# TRUST IN MEDIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA & LEGACY MEDIA IN PAKISTAN

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**Abstract**
*This study examines the evolving dynamics of media trust among media students at the University of the Punjab, focusing on their perceptions of mainstream and social media in terms of credibility, bias, and reliability. Using a quantitative survey method, the research analyzed correlations between perceived media bias, misinformation, and attitudes toward regulation and fact-checking. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between perceived media bias and the demand for verification and oversight (r = 0.340, p < 0.01). Despite reporting higher levels of trust in social media compared to mainstream media, respondents demonstrated awareness of its vulnerabilities, particularly the rapid spread of misinformation and the influence of algorithmic personalization. Overall, the findings underscore the evolving relationship between media users and information sources in Pakistan's digital era and emphasize the urgent need to foster media literacy, promote transparency, and strengthen ethical journalism practices to rebuild public confidence and ensure responsible communication in a rapidly changing media environment.*
*        **Key Words:** Media Trust, Social Media, Legacy Media, Media Bias*

## Media Trustworthiness in the Digital Age

In contemporary society, the way individuals consume and perceive information has undergone a radical transformation. The emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok has fundamentally changed how people access news, interact with information, and engage in discussions on various topics. Meanwhile, traditional mainstream media, which includes television, newspapers, radio, and online news portals run by established media organizations, has historically been regarded as the primary source of credible and verified information. The shift in news consumption patterns has led to an ongoing debate over the reliability and trustworthiness of these two mediums.

The trustworthiness of media sources has been a point of concern, especially among students of universities, who are an extremely active community in both social and mainstream media. While mainstream media has historically been seen as a formal and authoritative source of information, it has been increasingly criticized and losing credibility in recent years because of

charges of bias, political manipulation, and selective reporting. Social media, with its decentralized platform and ability to report in real time, has been a source of information for many. Its unregulated platform, however, has been vulnerable to misinformation, fake news, and algorithmic echo chambers that reinforce biases and not report objective information (Jarva et al., 2025). The significance of the issue is of particular relevance in an academic setting where students are expected to build critical thinking and the ability to recognize credible sources of information. The media students of Punjab University, who are the focus of this study, are not only consumers of news but also future media practitioners. Their perception of trust in various media sources will guide their practice of journalism, communication, and information dissemination in the years ahead. Knowing their perception of trust in social media versus mainstream media is thus significant in assessing the changing scenario of media credibility and the potential implications it could have on the future of journalism and public discourse.

The concept of trust in media has been extensively researched in media and communication studies. Conventionally, mainstream media have been the par excellence of credible information due to its systematic editorial policy, journalist ethics, and fact-checking. Print and broadcast media companies utilize trained professionals who sign up to professional codes of conduct to decide on accuracy and responsibility. Despite such guarantees, mainstream media have not been free from controversy. For years now, numerous reports of biased news, corporate influence, and political interference have raised questions about viewers' confidence. Research confirms that declining trust in traditional media is most typically explained by ownership issues in the media, ideological bias, and business interest preoccupation rather than journalism (Barash & Tyurina, 2024). The emergence of digital technology further complicated the balance of trust in media consumption. Social media provided users with unprecedented levels of access, interactivity, and variability of opinion.

**Objectives**

1. To compare the level of trust placed in social media and mainstream media among media students at Punjab University.
2. To examine the relationship between trust in mainstream media and trust in social media.
3. To analyze the impact of perceived media bias and misinformation on students' skepticism and their demand for fact-checking and media regulation.

**Bridging the Gap Between Perception and Reality**

Among the chief factors that make this study a necessity is growing disillusionment with mainstream and social media. Mainstream media, once the strongholds of respectable reporting of the news, have been decimated by reputational damage owing to accusations of political bias, corporate manipulation, and selective reporting of news (Barash & Tyurina, 2024). Concurrently, social media sites, which offer a more democratized and user-oriented means of sharing news, have been faulted for their role in perpetuating disinformation, creating echo chambers, and enabling sensationalism (Farag, 2024). This study will investigate the extent to which media students trust these sources, identify key factors influencing their trust, and determine how they differentiate between credible and non-credible information.

