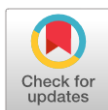


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Social Media & Investigative Journalism in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The current study examines the modern issues and potentials of investigative journalism in the context of social media. The closed linkage of Technological Affordance Theory is applied to analyze how online platforms are changing investigative journalism by providing new opportunities to gather information, linking audiences, and uncover the facts & truth behind any news story. Nevertheless, it also highlights the manipulation of these platforms such as fake news, online harassment, surveillance, and legal restrictions. For the present study, a sample of 125 investigative journalists has been acquired using snowball and purposive sampling approach to explore how they use social media in the current era of technological modifications, perceived opportunities, and challenges in the field of investigative journalism. Findings of the present study state that most of the investigative journalists participated in the present study's survey were from a political beat. Twitter is the most common platform they use for audience engagement, public awareness regarding human rights, corruption and political issues. Whereas, limited digital literacy, fake information & ethical issues on social media are the major challenges to investigative journalism. Perceived future needs and trends, as per findings of the study, are fact checking tools, regulatory measures, data & multimedia journalism.

Keywords: emerging trends, investigative journalism, Pakistan, social media, technological affordance theory

Introduction

Investigative journalism is one of the significant areas of journalism that not only reveals the truth but also presents details of issues of serious concern at national or international levels. It provides fact-checking mechanisms and additional analysis on key stories. It entails wide investigation so as to reveal hidden reality, depiction of corruption, and hold power accountable.

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According to Giachi (2018), investigative journalism is characterized by meticulous reporting, unveiling secret facts, exposing corruption, and holding institutions accountable. New media also includes digital platforms and technology that affect the nature of communication, instant information sharing, citizen journalism, and challenges. According to Aryal (2026), Investigative journalism serves as a watchdog to expose corruption, injustice in society and power abuse. He states that opportunities in investigative journalism can be seen as a technological revolution like data journalism & philanthropic support, whereas the challenges include political interference, safety risks, digital disruption and financial constraints.

The digital world offers opportunities and challenges to investigative journalism. It is one of the most influential aspects of modern media due to its unparalleled accessibility and geographic reach. Investigative stories also enable reaching the masses of the audience (Konow-Lund & Hoyby, 2023). In data journalism, large quantities of data are gathered and examined to identify trends and patterns of the stories of major interest. Storytelling can be enhanced with the situation and engage audiences by means of experiential evidence and graphics. Therefore, digital-technological investigative journalism involves collaboration.

The fact of cyber-attacks appears to be a massive challenge for the journalists who are striving to investigate the truth behind each story as argued by Posetti (2017). The impact of investigative journalism on the policy can hardly be undervalued. The role of investigative journalists in the maintenance of democratic institutions is that they help reveal human rights violations, uncover corruption, and keep governments accountable as pointed out by Ettema and Glasse (1998). Future journalists must be familiar with the advanced investigative devices, ethical codes, and digital literacy. Collaboration between media companies and educational institutions is necessary to provide the continuation of mentorship and training opportunities Graves and Konieczna (2015). Among the problems, censorship, the absence of editorial freedom, insufficient security protocols, and institutionalized pressures are often mentioned in such studies. Nonetheless, they also often overlook the increasing role of digital and social media in changing the sphere of investigative reporting (Skjerdal, 2010) and there is a significant need to understand how digital opportunities and challenges are perceived by investigative journalists in Pakistan. This

research will not only contribute to academic literature by enriching the literature on the subject, but will have an implication on practice by informing journalists, media houses, and policymakers in Pakistan about the perceived challenges and opportunities of using social media in carrying out investigative journalism.

The emergence of online media has significantly influenced investigative journalism and this study aims to explore opportunities of the field and challenges, including fabricated information, financial viability, ethical dilemmas, and security risks.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the frequency and primary purposes of social media usage in investigative journalism among journalists in Pakistan.
- To examine the perceptions of investigative journalists regarding the effectiveness of social media in raising public awareness in Pakistan.
- To explore the challenges and opportunities of social media for investigative journalism in Pakistan.

