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### From Headlines to Minds: The Agenda-Setting Power of One-Sided News

**Dr. Ali Bhadur**<sup>1</sup>

Lecturer, Department of Media and Communication Studies,  
Government College University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: [alibhadur@gcu.edu.pk](mailto:alibhadur@gcu.edu.pk)

**Tressa Jamshed**<sup>3</sup>

Student, Government College University, Lahore, Punjab,  
Pakistan

Email: [tressajamshed30@gmail.com](mailto:tressajamshed30@gmail.com)

**Washam Waseem**<sup>2</sup>

Student, Government College University, Lahore,  
Punjab, Pakistan

Correspondence: [washamwaseem@gmail.com](mailto:washamwaseem@gmail.com)

**Wahab Ali**<sup>4</sup>

Student, Government College University, Lahore,  
Punjab, Pakistan

Email: [wahabalibajwa447@gmail.com](mailto:wahabalibajwa447@gmail.com)

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#### Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore how one-sided political news headlines create an impact on young audiences. Considering how this one-sided news form opinions, builds perceptions and impact people's engagement with the content. The results were obtained through a quantitative survey method from over 100 Pakistani University students. The respondents belonged from the age group of 18-27. This paper investigated how without fully knowing the context or seeing the full picture, biased headlines can change what people see as important, trigger emotional reaction among them, and impact their beliefs. The results show that the media plays an important role in agenda-setting in today's digital era. It is noted that people instead of being informed get misguided with constant exposure to the headlines. These selective narratives get strengthened, and it feeds into cognitive biases which leads toward quick formation of opinions. This research helps us understand how one-sided news can be amplified with social media and how it can point towards the need for better media literacy and more critical news consumption among young audiences.

**Keywords:** Agenda-setting, Headlines, One-sided News, Political News, Social Media, Media Influence.



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## 1. Introduction

In the fast-paced digital media environment of today's world, headlines have become the first and often the only point of contact between audiences and news. Social media platforms like Instagram have made political content more visible than ever, allowing the users to scroll through and consume information quickly, without really knowing the whole picture (Arman & McClurg, 2024; Oo & Dai, 2024). Headlines are being written to grab attention and to score more views they are no longer being written to inform the public but to form public perception. While the focus remains on simplifying complex issues or simply highlight certain angles ultimately leads to one-sided understandings of the events (Zhu & Fu, 2024). Media does not tell people what to think but what to think about just by giving more importance to certain issues as stated in the agenda-setting theory (Zahariadis, 2025; Seeberg, 2023). While the framing theory talks about the presentation of information and how different parts of it are highlighted eventually shape interpretation and formation of public opinions (Güran & Özarlan, 2022; Roslyng & Dindler, 2023). If we look at both agenda-setting and framing theory we get to see that public conversation can easily be guided by content driven headlines which influences their political understanding, especially among younger audiences who depend heavily on social media for news (Williams et al., 2024). Although there is a major role played by social media in spreading political news, there's still not enough research looking at how one-sided, headline-focused content affects the beliefs, emotions, and sense of importance among university students in Pakistan. The agenda-setting power of political headlines on Instagram among individuals (aged between 18-27) is addressed with this study by evaluating how these headlines shape opinions and build perspectives.

The main objectives of this study include:

- Understanding the engagements rate of political headlines on social media among university students
- Evaluation of perceptions influenced by one-sided headlines of what issues matter and how opinions are formed
- Exploration of the emotional and cognitive responses triggered by the political headlines

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory proposes that the public perception is shaped by the media by not telling people what to think, but by emphasizing what important issues are (Zahariadis, 2025; Seeberg, 2023). Attention can be directed by media outlets to certain topics while excluding others, effectively highlighting issues prioritizes them in the public's mind. Previous research shows that the effects agenda-setting are expressed specially in political communication, where the news coverage's frequency and prominence can shape the political priorities and influence public discourse (Rossiter, 2022; Foreman, 2024). A foundational framework is provided with the help of this theory and to understand how headlines, short and attention-grabbing content can guide audiences' perceptions of importance.

### 2.2 Framing and Media Influence

Though agenda-setting theory gives people what they think about, framing theory examines the way news is presented and interpreted (Güran & Özarlan, 2022; Roslyng & Dindler, 2023). Shaping meaning and influencing audiences' interpretation by selecting specific aspects of an issue and highlighting them is framing. Many studies show that political news on social media platforms

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is frequently framed to evoke emotions or reactions among the users, thereby reinforcing selective interpretations and guiding cognitive processing (Arman & McClurg, 2024; Oo & Dai, 2024). Headlines are not neutral; as illustrated by the agenda-setting and framing theory, they actively guide the public's understanding of political events.

