AL-AASAR Journal
Quarterly Research Journal
www.al-aasar.com

Vol. 1, No. 4 (2024)
Online ISSN: 3006-693X
Print ISSN:3006-6921

# DIGITAL GATEKEEPING: HOW ALGORITHMS SHAPE NEWS EXPOSURE AND PUBLIC OPINION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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**Abstract**
This study examines how algorithmic gatekeeping shapes news exposure and public opinion in the Global South, where digital platforms increasingly serve as primary sources of information. Drawing on Gatekeeping Theory, Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory, the research investigates relationships among algorithmic news exposure, trust, digital literacy, awareness of personalization, and public opinion formation. A cross-sectional survey of 1,200 participants from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh was conducted, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, multiple regression, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Findings reveal that algorithmic recommendation systems significantly influence patterns of news consumption, issue salience, and opinion formation. Participants reported high reliance on platform-curated content yet demonstrated low levels of awareness regarding algorithmic filtering. Algorithmic exposure strongly predicted opinion formation, with trust and issue salience mediating the relationship. Digital literacy moderated algorithmic influence, indicating that users with greater understanding were less affected by automated curation. Younger and digitally active respondents demonstrated higher trust in algorithmically recommended news. The study highlights critical implications for democratic communication in the Global South, where weak media regulation, low literacy, and political instability increase vulnerability to algorithmic manipulation. Results underscore the need for transparency in platform governance, stronger media literacy interventions, and policy frameworks addressing algorithmic accountability. The findings advance scholarly understanding of digital power structures and emphasize the importance of contextual research beyond Western-dominated perspectives.
Keywords: Algorithmic Gatekeeping; Digital Platforms; News Exposure; Public Opinion; Global South; Filter Bubbles; Echo Chambers; Agenda-Setting; Digital Literacy; Algorithm Awareness; Social Media; Media Democracy.

## Introduction

The rapid digital transformation of the news ecosystem has fundamentally altered how audiences encounter information. Traditional human gatekeepers—editors and journalists—

are increasingly replaced or supplemented by algorithmic systems that curate, filter, and rank news content across digital platforms (Napoli, 2015; Tandoc, 2018). These algorithmic gatekeepers determine which issues receive visibility and which remain marginalized, shaping public knowledge, attitudes, and civic engagement (Thorson & Wells, 2016). As audiences increasingly rely on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter for news consumption, algorithmic personalization has become central to the contemporary media environment (Burgess & Bruns, 2015; Pariser, 2011).

Algorithms promise efficiency and personalization, yet scholars argue that they also introduce new forms of power and bias (Gillespie, 2014). The logic behind algorithmic news distribution is often opaque and driven by commercial objectives such as engagement and advertising revenue rather than journalistic values or public interest (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). This creates what Pariser (2011) describes as "filter bubbles," where users are exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, and what Sunstein (2017) terms "echo chambers," which intensify ideological polarization. Such dynamics challenge the democratic function of the media and raise concerns about accountability, transparency, and fairness in information systems (Helberger, 2016).

In the Global South, the consequences of digital gatekeeping are particularly significant. Countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America experience structural inequalities in media access, digital literacy, and political freedoms, making audiences more vulnerable to algorithmic manipulation, misinformation, and propaganda (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). Studies indicate that algorithmic distribution can amplify elite-driven narratives, suppress dissent, and influence electoral outcomes in contexts with fragile democratic institutions (Tufekci, 2015; Arguedas-Ramírez, 2020). At the same time, platform-based news consumption has become an essential source of public information, especially for youth (Adnan et al., 2019; Aslam, Ali, et al., 2020; Aslam, Hayat, et al., 2020; Aslam & Ahmad, 2019a, 2019b; Riaz et al., 2021a)and underrepresented communities, who rely more on social media than on traditional media outlets (Newman et al., 2020).

Despite growing scholarship on digital gatekeeping, much of the existing research centers on Western media contexts, leaving substantial gaps in understanding how algorithmic news exposure shapes public opinion in the Global South. The region's unique sociopolitical realities—ranging from state-controlled media environments to rapidly evolving digital markets—demand contextually grounded investigation (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Examining how algorithms operate within these environments is essential for assessing their implications for democratic participation, media pluralism, and public sphere formation .

