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Ivana STOJANOVIĆ PRELEVIĆ
University of Niš, Serbia

Zareesh ZEHRA
Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST), Islamabad, Pakistan

**A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF BRAND JOURNALISM ETHICS:
USER PERCEPTIONS IN SERBIA AND PAKISTAN**

Abstract: Given that there are different views on what brand journalism is, this article studies the ethics of brand journalism to provide a more thorough and accurate description. Not all cultures have adopted this phrase, including Serbia and Pakistan. The lack of research on user perceptions of and trust in brand journalism (Koch, Riehl & Viererbl, 2021) led scholars to poll young people, including 60 students from Pakistan and 50 from Serbia. According to Serbian and Pakistani student surveys, brand journalism is expected to grow in popularity as a career in these cultures. Additionally, it is not utilized; instead, terms like public relations or content marketing are used. The ethical aspects of brand journalism are the primary subject of the study. The findings demonstrate that brand journalism upholds ethical principles, while also occasionally violating them, including impartiality, objectivism, and independence.

Keywords: brand journalism; ethics; ethical codes; experts; students.

Introduction

As there are new kinds of journalism in the 21st century and new ethical problems are open, we focus in this paper on brand journalism, its characteristics and ethics. Brand journalism has a long tradition, but this term is new and not in use in all countries. Some of them are Serbia and Pakistan – two countries with different cultures and geographical locations.

First, we consider the problem of the definition of brand journalism, as well as the ethical aspects of brand journalism and the problems which arise here. Then, we compare the presence of this concept in Serbia and Pakistan, its recognition and the audience's opinion. We present the results of research on the opinions of the audience on brand journalism in Pakistan and Serbia – countries where it is still a new communication technique. The authors surveyed 60 students from Pakistan and 50 from Serbia in order to answer the questions of what their perception of brand journalism would be if they study brand journalism at university, and of whether they would be brand journalists tomorrow.

* **Ivana Stojanović Prelević** – PhD, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Niš, Serbia.

ivana.stojanovic.prelevic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

** **Zareesh Zehra** – Research Associate at the Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST), Islamabad, Pakistan.

zahrahasnain@hotmail.com

What is Brand Journalism?

As many theorists have noticed (Sherwood & O'Donnell, 2018; Koch, Riehl & Viererbl, 2021), in the last two decades and more, including the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a trend of precipitous declines in print newspapers and news magazines, while the opposite trend has been observed in corporate publications (Schijns, 2008; Serazio, 2021). To attract consumers, companies make their own media. It could be magazines, brochures, radio, blogs, podcasts, etc. Their language, style, layout and visuals could correspond to journalistic publications (Haeusermann, 2013). Brand journalism is a commercial concept that has had a spectacular and fast rise (Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017). It is a collective term for the production and distribution of news media created by companies and other organizations (e.g. nongovernmental organizations, unions, and associations) and resembles journalistic publications in terms of content and layout (Koch et al. 2021:3). Brand journalism activities were usually considered under the category of content marketing (Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017). Brand journalism has a long tradition – over a century (Allan, 2010), and it resembles corporate journalism, too. The development of technology and digitalization elevated corporate journalism to a new dimension (Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017). The latter conclude, according to communication consultants and company contents in Spain, that “the use of tools, techniques and journalistic formats for contents produced for media owned by brands or corporations seem to be essential notes of brand journalism” (2017: 3). “When the content and style of these publications are comparable with journalistic publications, should we refer to them as journalism?” asked Koch, Riehl, and Viererbl (2021:2). Journalists do not easily accept that brand journalism is a kind of journalism. When brand journalism has been put in the content marketing matrix, as Arrese and Pérez-Latre did¹, we can see that it is present in their own media and informative sphere. They explain that the new 21st-century dimension of brand journalism “has been a consequence of the unique set of circumstances that surround brand marketing management and the development of the world of journalism” (Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2021:125). While marketing transformed the relationship with the audience and gained more complex communication, journalism found itself in crisis, losing its identity (Blumler, 2010; Arrese & Pérez-Latre, 2017).

