

Media Framing and Policy Legitimacy in Road Safety Governance: Online Discourse on Nepal's Double Helmet Regulation (2016–2026)

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Abstract

The "Double Helmet" regulation in Nepal that mandates helmet use for both riders and pillion passengers which has become governance issue to contest with digital ecosystem. Nepal hosted more than 5,100 registered online media outlets in mid-2025, that is shifting public policy discourse toward digital journalism. The study used an exploratory sequential mixed-methods for examining online media regulation from 2016 to 2026 that has framed and analyzed its impact on public opinion, policy compliance and institutional legitimacy. Secondary data were drawn from a systematically sampled corpus of 105 news items across 21 major digital portals, complemented with quantitative analysis and 10 in-depth interviews with the stakeholder. Findings of the study has revealed that there is deep structural polarization in media packaging. Beyond routine enforcement spectacles, mainstream digital desks have promoted a "Policy Hack and Import Cartel" frame, linking the mandate to an artificial around 12 billion NPR market expansion across Nepal on import-dependent ecosystem. This commercial framing strongly validated a public defense mechanism of "Symbolic Compliance," in which 60–90% of commuters purchase substandard, uncertified headgear merely to evade administrative traffic fines rather than mitigating medical risk. The study also opined that there is a conversely, textual data significant geographic divergence. Because of the geographical divergence, metropolitan media fueled public cynicism over infrastructure deficits and road networks within regional networks successfully which has been constructed narratives of normative compliance by framing enforcement through community-centric welfare campaigns. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that newly registered Transportation Bill of Nepal (2024) attempts to codify compliance through statutory penalties, public legitimacy remains fractured. Online media serves public arena where road safety is constantly negotiated between corporate skepticism and a critical preventive public health intervention.

Keywords: media framing, policy discourse, double helmet regulation, road safety communication, injury prevention

1. Introduction

Road traffic injuries pose a profound public health and governance challenge in Nepal with more than two-thirds of road traffic fatalities shared by motorcycle riders. Head injuries have been recognized due in road crashes as the leading cause of death and long-term disability (Ojha et al., 2020). Government of Nepal has been provisioned *Double Helmet Regulation* in Road and Motor Vehicles and Transport Management Act, 1993 AD as per section 130, subsection 2 with mandatory protective headgear for both riders and pillion passengers. Though it has officially framed as a preventive safety intervention, the regulation quickly transcended its technical origins to become a polarized socio-political issue, marked by resistance, policy reversals, and intense public debate. Government regulation faces public skepticism amid a weak economy, a fragile socio-political environment, and a long-standing trust deficit in state agencies, all of which, as OECD (2010) notes, fundamentally erode state authority and capacity.

Public discourse often reframes safety mandates as “revenue-collection schemes” or “commercial maneuvers” that benefit helmet entrepreneurs rather than as life-saving measures. This erosion of regulatory legitimacy was further exacerbated by inconsistent official communication, delayed implementation, and abrupt policy shifts, fostering perceptions of institutional fragility and weakening public trust. Along with these policy discourses, Nepal has also experienced a dramatic transformation in its information landscape. Online media platforms have shifted the center of deliberation into a fragmented, interactive digital sphere. By 2025, internet penetration had reached over 55% of the population, with more than 14 million active social media users contributing to this evolving digital environment (DataReportal, 2025; Gurkha Technology, 2025; NapoleonCat, 2025). Online portals such as OnlineKhabar, Setopati, Ratopati, eKantipur, Nepal Live, and Shilapatra have become primary agenda-setters, displacing traditional media’s top-down, bureaucratic normalization with multi-directional dialogue. As the coverage of interactive social media platforms grows, viral stories, dramatic headlines, memes, and user-generated content have primarily molded public opinion, making it difficult for official narratives to influence public opinion.

