



Analysing the Role of Political and Economic Factors in Setting Media Agenda in Pakistan

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: February 12, 2025 Revised: March 26, 2025 Accepted: April 04, 2025 Available Online: April 07, 2025</p>	<p><i>The study explores the public need for orientation regarding Pakistani traditional and social media platforms. The research examines how the need for orientation functions as a moderation factor and impacts digital agenda-setting about political instability and economic uncertainty in circumstances as portrayed by Pakistani media. Survey data collection from 1,105 students from five universities in Pakistani ranked by world QS Ranking-2025 selected on random sample technique of probability sampling to investigate dependent factors of NFO like personal involvement, personal knowledge, and cognitive effort needed to respond to the media content on media agenda acceptability. The results indicate that personal involvement ($r = 0.336$, $p < 0.01$) and cognitive effort ($r = 0.363$, $p < 0.01$) are strong effect amplifiers for agenda-setting that adheres to McCombs and Weaver's NFO framework. The variable of uncertainty which forms a central part of NFO did not show any statistical connection since Pakistan appears to have normalized its state of uncertainty. NFO stays active as a mechanism that affects public priorities and media visibility while managing digital fragmentation and information saturation. Research emphasizes directional communication planning from users to resolve mental obstacles while recommending innovative strategies for dealing with excessive information overload. Research that analyzes NFO in digital networks and crisis frameworks produces updated literature on agenda setting while offering operational benefits to professionals working in the field of media policymakers.</i></p>
<p>Keywords: Need for Orientation, Agenda Setting, Relevance, Uncertainty, Personal Involvement, Personal Knowledge, Efforts Need to respond to Media Content</p>	
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Introduction

In 1922 Walter Lippmann presented his study which outlined how people face challenges when seeking necessary information about daily life issues through his research on media agenda-setting. Most individuals struggle to derive meaning from their regular life activities. Lippman argued in his book *Public Opinion* (1922) about "The Outside World and Picture in Our Head" which analyzes media images of the world while stating "Think about what." According to him, the mass media provides mostly inaccurate and incomplete visual information to the public. People realize that media present a reflection not an actual reality of events. The reflective process they identify supplies fundamental support needed for establishing standard worldviews in people. Bernard Cohen changed Lippmann's original concept in 1963 when he wrote, "Media do not force people to think certain ways yet they provide a comprehensive framework of thinking ideas to society".

The process through which media sets agendas shows variability since audience members determine their requirements for information guidance while influencing which matters seem most prominent (Valenzuela et al., 2014). The research findings indicated that issue salience perception grows through this process which supports news media outlets to fulfill their agenda-setting purpose (Matthes, 2008). The explanation regarding psychological need and media effect has attracted rapid growth in communication disciplines alongside psychology and political science fields. The "need for orientation" 'acts as a vital element to explain how people interact with media information in today's information age while determining public opinions and steering agendas' (Kook Lee, 2009).

People seek information due to orientation needs, but some are more expected to experience agenda-setting effects than others, according to their NFO. Researchers have built extensive evidence about agenda setting through over 50 years of study, which includes multiple territorial areas and various news platforms. The media effect of agenda-setting operates only under certain qualifying circumstances, which prevent its universal application. McCombs (2004) mentioned that orientation needs to form 'the most significant contingent factor which activates agenda-setting effects' (p. 67).

Historically, mainstream media played a crucial role in issue prioritization and shaping public opinion, with early studies indicating that traditional media significantly influenced public issue perception (Sihui Zheng et al., 2023). The agenda-setting landscape has transformed profoundly in the digital era, warranting a comprehensive analysis of foundational agenda-setting theory and contemporary applications. Numerous scholars have argued that economic and political factors shape media content and practices. The media landscape in Pakistan significantly encompasses issues of economic uncertainty and political instability in their media portrayal and orients the people's needs to familiarize themselves with the important issues. This article explores the role of the various factors that stimulate the need for the orientation of people in the prevalent media landscape about economic and political instability issues through news coverage in Pakistan.

Economic Uncertainty and Political Instability Issues

Pakistan's chronic political instability and economic uncertainty are deeply intertwined, creating a destructive cycle that impedes development. Frequent changes in government, military interventions, and weak institutions foster policy inconsistency, deterring investment and stifling growth (Haq, 2021). Such instability disrupts reforms, including IMF-mandated fiscal adjustments, worsening debt management and trade deficits (IMF, 2022).

