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## Towards an Informed Society: A Critical Analysis of Media Literacy in Pakistan

### ABSTRACT

Understanding media literacy in the digital age is essential for interpreting complex media narratives about critical issues and mitigating the risk of public misguidance, which is imperative for a democratic culture. This research investigates the state of media literacy in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Pakistan's nonmetropolitan region. Media literacy among the people in AJK has not been previously explored, so this research gap provides new insights and solutions using Critical Media Literacy Theory (CMLT) to examine the phenomenon. Key findings of the study reveal that social media serves as the primary source of information; however, users exhibit a limited understanding of media literacy when interpreting the embedded discourse within media content related to political and critical events. Nevertheless, individuals with higher education express confidence in identifying disinformation and acknowledge that fact-checking is useful for mitigating deceptive media narratives, but users rarely practice it. These findings highlight the need for a structured media literacy initiative to reduce the risks of public misguidance.

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**Keywords:** media literacy, media consumption, disinformation, fact-checking

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## **Introduction**

Media literacy navigates the complexities of information, enabling individuals to understand the intricacies of critical issues and events, and becomes a fundamental requirement for a democratic culture to effectively critique government policies (Gjerazi, 2024; Ali & Qazi, 2021). Media literacy enables users to distinguish between credible sources and misinformation, thereby avoiding manipulative media narratives (Tettey, 2022; Salman Salleh et al., 2023). In addition to technical skills, media literacy empowers individuals to recognize the emotional exploitation that occurs when formulating public opinion in polarized environments (Buckingham, 2020; Ramesh, 2024).

### ***Evolution of Media Literacy***

Hobbs (2010) states that the emergence of social media, specifically the politically charged media ecologies, has elevated the scope of media literacy. Many modern media communication experts view media literacy as a digital skill, emotional intelligence, and socio-political awareness as an insight into media manipulation (Potter, 2022; Mrisho & Dominic, 2023). This insightfulness is a growing need for individuals to understand media deception, but engage with it critically in politically polarized environments.

### ***Critical & Ethical Engagement***

Media literacy has become an essential routine skill for individuals involved in media consumption and dissemination. Hobbs (2010) argues that true media literacy enables individuals to interpret messages. Bias and deception proliferate manifold in the era of algorithmic decision-making. Media literacy allows users to identify misinformation, fostering informed public discourse and ensuring that democracy functions effectively. Thus, citizens must be able to critically assess the media discourse (Salman Salleh et al., 2023; Tettey, 2022).

### ***Emotional and Awareness***

Media do not just convey information—they shape identities, trigger emotions, and influence political behavior. Buckingham (2020) emphasizes that emotional literacy—understanding how media manipulates feelings—is a core part of literacy. This is relevant in polarized or conflict-driven regions, where media is often weaponized (Ramesh, 2024). Additionally, Rawan, Dar, and Siraj (2018) highlight that age, education, and socio-economic status determine individuals' access to media and their understanding of embedded deception in content.

### ***Media literacy in conflict***

Media literacy becomes a crucial practical skill requirement during times of war and propaganda, where media ecology serves as a weapon for both state and non-state actors to employ emotionally manipulative narratives (Rasheed & Riaz, 2022; Siraj, 2019). Therefore, the need for insight into literacy skills to counteract erudite falsehood campaigns becomes crucial (Siraj, 2012). Experts believe that understanding media literacy empowers vulnerable individuals to critically evaluate sources of deceptive media content and develop counter-narratives using social media (Tettey, 2022; Buckingham, 2020). In a developing society where media literacy is still in its early stages, conflict zones require immediate, community-based approaches that address both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of media consumption under duress (Livingstone, 2004; Siraj, 2016).

### **Research Gap**

The chosen region, AJK, represents a research gap for this study as media literacy in this region has not been previously explored, leading to new insights and solutions. Within this gap, this study investigates the empirical examination of AJK's (1) distinctive media ecology marked by constrained digital infrastructure and heightened vulnerability to disinformation; (2) the inadequate understanding of how non-metropolitan contexts affect the adoption and efficacy of media literacy; (3) and the absence of localized frameworks that integrate technical, emotional, and political competencies for such environments. Failure to address these dimensions perpetuates a dangerous oversight, whereby structural disadvantages and emotionally manipulative media practices continue to erode meaningful democratic participation in AJK's unique socio-political landscape.