Through a variety of framing techniques, such as economic critique, public health advocacy, punitive enforcement, and emotional human-interest storytelling, internet media has significantly influenced how the Double Helmet legislation is perceived, embraced, or opposed. Repetitive legal codification had little resonance, highlighting information fatigue and skepticism, but emotionally laden tragedy narratives and instances of elite rebellion produced great involvement. The Government of Nepal is revising the Vehicle and Transport Management Act for the first time since 1992 (2049 B.S.). A draft bill, published in 2025 by the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport, seeks public feedback. The proposed Vehicle and Transport Management Bill, 2081 B.S. (2025 AD), introduces stricter road safety measures, including mandatory helmets for riders and pillion passengers, and a ban on carrying children in the front seat.

The mandatory double helmet provision has remained a legal provision with enforcement of the Motor Vehicles and Transport Management Act of 1993 Section 130). Yet, repeated attempts have been made to practically enforce this provision. The government has to loosen enforcement in 2008 and 2019 as it was hard to defy public opposition mainly expressed through social media, underscoring the contested nature of road safety policy in Nepal (Thapa, 2023). In this context this study examines online media influence on shaping public perception, compliance and policy discourse on the Double Helmet regulation during 2016 to 2025. By situating the regulation within its socio-political context and Nepal’s evolving digital media landscape, the research contributes to broader discussions of media power, governance legitimacy and public trust in contemporary policy communication.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

According to the Economic Survey 2025/2026, the registration of 281,921 new vehicles in the first eight months of the fiscal year pushed Nepal's cumulative active fleet to 6,249,732 units by February/March 2026 (Ministry of Finance, 2026). Worryingly, over 5 million of these units are motorcycles and scooters they are representing more than 80% of all registered vehicles nationwide (Ministry of Finance, 2026). In Nepal, official monthly accident statistics from Nepal Police Headquarters confirm that two-wheelers are the most vulnerable category in the country's transport sector, accounting for a disproportionate share of road traffic incidents. Of the 3,130 vehicles involved in crashes between May 15 and June 14, 2026, motorcycles and scooters accounted for 1,867 cases. This represents 59.65% of the total number of vehicles involved, far outstripping all other transit categories combined. The crash involvement of two-wheelers is nearly five times higher than that of private automobiles (jeeps, cars, and vans at 13.00%) and roughly nine times higher than that of heavy commercial cargo transport (trucks, tankers, and tippers at 6.26%). This critical exposure index underscores a profound public health challenge, reinforcing the empirical need for targeted governance and policy enforcement for two-wheeler safety in a rapidly motorizing, developing economy (Nepal Police Headquarters, 2026; WHO, 2023).

The introduction of the "Double Helmet" regulation, which mandates certified headgear for both riders and pillion passengers, was intended as a crucial preventive health intervention to reduce traumatic brain injuries and fatalities. However, policy implementation has repeatedly stalled because of deep-seated public resistance, bureaucratic policy reversals, and contested institutional legitimacy. Within Nepal's hyperactive digital ecosystem, media coverage across online news portals has been structurally polarized. Rather than serving as a neutral conduit of information, digital journalism desks have actively selected and highlighted specific aspects of the mandate to drive competing interpretations (Entman, 1993). Mainstream online media has frequently put together state's aggressive penalty enforcement with local structural realities, such as poorly engineered, potholed road networks as an unstandardized retail market flooded with counterfeit helmets, and skepticism about an artificial 2-to-12 billion NPR import market expansion.

This fragmented reporting has created confusions on interpretive dissonance, undermining citizens' ability to distinguish state intentions from corporate collusion (Scheufele, 1999). Consequently, a critical research gap remains in understanding how online media platforms have structurally framed the Double Helmet regulation over the past decade (2016–2026) as well as competing media packages that has influenced for civic compliance, public consensus and the democratic legitimacy of road safety governance in Nepal.

1.2 Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: What dominant framing pattern can be observed amongst online media outlets that has influenced the enforcement of Double Helmet regulation during 2016-2026?

RQ2: In what ways online media enhanced the public engagement and audience response on enforcing double helmet policy?

RQ3: How do spatial focus (Kathmandu-centric versus district-level reporting) and institutional positioning (state-affiliated, mainstream, and niche outlets) shape discourse construction and public perception?

