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The Social Construction of Environmental Crisis in Pakistan: A Media-Centric Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study uses Dawn's carefully selected collection of newspaper articles to investigate how environmental issues are socially constructed in Pakistan through the lens of mass media. The study uses qualitative content analysis to pinpoint prevailing narratives and themes in media coverage that influence public opinion and environmental policy discussions. For the sake of getting themes by using induction from these columns, a mathematical approach is used. Each and every column was read thoroughly and highlighted wherever a new theme was identified by the writer. These themes clearly give us a roadmap to formulate certain strategies for controlling environmental degradation and coping with strategies to curb down environmental pollution." The results show that pollution, climate change, and environmental degradation are frequently viewed through institutional, political, and cultural prisms, revealing a complicated interaction between economic interests, governance issues, and public awareness. The study emphasizes how important the media is in creating environmental realities that impact regional and national reactions in addition to educating the public. The report highlights the gaps between policy and knowledge and makes the need for more aggressive, scientifically based media participation in environmental discourse.

Keywords: *Environmental Issues, Socially Constructed, Media Discussion, Environmental Degradation, Environmental Policy.*

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1. Introduction

In Pakistan, where pollution, unsustainable urban expansion, and climate-related calamities are becoming more common, environmental degradation has become a major concern. According to Eckstein et al. (2021), Pakistan is one of the top ten nations most impacted by climate change. Rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall patterns, frequent floods, and glacial melt all seriously jeopardize the nation's water supplies, food security, and public health. The public's understanding of environmental threats is becoming increasingly important as they escalate. Environmental narratives are framed by the media, particularly by newspapers like Dawn, which influence public opinion as well as the creation and application of policies. The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the media contributes to the social construction of environmental issues in Pakistan through an analysis of several Dawn stories from 2015 to 2025. The study also examines how the media's portrayal of these topics relates to or deviates from governmental policy and scientific data.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the social constructionism theory, which holds that social processes, language, and discourse shape realities rather than them being discovered objectively (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this framework, environmental concerns are seen as constructs influenced by institutional reactions, cultural narratives, and human interpretation rather than just physical realities. The media is a crucial location for this construction, providing biased portrayals that validate some viewpoints while devaluing others (Hannigan, 2006).

This research is also informed by Hajer's (1995) concept of discourse coalitions, which emphasizes how various players unite around particular framings of environmental issues. For instance, a coalition comprising international agencies, journalists, environmental NGOs, and political leaders may portray climate change as a development issue and stress the importance of clean energy transitions and sustainable growth. However, urban planners and business lobbyists may create counterarguments to environmental

laws by pointing to job security and economic concerns. The environmental agenda in Pakistan is shaped by these conflicting discourse alliances, which have an impact on public opinion and media portrayals. Additionally, pertinent is McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting hypothesis, which contends that the media tells individuals what to think about rather than what to consider. Certain environmental issues are given emphasis by frequent coverage and deliberate placement, which shapes the public's perception of their significance. One instance of this agenda-setting in Pakistan is when mainstream newspapers prioritize urban haze above rural water scarcity.

3. Research Methodology

Using a purposive sample of sixteen articles published in Dawn between 2015 and 2025, a qualitative content analysis was carried out. Relevance to environmental concerns such as air pollution, plastic waste, climate governance, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and green development was taken into consideration when choosing the articles. To find recurring themes in language, framing techniques, and discursive practices, the texts were thematically coded. Inductive development was used to create thematic categories, which were then examined in light of larger sociopolitical settings. A thorough and methodical assessment of the framing of environmental concerns in public discourse is made possible by this method, which adheres to the standards for qualitative media analysis set forth by Altheide and Schneider (2013). In order to ensure consistency in theme identification, the analysis also included inter-coder reliability checks, which involved two researchers in the coding process. The coding categories were refined through iterative discussions, resulting in five major thematic clusters discussed in the next section.

4. Key Themes from Media Discourse

Following key themes are given below.