The term *brand journalism* is not in use in Serbia. Nina Elezović, Manager of External Communication for Coca-Cola HBC Serbia, wrote: “Although not under this term, the approach is not unknown to the domestic market either in a somewhat simpler form. The first step towards direct dialogue with consumers was the advertorial, which some brands still use today as the only form of brand PR.”²

In Pakistan, *brand journalism* refers to a communication and marketing approach where brands and companies produce and disseminate material that mimics conventional journalism but serves marketing or branding objectives. The need for a new approach to marketing communications that can ensure consistency of communication messages sent to various audiences, has been created by the increased fragmentation of media and customers, as well as by the revolution in mass communication brought about by the new communication channels (McArthur & Gryphon, 1997; Smith, 2002). According to Duncan and Everett (1993), the goal of brand journalism is to develop prospective communication understandings by merging marketing communication aspects in a way that they complement and enhance one another (Duncan & Everett, 1993).

Ethics of Brand Journalism

Ethics is recognized as the main criterion of professional journalism. Where ethics is violated, we have a business with propaganda and fake news.

As it is known, every profession has its ethical codes, which could help in ethical behaviour, next to ethical education. We should bear in mind that there is a similarity between brand journalism and journalism, PR, or marketing. The study sketches common ethical values for these sectors. Analyzing

¹ They created a table distinguishing between marketing for paid, earned and owned media, and informative, persuasive and entertainment sphere (Table 1. The Rise of Brand Journalism, p. 125).

² Elezović, N. “Da li je brend novinarstvo novi pravac razvoja odnosa s javnostima?” Marketing mreža <https://marketingmreza.rs/da-li-je-brend-novinarstvo-novi-pravac-razvoja-odnosa-s-javnostima/>

the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics and the professional codes of ethics of the Public Relations Society of Serbia, we found many common ethical principles: the professional is obliged to consult as many sources as possible; the professional must not receive or request financial or any other benefit for collecting, publishing, postponing, or preventing the gathering or publishing of information; the professional is obliged to refuse a gift if it can be reasonably assumed that the gift is connected with the exercise of their profession; the professional must not be in any kind of business relationship with the subjects whose activities they cover or represent; the professional must respect a request for anonymity from the source of information; the professional must respect privacy, authorship, human rights, etc.³. The Journalists' Code of Ethics and the Marketing Code of Ethics in Serbia⁴ mostly have different ethical principles. The principles of speaking the truth, responsibility, decency, and respect for privacy are common in journalism and marketing. In the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, there is a principle that reads: "Work in PR and marketing agencies, lobbying agencies, public bodies and institutions, and political parties, is incompatible with the profession." In countries where brand journalism came to life, as well as organizations that have newsroom projects such as Coca-Cola, General Electric, IBM, Intel, and Microsoft, it changes ethics. One sense is that the value of independence is no more important if you speak the truth in the case of brand journalism. On the other hand, values of independence are not characteristic of marketing codes⁵; in that sense, brand journalism is more like marketing, not journalism. In the last decades, however, it is noticeable that journalism has changed and autonomy has become questionable for professional journalists. Their professional autonomy has been affected by organizational, social, economic, and political constraints (Skovsgaard, 2014), and in this context, journalist independence becomes questionable. Another ethical value – unbiased and balanced reporting, is problematic by itself. It is hard, even for professionals, to be always unbiased, bearing in mind people's nature and the influence of culture and tradition where they grew up, as well as the ethics on their behaviour. Koch et al. (2021) argue that "considering brand journalists raises the question of the extent to which they can report in an unbiased and balanced way when stories centre on the organization for which they work" (p. 5). We can ask the same for journalists, too. The principle of objectivity is also in connection with bias. Journalistic objectivity refers to being fair, balanced, and unbiased, presenting information fully and in a context. However, it does not exclude subjectivity (Bivins, 2017).

Results of a Survey with Students in Pakistan and Serbia: Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

According to the survey, brand awareness and the perception of public relations both have a favourable impact on customer loyalty. The study demonstrates that businesses should devote resources to PR since it can increase customer loyalty. In the services sector, executives and brand managers must comprehend customers' needs and satisfy them as much as possible by operating on the aforementioned independent variables. As a result, these customers will stick with the company on a long-term basis as an integral part of it (Rahi, *Arabian Journal of Business Management*, 2016, S2).