1.3 Research Objectives (ROs):

RO1: To identify and categorize framing strategies across phases of policy introduction, contestation, and normalization.

RO2: To analyze how framing relates to audience engagement and policy legitimacy.

RO3: To evaluate how media location and institutional orientation shape discourse and public understanding.

1.4 Delimitations of the Study

This study is deliberately limited to a corpus of 105 news items drawn from 21 major national and prominent subnational Nepali-language digital portals officially registered with the Government of Nepal's regulatory bodies. Chronologically, the empirical data collection is strictly limited to the period between 2016 and 2026. Topically, the focus is narrowly confined to the institutional media framing of two-wheeler road safety governance, with particular emphasis on the "Double Helmet" regulation and helmet-related policy discourse. Consequently, this research intentionally excludes broader user-generated public discourse and organic citizen counter-narratives circulating across algorithmic social media networks, public groups, or platforms such as Facebook and TikTok. Furthermore, safety-related coverage published in English-language newspapers, broadcast media (radio and television), or any digital portals outside the 21 designated sampled outlets is entirely outside the scope of this investigation.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance for public policy communication and road safety governance in developing economies. Theoretically, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by showing how digital media narratives shape public legitimacy, risk perception, and civic defense mechanisms such as "Symbolic Compliance" in an import-dependent, rapidly motorizing South Asian society over a ten-year cycle (2016–2026). Practically, the findings provide immediate, empirical, data-driven insights for transport policymakers, traffic enforcement authorities, and digital media desks. As Nepal implements sweeping statutory overhauls under the newly registered Transportation Bill (2024/2081 BS), this research offers a strategic framework for designing transparent, community-centered risk communication strategies, ultimately helping to bridge the critical trust deficit that frequently paralyzes the implementation of vital public safety laws.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between media logic and regulatory compliance has been emphasized in scholarly debates of public health policy. Theories of agenda-setting and framing has applied to deal the perspectives to understand this connection. Similarly, framing theory explains the problems and defined, causes that have been attributed, moral judgments. It is also used to make the solutions are proposed to influence interpretation and response, agenda-setting theory emphasizes the media's ability to prioritize issues and shape public and political attention (Albalawi & Sixsmith, 2015). These types of the frames are crucial for establishing the legitimacy of governance in developing countries because media representations have the power to either delegitimize safety mandates as coercive, costly interventions or legitimize them as public health imperatives (Bou-Karroum et al., 2017; Rando & Hastuti, 2025). The rapidly growing digital media ecosystem in Nepal, which is dominated by portals like eKantipur, Setopati, Ratopati, and OnlineKhabar, has made these dynamics more intense. According to Muhtar et al. (2024), online platforms facilitate the quick distribution, interactive interaction and viral amplification of discussions, turning viewers to be engaged participants in policy discussions. Acharya (2019) shows how Nepali media practices influence credibility and trust in regulatory reporting, which makes accountability issues in online journalism even more difficult.

According to Airi and Bhattarai (2024), media content use to have direct impact on online participation and discourse, making audience engagement through comment sections and social media metrics crucial to understanding resonance. The literature on risk communication makes a distinction between medical-risk frame. It is reframed compliance as a civic duty and enforcement-heavy frames, which frequently arouse feelings of coercion. However, research shows that unless technical narratives are combined with emotionally charged storytelling such as about catastrophic accidents on families, they only produce a limited level of engagement, highlighting the affective component of digital communication (Muhtar et al., 2024; Xi & Cochrane, 2023). Comparative studies offer helpful parallels: in India, celebrity involvement in traffic accidents has seen as a catalyst for policy debate, while administrative bureaucratic reports received less attention (Liang & Chou, 2025); in Indonesia, disciplinary enforcement sparked opposition while health advocacy increased compliance (Dwinarko et al., 2023). Cross-cultural studies also highlight sociocultural elements such as economic constraints, collectivist norms and trust in authority influence the people for safety information (Mancone et al., 2024).