Conversely, economic crises—driven by inflation, unemployment, and energy shortages—erode public trust, fuelling protests and demands for political change (Jalal, 2020). Economic mismanagement during transitions, such as abrupt subsidy cuts, disproportionately harms vulnerable populations, sparking unrest (World Bank, 2023). The military's historical role as a political arbiter further muddles governance, often prioritizing short-term stability over sustainable economic planning (Siddiq, 2017). Structural weaknesses like tax evasion, agrarian dependency, and energy shortages remain unaddressed amid political infighting (Husain, 2019). External debt exceeding \$130 billion and low forex reserves reflect the precarious balance between political priorities and economic needs (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

Problem Statement

Studies concerning agenda-setting theory seek to identify societal problems through conventional media outlets. No adequate evidence exists from current research to define these dynamic factors affecting NFO during this ever-transforming information age with its swiftly evolving technology. This research adopted the rising social media role as both a distribution pathway for information and an emerging power force (Reese et al., 2007). Research into first-level agenda-setting stands as a widely studied topic yet second-level agenda-setting remains a subject that shows minimal investigation regarding its effect on issue attribution to the public. The Studies about attribute-based framing and agenda-setting mechanics remain unclear to the research community since they prevent scholars from understanding the link between these elements and their shared impact on agenda-setting and block deeper comprehension of determining factors for agenda-setting influence in the digital media. This research examines the theoretical significance of orientation needs alongside their subcomponents which consist of relevance, uncertainty, personal involvement, personal knowledge, and response-related effort. The research investigates how specific variables from NFO framework influence the agenda-setting functionality during the contemporary digital period.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the "psychological aspect of needs for orientation" that drives people to orient themselves about their surrounding world including the physical and cognitive dimensions.
2. To Analyse the role of different elements influencing the need of orientation processes to seek media information.

Significance

Media users' Orientation function assists researchers in understanding diverse population media behavior so they can develop successful media framing approaches. Media professionals together with policy makers will gain impactful benefits from this research into orientation needs within agenda-setting effects. This article extends previous work through two key aspects: first, it explores NFO effects at the second agenda-setting level in Pakistan within a survey research framework. Second, this research represents one of the few studies conducted on NFO effects on second-level of agenda-setting about Pakistani media.

Defining Need for Orientation

Maxwell E. McCombs and David H. Weaver created the Need for Orientation (NFO) theoretical model after conducting their research (McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1980). The

psychological trait drives individuals to read news media content about everything they notice during their daily routine. A person with NFO psychological makeup performs active information searches because of this trait which enhances their exposure to agenda-setting influences based on Weaver (1980).

The internal psychological state of Need for Orientation based on how important they see a situation and how confused they feel about it (Jorg Matthes, 2007). People who demonstrate higher Need for Orientation characteristics show specific patterns when building trust with media and searching digital information. People who practice continuous observation for detailed subject matter research while actively participating in discussions display their Need for Orientation toward this particular issue according to Jorg Matthes' (2007) research.

Issue significance depends on the need for orientation which describes our drive to understand the world around us (Valenzuela et al., 2014). The process people undergo when seeking meaningful information based on their interests and mental understanding determines their media format interactions. The transformation of media environments caused by digital platforms led agenda-setting to adopt user needs as a framework for determining meaningful news. The requirement for lucid information determines how individuals use media to shape their political contributions (Samir Ljajiić et al., 2021).

The orientation needs of people establish the fundamental basis that shapes how agenda-setting happens. A person's understanding needs about their environment act as a determinant for their Orientation Needs. The level of Media agenda-setting influence is greater for individuals who show a strong need for Orientation since their media consumption directs them toward salient matters published by media outlets (Moon, 2011& Lee, 2010).

It can be inferred that those people who possess high NFO are likely to dedicate special devotion to news content, that makes them more prone to agenda setting. People with greater curiosity about a topic will use reporting media sources to gather information about that topic. An individual with strong NFO about local matters will find local newspapers rather than national television formats to satisfy this need. Media salience differs between each person because it relates directly to how much someone wants to know about a specific issue. The extent to which an individual perceives a subject matter as noteworthy through their media activities constitutes the perceived media salience. A person's NFO level determines their news content attention levels, which results in increased media salience perception. The enhanced level of media exposure creates increased public awareness about the issue, which generates agenda-setting effects.

Basic agenda-setting principles establish that increased media awareness of issues leads to heightened issue importance in public perception. Through NFO, we understand why particular individuals from the population tend to align with media agendas more than others fail to embrace them. The perceived media salience mediates NFO on public salience effects. The model can be found illustrated in Figure 1.

First Level Agenda Setting



Second Level Agenda Setting

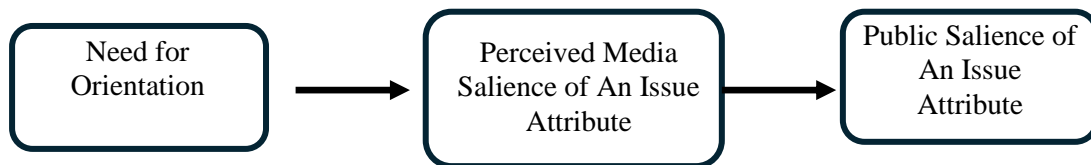


Figure-1:- The Association of Need for Orientation, First and Second Level of Agenda Setting

The strength of the connection between NFO and perceived media salience runs very deep. NFO serves as a variable that describes how people interpret media salience while it presents no direct influence on perceived public concern. One must require orientation to perceive the media salience which functions as a requirement for issue salience in first stage of agenda-setting influence. The perceived attention of media directed toward an issue directly determines the public consciousness of that issue in first level of agenda-setting establishment.