Pakistan

A survey was conducted among 60 students in their early 20s from the University of Karachi, who were from the Mass Communication Department (40 undergraduates and 20 Master's students). 70% were female and 30% were male. All of them had diverse majors: 24 studied Advertising and Public Relations, 25 Electronic Media, and 11 Communication.

³ Taken and adopted from the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics (<https://savetzastampu.rs/en/documents/kodeks-novinara-srbije/>) and the professional codes of ethics of the Public Relations Society of Serbia (http://www.pr.org.rs/kodeks_profesionalne_etike).

⁴ Code of Marketing Communication (<http://www.iaa.rs/v2/assets/Kodeks-radni-dokument>)

⁵ Ibid.

The questions asked and the responses are shown below.

With regard to trust in media, 40 students (67%) partially trust media, 13 (21%) fully trust them, and seven (12%) do not.

As for trust in professional journalists, 29 (48%) partially trust media, 19 (32%) trust them, and 12 (20%) do not. There are many different viewpoints on trust in professional journalists. Due to their biases and insufficient reporting of the facts, some students do not rely on these journalists or on their genuineness. Some students think that journalism is an important component of democracy and that it is essential for educating the public about current events. Others believe that journalists are driven by money and personal agendas and that the media have become too biased to be completely trusted. As the media frequently twist the truth, many individuals think it is critical to fact-check the news and information offered by journalists. Students' impressions of journalism are influenced by their own experiences and views of the media.

Talking about trust in marketing and PR experts, 24 students (40%) partially believe in marketing and PR experts, 18 (30%) fully trust them, while 18 (30%) do not.

In terms of the development of technology's contribution to the quality of journalism, 42 students (70%) said yes, five (21%) said no, and 13 (8.3%) had no definitive opinion.

With a view to the question of whether the digitization of journalism has led to greater public trust, 46 students (76%) answered positively, 10 (17%) partially, and four (7%) negatively.

The other research questions are directly related to brand journalism. They are graphically represented and have descriptive answers. These are:

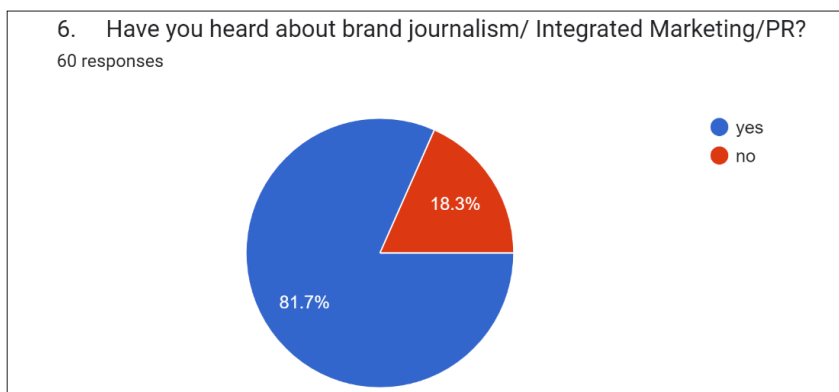
RQ 6: Have you heard about brand journalism /integrated marketing/ PR?

RQ 7: Do you feel any advantages for users when it comes to brand journalism?

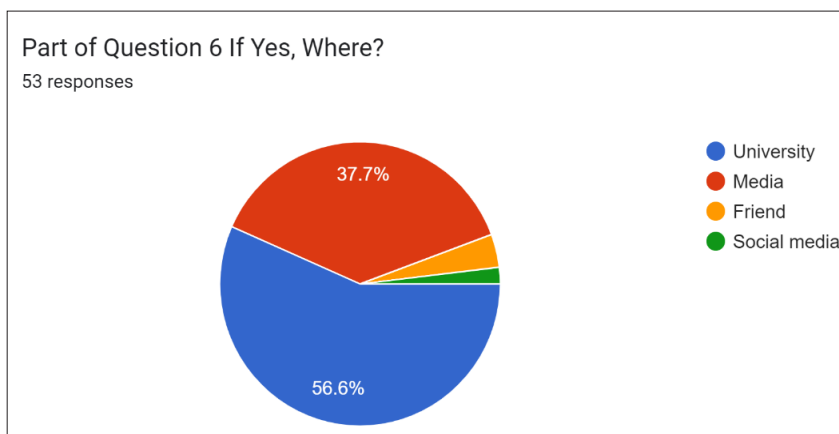
RQ 8: Do you think that brand journalism has developed in your country?