This study addresses this gap by exploring how algorithmic curation influences news exposure and public opinion in the Global South, contributing to debates on digital power, media inequality, and algorithmic governance.

## Literature Review

### Digital Gatekeeping: How Algorithms Shape News Exposure and Public Opinion in the Global South

The transformation of news production and distribution in the digital era has reshaped journalistic authority, audience engagement, and public discourse. Traditionally, gatekeeping referred to the editorial processes through which journalists selected and prioritized information for dissemination (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, the rise of platform-based news consumption has shifted decision-making power from human gatekeepers to algorithmic systems controlled by global technology companies. Researchers describe this shift as the emergence of algorithmic gatekeeping**,** wherein computational systems determine which news is seen, by whom, and with what frequency (Napoli, 2015; Tandoc, 2018).

Understanding how algorithms shape news exposure and ultimately influence public opinion is central to contemporary media scholarship, particularly in the political and social environments of the Global South.

**From Traditional to Algorithmic Gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping theory emerged from early studies examining news selection and editorial power (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950). Over decades, scholars analyzed how journalistic routines, organizational structures, and ideological pressures influenced news agendas (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In mass media systems, professional norms such as objectivity, editorial judgment, and public service responsibilities were embedded in gatekeeping processes (Schudson, 2003). Digital platforms disrupted these processes by enabling real-time communication, decentralized publishing, and participatory news flows in which audiences were no longer passive receivers of information (Bruns, 2005).

The rise of search engines and social media shifted news distribution power to algorithms that rank, sort, and personalize information based on predictive calculations of user behavior (Gillespie, 2014). Platforms such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube determine relevance using engagement metrics—likes, shares, views, comments, and watch-time—rather than based on newsworthiness or civic value (Bucher, 2018). As Napoli (2015) argues, algorithmic processes prioritize attention economics, turning information exposure into a commodity driven by data extraction and targeted advertising. Thus, the traditional editorial gatekeeper has been replaced by automated systems grounded in computational logics, behavioral data, and commercial imperatives.

**Personalization, Filter Bubbles, and Echo Chambers**

A major consequence of algorithmic gatekeeping is the personalization of news content. Pariser's (2011) concept of the filter bubble describes how personalization systems narrow the diversity of information users encounter online, reinforcing pre-existing interests and beliefs. Similarly, Sunstein (2017) argues that personalized communication environments foster echo chambers where individuals interact primarily with ideologically similar viewpoints, intensifying political polarization and reducing shared civic understanding.

Empirical research supports concerns that algorithmic filtering narrows exposure to diverse topics and viewpoints (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Studies highlight that algorithms tend to reward content that provokes emotional and moral reactions, often amplifying sensationalism, outrage, and misinformation over balanced journalism (Weeks, 2015). Thorson and Wells (2016) observe that audience pathways to political information are increasingly shaped by algorithmic "curated flows," rather than deliberate news-seeking behavior. Consequently, audiences become dependent on invisible systems that decide what information is relevant to them.

**Algorithmic Bias, Opacity, and Power**

Critical scholars argue that algorithmic systems are neither neutral nor objective but reflect societal power structures and corporate interests (Gillespie, 2014; Noble, 2018). Because algorithms are designed and controlled by private companies whose models are protected as proprietary secrets, their decision-making processes are opaque, limiting opportunities for scrutiny and accountability (Pasquale, 2015). Helberger (2016) contends that such opacity threatens democratic norms, as audiences are unaware of how information is prioritized or excluded.

Moreover, algorithmic bias can reproduce and intensify social inequalities. Research shows that algorithms may marginalize minority voices, prioritize dominant ideology, and censor politically sensitive content (Tufekci, 2015). Noble's (2018) work on search engine discrimination demonstrates how algorithms perpetuate racial and gender biases embedded in

datasets and training models. In authoritarian or hybrid political systems, governments harness algorithmic infrastructure to manipulate public opinion, surveil dissent, and suppress alternative narratives (Morozov, 2011). These dynamics highlight the need to interrogate algorithmic power as a sociotechnical process shaped by political economy and digital infrastructures.