Media literacy is a valuable skill in the contemporary digital world, where separating credible information from misinformation is getting more and more difficult. Students in universities, especially those who are media and communication majors, are gifted with the skill of cultivating critical thinking abilities to gauge the credibility of news sources, detect bias, and deal with information ethically and responsibly. Nevertheless, according to a study, even media-

studies literate students might find it difficult to handle the intricate media world and are not exempt from misinformation (Heaton, 2024).

The significance of the study lies in its examination of how media students at Punjab University perceive and trust different media platforms in a period of rapid digital transformation. By examining the determinants of their trust in social media and mainstream media, the study will provide significant insights into media consumption patterns, issues of misinformation, and the effectiveness of media literacy education. As future media professionals, their trust in sources of information will define the integrity and credibility of journalism in the future. The study's findings will not only add to academic knowledge but also have implications for practice for educators, policymakers, and media organizations that seek to ensure credible journalism remains a pillar of well-informed societies.

### Research Questions

1. To what extent do media students at Punjab University trust mainstream media compared to social media as a reliable source of information?
2. Is there a negative correlation between trust in mainstream media and trust in social media among media students?
3. How does perceived media bias and misinformation influence skepticism and the demand for fact-checking and regulation in media?

One of the key factors in the loss of trust in mainstream media is the perceived political bias of the news. As Newman et al. (2023) established, university students are more likely to perceive traditional media sources as politically biased than objective news reporting. For example, right-wing listeners in the United States have been more trusting of conservative media outlets like Fox News, whereas left-wing audiences prefer to use sources like CNN or The New York Times. This polarization generates media distrust among those who view opposing sources as biased, resulting in loss of confidence in journalism as a whole. Political interference with mainstream journalism has also been a cross-country phenomenon, especially in countries where governments own large media conglomerates. Reporters Without Borders (2022) indicated that in states with high levels of media censorship, like China, Russia, and Turkey, trust in independent journalism has greatly declined due to state-controlled narratives. Even in democratic states, there is increasing concern regarding media ownership affecting editorial choices, generating skepticism regarding whether news organizations actually serve the public interest.

A comprehensive analysis by Allcott and Gentzkow (2022) established that more than 65% of college students use social media as their main source of news. Three factors explain the popularity of social media compared to mainstream news: accessibility, interactivity, and pluralism of opinion. Social media, unlike newspaper and television news, which are constrained by fixed programming, offers a continuous stream of updates of breaking news stories. The real-time update advantage keeps students informed immediately and allows them to track live broadcasts in real time. Secondly, the interactive nature of social media websites allows students to contribute to critical discussions, exchange opinions, and access alternative opinions. A study by Newman et al. (2023) on youth's news consumption habits concluded that students like the interactive nature of social media, where they can comment, react, and engage in debates over news stories. The capacity to track multiple perspectives—those of independent journalists, influencers, and citizen journalists—makes social media more appealing than mainstream media, which is mainly seen as biased or selective reporting.

Thirdly, social media offers a highly personalized news experience, where algorithms present content in accordance with user interest and past engagement. Fletcher and Nielsen (2020)

concluded that students appreciate personalized news feeds, where they are able to consume content that interests them and not be subjected to generic news programs. This personalized experience leads to higher user engagement, making social media a more engaging platform for news compared to traditional news sources. Considering the weakness and strength of mainstream and social media, academics identify the significance of media literacy education to make students capable of critically analyzing sources of news. Lewandowsky et al. (2021) wrote that students undergoing media literacy education are less susceptible to being fooled by misinformation and are better skilled at cross-verifying the news across different sources.

The approach negates the risk of misinformation and prejudice, resulting in a better perception of things. In an attempt to deal with the problem of misinformation, policymakers and social media companies have also introduced fact-checking initiatives. Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube websites have introduced warnings against misinformation along with independent fact-checking partnerships to stop the proliferation of false news. Nonetheless, according to Tsfati and Cappella (2022), the initiative is inadequate, as individuals still consume news using unverified sources. Social media platforms, designed to maximize engagement and content virality, have by chance amplified fake statistics at an unprecedented fee. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) carried out a massive-scale study analyzing the spread of true and fake news on Twitter (now X) and discovered that fake information spreads six instances quicker than actual news. Their studies found out that incorrect information tends to be greater novel and emotionally engaging, main users to proportion it extra often than correct facts.

