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SOCIAL MEDIA VS. MAINSTREAM MEDIA: A STUDY OF PUBLIC TRUST AND PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY IN NEWS SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary media ecosystem presents a paradox: audiences have unprecedented access to information, yet public trust in the institutions and platforms delivering it is at a historic low. This study investigates the widening credibility gap between mainstream media (television and print) and social media within the transitional media landscape of Pakistan. Using a qualitative design anchored in Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) Source Credibility Theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 20 stakeholders (n = 20), comprising media policy experts, legacy journalists, media scholars, and active digital news consumers. Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis. Findings reveal a profound dual trust deficit: mainstream media suffers from eroded institutional authority due to perceived state censorship, corporate ownership, and political infotainment, while social media, though valued for speed and unfiltered perspectives, induces deep epistemic anxiety from algorithmic manipulation and misinformation. Crucially, digital audiences have redefined classical credibility metrics: institutional expertise is replaced by networked "authenticity," and "trustworthiness" is transferred through secondary gatekeepers (trusted peers and family) within digital and dark social networks such as WhatsApp. Four themes emerged: the speed-accuracy trade-off, institutional bias and political economy, algorithmic anxiety, and social heuristics via secondary gatekeepers. These directly answer the study's questions on how stakeholders define credibility and why audiences prefer one medium over another. The study concludes that media credibility is no longer a static institutional output but a volatile, user-constructed negotiation. It recommends that legacy media pivot toward rigorous fact-checking and editorial transparency, while digital platforms enhance algorithmic accountability and verification markers, offering a Global South perspective to enrich predominantly Western-centric media trust scholarship.

Keywords: *Media Credibility, Public Trust, Source Credibility Theory, Social Media, Mainstream Media, Algorithmic Curation, Misinformation, Pakistan Media Landscape*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of news consumption has undergone a profound transformation over the past few decades, shifting from traditional, legacy media print newspapers, radio, and television to digital and social media platforms. This transition represents more than a change in distribution technology; it signifies a fundamental restructuring of how information is gathered, disseminated, consumed, and ultimately trusted by the public (Chadwick, 2017). For over a century, traditional mass media operated on a one-to-many communication model in which journalists and editors acted as gatekeepers, determining which events were newsworthy and how they should be framed (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This gatekeeping fostered institutional trust: the public trusted news because they trusted

the historical legacy and professional norms of the masthead (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The rise of Web 2.0 and social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube fundamentally altered this architecture, shifting communication to a many-to-many model (Shirky, 2008) and dismantling the traditional gatekeeping monopoly. Audiences transformed from passive consumers into active participants, while algorithmic distribution replaced human editorial curation. Because these algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement and retention, a model Zuboff (2019) terms surveillance capitalism, they often privilege sensational, emotionally charged, or polarizing content over nuanced, factual reporting. This has produced what may be called a credibility gap: the widening disparity between the unprecedented volume of information available to the public and the public's declining trust in that information and its purveyors (Newman et al., 2023).

This crisis is particularly acute in transitional and developing media landscapes such as Pakistan, where the media system evolved rapidly from a state-owned television monopoly to a heavily corporatized private broadcast sector, followed almost immediately by explosive adoption of mobile broadband and social media (Siraj, 2009). In such contexts, mainstream electronic media is frequently entangled with political and corporate interests, and heavy regulatory pressure exercised through bodies such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and legislation such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) has fostered a culture of self-censorship among journalists (Mehmood, 2021; Farooq, 2022). Simultaneously, the digital sphere, including YouTube, X, and encrypted dark social platforms like WhatsApp, has emerged as an alternative public sphere, yet one equally vulnerable to disinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and coordinated political propaganda (Bhatthi & Riaz, 2020).

This transformation is not merely technological but epistemological. For over a century, the newspaper and, later, the television broadcast functioned as the centralized locus of public information, anchored by high barriers to entry that restricted mass news production to established, capital-intensive institutions (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Within this environment, credibility was largely an institutional inheritance: audiences trusted a masthead or a network not because they personally verified its reporting, but because the structured editorial hierarchy, professional codes of conduct, and legal accountability mechanisms surrounding the organization implicitly guaranteed a baseline of accuracy (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Web 2.0 dismantled this monopoly by democratizing the tools of publication; citizen journalism and algorithmically curated newsfeeds altered not only who could produce news but also how that news was discovered. Active news-seeking behavior deliberately navigating to a newspaper's website or tuning into an evening broadcast has been substantially replaced by incidental consumption, wherein news is encountered passively while scrolling through a social media feed interspersed with entertainment, personal updates, and advertising (Boczkowski et al., 2018). This unbundling of news from its institutional branding strips away the very visual and contextual cues audiences historically relied upon to assess a source's legitimacy, forcing users to become their own gatekeepers in an environment of chronic information overload.