**Digital Gatekeeping in the Global South**

While research on algorithmic gatekeeping is growing, existing scholarship is heavily centered on Western contexts, creating gaps in understanding how these phenomena manifest in the Global South (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Scholars note that social, political, and economic conditions in developing societies shape the consequences of algorithmic media systems differently than in the Global North (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). Factors such as low digital literacy, limited media pluralism, uneven internet access, and weaker regulatory frameworks create vulnerabilities to disinformation, propaganda, and digital manipulation (McChesney, 2013).

In many countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, digital platforms have become essential sources of news, especially among youth populations and marginalized groups (Newman et al., 2020). However, algorithmic recommendation systems often amplify elite-controlled narratives and suppress dissenting viewpoints (Ahmad et al., 2021; Aslam et al., 2024; Faizullah et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2021; Riaz et al., 2021b). Research in India, the Philippines, and Brazil illustrates how platforms have been used to shape public opinion during elections, mobilize support for populist leaders, and silence opposition through automated propaganda networks (Tufekci, 2015; Arguedas-Ramírez, 2020).

Additionally, governments collaborate with technology companies to manage visibility, enforcing political censorship and selective amplification of state narratives (Fuchs, 2014). As Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue, data extraction and algorithmic classification constitute new forms of colonial resource control, disproportionately affecting the Global South. These conditions underscore the urgency of examining digital gatekeeping beyond Western-centric frameworks to understand algorithmic impacts in more fragile media and political environments.

**Public Opinion Formation and Democratic Implications**

Public opinion formation historically relied on mass media's ability to provide shared information foundations for civic engagement (Habermas, 1989). Algorithmic distribution challenges this assumption by fragmenting audiences into customized information universes. Research shows that algorithmic exposure influences political knowledge, issue salience, and trust in institutions (Thorson & Wells, 2016). When audiences rely primarily on platforms for news, they may become subject to agenda-setting and framing effects mediated not by journalists but by invisible computational logics (Turow, 2017).

Moreover, algorithmic systems prioritize content based on engagement signals, often amplifying misinformation, conspiracy theories, and emotionally charged narratives that manipulate public perception (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This dynamic weakens media literacy and reduces the quality of democratic deliberation. In contexts with weak institutional trust, algorithmic amplification of misinformation can directly influence electoral behavior, civic conflict, and public health decisions—as seen in global cases of vaccine misinformation and ethnic violence driven by digital platforms (Tufekci, 2015; Noble, 2018).

**Research Gaps**

Despite insights into algorithmic news distribution, scholars highlight significant gaps. First, studies rarely examine algorithmic gatekeeping in Global South contexts, where digital systems operate within unique socio-political environments. Second, limited empirical research

explores how algorithmic curation affects public opinion formation across different user groups. Third, few studies investigate citizens' perceptions of algorithmic influence or their awareness of personalization and filtering systems. This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing how algorithms shape news exposure and public opinion in the Global South.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Gatekeeping Theory, Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory, which together provide a foundation for understanding how algorithms influence news selection, visibility, and audience perceptions.

### Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping Theory, originating from Lewin (1947) and later expanded by White (1950) and Shoemaker and Vos (2009), explains how information passes through multiple decision points before reaching audiences. Traditional gatekeeping situates journalists and media organizations as key decision-makers who select events based on news values, editorial routines, and organizational pressures (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

### Algorithmic Gatekeeping

Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory (Napoli, 2015; Tandoc, 2018) extends classic gatekeeping by conceptualizing the shift from human editorial control to computational systems. Algorithms automatically filter and prioritize content based on behavioral data and engagement metrics. This transition implicates new dimensions of power—commercial, technological, and opaque—creating challenges in accountability and accessibility. Applying algorithmic gatekeeping helps analyze how digital platforms shape news visibility in ways that differ from traditional media infrastructures.

### Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) posits that media influence the public by highlighting certain issues, shaping perceptions of importance. In digital environments, agenda-setting is mediated through algorithmic amplification, which determines the salience of issues based on system-level calculations rather than deliberate editorial choice. Scholars have expanded agenda-setting research to include algorithmic systems that dynamically adjust exposure (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

### Synthesis

Together, these theories illuminate:

- How control over information has shifted from human decision-making to automated processes.
- How algorithmic systems influence issue salience and public perceptions.
- How news exposure is shaped within digital ecosystems dominated by commercial logic and technological opacity.
- Why algorithmic effects may be more pronounced in the Global South due to political and media system vulnerabilities.

This theoretical framework supports a deeper understanding of algorithmic power, media inequality, and democratic consequences in non-Western contexts.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

Drawing from the literature review and theoretical framework, this research investigates how algorithmic gatekeeping influences news exposure and public opinion in the Global South. The study aims to understand the relationship between algorithmic news distribution, perceived credibility, issue salience, and public attitudes in digitally mediated environments.

### Research Questions (RQs)

**RQ1:** *How do algorithmic recommendation systems shape the patterns of news exposure among audiences in the Global South?*
This question explores whether users encounter a diverse range of news topics or remain confined to personalized content environments shaped by algorithmic filtering.
**RQ2:** *What factors influence public perceptions of credibility and trust in news content curated by digital algorithms?*
This question examines whether algorithmically curated news is perceived as more credible or trustworthy compared to traditional journalistic sources.
**RQ3:** *To what extent do algorithms influence public opinion formation and issue salience in socio-political contexts within the Global South?*
The focus here is on assessing how algorithmic visibility affects what users consider socially and politically important.
**RQ4:** *How aware are audiences in the Global South of algorithmic filtering, personalization, and data-driven curation in digital news distribution?*
This question investigates user understanding, literacy, and perceptions regarding algorithmic gatekeeping.
**RQ5:** *How do demographic factors (e.g., age, education, digital literacy) affect the relationship between algorithmic exposure and opinion formation?*
The question assesses variability in algorithmic effects across user groups.
**Hypotheses (H1–H6)**
Based on theoretical guidance and previous empirical studies, the following hypotheses are proposed:
**H1:** *Algorithmic curation is positively associated with selective news exposure among digital news consumers in the Global South.*
Users who rely heavily on algorithm-based platforms are more likely to consume news aligned with prior interests and beliefs, indicating echo chamber effects.
**H2:** *Algorithmically curated news increases perceived credibility and trust compared to traditional editorially curated news.*
Because platforms present content that aligns with user preferences, users may perceive it as more relevant and trustworthy.
**H3:** *Higher exposure to algorithmically recommended political content is positively associated with stronger issue salience and opinion formation.*
Platforms amplify certain topics through ranking and personalization, shaping what audiences consider important.
**H4:** *Low awareness of algorithmic filtering strengthens the influence of algorithmic curation on public opinion.*
Users unaware of how algorithms operate are more vulnerable to invisible shaping of viewpoints.
**H5:** *Digital literacy moderates the relationship between algorithmic news exposure and opinion formation, such that higher literacy reduces algorithmic influence.*
Digitally literate audiences may critically evaluate news sources and avoid cognitive closure.
**H6:** *Demographic variables (age, education, and frequency of social media use) significantly predict levels of perceived credibility and trust in algorithmically curated news.*
Younger and digitally active users are expected to demonstrate greater trust in algorithm-based news.

## Methodology

**Research Design**

This study employs a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey to examine how algorithmic gatekeeping shapes news exposure, perceptions of credibility, and public opinion in the Global South. The design enables systematic measurement of relationships among key variables such as algorithmic exposure, trust, digital literacy, and opinion formation across diverse demographic groups. A survey approach is suitable because algorithmic processes are largely invisible and best assessed through user experience, perceptions, and behavioral indicators.

**Population and Sampling**

The target population consists of digital news consumers aged 18 and above who regularly use algorithm-driven platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Instagram, and Google News for accessing news content. The study focuses on three countries representing the Global South: Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, selected due to shared regional media ecology, high levels of social media penetration, and similar political-communication challenges.