This locating is supported through Pennycook and Rand (2020), who argue that social media algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, meaning that sensational and emotionally charged content—even though fake—gets more visibility. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle, in which faux news profits traction and credibility genuinely thru repetition and widespread sharing. The effects of this phenomenon had been in particular evident at some stage in international crises together with the COVID-19 pandemic, in which fake claims approximately vaccines, remedies, and the origins of the virus spread rapidly across social media structures (Zarocostas, 2021). Despite efforts through reality-checking businesses, misinformation became frequently shared at a miles better rate than corrective information, main to public confusion and mistrust in reliable news assets.   As incorrect information on social media keeps to grow, university students are increasingly caught in a agree with quandary—they understand the accessibility and immediacy of social media news but continue to be skeptical of its accuracy

In politically sensitive contexts, mainstream media has been accused of selective reporting, framing biases, and ideological slants, which in addition complicates believe in news resources. Bakir and McStay (2018) spotlight that incorrect information isn't continually about outright falsehoods—it is able to also encompass deceptive headlines, omission of key statistics, and biased framing that distort public knowledge. This creates an surroundings wherein college students ought to navigate conflicting narratives, reality-test claims, and critically analyze resources to determine accuracy. To combat misinformation, several truth-checking agencies and media literacy packages had been added. Zarocostas (2021) emphasizes the significance of unbiased fact-checkers consisting of Snopes, FactCheck.Org, and Reuters Fact Check, which paintings to verify online claims and debunk fake records. However, their effectiveness stays constrained, as incorrect information often spreads too speedy for fact-checking businesses to maintain up.

It was discovered that scholars who've passed through formal media literacy education generally tend to believe mainstream media extra than social media due to the fact they understand the role of editorial oversight, reality-checking, and journalistic ethics in conventional journalism.

Their studies show that media literacy applications assist students apprehend the distinction between professional journalism and unregulated social media content, making them more discerning consumers of data. This aligns with findings with the aid of Vraga and Tully (2022), who argue that media literacy schooling can serve as a buffer in opposition to incorrect information by equipping college students with abilities to critically investigate sources, verify claims, and pick out deceptive narratives. They recommend the combination of information literacy courses in college curricula to reinforce college students' potential to navigate nowadays' complicated media panorama.

**Hypotheses**

1. There is a significant difference in the level of trust placed in social media and mainstream media by media students at Punjab University.
2. Trust in mainstream media is negatively correlated with trust in social media among media students.
3. Perceived media bias and misinformation increase skepticism and demand for fact-checking and regulation.

**Theoretical Foundations of Media Trust**

Media Trust Theory (Meyer, 1988) is a fine theoretical model with which to view how trust within different types of media is developed. According to this theory, trust is developed through perceived credibility, accuracy, fairness, and intentions of the media institutions. In Pakistan, where social media is faulted for the spread of misinformation and legacy media are accused of bias and state control, this theory can be applied to explain why individuals trust one form of media over the other. By comprehending how individuals evaluate journalistic ethics, editorial control, and fact-checking procedures in social and digital media, this theory enables comparative assessment of trust relations.

Institutional Theory (Scott, 2004) deepens the analysis even more by examining how institutional and regulatory mechanisms affect public confidence in media. Mainstream media operates within institutional constraints such as government regulation, journalistic standards, and corporate domination, which facilitate or destroy confidence. Social media remains largely decentralized and user-operated, however, susceptible to bottom-up credibility and disinformation. In the Pakistani media landscape, where political regulation and freedom of the press problems dominate trust perceptions, Institutional Theory contributes to comprehension of whether media audiences are inclined to trust institutionally organized and regulated media houses or the non-mediated and collaborative dynamics of social media.

