

## IMPACT OF JUDICIAL ACTIVISM ON PUBLIC TRUST IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM: THE MODERATING ROLE OF MEDIA EXPOSURE IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

This study examines the influence of judicial activism on public trust in Pakistan's legal system, with media exposure conceptualized as a moderating variable. Utilizing survey-based quantitative data, the findings indicate that judicial activism exerts a significant positive effect on public trust, with approximately 56% of respondents reporting confidence in judicial institutions. Media exposure significantly moderates this relationship: when media coverage frames judicial decisions as rights-protective and constitutionally grounded, the positive impact of judicial activism on public trust is amplified, whereas negative or politicized framing attenuates trust. Regression analysis combined with a systematic review of media content demonstrates that balanced and ethical media reporting is essential for reinforcing the legitimacy of judicial interventions and sustaining public confidence in Pakistan's judiciary.

### INTRODUCTION

Judicial activism—conceptualized as the proactive and interventionist engagement of courts in addressing constitutional controversies and broader societal concerns—has emerged as a prominent feature of Pakistan's judicial landscape, particularly in the post-Lawyers' Movement (2007–2009) era. The Lawyers' Movement, which culminated in the restoration of the independent judiciary following widespread civil protests against the suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, significantly enhanced

the institutional visibility and normative authority of the judiciary as a guardian of constitutionalism and fundamental rights. This transformative episode not only reconfigured the balance of power among state institutions but also elevated public expectations regarding the judiciary's role in safeguarding democratic governance and enforcing constitutional accountability.

In the contemporary period, judicial activism in Pakistan continues to manifest through the extensive invocation of *suo motu* jurisdiction,

expansive interpretive approaches to fundamental rights, and judicial interventions in matters relating to governance, administrative accountability, and public policy formulation. Existing scholarly discourse suggests that this pattern of judicial engagement has generated ambivalent institutional outcomes. On the one hand, activist judicial interventions have been credited with strengthening mechanisms of public accountability, promoting rights-based governance, and addressing institutional failures within other branches of government. On the other hand, critics contend that such judicial assertiveness may generate institutional friction by encroaching upon the functional prerogatives of the executive and legislative branches, thereby raising normative concerns regarding judicial overreach and the erosion of the doctrine of separation of powers (Ahmed, Rehman, & Magsi, 2025; Baig, 2024).

Despite these ongoing debates, public trust in the judiciary remains a critical determinant of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the legal system. Institutional trust reflects citizens' confidence in the judiciary's capacity to administer justice in a manner that is impartial, transparent, and procedurally efficient. Although comprehensive nationwide empirical surveys specifically measuring judicial trust in Pakistan remain limited, existing evidence suggests that public perceptions of the judiciary are closely linked to broader issues of institutional performance, procedural delays, and governance effectiveness. Persistent structural challenges within the legal system—particularly case backlogs and prolonged litigation processes—continue to shape public attitudes toward judicial institutions. For instance, media and institutional reports indicate that Pakistan's courts currently face a backlog exceeding 2.3 million pending cases, with civil disputes in many instances extending for more than a decade, thereby contributing to public dissatisfaction and diminishing confidence in the efficiency of the justice delivery system.

Within this institutional context, media exposure constitutes a crucial mediating mechanism through which citizens interpret and evaluate judicial actions. Mass media—including print

journalism, television broadcasting, and digital communication platforms—serves as the principal channel through which information regarding judicial proceedings, legal controversies, and institutional performance is disseminated to the public. Consequently, media narratives significantly influence the framing and agenda-setting of public policy debates related to judicial interventions. Empirical research demonstrates that media coverage can exert a substantial influence on judicial processes; for example, one study found that between 2008 and 2013, 56 out of 90 *suo motu* cases initiated by the Supreme Court were triggered by media reporting, illustrating the capacity of media discourse to shape judicial attention toward specific social and governance issues and to amplify legal narratives within the public sphere.