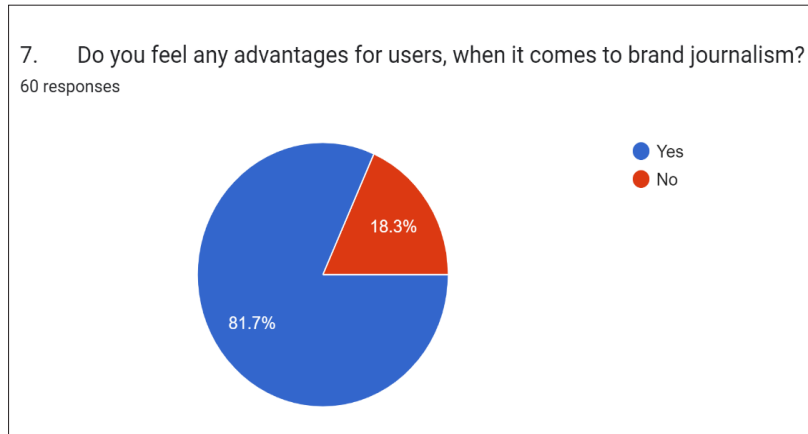
RQ 9: Does brand journalism contradict certain ethical values?

RQ 10: Would you be a brand journalist tomorrow?

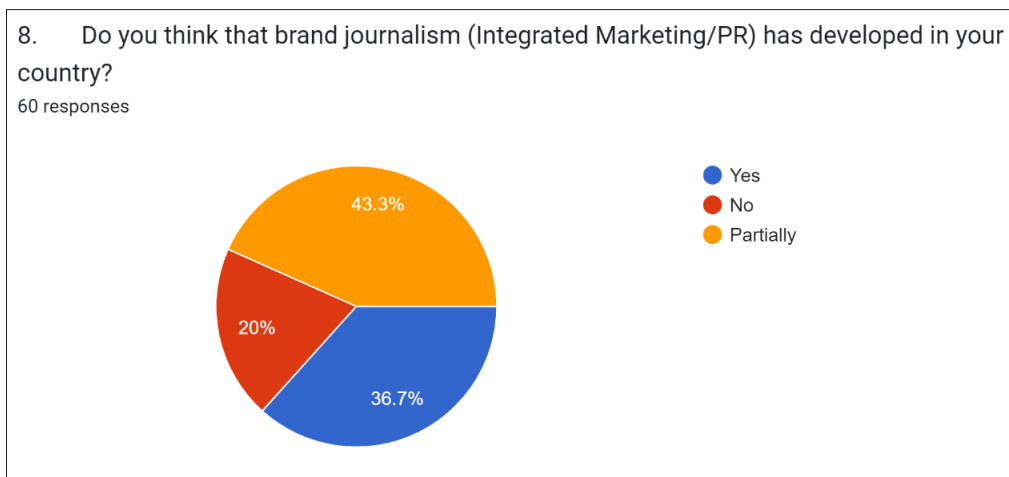


The charts above show that 49 students (81.7%) have heard about brand journalism, while only 11 (18.3%) have not. Among the respondents, 30 (56.6%) have become familiar with it at university, 20 (37.7%) from the media, and 10 (5.7%) from friends and social media.