Both these theories put together provide an exhaustive model to grasp how trust is developed and maintained in the mass media as well as online platforms

**Methodological Designs**

This study employs a quantitative study layout using of the survey approach to observe university college students' trust in mainstream media as opposed to social media as sources of news. The survey technique is suitable for this look at as it allows for the gathering of data-based, standardized responses from a large group of respondents, making it less difficult to research styles in media believe tiers. The study seeks to explore the volume to which university college students at Punjab University consider one-of-a-kind media assets, the elements influencing their believe, and the way they navigate misinformation. The population for this study consists of university students at Punjab University, as they constitute an vital demographic in media intake and digital literacy. University college students are relatively energetic social media users and now have publicity to academic and traditional media resources, making them best individuals for inspecting

comparative trust in specific media platforms. The study employs a random sampling approach, ensuring that college students at Punjab University have an equal risk of being selected for participation. A sample of a hundred students may be surveyed; that is the proper sample size to capture numerous perspectives and traits in media trust within the pupil population.

Primary information could be collected through survey-based research on the use of a self-administered questionnaire, distributed to students. The survey might be conducted both online (Google Forms) and in a physical layout to ensure wider participation. The survey will use a Likert scale (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) to assess perceptions, media literacy, and attention to incorrect information. Open-ended questions will also be covered to capture qualitative insights from college students regarding their media belief options. The collected data was analyzed the usage of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages, implied scores, and standard deviations, may be used to summarize respondents' perceptions of media acceptance as true. Additionally, inferential checks, which include impartial t-assessments or chi-square assessments, can be carried out to decide statistical relationships between variables, along with agreement levels and media literacy. Data evaluation was conducted with the use of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) or Microsoft Excel to ensure accuracy and validity in the effects.

**H1: There is a significant difference in the level of trust placed in social media and mainstream media by media students at Punjab University.**

The comparison of trust levels between mainstream media and social media among media students at Punjab University reveals a significant difference in perceptions. The frequency distribution indicates that 36.6% of respondents do not trust Pakistani television news channels more than social media, while 34.7% express trust in mainstream media as a more reliable source, and 28.7% remain neutral. In contrast, trust in social media platforms as a reliable news source is considerably higher, with 74.0% of respondents agreeing that social media provides more reliable information than mainstream media, while only 14.0% disagree and 12.0% remain neutral. These percentages suggest that media students exhibit a stronger inclination toward trusting social media over mainstream media.

*Table 0-1 t-test between item 4 and item 5*

| t-test | Df | Sign. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|
| -10.842 | 299 | 0.000 |

To statistically validate this observation, a paired samples t-test was conducted in SPSS, comparing trust in mainstream media and social media. The descriptive statistics show that the mean trust level in mainstream media is 2.89, with a standard deviation of 1.15, whereas the mean trust level in social media is notably higher at 3.81, with a standard deviation of 1.04. The results of the paired samples t-test indicate a t-value of -10.842 and a significance level (p-value) of 0.000, which is well below the 0.05 threshold for statistical significance. This confirms that the difference in trust levels between social media and mainstream media is not due to random chance but is statistically significant. These findings support the hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the level of trust placed in social media and mainstream media by media students at Punjab University. The results indicate that students overwhelmingly trust social media more than traditional Pakistani television news channels. This trend could be attributed to several factors, including greater accessibility to diverse perspectives, real-time news dissemination, and skepticism towards mainstream media due to potential political or ideological biases. The data

highlights a shifting paradigm in news consumption habits among media students, reflecting a broader global trend of increasing reliance on digital platforms for news and information.

**H2: Trust in mainstream media is negatively correlated with trust in social media among media students.**

*Table 0-2 Correlation between trust in social media consumption and mainstream media*

|  |  | Mainstream media | Social media |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mainstream Media Correlation | Pearson | 1 | -.416** |
| Social Media Correlation | Pearson | -.416** | 1 |

The Pearson correlation coefficient (r = -0.416, p < 0.01) indicates a moderate negative correlation between trust in mainstream media and trust in social media among media students. This means that as trust in mainstream media increases, trust in social media decreases, and vice versa. Since the correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, the hypothesis (H2) is supported, confirming that there is a negative relationship between trust in these two sources of information.