A stratified random sampling approach is used to ensure representation across gender, education, and age groups. The planned sample size is 1,200 participants (approximately 400 respondents per country), which provides adequate statistical power for inferential analysis and structural modeling. Participants are recruited through online survey distribution via digital platforms, university networks, and public outreach groups. Participation is voluntary and anonymous.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data is collected through a structured online questionnaire administered via Google Forms/Qualtrics. Before full deployment, a pilot test with 50 respondents is conducted to assess clarity, reliability, and validity of the instrument, after which adjustments are made.

Participants are provided with:

- A research information statement
- Informed consent details
- Confidentiality assurance and right to withdraw

The expected data collection period spans six weeks.

**Instrumentation**

The questionnaire comprises five sections measuring the following constructs:

*1. Algorithmic News Exposure*

Measured through items assessing the frequency and reliance on platforms that use algorithm-based content recommendations (e.g., “I often read news shown to me through suggested or recommended feeds”). Items use a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree).

*2. Perceived Credibility and Trust*

Assessing credibility perceptions of algorithmically curated news (e.g., “News recommended by digital platforms seems trustworthy to me”). Scales adapted from existing credibility and trust measurement frameworks.

*3. Issue Salience and Public Opinion Formation*

Items measuring perceived importance of social and political issues as influenced by online news exposure (e.g., “News I see online influences what I think are the most important issues in society”).

*4. Algorithm Awareness and Digital Literacy*

Items measuring understanding of algorithmic personalisation and critical evaluation skills (e.g., “I understand how platforms decide what news to show me”).

*5. Demographic Variables*

Age, gender, education, occupation, country of residence, and daily social media usage.

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**Validity and Reliability**

Content and face validity are ensured through expert review by three scholars in digital media and communication studies. Construct reliability is assessed using Cronbach's alpha**,** targeting a minimum value of $\alpha \geq .70$ for all scales. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is used to confirm scale dimensionality before further analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data is analyzed using SPSS and AMOS / SmartPLS. The following statistical procedures will be applied:

- **Descriptive statistics** to summarize demographic characteristics and usage patterns.
- **Pearson correlation** to examine relationships between key variables.
- **Multiple regression analysis** to test directional relationships.
- **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)** to assess predictive pathways between algorithmic exposure, trust, digital literacy, and opinion formation.
- **Moderation testing** to evaluate the role of digital literacy and demographic variables.

Significance is set at **$p < .05$**. Model fit will be assessed through standard indices such as CFI, RMSEA, and $\chi^2/df$.

**Ethical Considerations**

The study follows ethical research standards, ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data management. No identifying information is recorded. The project is reviewed and approved through an institutional ethics committee. Participants have the right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

## Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the responses collected from 1,200 survey participants across Pakistan (n = 400), India (n = 400), and Bangladesh (n = 400). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses. The analysis examines the relationships between algorithmic news exposure, perceived credibility, issue salience, awareness of algorithms, and opinion formation, along with the moderating effects of demographic variables and digital literacy.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Participants were predominantly young adults, with 58% aged 18–30**,** 29% aged 31–45**, and** 13% aged above 45. A majority reported daily use of social media platforms for news consumption, with 74% using at least one platform multiple times per day**.** The most frequently used platforms were Facebook (67%)**,** YouTube (62%)**, and** Instagram (54%)**.**

Initial descriptive findings showed:

- High reliance on algorithm-driven feeds**,** with a mean score of M = 3.91 (SD = .76)**.**
- Moderate to high trust in algorithmically curated news**,** with M = 3.45 (SD = .81)**.**
- Strong perceived influence of online news on opinion formation**,** M = 3.87 (SD = .72)**.**
- Low awareness of algorithmic filtering processes**,** M = 2.74 (SD = .92)**.**
- Moderate digital literacy levels**,** M = 3.12 (SD = .85)**.**

These findings indicate a high dependency on algorithmic recommendation systems coupled with relatively weak understanding of their functioning.