Research Questions

RQ.1 What is the frequency and intended use of social media by investigative journalists in Pakistan?

RQ.2 How do investigative journalists feel about the use of social media as a means of increasing societal awareness and participation on different problems in Pakistan?

RQ.3 What are the primary challenges and opportunities of investigative journalists in Pakistan using social media for investigative reporting in Pakistan?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical importance of this study is based on Technological Affordance Theory in the context of investigative journalism via social media. Alongside revealing issues as surveillance, disinformation, algorithmic bias, and harassment to journals, this theory provides a systematic way of understanding how journalists engage with the technological spaces that they occupy. It highlights how characteristics such as immediacy, interactivity, and networked communication provide new

possibilities concerning the process of information collection, communication with audiences, and narrative.

Norman ([1988](#)) further relates to the communication and media by the choices of action that a given technology offers to its users, depending on the interaction that the user has with the features of the technology. It emphasizes the perception and utilization of the features installed in a technology by people in achieving their goals. Affordances such as connectivity, real-time communication, multimedia sharing and algorithmic visibility make possible certain practices and interactions that affect the way users interact with the social media.

As a theory describes the relationship between the digital platforms and the journalistic activities, it is quite applicable to the dynamics of Journalistic practices of social media in Pakistan. It is the first time when investigative reporters possess the opportunities to gather, corroborate and share the information via social networks. Such characteristics as immediate sharing, universal connectivity, and interaction of the user enable journals to crowd source information and access more people and give more voices that are under-represented. Such affordances however do have a number of problems. The challenges faced by investigative journalists in Pakistan are the influence of algorithms, cyber stalking, and censorship, in which social media has become the space of free expression and the space of ideological control. Algorithms can favor sensationalism against deep journalism even when legal and regulatory restrictions (including cybercrime) can further tax the efforts of the journalists in sensitive affairs. The opportunities and constraints of investigative journalism in Pakistan are not only made accessible by technological affordances of social media but also influenced by them.

The application of technological affordance theory in current study is taken in the context that why investigative reporters can use digital tools to reach out to a larger audience, give undivided attention to marginalized voices, and to communicate with the world (Hutchby, [2001](#); Norman, [1988](#)). Meanwhile, it points out the weaknesses brought forth by platform-specific factors, such as digital surveillance, content algorithms, online harassment, and legal restrictions (Bradshaw & Howard, [2018](#); Papacharissi, [2010](#)). The awareness of such affordances in the Pakistani context is already bringing pressure on investigative journalism due to the institutional censorship, regulatory threats, and socio-political sensitivities (Papacharissi, [2010](#)).

Having broader implications in relation to journalists operating in a similarly restricted or semi-authoritarian media context this study examines the contribution of these two forces of empowerment in the form of challenges and constraints in investigative reporting in the era of digital media.

The development of the investigative journalism through the digital and social media has opportunities and risks across the globe. Such algorithmic-based approaches on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have increased access to content creation and distribution and complicated the process of performing a fact-check, propagating fake information easily, and undermining editorial authority (Posetti, [2017](#); Wardle and Derakhshan, [2017](#)). Moreover, the algorithm-driven nature of their business models often prioritizes click bait over reporting that requires substantial research, which makes long-form reporting less sustainable and visible (Napoli, [2019](#)).

This research bridges an important gap in the literature by analyzing the impact of the use of technological affordances on the practice of investigative journalism in the online community of Pakistan. In spite of earlier studies discussing the wide opportunities offered by digital media to journalism (Deuze, [2007](#); Hermida, [2010](#)). The study offers fresh findings on the use of digital tools by journalists under institutional and technological pressure through the application of the affordance theory. Besides contributing to the advancement of academic speech, this piece of work provides feasible suggestions to media houses, journalists, and policy activists that work in similar sociopolitical settings.

It emphasizes the importance of considering the national media ecologies to develop more contextually sensitive strategies to help investigative journalism in the digital age.