### **Research Questions**

This study constructed the following for investigation:

1. To what extent are the residents of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) aware of the fake news on social media?
2. To what extent do AJK residents perceive the effectiveness of fact-checking practices embedded within social media discourse?
3. What effective strategies can be developed to enhance media literacy among the residents of AJK

## **Literature Review**

The proliferation of misinformation has become a significant concern in the digital era, particularly with the rise of social media. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) analyzed over 126,000 stories shared on Twitter between 2006 and 2017, finding that false news spreads faster and further than true news, especially in political contexts. Their research attributed this to the novelty and emotional impact of false information, which evokes fear, disgust, and surprise—emotions more likely to prompt sharing. Bots were found to share both true and false news at similar rates; however, human users were more likely to spread misinformation due to emotional responses. These findings underscore the social and psychological aspects of misinformation, highlighting the need to understand how users engage with digital content. In a conflict environment, disinformation often reflects conflicting ideologies, making it difficult to verify content. In this regard, Broda and Strömbäck (2024) argue that disinformation serves as a weapon in a political war situation, utilizing ideological biases to deceive the audience for meticulously desired objectives. In such scenarios, media literacy involves understanding media literacy and technological techniques such as algorithmic dynamics.

Siraj et al (2016) report that young adults in Pakistan heavily consume social media for information seeking. Abbasi and Huang (2020) report that youngsters' exposure to fake news has grown significantly, and due to low media literacy, most of them do not verify the sources of information, thus becoming prey to false information in marketing and social media. These researchers recommend the inclusion of media literacy in the school curriculum so that teenagers become acquainted with the media literacy skill to evaluate the embedded deception in digital media content at an early age.

Media concentration further aggravates the deceptive situation in media content. Media researchers criticized concentrated media ownership for prioritizing corporate interests over the public good (Bagdikian, 2014; Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Media conglomerates compromise media pluralism and content diversity in the interest of elites within the democratic process (Uzuegbunam, 2020). In Pakistan, media ownership is often influenced by political discourse, with some outlets prioritizing the political party's agenda and others deceiving the audience for the sake of the attention economy (Siraj, 2016). Among private, political, and state actors (Hussain, 2012), this imbalance often marginalizes the voices of ethnic and regional groups. As Garz et al. (2023) observe, such concentration skews representation and reinforces stereotypes. Funk et al. (2019) argue in this regard that media literacy is highly required to deconstruct self-serving narratives.

Tasev and Stepanoska (2019) argue that media literacy enhances civic engagement, accountability, and resistance to propaganda—a fundamental requirement of democratic culture. Although media literacy is a good

practice, it may not lead to increased political participation on its own; however, critical engagement with media content reveals the essence of democratic culture (Hobbs, 2010; Tully & Vraga, 2017). Tugtekin and Koc (2019) researched students at Turkish universities who identified a link between media literacy and democratic tendencies, revealing that media literacy skills lead to a critical democratic disposition.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study utilized critical media literacy theory (CMLT), which critically analyzes users' understanding of media literacy by exploring the media narrative within the complex political power structures, ideological influences, and sociopolitical context in which media is consumed (Kellner & Share, 2007; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Core concepts of the CMLT include viewing media as a tool of power and control, as well as recognizing bias, propaganda, and misinformation in dominant media narratives. These thematic concepts of the theory served as constructs for the study to examine the media literacy situation in AJK, a nonmetropolitan region of Pakistan.

### **Research Methodology**

This study primarily used a quantitative research method to investigate the media literacy behaviors of the AJK residents. A cross-sectional survey, utilizing a structured questionnaire, was designed to collect data from the target sample at a single point in time. Thomas (2020) views this approach as generally suitable for capturing the current attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge about media literacy. However, to identify effective strategies for enhancing media literacy and combating misinformation in AJK, expert interviews were conducted with six media professionals and educationists.

### **Data Collection and Sampling Strategy**

Due to accessibility and logistical challenges, we employed convenience sampling data collection. Although we acknowledge the limitations of convenience sampling, we used demographic questions in the questionnaire to ensure representativeness. Moreover, we recruited individuals to assist us in data collection through social media, email, and community forums. To avoid sampling bias, the questionnaire was widely disseminated to experts in the field. The questionnaire primarily consisted of closed-ended questions focused on the major construct of the study. We took utmost care to ensure the sample's anonymity and confidentiality, employing informed consent. No sensitive or distressing content was included in the questionnaire. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. A total of 107 samples were collected from the selected region of AJK.

### **Validity and Reliability**

To ensure the content validity of the questionnaire, we sought a thorough expert review, whereas construct validity was done using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The reliability of the data collection was assessed through a pilot study, employing the split-half method with Cronbach's alpha. Across all questionnaire items, the test yielded an average reliability score of 0.76, which is generally considered acceptable for research purposes (Nixon et al., 2002; Regmi et al., 2017).

