

**RESEARCH PAPER****Citizen Journalism: Influence of Citizen-Generated Content on Mental Health****<sup>1</sup>Dr. Muhammad Manshoor Hussain Abbasi\*, <sup>2</sup>Samyah Zahoor and <sup>3</sup>Malaika Munir**

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**Corresponding Author** manshoor\_hussain@comsats.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the relationship between citizen journalism and mental health in Pakistan, particularly emphasizing the impact of exposure to citizen-generated content. Citizen journalism has changed the media environment, notably impacting public participation and emotional well-being. A qualitative approach and purposive sampling technique were employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews from three categories media persons, students and common citizens. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Approximately 65% of participants responded with emotional distress and increased anxiety caused by distressing content. Even though many had negative experiences, some reported positive outcomes when situations were handled responsibly. Consumption of citizen journalism and mental health were mediated by variables like age and media literacy. The results highlight the need for ethical standards and responsible reporting practices in citizen journalism. Enhanced media literacy and healthy coping strategies are essential for creating a supportive media landscape.

**Keywords:** Citizen Journalism, Coping Strategies, Emotional Well-Being, Ethical Reporting, Media Literacy, Mental Health**Introduction**

In recent years, the rise of digital media platforms has changed the landscape of journalism, leading to the emergence of citizen journalism. The emergence of citizen journalism represents the abandonment of traditional methods of news production and consumption (Yellowbrick, 2023). Unlike traditional journalism, citizen journalism empowers the public as active participants in the news-making process (Hermida, 2019). This shift has significant implications for the media industry and society at large, particularly concerning the psychological impact on individuals involved in or consuming citizen journalism.

**Citizen Journalism**

Citizen journalism can be mostly defined as the act of non-professionals and untrained reporting news and information, often enabled by digital technologies such as smartphones, social media, and internet connectivity. This form of journalism has democratized news production, allowing diverse voices to contribute to the public discourse and challenging the domination of traditional media outlets. (Bruns, 2008). Citizen journalism manifests in various forms, each with its unique characteristics and impact. Eyewitness reporting involves individuals who are present at the scene of an event sharing their firsthand accounts through text, photos, or videos. This type of citizen journalism can offer immediate and unfiltered information to the public (Bruns, 2008). Advocacy journalism refers to news reporting that openly supports a particular cause or viewpoint. Citizen journalists of this type of aim to raise awareness and drive social or political change

through their reporting and journalism (Chadha & Gattani, 2019). Collaborative investigations include citizen journalists working together, frequently with professional journalists, to conduct in-depth investigations. This collaborative approach can reveal stories that might otherwise be unnoticed. (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Personal stories include individuals who share their experiences and perspectives on various issues. This type of citizen journalism can civilize complex topics and provide relatable stories for the audience. (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001).

### **Background of Citizen Journalism**

The origins of citizen journalism can be traced back to the early days of the Internet, but it has gained importance with the proliferation of social media platforms. These platforms have provided citizens with the tools to easily generate and share content, leading to a more participatory media environment. The debates are sparked with the emergence of citizen journalism about its role and impact on the media landscape and environment, particularly in contrast to traditional journalism and mainstream media (Bruns, 2008).

### **Traditional Journalism Vs. Citizen Journalism**

Citizen journalism that is differentiated by its style, values, and institutional frameworks is divergent to professional journalism. Citizen journalism is predicated on digital empowerment and community involvement, whereas traditional journalism is stuck in established media enterprises and moral principles. Traditional journalism is considered by professional standards and editorial oversight, which guarantee the accuracy, reliability, and ethical uprightness of news reporting and spread (Ward, 2008). In contrast, citizen journalism often does not adhere to these criteria which can result in concerns about the quality and credibility of the information, news and content disseminated (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). As compared to traditional media, citizen journalism frequently grips advocacy and subjectivity (Ward, 2008). This difference can result in a more diverse range of perspectives, experiences and ideas, which can also raise questions about bias agenda-setting and such things (Chadha & Gattani, 2019).

### **Positive Impacts of Citizen Journalism**

Comprehending the good effect of Citizen Journalism implies the transformative potential and position in the effort of improving democracy and citizens' participation. Citizen journalism lets individuals share their stories and perspectives from diverse backgrounds, enriching the public discourse (Bruns, 2008). By reducing the barriers, citizen journalism democratizes news production, making it more comprehensive and representative. (Hermida, 2019). Citizen journalism encourages community engagement and participation in the news-making process (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Citizen journalists can fill information gaps by covering stories and making content that are unnoticed or ignored by traditional media. (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001).

