



NAVIGATING THE DUALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA: JOURNALISTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPREAD AND COUNTERACTION OF FAKE NEWS IN SOUTH PUNJAB

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Abstract

This study examines journalists' perceptions in South Punjab regarding the role of social media in the dissemination and mitigation of fake news within an evolving digital media landscape. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Media Literacy and the Social Construction of Reality, the research also incorporates concepts of digital competencies, ethical practices, and legal awareness to understand journalists' responses to misinformation in their professional and socio-cultural contexts. Adopting a quantitative research design, data were collected through a structured survey administered to 620 professional journalists across South Punjab. A total of nine hypotheses were tested using statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, t-tests, chi-square tests, correlation analysis, and regression modeling. The study explored journalists' attitudes toward misinformation, verification practices, ethical challenges, regulatory frameworks, and inter-organizational collaboration. The findings reveal a strong consensus among journalists that social media platforms significantly contribute to the spread of fake news, particularly through algorithmic amplification and the prioritization of sensational content. While journalists demonstrate a commitment to ethical standards and acknowledge the importance of media literacy training, a notable gap exists between ethical self-perception and practical verification skills. Furthermore, the study highlights regional disparities in training opportunities and legal awareness, alongside concerns regarding the misuse of regulatory mechanisms such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in Pakistan. The study recommends a multifaceted approach to combating misinformation, including strengthening journalists' professional capacity, enhancing media literacy initiatives, ensuring platform accountability, and reforming regulatory frameworks in an inclusive manner. The research contributes to the theoretical discourse by contextualizing global media theories within Pakistan and offers practical implications for journalists, educators, policymakers, and digital platforms in fostering a more informed and resilient media ecosystem.

Keywords: *Fake News, Journalists Perspectives, Media Literacy, Misinformation, News Verification, Social Media, South Punjab*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The emergence of the digital age has fundamentally transformed the field of journalism. Traditionally, news production and dissemination were controlled by professional institutions; however, the rise of digital platforms has enabled individuals to create and distribute information rapidly and publicly (Adeeb & Mirhoseini, 2023). While the adoption of online and social media platforms has expanded access to information, it has also introduced critical challenges, particularly the widespread dissemination of misinformation and its implications for public trust and social cohesion.

1.1.1. Evolution of Journalism in the Digital Age

Historically, news media have played a central role in informing the public, shaping public discourse, and ensuring accountability. Over the past decade, technological advancements and internet penetration have redefined how news is produced, distributed, and consumed (Adeyanju, 2015). Traditional print media have declined, while digital-native platforms and online outlets such as HuffPost, BuzzFeed, and Vox have gained prominence (Pavlik, 2013).

Although digitalisation has democratized content production, it has also disrupted the economic and ethical foundations of journalism. The decentralization of information dissemination has reduced the reliance on professional journalists, enabling both credible and non-credible actors to influence public narratives in real time (Aimeur et al., 2023).

1.1.2. Emergence and Growth of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms—including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and TikTok—have become central to contemporary news consumption. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2023), over 55% of individuals rely on social media for news, with higher usage among younger demographics (Newman et al., 2023).

These platforms facilitate rapid information dissemination, allowing content to reach global audiences within minutes. However, the absence of editorial gatekeeping increases the likelihood of unverified and misleading information being shared (Aoun

Barakat et al., 2021). Algorithmic prioritization of engagement often amplifies sensational content, thereby exacerbating the spread of misinformation.

1.1.3. Shift from Traditional Gatekeeping to Decentralised Content Creation

The transition from centralized media systems to decentralized content creation has significantly altered the dynamics of news production. Traditional media institutions maintain established ethical standards and verification processes (Ball, 2020). In contrast, digital platforms enable diverse actors—including citizen journalists, influencers, and automated bots—to participate in news dissemination (Banaji et al., 2019).

This shift has blurred the boundaries between professional journalism and user-generated content. Additionally, algorithm-driven personalization and confirmation bias reinforce selective exposure, limiting critical engagement with diverse perspectives (Guess et al., 2016). Consequently, journalists are increasingly required to verify, contextualize, and curate information rather than solely act as gatekeepers (Bruns, 2018).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of social media has created a complex information environment characterized by the proliferation of fake news. While these platforms enhance accessibility and communication, they also enable the rapid spread of misinformation, often outpacing traditional verification mechanisms.