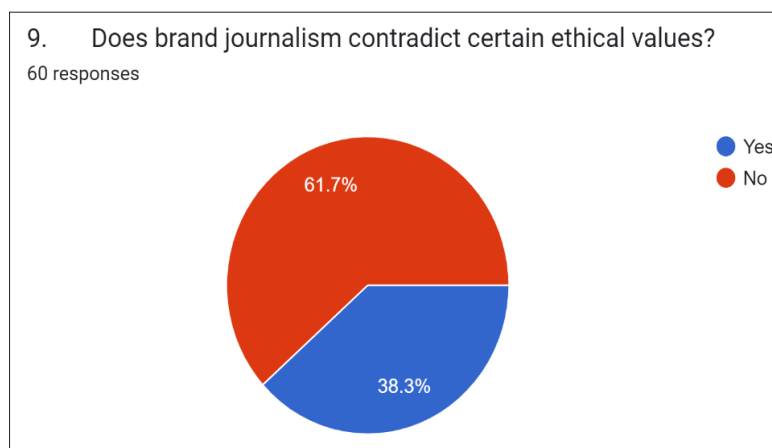
49 respondents (81.7%) feel there are advantages of brand journalism for users, and 11 (18.3%) feel there is no advantage for them.



26 students (43.3%) partially agreed with the development of brand journalism in Pakistan, 22 (36.7%) think it is developed, while 12 (20%) think it is still not developed.

Part of Question 8: If yes, in what form and scope?

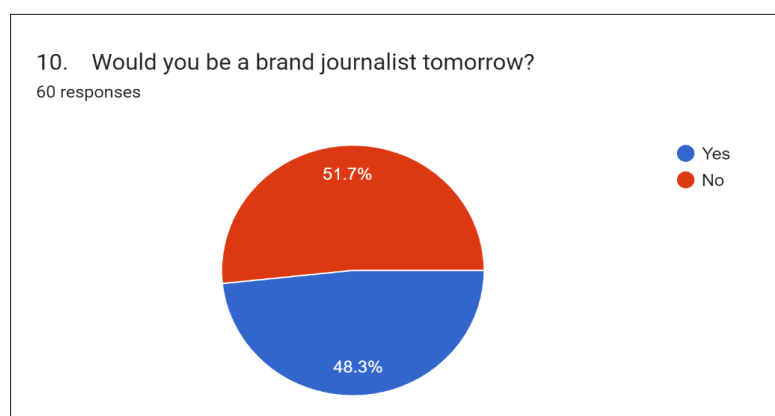
There is a variety of views on brand journalism (Integrated Marketing/PR). Some students think that influencer marketing and advertising have a lot of potential for boosting brand awareness and selling products. Others believe that brand journalism, public relations, and social media can help build a solid reputation and provide financial opportunities. Yet, some individuals may not see a market for product sales in Pakistan, while others are unaware of it. While some people believe that commercials and marketing initiatives might boost brand awareness, others do not see much promise in them. People’s impressions of advertising and marketing and personal experiences influence how they feel about how products are sold in the media.



37 students (61.7%) believe that brand journalism does not contradict ethical values, while 23 (38.3%) shared the opposite opinion.

Part of Question 9: If yes, please explain.

Some survey participants think that brand journalism may be dishonest or biased. Others believe it might help communicate a positive message or moral principles. Several respondents are unsure or ignorant of whether it contradicts ethical values or not. A few responses make specific points about journalism ethics, like objectivity and impartiality.



31 students (approximately 52%) were not interested in being brand journalists in the future, while 29 (about 48%) wanted to become such.

SERBIA

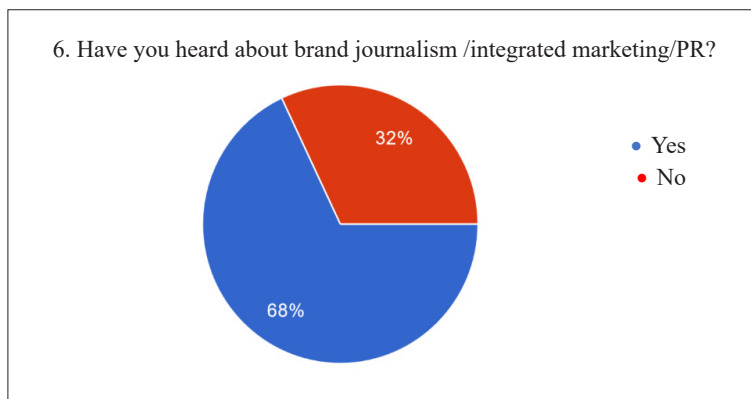
The same survey was conducted among 50 students from the universities of Niš and Belgrade – 38 undergraduate and eight Master's students from the University of Niš (Faculty of Philosophy, Communication and Journalism Department), and four Master's students from the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Belgrade (two from the Political Science Department, one from the Communication Department, and one from the Election and Election Campaigns Department). 92% of the respondents were female, and 8% were male. The Master's students previously studied Journalism (10.5%), Communication and Public Relations (36.8%), and the rest something else. To the question of whether they trust media, 39 students (78%) answered partially, and 11 (22%) negatively. 17 students (34%) said they trust professional journalists, 25 (50%) partially, and eight (16%) have no trust. The reasons why they do not trust professional journalists are as follows:

