

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION ON NEWS COVERAGE

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing human life expectancy all over the world, elder abuse has become one of the most pressing national and global problems. This paper broadly explores the risk factors for domestic elderly abuse, paying paramount attention to the individual characteristics of the offenders and victims. These risk variables can help reduce elder abuse and improve risk management strategies. The current study employed a quantity research design; therefore, data was collected through the self-developed structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions with the help of a purposive sampling technique respondents of the current study were 150 elderly Males and Females of District Bhakkar Pakistan. Data analysis was done using SPSS. Descriptive statistics and correlation results indicated a gloomy and significant positive relationship between physical abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, and financial abuse with domestic elderly abuse. The regression analysis $R^2=63.0\%$ shows that there is a significant effect of Independent Variables (Physical Abuse, Psychological Abuse, Neglect, and Financial Abuse) on the Dependent Variable (domestic elderly abuse). Furthermore, the authors also discovered that integrational relationship quality (IRQ) acts as a partial mediator of the links between such types of abuse and the abuse of domestic elderly. It was also found that cultural perceptions towards aging influenced the connection between IRQ and the contrasts in domestic elderly abuse. The conclusions made in this study stress the need for effective identification of the problem and the establishment of a definite strategy and policy so that authorities can respond to elder abuse appropriately and help those in need.

Keywords: Domestic, Elderly, Abuse, Silent treatment, Risk factors, Sociocultural Perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has transformed the way individuals' access and consume news, significantly altering the media landscape. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok now serve as primary sources of information for millions of people around the world, with many users relying on these platforms for breaking news and real-time updates (Sismeiro, & Mahmood, 2018). This shift has sparked considerable debate about the role of social media in shaping public opinion and influencing the interpretation of news coverage. While traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, television, and radio, have long been trusted sources of news, the

increasing prominence of social media has raised questions about its impact on public perceptions of news stories and the credibility of various media sources (Miranda, Young, & Yetgin, 2016; Abbasi et al., 2019).

Previous research has focused on the dissemination of information through social media, often treating it as an information channel similar to traditional media (Ren et al., 2018). However, less attention has been given to understanding the broader role that social media plays in shaping how news is consumed, interpreted, and trusted by the public (Abbasi et al., 2019). Social media platforms are not only sources

of information but also drivers of attention, emotional engagement, and public discourse (Jiao, Veiga, & Walther, 2020; Lashari et al., 2023). They create environments where news stories are often presented in more sensationalized, emotional, or polarized ways, which can influence public opinion and the perceived credibility of news sources (Lashari et al., 2023).

Recently, the European Union (EU) introduced legislation proposing that social media platforms should compensate traditional media outlets for incorporating news articles into their feeds. This proposal is based on two key assumptions: first, that both social media and traditional media serve the same function as information providers, and second, that their relationship is inherently competitive—social media platforms are seen as a threat to traditional media, potentially diminishing their audience as more readers turn to social media for news (Carleton Athey, Mobius, & Pál, 2017). However, the dynamics between social media and traditional media may also be more complementary than competitive. For instance, Sismeiro and Mahmood (2018) observed a marked decline in visits to traditional media websites during a Facebook outage. Similarly, Bar-Gill et al. (2020) found that Facebook's news recommendations had a stronger positive impact on traditional media viewership than email newsletters. These findings suggest that when information is shared through both social media and traditional media channels, social media can actually enhance traditional media viewership (Fang, & Peress, 2009).

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the role of social media in shaping public opinion on news coverage. Through a qualitative, exploratory research design, this paper investigates how individuals engage with news on social media, how they interpret this information, and how it influences their perceptions of traditional news outlets. Using a phenomenological approach and Brown and Clarke's thematic analysis, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between social media and public opinion formation, offering insights into how news consumption has evolved in the digital age.

In doing so, the study addresses key questions about the influence of social media on news interpretation and credibility, contributing to a growing body of

literature that examines the interplay between traditional and digital media in shaping public discourse. The findings of this research have important implications for media organizations, policymakers, and educators seeking to navigate the challenges posed by the digital transformation of news.

