EXPLORING PUBLIC TRUST IN PAKISTANI NEWS MASS MEDIA

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Abstract
This study explores public trust in the print and electronic media in Pakistan and its influence on consumption patterns. Source credibility theory is used as a theoretical framework in this study. By collecting responses from 380 residents of Islamabad through multi-stage sampling method, the researcher examined the patterns, correlations of media trust across demographic groups and consumption behaviors. The results show that newspapers are considered the most trusted medium. Despite being the most consumed news medium, television is regarded as the least trusted. The findings also reveal that demographic variables such as gender, education, and income exert very limited influence compared to structural and institutional factors. Moreover, higher trust levels are positively associated with greater consumption of newspapers and television. The results further indicate that audiences give more preference to international media over national media reflecting the perception that domestic media are less credible due to political influence.

INTRODUCTION

Public trust in mass media has become a central issue in advanced democracies. Media professionals are often criticized for manipulating news, exhibiting political bias, and spreading misinformation. The Digital News Report 2021 by the Reuters Institute shows that more than 57 percent of Europeans do not trust the media (Fletcher et al., 2021). Several scholars have also documented the steady decline of public trust in the media over the past few decades, noting that a once-respected profession is now a source of dissatisfaction and concern (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Ladd, 2011). Extensive scholarship on media trust has emerged in Western countries, particularly in politically polarized societies. These studies often emphasize the reliability of news content, its sources, and modes of delivery (Tsfati & Cohen, 2013). Research has also identified three major dimensions

of trust and mistrust: individual behavior towards media, political affiliations, and knowledge about media. However, the situation in Pakistan is less understood. Despite a unique and highly polarized media environment, systematic studies on public trust in Pakistani news media remain limited.

Some valuable contributions exist. For example, Bhutta (2020) found that young people in Pakistan regard traditional news outlets such as newspapers and television channels—along with their online editions—as more trustworthy for political news, while Twitter is seen as more credible than Facebook among social media platforms. Nevertheless, much of the existing research relies heavily on data collected from university students, raising questions about its generalizability. Moreover, while concepts such as fairness, accuracy, and impartiality are frequently

acknowledged, their precise indicators are rarely defined or measured.

This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive examination of public trust in Pakistani news media. Such an inquiry must consider factors such as political affiliations, levels of news exposure, and patterns of media consumption. In addition, Pakistan has witnessed intensifying political polarization in recent years, reflected in public discourse and debates (Yelmaz & Kainat, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored polarization as a global phenomenon, with youth in particular playing a prominent role in protests, accountability movements, and online debates (Adnan, 2022). These dynamics make it crucial to assess how trust in the media is shaped within the Pakistani context.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by moving beyond student populations and drawing data from the wider public. It also operationalizes key variables of trust—such as believability, fairness, accuracy, and impartiality—through measurable indicators, allowing for a more holistic analysis of public trust in news media. Ultimately, the study aims to investigate whether, and to what extent, Pakistani citizens trust the media, and to identify the key factors influencing trust and distrust.

Literature review

Keeping in view complexity and interdependence of societies, trust is like a social glue that not only connects people but also organizations and institutions (Sztompka, 2000). It includes both media and journalists and they cannot perform their roles without the trust of their audiences (Usher, 2018) and resultantly would have grave effects for society. In recent years, the trust has been witnessing downward trend globally (Strömbäck et al., 2020). As per online definition of Oxford dictionary, "trust means firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of something or someone".

In the realm of trust within media and journalism, individuals ideally place their trust in media persons, editors and newsrooms to responsibly collect accurate and valuable information. By doing so, news consumers blindly, rely on these sources without independently verifying their own information gathering. Hanitzsch et al. (2017) define media trust as 'the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner".

