



The Effect of Media Exposure on Crime Perception: Evidence from The Urban Residents of Faisalabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Media coverage plays a central role in shaping how the public understands crime. Although recorded crime changes only gradually, sensationalized reporting can amplify public fear well beyond what recorded crime would justify. This study examined how media exposure, and social media exposure in particular, shapes the perception of crime among the urban population of Faisalabad, Pakistan. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted with 150 media-consuming residents aged 18 years and above, selected through convenience sampling, using a structured interview schedule. Data were analysed in SPSS using frequencies, means, the chi-square test, the Gamma coefficient and multiple linear regression. The instrument showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .874$). Social media was the most frequently used medium (54.7%) and the main source of crime information (50.7%). Respondents agreed that crime is rising in Faisalabad ($M = 3.79$) and that fear of crime has increased ($M = 3.77$), while agreement that the media represents crime accurately was lowest ($M = 3.25$). All five hypotheses were supported: following crime news, sensational reporting, reliance on social media, crime type and time spent on media were each significantly associated with fear, perceived crime or perceived victimization. In a regression model explaining 61.7% of the variance in crime perception, sensational reporting was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .336$). The study concludes that sensational and selective reporting, particularly on social media, inflates perceived crime, and recommends responsible, evidence-based crime reporting and public media-literacy initiatives.

Introduction

The development of digital communication has resulted in transformation of the way people collect information and had a significant impact on the way people think about safety, justice and criminal policy. Over the last 15 years, social networks have changed from platforms for individual conversations to principal sources of information for millions of users. According to the Agenda-Setting theory, media do not only report events but also determine the importance of events in the eyes of their audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). In the digital environment, dissemination of scary and affect-laden messages can make people believe that their environment is more dangerous than it actually is. Unlike conventional media which are subject to an

editorial process, social media can spread information quickly with little filtering and it has been found out that false news spreads faster than true since emotional content can appeal stronger to audiences (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

People depend on various media forms for their understanding of crimes since they have little first-hand experience of crime (Gross & Aday, 2003), and the way crimes both violent and non-violent are presented in news only favors violence crime over non-violent ones. As a consequence, people exposed to large traces of media might feel that crime occurs in many more cases than statistics show, which only creates more fear (Gerbner, 1998; Intravia et al., 2017). The fear of crime stands as an important social issue of itself since it has a negative effect on people's psychological wellness and impairs certain social aspects related to people's feelings of anxiety and distrust (Ferraro, 1995).

The gap is particularly pertinent in cities which are experiencing rapid urbanisation, for example Faisalabad. Being one of the largest industrial and population centres in Pakistan, Faisalabad is often in the news due to thefts, violent crimes, and cybercrime. However, there is little information available on how various media channels influence the perception of crime in urban Faisalabad, limiting the capacity of media outlets, policy-makers, and law enforcement authorities to take informed decisions. Consequently, this research has six objectives: (1) to outline socio-economic profile of respondents; (2) to identify the frequency and types of crime reporting in media; (3) to understand the perception of crime in urban areas of Faisalabad; (4) to understand the perception of the gap between media coverage and official crime reports; (5) to understand the role of social media in crime-related anxiety; (6) to give recommendations on responsible crime reporting.

H1: Respondents who regularly view crime-related media reports believe that significantly more crime is taking place than actually occurs.

H2: Crime reports presented in sensationalist language generate a higher level of fear among the public regarding the occurrence of crime.

H3: Exposure to social media is associated with significantly greater fear of crime than exposure to traditional media (television and newspapers).

H4: Violent crimes as depicted in crime reports generate greater public fear than property crime or cybercrime.

H5: There is a positive relationship between the amount of media consumed and the degree of perceived victimisation.

