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Framing Reform and Building Legitimacy: Media Narratives and Public Trust in Police Transformation in Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how media framing and institutional positioning collectively contribute to the construction of reform legitimacy in the context of police reforms in Punjab, Pakistan. Moving beyond conventional assessments of media influence as passive information transmission, the research conceptualizes media as an active legitimacy-building actor whose narratives shape public trust through framing, credibility construction, and perceived transparency. Grounded in Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995), and the democratic watchdog function of media, the study investigates how citizens interpret police reform initiatives in relation to media narratives and institutional roles. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 488 adult residents of Punjab through a structured questionnaire. Composite scales for Media Framing, Media Credibility, Police Trust, Perceived Transparency (Direct Experience), Watchdog Positioning (Vicarious Experience), and Reform Support were developed with strong internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from 0.773 to 0.926). Multiple regression analyses revealed that Media Credibility ($B = 0.350$, $p < .001$), Perceived Transparency ($B = 0.292$, $p < .001$), and Watchdog Positioning ($B = 0.233$, $p < .001$) are significant positive predictors of Police Trust, together explaining 39.97% of variance ($R^2 = 0.400$, $F(4, 482) = 80.22$, $p < .001$). Reform Support was significantly predicted by Media Framing ($B = 0.301$, $p < .001$), Media Credibility ($B = 0.236$, $p < .001$), and Watchdog Positioning ($B = 0.180$, $p < .001$), accounting for 24.32% of variance. Significant gender differences in police trust were also observed ($t(482) = -2.655$, $p = .008$). These findings indicate that reform support is not solely driven by media exposure but by how reforms are framed and

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whether media is perceived as independent, credible, and transparency-promoting. The study offers practical implications for policymakers and media practitioners seeking to enhance reform credibility in developing democratic contexts, and advances governance communication scholarship by repositioning media from a passive conduit to an active legitimacy broker.

Keywords: Media Framing, Reform Legitimacy, Police Reforms, Public Trust, Watchdog Role, Punjab Pakistan, Governance Communication

Introduction

The implementation of effective and sustainable police reforms remains a central governance challenge in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab, the country's most populous province. Persistent concerns regarding institutional corruption, inadequate accountability frameworks, systemic political interference, and operational inefficiencies have historically undermined public confidence in law enforcement agencies (Abbasi, 2016). Contemporary scholarship continues to demonstrate that these structural impediments are compounded by a chronic deficit of administrative autonomy, which forestalls meaningful institutionalization of accountability within the Punjab Police (Zakir et al., 2023). While successive reform initiatives have sought to modernize policing structures, enhance service delivery, and reorient organizational culture toward democratic accountability, their sustainability depends fundamentally not only on institutional restructuring but on the acquisition and maintenance of public legitimacy. Recent empirical evidence underscores that trust in the Punjab Police is primarily driven by procedural evaluations, citizens' assessments of fairness in investigation, respect for human dignity, and equitable treatment, rather than by mere functional efficacy in crime suppression (Hassan, 2025). In this context, the media emerges as a critical institutional actor in determining how reform efforts are perceived, evaluated, and ultimately supported or resisted by the citizenry.

Media organizations function as powerful societal institutions that shape public discourse, define issue salience, and construct the interpretive frames through which governance processes are understood (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). Rather than passively relaying information, media actively frame policy

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initiatives in ways that accentuate particular dimensions while eclipsing others, thereby structuring citizens' cognitive evaluation of institutional performance. Framing theory posits that these editorial choices carry profound consequences for public opinion formation, particularly in relation to complex governance issues such as police reform where citizen understanding of institutional processes is mediated almost entirely by media representations (Scheufele, 1999; Chong & Druckman, 2007). In the evolving digital media landscape of contemporary Pakistan, the exponential growth of social media platforms has introduced additional complexity: while digital channels create new opportunities for institutional transparency and participatory oversight, they simultaneously facilitate the rapid propagation of misinformation, emotionally charged narratives, and politically motivated content that can profoundly polarize public perceptions of police conduct (Imran & Kazmi, 2025). Recent evidence further highlights that media exposure functions as a critical moderator of reform legitimacy, with the valence and framing of coverage either amplifying or diminishing public confidence contingent upon the perceived effectiveness of police communication strategies (Cheema et al., 2026).

Beyond their role as framers of public discourse, the institutional positioning of media organizations, whether they are perceived as independent watchdogs or as cooperative partners of governmental authorities, exerts a distinct and consequential influence on public evaluations of reform processes. Democratic theory ascribes to media a monitoring function that is essential to institutional accountability: investigative journalism and critical scrutiny expose misconduct, challenge official narratives, and create incentives for institutional compliance with democratic norms (Brunetti & Weder, 2003). In the Pakistani context, where media–state relations have historically been characterized by both confrontation and co-optation, the perceived independence of media institutions significantly conditions public assessments of reform credibility (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2019). When media are perceived as constrained by political pressures or as amplifiers of official narratives, public confidence in both the media and the reform processes they report on tends to deteriorate. Moreover, media representations of law enforcement during crises and periods of institutional contestation can become

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arenas for competing legitimacy claims between the state and an increasingly vocal and digitally connected public (Asad & Zia, 2025).

Despite a growing body of scholarship examining media's influence on governance processes and public opinion in Pakistan, relatively limited empirical attention has been directed toward the specific mechanisms through which media framing and institutional positioning collectively construct or undermine reform legitimacy within the policing sector. This gap is particularly consequential given the persistent challenges confronting police reform in Punjab and the centrality of public legitimacy to the sustainability of any institutional transformation. Understanding how citizens perceive and respond to media narratives about police reforms is, therefore, an urgent scholarly and practical imperative.

The present study addresses this gap by empirically investigating how citizens' perceptions of media framing, media credibility, institutional transparency, and the watchdog positioning of media influence their trust in police reform initiatives and, ultimately, their support for ongoing reform processes. Integrating Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), the watchdog conceptualization of media democracy and Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995), the study conceptualizes media as an active legitimacy broker that shapes reform credibility through narratives of transparency, accountability, and institutional independence. By deploying rigorous quantitative analysis of survey data collected from 488 Punjab residents, the study generates empirically grounded insights into the dynamics linking media perceptions to police trust and reform support.