The approach followed in first level of agenda setting is also used in the second level. A higher NFO level enhances people's perception of second-level attributes thus generating an impact on their agenda-setting preferences. People with high NFO levels tend to detect higher media salience than people who have low NFO. An individual who demonstrates a higher NFO presents issue attributes that are more easily accessible in memory which consequently produces increased attitudinal effects of news media exposure. This concept is also explained in Figure 1.

The question is about how individuals differ in their ability to recognize issue attributes between each other. A connection exists between NFO and the extent to which people perceive issue attributes to be salient to them based on their media consumption activities. A positive relationship should exist between how second-level attributes appear in the media and how important public perception rates those attributes as fundamental to the public. This phenomenon represents a second-level agenda setting. The significance of NFO determines how people perceive issue attributes which serve as vital requirements for second-level agenda-setting effects. Media issue salience makes an impact on how the public perceives issue attributes at the second level of agenda setting influence.

Review of Literature

Need for Orientation and Agenda-Setting Research

NFO provided its theoretical basis. According to research NFO defines the behavior where people actively pursue news media information about particular topics (McCombs, 1973). Studies have proven that increased information search activities from high NFO levels enhance people's exposure to agenda-setting effect (Weaver, 1980).

The second level of agenda setting evaluates a different method that studies an agenda of attributes in research (Llamas, Lo´pez-Escobar, & McCombs, 1998; Llamas, McCombs, Lo´pez-Escobar, 2000; Kalyango, Ro’ssler, 1999; & Wanta, 2007). The measurement attributes of agenda-setting may refer to thematic components known as cognitive attributes or specific journalistic evaluations, also known as affective attributes. The process of agenda-setting shapes both the subjects people should consider as well as their perspectives regarding these subjects (Shaw & McCombs, 1993, p. 63). The second level of agenda-setting as a research model has received major academic interest, yet scholars have raised questions about its basic assumptions and the way it links to broadcast framing (Tewksbury & Scheufele , 2007)

The studies on social media agenda-setting often overlook individual dynamics on platforms, treating them as singular entities with unified discourse across diverse issues and demographics. Emerging opinion leaders now include celebrities, business executives, bloggers, and the general populace, in addition to traditional figures like politicians (Leavitt et al., 2009; Park, 2013; Cho & Shin, 2014; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Parmelee, 2014). The Need for an orientation concept drives how people process media information and choose which problems to prioritize, thus affecting agenda-setting effects (Hussain, Abbas, & Shah, 2024). McCombs and Shaw first established that a higher need for Orientation leads people to focus more on salient media issues, thus linking individual agendas to media agendas (L. Camaj, 2014).

The media focuses on priority issues according to agenda-setting theory, which strongly affects public discussions, including digital speed distribution (Marcus Maurer, 2021). The study led by McCombs shows that NFO causes citizens to become more involved with media content essential in examining agenda-setting patterns and crisis and election periods (Raquel Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2023). Individuals experience orientation needs when they observe a significant issue combined with significant uncertainty leading to media information needs (Valenzuela et al., 2014). Individuals naturally pursue information that links to their important matters while being uncertain about various subjects through NFO. (Valenzuela & Chernov G, 2016).

Relevance

An individual judges the significance of a certain issue based on the level of alignment between that issue and their present circumstances. People feel motivated to search for media-based Orientation after they identify relevant issues according to Weaver (1980). People tend to confront media coverage and get influenced by it whenever they consider a news topic important to their frames of reference (Thesen, 2013).

Uncertainty

An individual experiences an issue-based information deficit which defines uncertainty. A person becomes more vulnerable to media influences whenever they feel unsure about their position regarding a particular matter (Abbas, Ahmad, Hassan, & Ahmed, 2024). An unclear or ambiguous issue encourages people to follow media-based cues which will guide their assessment of status (Vu et al., 2018, Yi & Wang, 2022; Hassan et al., 2021). Research identifies how personal experience and cognitive needs, relevancy, unclear conditions, and orientation requirements lead individuals to use media illustrated in Figure 2.

