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Perceptions of Pakistani Journalists Regarding the Credibility of Social Media

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Abstract

Social media is ubiquitous these days and its importance cannot be denied but the invincible expansion of fake news and disinformation is undermining its credibility; and demands more scholarly research in this area. The current study is specially designed to analyze the perceptions of Pakistani journalists regarding the credibility of social media as a news source. This study helps the researcher to ascertain whether social media is a credible source of information among Pakistani journalists or not. To investigate the proposed hypothesis, the researcher opted for a cross-sectional survey method (n=196) by using the questionnaire technique. The sample of this study is both male and female journalists from print and electronic media of Lahore. The results claim that journalists are using social media for news updates, sharing breaking news and depending on it for their professional needs. Study also identifies a significant association between the usage of social media and the perceptions of its credibility; if journalists are spending more time on a site then they are more likely to identify fake and fabricated news. The present study also contributes to the body of knowledge in the area of social media credibility and journalists' perception in Pakistan.

Keywords: social media credibility, perception, journalists, social media news, fake news, message credibility, medium credibility, source credibility.

1. Introduction

Social media has become the prime source of information for the people of all spheres (USW, 2021). According to some studies, social media is considered a more reliable source of information than other mediums because of the freedom of speech and the free flow of information (Popoola, 2014). Although social media is a great source of information but the problem is that there is too much information available. Among the tons of reliable sources and factual information, social media is also bombarded with fabricated information and disinformation. The users of social media are constantly facing false news and could easily get lost in misinformation (Ketchell, 2021). It is very difficult for a user to identify which social media platform is credible and how they can identify the factual sources? (Tunikova, 2018). Almost 58 % of Pakistani people believe that fake news is a major problem in Pakistan (Haque, 2017). Even though social media credibility is becoming suspicious but the traffic on social media is increasing day by day (Mohsin, 2021). People are using social media to get breaking news; and to share information and Pakistani journalists are not an exception (Cherilyn Ireton, 2018).

Social media is increasingly becoming the dominant source of information for journalists and most of the Pakistani journalists are depending on social media and utilize it to get news updates (Zulqarnain, 2016). Based on Malik's study almost 57.4 % of Pakistani journalists use social media for news updates daily and 40.4 % of journalists are completely relying on social media for news stories (Malik, 2019). Whereas social media has made some of the journalistic work easier like

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finding information, disseminating news and interacting with the audience, at the same time it has also made some functions challenging for journalists like verification of the facts and identification of fake news (Pradhan, 2018). In the rating race era, sometimes professional journalists (intentionally/ unintentionally) print or broadcast unverified, picked up from social media, news which afterward can create uncertainty and chaotic situation in society (Jamil, 2019).

In this scenario where most news organizations are becoming digital- first and investing more money in online journalism to reach out to the mass audience, journalists need to be more cautious and diligent. Otherwise, it will be dangerous not only for media institutions but also for society. Journalists should always report verified and factual information from reliable sources because they are the influential source of information for the general public (Butt, 2017). Since Pakistani journalists are utilizing the customer-driven medium, which is sabotaging its credibility by disseminating fake news and disinformation from individual to individual unstopably. The aim of this study is twofold; first, this study aims to analyze the journalist's perceptions regarding social media credibility as a news source to understand how much they depend on social media as a news source. Secondly, this study measures the influence of a journalist's demographics on their perception regarding social media news credibility.

To achieve the aims of the study, the following objectives are proposed:

- To ascertain the perceptions (understanding and attitude) of Pakistani journalists regarding the credibility of news shared on social media;
- To measure the influence of a journalist's demographics on their perception regarding social media news credibility.