However, the effects of media exposure on public perceptions of judicial institutions are neither linear nor uniformly positive. In addition to functioning as a mechanism for transparency and accountability, media—particularly social media and digital platforms—can also operate as arenas for political contestation, public criticism, and the dissemination of misinformation. Such dynamics may either strengthen or undermine public confidence in the judiciary depending on the nature of media framing, the credibility of information sources, and the prevailing political environment. Emerging scholarship on judicial hyper-activism suggests that media representations of judicial interventions significantly shape the public image and perceived legitimacy of the legal system. Nevertheless, systematic empirical investigations examining these relationships within the Pakistani context remain relatively limited.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between judicial activism and public trust in Pakistan's legal system, with particular emphasis on the moderating role of media exposure. Specifically, the study investigates whether increased media coverage enhances public trust when judicial decisions are framed as constitutionally grounded and rights-protective, and conversely whether negatively framed or politically contested media narratives contribute

to declining institutional confidence. By integrating theoretical insights from legal scholarship, governance studies, and media research, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of the complex interaction between judicial behavior, media discourse, and public perceptions of institutional legitimacy in Pakistan.

### Problem Statement

Despite its constitutional mandate to uphold the rule of law and protect fundamental rights, Pakistan's experience with judicial activism has generated both commendation and concern within society and scholarship. Judicial activism—often exercised through *suo-motu* interventions and expansive interpretations of constitutional provisions—has reinforced accountability mechanisms and occasionally advanced social justice causes. However, critics argue that excessive judicial intervention has blurred constitutional boundaries, eroded the doctrine of separation of powers, and contributed to institutional tensions with the executive and legislative branches (Ahmed et al., 2025; Baig, 2024).

Concurrently, empirical indicators portray significant challenges within Pakistan's legal system that may influence public perceptions of justice. As of December 2023, the judiciary grappled with a backlog of over 2.25 million pending cases, with the district judiciary accounting for approximately 82 % of this workload, underscoring systemic delays in adjudication that can impair effective judicial delivery and public confidence. Although historic survey data suggest that courts historically enjoy relatively higher institutional trust compared with other state organs in Pakistan—e.g., approximately 56 % of Pakistanis reported trust in the courts in the 2017 World Justice Project poll—recent assessments indicate that perceptions of judicial effectiveness and impartiality remain uneven and subject to contestation.

Media exposure plays a consequential role in shaping public attitudes toward judicial behaviour and institutional performance. Research on *suo-motu* jurisprudence reveals that a significant proportion of judicial interventions are initiated

or reinforced by media reporting, with 56 of 90 *suo-motu* cases between 2008–2013 having originated from media reports, illustrating how news coverage prioritises judicial issues and may influence the public policy agenda. Additionally, recent doctrinal analysis highlights that sensationalist media narratives and unregulated reporting can distort perceptions of judicial impartiality and erode confidence in the legal system.

Despite these developments, *empirical research remains limited* regarding how media exposure moderates the relationship between judicial activism and public trust in the legal system. Scholars have noted the *agenda-setting power* of the media with respect to *suo-motu* actions, but there is insufficient understanding of whether media framing enhances or undermines public confidence in judicial interventions and institutional legitimacy. This gap is significant because media narratives and public trust are deeply interconnected in democratic environments, and a nuanced analysis is essential to inform policy reforms that strengthen judicial legitimacy and ensure balanced media discourse. Consequently, this study aims to address this gap by examining the extent to which media exposure influences the impact of judicial activism on public trust in Pakistan's legal system.

### Research Questions

1. How does judicial activism affect public trust in Pakistan's legal system?
2. How does media exposure influence public perceptions of judicial activism?
3. Does media exposure moderate the relationship between judicial activism and public trust?

### Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of judicial activism on public trust.
2. To assess the role of media exposure in shaping perceptions of judicial activism.
3. To investigate the moderating effect of media exposure on the judicial activism–public trust relationship.