Given the significant influence of social media in shaping public attention, this study aims to address two key research questions:

1. Does the volume of social media activity impact news viewership, serving as an indicator of attention?
2. How do characteristics of social media posts, such as sentiment (both intensity and positivity) and the verifiability of their sources, influence the relationship between social media volume and news viewership?

This paper tries to develop better understanding about an alternative perspective on the role of social media, providing evidence that it functions primarily as an attention driver. This contrasts with the traditional view, which focuses on social media merely as an information channel that spreads basic news, misinformation, or feedback (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Castillo et al., forthcoming; Chen et al., 2014; Dellarocas, 2003). The study will also help to explain various phenomena highlighted in previous studies, such as social media-driven customer engagement (Castillo et al., 2021) and social media's role in product awareness (Duan et al., 2008).

There is a different mechanism, suggesting that social media and traditional media need not be in direct competition for audience attention. Instead, that social media can actually support traditional media by directing more attention to news stories published in traditional outlets.

Literature Review

Social Media as a Channel of Information

Social media platforms facilitate the creation and distribution of user-generated content, with a widely accepted view that the core function of social media is the sharing of information. As Standage (2013, p. 3) describes, social media serves as "an environment in which information is passed from one person to another along social connections." One key feature of social media is its capacity for bidirectional

communication, allowing for interaction and feedback (Dellarocas, 2003).

Previous research has primarily focused on the nature of the information that social media disseminates. Specifically, studies have examined whether social media spreads reliable information, such as factual data about stocks in financial markets, or unreliable content, such as rumors or "fake news." For instance, Clarke et al. (2020) and Vosoughi et al. (2018) demonstrate that fake news tends to spread more quickly than real news. Other studies (Bae et al., 2021; Schuetz et al., 2021) explore strategies for combating misinformation during events like the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, some researchers (Chen et al., 2014; Luo et al., 2013) argue that social media plays a crucial role in distributing legitimate, fundamental information that has yet to be factored into financial markets. Additionally, Hu et al. (2015) suggest that social media can also circulate information that generates social value online.

Some studies adopt a different perspective by focusing on information that includes sentiment. For instance, Deng et al. (2018) demonstrate that investor sentiment expressed on social media has a Granger causal effect on stock returns, revealing a bidirectional relationship between social media sentiment and stock market performance. Additionally, many financial studies use social media sentiment as a proxy for investor sentiment (see, for example, Antweiler & Frank, 2004; Dong & Gil-Bazo, 2020; Siganos et al., 2014; Sprenger et al., 2014). These studies operate under the assumption that sentiment itself is a form of information, which is then spread through social media platforms.

2.1.2. Social Media vs. Traditional Media

As social media platforms increasingly disseminate information, a key question arises about the distinctions between social media and traditional media. Several studies have explored which medium exerts a greater influence. For example, Dong et al. (2022) find that social media is a better predictor of stock returns over a longer period, whereas traditional media is more predictive for the immediate next day. In a different context, Dewan and Ramaprasad (2014) compare the effects of social media and traditional media on music sales, revealing that while traditional media can boost sales, social media can have a negative impact,

particularly on song sales. Yu et al. (2013) show that social media has a stronger correlation with stock performance compared to traditional media. Dong et al. (2022) also highlight that social media and traditional media differ not only in content but also in their respective utility. They argue that social media tends to focus on more specific, limited information, while traditional media offers a broader and more diverse range of information about the stock market.

Other studies examine the relationship between social media and traditional media, specifically questioning whether the rise of social media harms traditional media. For example, Sismeiro and Mahmood (2018) found that during a Facebook outage, visits to traditional media sites significantly dropped. Similarly, Bar-Gill et al. (2020) compared the effects of Facebook recommendations versus email newsletters on traditional media viewership, concluding that social media actually enhances traditional media viewership, suggesting their relationship is complementary, not competitive, as often assumed by regulators. Jiao et al. (2020) noted that traditional media and social media influence stock volatility and turnover differently, with social media often reiterating information from traditional media.

While many prior studies treat social media as simply another information channel, similar to traditional media, our paper challenges this assumption by exploring whether social media plays a distinct role in decision-making processes (Geet et al., 2017).