A review of the literature and a theoretical framework

Theoretical perspectives

The study is based on three different approaches. According to agenda-setting theory, if crime is given a prominent place in the news then it will also become a significant issue in the public's awareness, even if there are no corresponding trends in the actual rate of crime (McCombs, 2004). Cultivation theory suggests that continuous exposure to media content causes people to develop a certain way of interpreting social reality; those who consume a great deal of violent content tend to view the world as more dangerous than it actually is (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002). Intravia (2019) discovered that frequent consumption of content relating to crime on social media was linked to more punitive views of offenders. Cultivation theory has been adapted to the social media age: audiences are able to discuss news stories in the comment sections, and fearful comments can increase the sense of fear among other readers (Intravia et al., 2017). Lastly, the availability heuristic states that people assess the probability of an event by how easily examples come to mind, and emotionally charged, graphic material is remembered most easily (Vaughan & Hogg, 2014). Since social media provides a large amount of information that no individual can fully process, violent and alarming stories are remembered in greater proportion (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Influence of media, sensationalism, and perception of crime. The link between media use and fear of crime has been researched thoroughly. The most reliable demographic finding is that females tend to have considerably greater fear than males (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2015), while community-level variables such as disorder and perceptions of police are also important (Bolger & Bolger, 2019). Results regarding media effects are less consistent. Chadee, Smith and Ferguson (2019) found that people who considered television crime characters realistic had higher self-ratings of their chances of becoming victims, but their fear was not associated with the media variables they reported, a cautionary aspect of the finding because internet and social media were evaluated under one category.

Sensationalized reports of crime cloud the reality of the incidence of crime and creates unnecessary fear (Surette, 2015). Media outlets exploit strange and infrequent crimes, while insignificant crimes get ignored completely (Chattopadhyay & Sahoo, 2020). While Kadir (2025) talks about heightened fears of crime without an actual rise in crime, other studies show that exposure to media violence increases the public's support for penalties (Thunga et al., 2025). Demirbaş (2025) created a scale for understanding how social media affects fear of crime and found that the spread of information in social networks erodes people's sense of safety.

Research gap

A large number of studies in this area have been conducted outside Pakistan, concentrating more on general nation-wide trends. Local information regarding media consumption, use of social media and response of citizens to traditional and new media in cities of Pakistan is still limited. The current research fills this gap in the field by combining traditional and new media in the study of residents of Faisalabad. The framework regards media use, sensationalism, social media consumption and fear of crime as the independent variables and public opinions regarding crime as dependent variables.

Research Design

The study used a quantitative survey research design or method which allows the collection of objective data from a target population at one point in time and enables the researcher to assess the relationships among different variables through statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014). Research was done in urban and suburban areas of Faisalabad, Punjab province of Pakistan. The targeted population for the study was comprised of men and women of 18 years and above who regularly consume media through television, newspapers, or social media. A sample of 150 respondents was selected through convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where the respondents are selected based on accessibility and readiness to participate (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). This method was adopted due to time and resource limitations and the issues associated with generalizability are discussed in section 6.3.

The researcher had obtained primary data by conducting structured interviews personally and secondary data from various sources like books, journals, official crime statistics and governmental reports (Kothari, 2004). The data collection instruments had 7 items pertaining to demographic factors, 5 items pertaining to exposure to the media and closed-ended statements pertaining to the public's sentiment on crime, the influence of the media, the implications of crime on behaviour and recommended measures for reporting of news about crimes measured in five points from 1 to 5 on Likert scale. The content validity of the methods used for data collection was confirmed through scrutiny from the supervisory committee and topic experts. The internal consistency of the instrument was checked through Cronbach's alpha, which is an indicator of reliability of the instrument. In this regard, .70 and above represent the acceptable reliability while the values above .80 indicate the high reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

The SPSS statistical software was used to code and analyze the data (Pallant, 2020). The findings were summarized using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations). The hypotheses were tested using the chi-square test of independence and the Gamma coefficient, which measures the relationship between two ordinal variables, on a scale of -1 to +1 (Sheskin, 2003). Where one variable was nominal, Cramer's V was calculated; the impact and contribution of four predictor variables of public perception of crime were determined using multiple linear regression analysis (Field, 2018).

Respondents were told about the purpose as well as voluntary nature of the study, provided verbal informed consent, and were guaranteed anonymity in the process.

Results

Profile of the Respondents and Their Media exposure

Table 1 presents the profile of the 150 respondents. The characteristics of the 150 individuals surveyed are outlined in Table 1. In this case, men (58.7%) were slightly more numerous than women (41.3%), making it possible to presume that the male respondents had a greater impact on the findings. Most of the interviewees were in a younger or middle-aged group, with 37.3% being aged between 18 and 29 years and 28.0% being aged between 30 and 39 years; this makes it possible to conclude that 65.3% of the participants are under 40 while 34.7% are older than that. This group of people is the most active user of digital and social media, which makes it possible to say that the sample was appropriate for the study on media exposure. The demographic picture was supplemented by the fact that the majority of the respondents lived in the cities (74.7%) while the rest were from semi-urban areas (25.3%); this is also in accordance with the idea of the study. The education levels of the individuals were also interesting, as 40.0% were no older than high school graduates, while 26.7% had intermediate education and 33.3% were holders of a degree, meaning

that 60% of people received no lower than intermediate education and could comprehend the material presented in the media. The respondents comprised almost equal proportions of married and single individuals with proportion of 52.0% of married and other people and 48.0%, of single people.