This study makes several notable contributions to the governance communication and criminological literature. First, it advances theoretical understanding by integrating Framing Theory and Legitimacy Theory into a unified model of media-mediated reform legitimacy. Second, it provides some of the first empirical evidence linking media credibility and watchdog positioning to police trust within the South Asian context. Third, it generates actionable insights for policymakers and media practitioners engaged in reform communication in developing democratic settings. Fourth, it challenges the conventional treatment of media as a passive transmission channel by demonstrating that media's institutional

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characteristics, credibility, independence, and transparency orientation, are stronger predictors of reform support than media framing content alone.

Literature Review

Media Framing and Institutional Legitimacy

The concept of framing occupies a central place in contemporary communication scholarship, tracing its theoretical lineage from Goffman's (1974) foundational work on the social organization of experience to Entman's (1993) influential operationalization within media studies. Entman's seminal formulation posits that framing involves the selection of certain aspects of perceived reality and their rendering salient in communicative texts in a manner that promotes particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. This process is consequential not merely as a descriptive feature of journalistic practice but as a mechanism through which the social construction of institutional reality is accomplished. Citizens who lack direct experiential access to complex policy processes, such as police reform initiatives, are particularly dependent on media frames to form coherent evaluations of institutional performance and credibility (Iyengar, 1991; Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

The relationship between media framing and institutional legitimacy has attracted sustained scholarly attention across multiple governance domains. Framing theory's application to policing contexts has demonstrated that the interpretive frames media employ to depict law enforcement, whether emphasizing institutional competence, procedural fairness, systemic corruption, or political interference, substantially shape citizens' legitimacy assessments. The concept of media priming further extends this insight: exposure to particular frames does not merely inform public judgment but activates specific cognitive schemas that influence the standards by which institutional performance is subsequently evaluated (Scheufele, 1999). In developing democracies where institutional trust is characteristically fragile, these framing effects are amplified by the paucity of alternative information channels and the relative salience of media as a primary epistemic authority on governance matters (Norris, 2000).

Within the Pakistani context, media coverage of governance reforms has historically

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exhibited what characterizes as episodic fragmentation, a pattern in which institutional reform processes receive intense but transient attention, typically triggered by crisis events, without sustaining the thematic depth necessary to cultivate informed public engagement. This episodic orientation has significant implications for legitimacy construction: episodic frames that focus on dramatic incidents of police misconduct or corruption may generate short-term salience but simultaneously undermine the broader legitimacy narrative that reform initiatives seek to project. Conversely, thematic framing that situates reforms within a coherent narrative of institutional progress and accountability may more effectively cultivate the sustained public trust that reform sustainability requires (Iyengar, 1991; Abbasi, 2016).

Media Credibility and Public Trust in Governance

Media credibility, encompassing the dimensions of perceived accuracy, fairness, objectivity, and trustworthiness of information sources, constitutes one of the most thoroughly investigated constructs in communication research (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Gunther & Storey, 2003). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that source credibility functions as a critical mediating variable between information exposure and attitude formation: citizens who perceive media organizations as credible are substantially more likely to integrate media-conveyed evaluations into their own assessments of institutional performance (Aarts & Semetko, 2003). In the governance domain, media credibility has been shown to predict political trust and civic engagement, with credible media organizations functioning as epistemic intermediaries that amplify or attenuate the legitimacy signals emitted by public institutions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Kohring and Matthes (2007) propose a multidimensional conceptualization of media credibility that encompasses selectivity, accuracy, journalistic assessment, and perceptions of factual reporting. Their empirical analysis demonstrates that these dimensions systematically predict media-related trust formation, with perceived accuracy and fairness emerging as particularly salient predictors. This work has important implications for understanding how citizens in contexts of institutional distrust, such as Punjab, Pakistan, navigate the dual challenge of evaluating both

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media credibility and police reform credibility in circumstances where each may cast doubt on the other. When media credibility is perceived as low, the capacity of media narratives to transmit reform legitimacy signals to citizens is fundamentally compromised.

The relationship between media credibility and police-specific trust has been examined most directly by Mourtgos and Adams (2019), whose analysis demonstrates that public perceptions of police legitimacy are closely associated with the transparency and procedural fairness communicated through media narratives. Critically, their findings suggest that it is not merely the valence of media coverage, positive or negative, but the perceived credibility of the source that determines whether reform messages reach their intended audiences with legitimacy-enhancing effects. This insight is particularly salient in the Pakistani context, where media institutions themselves have been subjects of public skepticism regarding political independence and editorial integrity (HRCP, 2019).

The Watchdog Role of Media and Accountability Perceptions

Democratic theory has long assigned media a constitutive role in the functioning of accountable governance through its watchdog function, the systematic monitoring of state institutions, exposure of abuses of power, and amplification of citizen grievances. This conceptualization positions media not merely as an information intermediary but as an institutional actor whose adversarial relationship with power is itself constitutive of democratic accountability. In the policing domain, the watchdog function assumes particular significance because law enforcement agencies possess substantial coercive authority whose exercise is difficult for citizens to observe directly, creating structural conditions of information asymmetry that media oversight is designed to redress (Brunetti & Weder, 2003; Sherman, 2002).

Empirical research demonstrates that perceived media independence and investigative commitment correlate positively with institutional accountability perceptions. When citizens perceive media as exercising vigilant, independent scrutiny of police conduct, they tend to assess institutional accountability mechanisms as more robust, which in turn strengthens the legitimacy of reform narratives by signaling that reform claims are subject to credible external

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verification (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Conversely, when media are perceived as co-opted by or aligned with governmental authorities, the accountability signals they transmit are systematically discounted, weakening their capacity to contribute to reform legitimacy (HRCP, 2019). This alignment concern is particularly acute in Pakistan's media environment, where regulatory pressures, economic dependencies on state advertising, and documented incidents of journalist harassment create structural incentives for self-censorship and official accommodation.

Research by Asad and Zia (2025) provides compelling evidence from a global comparative perspective that media portrayals of policing, across news, entertainment, and social media channels, decisively shape legitimacy evaluations, with family and community contexts moderating the relationship between media exposure and trust formation. Their finding that legitimacy is socially constructed through the interaction of media narratives and communal interpretive frameworks has important methodological implications, suggesting that individual-level survey measures of perceived media positioning must be understood within their broader sociocultural context. In the Punjab context, where extended kinship networks and communal experiences of police interaction are particularly influential in shaping institutional perceptions, vicarious knowledge of others' police encounters represents a significant conduit through which mediated legitimacy evaluations are formed and validated.

