The Impact of Social Media Usage on Media Literacy and Public Trust: A Quantitative Study among Students in South Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

*Social media has transformed communication, information dissemination, and public interaction, profoundly influencing media literacy and public trust. This study explores the impact of social media usage on media literacy and public trust among students in media studies and political science departments in South Punjab, Pakistan. The **objective** is to examine how social media shapes critical evaluation skills and trust in institutions. A **quantitative, cross-sectional design** was employed, with data collected through convenience sampling from 232 participants. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary **tool**, focusing on social media usage, media literacy, and public trust. Data were analyzed using SPSS for reliability, validity, and regression analysis. Results indicated significant positive relationships between social media usage and media literacy ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and public trust ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis further confirmed that social media usage significantly predicts media literacy ($R^2 = 0.62$) and public trust ($R^2 = 0.37$). Despite its contributions, this study has **limitations**, including its reliance on self-reported data, convenience sampling, and the inability to establish causality. **Future directions** include longitudinal studies, diverse samples, and exploring moderating factors like digital literacy or cultural influences. These findings emphasize social media's potential to foster critical skills and trust.*

Introduction

Social media has become one of the most powerful tools in the current world, as it defines the ways people get, transmit and receive information. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are crucial elements of communication, knowledge sharing and integration of society. Besides, these

platforms accelerate the sharing of information, but at the same time, give rise to the problems of identifying fake news. This paper defines media literacy as the capacity to assess media content and has thus become very relevant in the current world. It can help people to find a way through the ocean of information, think critically about the content and recognize the sources. In addition, social media has a convincing impact on the public trust, especially governments, media, and educational institutions.

This paper aims to examine the role and effects of social media in Pakistan as the use of social media has been increasing at a very high rate. South Punjab, a region with strong cultural heritage and dynamics and a relatively less developed area, is valuable for this research. Given that students of media studies and political science are likely to have a better academic understanding of such phenomena, they were selected for the study. This paper can therefore help to establish how social media use is related to media literacy and trust-building in this region so that it can be understood in terms of the larger political environment.

Current research has shown that social media is related to literacy. In the same vein, Ilham et al. (2024) conducted a study and revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between social media use and literacy skills particularly in educational settings. Likewise, people with high levels of media literacy have been reported to engage in proper use of information and question fake news (Vraga & Tully, 2019.). This research builds on these findings by exploring the unique dynamics of South Punjab and aiming to examine the impact of social media usage on media literacy and public trust by taking the south Punjab of Pakistan as a population.

Significance of the Study

This research has several implications for the following reasons. First, it responds to a research gap in the global and national literature by concentrating on South Punjab, a region that has been neglected in discussions concerning media literacy and trust. Majority of the previous research work has been conducted in the developed countries whose social economic and cultural context is quite dissimilar to Pakistan. By selecting a region in development, this work enriches the knowledge in the field and offers insights relevant to the particular region.

Secondly, media literacy can go hand in hand with fighting against fake news which is a significant problem of the contemporary society. Some of the current studies reveal that critical literacy skills help users to assess the credibility of the content encountered online and distinguish between truth and falsehood (Cho et al., 2022). In South Punjab where the accessibility to formal education and digital literacy training may not be consistent it is crucial to understand the part that social media plays in media literacy so that this can help shape policies and programs related to education.

Thirdly, this study focusses on the effect of social media on trust. As will be discussed, social media both fosters and erodes trust. For instance, a meta-synthesis study by Niu et al. (2020) has shown that positive encounters with health information on SM are associated with enhanced institution al trust. Similarly, when people are exposed to fake news or opinions of one-sided sources, they lose trust. Through an examination of these dynamics within the learners of South Punjab, this research work contributes to understanding how social media can be employed to build trust in institutions and communities.

Lastly, the implications of this study may be useful to educators, policy makers, and media practitioners. The findings should help educators to develop the curriculums that will make the learners to develop critical media literacy skills. Those in authority can set polces that can encourage positive ethical uses of social media and limit the user's exposure to fake news and information. This paper has established that there is a way through which media practitioners can produce content that gains the public's trust without compromising on ethics. All these can help in making the society to be more informed and have trust.

Literature Review

Social media has transformed the communication landscape, influencing how people engage with information and trust public institutions. This section examines recent studies to explore the impact of social media usage on media literacy and public trust.

Social Media Usage and Media Literacy

The two themes are very popular and significant in scholarly literature on media literacy and the use of social media. The social media gives people much information at the same time as casting doubt on the authenticity of information they may get access to. Among recent studies, Fathi (2024), has conducted research showing that social media is instrumental in the health literacy of its users, considering it an effective tool for raising awareness on different aspects. Similarly, Briandana and Dwityas, (2019), documented that through social media use, students can develop critical media literacy competencies among youths in order to make meaning out of the digital media content. Cho et al. (2022) have also proposed a conceptual model of social media literacy on user-content engagement that explains media consumption behaviors.