2. Material and methods

The current study applies the credibility framework of Flanagin and Metzger for the understanding of medium, source and message factors (Flanagin, 2000). Credibility has three forms: source credibility, message credibility and medium credibility. Medium credibility is a perceived level of credibility of a specific medium, such as newspapers, television, internet or blogs (Sunar, 2001). In this study researcher is not comparing social media with traditional but comparing social media platforms such as mediums like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *WhatsApp*. Factors that define medium credibility are: *Trustworthiness*, *Reliability*, *Unbiased*, *Honesty* and *quality*). Source credibility is focused on the expertise or trustworthiness of the sources, such as journalists, experts, govt. officials, colleagues, influencers, private sources, friends and family, as the likelihood to provide credible information (Sobia, 2013). Factors that define source credibility are: *Knowledgeable*, *Influential*, *Transparent*, *Passionate*, *Reliable*, *Objective*, *Skilled* and *Professional*. Message credibility is a perceived level of credibility of the communicated message itself, such as information quality, accuracy, and currency (Flanagin, 2000). Factors that define message credibility are: *Clear*, *Fact- based*, *Believable*, *Unbiased*, *Accurate*, *Fair*, *Timely* and *interactive*.

We have opted for a quantitative research methodology to analyze the perception of social media news credibility among Pakistani journalists. The method that has been used to carry out this research is a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire contains multiple-choice questions. Through a simple random selection technique, a sample was selected and the data were collected from 196 (male and female) Pakistani journalists from television and print media. Flanagin and Metzger's credibility framework were used to identify the factors of medium, source and message credibility.

Instrument was carefully adapted carrying 4 sections and a 5-point likert scale (i.e., 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree). These sections were developed to inquire about journalists' use of social media, social media perceptions, the credibility of social media, and journalists' demographics. Section of the instrument related to social media perceptions was based on the scales adopted from Wajid Zulqarnain, social media credibility (Zulqarnain, 2016). The scale for the credibility of the social media section was adapted from various studies including Wajid's study (Wajid Zulqarnain, 2016, 2018), Rieh's scale (Rieh, 2007), Maurice Vergeer (Hermans, 2009), Cassidy (Cassidy, 2007), and Minjeong Kang (Kang, 2010).

We have applied Morgan and Krejcie's formula (Krejcie, 1970) to determine the sample size of the study. It offers more appropriate sampling:

$$s = \frac{X^2 N p(1-p)}{e^2(N-1) + X^2 P(1-P)}$$

In Krejcie- Morgan formula s = required sample size, X^2 = the table value of chi- square 6.64, N = population size, p = proportion of population 0.5 and e = acceptable sampling error 0.05 based on the research condition. According to the Krejcie- Morgan formula, the sample size for the current study is 226. Data collected from 226 journalists of Lahore, Pakistan was entered into SPSS Statistics 21 and 196 entries came up which account for an 87 % response rate. Cronbach's Alpha was also applied to check the reliability of the instrument, which was 0.949 as shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.949	.954	196

3. Discussion

Social media is the most acclaimed form of media because of its cheapest, fastest and most direct access to the world ([Dwivedi, 2021](#); [Kapoor 2018](#); [Reed, 2022](#); [Shabir, 2014](#)). The whole spheres of information system go through with some major changes after the advent of new technologies and the internet. Social media has disturbed the circulation flow of news because now the users of media information became contributors to its content ([Eijaz, 2013](#)). According to [Schifferes and Newman \(Schifferes, 2014\)](#), the study of the British Press shows that social media has become a major news source not just for the general people but for the journalists as well. It has become the source of breaking news for its users, additionally, celebrities (politicians and sports and entertainment) use social media channels like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram* to reach out to their audience and broadcast their messages that they know will be picked up by the other media. According to [Boyd \(Boyd, 2014\)](#), readers seek information from the internet rather than traditional media but it's very risky to completely rely on social media for news updates. The internet offers an opportunity to users to keep their identity, location and role anonymous and these features generate concern regarding the credibility of content and medium where the anonymous identity of the sender may result in fake and fabricated information ([Fogg, 2013](#)).