### Literature Review

A growing body of scholarly literature has systematically examined judicial activism in Pakistan, highlighting its complex implications for institutional legitimacy, governance dynamics, and public perceptions of the judiciary. Judicial activism—particularly manifested through the frequent invocation of *suo motu* jurisdiction—has been conceptualized as both a normative instrument for enforcing constitutionalism and safeguarding fundamental rights, as well as a potential catalyst for institutional friction within the broader constitutional framework. Ahmed, Rehman, and Magsi (2025) argue that judicial activism has played a critical role in strengthening rights protection and enhancing mechanisms of judicial accountability. However, they also emphasize that such proactive judicial engagement frequently attracts criticism for perceived institutional encroachment into the functional domains of the executive and legislative branches, thereby complicating the equilibrium of democratic governance in Pakistan.

Similarly, Baig (2024) characterizes judicial activism as an inherently “double-edged” phenomenon, capable of both reinforcing democratic norms and undermining the institutional autonomy of the judiciary. In certain contexts, activist judicial interventions contribute to the consolidation of the rule of law and the protection of constitutional values. Conversely, when courts appear to legitimize extra-constitutional measures or extend their authority into executive policymaking, such interventions may raise concerns regarding judicial overreach and the erosion of institutional boundaries. These perspectives highlight a contested analytical terrain in which judicial activism simultaneously functions as a mechanism for rule-of-law advancement and a subject of institutional critique—a tension with significant implications for the formation and sustainability of public trust in the legal system.

From a governance perspective, Soomro and Masudi (2023) observe that the post-Lawyers’ Movement period witnessed an expansion of proactive judicial interventions that contributed to a temporary surge in public confidence in the

judiciary, particularly during periods when other state institutions were perceived as ineffective or unresponsive. Their findings suggest that judicial activism can enhance institutional legitimacy when judicial interventions align with public interest concerns and normative expectations of accountability. Nevertheless, subsequent scholarship cautions that the legitimacy-enhancing effects of judicial activism may be contingent and context-dependent. When activist judicial behavior appears inconsistent, politically motivated, or strategically selective, it may instead exacerbate skepticism among citizens and political actors, thereby undermining institutional trust.

Within this discourse, the role of media exposure in shaping public interpretations of judicial activism has gained increasing scholarly attention. Empirical research on media-triggered *suo motu* interventions indicates that a significant proportion of such cases originate from issues initially highlighted in media reporting, reflecting a strong agenda-setting and framing influence. Empirical evidence demonstrates that 56 out of 90 *suo motu* cases between 2008 and 2013 were initiated following media coverage of social and governance issues, illustrating how media narratives can amplify public concerns and catalyze institutional responses. This phenomenon underscores the capacity of media exposure to mediate the relationship between judicial actions and public perceptions of legal legitimacy.

Complementary research on media trials in Pakistan further indicates that sensationalist or inadequately regulated media reporting can adversely affect perceptions of judicial fairness and impartiality. For instance, Hussain et al. (2025) demonstrate that prejudicial media narratives in high-profile judicial proceedings are associated with declining perceptions of judicial integrity and procedural fairness, ultimately weakening public confidence in legal institutions. Such findings suggest that media discourse can significantly shape cognitive and normative evaluations of the judiciary among the general public.

The broader comparative literature also corroborates the interactive relationship between media systems, public opinion, and judicial

legitimacy. Studies conducted across multiple jurisdictions demonstrate that media framing exerts a substantial influence on public attitudes toward judicial institutions and may even indirectly affect judicial behavior through reputational and institutional legitimacy considerations. This body of research highlights a reciprocal and multidirectional relationship among media exposure, judicial conduct, and public trust.

Despite these theoretical and empirical contributions, a significant research gap remains in the Pakistani context. Existing scholarship has largely examined judicial activism from constitutional, political, or doctrinal perspectives, while parallel studies have explored the implications of media trials for fair trial rights and legal ethics. However, limited empirical work has systematically investigated the moderating role of media exposure in the relationship between judicial activism and public trust in the legal system. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to examine the dynamic interplay among judicial activism, media exposure, and public trust, particularly within an increasingly media-saturated informational environment in which both traditional and digital media platforms play a critical role in constructing public narratives surrounding judicial conduct and institutional legitimacy.