Media trust is multifaceted, encompassing three key levels: (a) trust in the news information itself, (b) trust in the individuals delivering the news, involving interpersonal trust, and (c) trust in the media organizations, which extends to institutional trust. This includes distinguishing trust in specific media brands, types, and in general the broader category of news media (Williams, 2012; Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

In literature, both terms credibility and trust are frequently used interchangeably. They are labeled as nearly synonymous (Matthes & Kohring 2007). However, Belmas and Vanacker (2009) suggested that concepts of both credibility and trust should be segregated. Scholars argue that trust works as a broader macro-social concept, of which credibility constitutes just one element. Hardin (2002) highlights a common misconception in the literature on trust, of which the conflation of trust and credibility is an example, of equating trust with trustworthiness, or the attributes of the entity that is to be trusted. Trust is a relational phenomenon, since no individual or institution is trustworthy on their own. It depends on whether someone chooses to trust them and on how well they carry out the tasks or responsibilities expected of them. Contrary to trust, mistrust is defined as a "lack of trust or confidence; suspicion". It indicates a perception of doubt about someone or something. Mistrust or skepticismis is quietly different concept as receivers have general impression that news reports provided by media persons are neither based on objectivity nor fairness besides terming journalists' decisions inappropriate (Peri, 2006; Tsfati 2010).

Keeping in view basic journalism's principles like objectivity, fairness and balance, the media distrust phenomenon can be dubbed with hostile media where the people realize that media coverage is biased (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Gunther, 1992). Owing to multiple definitions and concepts, media trust is operationalized in many ways. According to Fletcher and Park (2017), media trust can be measured through asking from recipients about their trust on media or news. However, in this case, the recipients may have different understandings which are not kept in mind (Kohring, 2004).

The media trust can also be measured through multiple items. Kohring and Matthes (2007) measure it through four dimensions including issues selectivity, facts selectivity, accuracy of descriptions and journalistic assessment. Similarly, Tsfati (2003), investigates media trust with title of "media scepticism," utilizes different items which was borrowed from News Credibility Scale of Gaziano and McGrath's (1986)

. According to study carried out by Strömbäck and Tsfati, et al. (2020) media uses by people has assumed importance keeping in view the existing media environment. It remains unclear to what extent the news media being trusted by the people and how this trust influences their utilization of various media platforms.

In research to measure the characteristics of trust and mistrust, there are three levels or dimensions of media influence that can be distinguished as; individual behavior towards media, political characteristics and affiliations, and individual knowledge about media (Tsfati & Cohen, 2013).

Based on thematic analysis of 40 semi-structured interviews with Australian audiences who either consume heavy or minimal mainstream new, Park and his colleagues (2024) highlighted varying responses regarding the effort put into verifying questionable news. Among heavy news users, responses include 'pragmatic skepticism,' 'selective trust,' and 'generalized cynicism,' which drive behaviors like checking of facts and proper verification. These results suggest that distrust in mainstream news media isn't necessarily detrimental, as it can foster greater critical engagement with news and information. However, mostly non-news users exhibit 'critically conscious' or 'cynically disengaged' attitudes towards news, potentially leading to low-effort responses. This lack of trust, especially among non-news consumers, may contribute to a cycle of disengagement

Source Credibility Theory

This theory, which was propounded by Hovland, Janis & Kelly (1963) specified, "people or receivers are more likely to be persuaded when the source presents itself as credible". Later, in 1963 and 1974, Hovland and Weiss respectively also examined sources' influence on persuasion process. Other researchers also carried out their studies by making comparison between credible and non-credible information sources. They examined whether information received from credible sources could influence opinion of the audiences more as compared to non-credible sources. Information received from credible sources. Information or news received from credible sources always has a potential to produce required effect on perception of the audience (Umeogu, 2012). On the other hand, source having moderate credibility increases more positive attitude and response if identified before to information presentation. The audiences need reinforcement thoughts in case the sources have uncertain reputation (Sternthal et. al 1978). The audience attachment with the message is another reason in attitude change.

The study of credibility in mass communication continues to be fundamental to the field's understanding, with recent research focusing on audience perceptions of credibility across traditional and social media platforms, as well as their media preferences.

Flanagin and Metzger (2007) examined credibility by building upon numerous earlier studies to establish propositions and refine the definition of credibility.

Research Hypotheses

RH1: People trust newspapers more than television and radio for news consumption.

RH2: Female shows a higher level of trust in the news media as compared to male.

RH 3: Trust in newspapers, television, and radio is positively and significantly correlated.

RH4: Higher the consumption of media (in terms of time), more the trust in newspapers, television, and radio.