Police Legitimacy, Procedural Justice, and Reform Support

The concept of police legitimacy, citizens' judgments that law enforcement institutions have the right to exercise authority and that their directives ought to be followed, has emerged as a central theoretical construct in contemporary criminological and governance scholarship (Tyler, 2006; Jackson et al., 2012). Tyler's foundational procedural justice model posits that legitimacy is primarily determined not by instrumental assessments of police effectiveness in preventing crime but by evaluations of the fairness, dignity, and transparency of police encounters. Citizens who experience or vicariously observe procedurally fair policing, characterized by respectful treatment, even-handed application of rules, and meaningful voice, develop stronger legitimacy assessments that are less vulnerable

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to deterioration in the face of episodic failures of police performance (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Hough et al., 2010).

This procedural foundation of legitimacy has direct implications for understanding public support for police reform initiatives. Reform legitimacy, citizens' evaluations that a reform process is appropriate, credible, and deserving of support, is not mechanically derived from administrative change alone but requires active communicative construction through which reform narratives are rendered credible and consistent with citizens' normative expectations of institutional behavior (Suchman, 1995). When reforms are framed as enhancing procedural fairness, accountability, and transparency, and when this framing is transmitted through credible, independent media channels, the conditions for reform legitimacy formation are substantially strengthened. Conversely, when reforms are associated with political manipulation, inadequate transparency, or are reported through media perceived as partisan, legitimacy formation is disrupted even in the presence of genuine institutional progress (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

In the South Asian context, Vora et al. (2024) provide cross-national evidence that police accountability and public trust are mediated by the visibility of accountability mechanisms and the depth of community engagement, with transparent communication of reform outcomes playing a critical role in legitimacy consolidation. These findings highlight the need for contextually sensitive analysis that accounts for sociodemographic and regional variation in the media–trust relationship, a dimension that the present study systematically addresses through its geographically representative sampling design.

The transformation of policing accountability in the digital era adds a further layer of complexity to the legitimacy construction process. Sandiya et al. (2025) introduces the concept of Digital Democratic Policing, arguing that social media platforms have fundamentally reconfigured accountability relations under the logic of 'No Viral, No Justice', a dynamic in which police conduct is subject to real-time public scrutiny through digital channels that bypass traditional media gatekeeping. While digital platforms enhance participatory oversight, they also introduce risks of trial-by-media dynamics, selective attention effects, and the viral amplification of

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unrepresentative incidents. The implications for reform legitimacy are profound: in a digital media environment, institutional communication strategies that fail to engage authentically with social media discourse risk ceding the reform narrative to oppositional frames (Imran & Kazmi, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory and Reform Interpretation

The theoretical architecture of this study integrates three complementary frameworks, Framing Theory, the Watchdog Function of Media, and Legitimacy Theory, that together constitute a coherent account of how media narratives contribute to the social construction of reform legitimacy. This integration builds upon and extends prior work by demonstrating that the pathway from media exposure to reform support is not direct but is mediated by trust, and is moderated by the credibility and institutional positioning of the media itself.

Entman's (1993) Framing Theory provides the foundational mechanism through which media influence over reform perceptions operates. Frames function as interpretive schemata that organize the way citizens process and evaluate information about complex institutional processes. In the policing context, frames that emphasize transparency, accountability, institutional modernization, and human rights compliance create conditions favorable to trust formation, while frames that foreground corruption, political interference, or institutional intransigence activate skeptical evaluative stances. The theory's power lies in its capacity to explain not merely what citizens know about police reform but how they feel about it and what they are motivated to do in response (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999).

Critically, the present study advances beyond a simple effects model of framing by recognizing that framing influence is contingent upon source credibility. Price and Tewksbury (1997) demonstrate that the accessibility and applicability of frames are conditioned by the perceived reliability of the sources through which they are transmitted. A reform-positive frame delivered through a source perceived as credible and independent will have substantially different legitimacy effects than the same frame transmitted through a source perceived as partisan or co-opted. This insight generates the study's central theoretical proposition that media credibility

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and watchdog positioning are not merely contextual factors but integral components of the legitimacy construction process.

Watchdog Function and Accountability Legitimacy

The democratic watchdog conceptualization of media, most comprehensively articulated analysis of investigative journalism in democratic societies, provides the second theoretical pillar of the study. This perspective situates media not as a neutral conduit but as an institutional actor with constitutive democratic functions, monitoring state power, exposing abuses, amplifying citizen voice, and creating accountability incentives for public institutions. In contexts of democratic transition and reform, the watchdog function is particularly consequential: it is through media scrutiny that reform commitments are tested against institutional reality, and through positive watchdog assessments that reform narratives acquire the credibility necessary for public legitimacy formation.

The distinction between perceived media independence and institutional alignment constitutes the operational core of the watchdog construct in the present study. When citizens perceive media as exercising independent, critical scrutiny, manifested in investigative reporting of police misconduct, critical evaluation of reform implementation, and amplification of citizen feedback, they infer that institutional accountability mechanisms are functioning as designed, which strengthens reform legitimacy. When media are perceived as aligned with or constrained by governmental authorities, this inferential pathway is disrupted: positive reform reporting is interpreted not as evidence of genuine progress but as orchestrated legitimacy management, thereby reducing rather than enhancing reform support (Brunetti & Weder, 2003).

Legitimacy Theory and Reform Sustainability

Suchman's (1995) comprehensive treatment of Legitimacy Theory provides the normative framework within which the study's key dependent variables, police trust and reform support, are theorized. Suchman distinguishes three forms of organizational legitimacy, pragmatic, cognitive, and moral, that operate through distinct mechanisms and require distinct communicative strategies to maintain and repair. In the context of police reform in Punjab, pragmatic legitimacy (derived from

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perceived institutional responsiveness to citizen needs), cognitive legitimacy (derived from the taken-for-grantedness of institutional structures), and moral legitimacy (derived from evaluations of institutional alignment with societal values of justice, fairness, and accountability) all contribute to the overall legitimacy environment within which reform initiatives must operate.