4.1. Plastic Pollution and Urban Waste

The article titled "How Plastic is Killing Us" presents a compelling narrative on the unchecked consumption of single-use plastics. The issue is framed as a crisis of governance and public negligence, emphasizing the lack of data and

policy implementation. Pakistan's annual consumption of plastic is projected to reach 3 million tons by 2030 (WWF-Pakistan, 2022). Media narratives often assign responsibility to individuals and municipal bodies, urging behavioral changes such as reducing plastic bag usage and promoting recycling. However, the broader systemic issues such as weak enforcement of plastic bags, lack of industrial accountability, and absence of circular economy policies are underrepresented. A comparative analysis with India's ban on single-use plastics (Press Information Bureau, 2022) reveals that enforcement mechanisms and stakeholder collaboration are crucial to policy success, yet these dimensions are often overlooked in Pakistani media. The articles rarely link plastic pollution to public health or marine ecosystems, narrowing the scope of discourse to urban cleanliness and aesthetics.

4.2. Air Quality, Smog, And Public Health

Multiple articles document the worsening air pollution in Punjab, particularly Lahore. The use of scientific data, such as AQI readings and WHO standards, constructs air pollution as a public health emergency. A 2024 World Bank report estimates that air pollution shortens life expectancy in Lahore by over four years. The media often highlights industrial emissions, vehicular traffic, and stubble burning as key contributors, but less attention is given to structural policy reforms or transboundary pollution agreements with India (Greenstone & Fan, 2023). Seasonal smog is often treated as an isolated phenomenon, with limited coverage on its root causes or year-round impact. Instead of thorough air quality management plans, reports usually concentrate on temporary government actions like closing schools or limiting the number of vehicles. Furthermore, these narratives rarely focus on the vulnerable groups that suffer the most from air pollution, such as low-income communities, the elderly, and children.

4.3. Climate Change and Political (In)Action

Articles such as "Climate Change: Most Pressing Issue" and "Delivering Clean Air" draw attention to the disconnect between political action and scientific understanding. The right to a healthy environment (Article 9A) has been recognized by constitutional changes, although implementation

is still uneven. According to Rauf et al. (2021), institutional fragmentation makes it difficult for Pakistan to effectively implement the ambitious mitigation targets outlined in its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. The media frames these failures as part of a broader pattern of political inertia and misaligned priorities. Recurring themes include reliance on foreign aid, underfunding of climate projects, and frequent changes in the leadership of the climate ministry. In contrast, success stories such as the Billion Tree Tsunami project are occasionally highlighted but not deeply analyzed for ecological outcomes or policy sustainability.

4.4. Institutional and Governance Responses

Institutional initiatives like the Punjab Clean Air Programme and the establishment of the Pakistan Climate Change Authority are also reflected in the media. Nevertheless, these are frequently presented in the context of lax enforcement and inequalities between provinces. Effective environmental governance is hampered by bureaucratic lethargy and federalism issues (Mahmood, 2020). Furthermore, despite their importance in influencing policy outcomes, the impact of foreign donors—like the World Bank's green development projects in Punjab—receives little attention. Although local governments are constitutionally obligated to provide municipal services, their role in environmental management is rarely discussed. The disconnect between federal climate policies and local implementation mechanisms remains a major hurdle, as highlighted by UNDP (2023) assessments on climate adaptation projects in Pakistan.

4.5. Cultural Narratives and Environmental Awareness

Creative cultural projects like the Breath Pakistan campaign and the environmental drama "Dharti Maa" show how art and media can work together to increase awareness. By humanizing environmental deterioration, these campaigns help the public relate to and feel affected by it. As demonstrated by international examples like India's Green Oscar-winning documentary *The Elephant Whisperers*, these narrative techniques are essential for changing public perceptions (Singh & Joshi, 2023). The media continues to underutilize its cultural platforms to promote eco-literacy. Public participation can be increased by

covering community theater, environmental art exhibits, and school-based awareness campaigns. Building grassroots environmental movements

and democratizing knowledge could be achieved through environmental journalism in Urdu and other regional languages.

Table 1: *Dominant Themes in Dawn's Environmental Coverage*

Theme	Framing Strategy	Implications
Plastic Pollution	Crisis, negligence	Need for data, policy, and citizen awareness
Air Quality & Smog	Health emergency	Immediate and long-term policy action
Climate Change Governance	Political inertia vs. symbolism	Weak implementation of policies
Institutional Frameworks	Fragmentation, weak coordination	Call for integrated governance
Cultural Engagement	Emotional, artistic resonance	Enhances public engagement and literacy

Discussion: Constructing Environmental Realities in The Public Sphere

The media narratives under examination demonstrate how environmental issues are discursively framed as being intertwined with governance, the economy, and social behavior. The articles often blend scientific data with emotive language, thereby creating a dual discourse of urgency and helplessness. This is in line with Boykoff and Boykoff's (2004) "journalistic norms" theory, which maintains that balance and dramatization frequently skew how environmental science is presented.