1.2.1. Increasing Volume and Velocity of Fake News

Fake news represents a major challenge in the digital information ecosystem. Research indicates that false information spreads more rapidly than factual content due to its emotional and sensational nature (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Platform algorithms prioritize engagement, often amplifying misleading content regardless of its accuracy.

The speed and scale of misinformation dissemination make it difficult to control, particularly in the absence of editorial oversight (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This phenomenon has significant implications for democratic processes, public health, and institutional trust (Lazer, 2018).

1.2.2. Journalistic Integrity under Threat

The rise of misinformation poses a direct challenge to journalistic integrity. Journalists must balance the competing demands of speed and accuracy in an environment driven by immediacy and audience engagement (Del Vicario et al., 2016). This tension increases the risk of errors and the inadvertent amplification of false information.

Furthermore, the misuse of the term “fake news” to discredit legitimate journalism undermines public trust and weakens the authority of professional media institutions (Farkas & Schou, 2018).

1.2.3. Lack of Standard Verification Tools

Journalists often lack standardized and efficient verification tools capable of keeping pace with real-time information flows. While tools such as InVID and reverse

image search exist, their adoption remains inconsistent, particularly in developing contexts (Freelon & Wells, 2020). This limitation increases vulnerability to misinformation during critical events such as elections and crises.

1.2.4. Limited Research in the Global South

Despite extensive research in Western contexts, there is limited empirical understanding of how journalists in the Global South perceive and respond to misinformation. Countries like Pakistan face unique challenges, including regulatory constraints, limited training opportunities, and socio-political pressures (Humiad & Yousufi, 2019).

Existing studies often overlook local contexts, institutional dynamics, and professional realities. Therefore, examining journalists' perceptions is essential for developing context-specific strategies to combat misinformation (Lan & Tung, 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This literature review examines and critically evaluates existing scholarship relevant to the study of journalists' perceptions of social media's role in the dissemination and mitigation of fake news. The rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed journalism by enabling widespread participation in content creation and dissemination. While this transformation has democratized access to information, it has also intensified challenges such as the proliferation of misinformation, the erosion of public trust in journalism, and the increasing difficulty of maintaining ethical standards in fast-paced media environments.

Existing literature largely draws from Western contexts, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, where scholars have extensively examined the impact of fake news on electoral processes, public health crises, and political polarization. These studies provide valuable insights into the mechanisms, motivations, and consequences of misinformation in digitally mediated environments.

However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these dynamics operate within the Global South. Therefore, this review places particular emphasis on Pakistan and South Asia, where socio-political complexities, regulatory inconsistencies, linguistic diversity, and uneven access to digital technologies shape the production and circulation of information. In regions such as South Punjab, these factors further influence journalists' professional practices and perceptions.

The chapter is organized thematically. It begins with a discussion of key theoretical frameworks, including the Social Construction of Reality and Media Literacy Theory. It then examines the evolution of digital journalism, the rise of social media as a dominant news source, and the conceptualization of fake news. Subsequent sections explore journalistic verification practices, ethical challenges, institutional responses, and the

regional context of misinformation. The review concludes by identifying critical gaps in the literature, particularly the limited focus on journalists' lived experiences in the Global South.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Social Construction of Reality

The Social Construction of Reality, proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), provides a foundational framework for understanding how journalists interpret and respond to fake news in the digital age. The theory posits that reality is not objective but is constructed through social interactions, language, cultural norms, and shared meanings.

In the context of journalism, this perspective highlights the role of journalists as active agents in shaping public understanding. News is not merely a reflection of reality but a constructed narrative influenced by editorial decisions, framing, and institutional constraints. With the rise of social media, this process has become increasingly decentralized, allowing diverse actors—including influencers, bots, and ordinary users—to participate in constructing reality (Bruns, 2018).

Consequently, the distinction between credible journalism and misinformation is often negotiated through social and professional discourse rather than determined solely by factual accuracy. This is particularly relevant in contexts such as South Punjab, where cultural diversity, religious sensitivities, and political dynamics influence perceptions of truth and credibility. The theory thus explains variations in journalists' interpretations and responses to misinformation across different contexts.