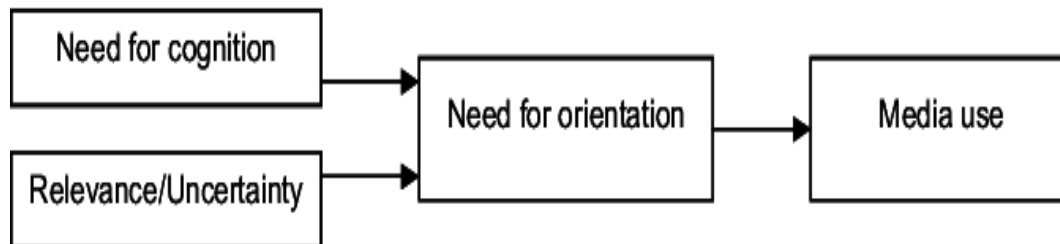


Figure 2: Relationship of Relevance, Uncertainty, NFO & Media Usage

A person forms NFO by integrating their level of interest with their present uncertainty about a particular topic. The strength of personal interest and anxiety about a particular issue leads people to show greater NFO and political information media consumption (Matthes, 2007).

Matthes (2006) advocated distinct measurement of relevance and uncertainty using the NFO instead of grouping them as an independent dimension. NFO requires us to analyze it through the predictive factors of relevance and uncertainty rather than using direct measurement metrics according to Matthes (2006). NFO is an advanced assessment tool that allows researchers to directly assess the concept through the framework. People demonstrate their selections for news sources about specific worries through defined indicators in the NFO Scale. (Matthes, 2006). Individuals experience an impact on NFO through uncertainty only if the topic holds significant relevance to them. Through this scale, respondents directly show their motive to access news content about particular subjects through media outlets. Additionally, the scale identifies three intertwined dimensions that makeup NFO. NFO toward issues, NFO toward facts, and NFO toward journalistic evaluations. Multiple surveys confirm that the scale demonstrates strong reliability and validity according to Matthes (2006). The scale is illustrated as shown in Figure 3.

Media exposure patterns depend on how relevant an issue appears to an individual while executing judgment on it because they have uncertain opinions (Weaver, 1980). The total Need for Orientation persists at its minimum level when individuals find a matter non-relevant and hold a solid unambiguous position regarding it. At both the highest levels of relevance and uncertainty, the NFO reaches its maximum along with significant agenda-setting effects from the broadcast media stemming from this state (Weaver, 1977).

Under agenda-setting theory, two fundamental variables of relevance and uncertainty determine both the Need for Orientation of individuals and their susceptibility to media content. The operational components used in McCombs and Weaver's model measure media inspiration and the Need for Orientation through relevance and uncertainty assessment as per Weaver (1980). Multiple

studies have confirmed the importance of relevance and uncertainty as critical factors in shaping agenda-setting processes according to (Thesen, 2013; Sheikh et al., 2022; Yi & Wang, 2022 and Vu et al., 2018).

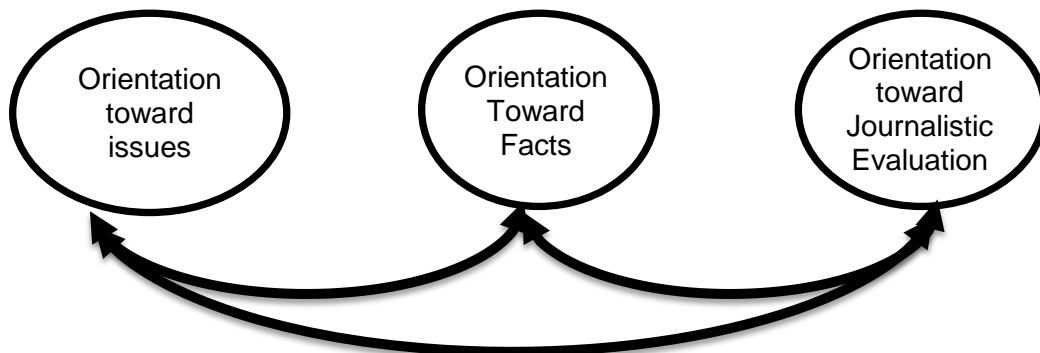


Figure-3 Need for Orientation Scale (Matthes 2006)

Modern academic literature asserted that relevance as the main initiating factor in NFO but adds uncertainty as its secondary defining element according to McCombs (2004). According to this position, a minimal connection with personal matters would lead to reduced numbers on the NFO scale. Matthes (2006) conducted a study that provides empirical evidence for this assumption. The study results demonstrated that NFO levels stay low when relevance rates are minimal independent of uncertainty degrees. People with high uncertainty tend to show stronger activity toward NFO compared to those with lower uncertainty levels when relevance is high. The influence of uncertainty becomes effective only when relevance reaches its highest degree.

This article takes an advanced approach by examining pivotal contingent elements impacting agenda-setting operations in the current digital media setting in Pakistan. The role of dependent factors of need for orientations that influence agenda-setting effects: (1) personal involvement (2) personal knowledge (3) efforts need to attend to the media content.

Hypotheses

H1: The agenda-setting influence of media issues is stronger for individuals who are personally involved in specific issues compared to people with less involved.

H2: Individuals who have stronger knowledge about specific issues will create stronger media issue agenda effects compared to people who know less.