Compounding this challenge is the architecture of algorithmic distribution itself. Unlike human editors, who curate content according to journalistic values such as civic importance, proportionality, or public interest, social media algorithms are optimized to maximize engagement metrics clicks, shares, comments, and time spent on a platforming service of the advertising-driven economic model described above. Because emotionally charged, polarizing, or sensational content reliably generates higher engagement than sober, nuanced reporting, these algorithms systematically privilege virality over veracity (Brady et al., 2017). The consequence is a media environment in which a rigorously fact-checked investigative report and a fabricated, emotionally manipulative post can appear visually indistinguishable within the same timeline, further eroding the audience's capacity to

differentiate credible journalism from misinformation. This dynamic is intensified by the growing sophistication of generative artificial intelligence, which enables the rapid production of deepfakes and synthetic media, introducing what Chesney and Citron (2019) describe as the liar's dividend secondary crisis in which the mere existence of convincing fabrications allows bad actors to dismiss authentic, verifiable reporting as fake, thereby deepening a pervasive and generalized public cynicism toward all mediated information, regardless of its actual accuracy.

At the same time, mainstream media has not been a passive victim of this digital disruption; its own structural and political-economic failures have significantly accelerated the erosion of public trust. In many transitional and developing media systems, legacy broadcasters and print outlets are deeply entangled with corporate ownership structures and state regulatory apparatuses, both of which actively shape editorial decision-making (McChesney, 2015). The hyper-commercialization of prime-time television news, in particular, has incentivized political infotainment dramatized, adversarial talk-show formats prioritizing partisan spectacle over investigative depth at the direct expense of independent, public-interest journalism (Niazi, 2020). When audiences perceive that legacy gatekeepers are selectively filtering, softening, or omitting critical information in favor of narratives convenient to political or commercial patrons, institutional trust does not merely decline; it collapses into active suspicion, transforming the newsroom from a perceived arbiter of truth into a perceived participant in political theater (Fletcher & Park, 2017).

This has produced what may be termed a social media paradox at the very center of the modern credibility crisis: audiences increasingly rely on digital platforms as their primary source of news, even as they simultaneously rate those same platforms as the least trustworthy media environments available to them (Newman et al., 2023). To resolve this apparent contradiction, users have developed alternative heuristics for assigning trust heuristics that rely less on the formal credentials of a publisher and more on social proximity, relying on the judgment of a trusted friend, family member, or admired online figure who shares a given piece of content (Turcotte et al., 2015). While this "networked trust" partially restores a sense of agency and community to an otherwise atomized information environment, it simultaneously creates fertile conditions for the viral spread of rumor, propaganda, and coordinated disinformation, particularly within closed, encrypted "dark social" spaces that operate entirely outside the reach of public fact-checking mechanisms (Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2018).

The consequences of this dual erosion of trust extend well beyond the news industry itself. When both mainstream and social media are perceived as fundamentally compromised, the shared factual foundation required for coherent democratic discourse becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Political polarization deepens as ideologically segmented audiences retreat into incompatible information ecosystems (Sunstein, 2018), disengaged citizens practice news avoidance to escape the cognitive burden of constant verification (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020), and populist political actors exploit the resulting vacuum of epistemic authority by delegitimizing independent journalism outright (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). It is precisely this convergence of technological disruption, institutional failure, and psychological strain that necessitates a focused, empirical investigation into how ordinary citizens and media professionals alike navigate, interpret, and ultimately assign credibility within this fractured contemporary media landscape.

Problem Statement

Despite the speed and reach of social media, issues of fake news persist, while mainstream media faces mounting challenges regarding perceived bias and state or corporate influence. Audiences are caught between a mainstream media establishment perceived as institutionally compromised and a social media landscape plagued by unverified information and algorithmic manipulation. While existing literature extensively documents the general decline in media trust through large-scale quantitative surveys, there remains a critical gap in

qualitative, contextualized research examining how different stakeholders media experts, journalists, scholars, and everyday digital consumers actively perceive, define, and negotiate this credibility gap in their lived experiences.

Research Objectives: This study pursues two central objectives:
(1) to compare perceptions of trust and credibility in mainstream versus social media among key stakeholders, and
(2) to identify the factors that contribute to perceived credibility in the current digital age.