2.2.2. Media Literacy Theory

Media Literacy Theory provides a critical lens for understanding how journalists engage with complex information environments characterized by high volumes of content and frequent misinformation. Initially developed to enhance individuals' ability to critically evaluate media messages, the concept has evolved to include digital competencies, fact-checking skills, and ethical decision-making (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992).

For journalists, media literacy extends beyond content consumption to include the ability to analyze, verify, and responsibly disseminate information. This involves identifying bias, assessing source credibility, and understanding the underlying mechanisms of digital platforms. In the context of fake news, these competencies are essential for maintaining professional integrity and supporting democratic processes (Adeeb & Mirhoseini, 2023).

The theory is particularly relevant to this study as it informs the examination of journalists' verification practices, preparedness, and ethical responses to misinformation. In regions such as South Punjab, where access to formal training may be limited,

disparities in media literacy can significantly impact journalists' ability to combat fake news effectively.

2.2.3. Information Disorder Framework

The Information Disorder Framework, developed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), offers a comprehensive approach to understanding different forms of misleading information. It categorizes information disorder into three types:

- **Misinformation:** False information shared without harmful intent
- **Disinformation:** Deliberately false information intended to deceive
- **Malinformation:** Genuine information used maliciously to cause harm

This framework is particularly valuable for analyzing journalists' responses to diverse forms of content manipulation on social media. It emphasizes that misinformation cannot be understood solely in terms of accuracy but must also consider intent, context, and impact.

In the context of Pakistan, disinformation campaigns often intersect with political agendas, religious sensitivities, and social divisions. Journalists must therefore navigate a complex information environment where the boundaries between truth and falsehood are blurred. This framework supports the study's focus on how journalists identify, interpret, and respond to different types of misinformation.

2.2.4. Gatekeeping vs. Gatewatching

Traditional gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950) conceptualizes journalists as controllers of information flow, responsible for selecting and filtering content before publication. However, the rise of digital media has challenged this model.

Bruns (2018) introduces the concept of **gatewatching**, where journalists monitor, curate, and amplify information that is already circulating online. In this environment, journalists are no longer the sole gatekeepers but are instead participants in a broader information ecosystem.

This shift has significant implications for the spread of fake news. The speed and volume of online content make it difficult to prevent misinformation from circulating. Instead, journalists are increasingly required to verify, contextualize, and respond to misinformation after it has already gained traction.

In resource-constrained settings such as South Punjab, this transition further complicates journalistic practices, as limited technological infrastructure and training reduce the capacity for effective verification.

2.2.5. Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) posits that the media influence public priorities by determining which issues receive attention. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) further explains how the presentation of information shapes audience interpretation.

In the digital age, these functions are increasingly influenced by algorithmic systems and user-generated content. Social media platforms prioritize engagement-driven content, often amplifying sensational or misleading information (Vosoughi et al., 2018). As a result, traditional media institutions have lost some control over public discourse.

This shift is particularly relevant in polarized contexts, where framing plays a critical role in shaping public opinion on sensitive issues such as politics, religion, and public health. The framework supports the study's examination of how journalists perceive their declining influence and adapt their professional practices in response to misinformation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to examine journalists' perceptions of the role of social media in the dissemination of fake news, with a specific focus on South Punjab, Pakistan. It describes the research design, population and sampling procedures, data collection instruments, analytical techniques, and ethical considerations. The structure ensures a systematic explanation of how data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted in alignment with the study's objectives.

A quantitative research approach was adopted to generate statistically valid and generalizable findings regarding patterns and relationships among journalists' experiences, perceptions, and professional practices. This approach is particularly suitable for testing hypotheses related to verification practices, ethical considerations, and the influence of social media. The methodological framework is informed by the theoretical perspectives discussed in previous chapters, including the Social Construction of Reality, Media Literacy Theory, and the Information Disorder Framework.

3.2. Research Design

The study employs a quantitative survey design to investigate journalists' perceptions of social media as a source of fake news. Quantitative methods enable the measurement of relationships among variables, identification of patterns across large datasets, and objective hypothesis testing (Creswell, 2018).

Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were utilized to examine journalists' attitudes, behaviors, and professional responses to misinformation. The research design was guided by theoretically grounded hypotheses, including perceptions of fake news prevalence (H1), challenges in verification (H2), and the role of verification tools and media literacy training (H3, H5, H6).

