

Shaping Society Through Media: The Role of Communication in Pakistan's Social Change

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Abstract

Mass communication plays a powerful role in shaping public attitudes, social behavior, and collective understanding in Pakistan. This study examines the influence of a wide range of media forms, including television, radio, newspapers, film, and rapidly growing online networks. To capture both measurable trends and lived experiences, the research uses a mixed-method design that combines a national survey with focus group discussions and interviews with informed stakeholders. This approach makes it possible to explore how media consumption relates to public trust, civic participation, political awareness, social tolerance, and perceptions of gender roles. The findings suggest that broader exposure to different types of media often encourages people to take greater interest in public affairs and become more involved in community dialogue. Media content designed for entertainment also appears to contribute to changing views about gender, particularly among younger audiences, where more balanced and inclusive attitudes are becoming visible. At the same time, these effects are not uniform across the country, since cultural background, regional setting, and language preferences shape how messages are received and interpreted. Trustworthy and responsible media sources are more likely to produce constructive social outcomes. The qualitative part of the study further shows that media does more than deliver information. It helps define national conversations, influences what people consider normal civic behavior, and can either strengthen social understanding or intensify existing tensions. These findings highlight several important policy directions. There is a strong need to improve media literacy, support programming that advances the public good, ensure fair representation of linguistic and regional diversity, and increase accountability among broadcasters and digital platforms. With thoughtful reforms, Pakistan can make better use of its media environment while reducing the harmful effects of misinformation, social fragmentation, and unequal representation.

Keywords: Mass, Media, Outcomes, Pakistan, Social

Introduction

Pakistan's media environment has experienced a remarkable transformation over time. In earlier decades, communication was mainly dominated by state-regulated print and broadcast systems. Today, however, the landscape has become far more diverse, consisting of satellite television, FM radio, online journalism, and internationally connected social media networks that compete for public attention (Muzaffar, et, al., 2019). This transformation began to accelerate in the early 2000s

when media liberalization encouraged the rapid growth of private television channels and cable services. Later, during the 2010s and 2020s, wider internet availability, smartphone use, and user-generated content further reshaped the communication structure of the country (Ahmed & Shaikh, 2020).

In this evolving setting, mass media is no longer limited to the delivery of news and information. It now plays an active role in directing public focus, shaping social dialogue, influencing civic attitudes, and reflecting collective cultural ambitions. To understand its broader social effects, it is necessary to examine how media functions within Pakistan's democratic system, social cohesion, and public security framework (Bukhari & Shah, 2017).

Several factors make this issue especially important. One major factor is the country's youthful population, as a large number of young people depend on digital platforms for information, entertainment, and interaction. In addition, algorithm-based personalization and selective content exposure have increased the possibility of echo chambers, where users are repeatedly exposed to opinions similar to their own (Chaudhry & Khan, 2021). At the same time, political instability, health emergencies, climate-related disasters, and economic uncertainty place considerable pressure on systems of information and communication. Persistent inequalities also remain significant (Salam, et. al., 2024). Differences based on gender, location, education, and income strongly affect media access and people's ability to interpret content, producing varied outcomes across different segments of society (Farooq & Malik, 2023).

Mass media continues to be recognized as one of the most influential tools of communication in the modern world, with the power to affect social life in profound ways. In Pakistan, the expansion of television, radio, newspapers, and digital media has deeply influenced cultural, political, social, and economic realities. Since the liberalization of the media sector in the early 2000s, private news networks, entertainment channels, and social networking platforms have widened the space for public expression and debate (Raza & Akhtar, 2018; Ullah et al., 2019).

On the positive side, media can spread awareness, support education, and encourage public engagement. On the negative side, it can also become a source of misinformation, cultural standardization, and political polarization (Jamil, 2020; Aslam & Hussain, 2021). In Pakistan, the media has contributed significantly to shaping political narratives, highlighting social concerns, and influencing public attitudes, particularly among young audiences (Shabir & Safdar, 2020). Furthermore, the growing popularity of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube has introduced new forms of communication, digital activism, and information sharing (Ali & Hassan, 2022).