Moreover, demonstrating how structural, cultural, and legal constraints mediate the connection between journalists and technology, the study expands the use of the affordance theory. By doing it, it alters the theory to suit more digital situations where freedom of expression is challenged, like hybrid or constrained ones (Velasquez & Rojas, [2017](#)). This study shows that such affordances as visibility, interactivity, and persistence are regarded as both a potential vulnerability and a tool of journalistic expression, gaining a more sophisticated insight into the risks and benefits of digital journalism in transitional democracies such as Pakistan (Bossetta,

[2018](#); Lewis & Molyneux, [2018](#); Tandoc & Maitra, [2018](#)). One of the most significant advantages of digital media is its ability to connect audiences all over the world. No longer relying on the use of print media and the traditional broadcast networks, investigative journalism has now gone beyond national borders.

The long text-based reports remained one of the main staples of classic investigative journalism, and new forms of stories that came with the advent of digital technology made complex topics more approachable and interesting to the reader. Contrary to the period when traditional journalism often relied on individual reporters or the small editorial staff to investigate a story, contemporary investigative journalism enjoys the benefits of cooperative networks, pool resources, expertise, and data analytic skills. In the digital age today, data journalism forms an essential part of the investigative reporting. Big digital data can be now accessed by investigative reporters, showing hidden trends and patterns and systemic problems. Papacharissi ([2010](#)) lingers more on data-driven reporting pointing out that data analysis improves the quality and level of investigative journalism.

False information and fake news are some of the biggest problems of investigative reporting in the digital era. Martins et al. ([2018](#)) observe that the democratization of information presented by the exploitation of digital platforms and social media makes it possible to propagate pseudo-stories organized by interest groups or the state apparatus in most cases, undermining the reputation of traditional journalism. Even though social media has turned out to be a significant source of news, it is also increasing the speed with which false information spread. It highlights how journalists need to adopt more stringent digital authentication processes. The emergence of social media has transformed journalism through its ability to access information immediately, whereas it has also challenged the traditional verification process (Pennycook & Rand, [2019](#)). The digital environment has blurred the lines between advocacy and journalism, and placed ethical challenges of objectivity and bias. The integrity of investigative journalism can be ruined by sensationalism, headlines and partisan reporting. These are the ethical issues investigative reporters have to resolve. Additionally, journalists have the chance to concentrate on sensational coverage more than on in-depth coverage given the strain to produce online vitality. Carson and Farhall ([2018](#)) state that viral content is

now more attractive due to the commercialization of online journalism by sacrificing journalistic ethics. The ethical rules need to be observed by investigative journalists; otherwise, they cannot ensure professionalism and protect their work by being unbiased and basis-driven.

Data journalism enables the reporter to access valuable information in big data which exposes stories that would have not been identified. Investigative journalists often have to deal with safety and legal threats because of the nature of their work being sensitive.

Research Methodology

Investigative journalists who work in print, electronic, and digital media were among the targeted population. And the sample has been extracted through purposive & snow ball respectively. Sample includes only those journalists who are specifically & purposefully covering investigative stories and being approached by applying snowball sampling method. The survey comprised Likert-scale items addressing four major variables: Social Media Use, Perceived Prospects, Perceived Challenges, and Future Outlook of investigative journalism on social media, in addition to demographics. Data was collected online using Google Forms, which made it possible to reach respondents in different parts of Pakistan more effectively and broadly. The questionnaire link was distributed via email, professional networks, and pertinent social media sites.

All of the scales in this study had Cronbach's alpha values of 0.84, 0.85, 0.80, and 0.90, respectively.

Operationalization and Measurement of Social Media in Investigative Journalism

Social media usage was measured with the help of following items:

- How frequently do you use social media platforms for investigative journalism?
- How much time do you spend on social media for investigative work each day?
- How frequently do you use the following social media platforms for investigative reporting?
- How frequently do you use social media platforms for the following purposes in your investigative reporting?"

The answers were gathered through 5-point Likert scale.

Perceived Prospects of Social Media in Investigative Journalism

The current study utilized below mentioned items to examine the opportunities of investigative journalism using the social media.