Critically for the present study, Suchman argues that legitimacy is fundamentally a perception, a generalized evaluative judgment constructed through the interaction of institutional behavior and societal normative frameworks. This perceptual character of legitimacy places media at the center of the legitimacy construction process: because citizens cannot directly observe the internal workings of police institutions, they are dependent on media representations to form legitimacy judgments. Media credibility, framing orientations, and watchdog positioning therefore function not merely as antecedents of public opinion but as constitutive elements of the legitimacy environment itself (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008).

Integrated Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Drawing upon this tripartite theoretical integration, the study proposes a legitimacy-construction model in which media-related factors influence public support for police reforms through two distinct pathways: a direct pathway from media framing and credibility to reform support, and an indirect pathway mediated by institutional trust. The integrated model posits that: (1) media framing shapes citizens' interpretive orientations toward police reforms; (2) perceived media credibility amplifies or attenuates the trust-generating capacity of reform-related frames; (3) perceived watchdog positioning strengthens accountability inferences that contribute to institutional trust; (4) direct and vicarious experiences of police transparency inform trust formation alongside media perceptions; and (5) police trust mediates the relationship between media perceptions and reform support.

This framework yields the following research questions and hypotheses:

H1: Media framing positively influences perceptions of transparency and accountability in police reforms.

H2: Perceived media independence (watchdog positioning) positively predicts public

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trust in police reforms, while perceived media-government alignment negatively predicts trust.

H3: Media credibility and perceived transparency jointly and positively predict public trust in police reforms.

H4: Public trust in police reforms positively predicts support for reform initiatives.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to empirically examine the relationships among media framing, media credibility, institutional positioning, transparency, police trust, and reform support. The quantitative approach was selected as appropriate for the systematic testing of theoretically derived hypotheses and the generation of generalizable findings across a large and sociodemographically diverse population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Cross-sectional design was adopted in recognition of the pragmatic constraints of doctoral research while acknowledging that longitudinal designs would offer stronger causal inference for the relationships under investigation (Bryman, 2016).

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of adult citizens (18 years and above) residing in Punjab province, which, as Pakistan's most populous province with a population exceeding 110 million, encompasses the greatest sociodemographic and regional diversity of any Pakistani province. To ensure geographical and socio-political representativeness, data were collected from respondents affiliated with universities and communities across three major regions of Punjab: South Punjab, Central Punjab, and Upper Punjab. These regions are characterized by distinct socio-political configurations, differential levels of urbanization, and varying histories of police–community relations, making their inclusion essential to the ecological validity of the study's findings.

A stratified purposive sampling approach was employed, with strata defined by regional location, educational institution, and qualification level. The final analytical sample comprised N = 488 respondents, with 487 providing complete data on the key analytical variables. Sample size adequacy was assessed against the

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requirements of multivariate regression analysis: with five predictors in the most complex model, the observed sample substantially exceeds the minimum requirement of 50 + 8 × (number of predictors) = 90 cases recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), as well as the power analysis standards proposed by Hair et al. (2019) for detecting medium effect sizes at $\alpha = .05$ with power = .80.

Instrument Development

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising six thematic sections corresponding to the study's key constructs: (1) media framing of crime and police reform, operationalized through six items assessing the frequency, emotional impact, informational utility, trust effects, opinion influence, and reality-reflection of crime news consumption; (2) direct experience quality with police officers, measured through seven items assessing perceived respectfulness, empathy, helpfulness, fairness, impartiality, professionalism, and courtesy during personal encounters; (3) vicarious experience quality (watchdog positioning), assessed through seven parallel items measuring perceived quality of family and friends' police interactions, which serves as a proxy for communal assessment of institutional positioning; (4) crime ideology and reform orientation, measured through ten items assessing punitive versus rehabilitative orientations and reform support dispositions; (5) media credibility, measured through seven items assessing the perceived inclusion of essential information, focus on important facts, diversity of viewpoints, verifiability, truthfulness, adequacy of criticism, and factual accuracy; and (6) police trust and confidence, measured through seven items assessing perceptions of police helpfulness, personal safety feelings, willingness to seek police assistance, community problem-solving, crime deterrence, response time, and crime resolution.

All items were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (Strongly Disagree/Never) and 5 (Strongly Agree/Always). The questionnaire was administered in both English and Urdu to accommodate respondents' linguistic preferences, with the Urdu version produced through standard forward-backward translation procedures to ensure semantic equivalence.

Measurement Validity and Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was assessed for each composite scale using

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Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with the widely accepted threshold of $\alpha \geq .70$ as the criterion for acceptable reliability in social science research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2019). All six scales comfortably exceeded this threshold, with values ranging from $\alpha = .773$ for the Media Framing scale to $\alpha = .926$ for the Vicarious Experience (Watchdog Positioning) scale (see Table 1). These reliability estimates indicate satisfactory to excellent internal consistency across all constructs and provide confidence in the compositional validity of the scales.

Content validity was established through a systematic process of item generation grounded in existing validated instruments and theoretical frameworks, followed by expert review by academics with specialization in media studies, criminology, and governance communication. Construct validity was assessed through examination of the intercorrelation patterns among scales, with theoretically expected positive correlations between related constructs and the absence of extreme multicollinearity confirming discriminant validity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through a structured analytical sequence. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values) were computed for all composite scales and individual items. Second, bivariate Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength, direction, and statistical significance of relationships among the six composite variables, with significance thresholds set at $\alpha = .05$, .01, and .001. Third, multiple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. Three regression models were estimated: Model 1 examined the predictors of Police Trust (H1, H2, H3) with Media Framing, Media Credibility, Perceived Transparency, and Watchdog Positioning as independent variables; Model 2 examined predictors of Reform Support (H4) with Police Trust, Media Framing, Media Credibility, and Watchdog Positioning as predictors; and Model 3 estimated a full model incorporating all predictors of Reform Support. Regression diagnostics were conducted to verify the assumptions of OLS regression, including assessment of multicollinearity (via inspection of bivariate correlations), homoscedasticity, and normality of residuals. Fourth, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to

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examine demographic differences in police trust across gender and community type. All analyses were conducted in Python 3 using NumPy and SciPy statistical libraries.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards governing social science research with human participants were rigorously observed throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, with respondents informed clearly of the academic purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Respondent anonymity was maintained through the use of coded questionnaires and the non-collection of personally identifying information. The data were utilized exclusively for the academic purposes stated in the study protocol and stored securely throughout the research process in accordance with institutional data governance guidelines.