RH5: People trust international media more than national media for news.

Methodology

Questionnaire survey approach is adopted for this study as research design to gather data from the selected sample. Owing to broader population in Islamabad, multi-stages sampling techniques were applied to draw sample. Initially, in the first stage, through simple draw, the researcher randomly selected four main sectors including D, F, G and I among all the sectors of the federal capital. Then

among the four selected sectors, the researcher through simple draw selected I sectors. However I sector has further classified in sectors I-8, I-9, 1-10, I-11, I-12, I-13, I-14, I-15 and I-16. Again through the simple draw, sector I-8 was chosen but the I-8 sector has further four sub sectors including I-8/1, I-8/2, I-8/3 and I-8/4. In last stage, through simple draw, I-8/3 sector was selected for distribution of questionnaires to get response from the residents. The researcher visited door to door and distributed 385 questionnaires. Through systematic sampling, the researcher distributed questionnaires in every 2nd house of consecutive first two streets and then every third house of every third streets of the sub-sector I 8/3. Out of total 385 distributed questionnaires, two respondents did not return the questionnaires while three were discorded due to partial responses.

Variables of the Study

Following two variables' Media trust and Media uses will be used in the research study. Media trust is a dependent variable while media uses is an independent variable.

Dependent variables
I. Media Trust:

The variable of media trust in the present study has been conceptualized as audience perception regarding believability, fairness, accuracy, unbiasedness and completeness.

Independent Variables
II. Media Uses:

The variable of Media uses has been conceptualized as the active/passive use and the media users exposure to the news media content of the mainstream news mass media (Newspapers, Tv, Radio).

Gender: gender is used as a categorical variable as male and female

Age: Age is recorded in four categories from 18 to 30 years to 61 and above years.

Education: Level of formal education is recorded from SSC/Metric to Ph.D

Income: Monthly Income of the respondents is recorded in five categories in Pakistani currency from less than Rs 40,000 to over Rs 100,000.

Party Affiliation: It is recorded as categorical variable and recorded as yes and no.

Measurement scale for public trust in news

The prime focus of this research study was to explore public trust in the news mass media i.e newspapers, radio and tv channels. To explore the public trust phenomena in the news media, previous literature was very significant to develop evaluation scale for trust in the news media. In various scholarships trust was examined as multi-dimensional indexes, which composed believability, fairness, accuracy, unbiased, tells the whole story (Completeness). The participants of survey indicated on a 5-points scale which includes three each empirical indicators of believability, fairness, accuracy, unbiasedness and completeness respectively.

Findings

Out of total 385 distributed questionnaires among the selected sample, 380 questionnaires were received completely filled, two respondents did not return the questionnaires while three were discorded due to partial responses. The response rate stood at 98.70 percent.

RH1: People trust newspapers more than television and radio for news consumption.
Table 1:
Public Trust in Terms of Media Types

Media Platform	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Newspapers	380	3.27	0.67	95.19	379	.000
Television	380	2.89	0.78	-	-	-
Radio	380	3.15	0.76	-	-	-

The findings indicate that newspapers have the highest trust score (M = 3.27, SD = 0.67), followed by radio (M = 3.15, SD = 0.76) and television (M = 2.89, SD = 0.78). The one-sample t-test for newspapers

confirms that the level of trust in this medium is significantly higher than zero (t(379) = 95.19, p < .001), indicating strong confidence in newspapers as a reliable news source. The research hypothesis is supported.

RH2: Female shows a higher level of trust in the news media as compared to male.
Table 2
Media Trust in terms of Gender

Media Platform	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	P value
Newspapers	Male	262	3.24	0.67	-1.59	378	.112
	Female	118	3.36	0.68			
Television	Male	262	2.86	0.83	-1.13	378	.260
	Female	118	2.96	0.66			
Radio	Male	262	3.16	0.76	0.29	378	.772
	Female	118	3.13	0.75			

The results indicate that female respondents reported slightly higher trust levels in newspapers (M = 3.36, SD = 0.68) and television (M = 2.96, SD = 0.66) compared to male respondents (M = 3.24, SD = 0.67 for newspapers and M = 2.86, SD = 0.83 for television). However, the independent samples t-tests show that these differences are not statistically significant (p > .05), suggesting that gender does not play a decisive role in media trust levels. For trust in radio, male respondents (M = 3.16, SD = 0.76) and female respondents (M = 3.13, SD = 0.75) showed almost identical mean values. The t-test confirms no significant difference between the two groups (t(378) = 0.29, p = .772). The hypothesis is not supported.