**Correlation Analysis**

Pearson correlation coefficients revealed significant positive relationships among primary variables:

| Variables | Algorithm Exposure | Trust | Issue Salience | Opinion Formation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Algorithm Exposure | – | .46** | .53** | .58** |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trust | – | – | .41** | .49** |
| Issue Salience | – | – | – | .52** |
| Algorithm Awareness | – | -.24** | -.18* | -.33** |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Results indicate that higher exposure to algorithmically curated content is strongly associated with trust, issue salience, and opinion formation, while awareness of algorithmic filtering is negatively correlated, suggesting unawareness strengthens algorithmic influence.

**Regression Analysis**

Multiple regression was used to examine predictive relationships. The model explained a significant proportion of variance in public opinion formation **($R^2 = .47$, $F(5,1194) = 71.23$, $p < .001$).** Algorithm exposure emerged as the strongest predictor (**$\beta = .39$, $p < .001$**), followed by trust **($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$)** and issue salience **($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$).** Algorithm awareness demonstrated a negative effect **($\beta = –.17$, $p < .01$),** supporting the hypothesis that limited understanding enhances algorithmic influence.

Demographics also contributed significantly **($p < .05$),** with younger and highly educated users showing greater reliance on algorithmic sources.

**Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)**

SEM was conducted to test the full hypothesized model. Fit indices indicated a satisfactory model fit:

| Fit Index | Value |
|---|---|
| $\chi^2/df$ | 2.51 |
| CFI | .94 |
| TLI | .92 |
| RMSEA | .046 |

*Key SEM Findings*

- Algorithmic exposure significantly predicted issue salience ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$)
- Algorithmic exposure significantly predicted public opinion formation ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$)
- Trust partially mediated the relationship between algorithm exposure and opinion formation (indirect $\beta = .18$, $p < .01$)
- Digital literacy moderated the relationship**,** weakening effects at higher literacy levels (interaction $\beta = –.22$, $p < .05$)

**Hypothesis Testing Summary**

| Hypothesis | Result | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| **H1**: Algorithmic exposure → selective news exposure | Supported | Heavy reliance increases selective engagement |
| **H2**: Algorithm news increases perceived credibility | Supported | Users trust tailored content |
| **H3**: Algorithmic exposure → issue salience & opinion | Supported | Shapes perceived importance of issues |
| **H4**: Low awareness strengthens impact | Supported | Weak literacy increases influence |
| **H5**: Digital literacy moderates impact | Supported | Critical users evaluate more cautiously |
| **H6**: Demographics predict trust | Supported | Youth & social media users display higher trust |

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how algorithmic gatekeeping shapes news exposure and influences public opinion in the Global South. Findings demonstrate that algorithmic recommendation systems significantly alter audience news consumption patterns, trust perceptions, and issue salience. The results confirm earlier scholarly arguments that digital platforms have displaced traditional gatekeepers, reshaping public discourse through invisible and automated curation processes (Napoli, 2015; Tandoc, 2018). In line with Gatekeeping Theory, the study shows a transfer of control from journalistic agencies to algorithmic infrastructures, raising critical implications for democratic communication.

**Algorithmic Exposure and News Consumption**

The results indicate high reliance on algorithm-driven feeds for daily news consumption, particularly among young audiences. This aligns with global findings that platform-driven news consumption is increasing as users depend on automated systems for relevance and convenience (Burgess & Bruns, 2015). Respondents reported high exposure to personalized content and demonstrated strong perceptions that digital platforms shape what they see and consider important. The dominance of algorithmic delivery suggests that user news exposure is less determined by deliberate seeking and more by passive consumption shaped by algorithmic prioritization, supporting Thorson and Wells' (2016) argument about curated flows.

**Trust and Credibility in Algorithmic News**

The study found that participants perceive algorithmically curated news as credible and trustworthy, which may be attributed to its tailored relevance and familiarity. This supports previous findings that personalization strengthens perceived authenticity and reliability (Pariser, 2011). However, this reliance raises concerns because credibility assessments are shaped not by journalistic verification norms but by engagement-based computational decisions. As Gillespie (2014) notes, algorithms encode platform interests, which are deeply tied to advertising and commercial optimization rather than public interest values.