### **Negative impacts of citizen journalism**

Considering the negative impacts of citizen journalism there is a need for looking at ways to reduce the potential harms it may cause, and to make the most of the benefits and positive outcomes in the digital age (Fitzsimmons, 2023). The lack of editorial oversight and such negligence can lead to the spread of misinformation and fake news in citizen journalism, which can result in serious consequences (Ward, 2008). Citizen journalists may mistakably violate privacy and ethical standards, which results in rising concerns about the responsible use of social media. (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). The credibility and trustworthiness of citizen journalism are often questioned due to its lack of professionalism, objectivity, and accountability (Hermida, 2019). Through looking at the mechanisms of mediation and moderation, a researcher can identify key elements that lead

to citizen journalism's success and develop actions that generate the most positive advantages while minimizing any negative consequences.

These factors include technological facilitators and barriers, social networks, cultural and ideological contexts, psychological factors and audience reception, regulatory and policy frameworks etc. (Whitley, 2023).

### **Mental Health and Citizen Journalism: Navigating the Media**

At the crossroads of psychological well-being and citizen journalism, there appears to be a broad spectrum of concerns regarding the possible psychological impact of media exposure on the individual. While citizen journalism websites serve as a source of a large amount of information for citizens, at the same time, incessant exposure to media can lead to adverse consequences for mental health (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Articles questioning the authenticity of viewpoints and stories, which appear online, can cause a general state of confusion, mistrust, and cognitive dissonance among the audience (Ward, 2008). Both the audience member and the news consumer can have traumatic experiences and compassion fatigue when exposed to violence and traumatic content (Newman et al., 2017).

### **Types of Mental Health Issues**

Citizen journalism may exacerbate anxiety disorders by allowing people to watch news coverage of violence, natural disasters, political turmoil, fear-choking stories etc., which may be difficult to endure for some individuals. Citizen journalism can sometimes cause depression due to exposure to distressing content, negative feedback, online harassment, trolling, bullying and deepfakes. Citizen journalism could assist in intensifying depressive symptoms by augmenting a negative pattern of thinking, amplifying social comparison, and fostering feelings of loneliness or inadequacy. The duty to report on such events can be burdening and may cause pain, stress and trauma to some individuals using graphic images or firsthand reports on violence etc. It can also have impact on the individuals consuming such content (Fenton & Morrison, 2023).

### **Literature Review**

Citizen journalism has come up in recent times featuring as a tool in the growing media landscape, allowing individuals to participate in the production and reporting of news. This change has introduced new dynamics to how content and news is consumed and perceived, especially regarding its impact on the mental health (Johnson, 2024). The literature review aims to explore the related and previous research regarding the relationship between citizen journalism and mental health, assessing its role compared to professional journalism and mainstream media, its impact on public perception, and ethical considerations in mental health communications (Thompson et al., 2023).

### **Citizen Journalism Overview**

Citizen journalism includes non-professional and untrained journalists that are taking part in reporting, gathering, producing, and spreading news and information. With the access of gadgets and internet connectivity, this form of journalism has transformed the media environment, allowing anyone with access to a digital platform and internet connectivity to share their perspectives, evidence of societal events or anything they want to share (Lewis, 2017).

### **Impact of Citizen Journalism on Mental Health**

Research indicates that exposure to the content shared via citizen journalism, especially regarding traumatic events, can have negative impacts on the mental health of individuals (Smith et al., 2018). Viewing such content related to natural disasters or violating content can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and stress levels among consumers. Additionally, the continuous and over-exposure to distressing content without filtering and contextualization can result in intensifying feelings of helplessness and fear (Newman et al., 2017).

### **Comparison with traditional Journalism**

Traditional journalism includes trained professionals who follow ethical standards and practices that ensure the accuracy and reliability of information and news. In contrast, citizen journalism lacks these ethical standards and guidelines, which can result in the spread of misinformation and sensationalism (Lee & Kim, 2020).

### **Role in Shaping Public Perception**

Citizen journalism plays a contributory role in shaping public perception by providing diverse perspectives and real-time updates regarding mental health. However, the unfiltered nature of citizen journalism can lead to the quick dissemination of false information, which may sway public opinion and cause stress, panic, or misinformed actions (Wang & Wu, 2019). The role of gatekeeping, traditionally used in traditional media, is reduced in citizen journalism, resulting in a more confused information environment (Jones et al., 2021).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations in citizen journalism are significant, especially concerning mental health and well-being. Media literacy and other skills are necessary for individuals to responsibly navigate the overabundance of information available through citizen journalism (Davies, 2023). Training and literacy in these areas can help individuals distinguish between credible content, thus helping in the protection of their mental well-being (Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

Additionally, in citizen journalism, the quick dissemination of misinformation and fake news adds to consumers' uncertainties and loss of trust (Wang et al., 2018). So, citizen journalists should implement ways to reduce the negative outcomes on health (Tandoc et al., 2017). Individuals can manage stress and anxiety more effectively if emotional resilience and coping strategies are promoted through these platforms (Primack et al., 2017).