At least in Serbia, the political commitment of many professional journalists can be observed; in Serbian society, the media are interestingly divided, which makes it difficult to fully trust them; today's

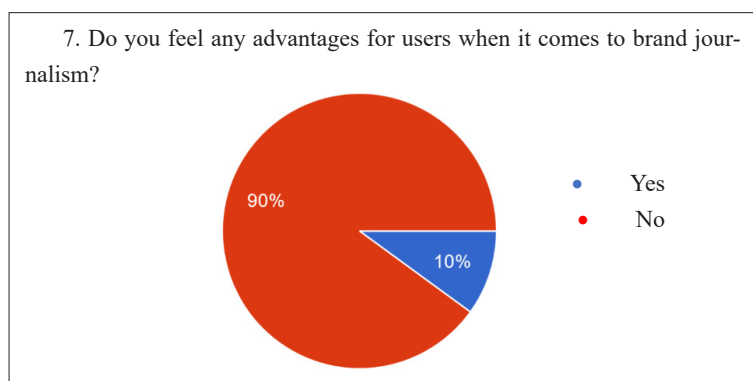
“professional” journalists have proven countless times that they tell or report various falsehoods; for the most part, subjective opinion has slipped through, as they are prone to exclusivity and creating shocking news even where there is no space for it. There is no freedom of media and expression but a desire for sensationalism. They are increasingly controlled by the state, and propaganda is increasingly visible. The media and journalists present us a picture that is not realistic, full of misinformation. Other students think that professional journalists respect ethics, work in the public interest, and have knowledge of the profession, but the presence of fake news causes insecurity and mistrust among citizens. For that reason, most students answer that they partially believe in media.

When we talk about marketing and PR, 18 students (35.3%) do not trust them, four (9.8%) trust them, and 28 (54.9%) partially do so. To the question of whether the development of technology has contributed to the quality of journalism, eight students (16%) said no, 19 (38%) said partially, and 23 (46%) said yes. Also, 30 students (60%) think that the transformation of journalism with the development of digitalization does not affect trust, 13 (26%) believe that it does, and seven (14%) think this is partially the case.

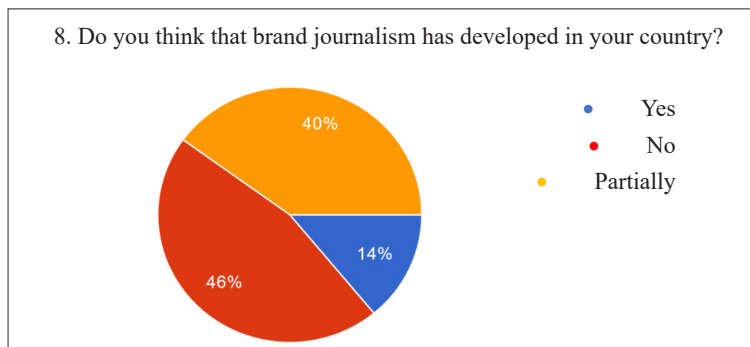
** Graphical representation of the research questions that are directly related to brand journalism and that have descriptive answers:*



34 students (68%) answered yes and 16 (32%) said no. Ten students answered that they heard about brand journalism at university, and others from media, the internet, or friends.