Research Questions: Correspondingly, the study addresses two research questions:
RQ1: How do different stakeholders define news credibility in the current media environment?
RQ2: What factors lead audiences to trust mainstream media versus social media for factual information?

This study holds significance across theoretical, practical, and methodological domains. Theoretically, it modernizes Hovland et al.'s (1953) Source Credibility Theory by testing its applicability within a hybrid media system where institutional gatekeeping competes with algorithmic distribution and user-generated content, while offering a much-needed Global South perspective to a literature that remains heavily Euro-centric (Newman et al., 2023). Practically, it offers actionable insights for media policymakers seeking to move beyond punitive digital regulation toward structural reform of legacy media, and for journalism practitioners seeking to rebuild institutional trust. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of qualitative, in-depth inquiry in capturing the lived, often contradictory rationale behind news consumption nuance that large-scale quantitative surveys frequently fail to reveal (Carlson, 2017).

Literature Review

Understanding the current credibility gap requires situating it within the historical continuum of media transitions. The mid-20th-century shift from print to television offers the most instructive precedent. Postman (1985) characterized the print era as the Age of Exposition, in which reading demanded sequential, rational engagement, and credibility was tied to logical coherence and institutional gatekeeping (Schudson, 1978). Television disrupted this paradigm by merging auditory immediacy with visual potency; McLuhan's (1964) assertion that "the medium is the message" became foundational to understanding how television shifted the public's credibility heuristic from structural logic to visual verification the cultural adage that seeing is believing. Empirical evidence from the Roper polls confirmed this shift, showing television definitively surpassing print as the most trusted news medium by 1963 (Roper, 1985; Carter & Greenberg, 1965). Television also personalized trust through parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956), wherein audiences developed quasi-interpersonal relationships with anchors, judging credibility through eye contact, vocal tone, and perceived sincerity (Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Yet scholars simultaneously critiqued television for prioritizing entertainment and sensationalism over substantive civic knowledge (Postman, 1985; Graber, 1990), giving rise to the knowledge gap hypothesis (Robinson & Levy, 1986).

The digital turn has reproduced and intensified these dynamics through new theoretical constructs: the echo chamber and the filter bubble. Sunstein (2001, 2018) describes echo chambers as enclosed media spaces where individuals encounter only belief-confirming information, driven by homophily and selective exposure (McPherson et al., 2001; Sears & Freedman, 1967). Pariser (2011) distinguishes the filter bubble as a technologically constructed phenomenon, wherein engagement-maximizing algorithms silently curate content based on behavioral data, exploiting confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) and motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). However, contemporary empirical research complicates this narrative. Bruns (2019) and Dubois and Blank (2018) argue that absolute ideological isolation is empirically rare, with politically engaged individuals often maintaining diverse media diets. Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) similarly found that true echo chamber

effects were confined to a small, hyper-partisan minority. This suggests that the credibility gap is less about a lack of exposure to mainstream news and more a qualitative shift in how institutional authority is perceived dynamic reinforced by the hostile media phenomenon, wherein partisan audiences perceive even balanced mainstream coverage as biased against them (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), particularly when framed by peer commentary that acts as a secondary gatekeeper (Turcotte et al., 2015).

Within Pakistan specifically, the media landscape presents a uniquely compressed and volatile case for studying this phenomenon. The liberalization of broadcast media in 2002 dismantled decades of state monopoly but introduced new distortions: intense commercial competition has driven prime-time television toward political infotainment rather than investigative journalism (Niazi, 2020), while concentrated corporate ownership and PEMRA's regulatory overreach have fostered public perceptions of censorship and narrative control (Eijaz, 2013; Mehmood, 2021). In response, YouTube has become a refuge for displaced journalists offering unfiltered alternative narratives (Ali & Fatima, 2023), X functions as an elite battleground rife with coordinated disinformation campaigns (Zahra-Malik, 2018; Bhatthi & Riaz, 2020), and WhatsApp operates as an invisible, high-trust dark social network where misinformation spreads rapidly through familial and community bonds (Jaffrelot & Louër, 2017).