- Social media investigative journalism makes people more aware.
- Through investigative reporting, social media assists in the revelation of suppressed problems.
- Investigative journalism is enhanced by social media.

Key Challenges of Social Media in Investigative Journalism:

In this study, following scale was used to examine the primary issues which investigative journalists face while using social media.

- Have you experienced any threats or harassment on the Internet in the course of conducting any investigative journalism using social media?
- Misinformation and fake news spread in social media present a major challenge to investigative journalism in Pakistan.
- Investigative journalists in Pakistan find it difficult to maintain ethics on social media.
- Insufficient digital literacy and training of investigative journalists in Pakistan inhibits the effective use of social media.

Sample

The current research data gathered, using purposive and snowball sampling among 125 investigative journalists across Pakistan, through self-administered survey questionnaires. The number of male and female investigative journalists was 113 and 12 respectively, which is taken as a limitation of the study and must be addressed in future research by having equal distribution among male and female journalists. The age distribution of the respondents indicates that investigative journalists are very diverse in terms of level of experience. The median age of most professionals (45.6%) being in the 25-34 range shows that the professionals who are in the early to mid-professional stages are massively engaged in social media investigative journalism. The fact that 26.4% of the respondents in the age range of 35 to 44 years shows the presence of more experienced

professionals in the field. Moreover, 12.8% of the sample falls within the 18-24 age group, which implies that younger journalists, just beginning their career or just graduated, were included in the sample. The age group of 45-54 years comprises of 10.4% of the actual sample. Whereas the oldest group (4.8% of the sample) consisted of individuals aged 55 years and above.

The social media investigative journalism professionals have a good academic background, as it was demonstrated that the majority of the respondents (46.4%) had an MA or MSc. Next to these were 9.6 percent of the participants with an MPhil degree and 24.8 percent with a Bachelor of Science (BS). Moreover, 5.6 percent were people with the Master of science (MS) degree. 8.8% had a Bachelor of Arts (BA). The presence of highly advanced academic credentials in the field was indicated by the smaller percentage (2.4%) with a doctorate degree. Just a small percentage of participants (0.8%) reported having less formal education, such as a diploma, intermediate degree, or matriculation.

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents had four to six years' experience, 16.8 percent had seven to nine years and (21.6) had one to three years' experience. Moreover, 12 percent had experience of 10 to 12 years, and 8.8 percent had experience of 13 to 15 years. Surprisingly, 20 percent are in their twenties.

The organizational affiliations of the respondents show that most of the participants are affiliated with electronic media (36.8%), whereas 2.5% are affiliated with digital or online media outlets. Print media remained important with 16.8% of the respondents considering themselves as traditional newspapers and magazines users. Additionally, 5.6% of the respondents were independent journalists and 12.8% were freelance reporters, which demonstrates the presence of self-governing reporting elite in the industry. The fact that only 2.4% of the respondents had worked in news organizations also indicates the variety of practice of investigative journalism in Pakistan.

Political reporting emerged as the hottest beat given its sensitivity in politics and the complexity of the national situation, as it used 36% of investigative reporters. It is highly concerned with accountability and social issues, which is reflected in the fact that crime and law enforcement was the second most frequently reported area (16.8%), then social justice and

inequality (14.4%), and human rights violations (12.8%). Other specialized beats included judicial reporting (3.2%), environmental concerns (8.0%), and corporate and financial fraud (8.8%). This diversity of beats shows that investigative journalism in Pakistan is a multifaceted profession in resolving critical social, political, and economic challenges.

27.2% responded that they use whatsapp very frequently and 39.2% use frequently for investigative journalism in Pakistan. This renders an effective instrument of communication and news dissemination. Twitter which is X (since that is no longer its name) is also a highly rated platform, as 16.8% of users use it very frequently and 40% of the participants use it frequently. Facebook comes next, with 33.6 percent of participants using it frequently and 13.6% using it very frequently. YouTube shows moderate usage, with 31.2% of users using it regularly and the same percentage occasionally. On the other hand, Instagram and TikTok are not as popular, and more respondents claim that they rarely use them or not at all (28.8% and 39.2%, respectively).