Note. The category for education includes illiterates (6.7%), primary (12.0%) and secondary (21.3%) educated respondents.

According to Table 2, respondents were habitual and heavy media users. More than half of respondents (53.4%) use media for three and more hours during the day. This includes 22.7% of those who used media for four hours or longer, while only 14.7% uses it for less than one hour. This indicates a big availability of content related with crime. Social media was the most popular among the respondents (54.7%), at least two times more than television (22.7%) or usually all newspaper press + radio (22.7%), indicating a full transition from traditional to modern media. The same pattern is confirmed by the source of information about crime: half of the respondents (50.7%) have chosen social media as their only source of information about crime, while only 36.0% depended on television and 13.3% leaned on newspapers. The interest in the crime news is at a significant level: 42.7% mentioned often and very often getting to know the news as well as 25.3% mentioned doing so sometimes, which means at least three quarters (74.7%) open the news at least from time to time.

Table2: Media exposure of the respondents (N=150)

Indicator	Category	%	Indicator	Category	%
Daily media time	< 1 hour	14.7	Main crime source	Social media	50.7
	1-2 hours	32.0		Television	36.0
	3-4 hours	30.7		Newspapers	13.3
	> 4 hours	22.7	Follows crime news	Often / very often	42.7
Most used medium	Social media	54.7		Sometimes	32.0
	Television	22.7		Rarely / never	25.3
	Newspaper / radio	22.7			

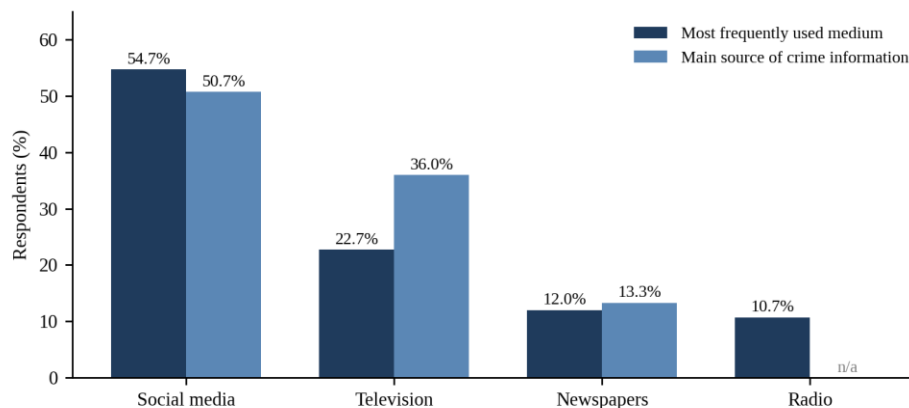


Figure 1. Medium used the most frequently, and the major source of crime information (N=150).

Perception of crime, media effect and impact on behavior

Table 3 and Figure 2 indicate that every statement was rated above 3.00. Respondents affirmed most strongly that crime is on the rise in Faisalabad ($M = 3.79$) and that people feel more afraid of crime than before ($M = 3.77$). It was mentioned that media projections of the real crime situation had the lowest score among the measured items ($M = 3.25$). As many as 65.3% of respondents argued that media overstate facts about crime whereas 70.7% felt that social media makes crime seem more common than it is. The most cited source of fear was the one related to crimes on social media ($M = 3.88$, with 73.3% general agreement), then followed by television ($M = 3.54$) and newspapers ($M = 3.21$). Moreover, respondents perceived the media as paying more attention to violent crimes than any other crimes ($M = 3.83$).