Beyond the structural and platform-level mechanisms described above, a growing body of literature emphasizes the psychological underpinnings that make audiences susceptible to the credibility distortions produced by both algorithmic curation and social endorsement. Confirmation bias the well-documented tendency to search for, interpret, and recall information in ways that validate pre-existing beliefs functions as a cognitive shortcut that reduces the mental burden of evaluating conflicting reports in an oversaturated information environment (Nickerson, 1998). Social media algorithms exploit this bias directly, continuously surfacing content that is cognitively easy to accept because it aligns with the user's existing worldview. When individuals encounter information that contradicts deeply held beliefs, the resulting psychological discomfort, or cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), frequently triggers motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), whereby users expend cognitive effort not to rationally update their beliefs but to discredit the source of conflicting information. This mechanism helps explain why factual, professionally verified reporting from mainstream outlets is often dismissed by digitally embedded audiences as biased or compromised, even when it meets conventional journalistic standards.

These psychological dynamics intersect with ongoing empirical debates regarding the actual prevalence and severity of filter bubbles and echo chambers. While Pariser (2011) and Sunstein (2001, 2018) present compelling theoretical models of algorithmic and social isolation, subsequent large-scale empirical work has complicated this picture considerably. Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015), in an extensive study of Facebook data, found that algorithmic curation played a comparatively modest role in limiting exposure to cross-cutting content relative to users' own choices about whom to follow. Similarly, algorithm audits conducted on YouTube's recommendation systems have produced mixed findings regarding the platform's tendency to radicalize users, suggesting that individual agency plays a considerably larger role than the algorithm's inherent design (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2020). Bail et al. (2018) add a further layer of complexity, demonstrating that exposure to opposing political viewpoints on social media can, counter-intuitively, increase polarization rather than mitigate ita backfire effect that suggests simply diversifying a user's information diet is insufficient to rebuild trust in cross-ideological sources.

Taken together, this body of research indicates that the credibility crisis addressed in this study cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of technological isolation. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of three interdependent forces: the structural political economy of legacy institutions, the engagement-driven architecture of digital platforms, and the psychological heuristics

audiences use to navigate both. This multidimensional understanding is particularly critical in contexts such as Pakistan, where weak institutional fact-checking infrastructure, high dependence on encrypted dark social networks, and pronounced political polarization amplify each of these forces simultaneously. It is this convergence rather than any single platform or institutional failure in isolation that necessitates a theoretical framework capable of capturing how credibility is actively negotiated, rather than passively received, by contemporary news audiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) Source Credibility Theory, which posits that audience trust in a message is contingent upon three perceived qualities of its source: expertise (the source's perceived capability to provide valid information), trustworthiness (the perceived absence of bias or manipulative intent), and dynamism (the communicative appeal and energy of the source). Originally developed to explain persuasion within stable, institutionally gatekept communication environments, this framework provides a robust yet flexible lens for the present study, as it allows for direct comparison of how each dimension is operationalized differently across mainstream and social media. Crucially, the theory is not applied rigidly; rather, this study extends it by examining how digital audiences have reconstructed each pillar replacing institutional expertise with perceived authenticity, replacing formal trustworthiness with networked, peer-endorsed credibility, and channeling dynamism through the parasocial appeal of independent digital creators. This theoretical adaptation bridges classical persuasion theory with the contemporary realities of algorithmic curation and networked communication, forming the analytical backbone for the thematic analysis presented in this study.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, rooted in a constructivist epistemological paradigm, on the premise that news credibility is not an objective, measurable property but a socially constructed value that varies across ideological backgrounds and media literacy levels (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, selected for their capacity to allow deep probing of participant motives beyond the reductionist categories imposed by Likert-scale surveys (Patton, 2015; Carlson, 2017). The interview guide moved sequentially from general media habits to explicit comparative evaluation of mainstream versus social media across the dimensions of Source Credibility Theory.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select an information-rich sample of 20 participants (n = 20), stratified into four sub-groups of five each: media experts/policy regulators, active journalists from legacy mainstream media, media scholars/academics, and active digital-first social media users. This stratification ensured triangulation across structural, professional, theoretical, and lay perspectives. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure video conferencing, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim; anonymity was preserved through pseudonyms. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase Thematic Analysis: familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining, and reporting, using NVivo software to manage coding across transcripts, combining deductive coding (guided by Source Credibility Theory) with inductive, emergent coding.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the 20 interview transcripts produced four dominant themes: the speed-accuracy trade-off, institutional bias and political economy, algorithmic anxiety and information chaos, and social heuristics operating through secondary gatekeepers. These themes, and the tensions between them, provide direct answers to the study's two research questions.