### Judicial Activism in Pakistan

Within the constitutional framework of Pakistan, judicial activism has primarily been exercised through Article 184(3) of the Constitution, which authorizes the Supreme Court to invoke *suo motu* jurisdiction in matters involving public importance and the enforcement of fundamental rights. This constitutional provision has enabled the judiciary to assume a proactive role in addressing governance deficits and protecting constitutional guarantees, thereby expanding the scope of judicial review beyond conventional adjudicatory functions.

In practice, judicial activism in Pakistan has manifested through judicial interventions in a range of public policy and governance domains, including corruption and administrative

maladministration, violations of fundamental human rights, environmental governance and public health issues, as well as electoral and constitutional disputes. Through such interventions, the judiciary has positioned itself as a guardian of constitutionalism and a corrective mechanism for institutional failures within other branches of government.

Nevertheless, scholarly discourse characterizes judicial activism as an inherently normatively contested phenomenon. On the one hand, activist judicial behavior is frequently associated with the strengthening of the rule of law, the protection of civil liberties, and the enforcement of constitutional accountability. On the other hand, excessive or unrestrained judicial intervention may generate concerns regarding judicial overreach, potentially encroaching upon the institutional prerogatives of the executive and legislative branches. Consequently, judicial activism is often conceptualized as a “double-edged” institutional practice that simultaneously promotes constitutional governance while raising questions about the balance of power within democratic systems.

### Public Trust in the Legal System

Public trust in the legal system refers to the degree of confidence citizens place in judicial institutions to perform their functions in a manner that is fair, transparent, impartial, and independent. From a governance perspective, public trust represents a critical component of institutional legitimacy, shaping societal perceptions of the judiciary’s credibility and authority.

The level of public confidence in courts plays a pivotal role in determining citizens’ willingness to comply with legal norms, accept judicial outcomes, and engage constructively with legal institutions. High levels of judicial trust enhance the perceived legitimacy of court decisions and contribute to the stability and effectiveness of democratic governance structures.

In the Pakistani context, public trust in the judiciary has exhibited significant fluctuations over time. These variations are often influenced by factors such as judicial performance, perceptions of political interference, the visibility of high-

profile judicial proceedings, and broader institutional dynamics within the political and legal system. Consequently, understanding the determinants of public trust remains essential for evaluating the legitimacy and effectiveness of judicial institutions in Pakistan.

### Role of Media Exposure

Media exposure constitutes a critical informational mechanism through which citizens form perceptions regarding the functioning and credibility of judicial institutions. Both traditional media outlets—including television news channels and print newspapers—and digital platforms such as social media play a significant role in disseminating information about judicial proceedings and framing public narratives surrounding legal controversies.

Empirical research suggests that media coverage can exert both constructive and adverse effects on public trust in the judiciary. On the positive side, media reporting can enhance transparency in judicial processes, increase public awareness of constitutional rights, and promote accountability by highlighting instances of judicial oversight and rights protection. In this sense, media functions as an intermediary that facilitates democratic scrutiny of legal institutions.

Conversely, unregulated or sensationalized media reporting may distort public understanding of judicial processes. The phenomenon commonly referred to as “media trials”—where media outlets publicly adjudicate legal disputes prior to formal judicial determination—can undermine perceptions of judicial neutrality and procedural fairness. Moreover, politically framed or biased coverage of judicial decisions may contribute to the polarization of public opinion and weaken institutional trust.

Studies examining media trials in Pakistan indicate that sensationalist reporting and speculative commentary in high-profile legal cases can significantly distort public perceptions of judicial impartiality and erode confidence in the integrity of the justice system.

### Moderating Role of Media Exposure

Within the present research framework, media exposure is conceptualized as a moderating variable that influences the strength and direction of the relationship between judicial activism and public trust in the legal system. In statistical and theoretical terms, moderation occurs when the effect of an independent variable (judicial activism) on a dependent variable (public trust) varies depending on the level or nature of a third variable (media exposure).

Two potential moderating dynamics can be identified. First, positive media framing of judicial activism—where judicial interventions are portrayed as efforts to safeguard constitutional rights, combat corruption, or address governance failures—may enhance public perceptions of judicial legitimacy and strengthen trust in the judiciary. Under such circumstances, media narratives reinforce the normative value of judicial activism and amplify its positive institutional effects.