### **2.3 Propaganda, Bias and One-Sided Narratives**

One-sided and biased news is used like a powerful tool to shape public opinion and strengthening political agendas (Zhu & Fu, 2024; O'Shaughnessy, 2024). Headlines are short and perspectives get highlighted in them excluding counterarguments or the whole picture which results in selective exposure and confirmation bias (Salami & Adeleye, 2025; Stelgias, 2025). Soft news gets used by the media organizations to charge the narratives emotionally as gateways to influence beliefs of the audiences, highlighting the role of digital platforms in amplifying propaganda (Williams et al., 2024; Kumar, n.d.). These studies highlight the issue that one-sided or biased headlines are not used to convey information but to change public's perception and influence their priorities and it perfectly aligns with both the agenda-setting and framing theory.

### **2.4 Digital Media and Social Platforms**

In this digital era, social media platforms like Instagram have become a major source of information for the young generation which has significantly impacted their news consumption behaviors (Arman & McClurg, 2024; Oo & Dai, 2024). These platforms have a very specific algorithm due to which news is often condensed into headlines, keeping it short in the form of captions, posts, or reels which allows users to go through information without getting into the depth of it. A lot of studies have shown that this kind of headline-focused exposure to the news not only strengthens selective narrative but also speeds up the formation of public opinions.

### **2.5 Headlines and Public Perception**

Research shows that even before people take the time to read the entire story or understand the complete context they tend to rely on the headlines as they are short and form their judgements based on one-sided or biased news (Zhu & Fu, 2024; Larouci & Benaoda, 2024). Emotional reactions can easily be sparked by sensational or misleading headlines; they can encourage quick engagement and most of the times people believe wrong or one-sided information (Williams et al., 2024; Kumar, n.d.). Studies consistently show that selective exposure to headlines can strongly influence political opinions despite of what platform it is received on whether it is a televised political debate, online news or even social media (Rossiter, 2022; Seeberg, 2023; Arman & McClurg, 2024).

## **3. Research Gap**

Agenda-setting, framing, and the impact of social media platforms on political communication has already been covered in existing literature, but there is not much research been done on the influence of headline-driven, and one-sided political news on young audiences in Pakistan. Most of the studies have focused on the Western context or a broad digital media which leaves a gap how short headlines used to grab attention on platforms like Instagram shape public opinion, perception or emotional responses in a South Asian context. This study aims to address the gap by investigating the impact of one-sided headlines on university students belonging to the age group of 18–27, evaluating how exposure to headlines affects their understanding of political issues and reinforces selective narratives.

## **4. Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

A quantitative research design was employed in this study using a survey with structured questions to investigate the impact of one-sided political news headlines on young audiences. As surveys allow systematic data collection from a relatively large sample and enables the measurement of specific variables such as headline exposure, formation of opinion, and emotional response therefore it was chosen. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **4.2 Population and Sample**

For this study, university students in Pakistan belonging from the age group of 18-27 were the targeted population. This population frequently consumes political news on social media, and it also represents a young and digitally active audience. A sample size of 100 respondents was selected to provide sufficient variability while keeping it manageable for analysis as well.

### **4.3 Sampling Technique**

The convenience sampling method was used for this research. The participants were selected on the basis of their accessibility and willingness to participate. Usually survey-based studies use this approach within university settings. It allows quick data collection from the relevant population (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

### **4.4 Data Collection Tool**

The data was collected through a Google Form survey, having structured questions which were designed to capture:

- The news consumption habits
- One-sided or biased political news' exposure
- Emotional responses to the headlines
- Opinion formation and verification practices

The questions were a mix of:

- Multiple-choice
- Likert-scale items
- One optional open-ended question (it was used to provide qualitative insight without overburdening respondents)

### **4.5 Variables**

#### **Independent Variable:**

- One-sided or biased political news headlines exposure on social media platforms, Instagram.

#### **Dependent Variables:**

- Perception of issue importance
- Formation of Opinion
- Emotional reactions
- Strengthening bias

#### 4.6 Procedure

The survey was shared through platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and direct messages were sent to the university students through a link. Students were informed about voluntary participation in the survey, but honest answers had to be provided. The responses were completed in a week.