The literature review highlights the intricate relationship between citizen journalism and mental health. Citizen journalism poses significant risks regarding misinformation and emotional distress even though it democratizes information dissemination and offers diverse perspectives (Messer, 2021). It requires ongoing efforts in media literacy education, ethical standards implementation, and support for mental health resilience to balance the values and challenges of citizen journalism (Porterfield, 2024).

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication**

The presentation of unethical or inaccurate content in citizen-generated media may normalize or reinforce negative attitudes and practices around fake news, or individual stories. This theory suggests that harmful behaviours and norms can be perpetuated through media modelling in citizen journalism (Bandura, 2001).

### **Media Contagion Theory**

Irresponsible reporting or sensitive coverage can increase the risk of dissemination, leading to further issues and problems. This theory highlights that harmful ideas can be promoted through sensationalism or irresponsible reporting (Bierut et al., 2020).

### **Media dependency theory**

This theory suggests that relying on and depending on citizen journalism platforms without verification and fact-checking may increase an individual's susceptibility to misinformation and inaccurate reporting (Turner et al., 2017).

### **Media Richness Theory**

The use of digital platforms can promote the rapid spread of highly false or fake news content, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine and false content. This theory believes that the media and interactive platforms may amplify the negative impacts of misinformation and misunderstanding (Dennis et al., 2008).

Applying these theoretical underpinnings, the research investigates the impact of citizen journalism on an individual's mental health.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Research Design**

For our research, we used qualitative methodology to answer comprehensively about the influence of citizen journalism on an individual's mental health and to obtain a detailed perception. Participants were divided into three categories i.e., students, media persons and common citizens (male and females). The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Ethical issues were a focus throughout our research process. Therefore, the research design was intended to provide holistic views of the intricate relationship between citizen journalism and mental health in the current digital era.

### **Procedure**

Participant selection was the top phase of this research. A purposive sampling method was used. Participants were divided into the three respective categories of media persons, students, and common citizens, eight each and in total twenty-four also, it was managed to balance the ratio of the male and females. This method was better as we were supposed to get deeper insights and information.

We made interview questions according to the research questions and objectives. Each interview lasted for 20-25 minutes. We systematically managed the transcription to get deep insights from the gathered data. The qualitative research methodology employed in this study is called "thematic analysis" and was done by sorting the text into categories.

### **Ethics**

Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participant after giving enough guidelines and information regarding research topics. Every aspect of the interview was noticed, and rapport was built initially.

## Analysis

After finishing the interview writing, we carefully read all the papers. For each question, we marked meaningful themes with diverse colours. Then picked out the main subjects and key themes. Some themes were connected because they were identical, while others, even if they did not come up a lot, were still significant. We double-checked everything on the paper. Important words were highlighted, and the rest of the data was saved for later. We also again looked at the themes to make sure they were obvious and did not have any preference from the researcher. This allowed us to confirm that the themes we identified were important and suitable.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1**  
**Main Themes and Sub-themes**

<b>Media person</b>	<b>Common citizen</b>	<b>Students</b>
Emotional toll	Effect of social media	Emotional impact
Challenges in citizen journalism	Challenges in citizen journalism	Learning and awareness
Mental health considerations	Engagement and emotional investment	Coping strategies and self-care
Ethical dilemmas	Long-term effects of news consumption	Media literacy and education
Long-term effects	Media literacy and verification	Impact on well-being
Support system	Coping strategies	Ethics and responsibility
Impact on reporting quality	Community impact	Supportive environment
Educational initiatives	Advocacy and responsible consumption	Digital citizenship
Advocacy and policy	Support system	Advocacy and activism