**H3: Perceived media bias and misinformation increase skepticism and demand for fact-checking and regulation.**

*Table 0-3 Correlation between perceived biases and need for regulation*

|  | Perceived biases | Need for regulation |
|---|---|---|
| Perceived biases | 1 | .340** |
| Need for regulation | .340** | 1 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation coefficient (r = 0.340, p < 0.01) indicates a moderate positive correlation between perceived media biases and the need for regulation among media students. This suggests that as perceptions of bias in media increase, there is a corresponding rise in the demand for fact-checking and stricter regulations to ensure credibility. Since the correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, it confirms that the relationship is not due to random chance. These findings support Hypothesis 3 (H3), indicating that students who perceive greater bias and misinformation in media are more likely to advocate for stricter media regulation and fact-checking measures.

**Trust in Social Media and Mainstream Media**

The first hypothesis (H1) proposed that there is a significant difference in the level of trust placed in social media and mainstream media by media students at Punjab University. The study found that 74% of respondents agreed that social media platforms provide more reliable information than mainstream media, while only 14% disagreed. In contrast, trust in Pakistani television news channels as a reliable news source was considerably lower, with 34.7% of respondents expressing trust and 34.6% expressing distrust. The statistical analysis confirmed these observations. The paired samples t-test revealed a significant difference in trust levels (t = -10.842, p = 0.000), supporting the hypothesis that social media is perceived as more reliable than mainstream media. The preference for social media may be attributed to its real-time information dissemination, diversity of perspectives, and reduced censorship, whereas traditional media is often viewed as biased or politically influenced.

The second hypothesis (H2) suggested a negative correlation between trust in mainstream media and trust in social media among media students. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r = -0.416, p < 0.01) confirmed a moderate negative relationship, indicating that students who trusted mainstream media were less likely to trust social media and vice versa. This finding aligns with existing literature on media trust dynamics. It reflects the growing skepticism toward traditional news sources due to perceived bias, while social media is increasingly seen as a more direct and unfiltered source of information. However, concerns regarding misinformation on social media persist, suggesting that trust in digital platforms is conditional and varies based on the credibility of individual sources.

**Perceived Media Bias and Demand for Regulation**

The third hypothesis (H3) examined whether perceived media bias and misinformation increase skepticism and the demand for fact-checking and regulation. The correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship (r = 0.340, p < 0.01), indicating that students who perceived bias in media were more likely to support fact-checking initiatives and regulatory measures. The results showed that 60% of respondents agreed that news coverage in Pakistani media is influenced by ideological or political biases, making fact-checking necessary. Additionally, 67.3% supported the regulation of Pakistani social media platforms to ensure the credibility of news content. This finding suggests that while social media enjoys higher trust levels than mainstream media, students remain aware of its vulnerabilities, particularly in the spread of misinformation and algorithm-driven echo chambers.

Another critical finding was the impact of social media algorithms on trust perception. Approximately 63.3% of respondents agreed that social media algorithms reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, making them trust news that aligns with their views. This phenomenon, often described as an 'echo chamber' effect, suggests that while social media provides diverse perspectives, its algorithmic structure may limit exposure to opposing viewpoints, reinforcing biases. The study also examined the broader impact of media trust on public discourse. The results indicated that 60% of respondents believe that trust in the media significantly influences public opinion on major national issues in Pakistan. Furthermore, 45.4% stated that their level of trust in the media would influence their stance on policy changes. These findings highlight the critical role of media credibility in shaping public perceptions and democratic engagement.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive understanding with in media affects information consumption amongst media college students at Punjab University. The research confirms that social media is increasingly more preferred over mainstream media due to its accessibility, range,

and immediacy. However, worries regarding incorrect information and biases in both traditional and digital media regularly occur. One key conclusion drawn from this study is that students' agreement with mainstream media is inversely related to their believe in social media. This indicates that as skepticism toward conventional news assets grows, reliance on virtual structures increases. However, the presence of misinformation on social media raises worries, highlighting the necessity of media literacy applications to equip college students with the ability to critically examine information sources.

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