H3: Higher effort in engaging with media content produces stronger media issue salience effects among individuals compared to those who show lower effort in their media response.

The Contingent Factors NFO

The research needs to understand the interaction between personal involvement and personal knowledge with individual effort to respond to media content that determines their effect on message interpretation and Agenda-Setting function (Sadia Jamil et al., 2023).

As media outlets transition to user-content generation and audience participation rises researchers have chosen to investigate dependent elements. Analytical tracing of user-generated content remains critical in social media research because scientists need flexible examination procedures to explore media processing dynamics (Yaqi Mao, 2023).

People face information overflow problems in the digital age because they need to understand how electronic media platforms build connections between their users and their information systems. The literature review explored psychological elements that affect agenda-setting effects as they respond to personal involvement and information strength alongside difficulties in processing media content during contemporary digital media usage. The media efficacy evolves from the message qualities and individual information understanding as well as from how much the information matters emotionally (Safran Safar Almakaty, 2024).

The contingent factors influence agenda setting and their relationship is also illustrated in Figure 4.

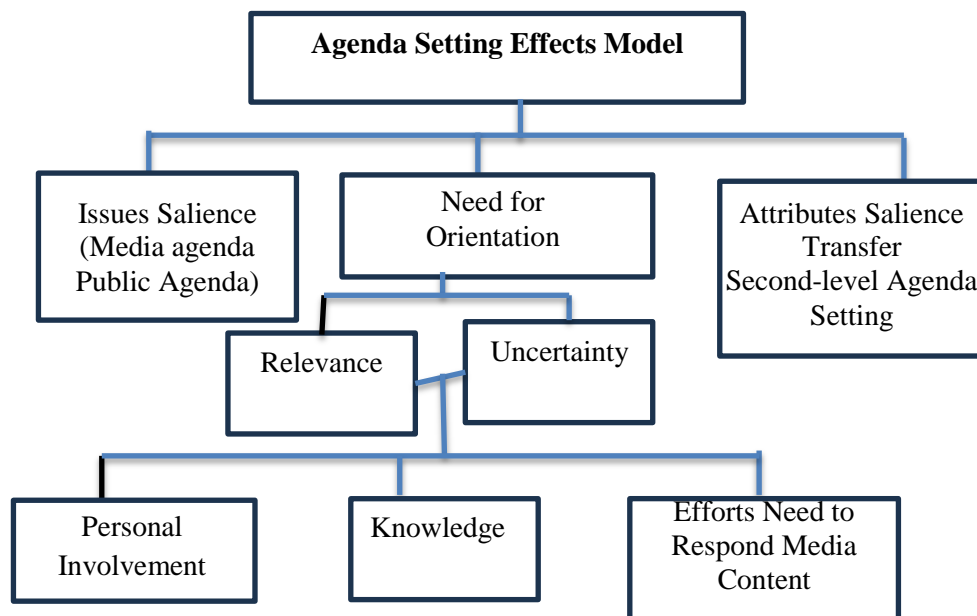


Figure-4: Contingent Factors Influencing Agenda-Setting Effects

Personal Involvement

Personal involvement emerges as the solution for lack of attention because it enables better audience connections with media outlets. The digital media environment features an extensive number of channels that lead users to spread their focus between multiple items while being subjected to an excess of news from various media outlets. An increased exposure to media channels results in shorter attention spans (DiMaggio & Goldhaber et al., 2001).

People process media messages through their perspective based on what matters to them because personal involvement stands for individual interest in critical issues. During the development of agenda-setting theory, personal involvement gained progressively more importance in media understanding. Studies from the initial research period studied how media dominates public

attention using a straightforward process that links media content with public awareness. Research without audience variation assessment failed to account for individual media usage effects on perception (Dental et al., 2023).

Personal devotion to media material determines how well people practice critical analysis of media communications (Dental et al., 2023). The research factor of user involvement remains crucial because people connected to content through personal experience specifically want exhaustive information regarding media demonstrations (Safran Safar Almakaty, 2024). People who strongly care about their media content display increased interest in the media material they consume.

According to Barber (1998) the audience shows declining interest in watching network television news along with reading newspapers. The public has shifted their attention from television networks and newspapers to new media behaviors which they use to fulfill their orientation needs. The method used to measure orientation needs through universal media exposure encounters obstacles due to current changes (Bimber, 2003). Media users engage actively in community discussions through emotional synchronization surrounding events because they guide social discourse formation based on media involvement and emotional reactions (Yaqi Mao, 2023; Yasir et al., 2023). Jamil.S. et al (2023) conducted research that showed persons who actively engage with news reveal higher reactions toward crucial agenda topics.