**Table 2**  
**Thematic Analysis of Media Persons**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>verbatim</b>	<b>frequency</b>
Emotional Toll of Exposure	Desensitization and reduced empathy from disturbing content, Anxiety, and stress from virality pressure	"Reporting on tragic events every day has negative outcomes i.e. anxiety, stress."	High
Challenges in Citizen Journalism	Lack of professionalism and training, Spread of misinformation, and deep fakes	"We often struggle with verifying information due to the lack of formal training."	High
Mental Health Considerations	Coping with exposure to graphic content, Impact of crisis reporting on mental well-being	Covering crisis events and consumption of such events leaves a lasting impact on mental health."	High
Ethical Dilemmas	Balancing engaging content with responsibility, Managing online harassment's impact	"It's a real challenge to create content that's engaging but still responsible."	High
Long-Term Effects	Development of emotional fatigue and scepticism, Risk of anxiety disorders and depression	"Over time, I've become more sceptical and emotionally fatigued."	Moderate

Strategies for Coping	Importance of media literacy and critical thinking, Implementing self-care practices	"Critical thinking and self-care are essential to cope with the stress and anxiety."	Moderate
Support Systems	Collaborative efforts for mental health in media organizations, Encouraging open discussions	"We should encourage open discussions about mental health."	Moderate
Impact on Reporting Quality	Influence of mental health on news accuracy and objectivity, Balance between well-being and work	"My mental health directly affects the quality of my reporting."	low
Educational Initiatives	Mental health training and coping strategy, Integrating ethics in citizen journalism	"Training programs on mental health have been very helpful."	Moderate
Advocacy and Policy	Advocating for better mental health support, Addressing ethical standards in journalism	"We need better mental health support and ethical standards in journalism."	High

**Table 3**  
**Thematic Analysis of Common Citizens**

Themes	Sub-themes	Verbatim	Frequency
Effect of social media	Emotional responses to fake news, Impact of comparisons and harassment on mental health	"Exposure to fake news makes me anxious and sometimes depressed and stressed."	High
Challenges with Citizen Journalism	Lack of regulation and ethics, Necessity for critical thinking and media literacy	"There is no oversight; anyone can post anything without consequences."	High
Engagement and Emotional Investment	Emotional responses to different content formats, Subjective experiences, and emotional triggers	"Certain news formats really get to me emotionally."	High
Long-Term Effects of News Consumption	Emergence of scepticism and mistrust, Impact on mental health from prolonged exposure to intense information	"I have become more doubtful of news sources over time because of obvious reasons."	High
Media Literacy and Verification	Importance of fact-checking and data verification, Distinguishing bias, and unreliable information	"It's vital to verify information before believing it."	High

Coping Strategies	Managing emotional effects such as stress and anxiety, Seeking reliable sources, and open discussions for validation	"I try to avoid stressful content and look for reliable sources."	Moderate
Community Impact	Influence of citizen journalism on public opinion and dialogue, Effects of misinformation on societal unity	"Citizen journalism plays an important role in shaping our perception and how we discuss public issues."	Moderate
Educational Initiatives	Support for media literacy programs in educational institutions, Raising awareness about mental health risks	"Institutes should teach media literacy to help individuals navigate the news."	Moderate
Role of social media	Impact of Algorithms and content presentation on News Responses, Platforms' Role in promoting emotional Well-being	"Algorithms often show me emotionally charged news and have negative effects."	Moderate
Advocacy and Responsible Consumption	Encouraging responsible engagement with news on social media, Campaigning for ethical practices in citizen journalism	"We need to engage responsibly with news on social media. Not everything is true"	Moderate

**Table 4**  
**Thematic Analysis of Students**

Themes	Sub-themes	Verbatim	Frequency
Emotional Impact of News Consumption	Psychological effects of exposure to graphic or disturbing content, Stress and anxiety from social media comparisons, and pressure to curate idealized content	"Seeing disturbing news every day affects my mood and has negative effects. "	High
Learning and Awareness	Opportunities for gaining diverse perspectives through citizen journalism, the Importance of critical thinking and fact-checking skills in news evaluation	"Citizen journalism has helped me see things from different viewpoints."	High



Coping Strategies and Self-Care	Techniques for managing emotional responses to news, Promoting mental health awareness and self-care practices	"I try to practice self-care when news gets overwhelming. I try to manage and regulate my emotions on my own "	Moderate
Media Literacy Education	Incorporating media literacy into curricula, Navigating emotional triggers and conflicting information in news	"Learning to fact-check the news as everything shown cannot be authentic and true."	Moderate
Impact on Well-being	Long-term effects of news consumption on mental well-being, Maintaining a healthy balance for mental health protection	Constant exposure to such content has long-term impacts on my mental health."	High
Ethics and Responsibility	Discussing ethical considerations in citizen journalism, Encouraging critical engagement with news content	"Ethical standards and training in journalism are essential to avoid spreading misinformation."	Moderate
Supportive Environments	Creating supportive spaces for mental health concerns, Encouraging dialogue about news consumption habits	"Taking initiative and educating individuals about the concerns and how to manage them is really important. "	Moderate
Community Engagement	Promoting media literacy and responsible news sharing, Raising awareness about mental health and media ethics	"We need to share news responsibly and promote media literacy."	High
Digital Citizenship	Teaching responsible digital citizenship and ethical online behaviour, Empowering advocacy for media standards	"Being a responsible digital citizen is important."	Low
Advocacy and Activism	Advocating for mental health awareness and responsible media consumption, Promoting activism for media literacy and ethical standards	"We should advocate for mental health and be responsible for media use. Ethical consideration should be followed, and we must have digital literacy "	Moderate

## Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the impact of citizen journalism on citizens' mental health. This complex relationship could not be studied by quantitative measures as this will only uncover the specific aspects. For the sake of more involved insights into the pinpointed

experiences and the hidden coping tactics, qualitative approaches such as interviews or focus groups are the most appropriate. (Brown & Clark, 2019).

The study confirms the conceptual framework that various concepts of theories i.e., media dependency theory, Media richness theory, social contagion theory and social cognitive theory of mass communication support apply and are related to the effect of citizen journalism on mental well-being. Overexposure to anything can lead to negative effects and being dependent on one thing without fact-checking and checking the accuracy could have negative effects. Individuals consuming diverse types of content via citizen journalism can lead to negative effects as citizen journalists do not follow ethical considerations and are not trained professionals. Consuming and being exposed to disturbing content can increase the likelihood of psychological issues i.e., depression, anxiety, stress, and PTSD (Newman & Fletcher, 2018). Everyone has a unique way of perceiving, consuming, and experiencing information from citizen journalism.

Exposure to disturbing content/graphics, deep fakes, personal stories, and content without filtering can lead to negative effects and many people cannot handle or control these effects which can result in the worsening of the consequences. Social media platforms and internet connectivity play a significant role in the generation of citizen journalism content in the spread or consumption of such content. Most of the people responded with negative effects of citizen journalism but few responded that it also has positive effects if the consumer regulates their emotions, don't get overexposed to the content, fact check the information and have literacy also if the citizen journalists follow the ethical standards and get some training just like the traditional journalists (Porterfield, 2024).

The relationship between citizen journalism consumption and mental well-being may be mediated by demographic factors such as age, literacy, education, and socioeconomic status. Moreover, Media literacy and awareness are important to understand how individuals can navigate and regulate their emotions as the result of any violating or distressing content. Changes in coping strategies and mental health can be tracked by longitudinal studies over time, whereas the responsibilities of citizen journalists and media platforms can be addressed by highlighting the ethical considerations which provide the need to protect vulnerable groups (Roberts & Adams, 2022). Cross-cultural comparisons are essential to understand the relationship between citizen journalism exposure and mental health which highlights the universal and culturally specific aspects on a global scale. (Nguyen, 2021).

The paper discusses the major influence of social media algorithms in determining what citizen journalism content the user comes across and what is their emotional response to it (Tao & Freemont, 2024).

The article initially underscores the significance of distinguishing between several types of citizens' journalistic content and how they influence people's emotional responses and mental health outcomes. (Goldberg & Ritter, 2022). The findings suggest that participants responded with a range of experiences that highlight the negative impact, including heightened anxiety, stress, emotional turmoil, and information overload when exposed to distressing or controversial content shared via citizen journalism. These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions and ethical guidelines to moderate the negative psychological consequences linked with citizen journalism.

The research wraps up a convincing argument of the need for continuous research in some areas that are related to both citizen journalism and mental health. The study shows the intricate relationship between media consumption, emotional responses, and psychological well-being in the digital era (Seely, 2023). Through a thorough analysis of diverse perspectives and experiences of the three categories and the effects of citizen journalism on mental health, we have highlighted the importance of promoting ethical

standards, training, responsible reporting and intervention development in the realm of citizen journalism.

### **Recommendations**

Encourage citizen journalists to follow ethical standards and adopt responsible reporting practices to lessen the negative impacts on mental health.

Educational initiatives to improve media literacy among individuals focus on critical thinking and the ability to discern genuine information from misinformation.

Encouragement for the incorporation of coping strategies and practices to help individuals manage the emotional toll and other issues caused by consuming distressing content shared via citizen journalism.

Collaboration between media organizations, mental health professionals, and community groups to create support systems that address mental health concerns linked with citizen journalism.

Encourage open discussions about the mental health consequences of citizen journalism to raise awareness and reduce stigma, creating a healthier media consumption landscape.

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