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using Excel. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means) were used to summarize demographics and media habits. The study employed appropriate statistical methods to analyze the thematic constructs and address the research questions.

## **Results**

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents were young adults aged 18–24 (58.9%), predominantly female (64.5%), and primarily students (63.6%), indicating a digitally active and media-aware population. Most participants held at least a bachelor's degree (56.1%), with a significant portion having a master's or higher qualification (31.8%), reflecting a well-educated sample. The occupational distribution was limited, with fewer individuals from the government, private sector, or self-employed. Table 1 highlights a sample that is youthful, educated, and student-dominated, which may influence their media usage and views on misinformation.

**Table 1**

Characteristics of the sample

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (%)
<b>Age Group</b>	18–24	63 (58.9%)
	25–34	39 (36.4%)
	35–44	5 (4.7%)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	69 (64.5%)
	Male	38 (35.5%)
<b>Education Level</b>	College	13 (12.1%)
	Bachelor	60 (56.1%)
	Master or Higher	34 (31.8%)
<b>Occupation</b>	Government Employee	9 (8.4%)
	Private Sector Employee	24 (22.4%)
	Self-Employed/Business Owner	6 (5.6%)
	Student (School/College/University)	68 (63.6%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>107 (100%)</b>

As presented in **Table 2**, most respondents reported consuming news daily (55.5%), with social media being the dominant source (89.1%). Traditional platforms such as television (27.3%), online news websites (20%), newspapers (10%), and radio (1.8%) were used significantly less. Among social media platforms, Instagram (34.5%) and Facebook (30.9%) were the most preferred for news, followed by YouTube (14.5%), Twitter (12.7%), and TikTok (7.3%). The results from Table 2 indicate a clear preference for digital and social media platforms over traditional news sources, reflecting the changing information consumption habits of a largely young and tech-savvy audience.

**Table 2**  
Information Consumption Patterns and Platform Preferences

Category	Subcategory	Freq (%)
<b>News Consumption</b>	Daily	61 (55.5%)
	Several times a week	25 (22.7%)
	Less than once a week	8 (7.3%)
	Once a week	6 (5.5%)
	Rarely/Never	10 (9.1%)
<b>Used News Platforms</b>	Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)	98 (89.1%)
	Television (Geo News, ARY News, Dunya News)	30 (27.3%)
	Online News Websites/Apps (Dawn.com, Geo.tv)	22 (20.0%)
	Newspapers (Dawn, Jang, Express)	11 (10.0%)
	Radio (FM 91, Radio Pakistan)	2 (1.8%)
<b>Social Media Platforms for News</b>	Instagram	38 (34.5%)
	Facebook	34 (30.9%)
	YouTube	16 (14.5%)
	Twitter	14 (12.7%)
	TikTok	8 (7.3%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>110 00%</b>

Table 3 presents data in response to RQ 1, which examines the level of awareness among residents of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) regarding their ability to identify fake news on social media. The findings reveal that a majority of respondents reported some degree of awareness in discerning misinformation. Specifically, 54 respondents (49.1%) indicated they were 'aware,' while 36 (32.7%) described themselves as 'very aware.' In contrast, 18 participants (16.4%) reported being 'somewhat aware,' and only two respondents (1.8%) indicated they were 'not at all aware.' These results

suggest that although most participants feel reasonably confident in their ability to identify fake news, a notable minority still lack strong awareness in this regard.

**Table 3**

*Aware to Identify Fake News*

<b>Awareness Level</b>	<b>Freq.&amp; %</b>
Very Aware	36 (32.7%)
Aware	54 (49.1%)
Somewhat	18 (16.4%)
Not at all	2 (1.8%)
Total	110 (100%)

Table 4 presents data in response to Research Question 2, which explores the perceived effectiveness of fact-checking practices embedded within social media discourse. The results indicate that a majority of respondents consider fact-checking tools to be at least somewhat helpful. Specifically, 30.9% rated them as 'very helpful,' while 27.3% described them as 'helpful.' These findings reflect a generally positive perception of the effectiveness of fact-checking websites and applications. Additionally, 35.5% of participants rated the tools as 'somewhat helpful,' suggesting a moderate level of trust. In contrast, a small proportion of respondents viewed these tools less favorably, with 4.5% indicating they were 'not very helpful' and 1.8% stating they were 'not at all helpful.' Overall, while most respondents value fact-checking mechanisms, a portion remains uncertain about their reliability or usefulness.