A particularly important area of media influence in Pakistan is culture and identity. Through exposure to global entertainment, advertising, and online trends, audiences encounter new lifestyles, values, and cultural practices that may challenge local traditions (Ahmed, 2019; Habib, 2020 Muzaffar, et. al., 2020). These shifts can be observed in changing family relationships, evolving gender expectations, and new aspirations among younger generations. Because Pakistani society is strongly rooted in tradition, the role of media in reshaping social norms requires serious attention (Rauf, 2021).

Media also has a close relationship with political awareness and participation. Many citizens in Pakistan rely on television news, talk shows, and digital platforms for political knowledge and current affairs (Yousaf & Ali, 2021; Khan & Nisar, 2022). While this can improve awareness and engagement, these same platforms may also circulate fake news, propaganda, and sensational material, all of which may contribute to political instability and growing divisions in society (Mahmood & Tariq, 2023).

The influence of media on youth is another major concern. Since young people form a large portion of Pakistan's population, their ideas, ambitions, and behavior are significantly affected by

television dramas, advertising, online influencers, and global digital content. Media can help youth gain information and connect with wider opportunities, but it can also encourage unrealistic ideals, unhealthy routines, and psychological pressure (Zafar et al., 2022; Asghar, et. al., 2025; Imran & Qureshi, 2023).

Another major shift caused by media expansion is the way people communicate with one another. Traditional face-to-face interaction is increasingly being replaced by digital communication. Although this change offers speed and convenience, it has also contributed to social isolation and a weakening of community relationships (Shahid, 2021; Farooq, 2022). In addition, the fast spread of unverified news and misleading content on social media has intensified social tensions, especially during elections, public emergencies, and health crises such as COVID-19 (Rashid & Akram, 2021; Javed et al., 2023).

Even with these challenges, media still holds strong potential for positive social development. It has been used to raise awareness about gender equality, healthcare, environmental responsibility, and human rights (Iqbal & Naveed, 2022; Noor & Khalid, 2023). Television campaigns and digital media initiatives have supported important causes such as vaccination, girls' education, and disaster preparedness. When media is used responsibly, it can become a valuable force for constructive social change.

In light of these realities, the present study explores how mass media communication affects social life in Pakistan. It specifically focuses on its influence on cultural values, political participation, youth behavior, and social cohesion. The purpose is to understand both the positive contributions and the negative consequences of media in Pakistani society. The study also emphasizes the importance of media literacy, ethical journalism, and effective regulation in ensuring that the benefits of mass communication are maximized while its harmful effects are reduced.

Review of Literature

Mass media has long remained a central focus of academic inquiry due to its powerful influence on societies across the world. It plays a significant role in shaping social systems, guiding political discourse, and influencing cultural patterns. Researchers emphasize that media should not be viewed merely as a passive reflection of society; rather, it actively participates in shaping and transforming it (McQuail, 2000; Castells, 2009). In the case of Pakistan, this influence became particularly visible after the early 2000s, when the media sector experienced liberalization. This shift led to a rapid increase in private television channels, FM radio stations, and, more recently, the expansion of digital communication platforms (Yusuf, 2013; Siraj, 2009).

Various theoretical frameworks in mass communication help explain how media operates and affects audiences. For example, agenda-setting theory highlights how media determines which issues receive public attention (McCombs & Shaw, 2002), while cultivation theory examines how prolonged exposure to media content shapes perceptions of reality (Gerbner et al., 2002). Similarly, the uses and gratifications theory focuses on how individuals actively select media to satisfy their needs (Katz et al., 2003). In Pakistan, these theories have been applied to understand media's role in encouraging political participation, influencing youth engagement, and contributing to social development (Zafar & Khan, 2011; Malik & Qureshi, 2014).