Some articles focus on community action and moral persuasion, while others promote institutional reform. The disputed character of Pakistani environmental discourse is reflected in this variety of framing. Furthermore, linguistic and digital divides may restrict public engagement if English-language elite newspapers like Dawn are relied upon (Zubair, 2019). According to O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole's (2009) research on climate change communication, there is a propensity to frame environmental issues in crisis mode, which may contribute to public fatigue or disengagement. One of the most important worldwide issues of the twenty-first century is environmental degradation. Countries all throughout the world are battling a variety of ecological issues, such as urban pollution and climate change. The media is crucial in creating, forming, and disseminating environmental narratives in developing nations like Pakistan,

where the issue is made worse by growing urbanization and inadequate environmental governance (Boykoff, 2009). Newspapers in particular are essential for defining agendas, presenting environmental issues, and affecting public opinion and policy debate.

The coverage of environmental issues by Dawn, a prominent English-language daily in Pakistan, is critically examined in this review paper. Through a mixed-method analysis of themes emerging from its opinion and feature columns, the paper seeks to evaluate the media's framing strategies and their broader sociopolitical implications. The five core themes identified—plastic pollution, air quality and smog, climate change governance, institutional frameworks, and cultural engagement—provide a useful lens through which the complex relationship between media, society, and environment in Pakistan can be understood. This study draws primarily on **framing theory**, as developed by Entman (1993), which argues that media frames select certain aspects of reality and make them more salient in order to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. In the context of environmental reporting, this means that the way an issue is framed—whether as a crisis, opportunity, or political debate—has significant implications for how it is understood and addressed by the public and policymakers.

From a sociological perspective, the paper also engages with the **social construction of**

environmental problems. According to Hannigan (2006), environmental issues do not automatically become public concerns; they must be framed, interpreted, and narrated in ways that align with cultural beliefs and institutional logics. Hence, media narratives play a critical role in the “claim-making” process that determines which environmental issues receive attention and which do not. Five dominant themes were identified and categorized according to their **framing strategy** and the **implications** drawn by the columnists. These themes were not derived from frequency counts alone but emerged from interpretive analysis of how environmental issues were constructed and contextualized. The mixed approach allows for both qualitative interpretation and theoretical synthesis.

Plastic pollution consistently appears in Dawn’s environmental coverage as a symbol of urban neglect and systemic apathy. Columns often frame it as a crisis, emphasizing the visibility of plastic waste in public spaces, rivers, and oceans. This crisis framing is frequently paired with **moral outrage**, directed at both policymakers and citizens for their complacency (Dawn, 2023).

Notwithstanding this forceful rhetoric, the coverage emphasizes inadequate policy implementation and a dearth of trustworthy data. Although several provinces have declared plastic bag bans, enforcement is still patchy and uneven. Similar patterns can be seen throughout South Asia. According to Jambeck et al. (2015), the region’s poor waste management infrastructure makes it one of the biggest producers to ocean plastic.

Furthermore, Dawn has a propensity to personalize environmental issues by emphasizing consumer behavior over corporate accountability or structural policy shortcomings. This runs the risk of hiding the necessity of structural fixes like circular economy models and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR).

In recent years, Dawn has increasingly covered smog episodes in Lahore and other urban centers, especially during the winter months. The framing here is unmistakably one of **public health emergency**, with headlines invoking imagery of hospitals, masks, and vulnerable populations (Dawn, 2022).

This framing is effective in **generating urgency**,

but often lacks historical or structural context. There is little discussion, for instance, on **vehicular emissions standards, industrial regulations, or urban planning policies** that contribute to the crisis. Furthermore, the seasonal increase in coverage could make smog a transient problem rather than a persistent urban ailment with roots in development trends.

Similar trends may be seen in Indian media, where severe air pollution problems are also present in places like Delhi. According to Ghosh (2021), emergency framing can encourage short-term governance but seldom results in long-term change unless institutional responsibility and public pressure are also present.