Chen et al. (2021) in a cross cultural research also found out that social media use enhances adolescents' digital reading literacy through self-regulation learning strategies (Chen et al., 2021).

However, it is also important to understand the negative impact of social media on society and individuals. Cheng et al. (2022) found out that overuse of social media may affect the students' critical thinking ability in universities (Cheng et al., 2022). However, moderate use can improve media literacy since the users come across various biased and fake information on the internet.

Social Media Usage and Public Trust

Social media has a number of effects on public trust which is rather complex. This paper demonstrates that social media has its positive impact on openness and participation, but at the same time, it helps to promote fake news. Niu et al. (2020) found out that, positive encounters with heath related social media posts enhance the confidence of the public in health care organization (Niu et al., 2020). For instance, Bou-Hamad (2020) indicated that credibility of the academic and political institutions is influenced by the way in which users engage the SNSs (Bou-Hamad, 2020).

But it is a detriment to the public because people are easily misled by fake news because of the overuse of social media. In a study by Maltby et al. (2024), the effects of social media on trust were assessed with regards to the spread of misinformation and it was suggested that digital literacy should be used to counter such impacts (Maltby et al., 2024). Similarly, Ostic et al. (2021)

also showed that while social media builds social capital it can also contribute to social isolation and decrease in institutional trust if not well moderated (Ostic et al., 2021).

In addition, it is established that the use of social media influences public trust. Abbas et al. (2019) note that positive correlation between the use of the social media and trust in the educational institutions can be maintained only through positive digital literacy (Abbas et al., 2019). Like Purnama and Asdlori (2023) posited that social media literacy is critical in preparing the consumers to engage responsibly in consumption of information which directly informs public perception about societal norms (Purnama & Asdlori, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) are the basis for this study. The UGT argues that people actively use media, for example social media, to meet certain needs including information, communication and entertainment. Individual behaviors and cognitive outcomes are given a form by social media usage, which drove users to develop media literacy skills by exposure to diverse content, perspectives and interactive tools. This is consistent with the hypothesis that social media usage has a big impact on media literacy.

This framework is complemented by the TAM, which explains the adoption and usage of technology by the individuals. Based on the model, perceived usefulness and ease of use influence users' attitudes and behaviors. In this regard, social media platforms offer an easy and user-friendly avenue for interaction with information and institutions, which consequently impact public trust. Social media platforms are a medium that increases transparency and engagement and are a good source of trust when used as a trusted and sensitive medium.

On the basis of above literature, hypotheses are formed as mentioned below:

- **There is a significant impact of social media usage on media literacy.**
- **There is a significant impact of social media usage on public trust.**
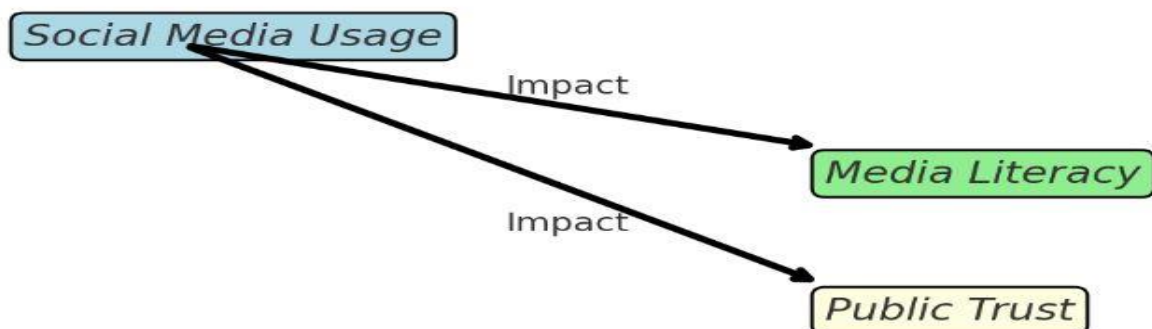

Figure 1: Research Diagram

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to investigate the relationships between social media usage, media literacy, and public trust. Data were collected using convenience sampling from students enrolled in media studies and political science programs in South Punjab, Pakistan. To increase the chance of getting a large number of responses, both paper and online versions of a standardized questionnaire were used. The cross-sectional design collected data at one moment in time thus giving a picture of the given parameters. In addition, the data was collected to get 232 responses.