Methodologically, content analysis, sentiment analysis and engagement metrics are widely used to assess to know audience resonances (Broucke & Vandenbosch, 2018). Yet, challenges such as misinformation, urban biasness and unethical representation are identified as eroding factors on trust (Okuhara et al., 2025; Ontaş et al., 2024). Complementary studies have highlighted broader intersections between media and health regulation policy actions. Cultural norms and self-determination theory influence risky behaviors, such as careless driving, in Nepal, highlighting the significance of communication tactics for adherence (Ranjit et al., 2017). Online reporting is a tool for digital disease detection and public health monitoring, according to media surveillance research (Schwind et al., 2017). Media framing can support or undermine regulatory actions, as demonstrated by comparative viewpoints on tobacco advertising bans and international political communication (Samodro, 2023; Shahreza, 2024). Digital platforms increase both opportunities and challenges for regulatory acceptance, according to broader scholarship on ICT transformations and gaps in health communication (Shakya & Drechsler, 2023; Sharma et al., 2019). When combined, these observations provide context for Nepal's Double Helmet regulation, where public participation, media discourse, and institutional positioning all work together to influence skepticism, compliance, and long-term policy outcomes.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, Public Sphere Theory, and the concept of the Mediatization of Policy to examine how Nepal's online media shaped public perception and policy discourse surrounding the Double Helmet regulation. Collectively, these perspectives can provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing issue salience, meaning construction, public deliberation and overall media-policy interaction.

2.2 Application of Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory has promoted by McCombs and Shaw (1972), holds that while the media may not determine what individuals think, it strongly shapes which issues are considered important. In Nepal's expanding digital media environment, frequent and episodic coverage of helmet-related enforcement actions, traffic fatalities, and policy reversals elevated the Double Helmet regulation to a matter of national concern. This study has used agenda-setting theory to assess on the frequency, timing and prominence of coverage particularly during enforcement drives or viral incidents shaped public attention and prioritized the regulation within the broader policy agenda.

While agenda-setting explains visibility, Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) elucidates how meaning is constructed. Frames define problems, assign causality, offer moral evaluations, and suggest remedies. Nepali online media employed diverse frames in communicating messages on the Double Helmet regulation. Economic Burden Frame is presenting helmets as financially oppressive. Elite Defiance Frame highlighting law-breaking by powerful figures to trigger indignation. Medical Risk Frame is moralizing compliance through neurosurgical evidence and accident statistics. Governance Legitimacy Frame is questioning over the fairness and transparency on the enforcement efforts by state authority. The above-mentioned frames function to influence the public perception with main focus over the essentiality of specific public policy as protective necessity or the act of government as coercive authority practice. These types of informative information have been functioned as cognitive level of the information whether the public perceived this information as a protective necessity.

2.3 Public Sphere and Mediatization for the Deliberation and Governance

Drawing on Habermas, Public Sphere Theory, and the positions online news portals, comment sections, and social media threads can be recognized as arenas for public deliberation and discourse. These digital spaces have contributed on direct public-state interactions forum in Nepal. In Nepal, these digital spaces mediated citizen state interactions, in case of double helmet policy enforcement, transforming helmet regulation into a topic of debate through news reports, opinion pieces, and reader commentary, the online media has brought the double helmet policy as public debate motion. This study examines whether such forums facilitated rational-critical debate or constrained deliberative potential with whether sensationalism, polarization, and misinformation constrained deliberative potential that is creating echo chambers of resistance. In addition, the Mediatization of Policy (Hjarvard, 2008) concept suggest how governance increasingly adapts to media logic. Nepal is not different, where policy announcements, suspensions, and enforcement often followed peak attention in media and grab public reaction. The Double Helmet regulation illustrates a reactive governance model, where frequent reversals and enforcement fluctuations reflected the “digital temperature” of coverage. This framework enables analysis of feedback loops through which media framing and audience engagement influenced policy communication, enforcement strategies, and regulatory legitimacy.