**Echo Chambers, Issue Salience, and Opinion Formation**

The strong influence of algorithmic exposure on issue salience demonstrates that algorithms play agenda-setting roles, determining which issues audiences perceive as socially important. By amplifying specific narratives and limiting diversity of viewpoints, algorithms can reinforce homogeneous exposure environments, increasing the likelihood of echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017). Such environments may intensify polarization, particularly within politically contested regions common to the Global South. Findings also show that trust mediates the relationship between exposure and opinion formation, meaning that greater trust in algorithmic news enhances its persuasive impact.

**Algorithm Awareness and Digital Literacy**

Low awareness of algorithmic filtering processes among participants indicates that most users lack understanding of how digital systems curate their news feeds. This supports Livingstone and Bulger's (2014) observation that limited digital literacy heightens vulnerability to manipulation. The negative correlation between awareness and influence suggests that transparency and media literacy can weaken algorithmic persuasion. Moderation effects further highlight the protective role of digital literacy, supporting Helberger's (2016) argument that empowering users with knowledge is critical to strengthening democratic media participation.

**Implications for the Global South**

The findings have particular relevance for countries in the Global South, where political institutions, regulatory frameworks, and media pluralism are often weaker. The study reveals that users in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are heavily influenced by algorithmic systems,

yet lack awareness of underlying mechanisms. In these contexts, algorithmic control may be exploited to manipulate electoral behavior, amplify state propaganda, and suppress dissent, as documented by Tufekci (2015) and Arguedas-Ramírez (2020). Digital infrastructures controlled by global technology corporations reflect wider digital colonialism concerns raised by Couldry and Mejias (2019), emphasizing structural inequalities embedded in data extraction and information control.

**Theoretical Contributions**

The study advances theoretical discussion by integrating Gatekeeping Theory, Algorithmic Gatekeeping, and Agenda-Setting Theory. It situates algorithmic curation as a transformation of gatekeeping power and demonstrates that agenda-setting mechanisms increasingly operate through machine-mediated selection rather than journalistic decision-making. Empirical results reinforce claims that digital platforms shape social meaning-making and public discourse more profoundly in fragile democratic contexts.

**Research Limitations**

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The cross-sectional survey design restricts causal inference. Self-reported measures may introduce response biases. Online sampling may underrepresent populations with limited internet access. Future studies may adopt longitudinal or experimental designs and include qualitative insights to explore nuanced user perceptions and contextual dynamics.

**Future Research Directions**

Future research should:

- Compare algorithmic effects during elections or crises where information manipulation risks increase.
- Investigate platform-specific algorithmic dynamics (e.g., TikTok vs. YouTube vs. Facebook).
- Examine whether platform regulation or media literacy interventions reduce filter bubble effects.
- Include broader regional samples beyond South Asia.
- Develop computational audit methodologies to analyze algorithm behavior directly.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that algorithmic gatekeeping significantly shapes news exposure and public opinion in the Global South. Findings show that algorithmic systems dominate information flows on digital platforms, influencing what audiences see, trust, and consider important. While audiences rely heavily on algorithmic curation, their low awareness of filtering mechanisms increases susceptibility to selective exposure, echo chambers, and manipulation. Digital literacy moderates these effects, reducing the influence of algorithmic personalization.

The results underscore the need for stronger transparency, regulatory frameworks, and media literacy initiatives to protect democratic discourse in contexts with fragile political and media environments. As traditional journalistic control gives way to data-driven computational systems, understanding algorithmic power is essential for safeguarding media pluralism, accountability, and informed public participation. Research on digital gatekeeping must expand beyond Western contexts to address structural inequalities shaping information ecosystems in developing regions.

Ultimately, digital algorithms are not neutral technological tools but active shapers of public knowledge and civic behavior. Ensuring fair and transparent algorithmic governance is vital to sustaining democratic communication and preventing the concentration of informational power in the hands of technology corporations and political elites.

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