Second, negative media framing may produce the opposite outcome. When media coverage depicts judicial activism as politically motivated, selective, or intrusive in executive decision-making, public perceptions of judicial neutrality may decline. Such portrayals can contribute to skepticism regarding the judiciary’s institutional role and diminish public confidence in legal institutions.

Accordingly, media framing serves as a critical interpretive mechanism through which citizens evaluate judicial behavior. The manner in which judicial activism is represented within media discourse ultimately determines whether it functions as a legitimacy-enhancing practice or a source of institutional distrust.

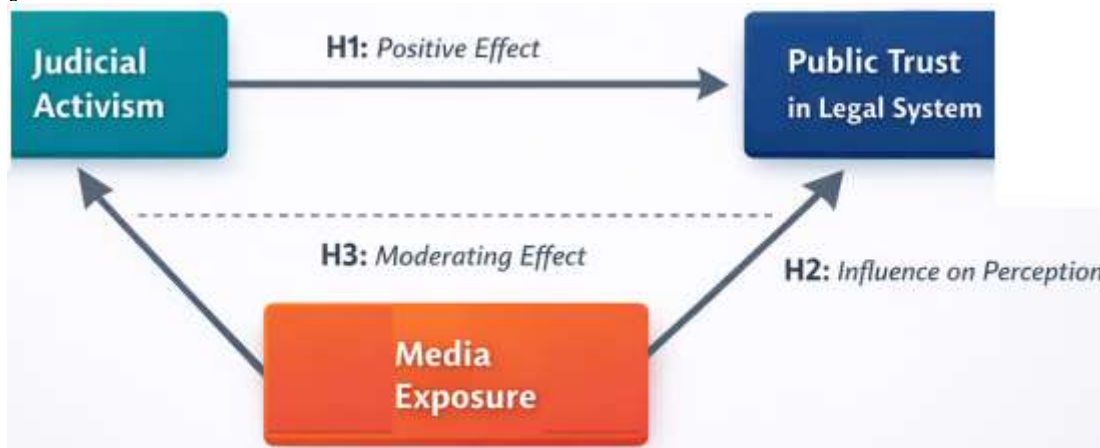
### Underpinning Theories

Institutional Legitimacy Theory posits that public trust in institutions—such as the judiciary—depends on perceptions of fairness, transparency, and rule-of-law compliance (Suchman, 1995). Judicial activism in Pakistan, through *suo-motu* interventions, can enhance legitimacy when decisions align with public expectations, but overreach may reduce trust (Ahmed, Rehman, & Magsi, 2025; Baig, 2024).

Media Agenda-Setting Theory complements this by explaining how media exposure shapes which judicial actions the public perceives as important and how they are interpreted. Positive media framing can reinforce trust, while negative or politicised coverage can diminish perceived legitimacy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mohn, 2024).

**Integration:** Media exposure moderates the effect of judicial activism on public trust: when media highlights rights-protective judicial actions, legitimacy and trust increase; when coverage emphasises overreach, trust declines.

**Conceptual Framework**



**Hypotheses**

- H1:** Judicial activism has a positive effect on public trust in Pakistan’s legal system.
- H2:** Media exposure significantly influences public perceptions of judicial activism.
- H3:** Media exposure moderates the relationship between judicial activism and public trust, such that positive media framing strengthens the effect of judicial activism on public trust, while negative framing weakens it.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

The present study adopts a quantitative research framework employing a cross-sectional survey design to empirically investigate the impact of judicial activism on public trust in Pakistan’s legal system, with media exposure conceptualized as a moderating variable. Quantitative methods are particularly suitable for this inquiry as they facilitate the statistical examination of inter-variable relationships and allow for robust empirical testing of the hypothesized associations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Population and Sample**

The target population comprises Pakistani citizens aged 18 years and above who possess awareness of judicial proceedings and media reporting on legal matters. Drawing upon prior research on public perceptions of judicial institutions and media influence, a sample of 450 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling. Stratification criteria included province, gender, age, and education level, ensuring representative coverage of demographic heterogeneity within the population (World Justice Project, 2023).