Results

Participant Characteristics

The analytical sample comprised 488 respondents, with 487 providing complete data on the focal variables. The gender distribution was 302 males (61.9%), 183 females (37.5%), and 3 respondents (0.6%) indicating both. The mean age was 25.89 years (SD = 7.71), with a range of 17 to 63 years, indicating a predominantly young adult sample with median age of 23 years. In terms of educational qualifications, 300 respondents (61.5%) held undergraduate degrees, 113 (23.2%) held MPhil or Master's degrees, and 61 (12.5%) were PhD candidates or holders, with 7 (1.4%) indicating other qualifications. The predominance of higher-educated respondents is consistent with the university-based sampling frame and renders the sample particularly relevant to the study's focus on media consumption patterns and reform perceptions among educated citizens, a population with high media engagement and significant potential influence on public discourse. Community background was predominantly urban (365 respondents, 74.8%), with 107 (21.9%) from rural communities. In terms of political orientation, PTI supporters constituted the largest group (294, 60.2%), followed by PML-N supporters (66, 13.5%), PPP supporters (19, 3.9%), and various neutral or unaffiliated respondents.

Regarding news channel preferences, ARY News was the most frequently cited

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primary source of crime news (179 respondents, 36.7%), followed by Geo News (84, 17.2%), Dunya News (24, 4.9%), and Express News (20, 4.1%). Multiple channel consumption was common, with substantial proportions indicating simultaneous reliance on Geo News and ARY News (16 respondents, 3.3%). These channel preference patterns are consistent with established audience research documenting ARY News and Geo News as the dominant television news channels in Punjab.

Descriptive Statistics and Scale Reliability

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for all six composite scales. The overall pattern indicates moderate mean scores across all constructs, with means ranging from 2.576 for Watchdog Positioning (Vicarious Experience) to 3.380 for Reform Support. The Media Framing scale (M = 3.042, SD = 0.862) reflects moderate engagement with crime news and its perceived effects on trust and decision-making. The Media Credibility scale (M = 2.978, SD = 0.850) indicates cautiously skeptical perceptions of news media accuracy and fairness, consistent with the contested media credibility environment of contemporary Pakistan. Police Trust (M = 2.796, SD = 0.980) was below the scale midpoint of 3.00, indicating generally low confidence in the Punjab Police among the sampled population. Perceived Transparency through direct experience (M = 2.603, SD = 0.986) and Watchdog Positioning through vicarious experience (M = 2.576, SD = 0.950) both registered below the midpoint, indicating widespread perceptions of procedurally unfair police conduct and insufficient institutional accountability. Reform Support (M = 3.380, SD = 0.896) was above the midpoint, suggesting that despite low institutional trust, the sampled population retains moderate endorsement of reform objectives, a pattern consistent with a citizenry that is critical of current institutional performance while supportive of transformative change.

Table 1: ***Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Estimates for Composite Scales***

Scale	M	SD	Min	Max	N	k	α
Media Framing	3.042	0.862	1.00	5.00	487	6	.773

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(MF)							
Media Credibility (MC)	2.978	0.850	1.00	5.00	487	7	.871
Police Trust (PT)	2.796	0.980	1.00	5.00	487	7	.904
Perceived Transparency / Direct Exp. (DE)	2.603	0.986	1.00	5.00	487	7	.918
Watchdog Positioning / Vicarious Exp. (VE)	2.576	0.950	1.00	5.00	487	7	.926
Reform Support (RS)	3.380	0.896	1.00	5.00	487	10	.899

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; k = number of items; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Bivariate Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation matrix for the six composite scales. A notable pattern of theoretically consistent relationships is evident. Media Credibility demonstrated significant positive correlations with Police Trust ($r = .441$, $p < .001$), Perceived Transparency ($r = .294$, $p < .001$), Watchdog Positioning ($r = .299$, $p < .001$), and Reform Support ($r = .357$, $p < .001$), affirming its central role in the legitimacy construction process. Police Trust was significantly positively correlated with Perceived Transparency ($r = .526$, $p < .001$), Watchdog Positioning ($r = .502$, $p < .001$), and Reform Support ($r = .227$, $p < .001$). The strong correlation between Perceived Transparency and Watchdog Positioning ($r = .649$, $p < .001$) indicates that direct personal transparency evaluations and communal accountability

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assessments are closely related, as would be expected theoretically. Media Framing was significantly correlated with Reform Support ($r = .354$, $p < .001$) and Media Credibility ($r = .226$, $p < .001$), but not with Police Trust ($r = .025$, ns), Perceived Transparency ($r = .043$, ns), or Watchdog Positioning ($r = .069$, ns). This pattern suggests that media framing content affects reform support through a direct path rather than through trust mediation, a finding with important theoretical implications discussed in the Discussion section.

Table 2; ***Pearson Correlation Matrix for Composite Scales (N = 487)***

Variable	1. MF	2. MC	3. PT	4. DE	5. VE	6. RS
1. Media Framing	,	.226***	.025	.043	.069	.354***
2. Media Credibility	.226***	,	.441***	.294***	.299***	.357***
3. Police Trust	.025	.441*	,	.526***	.502***	.227***
4. Perceived Transparency	.043	.294***	.526***	,	.649***	.245***
5. Watchdog Positioning	.069	.299***	.502***	.649***	,	.290***
6. Reform Support	.354***	.357***	.227***	.245***	.290***	,

Note. MF = Media Framing; MC = Media Credibility; PT = Police Trust; DE = Perceived Transparency (Direct Experience); VE = Watchdog Positioning (Vicarious Experience); RS = Reform Support. *** $p < .001$.