2.4 Integrative Synthesis

Collectively, these theories provide multidimensional framework: Agenda-Setting explains issue salience, framing reveals meaning construction, Public Sphere situates citizen deliberation, and Mediatization highlights feedback loops between media discourse and governance. This integrated perspective also confirm the probability of Nepali online media did not merely reflect debates surrounding the Double Helmet regulation but actively shaped policy salience, interpretive meaning, public deliberation, and governance outcomes.

3. Methodology

This study uses an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design to examine how Nepal’s online media framed the "Double Helmet" regulation and its impact on policy legitimacy between 2016 and 2026. By integrating qualitative discourse analysis and stakeholder interviews with quantitative content analysis, the research offers a holistic assessment of digital journalism’s role in mediatizing regulatory discourse in Nepal. Although Nepal hosts over 5,100 registered online outlets, the study used a multi-stage purposive sampling approach to select 21 major national and prominent sub-national, Nepali-language digital news portals based on institutional relevance and audience reach. To validate

portal selection, a preparatory survey of 10 active mainstream journalists across Nepal was conducted, identifying the most influential digital platforms.

The first phase involved a quantitative content analysis of a systematically sampled corpus of 105 news items (5 items per portal). These items were retrieved through targeted keyword searches including "Helmet," "Double Helmet," "Motorcycle Accidents," and "Road Injuries" and filtered for long-term digital availability and ease of access. Within this sequential framework, Phase II applied qualitative discourse analysis to these texts to decode deeper rhetorical strategies and symbolic meanings. Finally, Phase III incorporated in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 10 key stakeholders representing institutional diversity (traffic authorities, transport experts, and media professionals). All interview participants provided informed consent, and qualitative data were analyzed using systematic thematic coding while maintaining strict confidentiality.

Table 1: *Methodological Framework*

Phase	Method	Unit of Analysis	Primary Objective
Preparatory Expert Survey		10 Active Mainstream Journalists	Validate and finalize the selection of the 21 major digital news portals.
Phase I	Quantitative Content Analysis	105 English and translated news items	Map dominant framing patterns, frequency, and baseline engagement metrics.
Phase II	Qualitative Discourse Analysis	Sampled Headlines and Core Media Narratives	Decode rhetorical strategies, ideological positions, and symbolic meanings.
Phase III	In-Depth Interviews	10 Purposively Sampled Stakeholders	Explore lived perceptions of policy agendas, market skepticism, and legitimacy.

3.1 Preparatory Phase: Expert Survey

To ensure methodological rigor, an expert survey was conducted with 10 active mainstream journalists representing diverse reporting backgrounds across digital and traditional media ecosystems. The primary objective of this phase was to validate and finalize the selection of the 21 major digital news portals used in the core study, establishing a representative sample based on industry consensus and portal prominence.

This study analyzed 105 news samples from 21 leading Nepali online portals (2016–2026) to map digital framing of the Double Helmet regulation. The quantitative distribution of primary frames and their engagement metrics is summarized. As public safety & medical risk category accounted for the largest share of coverage by 43.8%, focusing on injury prevention and health advocacy (e.g., Onlinekhabar and Ratopati). Similarly, in economic burden & political economy category, it has focused heavily on market costs by 28.6%), commercial dealer interests and skepticism of corporate monopolies (e.g., Setopati, Shilapatra). Likewise, punitive enforcement & policy fluctuation has highlighted traffic penalties with 17.1%) and abrupt regulatory shifts or U-turns (e.g., Kathmandu Pati, Khabarhub). At last, elite defiance documented high-profile regulatory violations by 10.5% public figures or politicians (e.g., Nepalkhabar, Khabarhub).

3.2 Engagement Analysis

While safety frames were common, economic Burden and Elite Defiance metrics generated the most virality. For instance, Setopati's piece on commercial helmet traders

garnered 27.3k shares, and Ratopati's report on passenger mandates peaked at 95.3k shares. Conversely, proactive educational or policy explainers drew minimal user engagement.