According to the study on the science of fake news ([Lazer et al., 2018](#)), the issue with social media is that the penetration of disinformation and fake news is uncontrollable ([Duyn, 2019](#); [Li, 2020](#); [Molina, 2021](#); [Yamamoto, 2017](#)). Some people are intentionally spreading fake information to harm a person or the whole society. Regarding Pakistan, there are many examples of fake news available which were built up by a person or groups to defame a well- known individual or demoralize the society. The recent incident of Sunita Mashih's gang rape went viral on social media and was picked up by other media too, but turned out fake ([HelloPakistan, 2021](#)). Similarly, the recent *Facebook* post of Nobel Prize winner, Montagnier, on "Corona vaccinated people will die in 2 years" creates chaos in society but after the investigation it turns out he was just sharing his thoughts, not making any official statement ([Dunn, 2021](#)). Likewise, the fake image with an official stamp regarding "mutton eaters have more chances to get affected by the corona virus" were circulated on all the social media platforms and damaged the supply of meat, before it was declared fake ([AFP, 2020](#)). The main point here is that although social media is filled with rumors and disinformation but it cannot be denied that it's still a very beneficial source for breaking news ([Vorhaus, 2020](#)).

The Internet has changed the role of journalists in the communication process ([Arif, 2016](#); [Cassidy, 2007](#)). On one hand, social media empowers journalists with unparalleled information access, while on the other hand, it presents challenges of ensuring that the unfiltered information from unofficial sources is credible or not. There is a popular opinion that social media is full of disinformation. Newman's research ([Newman, 2009](#)) has found that even the Newsrooms integrated social media to gather content and find story ideas because it's changing the nature of breaking news. According to the research by Cision and The George Washington University on journalists' use of social media ([Bugasch, 2010](#)), most American journalists (61 %) are using Google or Wikipedia in their work. Social media is now becoming a relevant part of journalistic research. Almost 56 % of reporters are relying on social media sources for their news updates and breakings.

Although, American journalists think social media is less credible than traditional media but still use social media information actively. They claim in their research that mainstream media, television and newspapers, are relying on social media for their news research and reporting (Salaudeen, 2020; Shearer, 2018).

This obsession of people with using social media for a minute -to -minute updates and eyewitness reporting has raised a question not only on the credibility of social media but also about the credibility of Journalism. This customer- driven media is undermining its credibility by disseminating hoaxes, lies, disinformation and rumors from individual to individual unstoppably (Ireton, 2018; Situngkir, 2011).

Here are few questions arise: Do journalists consider social media as a credible news source? Do journalists use social media as a news source for reporting purposes in Pakistan? Which social media platform is more credible for news updates (breaking news) among Pakistani Journalists? What are the important factors that help journalists to assess the credibility of medium, source and message? Is there any relation between usage of social media and perception of its credibility?

The current study addresses the following hypothesis:

H₁: There is a significant effect of Journalists' use of social media on their perceptions regarding social media credibility as a news source.

H₂: Journalists' demographics are significantly associated with their perceptions regarding social media credibility as a news source.

H₃: Journalists perceive source credibility more important than medium and message credibility.

4. Results

Demographic information was collected in terms of age (i.e., 18 to 25 = 33 percent, n = 65; 26 to 35 = 59 percent, n = 115; 36 to 50 = 6 percent, n = 12; Above 65 = 2 percent, n = 4), educational level (i.e., High school = 6 percent, n = 12; Bachelors = 29 percent, n = 57; Master = 59 percent, n= 115; Doctorate = 6 percent, n= 12), and working experience of journalists in the field (i.e., less than 5 year = 48 percent, n= 94; 5-15 year = 48 percent, n= 94; more than 15 year = 4 percent, n = 8). Among survey participants 80 percent indicated that they access social media very often, followed by "often" (19 percent) and "occasionally" (1 percent). Out of the sample of 196, five types of active social media users were identified. Code 1 was given to "more than 2 hours" code 2 was given to "1-2 hours every day" code 3 was given to "few minutes every day" code 4 was given to the users who use social media only "once a week" and code 5 was given to those who "rarely" use social media. The effect of journalists' demographics on their perceptions regarding social media news credibility was tested. The results of the hypotheses tested in the present study are reported in the result section.