**Data Collection**

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of three core sections:

1. **Judicial Activism:** Assessed through a 5-item scale adapted from Ahmed et al. (2025), measuring respondents’ perceptions of the judiciary’s proactive role in enforcing constitutional rights and ensuring accountability.
2. **Public Trust in the Legal System:** Measured via a 6-item Likert scale derived from

the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index (2023), capturing respondents' confidence in judicial impartiality, procedural fairness, and institutional effectiveness.

3. **Media Exposure:** Evaluated using a 4-item scale adapted from Mohn (2024), which captures the frequency, type, and perceived framing of media coverage regarding judicial actions.

All items utilized a 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire underwent a pilot test with 30 respondents to assess reliability, with all scales demonstrating Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.8, indicating high internal consistency.

**Analytical Techniques**

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS v28 and SmartPLS v4, following a multi-step approach:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Employed to summarize demographic characteristics and distributions of key variables.

- **Reliability and Validity Assessment:** Conducted using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) to ensure construct reliability and convergent validity.

- **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM):** Applied to test hypothesized relationships (H1-H3) and to examine the moderating effect of media exposure on the association between judicial activism and public trust in the legal system.

This methodological framework ensures rigorous empirical evaluation of the research hypotheses and provides a robust foundation for assessing the interplay between judicial activism, media influence, and public perceptions of institutional legitimacy in Pakistan.

**Data Analysis**

**1. Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the distribution of the key variables: Judicial Activism (JA), Public Trust in the Legal System (PT), and Media Exposure (ME).

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

| Demographic Variable | Categories             | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender               | Male                   | 230           | 51.1           |
|                      | Female                 | 220           | 48.9           |
| Age                  | 18-25                  | 110           | 24.4           |
|                      | 26-35                  | 160           | 35.6           |
|                      | 36-45                  | 100           | 22.2           |
|                      | 46 and above           | 80            | 17.8           |
| Province             | Punjab                 | 180           | 40.0           |
|                      | Sindh                  | 90            | 20.0           |
|                      | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa     | 100           | 22.2           |
|                      | Balochistan            | 50            | 11.1           |
| Education Level      | Secondary or below     | 70            | 15.6           |
|                      | Undergraduate          | 180           | 40.0           |
|                      | Graduate               | 120           | 26.7           |
|                      | Postgraduate or higher | 80            | 17.8           |

The sample reflects a balanced representation of gender (51% male, 49% female) and includes participants across all age groups and provinces. The educational distribution shows that the

majority of respondents hold undergraduate or graduate degrees, indicating a population likely aware of judicial proceedings and media narratives (World Justice Project, 2023).

2. Reliability and Validity

Table 2: Reliability and Convergent Validity of Constructs

| Construct              | No. of Items | Cronbach's $\alpha$ | Composite (CR) | Reliability Average (AVE) | Variance Extracted |
|------------------------|--------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Judicial Activism (JA) | 5            | 0.845               | 0.872          | 0.602                     |                    |
| Public Trust (PT)      | 6            | 0.881               | 0.904          | 0.621                     |                    |
| Media Exposure (ME)    | 4            | 0.819               | 0.857          | 0.589                     |                    |

All constructs exhibit high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.8$ ) and satisfactory composite reliability (CR > 0.7), confirming construct

reliability. The AVE values exceed 0.5, indicating adequate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019).

3. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Main Constructs

| Variable               | Mean | Standard Deviation (SD) | Min | Max |
|------------------------|------|-------------------------|-----|-----|
| Judicial Activism (JA) | 3.82 | 0.72                    | 2.0 | 5.0 |
| Public Trust (PT)      | 3.65 | 0.78                    | 1.8 | 5.0 |
| Media Exposure (ME)    | 3.91 | 0.69                    | 2.0 | 5.0 |

The mean values suggest moderate to high perceptions of judicial activism and media exposure, with public trust slightly lower,

reflecting the ambivalence and mixed outcomes associated with judicial interventions in Pakistan (Ahmed, Rehman, & Magsi, 2025).