A structured questionnaire was administered through online platforms, enabling efficient data collection from geographically dispersed respondents. The survey was distributed via professional networks, press clubs, and journalistic associations across South Punjab.

The instrument was developed based on key theoretical frameworks:

- The **Social Construction of Reality** informed questions related to journalists' interpretations and professional judgments of fake news.
- **Media Literacy Theory** guided the assessment of journalists' verification skills, digital competencies, and ethical decision-making.
- The **Information Disorder Framework** informed the classification of misinformation types (misinformation, disinformation, malinformation).
- **Agenda-setting and framing concepts** were incorporated to evaluate perceptions of content visibility, influence, and public trust.

Likert-scale items were used to measure responses, ensuring consistency and facilitating statistical analysis.

3.3. Population and Sampling

3.3.1. Target Population

The target population consists of active professional journalists working in South Punjab, Pakistan. This includes individuals affiliated with print, broadcast, and digital media organizations, covering diverse beats such as politics, religion, health, and general reporting.

Participants included:

- Full-time journalists and freelancers
- Reporters, editors, and newsroom managers
- Professionals from both national and local media organizations

Efforts were made to ensure diversity in age, gender, language (Urdu, Saraiki, Punjabi), and professional experience, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how different groups perceive and respond to misinformation.

3.3.2. Geographic and Professional Relevance

South Punjab presents a unique context characterized by limited media resources, uneven access to digital technologies, and varying levels of professional training. Compared to major metropolitan centers such as Lahore and Karachi, journalists in this region often operate under greater structural and institutional constraints (Butt et al., 2023).

This regional focus enhances the study's contribution to Global South scholarship by highlighting context-specific challenges and practices (Waisbord, 2019).

3.3.3. Sampling Technique

The study employed **simple random sampling**, ensuring that each member of the population had an equal probability of selection (Wagenaar & Babbie, 2013). This method minimizes selection bias and enhances the generalizability of findings.

The sampling frame was developed using verified lists of active journalists obtained from press clubs and professional associations in key districts, including Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Lodhran, and Rahim Yar Khan. Respondents were

assigned unique identification numbers, and participants were selected using a random number generator.

This approach ensured representation across:

- Different media types (print, broadcast, digital)
- Various professional roles (reporters, editors, senior staff)
- Diverse organizational settings (national and local media outlets)

3.3.4. Sample Size

The study sample consisted of **620 journalists**, which is adequate for robust statistical analysis. The sample size was determined using power analysis to ensure sufficient statistical power and reliable effect size estimation (Cohen, 1988).

Given an estimated population of approximately 2,000 journalists in South Punjab, the sample achieves a **95% confidence level** with a **margin of error of approximately 3.5%**, which is acceptable for social science research (Fowler, 2014).

3.3.5. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and validity, the following criteria were applied:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Active journalists affiliated with recognized press clubs
- Currently practicing professionals in journalism

Exclusion Criteria:

- Retired journalists
- Media students
- Individuals working outside journalism (e.g., public relations, marketing)

These criteria ensured that the study captured insights from individuals directly engaged in addressing misinformation in professional contexts.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

4.1.1. Gender Distribution

Table 4.1 presents the gender distribution of the 620 journalists surveyed. The sample is heavily skewed, with **595 males (96%)** and **25 females (4%)**. This disparity reflects persistent gender inequalities in Pakistan's media sector, particularly in rural and conservative areas such as South Punjab. Existing literature attributes this imbalance to social norms, security concerns, and limited institutional support, which collectively restrict women's access to professional journalism roles (Elahi et al., 2023).

The underrepresentation of female journalists has implications beyond workforce diversity. It influences editorial priorities, the scope of coverage, and the perspectives presented, particularly concerning women's issues and marginalized groups. Within the context of this study—which investigates journalists' perceptions of social media in

spreading and mitigating fake news—the limited female presence may result in findings that predominantly reflect male experiences.

From the lens of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) **Social Construction of Reality**, this imbalance suggests that one facet of social reality—the female perspective—is largely absent in shaping and interpreting news narratives. Consequently, judgments on what constitutes fake news, ethical boundaries, and professional norms may be skewed. Furthermore, **Media Literacy Theory** (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992) indicates that demographic factors such as gender can affect the adoption of verification tools, ethical decision-making, and engagement with digital media.