The data reveals that the most popular activity performed on social media is the creation of awareness with 25.6% (64 respondents) reporting to have done it very frequently, and 39.2% (98 respondents) frequently. This highlights the strength of social media in advocacy and outreach to the masses. Similarly, the use of social media in visual tools is the norm; among the respondents, 21.6% (54 respondents) use very often, and 36.8% (92 respondents) use often. The usefulness of the platform in terms of distributing content directly is also clear with 19.2 (48 respondents) publishing investigative content very often and 35.2 (88 respondents) publishing it frequently.

The audience engagement distribution, however, is a bit more evenly distributed, with the significant 32.8% (82 respondents) only occasionally engaging and the 11.2% (28 respondents) engaged very frequently and frequently. The other role is also to promote transparency by promoting transparency via social media; the moderate yet substantial attempts to build trust are reflected in the 16.0% (40 respondents) who use it very often and the 32.8% (82 respondents) who use it often. Finally, 16.8% of respondents (42 respondents) and 33.6% of respondents (84 respondents) work with other journalists using social media very often and often, respectively, which proves the emphasis on social media as a means of professional coordination and networking.

Results

Perceived Prospects to Investigative Journalism on Social Media

Table 1 presents the views of the respondents regarding the role of investigative journalism on the social media in Pakistan. 35.2 % (44 respondents) strongly agreed with the notion that social media investigative journalism is critical to create awareness on corruption. Whereas 44.0 % (55 respondents) agreed with the statement to create awareness. Equally, a consensus on the significance of social media investigative journalism in facilitating social justice and equality is reached with 40.0% (50 respondents) strongly agreeing and 40.0% (50 respondents) agreeing that it creates awareness about human rights.

The responses were slightly more balanced with respect to the promotion of accountability. Though 40.0% (50 respondents) and 24.8% (31 respondents) strongly agreed, a considerable 24.8% (31 respondents) were neutral, indicating a moderate level of doubt or uncertainty concerning the direct role of the social media in holding people or institutions accountable. In terms of amplification of unheard voices, the same trend was observed with 45.6 percent (57 respondents) agreeing, and 25.6 percent (32 respondents) strongly agreeing. Although 20.0% (25 respondents) responded as neutral, this shows that social media investigative journalism is perceived as an inclusive tool in general. Lastly, in terms of increasing political awareness, 40.0% (50 respondents) and 36.8 (46 respondents) indicated that they strongly agreed respectively that social media could be used to create awareness on the political matters. In general, the statistics indicate that respondents are strongly convinced that social media-based investigative journalism contributes to high rates of accountability, awareness, and democratic participation in Pakistan.

Table 1

Perceptions of Public Awareness through Investigative Journalism on Social Media

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Investigative journalism on SM raises awareness about corruption	35.2% (44)	44.0% (55)	12.8% (16)	4.0% (5)	4.0% (5)	125

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Investigative journalism on SM promotes human rights awareness	40.0% (50)	40.0% (50)	8.0% (10)	6.4% (8)	5.6% (7)	125
Investigative journalism on SM improves accountability	24.8% (31)	40.0% (50)	24.8% (31)	5.6% (7)	4.8% (6)	125
Investigative journalism on SM amplifies unheard voices	25.6% (32)	45.6% (57)	20.0% (25)	2.4% (3)	6.4% (8)	125
Investigative journalism on SM creates awareness on political issues	36.8% (46)	40.0% (50)	12.8% (16)	4.0% (5)	6.4% (8)	125

Table 2 presents the responses of the participants regarding the role of multimedia tools, i.e., images, videos, and infographics, in improving investigative journalism in social media.