The main condition for information seeking stems from personal involvement followed by curiosity and knowledge as secondary factors for the "Need for Orientation" step. The study needs to determine how these situations would perform in current social media environments. The research study draws its personal involvement measures from personal involvement concept outlined by Zaichkowsky (1985) through its continuous scale measuring motivational levels. The demand for orientation in previous research studies caused people to increase their media exposure which led to advanced agenda-setting effects. The study established the relevance of this factor when applying reversed relevance to determine the need for orientation (Weaver, 1980). Based on this study, the authors established the following assumption: -

H1: The agenda-setting influence of media issues is stronger for individuals who are personally involved in specific issues compared to people with less involved.

Personal Knowledge (Prior Cognition)

According to personal involvement alignment with media knowledge, people show different degrees of participation in content matters as well as public discourse. Social media platforms spread across the internet and continuous online access drive significant public opinion changes towards agenda development during modern times. People react to media content through the combination of their acquired knowledge base personal life stories and educational background (Marleen Muskita et al., 2023). Audience participation in media usage results from their existing knowledge framework because they use this to adapt media messages while they oppose typical mainstream interpretations.

The way each person understands media content depends on their knowledge which shapes their reception of media messages. People who understand specific subjects well tend to develop higher analytical skills when evaluating media content, they access through reading and viewing (Abbas, Ahmad, Ahmed, & Kaleem, 2024). The selection of media content through discriminatory

exposure relies on personal beliefs which can produce either confirmation of pre-knowledge or denial of contrasting views (Safran Safar Almakaty, 2024).

New media creates risks according to Patterson (2000) for people to disregard their learning processes. User information selection tasks become challenging because numerous options within this environment disrupt their established ways of setting priorities. Public information reception underwent significant modifications because media technology has evolved (Schudson, 1995).

The rapid digital revolution created a complex situation resulting in extensive disagreement concerning the relation between personal knowledge and media content. Studies show that persons who grasp the fundamental aspects of a subject develop enhanced media content analysis abilities which improves their information evaluation and contextual narrative interpretation of media storytelling (Safran Safar Almakaty, 2024).

The media professionals along with communication strategists can establish strategic methods by employing their involvement with knowledge and understanding. The effective response to critical issues stems from audience-specific media content that uses prior knowledge to result in better public participation in democratic processes. The scholarly community lacks comprehensive research regarding how combining gender, racial, socio-economic, and cultural backdrop elements affects this affiliation (Marleen Muskita et al., 2023).

The relationship between knowledge acquisition and reduced uncertainty remains unclear because additional facts do not necessarily reduce uncertainty yet uncertain situations do not indicate knowledge absence. Exceptional knowledge exists independently from uncertainty levels and exceptional knowledge does not result from uncertainty reduction. People with low uncertainty levels can hold either considerable information or no information at all. A person with high uncertainty will show either substantial knowledge levels yet still want more education or lack knowledge completely.

Studies show that enhanced media exposure and interest in various topics results from knowing more (Neuman, 1986; Neuman et al., 1992) which makes media more receptive to agenda-setting effects (Hill, 1985; Wanta, 1997). Public exposure to news topics before reading publications allows readers to comprehend media content better while building their ability to detect media agenda creation.

The process of agenda setting operates differently between knowledge and uncertainty although they both affect human cognitive functions. The purpose of this article is to establish the relationship between 'low knowledge' and 'uncertainty' and 'high knowledge' and 'certainty' regarding need for orientation viewpoints because previous research fails to define their difference clearly. The revised conceptualization of the need for orientation usages knowledge instead of uncertainty. The research presents the following hypothesis:

H-2: Individuals who have stronger knowledge about specific issues will create stronger media issue agenda effects compared to people who know less.

Efforts Needed to Respond to Media Content

Media message understanding and interpretation knowledge have gained crucial importance due to an ongoing surge of media message numbers. Audience members who actively study and evaluate

media content create different interpretations of issues while establishing their ownership of the communication process. Empirical studies show audience interaction makes the media agenda-setting function stronger even though this process does not operate solely in a top-down direction. According to Yaqi Mao (2023) McCombs and Shaw gave the initial definition explaining how media influences the public agenda.

Psychologists and consumer behavior experts (Taylor & Fiske, 1984; Simon & Newell, 1990; Kahneman et al., 1982) have devoted their research to the human cognitive effort involved in accepting media content. The limited cognitive resources people have to help them make successful choices in life. People seek awareness about their surroundings by looking for media messages to fill this need which forms the basis of orientation needs. Topics that are not well known require longer cognitive effort than familiar subjects for understanding. The strength of media message and public opinion relationships depends on the amount of 'efforts needed to particular respond to media message'.

Multiple studies by Chaiken & Eagly (1993) and & Leavitt Greenwald (1984) demonstrate that cognitive activity linked with deep information comprehension produces positive results. Increased mental dedication transforms the memory content along with personal convictions in individuals. A small amount of mental effort might not affect how a person evaluates the standing of an issue yet elevated cognitive effort levels might result in changes. Technology advances during the digital age have reduced television news observation while creating a surge of new information outlets (Barber 1988; Bimber 2003).