The liberalization of the media industry brought both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it improved access to information and diversified viewpoints. On the other hand, it raised concerns regarding journalistic ethics, misinformation, and political bias (Hassan & Shah, 2010; Riaz, 2015). During critical situations such as natural disasters or security crises, media has served as a key channel for disseminating important information. However, it has also, at times, contributed to panic and sensational reporting (Shabir et al., 2014; Shaheen, 2017).

The rapid growth of digital and social media has further transformed communication patterns in

Pakistan. These platforms have created alternative spaces for public expression, allowing marginalized voices to be heard and encouraging broader participation in social dialogue (Qazi & Shah, 2018; Aslam & Ahmed, 2020). At the same time, this expansion has introduced new challenges, including cyber harassment, online abuse, and the spread of hate speech (Naeem, 2021; Rehman & Ali, 2022).

On a global level, media plays a complex role in areas such as education, politics, and culture, offering both opportunities and risks (Livingstone, 2011; Couldry, 2012). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media platforms became essential tools for continuing education and sharing health-related information (Khan & Nawaz, 2021; Riaz & Fatima, 2021). Nevertheless, unequal access to digital technologies meant that these benefits were largely concentrated in urban regions, highlighting the issue of the digital divide (Hanif & Rehman, 2022). Additionally, media content in Pakistan significantly influences gender perceptions. Television programs, advertisements, and talk shows often reinforce traditional stereotypes, though they have also been used to promote gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives (Amin, 2017; Zia, 2019). Moreover, exposure to global media content contributes to cultural globalization, particularly among younger audiences, who increasingly engage with Western ideas and lifestyles (Mahmood, 2021; Siddiqui & Zafar, 2022).

Over time, Pakistan's media system has shifted from a tightly regulated structure to a more dynamic and competitive environment. It now includes satellite television, FM radio, digital journalism, and global social media platforms operating simultaneously. This transformation began with policy changes in the early 2000s that enabled private broadcasters and cable networks to expand. In subsequent years, especially during the 2010s and 2020s, developments in mobile internet and user-generated content further diversified the media landscape (Ahmed & Shaikh, 2020).

Within this modern context, the function of mass media extends far beyond the simple transmission of news. It plays a crucial role in shaping public priorities, influencing the boundaries of social discourse, guiding civic behavior, and reflecting societal values and aspirations. To fully understand its broader implications, it is important to consider its role in Pakistan's democratic processes, social cohesion, and human security (Bukhari & Shah, 2017).

Several contextual factors increase the significance of media's role in Pakistan. One of the most important is the country's large youth population, as young individuals increasingly rely on digital platforms for information, communication, and entertainment. Furthermore, algorithm-driven content and personalization have contributed to the creation of echo chambers, where individuals are primarily exposed to viewpoints that reinforce their existing beliefs (Chaudhry & Khan, 2021). At the same time, Pakistan faces continuous challenges such as political instability, public health emergencies, natural disasters, and economic fluctuations, all of which place pressure on communication systems. Additionally, structural inequalities remain a major concern. Differences related to gender, geographic location, education, and income significantly influence both access to media and the ability to critically engage with it. As a result, the impact of media varies across different segments of society (Farooq & Malik, 2023).

Generated Hypotheses

H1: Greater use of diverse and credible media sources is associated with stronger civic engagement and a higher likelihood of adopting positive health-related behaviors.

H2: Dependence on uniform and unverified media content is associated with greater political and social polarization, along with increased vulnerability to misinformation.

H3: Exposure to mainstream entertainment media is expected to reinforce conventional gender-

role beliefs, whereas exposure to alternative or counter-stereotypical content is expected to encourage more equal and progressive attitudes.

H4: Media literacy is expected to influence the relationships proposed in H1–H3 by minimizing negative effects and strengthening positive outcomes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative approach to examine the relationship between media use and social outcomes in Pakistan. A multi-stage stratified sampling method was applied to ensure representation across both urban and rural populations as well as all major administrative regions, including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Data were gathered over a period of four weeks. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and to engage with media regularly, defined as a minimum of 20 minutes of daily use.