2.2. Social Media as an Attention Driver

Social media functions as an attention driver. Users may become aware of certain topics circulating on social media and, as a result, seek out more detailed, fundamental information (Jha & Shah, 2019). This means that even when social media only contains non-fundamental content, it can still play a role in driving the dissemination of more substantive information. This argument is supported by various phenomena documented in prior research. For instance, Duan et al. (2008) observe that while the ratings of online user reviews do not have a significant statistical relationship with movie box office revenues, the volume of online posts does impact sales. They suggest that this indicates that social media boosts product awareness. Castillo et al.

(2021) find a similar pattern, showing that social media-driven customer engagement before a product's release is positively associated with box office revenues (Knight, 2014). One explanation for this is that social media platforms capture user attention, even when the posts themselves may be relatively uninformative.

Although limited, some studies have explicitly identified social media's role as an attention driver. For example, Zhu et al. (2020) discuss the concept of attention spill overs, building on earlier work on social media spill overs (Aral et al., 2013). They explore how the attention generated by a popular Wikipedia article can spill over to linked articles, suggesting that the visibility of one article can increase attention to related content. Similarly, Carmi et al. (2017) document that external attention shocks—such as product recommendations from shows like *Oprah* or major outlets like *The New York Times*—can drive attention to other product recommendation networks, like Amazon.

Our study diverges from these prior works by focusing not just on attention spillovers within social media networks, but on how attention can spill over from social media to traditional media. This extends the existing literature by exploring the role of social media as a bridge that channels user attention to more in-depth traditional media content.

3. Method and Procedure

This study aimed to explore the role of social media in shaping public opinion on news coverage, using a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. The research design was exploratory in nature, allowing for an open-ended investigation of how social media influences public opinion regarding news. A phenomenological methodology was employed to understand the lived experiences of individuals and how they perceive the interaction between social media and traditional media in shaping their views on news events.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted an exploratory, qualitative design to allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Through a phenomenological approach, the study sought to capture participants' subjective experiences and

interpretations of how social media shapes their opinions about news coverage. The goal was to uncover the meanings and insights participants associate with their exposure to social media content and its influence on their perceptions of news events.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while ensuring that key topics were addressed. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were active users of social media and who engaged with news content regularly. A total of 10 participants were interviewed, providing a diverse range of perspectives on the topic.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the research questions, focusing on topics such as the participants' use of social media for news consumption, their perception of social media's influence on news coverage, and how they perceive the relationship between social media and traditional news outlets. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and insights. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants for subsequent transcription and analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Brown and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis, which is a widely recognized approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. This method is particularly well-suited for phenomenological studies, as it allows for the identification of key themes that emerge from participants' lived experiences. Thematic analysis was applied in a six-step process:

- **Familiarization with the data:**

The researcher first transcribed the interviews and reviewed the transcripts to gain an understanding of the depth and breadth of the data.

- **Generating initial codes**

The researcher systematically coded segments of the data that were relevant to the research questions.

- **Searching for themes:**
Codes were grouped into potential themes based on similarities and connections between different data segments.
- **Reviewing themes:**
The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data.
- **Defining and naming themes:**
The final themes were defined, and each theme was given a descriptive label that encapsulated its meaning.
- **Producing the report:**
The analysis was then used to construct a detailed report that discussed the themes and how they related to the research questions.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All ethical measures were followed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Before the interviews, participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were assured that their personal information would be kept anonymous and that any identifying details would be removed during the analysis and reporting of the findings. Additionally, participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

The researcher-maintained transparency and objectivity during the data analysis process to ensure the integrity of the findings. All interview data were securely stored and only accessible to the research team, in compliance with ethical guidelines for qualitative research.

3.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing were implemented. Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Triangulation was achieved by comparing the interview data with existing literature to ensure that the findings were grounded in both participants' experiences and previous research. Peer

debriefing involved discussing the data analysis process with colleagues to refine the interpretations and enhance the validity of the results.