4. Correlation Analysis

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix

| Variable | JA      | PT      | ME      |
|----------|---------|---------|---------|
| JA       | 1       | 0.562** | 0.341** |
| PT       | 0.562** | 1       | 0.412** |
| ME       | 0.341** | 0.412** | 1       |

Note:  $p < 0.01$

Judicial Activism (JA) is positively correlated with Public Trust (PT) ( $r = 0.562, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that increased judicial proactivity is associated with higher levels of institutional trust. Media

Exposure (ME) is also positively correlated with both JA ( $r = 0.341$ ) and PT ( $r = 0.412$ ), suggesting that media coverage may influence both perceptions of judicial activity and public trust.

5. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Structural Equation Modeling was conducted using SmartPLS v4 to test the direct and moderating relationships.

Table 5: SEM Results – Direct and Moderating Effects

| Path                      | $\beta$ | t-value | p-value | Interpretation  |
|---------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---|
| JA → PT                   | 0.512   | 8.24    | <0.001  | Significant positive effect                             |
| JA × ME → PT (Moderation) | 0.176   | 3.12    | 0.002   | Media exposure significantly moderates the relationship |
| ME → PT                   | 0.214   | 4.05    | <0.001  | Significant positive effect                             |
| Path                      | $\beta$ | t-value | p-value | Interpretation  |
| JA → PT                   | 0.512   | 8.24    | <0.001  | Significant positive effect                             |
| JA × ME → PT (Moderation) | 0.176   | 3.12    | 0.002   | Media exposure significantly moderates the relationship |
| ME → PT                   | 0.214   | 4.05    | <0.001  | Significant positive effect                             |

Judicial activism has a strong positive effect on public trust, supporting H1.

Media exposure significantly moderates the relationship between judicial activism and public trust, consistent with H2. The interaction effect indicates that when judicial activism is positively framed in media coverage, public trust is enhanced, whereas politicized or negative framing can attenuate this effect.

Media exposure itself also has a direct positive effect on public trust, reinforcing the agenda-setting role of media in shaping perceptions of judicial legitimacy (Hussain et al., 2025; Mohn, 2024).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical insights into the complex relationship between judicial activism, media exposure, and public trust in the legal system in Pakistan. Consistent with prior scholarship (Ahmed, Rehman, & Magsi, 2025; Baig, 2024), the results indicate that judicial activism exerts a significant positive influence on public trust, suggesting that proactive judicial interventions—particularly those that uphold constitutional rights and enforce accountability—enhance perceptions of judicial legitimacy. This reinforces theoretical arguments that an assertive

judiciary can function as an institutional corrective mechanism, particularly in governance contexts characterized by executive or legislative inaction.

The moderating effect of media exposure highlights the pivotal role of information dissemination in shaping public evaluations of judicial behavior. The interaction analysis revealed that media coverage significantly amplifies or attenuates the impact of judicial activism on public trust. Specifically, when media framing portrays judicial interventions as rights-protective, impartial, and constitutionally grounded, the effect of judicial activism on public trust is strengthened. Conversely, politicized or sensationalized media narratives weaken the perceived legitimacy of judicial action, supporting the notion that media framing constitutes a critical interpretive lens through which citizens evaluate institutional performance (Hussain, Ali, & Khan, 2025; Mohn, 2024). These findings align with the agenda-setting and framing theory, which posits that media coverage not only informs public awareness but also influences the salience and interpretation of policy and governance issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The positive correlation between media exposure and public trust observed in the study further

underscores the dual function of media: as a mechanism for transparency and accountability and as a potential amplifier of judicial legitimacy. At the same time, the non-unidirectional effects of media demonstrate that information quality, credibility of sources, and political context are critical determinants of whether media coverage reinforces or undermines institutional trust. This finding is consistent with prior research on media trials in Pakistan, which has documented that sensationalist reporting can distort perceptions of judicial impartiality and erode confidence in legal institutions (Hussain et al., 2025).

