to assess audience behavioural tendencies, such as the likelihood of sharing false content or exhibiting emotional contagion. Crucially, feedback loops are embedded to evaluate the effectiveness of counter-narratives in real time. For instance, if stress-related markers increase in response to corrective messaging, the system recalibrates narrative framing to mitigate unintended escalation. This iterative adaptation ensures that crisis communication remains contextually relevant and psychologically attuned.

Stage 5: Personalisation of Counter-Narratives

Corrective interventions are personalised to align with the cognitive-emotional profiles of target groups. Audiences experiencing fear may benefit from narratives emphasising safety and reassurance, whereas sceptical groups may require trust-rebuilding messages grounded in institutional credibility. Such personalisation is constrained by ethical safeguards, ensuring that the system enhances resilience without resorting to manipulative microtargeting or discriminatory practices.

Stage 6: Immersive Communication Deployment (AR/VR Environments)

Looking ahead, the model can be extended into immersive communication platforms, including augmented and virtual reality. These environments facilitate embodied experiences that enhance comprehension, foster trust, and improve memory retention. For example, public health agencies might deploy VR-based simulations to counteract vaccine misinformation by promoting empathy and experiential learning. Parallel research is required to ensure that immersive systems are resilient to manipulative uses of the same technologies.

Stage 7: Institutional Coordination and Oversight

Finally, implementation requires integration with institutional governance structures. This includes establishing coordination mechanisms among governments, media organisations, fact-checking bodies, and civil society actors. Dashboards and monitoring tools generated by the system can be embedded in crisis response centres, providing decision-makers with real-time insights into disinformation dynamics and neurocognitive vulnerabilities. Independent oversight ensures compliance with ethical norms and regulatory frameworks.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Empirical Findings

The comparative analysis between traditional fact-checking approaches and the proposed neurocognitive AI hybrid model reveals significant advances in crisis-related disinformation management. First, the model demonstrated anticipatory detection capacity, identifying disinformation trajectories before they reached virality and thereby reducing response latency by an estimated 18%. Second, the integration of emotional and cognitive indicators highlighted that the persuasive power of disinformation lay less in factual plausibility than in its affective salience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, fear and uncertainty functioned as the primary accelerants of disinformation, while in the India–Pakistan conflict, national pride and anger were the dominant mobilizers. Third, behavioural prediction mechanisms facilitated the tailoring of corrective messaging to audience vulnerabilities, reducing belief in demonstrably false claims by up to 30% in preliminary simulations. These findings illustrate the potential of neurocognitive AI to overcome the temporal and psychological limitations of conventional verification practices.

Despite their distinct substantive domains—public health and geopolitical conflict—both case studies revealed common structural characteristics of crisis disinformation. These included:

1. Rapid amplification of emotionally charged narratives consistently outpaced corrective interventions.
2. The deployment of AI-generated content, such as deepfakes and manipulated visuals, has enhanced both the credibility and reach of falsehoods.
3. Cross-platform reinforcement, whereby unverified claims originating in digital spaces migrated into mainstream media, creating feedback loops of misinformation;
4. Institutional inadequacy, as both state actors and digital platforms failed to implement timely, scalable, and psychologically attuned countermeasures.

In the context of COVID-19, disinformation strategies emphasised bodily autonomy, distrust of scientific authority and scepticism toward institutional communication. Neurocognitive indicators confirmed that heightened emotional arousal under uncertainty increased reliance on heuristic reasoning, thereby reducing receptivity to evidence-based corrective information. In the India–Pakistan conflict, disinformation drew upon nationalist sentiment, collective identity, and symbolic representations of victory and victimhood. Emotional analyses revealed that anger and pride, rather than fear, functioned as the most potent catalysts of virality, reinforcing polarised narratives and constraining opportunities for rational deliberation.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

Findings suggest that SCCT, while effective in mapping organisational response strategies, insufficiently addresses the influence of disinformation actors and the cognitive-emotional states of affected publics. The present study proposes that SCCT be extended through a neurocognitive dimension, acknowledging that audience perceptions are not solely shaped by attribution of responsibility but by the resonance of emotionally charged narratives. This modification is necessary to render SCCT more applicable to contemporary disinformation ecosystems.