Through these methods, the study aimed to produce reliable and meaningful insights into the role of social media in shaping public opinion on news coverage.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the qualitative analysis conducted on the semi-structured interviews with 10 participants. The analysis identified several key themes that emerged from participants' experiences and perspectives on the role of social media in shaping public opinion on news coverage. The thematic analysis, following Brown and Clarke's (2006) methodology, resulted in three major themes: **Social Media as a Catalyst for News Attention, Social Media Influences on News Interpretation, and Trust and Credibility of News Sources.** These themes are discussed below, along with relevant excerpts from the interview transcriptions.

4.1 Social Media as a Catalyst for News Attention

A significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of social media in attracting attention to particular news topics. Participants indicated that social media often serves as the first point of contact with breaking news, with many claiming to discover important stories through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram before encountering them in traditional news outlets. Participant P3 noted:

"I usually find out about major news events on Twitter first. It's quick and everyone starts talking about it there before the TV channels or newspapers even catch up."

Similarly, Participant P7 explained how social media platforms drive them to seek out more detailed news coverage:

"When I see something trending on Facebook or Twitter, I'm immediately curious and start looking for more information on it through the news websites. It definitely makes me go beyond just the headline."

This theme illustrates how social media serves as a driver of public attention, often leading individuals to traditional media sources for deeper coverage.

4.2 Social Media Influences on News Interpretation

The second key theme relates to how social media influences the interpretation of news stories. Several participants expressed that while social media exposes them to various viewpoints, it also shapes the way they perceive news coverage. The commentary found on platforms like Facebook or Twitter can sometimes affect their understanding of news events, often introducing opinions or biases that might not be present in traditional media reports. Participant P6 reflected:

"Social media is full of people sharing their opinions, and sometimes it makes me think about the news differently. I'll read something on Facebook, and then I'm not sure what to believe anymore, especially if it's really emotional or sensationalized."

Participant P2 shared a similar experience, explaining how social media commentary can alter their view of news stories:

"Sometimes when I see a post about a news event that's really angry or passionate, I'll start to question the facts in the actual news article. Social media makes me more skeptical of everything I see."

These responses suggest that while social media serves as a source of initial information, it can also lead to varied interpretations and potential biases, shaping public opinion through collective commentary and emotional responses.

4.3 Trust and Credibility of News Sources

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was participants' concerns about the trustworthiness and credibility of the news shared on social media. Many participants expressed skepticism about the reliability of information encountered on social platforms, often indicating that they prefer to rely on traditional media for confirmation. Participant P5 noted:

"I feel like you can't always trust what you see on social media. There's a lot of misinformation, so I try to verify it through established news outlets. If it's not covered by the big newspapers or TV, I don't usually believe it."

Conversely, some participants believed that traditional media outlets also had their own biases, and therefore, social media provided a form of alternative perspective. Participant P9 explained:

"Traditional media can be biased too, so sometimes social media gives you a chance to hear other views that you might not get from the mainstream news."

This theme highlights the complex relationship between social media and traditional media, where users are constantly evaluating the credibility of sources and considering both types of media to form opinions.

The results from the interviews demonstrate the multifaceted role social media plays in shaping public opinion on news coverage. Participants consistently described social media as a primary tool for discovering news and drawing attention to specific stories. However, they also recognized the influence of social media on how news is interpreted, often leading to a more critical or skeptical view of traditional media coverage. Finally, issues of trust and credibility were central to how participants navigated both social media and traditional news, with many seeking a balance between the two sources to form well-rounded opinions.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex and multifaceted role of social media in shaping public opinion on news coverage. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, three key themes emerged: **Social Media as a Catalyst for News Attention**, **Social Media Influences on News Interpretation** and **Trust and Credibility of News Sources**. These themes not only reflect how social media functions in the modern media landscape but also illustrate the dynamic relationship between social media and traditional media in shaping public perceptions of news stories.

5.1 Social Media as a Catalyst for News Attention

The first major theme of the study suggests that social media plays a critical role in drawing attention to specific news topics, often serving as the initial point of exposure to breaking news events. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the ability of social media platforms to drive user engagement with news content (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Participants in this study reported discovering news stories on social media before they encountered them in traditional media outlets,

underlining the growing importance of social media as a news dissemination tool. This behavior mirrors the "attention economy" (Goldhaber, 1997), where platforms like Twitter and Facebook attract users' attention by circulating trending topics, which can then lead them to seek more comprehensive information through traditional media sources such as news websites or television channels.