Table 2

Role of Multimedia Tools, Public Awareness & Global Reach in Enhancing Investigative Journalism on Social Media

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Multimedia tools	56.0%(70)	32.8%(41)	10.4%(13)	0.8%(1)	0	125
Public Awareness	40.8%(51)	44.8%(56)	10.4%(13)	3.2%(4)	0.8%(1)	125
Global reach and collaboration	41.6%(52)	47.2%(59)	8.8%(11)	2.4%(3)	0	125

The table indicates the perceptions of the respondents regarding the usefulness of social media in Pakistani investigative journalism in bringing awareness to people. This shows where (44.8) percent strongly agreed, and (40.8) percentage of the people agreed, which is a testament to the great belief in the use of social media as an educative tool. There was 10.4 percent neutrality only with 3.2, and 0.8 percent disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively.

Key Challenges to Investigative Journalism on Social Media

Table 3 demonstrates how often investigative journalists in Pakistan experience various issues when using social media platforms. Fake information was the most frequent challenge reported with 44.0% (55 respondents) saying they frequently encounter it and 31.2% (39 respondents) saying they very frequently encounter information that is fake one. This highlights the widespread anxieties about misinformation in the digital journalism room. Only one respondent, i.e, 0.8% never experienced this issue. Notably, 32.8% (41 respondents) said that they were occasionally financially constrained, 32.0% (40 respondents) said that they were frequently constrained, and 15.2% were (19 respondents) often constrained. This indicates that the majority of them face persistent financial challenges in producing investigation content.

Among the respondents, 37.6% (47) respondents said they had frequently encountered ethical issues, 12.8% (16) said they encountered ethical issues very frequently, and 35.2% (44) said they occasionally encountered ethical issues. About legal constraints, 26.4% (33 respondents) reported that they experienced them occasionally, 33.6% (42 respondents) experienced them frequently, and 21.6% (27 respondents) experienced them very frequently. This implies that there is a lot of concern regarding legal risks and regulatory restrictions. Pressure by authorities was reported by 24.8% (31 respondents) as frequently or very frequently (23.2% 29 respondents). Moreover, among 36 respondents 28.8% indicated that they experienced it occasionally, which suggests that investigative journalists are still under pressure in their institutions.

Finally, 31.2% (39 respondents) and 20.8% (26 respondents) associated threats and safety concerns as frequently and very frequently, respectively. This underscores the fact that journalists often risk their lives when undertaking social media investigations. The data indicates that Pakistani investigative reporters have to cope with several continuing, often intersecting concerns that compromise their ability to operate effectively on social media, such as misinformation, ethical and economic stress, and security risks.

Table 3

Frequency of Challenges Faced in Practicing Investigative Journalism on Social Media

Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Very Frequently	Total
Fake Information	0.8% (1)	4.8% (6)	19.2% (24)	44.0% (55)	31.2% (39)	125
Financial Constraints	4.0% (5)	16.0% (20)	32.8% (41)	32.0% (40)	15.2% (19)	125
Ethical Issues	1.6% (2)	12.8% (16)	35.2% (44)	37.6% (47)	12.8% (16)	125
Legal Limitations	4.8% (6)	13.6% (17)	26.4% (33)	33.6% (42)	21.6% (27)	125
Pressure from Authorities	8.0% (10)	15.2% (19)	28.8% (36)	24.8% (31)	23.2% (29)	125
Threats and Safety	5.6% (7)	16.8% (21)	25.6% (32)	31.2% (39)	20.8% (26)	125

According to the respondents, fake news and disinformation is the second most prevalent threat to the investigative journalism on the Pakistani social media. An enormous percentage of the respondents (66.4% strongly agreed that there is a serious challenge of misinformation on social media. Whereas 6.4% stayed neutral, 0.8% disagreed and 1.6% strongly disagreed as shown in table given below.

Table 4

Challenge of Misinformation, Limited Digital Literacy, Legal Framework, Online Harassment, Legal & Regulatory Challenges on Social Media

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Misinformation	66.4%(83)	24.8%(31)	6.4%(8)	0.8%(1)	1.6%(2)	125
Limited digital literacy	46.4%(58)	46.4%(58)	5.6%(7)	0.8%(1)	0.8%(1)	125
Legal framework	33.6%(42)	41.6%(52)	20.8%(26)	2.4%(3)	1.6%(2)	125
Online Harassment	34.4%(43)	42.2%(53)	19.2%(24)	2.4%(3)	1.6%(2)	125
Legal & regulatory challenges	34.4%(43)	44.0%(55)	19.2%(24)	1.6%(2)	0.8%(1)	125

As Table 4 shows, a lack of training and low digital literacy levels are often cited as barriers to the effective use of social media in Pakistan in investigative journalism. Based on these findings, enhancing digital capabilities is believed to be paramount to increasing the quality and effectiveness of investigative journalism on social media.