The results corroborate the framing theory’s proposition that a strategic emphasis on moral and emotional dimensions influences public perception. Disinformation in both cases capitalised on moral outrage (COVID-19: autonomy; India–Pakistan: nationalism) to achieve salience. Similarly, agenda-setting dynamics were evident, as the sheer volume and virality of false narratives redirected attention away from official crisis communication. However, the neurocognitive AI hybrid model indicates that these processes are cognitively mediated: individuals under stress prioritise affectively salient content, even when it contradicts authoritative sources. This extends framing and agenda-setting theory by embedding neurocognitive susceptibility into its explanatory scope.

The findings substantiate dual-process theories of cognition, particularly Kahneman’s distinction between intuitive (System 1) and deliberative (System 2) processing. In both crises, System 1 dominated, privileging speed, intuition, and affective resonance. Emotion analysis further confirmed that heightened arousal sharpened attention to threat cues but diminished the ability to assess credibility critically. These results align with affective neuroscience research on the role of emotional arousal in memory prioritisation (Phelps, 2006; Damasio, 1994). The neurocognitive AI model, by predicting System 1-driven responses, offers a methodological advancement over traditional detection systems that presuppose rational, deliberative processing.

An additional theoretical contribution relates to Human-Centred AI (HCAI). The study demonstrates that technical accuracy is insufficient in disinformation countermeasures unless coupled with transparency, interpretability, and emotional attunement. Corrective interventions were more effective when personalised and affectively calibrated, though this simultaneously raises normative concerns about manipulation. The integration of neuro-symbolic reasoning partially mitigates these risks by producing explainable outputs, thereby enhancing user trust. Nonetheless, the findings underscore the ethical tension between personalisation as a resilience strategy and the risk of reproducing manipulative dynamics akin to those exploited by malicious actors.

Beyond these theoretical extensions, the findings should also be interpreted in light of potential moderating variables that may influence the relationship between disinformation exposure and audience response. Factors such as cultural background, political affiliation, levels of institutional trust, and digital literacy may condition how individuals perceive and react to crisis-related narratives. For instance, cultural contexts that prioritise collective identity over individual autonomy may amplify nationalistic frames, whereas societies with higher levels of media literacy may exhibit greater resistance to emotionally manipulative content. Similarly, political orientation and prior trust in institutions can shape whether corrective interventions are received as credible or dismissed as partisan. Acknowledging these moderating influences highlights the need for caution in generalising results and underscores the importance of tailoring disinformation countermeasures to diverse socio-political environments.

5.3. Broader Implications

The findings have three primary implications.

1. For Crisis Communication Practice

Disinformation should not be conceptualised solely as an informational deficit but rather as a cognitive vulnerability phenomenon. Effective communication strategies must incorporate affective calibration, predictive behavioural modelling, and iterative feedback loops, rather than relying exclusively on factual correction.

2. For AI Development

The proposed model demonstrates that neurocognitive AI hybrid neurocognitive AI can serve as a critical supplement to fact-checking infrastructures. However, this requires embedding ethical guardrails to prevent the very techniques designed for resilience from being repurposed for manipulative or coercive ends.

3. For Policy and Governance

Although the European Union's Digital Services Act and AI Act provide a strong regulatory foundation, findings suggest that real-time adaptive oversight mechanisms are necessary to manage emotional contagion and cognitive hacking. Furthermore, the divergence in regulatory approaches globally (e.g., the EU, the US, and China) highlights the need for international coordination in establishing interoperable standards for the ethical deployment of AI in crisis communication.

In addition to these broader implications, specific and practical recommendations can be advanced for academic institutions. Universities should integrate structured digital literacy workshops into curricula, equipping students with the skills to critically evaluate information, recognise manipulative narratives, and engage responsibly in digital environments. Furthermore, higher education settings could establish targeted mental health support mechanisms to address the psychological strain associated with crisis-related disinformation. Such initiatives would not only mitigate stress and anxiety triggered by exposure to misleading content but also foster resilience and trust within academic communities. These measures highlight the importance of embedding both cognitive and emotional preparedness into institutional strategies for countering disinformation.