The given below tables are the actual representation of collected data in their specific categories to make it more convenient for others to understand the perception of Pakistani Journalists regarding the credibility of social media news.

H₁: There is a significant effect of Journalists' use of social media on their perceptions regarding social media credibility as a news source.

Table 2. Effect of Journalist's use of social media on their perceptions

Model Summary ^b			
R Square	Regression (Sum of Squares)	ANOVA (sig.)	Constant B
.513	36.765	.000	17.987

Table 2 illustrates that the coefficient of determination value R² indicates that 51 % of the variability in social media credibility can be predicted from the variable access (usage). The p-value of this hypothesis is 0.00 which is less than the Alpha-value of 0.05; it means there is a significant effect of Journalists' use of social media on their perceptions regarding social media credibility as a news source.

H₂: Journalists' demographics are significantly associated with their perceptions regarding social media credibility as a news source.

Table 3. Association between Journalist's demographics and their perception

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square (age)	77.293 ^a	30	.000
Pearson Chi-Square (education)	95.171 ^a	30	.000
Pearson Chi-Square (experience)	49.445 ^a	20	.000
N of Valid Cases	196		

According to [Table 3](#), the p-value of this hypothesis is 0.00 which is less than 0.05, so we can interpret that there is a significant association between demographics and journalists' perceptions regarding credibility. The results show that young journalists between the age of 26-35 with the experience of less than 5 years and more educated in the field are more likely to believe in social media credibility than more aged and experienced journalists.

H₃: Journalists perceive source credibility more important than medium and message credibility

Table 4. Type of credibility

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Message	4	2
	Medium	48	24.5
	Source	144	73.5
	Total	196	100.0

[Table 4](#) demonstrates that the majority of the journalists perceive source credibility more important to assess the social media credibility than other forms of credibility. More than half of the journalists (i.e., source credibility = 73.5 percent, N= 144) think Knowledgeable, Influential, Transparent, Passionate, Reliable, Objective, and Skilled source is more important than Trustworthy, Reliable, Unbiased, Honest, quality medium (i.e., medium credibility = 48 percent, n= 24.5) and Clear, Fact-based, Believable, Unbiased, Accurate, Fair, Timely, interactive message (message credibility = 4 percent, n= 2).

Table 5. Usage level

	Twitter	Facebook	WhatsApp	YouTube
More than 2 hours everyday	39 (20 %)	106 (54 %)	184 (94 %)	70 (36 %)
1 hour everyday	53 (27 %)	49 (25 %)	4 (2 %)	52 (26 %)
Few minutes everyday	84 (43 %)	16 (8 %)	8 (4 %)	54 (28 %)
Rarely	20 (10 %)	25 (13 %)	0	20 (10 %)

Table 6. Spreading Fake News

	Twitter	Facebook	WhatsApp	YouTube
Not at all	127 (65 %)	29 (15 %)	34 (17 %)	16 (8 %)
Sometimes	69 (35 %)	98 (50 %)	112 (57 %)	131 (67 %)
Most of the time	0	49 (25 %)	42 (22 %)	41 (21 %)
Always	0	20 (10 %)	8 (4 %)	8(4 %)

Table 7. Credible source for news information

	Twitter	Facebook	WhatsApp	YouTube
Strongly agree	29 (15 %)	0	13 (7 %)	4 (2 %)
Agree	97 (49 %)	4 (2 %)	122 (62 %)	8 (4 %)
Neutral	66 (34 %)	57 (29 %)	41 (21 %)	17 (9 %)
Disagree	4 (2 %)	93 (47 %)	12 (6 %)	113 (58 %)
Strongly disagree	0	42 (22 %)	8 (4 %)	54 (27 %)

Table 8. Social media is a credible source

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	9	5
Agree	74	38
Neutral	48	24
Disagree	46	23
Strongly disagree	19	10