3.3 Phase II: Qualitative Discourse Analysis

The qualitative discourse analysis has indicated that some of the portals deploy highly sensational, coercive and market-skeptic rhetoric to make competing policy narratives. Media outlets were weaponized corporate-interest keywords that were casting public safety as a corporate conspiracy. Key examples include Setopati's headline, "Passenger Safety or a Scheme to Benefit Traders?" and Lokaantar's headline, "Commercial Interests in the Name of Passenger Safety." State-centric, enforcement-oriented narratives had relied heavily on punitive language to ensure compliance. Portals deployed aggressive policy hooks, such as "Policy Hack" (Mero Auto), and issued enforcement ultimatums, such as "No Helmet, No Fuel" (Prasashan, Nepal Television). Headlines have amplified public cynicism by highlighting regulatory instability and elite hypocrisy. Outlets used reactive terms such as "Traffic Police Make a U-Turn" (Kathmandu Pati) and "Rule Dropped without Further Discussion" (Setopati), and showcased high-profile defiance, including former prince Paras's "intimidating the police" while riding helmetless (Shilapatra, Nepalkhabar).

3.4 Phase III: In-Depth Interviews

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively sampled stakeholders (including transport authorities, journalists, and traffic police) identified two core themes regarding the policy's implementation). Perceived Legitimacy Deficit: Stakeholders noted that while the primary intent of the Double Helmet policy was to reduce injuries, the sudden, top-down enforcement mechanism lacked transparency, leading to immediate public friction and institutional distrust. Market Skepticism and Resentment: Respondents explicitly highlighted a widespread belief among commuters that the regulation was a commercially driven mandate intended to clear importer inventories rather than a pure public safety initiative, ultimately forcing the state to reverse course.

4. Findings

This study analyzed 105 news samples from 21 leading Nepali online portals (2016–2026) to examine how digital media framed the Double Helmet regulation and how these frames shaped public discourse, perception, and policy dynamics. The thematic findings emerged; those are discussed below:

4.1 Media Framing Patterns

Media coverage was fragmented, oscillating between public-safety and medical-risk frames that emphasized injury prevention and punitive traffic fines (Goddard et al., 2019; Tharu & Shrestha, 2021). State-centric normalization frames portrayed compliance as an inevitable civic obligation (Anand, 2011), whereas localized economic-burden and political-economy frames questioned the affordability of policy and the role of helmet import monopolies during enforcement suspensions (Poudyal, 2025). Furthermore, elite-defiance frames focusing on regulatory violations by public figures amplified public resentment and institutional skepticism (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Subedi, 2023). Finally, while rights-based narratives appeared sporadically, broader socioeconomic and gender inequities remained confined to peripheral district-level reporting rather than to mainstream, Kathmandu-centric coverage (Poudel, 2021).

4.2 Narrative Construction

Media packaging of the mandate relied heavily on statistical governance, using raw accident figures and daily traffic penalty metrics to mechanically justify state enforcement (Anand, 2011; Poudel, 2021). Digital desks frequently weaponized sensational enforcement conflicts and tragedy-and-consequence framing to personalize risk and artificially amplify public urgency (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Subedi, 2023). Conversely, proactive educational awareness campaigns and consumer-safety explainers regarding headgear safety standards remained highly marginalized within the news ecology. While the strategic deployment of emotive imagery and human-interest victim narratives successfully drove digital virality, it consistently displaced contextual policy explanations, structural road-engineering critiques, and long-term public health advocacy (Bennett, 2014).

4.3 Public Perception and Engagement

Sentiment analysis indicated that emotionally charged enforcement narratives and economic-shock frames drove high digital engagement, whereas legal and explanatory framing attracted minimal attention (Poudyal, 2025). Chronic institutional ambiguity induced interpretive dissonance, prompting citizens to view helmet purchases as a means of evading fines rather than a medical necessity (Covello & Sandman, 2001). Satirical memes and corporate collusion narratives reinforced public skepticism, transforming comment sections into fragmented public spheres characterized by cynical critique (Subedi, 2023). These dynamics forged a reactive media policy feedback loop, where online backlash routinely forced sudden government clarifications or temporary policy suspensions (Tharu & Shrestha, 2021). Consequently, while reform-oriented media marginally normalized long-term helmet compliance, persistent episodic sensationalism obscured the structural dilemmas of transport safety. Ultimately, Nepal's digital media ecosystem served as an agenda-setter and discourse amplifier, validating road safety objectives while eroding public trust in institutions (Entman, 1993).

5. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that online journalism in Nepal serves as a primary political and cultural arena for negotiating the legitimacy of road safety governance. When evaluated against structural framing paradigms, the polarization of online narratives shifting between clinical risk amplification and skepticism about institutional conspiracies reveals that selective media packaging directly constrains how citizens interpret a technical public health mandate (Entman, 1993). This narrative dynamic shows that public resistance in Nepal is not a blunt, anti-safety rejection of traffic regulations. Instead, it is a highly rational, structured critique of three deeply rooted systemic failures within the country's socio-technical, commercial, and legislative landscape:

The Infrastructure Deficit vs. Reactive Penalization: Digital narratives validate public anger by contrasting the state's aggressive penalty extraction with the physical backdrop of severely damaged, potholed, and poorly engineered road networks (World Bank, 2020). Media production cycles divide this reality into two conflicting dimensions. On the one hand, outlets deploy an emotionalized "Tragedy-and-Consequence" frame such as Ukeraa Daily's coverage of the BP Highway crash using raw human grief ("My son would be with me today if traffic rules were followed") to personalize user risk and amplify administrative urgency. On the other hand, the digital public sphere uses these same infrastructure reports to redirect accountability toward the state, arguing that the government must fulfill its ethical duty to provide safe, drivable roads before tracking and punishing individual commuters through progressive financial hikes.

Commercial Exploitation, Import Cartels, and Symbolic Compliance: A foundational driver of public cynicism is the institutional vacuum surrounding helmet quality standardization and the political economy of imports. Media disclosures from OnlineKhabar reveal that while the Nepal Bureau of Standards and Metrology (NBSM) established an ISO-aligned "Nepal Standard" (NS Mark), it remains completely voluntary because the state lacks a functional, accredited structural testing laboratory. Consequently, the market is flooded with sub-standard, counterfeit headgear retailing for as low as 500 NPR.

Empirical trade data indicate that 60–90% of consumers in Nepal systematically purchase these cheap, uncertified helmets solely for "symbolic compliance" to evade arbitrary highway checkpoints and traffic fine extractions ranging from 500 to 1,500 NPR rather than to mitigate genuine medical risk (Poudyal, 2025). This behavioral anomaly is clearly documented in regional reporting, such as Ratopati's coverage of the Chitwan Traffic Police intervention, where enforcement units were forced to launch targeted campaigns to confiscate downsized headgear that covered "only the crown of the head" (Sharma, 2016). In these localized contexts, enforcement temporarily shifted away from reactive fine extractions toward structural safety corrections seizing unsafe helmets and releasing riders only upon presentation of certified headgear (Sharma, 2016).

However, when digital media outlets like Nepal Press report that a strictly enforced secondary helmet rule would instantly expand an import market drawing from 39 countries into an artificial monopoly worth 2 to 12 billion NPR, columnists package the mandate as a corporate "Policy Hack" to enrich trading houses. On-the-ground market realities strongly validate this media skepticism, proving that public resistance is a calculated defense mechanism against an unstandardized, penalizing retail environment.

Statutory Transition and Regional Divergence: While historical executive directives from traffic police were plagued by a severe implementation gap and abrupt administrative "U-turns" (such as the 24-hour enforcement freeze in May 2019), data tracking the newly registered Transportation Bill (Clause 42, Sub-clause 3) indicate a definitive institutional effort to transition the mandate into permanent statutory law (Federal Parliament of Nepal, 2024). This statutory codification introduces a rigid 1,000 NPR penalty under Clause 68 to circumvent executive instability and elite defiance from previous decades.