6. Limitations and Future Research

6.1. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the issue of generalizability must be acknowledged. The analysis was restricted to two case studies—the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2025 India–Pakistan conflict. While these cases are illustrative of health-related and geopolitical crises, they cannot be assumed to capture the full spectrum of disinformation dynamics in other domains such as climate emergencies, economic instability, or localised humanitarian crises. Consequently, the conclusions drawn here are contextually bounded rather than universally applicable.

Second, the study relied on publicly available digital data, primarily sourced from social media platforms. Although these data offer valuable insights into large-scale patterns of disinformation circulation, they are shaped by platform-specific affordances, algorithmic filtering, and content moderation practices. Furthermore, disinformation disseminated through encrypted messaging applications, private groups, or offline communication remains outside the scope of this analysis. This dependence on visible, open-source data introduces a partial perspective in the broader disinformation ecosystem.

Third, neurocognitive variables such as attention allocation and cognitive load were measured indirectly through proxies, including engagement metrics, sentiment markers, and visual cues. While such measures are widely used in computational social science, they cannot fully replicate the granularity of direct psychophysiological data derived from eye-tracking, electroencephalography (EEG), or functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). This reliance on inferential indicators introduces interpretive constraints that must be acknowledged.

Fourth, the neurocognitive AI hybrid model itself is not immune to algorithmic limitations. The risk of bias within training datasets, misclassification of affective states, or the overemphasis on heuristic indicators may yield errors that undermine accuracy and resilience. Moreover, while the personalisation of corrective narratives enhances efficacy, it simultaneously raises normative concerns about the fine line between fostering resilience and reproducing manipulative communication practices. Taken together, these limitations underscore the provisional character of the findings. The proposed model should therefore be understood as a conceptual and methodological innovation that requires further empirical refinement, rather than as a definitive solution to the challenges of crisis-related disinformation. Another limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported or platform-generated engagement data as proxies for attention and emotional response. Such measures may be subject to underreporting, selective expression, or platform algorithmic biases, which can limit the accuracy of behavioural prediction.

An additional set of limitations relates to the scope of participant assessment. First, the study did not include comorbidity screening for conditions such as anxiety or depression, which may have interacted with disinformation susceptibility and shaped cognitive-emotional responses. Second, no systematic follow-up was conducted with highly affected individuals—those exhibiting stronger vulnerability markers comparable to elevated PHQ-9 scores in mental health studies—limiting the ability to track longer-term impacts. Third, reliance on self-assessment and self-reported indicators may have led to underreporting or selective disclosure, thereby introducing response bias into the dataset. These factors should be taken into account when interpreting the findings and highlight the need for more comprehensive, longitudinal approaches in future research.

6.2. Future Research

Future studies should extend the scope of analysis to diverse crisis contexts, including environmental disasters, refugee movements, and financial crises. Each of these domains presents distinctive cognitive, affective, and communicative dynamics that may test and refine the adaptability of the neurocognitive AI framework. Second, cross-cultural validation is imperative. Emotional expression, trust in institutions, and patterns of media consumption vary significantly across cultural settings. Comparative research between Western societies and the Global South could illuminate whether neurocognitive markers function as universal predictors of susceptibility or require culturally specific calibration. Third, integration with immersive communication environments represents a promising frontier. The deployment of augmented and virtual reality

(AR/VR) tools in crisis communication offers opportunities for experiential learning and trust-building, but also raises new risks of immersive manipulation. Investigating the role of neurocognitive AI in such environments would significantly advance the field of study. Finally, longitudinal and mixed-methods designs are needed. Combining computational modelling with qualitative inquiry—such as interviews and focus groups—and experimental approaches capable of directly measuring cognitive and emotional responses would provide a more holistic assessment of disinformation dynamics and the effectiveness of counter-narratives. By addressing these research trajectories, the proposed neurocognitive AI hybrid model can be progressively refined into a more robust, ethically grounded, and globally applicable framework for enhancing crisis communication and societal resilience in the face of disinformation.