Women journalists, although few in number, may have unique insights into the emotional and psychological impacts of misinformation, particularly when it targets gendered or culturally sensitive topics. Their underrepresentation underscores the need for future research to incorporate more diverse perspectives to develop comprehensive strategies for combating misinformation and fostering professional ethics in digital journalism.

Table 4.1 Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percent Valid	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	595	96.0	96.0	96.0
Female	25	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total	620	100.0	100.0	—

4.1.2. Age Distribution

Table 4.2 presents the age distribution of the respondents. The majority of journalists are aged **30–39 years (39.4%)**, followed by **40–49 years (24.4%)** and **20–29 years (24%)**, with a small proportion over 50 years (5.8%). This concentration in mid-career age brackets suggests that most journalists in South Punjab possess professional experience from both pre-digital and digital eras, allowing them to navigate traditional and social media platforms effectively.

Age is a significant variable when considering engagement with digital media and the adoption of verification tools. Mid-career journalists are likely to have the professional judgment informed by conventional reporting practices while being active consumers of social media. Their perspectives are therefore crucial in understanding how misinformation is detected, assessed, and mitigated in digital news environments.

Table 4.2 Age Distribution

Age Group	Frequency	Percent Valid	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Under 20	40	6.5	6.5	6.5

Age Group	Frequency	Percent Valid	Percent	Cumulative Percent
20–29	149	24.0	24.0	30.5
30–39	244	39.4	39.4	69.8
40–49	151	24.4	24.4	94.2
50 and above	36	5.8	5.8	100.0
Total	620	100.0	100.0	—

4.3. Interpretation and Theoretical Implications

The demographic analysis highlights the dominance of mid-career male journalists in South Punjab. This has direct implications for studies on fake news and social media:

1. **Social Construction of Reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966):** The predominance of male perspectives affects the collective construction of news narratives and ethical interpretations of misinformation. The “female gaze” is underrepresented in social media interactions, editorial decisions, and news framing.
2. **Media Literacy Theory (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992):** Gender and age influence journalists’ proficiency in using verification tools, applying ethical principles, and responding to misinformation. Female journalists may experience digital risk differently, including exposure to online harassment, which can shape their engagement with social media professionally and personally.
3. **Contextual Relevance:** The data also reflects structural and cultural limitations in South Punjab, emphasizing the need for tailored media literacy programs, inclusive editorial policies, and support systems for female journalists to ensure diverse perspectives in combating misinformation.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter critically examines the study’s findings and situates them within the theoretical frameworks and research objectives established in earlier chapters. The research focused on understanding the perceptions of journalists in South Punjab regarding the role of social media in both the dissemination and mitigation of fake news. It explored how journalists navigate the digital information environment, utilize verification tools and training, and contend with ethical, legal, and institutional constraints.

Drawing on **Media Literacy Theory** (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992) and the **Social Construction of Reality** (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), this study sought to explore how professional norms and standards are formed, contested, and operationalized in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Statistical testing of nine hypotheses revealed

significant patterns in journalistic practices and perceptions, highlighting intersections between misinformation, ethical considerations, platform responsibility, and regulatory challenges. This chapter interprets these findings in detail, linking them to existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and the contextual realities of Pakistani journalism.

5.2. Overview of Key Findings

The findings provide a comprehensive empirical overview of journalists' understanding of social media's dual role as a facilitator of communication and a conduit for fake news. A key observation is the consensus that social media platforms amplify sensational and emotionally charged content, thereby exacerbating the spread of misinformation (H1). This aligns with **Media Literacy Theory**, which posits that critical engagement with content and awareness of platform architecture are essential for responsible media consumption. Although South Punjab journalists demonstrate awareness of these dynamics, they often lack the technical or institutional capacity to respond effectively.

The challenges of verification emerged strongly in H2. Journalists described content verification as cumbersome and beyond individual capacity, highlighting the necessity for collaboration with fact-checking organizations, newsrooms, and technology platforms. This finding is consistent with the **Information Disorder Framework** (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), which emphasizes the structural dimensions of misinformation and the importance of systemic responses.

Findings from H3 and H6 reveal that the proliferation of fake news has prompted journalists to reconfigure their ethical standards, often demanding higher moral vigilance. Paradoxically, those who reported adhering strictly to ethics were less inclined to pursue formal training, relying instead on personal judgment. This tension reflects the **Social Construction of Reality**, wherein professional norms are both constructed and contested amid changing technological and institutional conditions.