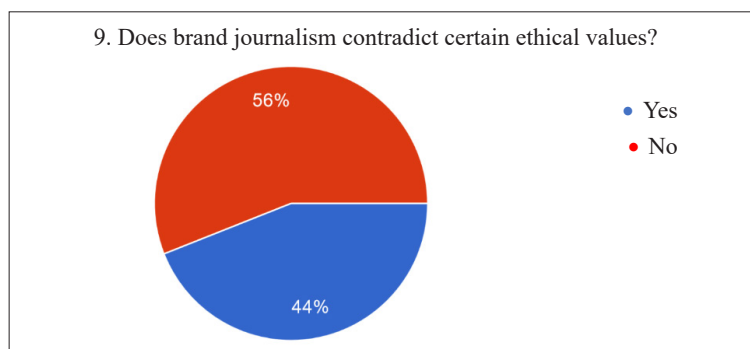
45 students (90%) answered negatively, and five (10%) positively. Four students explained what the advantages were: loyalty, user trust, more freedom to choose topics, independent creation, and marketing content; in this way, readers can get to some content that they would otherwise not be able to reach through regular communication channels; also, companies create their content for the public.



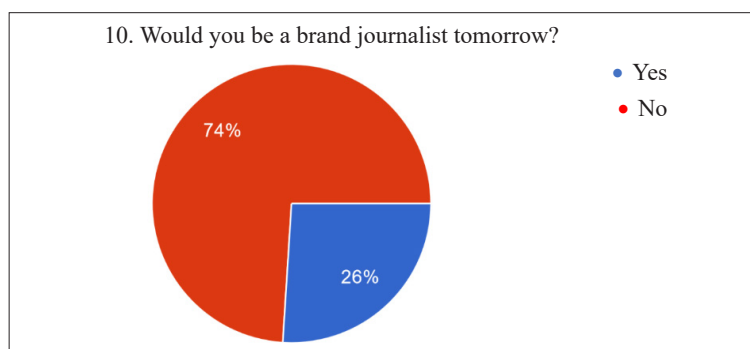
23 students (46%) said no, 20 (40%) said partially and seven (14%) said yes.

Part of Question 9: If yes, in what form or scope?

Three students said that brand journalism was a kind of journalism, five that it was content marketing, three that it was PR, four that it was both content marketing and PR, one that it was a kind of marketing, and one that it was influential. 27 students (54%) think that brand journalism is present in Serbia, 21 (42%) that it is hardly noticeable, and the rest that it is obvious.



28 students (56%) said no, and 22 (44 %) yes. Their answers included violation of human rights, truth, independence, consistency, trust, and sincerity.



37 students (74%) gave a negative answer, and 13 (26%) an affirmative one.

Conclusion

The study examined the development of brand journalism in Serbia and Pakistan, motivated primarily by its low recognition among citizens as a new form of communication of organizations with an audience. After examining brand journalism ethics in Serbia and Pakistan, the study identified a

similarity: ethics are being disregarded in both nations. Given that our target group included students majoring in Communicology, Journalism, Mass Communication, and Political Science, it was expected that they would be familiar with this term. 81.7% of the sampled students in Pakistan have heard about it, and 18.3% have not. 56.6% of them have come across it at university, 37.7% in the media, and the rest from friends or on social networks. In Serbia, 68% of the students have heard about brand journalism, and 32% have not. The fact that many students are not familiar with this term confirms the initial hypothesis that the term *brand journalism* is not well known among the public.

In Serbia, 28 of the respondents (56%) think that brand journalism does not contradict certain ethical values, while 22 (44%) think it does. In their opinion, the following ethical values are violated: human rights, truth, independence, consistency, trust, and sincerity. In Pakistan, 37 students (about 62%) believe that brand journalism does not contradict ethical values, while the remaining 23 (about 38%) believe the opposite. Thus, there is a similarity among students' opinions in Serbia and Pakistan – the majority think that brand journalism does not contradict ethical values. The students who think there are ethical violations find that these are dishonesty and bias.

Despite the lack of awareness of brand journalism in both Serbia and Pakistan, there are students who would be happy to be brand journalists tomorrow. In Serbia, out of 50 respondents, 26% answered yes, while in Pakistan, out of 60 respondents, 48.3% gave an affirmative answer. Such results, as well as a positive attitude towards brand journalism, can be an indicator of the development of brand journalism in these countries in the future.

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