Table 3: Crime perception, media influence, and its effect on behaviour: means, standard deviations, and consensus

Statement	M	SD	% agree
Perception of crime among public			
Public perceptions about crimes	3.79	1.17	69.3
The crime rate in Faisalabad is rising	3.77	1.18	69.3
I have grown fearful of crime in recent times	3.56	1.20	60.0
There is an increase in crime in my neighborhood making me feel unsafe	3.25	1.22	48.0
Media effects			
Crime stories in social media have increased my fear of crime	3.88	1.15	73.3
Media pays more attention to violent crimes	3.83	1.16	70.7
Media has made crime look more prevalent through social media	3.78	1.18	70.7
Exaggerated headlines make me fearful of crime	3.77	1.19	68.0
Sensational portrayal of crime news	3.77	1.16	69.3
Media tends to exaggerate crime situations	3.68	1.17	65.3
Crime stories on TV increase my fear of crime	3.54	1.20	60.0
Crime information printed in newspapers increases my fear	3.21	1.23	45.3
Behavioral implications			
Violent crimes make me afraid	3.88	1.18	72.0
Property crimes make me afraid	3.65	1.21	64.0
Cybercrimes make me afraid	3.63	1.18	62.7
I think that I can become a victim of crime	3.60	1.24	62.7
Due to the news about crime, I avoid going out in the night	3.52	1.23	58.7
I trust the police department to control crime	3.23	1.23	46.7

Note. Five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). % agree = agree plus strongly agree.

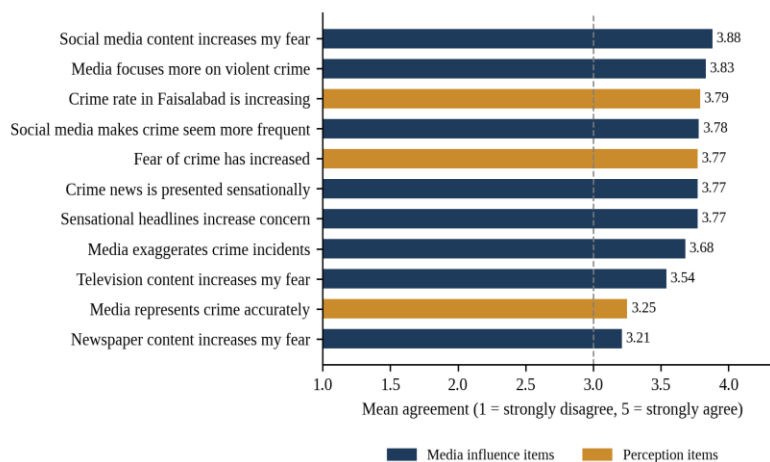


Figure 2. Agreement with crime perception and media-influence statements, in order of agreement: (N = 150). Mid-point on the scale is marked by a broken line (3.00).

Violent crime was the most feared of crimes (M = 3.88), followed by property crime (M = 3.65) and cybercrime (M = 3.63), but there were only small differences for the last two crimes. Crime related news also has an influence on behaviour as 58.7% said they

had abstained from going out at night. The level of trust in law enforcement was the lowest reported ($M = 3.23$). There was a strong preference for reform with the highest level of support for responsible journalism ($M = 4.05$; 78.7%) followed closely by having more factual and statistical information (and no sensationalism) (both $M = 3.97$; 74.7%).

Testing of hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested using the chi-square method and gamma coefficient (see Table 4 and Figure 3). The results showed that the associations identified were true and in the expected direction. People who followed crime news more frequently were more likely to see crime as a serious threat, with 56.7% of those following crime news often or very often categorizing crime as a serious threat as opposed to 16.7% among those who did not follow crime news (H_1). The strongest association was found for sensationalist journalism and fear ($\gamma = .63$; H_2). It turned out that obtaining information from social media rather than television and newspapers was associated with a higher level of fear. In particular, the number of those who reported feeling fear was 60.5% among social media users and 28.1% among traditional media users (H_3). As for types of crime generating fear, violent crime was responsible for creating fear in 112 respondents out of 150, as compared to property crime that affected 78 respondents and cybercrimes with 62 (H_4) and more frequent consumption of media information leads to a greater belief in being a victim of a crime (H_5).

Table 4: Hypothesis Tests Summarized.

Hypothesis	Relationship tested	χ^2 (df)	p	Effect size	Result
H_1	Following crime news $\times$ perceived crime rate	23.93 (4)	< .001	$\gamma = .49$	Supported
H_2	Sensational reporting $\times$ fear of crime	40.76 (4)	< .001	$\gamma = .63$	Supported
H_3	Media type $\times$ fear of crime	17.07 (2)	< .001	$\gamma = .53$	Supported
H_4	Crime type $\times$ fear level ($N = 450$)	36.58 (4)	< .001	$V = .20$	Supported
H_5	Time on media $\times$ perceived victimisation	15.79 (4)	.003	$\gamma = .40$	Supported

Note. $N = 150$ with the exception of H_4 as the 450 observations related to test H_4 are three responses from each of the respondents and hence the independence is not completely achieved; thus, the interpretation must be done very carefully.