The results regarding **fact-checking** reveal a significant discrepancy between perceived effectiveness and actual usage. While acknowledging the benefits of fact-checking resources, respondents' consistent use is limited, as shown by the fact that 45.5 percent of respondents reported never using fact-checking tools, and 40.9% use them only rarely. This suggests that while fact-checking tools are recognized as useful, they are not widely integrated into regular information verification practices. The relatively low frequency of use, especially when compared to the positive perception of their effectiveness, suggests that barriers such as a lack of time, trust, or awareness of these resources may be present.



**Table 4**

Perceived Effectiveness and Fact-Checking Practices

<b>Effectiveness Level</b>	<b>Freq &amp; %</b>	<b>Fact-Checking</b>	<b>Freq &amp; %</b>
Most helpful	34 (30.9%),	Very often	8 (7.3%)
Helpful	30 (27.3%)	Often	10 (9.1%)
Somewhat helpful	39 (35.5%)	Sometimes	15 (13.6%)
Not very helpful	5 (4.5%)	Rarely	45 (40.9%)
Not at all helpful	2 (1.8%)	Not at all	50 (45.5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>110 (100%)</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>110 (100%)</b>

To address Research Question 3, this study conducted interviews with prominent media professionals and educationists in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) to examine strategies for enhancing media literacy and combating misinformation in the region. The experts proposed a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach, which includes the following components:

- a. Strengthening media literacy programs in schools and communities through the use of interactive methods, such as gamified learning and case-based instruction, to foster critical thinking and engagement.
- b. Bridging the digital divide by improving internet accessibility, ensuring the availability of affordable digital devices, and providing targeted digital literacy training for marginalized populations.
- c. Developing localized fact-checking tools in regional languages, in collaboration with media outlets and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to empower citizens with the means to verify information independently.
- d. Raising public awareness about media ownership as a core component of literacy initiatives, enabling audiences to identify and critically assess media bias and influence.
- e. Promoting civic engagement through media, enhancing media accountability through independent monitoring bodies, and integrating media literacy into teacher training curricula to ensure long-term institutional impact.
- f. Engaging religious and cultural leaders in literacy campaigns to align efforts with local values and effectively counter misinformation rooted in cultural or religious narratives.

## Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into the media consumption patterns, perceptions of misinformation, and the use of fact-checking tools among a digitally engaged population in Pakistan.

As seen in Table 1, the sample is predominantly young (ages 18–24), female, and highly educated, with most participants being students. They were more engaged with digital platforms and media-related issues, which aligns with the findings in Table 2. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Facebook, dominate news consumption, with 89.1% of respondents using them as a primary source of news. This mirrors global trends, where younger, tech-savvy audiences are shifting away from traditional news outlets, such as television and newspapers, and instead prefer the speed and accessibility of social media for news updates (Pew Research Center, 2021). The shift from traditional to digital platforms aligns with the findings of prior studies, which highlight that millennials and Gen Z rely more heavily on social media for news (Anderson & Shearer, 2021).

Regarding **confidence in identifying fake news** (Table 3), 82 percent of respondents expressed at least some confidence in their ability to discern misinformation. While this reflects a positive perception of media literacy, it also suggests that there may be gaps in actual skills, as many studies indicate that individuals often fall victim to misinformation in practice, despite believing they can identify fake news (Friggeri et al., 2014). This explains the requirement for enhanced media literacy programs that go beyond confidence and aim to improve actual detection skills, particularly in the context of the vast amount of misinformation circulating online.

In **Table 4**, the results show that while a large proportion of respondents perceive fact-checking tools as helpful (58.2% rated them "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful"), actual usage is far less frequent. More than 45% of respondents report never using fact-checking tools, and 40.9% use them rarely. This discrepancy between the perceived effectiveness of fact-checking tools and their actual use is significant. Although respondents acknowledge the value of fact-checking resources, they are not frequently incorporated into daily practices. This finding aligns with previous research that highlights a gap between knowledge and behavior regarding the use of fact-checking tools (Friggeri et al., 2014). The absence of time, awareness, or trust in the effectiveness of tools may contribute significantly to the low level of media literacy. As suggested by Lewandowsky et al. (2012), regular use of fact-checking removes a practical barrier and increases trust in their reliability (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The findings highlight the importance of digital media literacy in a young, educated population. While respondents demonstrate confidence in identifying fake news and recognize the utility of fact-checking tools, a gap remains between perceived effectiveness and actual usage. The extensive use of social media for seeking information on current issues and events

underscores the shifting dynamics of youth media engagement in the region; however, relatively low engagement with fact-checking suggests that further investigation is needed to promote this vital element of media literacy. Bridging this gap could involve educational interventions to enhance awareness of fact-checking tools and the practical application of media literacy skills in everyday digital interactions.

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