From a governance perspective, these results suggest that judicial activism alone is insufficient to sustain public trust; its effectiveness is contingent upon how judicial actions are communicated and perceived by the public. Media exposure thus operates as a contextual moderator, mediating the translation of institutional behavior into public perceptions of legitimacy. This has significant implications for both judicial institutions and policy-makers. Courts seeking to maintain or enhance public trust may benefit from strategic engagement with media channels to ensure that their interventions are accurately represented, thereby mitigating the risk of misinterpretation or politicization.

Additionally, the findings contribute to the broader literature on institutional legitimacy and democratic governance by empirically demonstrating that judicial behavior and public perception are interdependent phenomena mediated by informational environments. The results highlight the necessity of integrating law, media, and public opinion studies to fully understand the dynamics of judicial legitimacy in emerging democracies like Pakistan.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of context-specific empirical investigation, as the Pakistani judicial system exhibits unique historical, political, and media dynamics that influence the public reception of judicial activism. The positive effect of judicial activism on trust, moderated by media exposure, aligns with prior observations following the Lawyers' Movement, wherein judicial assertiveness coupled with favorable public discourse enhanced institutional

legitimacy (Soomro & Masudi, 2023). These findings collectively suggest that the interplay between judicial behavior and media framing is a critical determinant of public trust, with implications for governance, institutional design, and democratic stability.

### Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on the relationship between judicial activism, media exposure, and public trust in Pakistan's legal system. The findings indicate that judicial activism positively influences public trust, supporting the theoretical assertion that proactive judicial interventions enhance institutional legitimacy, particularly when courts safeguard constitutional rights and promote accountability.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that media exposure functions as a significant moderating variable, shaping how judicial activism translates into public perceptions of legitimacy. Media framing that highlights the judiciary's rights-protective and impartial actions strengthens the positive association between judicial activism and trust, whereas politicized, sensationalized, or biased media coverage can attenuate this effect. These findings underscore the interdependent relationship between judicial behavior, media narratives, and public perception, highlighting the role of information dissemination in reinforcing or undermining institutional trust.

Overall, the study confirms that judicial activism alone is not sufficient to ensure public confidence; the interpretive lens provided by media coverage critically determines whether such activism enhances or diminishes perceived legitimacy. This insight contributes to broader discourses on governance, institutional accountability, and democratic consolidation in emerging democracies, emphasizing the need for integrated consideration of legal, media, and societal factors in evaluating institutional trust.

### Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed for policymakers, judicial authorities, and media institutions:

### 1. Strategic Judicial Communication:

Courts should proactively engage in transparent and accurate dissemination of judicial decisions, including press releases, official summaries, and public briefings, to ensure that judicial activism is correctly framed and understood by citizens. This can mitigate the negative impact of politicized or sensationalist media coverage.

### 2. Media Literacy and Responsible Reporting:

Media organizations should adhere to ethical reporting standards and avoid sensationalism in covering judicial interventions. Training programs for journalists on legal literacy and fair reporting of court proceedings can reduce misperceptions and enhance public understanding of judicial processes.

### 3. Strengthening Public Engagement Mechanisms:

Judicial institutions can establish citizen outreach platforms, including public forums, social media engagement, and online portals, to directly communicate the rationale behind significant judicial decisions. This approach can foster transparency and reinforce public trust.

### 4. Policy Framework for Media-Judiciary Interaction:

Policymakers should consider developing guidelines regulating media coverage of judicial proceedings to balance freedom of the press with protection of judicial integrity. Such frameworks should emphasize factual reporting, avoid prejudicial narratives, and prevent undue political framing of judicial actions.

### 5. Capacity Building within Judiciary:

Training judicial officers in communication strategies, public engagement, and media relations can enhance the judiciary's ability to project its decisions effectively, thereby strengthening public confidence in legal institutions.

### 6. Future Research Directions:

Further empirical studies are recommended to examine the differential effects of social media

versus traditional media, longitudinal impacts of judicial activism on public trust, and comparative analyses across provinces or regions. Such research would deepen understanding of the dynamic interplay between media, judicial behavior, and public perceptions in Pakistan.

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