Theme 1: The Speed-Accuracy Trade-off. Participants across all groups acknowledged that social media's velocity has fundamentally

altered expectations of news delivery, often at the expense of accuracy. Digital users reported turning to platforms like X for breaking events because "by the time a news channel verifies it ... there are already a hundred raw videos on my timeline" (Participant 14). Legacy journalists, conversely, expressed professional anxiety that this expectation of instantaneous reporting subverts verification: "The pressure to push a breaking news ticker before we've verified the source is immense when we try to be accurate, the audience calls us slow" (Participant 7). This theme demonstrates that speed itself has become a credibility currency, one that inherently penalizes the deliberative verification processes historically associated with journalistic rigor (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

Theme 2: Institutional Bias and Political Economy. A pervasive, cross-cutting perception emerged that legacy media is compromised by political and corporate interests. A media scholar noted that "the public is not naive ... when a major political event is completely blacked out on the evening broadcast, the channel doesn't just lose that story; it permanently loses its institutional authority" (Participant 11). Users framed their migration to social media as a direct rejection of this perceived gatekeeping-as-censorship: "I assume everything on the 9:00 PM news bulletin has been approved by someone in power ... I go to YouTube vloggers to find out what the TV anchors were legally forbidden from saying" (Participant 18). This confirms findings from the Pakistani media literature regarding PEMRA's regulatory overreach and the corrosive effects of concentrated media ownership on public trust (Eijaz, 2013; Niazi, 2020).

Theme 3: Algorithmic Anxiety and Information Chaos. Despite migrating toward digital platforms, users exhibited high algorithmic awareness coupled with cognitive exhaustion. One participant admitted, "I know the algorithm is just feeding me what I already agree with ... but it's exhausting to constantly cross-check everything. Eventually, you just start passively absorbing the outrage" (Participant 16). A media regulator characterized this as a crisis of epistemic security, noting that "a Pulitzer-winning investigative report and a completely fabricated AI deepfake carry the exact same visual weight on a timeline" (Participant 3), echoing Pariser's (2011) filter bubble theory and Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) concept of information disorder.

Theme 4: Social Heuristics and Secondary Gatekeepers. In the absence of trusted institutional or algorithmic authority, participants revealed heavy reliance on interpersonal networks, particularly encrypted platforms like WhatsApp. As one user explained, "if my father ... forwards that exact same graphic to our family WhatsApp group, I pause. I am much more likely to believe it ... because I trust him, even if I don't know the original source" (Participant 19). This finding directly extends Turcotte et al.'s (2015) concept of the secondary gatekeeper into the Pakistani dark social context (Jaffrelot & Louër, 2017).

Table 1 maps these themes directly onto the study's two research questions, demonstrating how the thematic findings function as direct empirical answers.

Table 1 *Mapping of Main Themes to Research Questions*

Research Question	Corresponding Theme(s)	How the Theme Answers the Question
RQ1: How do stakeholders define news credibility?	Institutional Bias & Political Economy	Experts define credibility via institutional structures (gatekeeping, ethics); users view these same structures as evidence of censorship and bias.
	Social Heuristics & Secondary Gatekeepers	Users redefine trustworthiness and expertise around the identity and endorsement of the peer

Research Question	Corresponding Theme(s)	How the Theme Answers the Question
		who shared the news, rather than the original publisher.
RQ2: What factors drive medium preference for factual information?	Speed-Accuracy Trade-off	Users prioritize the immediate velocity of breaking news and raw visual evidence over the slower verification processes of legacy TV.
	Institutional Bias & Political Economy	Users migrate to digital platforms to escape perceived state-controlled narratives, corporate agendas, and sanitized political infotainment.
	Algorithmic Anxiety & Information Chaos	Despite recognizing algorithmic manipulation, users prefer social media because it offers the illusion of an unfiltered sphere and personal agency in fact-triangulation.

Discussion: Intersecting Findings with Source Credibility Theory

These findings necessitate a critical re-evaluation of Hovland et al.'s (1953) three-pillar model. Regarding expertise, media experts and journalists retain the traditional definition rooted in institutional affiliation and methodological rigor, while users increasingly conflate expertise with authenticity and proximity to an eventvaluing raw citizen footage over polished studio broadcasts. Regarding trustworthiness, both mediums fail the audience but for different reasons: mainstream media is distrusted due to perceived political economy and censorship, while social media is distrusted due to algorithmic manipulation and misinformation; users resolve this tension by anchoring trust in localized peer networks rather than either institutional source. Regarding dynamism, the migration of displaced journalists to YouTube has produced highly parasocial, charismatic digital figures whose emotive transparency is perceived by users as more trustworthy than the feigned objectivity of formal anchors, even though scholars in the sample criticized this as the triumph of personality over facts.