RH 3: Trust in newspapers, television, and radio is positively and significantly correlated.
Table 3:
Correlations between Public Trust in different News Media

Variable	Trust in Newspapers	Trust in TV	Trust in Radio
Trust in Newspapers		.44**	.56**
Trust in TV			.46**
Trust in Radio			

Note. *N* = 380. Pearson correlations reported. **p** < .01 (two-tailed).

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between trust in newspapers, television, and radio. The results indicate statistically significant positive correlations between all three media platforms.
Trust in newspapers was moderately correlated with trust in television, **r**(380) = .44, **p** < .001, and more strongly correlated with trust in radio, **r**(380) = .56, **p** < .001. Likewise, trust in television was positively correlated with trust in radio, **r**(380) = .46, **p** < .001.

The hypothesis is supported. These findings suggest that individuals who trust one traditional news medium tend to trust others as well. The stronger correlation between newspapers and radio compared to newspapers and television may indicate that audiences perceive print and audio media as more reliable sources of news. The moderate correlation between television and other media suggests that while TV remains an important source of information, it might be viewed with more skepticism compared to newspapers and radio.

RH4: Higher the consumption of media (in terms of time), more the trust in newspapers, television, and radio.

Table 4:

Correlations between time spent and Public Trust in News Media

Variable	Overall Trust	Newspapers	TV Channels	Radio
Time spent		.14**	.40**	.00
Newspapers			.22**	.16**
TV Channels				-.03
Radio				

Note. *N* = 380. Pearson correlations reported. **p** < .01 (two-tailed).

A Pearson correlation analysis was carried out to explore the relation between time spent to consume media (newspapers, television, and radio) and trust in news media.

The findings indicate that the total time spent consuming media was significantly and positively correlated with trust in newspapers (**r** = .14, **p** < .01) and television (**r** = .40, **p** < .01), but there was no significant relationship between time spent on media and trust in radio (**r** = .00, **p** = .99). This advocates that individuals who spend more time engaging with newspapers and television tend to have greater trust in these mediums, whereas radio trust does not appear to be influenced by time spent. Further, newspaper consumption was positively correlated with both television (**r** = .22, **p** < .01) and radio (**r** = .16, **p** < .01), indicating that those who read newspapers frequently are also likely to consume other forms of media.

However, television consumption and radio consumption were not significantly related (**r** = -.03, **p** = .61), suggesting that these two platforms may attract different audience segments. The hypothesis is supported.

There is also a strong positive correlation between public trust and time spent watching television (**r** = .40, **p** < .01), suggesting that TV is being used as a primary source for news consumption. Accessibility to major areas, real-time reporting and visual appeal may some of the reasons for its greater perceived credibility. Furthermore, there is a relatively weak correlation between time spent on reading newspapers and public trust which suggests that although print media is considered trusted medium, it faces many challenges such as declining readership and massive growth of digital and social media.

RH5: People trust international media more than national media for news.

Table 5:

Preference for National vs. International News Sources

News Source	*N*	Percentage (%)	X^2 (df = 378)	*P*
National News Sources	153	40.3	121.02	.020
International News Sources	227	59.7		
Total	380	100.0		