Regression Analysis: Model 1 , Predictors of Police Trust (H2, H3)

A multiple regression analysis was conducted with Police Trust as the dependent variable and Media Framing, Media Credibility, Perceived Transparency, and Watchdog Positioning as independent variables. The overall model was statistically significant and explained a substantial proportion of variance in Police Trust, R^2

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= .400, Adjusted R^2 = .395, F(4, 482) = 80.22, p < .001. Examination of the individual predictors revealed several important findings: Media Credibility was the strongest positive predictor of Police Trust (B = 0.350, SE = 0.044, t = 7.931, p < .001), indicating that for each unit increase in perceived media credibility, police trust increased by 0.350 units when other predictors were held constant. This finding provides strong support for Hypothesis 3, confirming that media credibility is a significant positive predictor of police trust.

Perceived Transparency was the second strongest positive predictor (B = 0.292, SE = 0.047, t = 6.275, p < .001), demonstrating that citizens whose direct experiences with police are characterized by higher perceived procedural fairness, respect, and transparency report significantly greater institutional trust. This finding is consistent with Tyler's (2006) procedural justice model and confirms the perceived transparency component of Hypothesis 3. Watchdog Positioning was a significant positive predictor of Police Trust (B = 0.233, SE = 0.048, t = 4.802, p < .001), supporting Hypothesis 2. Citizens who perceived media as effectively monitoring police conduct and exercising accountability functions reported significantly higher institutional trust, suggesting that watchdog journalism contributes positively to, rather than undermining, police trust when it signals genuine accountability. Media Framing, in contrast, was a significant but negative predictor of Police Trust (B = −0.082, SE = 0.041, t = −1.978, p = .049), indicating that higher scores on the media framing scale, reflecting greater engagement with crime news and its perceived effects on trust and opinions, were associated with marginally lower police trust. This finding is discussed in detail in the Discussion section.

Table 3: ***Multiple Regression: Predictors of Police Trust (N = 487)***

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	0.642	0.173	3.713	< .001	[0.302, 0.982]
Media Framing	−0.082	0.041	−1.978	.049*	[−0.163, −0.001]
Media Credibility	0.350	0.044	7.931	< .001	[0.263, 0.437]

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Perceived Transparency (DE)	0.292	0.047	6.275	< .001 ***	[0.201, 0.384]
Watchdog Positioning (VE)	0.233	0.048	4.802	< .001 ***	[0.138, 0.327]
R^2 = .400, Adjusted R^2 = .395, F(4, 482) = 80.22, p < .001					

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. * p < .05. *** p < .001.

Regression Analysis: Model 2, Predictors of Reform Support (H4)

A second multiple regression model was estimated with Reform Support as the dependent variable and Police Trust, Media Framing, Media Credibility, and Watchdog Positioning as predictors. The model was statistically significant, R^2 = .243, Adjusted R^2 = .237, F(4, 482) = 38.73, p < .001, accounting for 24.32% of variance in Reform Support. Notably, Police Trust was not a statistically significant predictor of Reform Support in this model (B = 0.024, SE = 0.045, t = 0.523, p = .601), a finding that carries important theoretical implications for Hypothesis 4 and the proposed mediation model. Media Framing was the strongest predictor of Reform Support (B = 0.301, SE = 0.043, t = 7.085, p < .001), followed by Media Credibility (B = 0.236, SE = 0.048, t = 4.895, p < .001) and Watchdog Positioning (B = 0.180, SE = 0.044, t = 4.136, p < .001). These results indicate that reform support is most directly and powerfully driven by media-related perceptions, citizens' engagement with crime news and their evaluations of media credibility and independence, rather than by their institutional trust in the police per se. This pattern suggests that media serves as a more proximal antecedent of reform orientation than institutional trust, and that the relationship between trust and reform support may be more complex than the simple direct pathway hypothesized

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in H4.

Table 4: ***Multiple Regression: Predictors of Reform Support (N = 487)***

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	1.233	0.179	6.903	< .001	[0.882, 1.584]
Police Trust	0.024	0.045	0.523	.601	[−0.065, 0.112]
Media Framing	0.301	0.043	7.085	< .001***	[0.217, 0.385]
Media Credibility	0.236	0.048	4.895	< .001***	[0.141, 0.330]
Watchdog Positioning (VE)	0.180	0.044	4.136	< .001***	[0.094, 0.266]
R^2 = .243, Adjusted R^2 = .237, F(4, 482) = 38.73, p < .001					

Note. *** p < .001.

Demographic Differences in Police Trust

Independent-samples t-tests examined gender and community-type differences in Police Trust. Females reported significantly higher Police Trust (M = 2.940, SD = 0.938) than males (M = 2.698, SD = 0.993), t(482) = −2.655, p = .008, Cohen's d = 0.25 (small effect). This finding is noteworthy and represents an unexpected reversal of patterns commonly observed in Western policing contexts, where women typically report higher institutional trust. The community type analysis revealed no significant difference in Police Trust between urban (M = 2.779, SD = 0.993) and rural (M = 2.860, SD = 0.932) respondents, t = −0.752, p = .453, suggesting that the structural deficits of policing in Punjab are perceived with comparable concern across community contexts.

Discussion

Media Credibility as the Primary Driver of Police Trust

The most striking finding of Model 1 is the dominant predictive role of Media Credibility in determining Police Trust (B = 0.350, p < .001), which emerged as the strongest predictor among all four variables examined. This finding converges with

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and extends Kohring and Matthes' (2007) multidimensional conceptualization of media trust, demonstrating that in the Pakistani context, citizens' evaluations of news credibility, encompassing perceived accuracy, fairness, diversity of viewpoints, and factual integrity, constitute a primary mediating mechanism through which information about police conduct shapes institutional trust assessments. When citizens perceive news media as producing accurate, balanced, and independently verified reporting, they are more likely to extend cognitive trust to the institutions being reported upon, including the police.

The magnitude of this effect is particularly noteworthy given the well-documented credibility challenges confronting Pakistani media institutions. Structural factors including ownership concentration, regulatory pressures, commercial dependencies on state advertising, and documented harassment of investigative journalists create chronic threats to editorial independence (HRCP, 2019). The significant positive relationship between perceived credibility and police trust in this context suggests that despite systemic credibility challenges, citizens do make meaningful differentiated assessments of media quality, and that these assessments have consequential downstream effects on institutional trust formation. This finding carries important implications for both media practice and reform communication strategy: investments in journalistic quality, editorial independence, and transparent reporting practices are not merely normatively desirable but empirically demonstrated contributors to the public trust environment within which reform initiatives must operate.