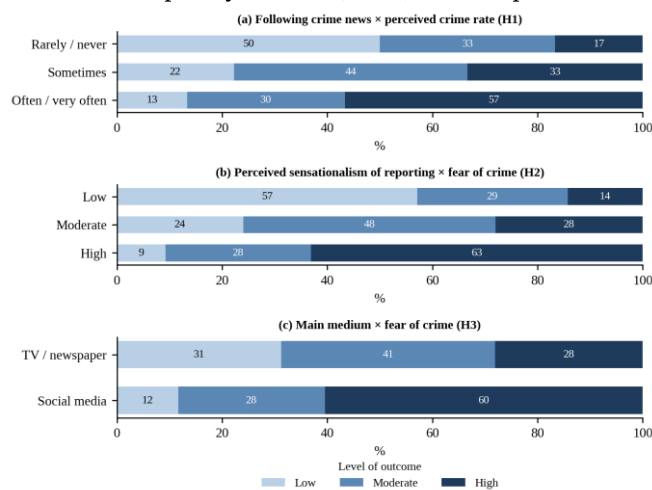


Figure 3. Outcome levels (%) among categories of predictor across hypotheses H_1 to H_3 ($N = 150$).

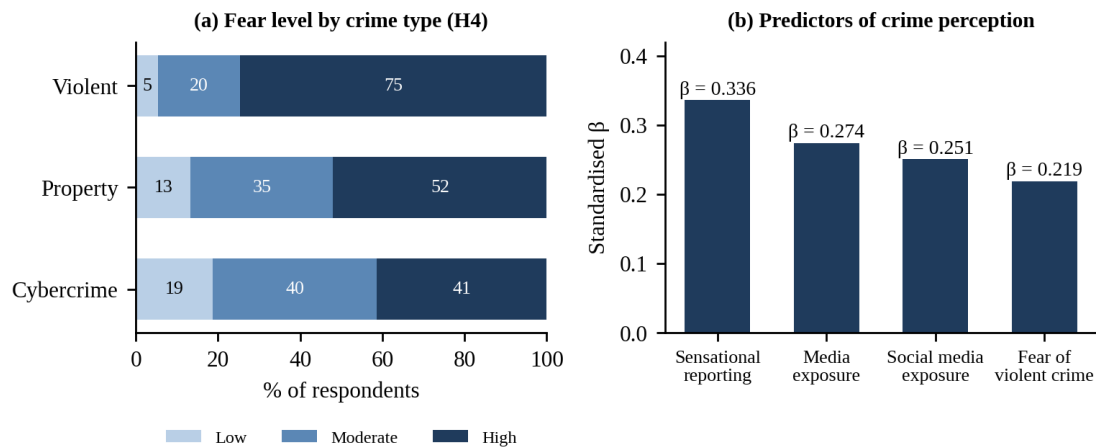
Multiple regression analysis

A multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the impact of media reporting, sensational crime news, exposure to social media, and fear of being subject to crime on people's crime perception. The analysis yielded a good-fit statistical model, $F(4,145) = 58.40$, $p < 0.001$, with $R = .786$, $R^2 = .617$, and adjusted $R^2 = .606$, suggesting that the examined four predictors accounted for 61.7% of all variance in crime perception. All independent variables exerted significant positive impact on the dependent variable. (Table 5, Figure 4), and sensational crime reporting emerged as the most influential predictor ($\beta = .336$).

Table 5: Multiple regression predictive of social perception regarding crime

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>
(Constant)	0.842	0.294	—	2.864	.005
Sensational crime reporting	0.314	0.067	.336	4.687	< .001
Media exposure	0.286	0.071	.274	4.028	< .001
Social media exposure	0.267	0.073	.251	3.658	< .001
Fear of violent crime	0.228	0.064	.219	3.563	.001

Note. $R^2 = .617$; adjusted $R^2 = .606$; $F(4, 145) = 58.40$, $p < .001$.