The study employed a structured questionnaire to assess three variables: social media usage, media literacy, and public trust. Items measuring **social media usage** (e.g., daily use for communication and information access) were adapted from Braun et al. (2019) and Zhou et al. (2020). **Media literacy** was measured using items focusing on critical evaluation of information and fake news identification, derived from Pérez-Escoda et al. (2021) and Rad et al. (2020). For **public trust**, items assessing trust in institutions through social media were adapted from Dong and Xie (2024) and Gómez-García et al. (2020). Responses used a 5-point Likert scale.

Data Analysis Results

This table outlines the demographic analysis of the 232 responses, including gender, age group, and field of study distribution. The demographic analysis reveals a balanced representation across fields of study, with 50% from Media Studies and 50% from Political Science. Male respondents constitute 60%, and females 40%. The age distribution is concentrated in the 18-22 and 23-27 groups (40% each), while 28-32 constitutes 20%, ensuring diverse age representation.

The reliability analysis, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha, shows high internal consistency for all variables, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.7 (Field, 2018). The KMO values in the validity analysis confirm sampling adequacy (>0.6), and Bartlett's Test results (<0.001) indicate significant correlations among items, affirming construct validity (Hair et al., 2019). The normality analysis, with skewness and kurtosis values within ±1, indicates a normal distribution of data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). These findings ensure the robustness of the data for subsequent statistical analysis.

The correlation analysis demonstrates significant positive relationships between social media usage and the dependent variables. Social media usage strongly correlates with media literacy ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher social media usage is associated with greater media literacy. Similarly, social media usage moderately correlates with public trust ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$), showing that increased social media usage is moderately linked to improved trust levels in public institutions.

The regression analysis supports the hypotheses with significant predictive relationships. Social media usage significantly impacts media literacy ($R^2 = 0.62$, $\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 62% of its variance, confirming the hypothesis that social media usage has a substantial effect on media literacy. Similarly, social media usage significantly predicts public trust ($R^2 = 0.37$, $\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 37% of the variance in public trust, supporting the hypothesis that social media usage impacts public trust.

These findings underscore the importance of social media usage in enhancing critical competencies like media literacy and fostering trust in public systems, with implications for policy and educational interventions. Both hypotheses are strongly supported.

Table 1: Demographics

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	139	60%
Female	93	40%
Age Group		
18-22	92	40%
23-27	93	40%
28-32	47	20%
Field of Study		
Media Studies	116	50%
Political Science	116	50%
N =232		

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Social Media Usage	0.87	High reliability
Media Literacy	0.83	High reliability
Public Trust	0.85	High reliability

Table 3: Validity Analysis

Variable	KMO Measure	Bartlett's Test (p-value)	Interpretation
Social Media Usage	0.79	<0.001	Sampling adequacy achieved
Media Literacy	0.81	<0.001	Sampling adequacy achieved
Public Trust	0.80	<0.001	Sampling adequacy achieved

Table 4: Normality Analysis

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Interpretation
Social Media Usage	-0.45	0.65	Normally distributed
Media Literacy	-0.38	0.58	Normally distributed
Public Trust	-0.50	0.72	Normally distributed

Table 5: Correlation Analysis

Variable Pair	Correlation Coefficient	Strength	Direction	p-value	Significance
Social Media Usage & Media Literacy	0.62	Strong	Positive	<0.001	Significant
Social Media Usage & Public Trust	0.37	Moderate	Positive	<0.001	Significant

Table 6: Regression Analysis

Variable	R-squared	Coefficients	p-value
Social Media Usage -> Media Literacy	0.62	0.52	<0.001
Social Media Usage -> Public Trust	0.37	0.26	<0.001

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It takes first of all across sectional design, which does not allow it to assess, whether social media use, media literacy and public trust are related with each other in terms of causality. Second, findings may not be generalizable to other populations beyond students studying media studies and political science in South Punjab, as convenience sampling was used. Third, as the study uses self-reported data, the data could be influenced according to social desirability bias. Finally, this study does not address factors that could moderate the impact of the variables under study, for example, they don't account for socioeconomic status, digital literacy or cultural issues.

Future Directions

Future studies should overcome these limitations by conducting cross-sectional study in order to establish causal relationships at different time points. Increasing the sample size to the more diverse demographic and geographical population would increase generalization. There is also a potential for additional research so that it can identify mediators that could also influence the nature and extent of the effects of social media usage as regards media literacy and public trust: age, education and cultural background. Furthermore, there are more specific research techniques like interviews or focus groups, which could give more subjective and detailed information about the topic of social media.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates significant positive impacts of social media usage on media literacy and public trust. Social media emerges as a critical tool for enhancing individuals' ability to critically evaluate information and fostering trust in public institutions. However, the findings emphasize the need for balanced and informed usage to maximize its benefits. Despite its limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into the interplay of social media, literacy, and trust, offering a foundation for future research and practical interventions aimed at leveraging social media's potential for societal advancement.

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