The table indicates that the respondents are of a strong belief that the current laws and regulations do not adequately tackle the challenges facing Pakistani investigative journalists on social media, 33.6% agreed with this notion. A very low percentage disagreed (2.4%), which means that there is not much to be skeptical about regarding this perception. This shows how legal reform is widely needed to promote digital investigative journalism.

Pakistani investigative reporters are especially insecure about official and source harassment and threats via the Internet. An overwhelming majority of respondents (76.8) agreed (42.4) or strongly agreed (34.4) with this opinion. Only a small percentage did not (2.4) or strongly disagreed (1.6), with 19.2% being neutral. These results reveal that there is a broad awareness of the dangers of digital safety journalists face when engaging in online investigative reporting.

As per Table, social media pressures on sources and authorities are perceived by investigative reporters in Pakistan as a challenge in general. In total, 78.4% of respondents indicated agreement (44.0%) and strongly agreed (34.4) with this statement. Moreover, the percentage of those who disagreed and strongly disagreed was only 1.6 and 0.8 respectively, in comparison to 19.2 who were neutral. These figures demonstrate that the fear of legal harassment or restrictions linked to inquiry reporting on the internet is a significant concern.

Pakistani Journalists' Perceptions of the Future of Investigative Journalism on Social Media

According to Table 5, a large proportion of the respondents had a strongly positive opinion on the importance of legal protection (47.2%), media literacy (43.2%), and fact-checking tools (49.6%), as the necessary aspects in further development. The responses on neutral were moderate on all items, which refers to a partial uncertainty or variability in the viewpoints. Nonetheless, a large percentage agreed with the importance of the secure tools (41.6%) and regulatory regulations (36.8%).

Strongly disagree and disagree categories had the lowest support of less

than 10% of total responses. This implies that it is largely felt that such categories should be enhanced in future.

Collectively, the findings provide insights into the urgency of establishing the legislative frameworks, digital literacy programs, fact-checking and digital safety tools to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of investigative journalism in the Pakistani social media sector.

Table 5

Perceived Future Needs for Strengthening Investigative Journalism on Social Media

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Future Legal Protection	4.8% (6)	1.6% (2)	10.4% (13)	36.0% (45)	47.2% (59)
Future Media Literacy	4.8% (6)	2.4% (3)	8.8% (11)	40.8% (51)	43.2% (54)
Future Fact-checking Tools	4.8% (6)	3.2% (4)	5.6% (7)	36.8% (46)	49.6% (62)
Future Secure Tools	3.2% (4)	4.0% (5)	12.8% (16)	41.6% (52)	38.4% (48)
Future Regulatory Measures	4.8% (6)	2.4% (3)	16.0% (20)	36.8% (46)	40.0% (50)

Table 5 presents the opinion of the investigative journalists on the major developments in the application of social media in their job in Pakistan. As far as smartphones are commonly considered as a key reporting instrument, the trend of mobile journalism is considered as the most acceptable with 40.8% (51) who agreed with it and 43.2% (54) who strongly agreed.

Similarly, 51.2% were in agreement with multimedia journalism which means that to avail better opportunities on the digital platforms in present era journalists are adopting a range of info graphics and videos. Citizen journalism was also positively viewed, with 48.0% (60) agreeing and 28.0% (35) strongly agreeing to it, creating the impression that it is increasingly being viewed as a complement to traditional investigative methods. Over 80 percent of the participants agreed with collaborative networks (52.0 percent and 28.8 percent, respectively), which implies that there is a preference towards cross-platform or team-based studies.