Interestingly, text analysis reveals a significant geographic divide, as subnational media networks (e.g., Gorkhapatra and Rajdhani Daily, reporting from the Bara and Jhapa districts) bypass metropolitan digital resistance. By framing enforcement through decentralized, community-centric "Traffic Weeks", free ophthalmic camps, and mechanical checkups, regional discourses actively reconstruct traffic police as proactive public welfare agents rather than coercive revenue collectors. This creates a localized narrative of normative compliance that remains highly fractured within mainstream, urban digital public spheres.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Nepal's digital media networks are not merely passive conduits of information but highly influential institutional actors that actively shape the parameters of public legitimacy and policy discourse surrounding the "Double Helmet" regulation. Over a ten-year cycle (2016–2026), online platforms have served as contested arenas of discourse, framing the mandate through structurally polarized narratives. While public health and preventive risk frames marginally encouraged regulatory acceptance, mainstream digital desks heavily weaponized frames of economic burden, infrastructure deficits, and corporate import cartels. This commercial framing strongly validated a public defense mechanism of "Symbolic Compliance," in which riders purchased substandard

headgear to evade immediate traffic fines rather than to mitigate genuine medical risk. Furthermore, the digital ecosystem's interactive architecture has amplified these structural tensions, transforming online media into fragmented public spheres where click-driven sensationalism frequently undermines rational-critical policy debates. As Nepal transitions into a new era of enforcement under the newly registered Transportation Bill (2024/2081 BS), these findings underscore an urgent need for a paradigm shift in state communication. Salvaging institutional legitimacy requires regulatory bodies to move from purely punitive measures toward transparent, data-driven, and community-centric risk communication. Concurrently, online journalism must move beyond algorithmic sensationalism toward contextualized public health reporting. Bridging this systemic divide between state directives and digital media representation is essential to restore civic trust, foster informed democratic discourse, and build sustainable public compliance with road safety standards in Nepal.

7. Recommendations

- The studies should broaden the sampling frame beyond institutional online news portals to include algorithmic social media platforms such as TikTok and public Facebook groups, where spontaneous, citizen-led counter-narratives and informal policy negotiations frequently emerge.
- Secondly, there is a compelling need for large-scale quantitative audience impact studies that use extensive user surveys to measure direct causal links between specific media exposure, institutional trust, and actual behavioral compliance rates among motorcycle users.
- Thirdly, scholars are encouraged to extend this inquiry into a broader regional comparative analysis of other South Asian nations that face similar structural friction, unstandardized retail helmet markets, and rapid motorization trends in urban transport governance.
- Fourthly, future research should integrate transport economics more deeply into communication studies by examining how online media landscapes frame the political economy of safety equipment imports and market monopolies.
- Finally, given the systemic challenges identified in local archiving, it is highly recommended to investigate how the lack of digital infrastructure in sub-national media networks affects long-term public policy communication, regulatory transparency and data-driven policy evaluation.

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Annex I: Sample Online News Outlets

The following 21 Kathmandu-centric online media outlets were systematically selected and included in this study:

1. Onlinekhabar (onlinekhabar.com)
2. Ekantipur (ekantipur.com)
3. Setopati (setopati.com)
4. Gorkhapatra Online (gorkhapatraonline.com)
5. Mero Auto (meroauto.com)
6. Ratopati (ratopati.com)
7. Nepalkhabar (nepalkhabar.com)
8. Lokaantar (lokaantar.com)
9. Shilapatra (shilapatra.com)
10. Rajdhani Daily (rajdhanidaily.com)
11. Nepal Press (nepalpress.com)
12. Ukeraa (ukeraa.com)
13. Baahrakhari (baahrakhari.com)
14. Prasashan (prasashan.com)
15. Nepal TV Online (nepaltvonline.com)
16. Annapurna Post (annapurnapost.com)
17. Nepal Live (nepallive.com)
18. Lokpath (lokpath.com)
19. Kathmandu Pati (kathmandupati.com)
20. Bikash News (bikashnews.com)
21. Khabarhub (khabarhub.com)