According to scholarly research people who have extensive knowledge about particular topics are able to analyze media content better. Better information-filtering abilities lead to more precise media story interpretations for individuals who have mastered their subject matter. The review has contributed to shaping practices in political communication as well as public health messages and crisis response operations (Safran Safar Almakaty, 2024). Thus, the idea leads to the following hypothesis: -

H3: Higher effort in engaging with media content produces stronger media issue salience effects among individuals compared to those who show lower effort in their media response.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative approach through survey collection and statistical analysis to reveal pattern changes. Traditional studies about agenda-setting demonstrate that mainstream media directs public perception through their strategic decision to promote essential matters. Because digital media targets specific audiences they present the risk of changing the established function of mainstream media in setting public priorities. The research analyzed how university students viewed political instability and economic instability issues portrayed by traditional news and social media sources.

The research focused on Pakistani universities that received standing according to World University Rankings (QS) Universities Ranking-2025 which released its results on 04 June 2024 as part of the systematically chosen population.

Table-1: Target Population for Survey

Name of Universality	World QS Ranking-2025 (issued on 04 June 2024)
Quaid-I-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad	315
National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad	353
Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) Lahore	535
Punjab University, Lahore	540
University of Agricultural, Faisalabad (UAF)	681-690

Probability sampling through the simple random technique is employed as the sampling method. Because the simple random selection allows every sample to have equal selection opportunities along with ensuring random selection that enables population-wide generalization. The sample selection criteria are according to the rule of sample size selection of Dr. John Curry. A total of 1260 students attend the top five Pakistan-based universities listed in the World QS Ranking 2025. However, 1137 respondent recorded their feedback during the survey from August 2024 to December 2024, and out of 1105 responses were found valid and selected for analysis.

In the survey phase, the author attempted to get an understanding of the audience's perceptions through survey research regarding the media's influence on the formation of opinions regarding political instability and economic uncertainty issues portrayed in the Business Recorder Newspaper, Pakistan Television, news feed, and posts in the Facebook. The survey was conducted from 30 August to 30 December 2024 in the shape of questionnaire feedback asked via an online Google form. A survey questionnaire served as the data collection instrument. Several media academic experts, both locally and internationally, refined and validated the instrument before its final questionnaire form was developed. The survey then moved to an online Google survey form to gather immediate responses from the sample population.

The independent variable is the Need for Orientation, and the dependent variables are personal involvement, the effort needed to respond to the media content and personal knowledge.

Reliability and Validity Test

The communication experts validated the instrument as a measurement tool. Cronbach's Alpha provides an analysis to check whether instrument items share classification within a group which examines the association between individual components against the instrument's entire variability. These tests establish reliability and covariance of items for the research instrument which resulted from the reliability test. The Cronbach's Alpha Reliability result indicated .773 which demonstrates an acceptable internal consistency of the test.

Statistical Methods for Data Analysis

The statistical analysis includes relationships and correlation tests of the variables. The research determined an analytical approach using SPSS to handle quantitative statistics. They applied

frequency measurement for each questionnaire response and descriptive statistics alongside correlation testing which they presented as follows:

Table-1: Contingent Factors of Need for Orientation

	Descriptive Statistics		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
To what extent the news on political economic issues have relevancy to you as depicted in media (Such as Facebook, Business Recorder Newspaper, Pakistan Television) ?	3.48	1.165	1105
To what extent the news on political and economic issues have uncertainty as portrayed in the media (such as Business Recorder Newspaper, PTV News, and Facebook).	3.10	1.104	1105
After getting news information from media, to what extent do you involve Personally to understand the Political and economic issues as portrayed in media (Such as Facebook, Business Recorder Newspaper, Pakistan Television) ?	2.90	1.137	1105
After getting information from the media to what extent does your knowledge help you understand the Political and economic issues portrayed in the media (such as Facebook, Business Recorder Newspaper, Pakistan Television)?	3.36	.987	1105
After getting information from media, to what extent do you have to Put in More Effort to understand the Political and Economic issues as portrayed in media (Such as Facebook, Business Recorder Newspaper, Pakistan Television) ?	3.27	1.007	1105

Survey data shows important details about survey participants who evaluated political and economic media coverage from Facebook and Business Recorder Newspaper and Pakistan Television throughout the survey phases. Respondents demonstrated moderate acknowledgment of how news affects their daily lives based on a scale that measures their evaluation from 1 to 5. The mean score of 3.48 (SD = 1.165) stands as evidence. Respondents rated the economic uncertainty issue at a moderate rate with an average of 3.10 (SD = 1.104).