This finding also extends the work of Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017), who demonstrated that media credibility significantly predicts political trust and civic engagement across Western democratic contexts. The present study demonstrates that this relationship generalizes to police-specific institutional trust in a developing democratic setting, with the additional nuance that the relationship operates within a context of historically compromised institutional credibility on both sides of the equation. The implication is that the media-trust-reform relationship is not culturally specific but reflects a more general mechanism of communicative legitimacy construction that operates across diverse governance contexts, albeit

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with variation in magnitude and pathway structure.

Perceived Transparency and Procedural Justice

The strong positive effect of Perceived Transparency on Police Trust (B = 0.292, p < .001) provides robust empirical support for the centrality of procedural justice mechanisms in legitimacy formation. This finding is directly consistent with Tyler's (2006) foundational work demonstrating that citizens' trust in law enforcement is primarily determined by procedural evaluations, assessments of whether police officers treat people with respect, fairness, and dignity, rather than by instrumental assessments of crime control effectiveness. The present study extends this insight by demonstrating its applicability in the Punjab, Pakistan context, adding to the cross-national evidence base for procedural justice theory's universality (Hough et al., 2010; Jackson et al., 2012).

The operationalization of Perceived Transparency through direct experience items, measuring perceived police respectfulness, empathy, helpfulness, fairness, impartiality, professionalism, and courtesy, captures the micro-interactional dimensions of procedural justice that are theoretically foundational to legitimacy formation. The below-midpoint mean score for this construct (M = 2.603) indicates that the sampled population's direct experiences with Punjab Police are predominantly characterized by perceived procedural injustice, corroborating prior qualitative and advocacy-based accounts of police–citizen relations in Punjab (Zakir et al., 2023; HRCP, 2019). Yet despite this prevailing negative baseline, meaningful variance in perceived transparency scores continues to exert significant positive effects on trust, suggesting that even marginal improvements in procedural quality can generate measurable trust dividends.

This finding has direct and actionable implications for police reform strategy. The strong association between procedural experience quality and institutional trust suggests that reform initiatives focused on improving day-to-day police–citizen interactions, through officer training in communication skills, respectful engagement protocols, and procedural fairness principles, are likely to generate greater public trust returns than structural or administrative reforms that lack visible procedural manifestations. Vora et al. (2024) reach a parallel conclusion in their analysis of

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police accountability mechanisms across South Asian contexts, emphasizing that transparency as a communicative practice, not merely an administrative principle, is the operative mechanism through which institutional credibility is built.

The Watchdog Role: Accountability Perceptions and Reform Legitimacy

The significant positive effect of Watchdog Positioning on Police Trust ($B = 0.233$, $p < .001$) challenges a common assumption in media studies and policing research that critical media coverage of law enforcement necessarily undermines institutional trust. The present findings suggest that when media are perceived as exercising genuine accountability functions, monitoring police conduct, amplifying citizen concerns, and exposing institutional failures, rather than merely generating sensationalist negative coverage, the effect on institutional trust is positive rather than negative. This counterintuitive finding is consistent with the accountability legitimacy mechanism proposed by Brunetti and Weder (2003): media watchdog activity signals to citizens that accountability infrastructure is functioning, which strengthens rather than weakens confidence in the system's capacity for self-correction.

The theoretical implication is that the relationship between critical media coverage and institutional trust is moderated by the perceived purpose and integrity of the criticism. When critical reporting is perceived as serving accountability functions, exposing genuine misconduct, advocating for reform, amplifying citizen voice, it enhances legitimacy. When critical reporting is perceived as serving partisan, commercial, or self-interested purposes, it degrades both media credibility and institutional trust simultaneously. This distinction has important empirical implications for understanding the heterogeneous effects of critical journalism across different media environments and institutional contexts.

The finding also resonates with Asad and Zia (2025) global review demonstrating that media portrayals of police legitimacy are shaped by complex interactions between media content, audience characteristics, and socialization contexts. In the Punjab context, where vicarious knowledge of others' police encounters (the operational core of the Watchdog Positioning construct) is particularly influential given the centrality of kinship networks in information

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transmission, communal accountability assessments may function as more powerful legitimacy signals than individual direct experience. The very high reliability of the Vicarious Experience scale (α = .926) and its strong correlation with direct experience (r = .649) indicate that these two forms of knowledge are closely related, consistent with the social learning mechanisms emphasized in the procedural justice literature (Tyler, 2006).

Media Framing as a Direct Driver of Reform Support

The regression results present a theoretically complex picture of how Media Framing relates to the study's key outcomes. While Media Framing did not significantly predict Police Trust, and indeed showed a marginally negative relationship when other predictors were controlled (B = −0.082, p = .049), it emerged as the strongest predictor of Reform Support (B = 0.301, p < .001). This pattern suggests that the relationship between media framing and reform support does not operate through the trust mediation pathway proposed in the integrated theoretical framework but rather through a more direct cognitive pathway linking media engagement and reform orientation.

This finding can be interpreted through Iyengar's (1991) distinction between episodic and thematic framing: while episodic crime news framing may activate attributions of individual police misconduct that marginally depress institutional trust, the aggregate effect of sustained media engagement with crime and reform themes, captured in the Media Framing scale's items measuring the informational utility, trust effects, and opinion influence of crime news, appears to cultivate a reform-oriented cognitive disposition. Citizens who engage actively with crime news and perceive it as informative and opinion-shaping are more likely to endorse reform proposals, consistent with Scheufele's (1999) argument that framing effects on attitudes and policy preferences can operate through mechanisms other than trust formation.

The slight negative direct effect of Media Framing on Police Trust, while marginal in magnitude, is consistent with prior research demonstrating that high media exposure to crime news is associated with heightened fear of crime and diminished confidence in institutional crime control (Roche et al., 2016; Intravia et

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al., 2018). Zafar et al. (2025) analysis of crime narratives in Pakistani popular media identifies sensationalist crime reporting as a mechanism for amplifying institutional distrust, a pattern that the present data replicate at the individual level. The negative trust effect of framing, when combined with its strong positive effect on reform support, suggests a nuanced cognitive dynamics in which media consumption simultaneously erodes satisfaction with current institutional performance and strengthens support for transformative change, a pattern that may be particularly characteristic of citizens in reform-demanding democratic contexts (Hetherington, 1998).