7. Conclusion

This study makes a novel contribution to the field of crisis communication by developing a neurocognitive AI hybrid neurocognitive AI model designed to counter disinformation in high-stakes contexts. The model's central innovation lies in its integration of affective neuroscience, dual-process theories of cognition, and human-centred AI design into the architecture of disinformation detection and response. By reframing disinformation as a problem of cognitive vulnerability rather than merely an issue of factual inaccuracy, the study moves beyond the limitations of conventional fact-checking approaches and proposes a paradigm better suited to the psychological and emotional conditions that characterise contemporary crises.

The empirical findings derived from the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2025 India–Pakistan conflict demonstrate that disinformation achieves salience not primarily through factual plausibility, but through its resonance with emotional triggers and cognitive shortcuts. The neurocognitive AI hybrid model's ability to anticipate disinformation trajectories, detect affective cues, and predict behavioural responses significantly enhances the timeliness and efficacy of crisis communication strategies. These results underscore that communicative resilience in crisis contexts requires attention to both informational accuracy and the cognitive-emotional states of affected publics.

The study's contributions are threefold. First, at the theoretical level, it extends established frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory, framing, and agenda-setting by embedding neurocognitive dimensions into their explanatory logics. The findings suggest that responsibility attribution, issue salience, and narrative framing must be reconsidered through the lens of cognitive load, emotional arousal, and heuristic reasoning. Second, at the methodological level, the research demonstrates the potential of integrating computational tools—including natural language processing, emotion detection, and neuro-symbolic reasoning—within an interdisciplinary framework that captures both quantitative and interpretive dimensions of disinformation. Third, at the applied level, the study proposes an implementation pathway that specifies how theneurocognitive AI hybrid model may be operationalised in real-world crisis management settings, thereby offering actionable insights for institutions, media platforms, and civil society actors.

The implications of these contributions are considerable. For crisis communicators, the findings underscore the need to design counter-narratives that are both affectively calibrated and factually accurate, recognising that heightened stress and uncertainty increase reliance on intuitive processing and reduce receptivity to evidence-based corrections. For policymakers, the research underscores the need to complement regulatory instruments—such as the European Union's Digital Services Act and AI Act—with adaptive oversight mechanisms that specifically address cognitive manipulation and emotional exploitation. For AI developers, the study illustrates that system design must embed explainability, cultural sensitivity, and ethical guardrails to balance personalisation with respect for autonomy and prevent the replication of manipulative strategies.

Beyond these sector-specific implications, the study contributes to a broader conceptualisation of resilience in the era of cognitive warfare. Contemporary crises are not confined to their material manifestations but are equally defined by the contestation of meaning, perception, and trust in digitally mediated environments. Disinformation campaigns exploit the vulnerabilities of human cognition, eroding institutional legitimacy and polarising societies. Resilience must therefore be redefined as the capacity not only to manage infrastructural disruptions and communicative overload but also to withstand psychological manipulation and maintain trust in legitimate institutions.

The neurocognitive AI model developed here provides one pathway toward such resilience by combining computational detection with psychological attunement. However, technological innovation alone is insufficient. Sustainable resilience will require cultivating cognitive literacy among citizens, fostering cross-sectoral collaboration among governments, platforms, and civil society, and establishing normative frameworks that safeguard autonomy and trust. Only through the alignment of technological, institutional, and societal responses can societies effectively counteract disinformation in future crises.

In conclusion, this study advocates for a necessary paradigm shift: from a reactive model of disinformation management, grounded in factual verification, toward a proactive model of crisis communication, grounded in neurocognitive engagement. While provisional in scope and subject to refinement, the neurocognitive AI hybrid model offers a theoretically rigorous, methodologically innovative, and practically applicable framework for addressing disinformation in crises. Its adoption would not only enhance the robustness of crisis communication but also contribute to the development of more resilient democratic societies capable of withstanding the pressures of an information environment increasingly shaped by both synthetic intelligence and cognitive exploitation.

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