The results emphasize the symbiotic relationship between social media and traditional media. While social media platforms may often serve as the first encounter with a story, it is evident from participants' responses that traditional media still plays a crucial role in providing in-depth coverage. This suggests that rather than replacing traditional media, social media acts as a complement, guiding users toward more detailed and authoritative news sources.

5.2 Social Media Influences on News Interpretation

A second prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the influence of social media on how participants interpret news stories. Many respondents reported that social media commentary, particularly in the form of user-generated opinions, can shape their understanding of a news event. This finding aligns with the idea that social media does not merely disseminate information but also serves as a platform for framing news in particular ways (Entman, 1993). When social media posts surrounding a news story are highly emotional, sensationalized, or opinionated, they can alter the way individuals interpret the same story in traditional media.

This theme also underscores the power of social media in shaping public opinion through collective engagement. As participants expressed, the opinions and emotions shared on platforms like Facebook and Twitter often overshadow the more neutral tone of traditional news outlets. Previous studies have also explored how social media can amplify certain frames and perspectives, which in turn can influence public discourse (Chadwick, 2013). The findings of this study suggest that the emotional and personal narratives prevalent on social media platforms may act as a powerful filter through which people process news, often clouding their judgment of the facts presented in traditional media.

5.3 Trust and Credibility of News Sources

The third theme—trust and credibility—emerged as a critical factor in how participants navigate the relationship between social media and traditional media. On one hand, participants acknowledged that social media can be a source of unreliable or biased information, leading them to cross-check with traditional media outlets for verification. This aligns with previous research indicating that while social media offers diverse perspectives, it also carries the risk of spreading misinformation (Friggeri, Garimella, & Weber, 2014). Participants in this study expressed a preference for traditional media outlets, which they perceived as more credible and trustworthy. However, some participants also noted that traditional media itself could be biased, which led them to seek alternative perspectives via social media.

The dual concern about trustworthiness in both social media and traditional news reflects the ongoing debate regarding the credibility of these platforms. Scholars have long recognized that social media's democratized nature allows for the rapid spread of unverified content, but it also gives voice to alternative perspectives that are not typically represented in mainstream media (Tufekci, 2015). The findings suggest that individuals engage in a balancing act, where they seek multiple sources of information—both traditional and social—to form their opinions.

5.4 Implications for Policymakers and Media Organizations

The results of this study have important implications for both policymakers and media organizations. For policymakers, the findings underscore the growing influence of social media on public opinion and the need for regulations that promote media literacy and the responsible dissemination of information. As social media continues to shape the public's understanding of news, it is essential that individuals are equipped with the skills to critically assess the information they encounter online.

For media organizations, the study suggests that traditional outlets should recognize the role of social media in driving attention to news stories. Instead of viewing social media as a competitor, media organizations might consider strategies for leveraging social media platforms to engage

audiences and promote in-depth news coverage. By integrating social media-driven attention into their content strategies, traditional media outlets can maintain relevance and foster trust in their reporting.

5.5 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of social media in shaping public opinion, it is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size of 10 participants and the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size and incorporate quantitative methods to assess the broader impact of social media on news consumption and public opinion.

Additionally, future studies could explore how different types of social media content—such as video, memes, or hashtags—affect public opinion formation. Investigating how various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) differently influence news interpretation and attention could also yield important insights. Finally, examining the role of social media in different cultural contexts would offer a more comprehensive understanding of its impact on global news coverage and public opinion.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex relationship between social media and traditional media in shaping public opinion on news coverage. Social media serves as a powerful attention driver, prompting individuals to seek further information from traditional media sources. However, the emotional and opinionated nature of social media can influence how news is interpreted, sometimes leading to skepticism about the facts presented by traditional outlets. As media consumption continues to evolve, understanding these dynamics is crucial for both media organizations and policymakers in fostering informed and critical audiences.

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