Note. *N* = 380. X^2= Chi-Square test

A Chi Square test was carried out to compare the preference for national and international news sources among respondents. The results indicate a statistically significant difference in preference, X^2 (378) = 121.02, *p* = .020. The hypothesis is supported. The results suggest that respondents significantly prefer international news sources (N = 60 percent)

over national news sources (N = 40.3 percent), as indicated by the statistically significant result (*p* = .020). This finding implies that individuals may perceive international media as more reliable, comprehensive, or unbiased in reporting political news compared to national sources. It is generally perceived that the government can easily exert

significant influence the local sources through various means such as political press, ownership, regulatory control, censorship, certain law while in contrast, the government ability to influence international news sources is relatively minimum owing to their diverse editorial standard, independence and transnational nature. So, keeping in view the above said factors, the people have greater trust in the international sources as compared to local and national ones.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study explores in-depth- complex nature of public trusts in news media among the citizen residing in federal capital Islamabad. The results of scholarship disclose that media trust is not only a multidimensional but also context-sensitive construct which is shaped by various intersecting factors such as demographic characteristics, political affiliation, patterns of media consumption and institutional credibility. The findings of the research are aligned with the available academic literature about media trust especially in the context of developing countries and politically polarized media landscape like in Pakistan.

The limited effect of income and education on media trust may be attributed to the landscape of educational system in Pakistan. The findings also show that mostly formal education in Pakistan lacks components of critical media literacy besides not adequately cultivating analytical competencies to examine media system, ownership system and political affiliations. This result endorsed the findings of Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) who contend that structural factors such as press freedom and the existence of public broadcasting are not sufficient to fully explain variations in media trust. Similar findings are also reported by Islam et al. (2023) in his research in neighbouring country Bangladesh that factors like poor news quality, sensationalist reporting and political biases exert a more decisive influence on public trusts as compared with demographic variables. The results of the study into the perceived trustworthiness of news mass media including newspaper, radio and television disclosed a clear hierarchy. The findings reveal that newspapers are considered most trusted source for getting news information followed by radio while the people have low trust on television. This finding is aligned with the

scholarships of Hanitzsch et al. (2018) and Fletcher & Park (2017), who found that the newspapers have more trust worthy owing to their in-depth reporting, permanence and editorial oversight as compared with other news medium such as radio and tv. In Pakistan, this perception further strengthens as there is a longstanding linkage of print journalism with intellectual engagement and investigative reporting. These results are also consistent with local prior studies such as Bhutta (2020) who explained that Pakistani people regard newspapers as more credible source for political news than other digital or government sources.

The audience ranked television lowest in their trust despite the fact that mostly they spend more time on it as compared with radio and newspapers. This indicates a broader global and local concern about element of sensationalism in TV journalism particularly in competitive media markets such as Pakistan. Zulqarnain (2016) and Azam et al. (2021) in their scholarships link this shift to factors mainly biased nature of reporting, enhance political and corporate interests and absence of editorial independence. The findings reveal that TV witness visible trust erosion due to not following basic journalistic principles of objectivity and balance despite dominant in reach. Tsfati (2002) and Bennett (2012) also highlighted these concerns in their studies. The result of the study that there is a positive correlation between trust in one traditional media (newspapers) and trust in others medium (radio and television) endorse Kohring and Matthes's (2007) conceptualization of media trust as a multidimensional but integrated construct. As per their model, media trust consists of issue selectivity, factual selectivity, accuracy of representation, and the interpretive performance of journalists. This interconnectedness recommends that public perception of one medium can effect perceptions of others, reinforcing broader patterns of trust or distrust.

Investigation of relationship between consumption of media duration and level of public trust is a significant contribution of the current study. The findings explore that more exposure to newspapers and television is positively correlated with higher trust levels which endorses the exposure trust hypothesis (Lee, 2010; Metzger et al., 2003). Significant gap

between national and international media is another key finding of the study. The participants of the study consider international news sources more trustworthy than the national news sources which endorse the results of Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) and Liu et al. (2020 who noted that the audiences consider international media more objective and impartial in political constrained environment. This perception has significant implications as switching to international media give broader perspectives. It indicates that the people have no trust on national institutions which can weaken domestic discourse and accountability mechanism.

Reliance of the audiences on international media shows that they not only avoid watching biased coverage but also distrust on local media.

To sum up, the scholarship indicates that trust in media in not a simple concept rather it is complex, multilayered and context dependent construct adding that political affiliations, perceptions of institutional integrity, consumption of media and generational experiences shape the trust in media. The results also suggest that trust in media cannot simply restore through better content but there is also dire need to change the relationships between media, politics and the people. The media can regain its place of trusted pillar in polarized society only transparency, independence and meaningful engagement.

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