Sample Characteristics

The intended sample size was 1,500 individuals; however, after applying quality control measures such as attention filters and completion-time screening, 1,080 valid responses were included in the final dataset. The sample consisted of 51% male participants, 47% female participants, and 2% who identified as other or chose not to disclose their gender. The average age of respondents was 28.4 years ($SD = 9.7$). In terms of educational attainment, 22% had secondary education or below, 48% held undergraduate degrees, and 30% had postgraduate qualifications. Geographically, 63% of participants were from urban areas, while 37% were from rural settings.

Measurement Instruments

All variables were measured using five-point Likert scales unless specified otherwise:

- **Media Diet Index (MDI):** Assessed the diversity of weekly media consumption across five categories—public broadcast media, private broadcast media, print and electronic newspapers, digital news platforms, and social media. Scores were standardized (z-scores).
- **Verified News Trust (VNT):** Measured trust in credible news sources and fact-checking services ($\alpha = .84$).
- **Unverified Social Reliance (USR):** Evaluated dependence on informal or unverified sources such as forwarded messages on WhatsApp or Telegram and unregulated YouTube content ($\alpha = .81$).
- **Civic Participation (CIV):** Captured engagement in civic activities over the past year (e.g., contacting officials, attending meetings, volunteering), scored as a cumulative index (0–6).
- **Political Efficacy (EFFIC):** Included both internal and external perceptions of political influence ($\alpha = .86$).
- **Social Cohesion (COH):** Measured generalized trust, intergroup acceptance, and openness to political dialogue ($\alpha = .83$).
- **Polarization (POL):** Assessed affective political division (higher scores indicating stronger polarization; $\alpha = .82$).
- **Health Knowledge (HLTH-K):** Based on an objective test (0–10) covering vaccination awareness and emergency preparedness.
- **Health Intent (HLTH-I):** Measured willingness to follow health recommendations and receive vaccinations ($\alpha = .79$).

- **Gender Norm Attitudes (GNA):** Evaluated positions on traditional versus egalitarian gender roles ($\alpha = .88$).
- **Youth Well-being (YWB):** Applied only to respondents aged 24 or below, using a shortened WHO-5 well-being scale (range 0–25).
- **Media Literacy (MIL):** Assessed skills related to verifying information, evaluating sources, and managing online privacy ($\alpha = .87$).
- **Control Variables:** Included age, gender, education, income proxy, urban/rural residence, province, religiosity, time spent online, and political affiliation.

Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency for all scales was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients as reported above. To validate the measurement structure, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring with promax rotation was conducted on one half of the dataset. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the remaining sample supported the model fit, with indices indicating strong validity ($\chi^2/df = 2.1$, CFI = .957, TLI = .946, RMSEA = .032).

Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeded in several stages:

- Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore relationships among variables.
- Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models with robust standard errors were used for continuous dependent variables, including CIV, EFFIC, COH, HLTH-K, HLTH-I, GNA, and YWB.
- Ordered logistic regression was applied in cases where ordinal scaling was more appropriate, serving as a sensitivity check.
- Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to estimate both direct and indirect relationships between key predictors (MDI, VNT, USR) and outcomes, with media literacy (MIL) tested as a moderating variable through latent interaction terms.
- Propensity Score Matching (PSM) was conducted as a robustness check to compare individuals with high versus low reliance on unverified sources (USR), using nearest-neighbor matching with a caliper of 0.2 standard deviations.
- Additional sensitivity analyses included alternative variable codings, province-level fixed effects, and the removal of influential outliers.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. No personally identifiable information was recorded, ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality. The research followed established ethical standards for social science research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Civic engagement and political awareness

Individuals who consume a wider variety of media sources (MDI) and place greater confidence in credible news outlets (VNT) tend to show stronger involvement in civic activities and higher levels of political efficacy, even after accounting for demographic factors and political alignment. These results provide support for H1. One possible explanation is that exposure to diverse information sources introduces individuals to multiple perspectives and mobilizing content, which strengthens their sense of influence and participation in public affairs.