Comparative Analysis

Building on these themes, a direct comparative analysis of trust mechanisms across the two mediums reveals systematic bifurcation across four dimensions: locus of control, nature of source, verification paradigm, and audience agency, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 *Comparative Thematic Analysis of Trust Mechanisms: TV/Print vs. Social Media*

Dimension	TV & Print (Mainstream)	Social Media (Digital)
Locus of Control	Centralized, human-driven gatekeeping perceived as censorship and political manipulation	Decentralized, algorithmic curation perceived (paradoxically) as an unmediated public sphere
Nature of Source	Institutional authority; high production values now signal elite detachment	Networked authenticity; parasocial appeal and peer endorsement drive trust

Dimension	TV & Print (Mainstream)	Social Media (Digital)
Verification Paradigm	Methodological fact-checking, but penalized by audiences as slow	Visual velocity and raw footage accepted as truth despite deepfake/decontextualization risk
Audience Agency	Passive, one-to-many model fostering feelings of powerlessness	Active triangulation, but at the cost of cognitive overload and exhaustion

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that neither mainstream nor social media satisfies the audience's demand for a stable, trustworthy source. Instead, the modern news consumer navigates a dual trust deficit, trading the perceived censorship of institutional gatekeeping for the perceived chaos of algorithmic and networked information flows.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to investigate the credibility gap between mainstream and social media by addressing two research questions concerning stakeholder definitions of credibility and the drivers of medium preference. The findings demonstrate that this gap is not a simple linear transfer of trust from old to new media, but a systemic bifurcation in how credibility itself is defined and constructed. In answering RQ1, the study found that media experts, regulators, and journalists continue to define credibility through institutional criteria editorial gatekeeping, ethical codes, and legal accountability while active digital users have fundamentally redefined credibility through interpersonal and anti-institutional criteria, privileging authenticity, raw visual evidence, and peer endorsement over formal expertise. In answering RQ2, the study found that audience preference for social media is driven not by uncritical trust but by a calculated rejection of mainstream media's perceived political economy its censorship, corporate ownership, and political infotainment tempered by an acute, unresolved anxiety about algorithmic manipulation and misinformation on digital platforms.

The overarching conclusion is that the credibility gap represents a systemic, society-wide collapse of institutional epistemic authority rather than a transitional phase. The traditional pillars of Source Credibility Theory expertise, trustworthiness, and dynamism have not disappeared but have been reconstructed: expertise is now conflated with authenticity, trustworthiness is now mediated through secondary gatekeepers rather than institutions, and dynamism is amplified through parasocial digital relationships. The modern news consumer is, in effect, intellectually orphaned, caught between a mainstream media establishment perceived to lie by omission and a digital landscape that overwhelms with unverified noise. This has profound implications for democratic discourse, which relies on a shared baseline of verifiable fact (Dahlgren, 2018); the current dual trust deficit poses a genuine threat to civic cohesion, particularly in transitional democracies such as Pakistan where regulatory overreach and algorithmic disinformation compound one another.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. For legacy journalists and mainstream media organizations, the study recommends a strategic pivot away from competing with social media on speed, and toward emphasizing rigorous fact-checking, contextualization, and radical editorial transparency explicitly demonstrating verification processes to rebuild audience confidence alongside a deliberate divestment from ratings-driven political infotainment that has degraded the medium's long-term credibility. For social media platforms, the study recommends enhanced algorithmic transparency that allows users to understand why specific content is surfaced, the introduction of "circuit breakers" that slow the viral spread of unverified emotionally charged content, and the design of clear contextual markers that visually distinguish verified journalism from user-generated commentary. For encrypted dark social platforms such as

WhatsApp, the study recommends introducing deliberate friction such as forwarding limits and prominent forwarding tags alongside accessible in-app fact-checking integrations, without compromising end-to-end encryption.

This study is limited by its modest sample size (n = 20) and its specific contextual grounding in Pakistan's regulatory and political economy, meaning findings may not generalize directly to Western media systems with different broadcasting traditions. Future research should pursue large-scale quantitative surveys to test the prevalence of themes such as algorithmic anxiety and the secondary gatekeeper effect across broader populations, employ computational network analysis to map misinformation spread through dark social platforms, and conduct longitudinal studies assessing whether media literacy interventions genuinely alter trust evaluation or are ultimately overridden by confirmation bias. Ultimately, rebuilding a credible public information ecosystem will require sustained, coordinated effort from journalists committed to transparency, technologists committed to ethical design, and citizens equipped to critically navigate the digital turn.

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