**Figure 4. Fear level by crime type ($N = 450$ responses) and standardised regression coefficients of the four predictors.**

Discussion

According to the results obtained, the role that the media play is very important in the perception of crime by the residents of Faisalabad. Those who tend to read about crimes more, and spend more time on the mass media are more likely to think that crime is on the rise and that they can become victims. This supports the cultivation theory that constant media exposure shapes an understanding of the social reality (Gerbner et al., 2002), and it correlates with the research that proved that heavy users of crime news develop a more pessimistic perspective on the situation in the world (Gerbner, 1998; Intravia et al., 2017). The findings of the research by Chadee et al. (2019) are in agreement with this as well as they prove that media exposure influences the perception of the possibility of getting victimized.

The central role of social media must be pointed out. This is true since this platform has been used the most, has served as the main source of information about crimes and has provided the most significant amount of fear reported by respondents who have mentioned using it as an information source compared to the data received from newspapers or television. This complies with Demirbaş (2025), who has shown that criminals' information not filtered by anyone that can be found on social media lowers the sense of safety of people. This is also supported by the research conducted by González (2019), who has discovered that information obtained through social media is more alarming than that received from traditional sources. The mechanism is plausible, as social media transmits videos, obscene images and unverified information as fast as possible, which results in the fact that emotional news reaches a wider audience compared to accurate stories (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The emotional information makes criminals and crime seem more common than they really are.

The manner in which news is reported was equally important as the amount of news. The correlation between sensationalism in the news and fear turned out to be at its strongest ($\gamma = .63$) and its most robust regression predictor could be seen ($\beta = .336$). Therefore, this matches the studies indicating that sensationalism produces fear far greater than actual risk (Surette, 2015). The respondents believed that violent crime receives much more coverage compared to other crimes. Moreover, they experienced greater fear associated with violent crime. Hence, this should confirm the agenda setting hypothesis that the appearance of an issue in the mass media proves that this issue is important for the public (McCombs, 2004) and follows the common media trend of focusing on exceptional, dramatic crime cases (Chattopadhyay & Sahoo, 2020). As far as the H_4 test is concerned, the findings are based on the descriptive statistics only.

Two results need to be highlighted. Firstly, while the fear levels were higher, the respondents were skeptical at the same time, as shown by the moderate ratings for the accuracy of media reporting ($M = 3.25$) and law enforcement institutions ($M = 3.23$), and by the fact that 60% of them believed it would be correct to say that the crime level is higher than provided by the statistics. Continuous exposure to negative news about criminal activities without adequate attention to effective policing may cause lowering of confidence in institutions and lead to moral panic and policy-making in the response to it (Kadir, 2025; Thunga et al., 2025). Secondly, while expressing their concerns about violence reporting, the respondents did not oppose it in principle—they were asking for more responsible, factual, and less sensational reporting.

Conclusion, Recommendations and Limitations

Conclusion

Media use is strongly related to the perception of crime by the urban population of Faisalabad city. Greater use of media and higher frequency of crime news usage were correlated with increased perceptions of crime increase and crime risk. Sensational media use was the strongest indicator of crime perception and social media became the most widely used medium, the major source of crime information and the strongest cause of fear. Violence crime created higher levels of fear than property crime and cybercrime and it appeared that respondents believed that media coverage was biased toward violence crimes.

Recommendations

Media outlets must provide proportional coverage of crimes, refrain from exaggerated headlines and images, include statistical evidence and trends in their reporting, cover property crime and cybercrimes in a fair manner, and implement recommended guidelines for reporters on crime coverage.

The government and the law enforcement agencies must provide regular statistics on the level of crime per district, create and maintain an active presence on social media to combat any spread of misinformation, tackle perceptions of insecurity along with crime rates, and formulate a code of conduct for media including both digital and traditional media. Individuals and educators must incorporate media literacy into the curriculum at schools and universities.

Limitations and future research

Convenience sampling and small sample size of 150 imply that results cannot be generalised with any confidence to the wider population outside the sample participants. The cross-sectional study can only prove association but cannot prove causality: it cannot tell us whether media exposure causes fear or fear causes consumption of crime news. All variables were self-reported and the study measured perceptions alone without any content analysis of media products and comparing them with official crime statistics. In future research, probability sampling and larger sample sizes, longitudinal study designs, triangulation with content analysis and police statistics, comparisons between urban and rural areas and other cities in Pakistan, mixed method designs, and specific platform analysis are recommended because social media was considered as one unit here.

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