The mean score for personal involvement assessment in the comprehension of issues from media-based information was 2.90 (SD = 1.137) indicating moderate personal engagement. The existing information that participants brought to the table helped their understanding of media-presented issues at a moderate level according to their reported mean score of 3.36 (SD = 0.987). People classify understanding political and economic issues in media content as a moderately complex task because they rated it with 3.27 points (SD = 1.007). The statistics demonstrate varied levels of media participation concerning political and economic news together with some obstacles to personal comprehension and involvement.

The analysis using the correlation test validates that news relevance and personal involvement together with the knowledge and effort needed to understand media messages show vital associations between three media resources namely Facebook, Business Recorder Newspaper and PTV News.

News relevance shows a moderate and positive relationship with personal involvement based on data analysis. Personnel involved in relevant news respond more actively to the news content ($r = 0.336, p < 0.01$). People who find news material relevant tend to focus more on understanding its meaning. Additionally, a weak but significant correlation Personal knowledge has a relationship ($r = 0.145$) that is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) to news relevance. The content of relevant news supports understanding but by itself fails to be the defining factor.

Table-2: Need for Orientation and Sub dimensions

Correlations: News Relevance, Uncertainty, Personal Involvement, Knowledge, and Effort Needed to Respond the Media Content		1	2	3	4	5
1 To what extent the news on political economic issues have relevancy to you as depicted in media?	Pearson Correlation	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
2 To what extent does the news on political and economic issues have uncertainty as portrayed in the media?	Pearson Correlation	.012	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.686				
3 After getting news information from media to what extent do you involve personally in understanding the Political and economic issues as portrayed in the media?	Pearson Correlation	.336	.011	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.715			
4 After getting information from the media to what extent does your knowledge help you understand the Political and economic issues portrayed in the media	Pearson Correlation	.145	-.025	.350	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.399	.000		
5 After getting information from media to what extent do you have to Put in More Effort to understand the Political and Economic issues as portrayed in the media?	Pearson Correlation	.363	.046	.353	.244	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.124	.000	.000	
. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						

The finding also indicated a moderate relation exists between news relevance and how much effort it needs to understand the news content. Complex information reporting seems to need additional cognitive resources according to this relationship ($r = 0.363$, $p < 0.01$). cognitive effort. The perceived uncertainty of news does not produce any significant correlation effect. Personal involvement together with personal knowledge and efforts needed to process media news require distinctive levels of response involvement. Studies show trust in news sources has a more significant influence than news relevance does. Lastly, strong correlations The variables show a significant correlation between personal involvement and effort needed to grasp information ($r = 0.353$, $p < 0.01$). Audiences generally face difficulties when seeking to understand news content according to both their overall news understanding ($r = 0.353$, $p < 0.01$) and their personal background knowledge ($r = 0.244$, $p < 0.01$). People have obstacles when they attempt to comprehend political and economic matters.

The results of the study demonstrate news organizations should develop clearer reporting styles that promote public understanding of information or news content about the issues.

Discussion and Important Findings

The results of the research indicated that the Need for Orientation (NFO) functions as a central mechanism to support digital agenda-setting effects specifically prevailing political instability and economic instability issues in Pakistan. The study confirms both personal involvement (H1) and efforts required to respond to the media content (H3) lead to amplified agenda-setting effects which follow McCombs and Weaver’s NFO model. Perceived relevance of political and economic news results in increased audience personal engagement according to the study data ($r = 0.336$, $p < 0.01$) because people tend to pay attention to subjects that are relevant to them. The extent of cognitive effort that people invest in processing information directly correlates with agenda-setting effects ($r = 0.363$, $p < 0.01$).

The research indicated that NFO did not relate significantly to uncertain conditions (H2 was unsupported). Pakistan's political instability creates an unforeseeable environment that has normalized political uncertainty thus possibly diminishing information-seeking motivation. Agenda-setting effects increased slightly when individuals had prior knowledge (H2) about the issue under study ($r = 0.145$, $p < 0.01$) because informed audiences evaluate media content consciously while still being affected by what gets the most attention.

User-created content combined with algorithm-based organization now allows an excessive fragmentation regarding traditional media gatekeeping functions in the digital era. Yet NFO establishes how people order important matters within the sea of obtainable information. The evaluation of media salience demonstrates that NFO creates an indirect impact on public preferences by selecting news topics according to audience preferences.

Conclusion

The fragmented Pakistani media environment finds its unity at NFO since it connects personal cognitive needs with media-created agendas. The prominence of relevance and effort has grown while uncertainty-based factors have declined due to general population sensitization toward instability. Clear presentation together with audience-focused reporting holds essential importance for those working in media because they help minimize cognitive difficulties. Legislators need to handle excessive information to develop public discussions based on facts. The field needs future study that investigates NFO dynamics when merged with socio-cultural aspects together with wide-ranging analysis extending past undergraduate profiles. The research establishes new insights into agenda-setting theory by analysing how NFO operates in digital environments as it provides a framework that helps determine media impacts in the new media landscape.

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