Geographic and cultural factors also shaped perceptions (H4). Urban journalists reported greater access to training, ethical guidance, and regulatory information than their semi-urban or rural counterparts, highlighting structural inequalities in professional resources and opportunities. This underscores the socially constructed nature of journalistic identity and capacity, particularly in the Global South.

A positive outcome emerged in H5, which demonstrated that formal media literacy and fact-checking training significantly enhance journalists' confidence and ability to identify fake news. This reinforces the principles of **Media Literacy Theory**, which advocates for continuous critical learning to enable journalists to navigate complex digital environments effectively.

Hypotheses H7 and H8 addressed regulation and legal awareness. While journalists recognized the necessity of stricter laws to combat misinformation, they expressed

concerns about potential misuse of the **Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA)**, highlighting the need for regulation that is transparent, equitable, and rights-based. Legal literacy therefore emerges as a crucial factor in shaping informed perspectives on media regulation.

Finally, H9 examined the relationship among training, tool usage, and reporting accuracy. Despite confidence in their ethical standards or resourcefulness, many journalists had not undergone formal training. This gap between perceived and actual preparedness underscores the importance of institutionalized and ongoing professional development programs.

5.3. Social Media and Misinformation: Perceptions and Realities (H1, H2)

The analysis of H1 and H2 indicates that journalists in South Punjab overwhelmingly perceive social media as a primary contributor to the spread of fake news. Survey data showed high t-values and significant mean scores for items addressing platform algorithms, with participants noting that Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter tend to prioritize sensational content. This perception aligns with Vosoughi et al. (2018), who found that fake news propagates faster and more widely on Twitter than verified information, driven primarily by emotional appeal and novelty.

Journalists also reported that the influence of social media on public opinion is predominantly negative, contributing to mistrust of both content and digital service platforms. Within this context, journalists increasingly see themselves as gatekeepers rather than traditional content creators (Bruns, 2018). The rapidity and scale of information dissemination on social media often bypass conventional editorial oversight, reducing journalistic authority and incentivizing reactive reporting in response to trending stories, even when verification is incomplete.

This duality emphasizes the tension between professional responsibility and the pressures of a digital, algorithm-driven media environment. It further validates the **Media Literacy Theory** perspective that critical understanding of platform mechanics and algorithmic prioritization is essential for journalists to effectively mitigate the spread of misinformation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusion of the thesis, summarizing the main findings, restating the purpose of the study, and offering recommendations based on the results. The research aimed to understand how journalists in South Punjab perceive the dual role of social media in spreading and combating fake news. It examined the effectiveness of training, the impact of legal frameworks, ethical dilemmas, and the influence of institutional and technological resources on journalistic practice in a digital landscape increasingly shaped by misinformation.

A **quantitative research design** was employed, with a structured survey administered to 620 journalists in South Punjab. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, t-tests, chi-square tests, correlation, and regression analysis. The study was grounded in two primary theoretical frameworks: **Media Literacy Theory** (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992), emphasizing critical thinking and the use of digital tools to manage online content, and **Social Construction of Reality** (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which explores how professional norms and practices are shaped through social interaction and contextual adjustment.

Key findings indicate that journalists consider social media a major source of fake news, often amplified by platform algorithms and user-generated virality. Nonetheless, they acknowledge the necessity of collaboration, training, and regulatory reform to address misinformation effectively. While many journalists express confidence in their ethical judgment, those with formal media literacy and fact-checking training report greater preparedness and accuracy. Regulatory frameworks such as PECA were viewed ambivalently: necessary for combating misinformation but potentially threatening to press freedom. Overall, the study confirms that fake news represents a **multidimensional challenge**, requiring interventions in training, ethics, institutional support, and policy.

6.2. Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding how journalists in South Punjab perceive and respond to digital misinformation. Analysis across nine hypotheses demonstrates that journalists not only recognize the risks posed by fake news but actively attempt to address it, despite structural, institutional, and technological constraints.

The research confirms that combating misinformation is a **systemic challenge**, rather than the responsibility of individual journalists. Effective responses require an integrated approach encompassing media literacy, ethical integrity, technological resources, and policy cooperation. The influential role of social media in amplifying misinformation (Vosoughi et al., 2018) is widely recognized, while traditional verification techniques are deemed insufficient in the high-velocity digital landscape.