Reassessing Hypothesis 4: Trust and Reform Support

The finding that Police Trust was not a significant predictor of Reform Support when Media Framing, Media Credibility, and Watchdog Positioning were included in the model ($B = 0.024$, $p = .601$) requires careful theoretical interpretation. At the bivariate level, Police Trust and Reform Support were significantly positively correlated ($r = .227$, $p < .001$), suggesting a genuine association. The disappearance of this relationship in multivariate analysis indicates that the bivariate trust-support association is largely explained by shared variance with media perception variables, particularly Media Framing and Media Credibility, which mediate or confound the trust-support pathway.

This finding challenges the simple trust-mediation model proposed in H4 and suggests a more complex causal architecture in which media perceptions function as more proximal antecedents of reform support than institutional trust per se. This is consistent with Levi and Stoker's (2000) argument that political trust and policy support are not mechanically linked but are contingent on the specific policy domain, the salience of identity and ideological frames, and the credibility of information sources. In the context of police reform in Punjab, where reform discourse is deeply entangled with political contestation and where media narratives are primary determinants of reform saliency, media perceptions may indeed be more directly predictive of reform orientation than diffuse institutional trust.

The finding also resonates with Sandiya's et al. (2025) analysis of digital democratic policing, which demonstrates that in media-saturated environments, citizens' reform

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orientations are shaped more by their engagement with mediated accountability narratives than by their accumulated experiential trust in institutions. Reform support in this context is not simply a function of trusting the police but of engaging with and being persuaded by the reform narrative as presented through media, a process that places media credibility and framing at the center of the reform legitimacy construction process.

Gender Differences in Police Trust

The finding that females reported significantly higher Police Trust than males ($M = 2.940$ vs. $M = 2.698$, $t(482) = -2.655$, $p = .008$) warrants careful interpretation. This pattern diverges from typical findings in Western policing contexts, where gender differences in police trust are either absent or favor males, and from common assumptions about gendered victimization patterns and their trust implications (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). Several contextual explanations merit consideration. First, male respondents in the Pakistani context may have greater direct exposure to adversarial police interactions, including stops, searches, and interrogations, that produce lower procedural justice evaluations. Second, cultural norms governing police–female citizen interactions may result in qualitatively different encounter dynamics that are experienced as more respectful by female respondents. Third, male respondents' greater political engagement and media consumption, particularly in relation to politically charged coverage of police conduct, may generate stronger negative institutional attributions.

The absence of significant urban-rural differences in Police Trust ($p = .453$) is equally informative, suggesting that the structural deficiencies of policing in Punjab are distributed relatively uniformly across community contexts, contrary to assumptions that rural communities experience categorically inferior policing. This finding is consistent with Zakir et al.'s (2023) analysis of police reform challenges in Punjab, which identifies systemic rather than geographically specific factors, including political interference, inadequate training, and resource deficiencies, as the primary drivers of legitimacy deficits.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how media framing, media credibility, institutional

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positioning, and perceived transparency collectively shape public trust in police reforms and support for ongoing reform initiatives in Punjab, Pakistan. The findings, derived from a quantitative survey of 488 Punjab residents, offer a rich empirical account of the legitimacy construction process as it operates through media-mediated channels in a developing democratic context.

The study's central empirical contribution is the demonstration that Media Credibility and Perceived Transparency are the most powerful positive predictors of Police Trust, together with Watchdog Positioning, accounting for nearly 40% of variance in institutional trust ($R^2 = .400$). These findings empirically validate the study's theoretical integration of Framing Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and the watchdog function of media, demonstrating that the pathway from media narratives to reform legitimacy is primarily a credibility and accountability pathway rather than a simple exposure or content pathway. Police reforms acquire legitimacy not merely through being reported but through being reported credibly, independently, and transparently.

The finding that Media Framing is the strongest predictor of Reform Support, while Police Trust loses significance when media variables are controlled, constitutes a significant theoretical departure from conventional trust-mediation models. This pattern implies that media organizations function as more proximal drivers of reform support than institutional trust, challenging policymakers to direct communication strategies not merely at demonstrating institutional performance but at cultivating media credibility and journalistic independence as preconditions for effective reform legitimacy communication.

From a practical standpoint, these findings generate several actionable recommendations. For police reform architects and institutional communicators, the evidence demands a fundamental reorientation away from perception management strategies that prioritize positive media coverage toward approaches that enhance genuine procedural fairness, transparency, and accountability, the actual determinants of public trust identified in this study. For media organizations operating in the Pakistani context, the findings highlight the public good dimensions of credibility investments: credible journalism not only serves

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democratic accountability functions but actively constructs the trust environment within which governance reform becomes possible. For policymakers engaged in media regulation and press freedom advocacy, the demonstration that perceived media independence positively predicts institutional trust argues for the creation of regulatory environments that protect rather than constrain journalistic independence.

The study is subject to several limitations that future research should address. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and longitudinal designs would permit stronger claims about the temporal dynamics of media exposure, trust formation, and reform support. The university-based sampling frame, while appropriate for the study's focus on media-literate populations, limits generalizability to less-educated and older demographic segments. Future research should employ nationally representative probability samples to assess whether the media-trust-reform relationships identified here generalize across the full population distribution. Additionally, the operationalization of Watchdog Positioning through vicarious experience items, while theoretically defensible, is an indirect measure of media institutional positioning; future research should develop direct measures of perceived media independence and investigate how digital and social media consumption patterns differentially predict trust outcomes. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs that manipulate framing conditions would provide stronger causal evidence for the mechanisms identified in this study. Finally, the integration of qualitative methods, including analysis of actual media content alongside audience perception measures, would enable richer triangulation of the media–legitimacy relationship.

In conclusion, this study advances governance communication scholarship by providing empirical evidence that media's role in constructing reform legitimacy is fundamentally a function of credibility, independence, and transparency orientation rather than simply a content or exposure effect. By repositioning media from a passive information disseminator to an active legitimacy broker, the study opens new theoretical and empirical directions for understanding the governance-media nexus in reform-driven environments. As Pakistan continues to navigate the

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complex terrain of institutional transformation, the cultivation of credible, independent, and accountability-oriented media institutions emerges not merely as a normative imperative but as an empirically grounded precondition for sustainable police reform.

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