#### 4.7 Ethical Considerations

The participation in the survey used for this study was completely voluntary. The respondents were informed beforehand that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential. No personal information was collected at any stage. An informed consent was obtained at the start of the survey to make sure that the participants understood the purpose of the study and were aware that they could withdraw at any point.

### 5. Results

#### 5.1 Demographic Information

There was a total of 100 respondents who participated in the study. Many of the participants (47%) belonged to the age group of 21–23, followed by 18–20 (43%) and 24–27 (10%). In terms of gender, 75% of the respondents were female and were 25% male. Many of the participants were undergraduate students, 92%; the rest of the 8% were enrolled in the graduate program.

#### 5.2 News Consumption Habits

According to the results, it is apparent the political news consumption through Instagram among young audiences is relatively higher. 48% of the respondents said that they consumed daily political news, while 29% of the respondents engage a few times a week with political news, 21% rarely and the remaining 2% never consume political content on Instagram. While talking about content engagement, 80% of the respondents gain political news through posts or reels while just 9% focus on the headlines and the remaining 11% of the respondents read the captions. Results showed that a majority solely rely on the headlines with 29% always and 38% often reading only the headlines without accessing the full content.

How often do you consume political news on Instagram?  
100 responses

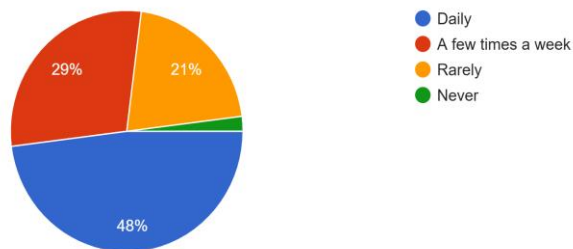


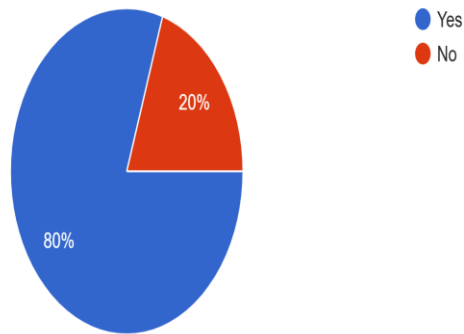
Figure 1: The consumption of political news from Instagram

### 5.3 Opinion Formation Through Headlines

It was admitted by 80% of the respondents that they had formed opinions about political issues just by reading a headline. But when it was asked if they had believed political claims through headlines without verifying it, we got mixed results, lowest level was selected by around 33% of the respondents which was gradually decreased by percentages towards higher agreement levels. It suggests that many respondents are cautious while believing what they come across still a large fraction depends on headlines for opinion formation.

Have you ever formed an opinion about a political issue based only on a headline?

100 responses

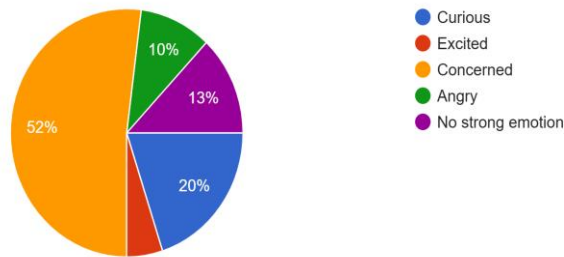


**Figure 2** – *Formation of political opinions from headlines*

### 5.4 Emotional and Behavioral Responses

It is noted that emotional reactions can be easily triggered by political headlines, such as concern felt by 52% of the respondents making up a majority, followed by curiosity felt by 20% and anger experienced by 10% and lastly excitement experienced by just 5% of the respondents and 13% of the respondents felt no strong emotion. It was also noted that political headlines can trigger emotions, but they do not highly affect behavioral responses such as sharing news or discussing it.