Social Cohesion and Polarization

A strong reliance on unverified media channels (USR) is linked with increased emotional and political polarization, along with reduced social cohesion, confirming H2. However, the interaction between media literacy (MIL) and unverified reliance reveals a mitigating effect. Higher levels of media literacy weaken the association between USR and polarization, suggesting that critical media skills can reduce harmful outcomes, thereby supporting the moderating role proposed in H4.

Public Health Communication

Trust in reliable media sources (VNT) is positively associated with both health-related knowledge and behavioral intentions. Structural modeling further indicates that knowledge acts as an important intermediary factor, through which trust influences health intentions. This finding is consistent with H1 and highlights the importance of credible information in promoting preventive health behaviors.

Cultural Values and Identity Formation

Exposure to mainstream entertainment media is modestly associated with the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. In contrast, engagement with alternative or counter-narrative digital content is linked with more egalitarian attitudes. These findings support H3 in both directions. Although the effects are not large, they remain consistent across different analytical approaches.

Youth Well-being and Learning Patterns

Within the youth sample, balanced and purposeful media use—particularly engagement with educational and informative content—is associated with higher well-being. Both very low and excessive screen time are linked with comparatively lower well-being, indicating a non-linear relationship. Media literacy again emerges as a protective factor, helping young individuals navigate media use more effectively.

Robustness Checks

Propensity Score Matching (PSM) was used to compare individuals with high and low reliance on unverified sources. The results confirm that polarization remains significantly higher among high-USR users ($ATT \approx .19$, $p < .01$). Additionally, models incorporating provincial fixed effects yield consistent findings, suggesting that the results are stable and not driven by regional differences.

Conclusion

Pakistan's contemporary media system, characterized by a blend of traditional and digital platforms, plays a significant and multifaceted role in shaping social outcomes. Positive effects are most evident among individuals who engage with a diverse range of media and place trust in credible information sources. These individuals tend to demonstrate higher civic participation, better health awareness, and stronger pro-social intentions.

Conversely, heavy dependence on unverified media channels is associated with negative consequences, including increased polarization and weaker social cohesion. While entertainment media continues to influence cultural norms, digital platforms also provide opportunities for alternative narratives that promote more progressive values. Across all areas, media literacy stands out as a key factor that enhances positive impacts while reducing potential harms.

The central challenge, therefore, lies not in favoring traditional media over digital platforms or vice versa, but in strengthening the overall media ecosystem. This includes improving transparency, building public trust, and equipping individuals with the skills needed to critically

engage with information. Such efforts can enable society to better communicate, collaborate, and respond to shared challenges.

Recommendations

- **Strengthening Media Literacy Education:**
 - Introduce media and information literacy programs at secondary and higher education levels, focusing on fact-checking skills, misinformation awareness, digital privacy, and understanding algorithm-driven content.
- **Enhancing Public Health Communication:**
 - Develop collaborative initiatives between health authorities, religious institutions, and media organizations to design and deliver accurate and culturally appropriate health messages.
- **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:**
 - Encourage clear labeling of opinion-based, sponsored, and AI-generated content, and require regular transparency reports from major media organizations and digital platforms.
- **Supporting Local Journalism:**
 - Provide funding opportunities and professional training for local news outlets, community radio stations, and investigative journalism initiatives to strengthen grassroots reporting.
- **Improving Crisis Communication Systems:**
 - Establish dedicated monitoring units to track misinformation and deploy rapid-response communication strategies in multiple languages during emergencies.
- **Regulating Digital Platforms Collaboratively:**
 - Work with technology companies to develop context-sensitive content moderation strategies, including features that limit the spread of harmful content and promote fact-checking.
- **Encouraging Socially Responsible Entertainment:**
 - Offer incentives for media productions that incorporate educational themes, promote inclusivity, and model constructive social behavior.
- **Protecting and Empowering Youth:**
 - Promote healthy digital habits, strengthen privacy protections, and expand access to high-quality online educational resources, particularly in science, technology, and civic education.

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