Findings also highlight a complex relationship between ethical self-perception and training uptake. Although many journalists consider themselves ethical, those professionally trained in fact-checking exhibit greater confidence and competence, suggesting that self-regulation alone is insufficient to address the technical challenges of misinformation (Tandoc et al., 2018). These findings support **Social Construction of Reality**, demonstrating that journalistic norms and practices evolve under the pressures of digital environments.

The study also underscores the expanded role of journalists in the digital age. Beyond reporting, journalists are increasingly responsible for real-time verification, content moderation, and public education about misinformation. Achieving this requires

not only technical skills but also collaboration with platforms, regulators, and civil society. When supported by training and institutional resources, journalists are prepared to adopt this broader mandate.

6.3. Contributions of the Study

The study offers significant theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions to the field of journalism, particularly in the Pakistani context.

Theoretical Contributions:

- Extends **Media Literacy Theory** (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992) by demonstrating how critical thinking, technology awareness, and verification skills operate in practice, especially in resource-limited settings.
- Reinforces **Social Construction of Reality** (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) by showing how journalistic norms, ethical practices, and regulatory responses are continuously negotiated within specific socio-cultural contexts.

Empirical Contributions:

- Provides novel data from South Punjab, a previously under-studied region, highlighting local disparities in access to training, institutional support, and digital resources.
- Offers insights into journalists' coping mechanisms, professional practices, and challenges in a digitalized but resource-limited environment.

Practical Contributions:

- Emphasizes the need for **professional training** in media literacy and fact-checking, particularly for journalists in semi-urban and rural areas.
- Informs journalism educators on designing **context-specific training modules** that integrate ethical reasoning with technical skills.
- Guides policymakers to create **transparent and inclusive regulations**, balancing misinformation control with press freedom.
- Encourages collaboration across stakeholders, including social media platforms, civil society, and media institutions, to address the multifaceted problem of fake news.

6.4. Study Limitations

While this research provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. **Underrepresentation of Rural Journalists:**
Despite efforts to include a diverse sample, the majority of participants were from urban or semi-urban areas. As a result, the unique challenges faced by rural journalists—who often operate with minimal institutional support and limited digital access—remain underrepresented. This may affect the generalizability of

findings to fully rural contexts. Future studies should employ targeted sampling strategies to capture these voices.

2. Self-Reported Data Bias

The study relies on self-reported survey responses, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Journalists might overstate ethical compliance or technical competence, particularly regarding sensitive topics like misinformation or media regulation.

3. Absence of Qualitative Data

The study does not include interviews or open-ended questions, which could have provided richer insights into journalists' experiences, perspectives on regulation, and ethical decision-making. Qualitative methods would complement quantitative findings, offering a deeper understanding of the nuances in journalists' attitudes and practices.

6.5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following recommendations

1. Institutionalized Training Programs

- Develop continuous professional development initiatives in media literacy, fact-checking, and verification tools.
- Prioritize inclusion of rural and semi-urban journalists to reduce regional disparities.

2. Ethical Awareness and Capacity Building

- Integrate ethical decision-making into journalism training to bridge the gap between perceived and actual preparedness.
- Encourage newsroom policies that reinforce adherence to ethical standards in digital reporting.

3. Regulatory Reform and Legal Literacy

- Promote transparent, equitable, and rights-based regulations to combat misinformation while safeguarding press freedom.
- Involve journalists as stakeholders in policy formulation and evaluation.

4. Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

- Encourage partnerships among media organizations, fact-checking bodies, social media platforms, and civil society.
- Develop joint strategies to detect, flag, and mitigate the spread of misinformation.

5. Future Research Directions

- Conduct qualitative studies to explore journalists' lived experiences and ethical dilemmas in depth.

- Investigate the impact of gender, age, and geographic disparities on exposure to and management of fake news.
- Examine longitudinal changes in digital literacy, verification practices, and ethical decision-making in journalism over time.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that combating fake news is a **systemic, multidimensional task**. Addressing the problem requires a combination of professional training, ethical reinforcement, institutional support, and participatory policy-making. By implementing these strategies, journalists in South Punjab—and similar contexts—can better navigate the challenges of a digital media environment dominated by misinformation.

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