Table 6

Perceived Future Trends in Investigative Journalism Using Social Media in Pakistan

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Data Journalism	2.4% (3)	2.4% (3)	12.0% (15)	44.8% (56)	38.4% (48)
Citizen Journalism	0.8% (1)	3.2% (4)	20.0% (25)	48.0% (60)	28.0% (35)
AI Fact-checking	1.6% (2)	15.2% (19)	24.0% (30)	39.2% (49)	20.0% (25)
Multimedia Journalism	3.2% (4)	0.8% (1)	8.8% (11)	51.2% (64)	36.0% (45)
Collaborative Networks	2.4% (3)	5.6% (7)	11.2% (14)	52.0% (65)	28.8% (36)
Mobile Journalism	2.4% (3)	0.8% (1)	12.8% (16)	40.8% (51)	43.2% (54)

Conversely, the views on the AI-based tools of fact-checking were more ambivalent. A considerable fraction (24.0% or 30) was indifferent, and 15.2% (19) were disagreeing, though 20.0% (25) strongly agreed and 39.2% (49) agreed. Lastly, the rating of data journalism shows the increased importance of data analysis in investigative reporting as showed in table 6.

Discussion

In this research, 125 Pakistani investigative journalists were approached through purposive and snowball sampling, along with certain more experienced media practitioners, and challenging-to-reach practitioners who work in sensitive settings. The study was modified to include the Technological Affordance Theory by utilizing the methodology that allowed adjusting the instruments to a level of validity without losing the relevance to the unique media ecosystem of Pakistan specifically focusing on prospects and challenges. The research by Nazir and Gillani (2024) on investigative journalism states that challenges are legal frameworks, organizational policies, cultural and religious influences, resource constraints, ethical dilemmas and harassment. These are the factors explored in the present study also.

Social media has a revolutionary impact in all spheres of life. To begin with, it is effective in attracting the attention of the masses to pressing issues of concern such as corruption and human rights, and an overwhelming

majority of journalists testified to this fact. Second, the global presence of the platform allows establishing unprecedented cross-border collaboration, broadening the prospects of investigations. Third, multimedia storytelling highlighted by the respondents has rewritten the definition of audience participation by using films, infographics, and data visualization (Jacobson, [2012](#)). Similarly, the present research explored that investigative journalism in the digital age is one of the biggest tools towards fact-checking and bringing truthful information for consumers; whereas media literacy could play a significant role in this regard.

These advantages are especially effective in the hostile online environment of Pakistan, where the challenges affecting reporters are multifold. Fake news is the most widespread form of misinformation that is frequently encountered. Mostly, journalists are the victims of online harassment as per the data.

Investigative journalism surfaces a collection of operational and moral challenges, ranging from monetary austerity and political vulnerability to multifaceted digital ethical dilemmas which gradually threaten its initial democratic role (Karadimitriou et al., [2022](#); Siebert et al., [1956](#))

The journalists anticipate that in the future, there will be several radical developments that can transform the field of investigation. The most active multimedia reporting and mobile journalism are likely to be first in line, and technical options such as AI fact-checking may support the struggle against fake information. The most encouraging is that most respondents think that collaborative networks will have a significant role in investigative work, which may help slow down the constraints of resources and isolation. These developments are indicative of an evolving climate where the role of social media continues to change towards supporting and not enabling investigative journalism, provided that flaws in the system are addressed through concerted legislative action and professional collaboration.

Recommendations

On the basis of the data, following are the recommendations

- An encrypted communication system, training of staff on digital security and AI fact-checking technologies should be utilized by newsrooms to ensure that in the digital space of Pakistan, journalists are not censored and are not harassed.

- In order to decrease dependence on commercial revenue and maintain editorial independence, nonprofit connections and government grants must be employed to develop long-term financial services.
- It is convenient that investigative reporting can occur through these multi-level actions, based on addressing the legal, technological, and economic issues that the present research has raised.
- Furthermore, it is recommended that there should be a balanced proportion of the sample in future studies focusing on investigative journalism.

Author Contribution

Tayyaba Jabeen: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization. Ayesha Sadaf: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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