A political headline has made me feel:  
100 responses

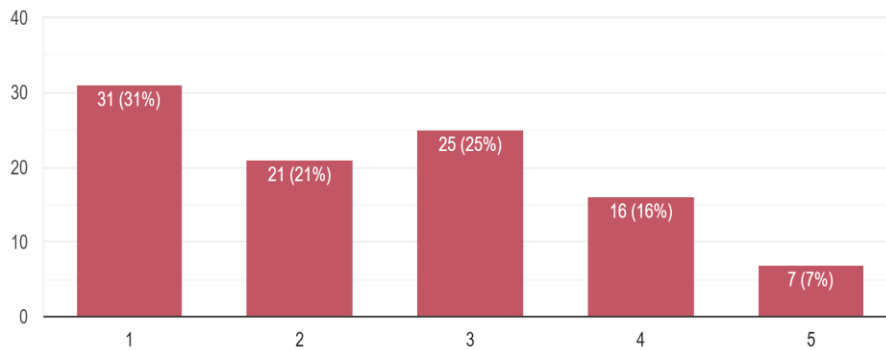


**Figure 3:** Political headlines can induce feelings

### 5.5 Perception of One-Sided News and Misinformation

Although respondents were aware of the fact that news can easily be one-sided and biased, they still believed it. The majority agreed that social media presents only one-sided narratives of political news, only showing one part of the story. Furthermore, 78% of the respondents admitted that they had trusted a misleading political headline that they learned about later on, and 76% admitted that they had believed viral political claims that turned out to be wrong. These findings indicate a high exposure to and impact of misleading or one-sided information.

Even knowing that news can be biased, I still tend to believe headlines:  
100 responses



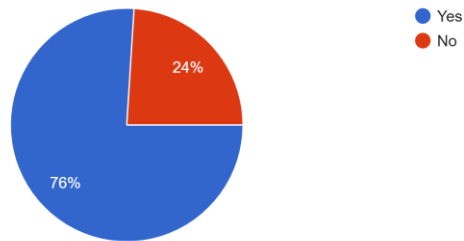
**Figure 4:** The strong belief on social media

## 5.6 Verification and Critical Thinking

The verification behavior revealed inconsistencies keeping the responses in view. Some respondents admitted that they verify the news frequently, while others indicated low levels of verification. Upon being asked if they questioned the credibility of political headlines, responses were distributed across all levels, with just a minority toward agreement. Which suggests that although people are aware of biased news, it does not always translate into consistent critical evaluation of news content.

Have you ever believed a viral political claim (e.g., policy change, election result, economic news) that later turned out to be false?

100 responses



**Figure 5:** *Believing false viral claims on internet*

### 1. Discussion

This study's results support the principles of Agenda-Setting Theory, showing how the political headlines strongly influence the young audience's perception. Most of the respondents who consume political news daily or frequently solely rely on the headlines to indicate the exposure to media content is both rapid and just surface-level. The fact that 80% of the participants admitted that they form opinions just by reading the headlines really shows how powerful the headline-driven communication has become in shaping how people perceive information. This connects it with the Framing Theory, which talks about how the presentation of the information can influence the way it is understood and interpreted. At the same time, there is a clear contradiction between both awareness and actual behavior according to the results. Even though many respondents were aware of the fact that political news could be one-sided and biased, the majority still said they had believed misleading headlines or viral claims. Audience accepts information that is accessible and emotionally appealing, which indicates cognitive biases. A big role it played by the emotions, headlines that trigger feelings such as concern or curiosity get more engagement and public attention. While doomscrolling or skimming through the content, people lack the time to verify if the news is actually true. Therefore, they believe what they see, driven by their emotions. It is seen that social media platforms such as Instagram play a crucial part in strengthening the agenda-setting power of the headlines. Social media encourages doomscrolling, which creates a filter bubble around the users where public opinions can easily be shaped by presenting one-sided and biased news, especially among the younger audiences.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study investigated the agenda-setting power of one-sided news among the University students in Pakistan. It was concluded through the results that headlines alone play an important role in shaping public perception, influencing opinion formation, and triggering emotional reactions. A majority admitted that they had formed opinions about political issues just by reading headlines without taking the time to verify the information, reading the full context or seeing the whole picture. It has been proved that their fact-checking habits are very inconsistent; they are aware of political news being biased, and one-sided they still believe it. It leaves a clear gap between their knowledge and their actions. The ultimate results indicate that headlines can quietly strengthen one-sided perspectives of the stories, and that headline driven media is growing in today's digital era. It becomes important to educate the young audience and encourage critical thinking before believing anything that just looks visually appealing. It can help them navigate them and question everything they see.

## **8. Limitations and Future Research**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations in this research. As we focused on a small group of university students through convenience of sampling, therefore, the results might not get applied to a wider and diverse population. A wider and diverse population can be used for future research. And look at how different platforms can impact opinion formation and perception of building differently.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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