Table 9. Use social networking sites to

	Frequency	Percent
Get the breaking news	20	10.2
Break the news	29	14.8
Both	147	75.0

Table 10. Source you use to verify the validity of news

	Frequency	Percent
Personal contacts	124	63.3
Government Officials	36	18.4
Private official sources	16	8.2
Traditional media sources	20	10.2

It's been observed that journalists are using social media on daily basis and depending on social networking sites to prepare their reports and news (Safori, 2016). This study explores that journalists are mostly spending their time using WhatsApp (94 %), and utilizing *Whatsapp* and *Twitter* for accessing information (25 % and 25 % respectively) regarding news and current happenings, rather than other social networking sites like *Facebook* (12 %) and *YouTube* (8 %).

According to the results of this study, *Twitter* and *Whatsapp* are the most trusted social networking sites for journalists because, as reported, *Twitter* is the least in spreading fake news and rumors.

As inspected, Pakistani journalists consider social media as a credible news source. Nearly half of the journalists are agreed that social media is a credible news source and half of them neither agree nor disagree with the statement. Journalists are usually depending on *Whatsapp* to verify the news by using their contacts. They don't reach out to the government or private officials very often to verify the social media news.

Moreover, Journalists are not only using social media to break the news but to get the breaking news as well. This study documented some attention-grabbing results and found excessive usage of social media among Pakistani journalists. According to their perceptions, social media is playing a vital role in their work life. Journalists are now relying on social media for news updates and breakings. This research suggests that there is a need to work more on social media credibility and verification methods for social media news.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this empirical study was to examine the perceptions of Pakistani journalists regarding the credibility of social media. It's been discovered that there is a significant effect of Journalists' usage of social media on their perceptions regarding social media as a credible news source. Results indicate that journalists' demographics (age, education and experience) are significantly associated with their perceptions regarding social media credibility as a news source. Another inference can be made based on this research that journalists perceive source credibility as more important than medium and message credibility. In addition, *Knowledge*, *Influential*, *Transparency*, *Passion*, *Reliability*, *Objectivity* and *Skills* are the most important factors to verify the credibility of any news source. The study explores that journalists prefer social media to get an update regarding soft news (*Entertainment*, *Health*, *Sports* or *Weather*) as compared to hard news (*Political*, *International*, *Economic*, *Crime* and *Disaster News*).

Social media is becoming the priority to get breaking news not only for people but for journalists as well. It has changed the world by removing the communication gap. It not only allows users to create, share and disseminate content but it helps to construct their opinion via available information online (Molyneux, 2019). This research has successfully answered the research questions of the study. Do journalists use social media as a news source for reporting purposes in Pakistan? Journalists are using social media for news updates, sharing breaking news and their personal opinion regarding the news and depending on it for their professional needs. For the traditional media Journalists, it's obligatory to follow the organization's policy. But social media allows sharing their personal views with its users. Journalists use social media to prepare their reports, to collect in-depth detailed information and trending topics as well.

Which social media platform is more credible for news updates among Pakistani Journalists? The current study discovers that journalists do consider social media as a credible news source. There is a mixed perception regarding social media credibility. Almost 40 % of journalists are agreed with the statement that social media is a credible news source but 25 % disagree and 25 % are neutral. Among the sample of 196, 122 journalists consider *Whatsapp* the most credible source of news because through *Whatsapp* they can contact their colleagues and other journalists to share and receive the current happenings and news.

Is there any relation between usage of social media and perception of its credibility? The current study also identifies a significant association between the usage of social media and the perceptions of its credibility; if journalists are spending more time on a site then they are more likely to identify fake and fabricated news.

Although the current study generated significant findings, there are some limitations, such as the sample was only based on the journalists from Lahore, which is why the study is limited. The study has opted for the survey method because of the limited time frame but a survey technique with in-depth interviews of journalists will be more adequate for much better results. There is a dire need to research social media credibility and how journalists can identify the credibility of the source, message or medium. Also to investigate which methods journalists use to verify the news they receive from social media sites.

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