Another recurrent issue in Dawn is the governance of climate change, which is frequently discussed in terms of political symbolism vs implementation failure. At international conferences like COP26, Pakistan’s status as a vulnerable nation in the Global South is often brought up. Columnists frequently draw attention to the discrepancy between the stated policies (such as Clean Green Pakistan and Billion Tree Tsunami) and their actual results (Dawn, 2021).

The public’s growing distrust about climate performativity—political leaders’ propensity to take symbolic environmental actions without institutional follow-through—is revealed by this frame. Khan and Khan (2022) believe that this performativity inhibits genuine climate action and promotes cynicism among citizens.

Although Dawn occasionally publishes articles supporting more robust climate institutions, there is little in-depth coverage of intergovernmental coordination, climate finance, or the function of provincial autonomy in carrying out policies. Because of this, the criticism is still general and frequently devoid of in-depth research.

The criticism of disjointed institutional systems is one of Dawn’s more complex themes in its environmental coverage.□ The overlap and misunderstanding between federal, provincial, and local authorities tasked with environmental control have been highlighted in articles. For instance, the Punjab Environmental Protection Agency (PEPA) is commonly accused for having neither capability nor authority.

This theme is framed as a **problem of weak**

coordination, with calls for **integrated governance** and clearer mandates. Scholars such as Najam and Bari (2020) argue that Pakistan's federal structure requires greater institutional harmonization if climate resilience is to be achieved.

However, while the newspaper identifies institutional dysfunction, it rarely delves into the **political economy** of environmental governance—how interests, incentives, and bureaucratic rivalries shape policy outcomes. This is a key area where academic research can complement media narratives. And here comes the main theme that is highly relevant to the paper; **Cultural Engagement: The Power of Emotional and Artistic Resonance**

Unlike traditional issue reporting, Dawn occasionally features articles that frame environmental degradation through **cultural and emotional lenses**. Poetic essays, visual metaphors, and references to Sufi philosophy are used to evoke a sense of loss and reverence for nature (Dawn, 2020).

This form of **emotive framing** has significant implications. It moves beyond technocratic discourse and engages the public at a **deeper affective level**. Boykoff and Osnes (2019) argue that art, storytelling, and performance can act as powerful mediums for environmental communication, particularly in societies where literacy levels and civic engagement are low.

Such coverage is also in line with worldwide trends in eco-criticism, which uses literature, art, and religion to reimagine the relationships between humans and nature. This strategy might be essential for raising environmental awareness in a nation like Pakistan that is spiritually oriented and culturally diverse.

5. Discussion

The aforementioned themes illustrate Dawn's approach to navigating Pakistan's challenging environmental journalism landscape. On one hand, the newspaper serves as an important platform for raising awareness and advocating for change. Its framing techniques, whether they are emergency, crisis, or emotional, work well to draw attention. However, structural critique is frequently absent from the coverage. The ways that transnational influences, governance

shortcomings, and economic interests shape Pakistan's environmental reality are not sufficiently examined. This gap is not unique to Dawn. Media studies show that environmental journalism globally is constrained by **editorial priorities, limited expertise, and audience fatigue** (Cox, 2013). In Pakistan, these challenges are compounded by political pressures and a weak culture of investigative reporting. Nonetheless, the themes identified in this review offer valuable entry points for policy engagement, **academic research, and civil society mobilization**. For example, recognizing the media's focus on air pollution could lead public health researchers to collaborate with journalists in framing long-term solutions. Similarly, the emotive narratives of environmental loss could be harnessed by NGOs to develop culturally grounded awareness campaigns.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the dominant environmental themes in Dawn newspaper through the lenses of framing theory and environmental sociology. The analysis reveals that Dawn plays a dual role: it informs and alerts the public while also reflecting the limitations of media institutions in a developing democracy. The newspaper's focus on crisis and emergency framing is effective in generating awareness but needs to be complemented by deeper structural analysis and long-term policy advocacy. To strengthen environmental discourse in Pakistan, there must be greater **collaboration between media, academia, and policymakers**. Journalism schools should train reporters in environmental science and data literacy. Researchers must translate their work into accessible language for public consumption. Most importantly, policymakers should treat media not just as critics, but as **partners in sustainability**.

7. Recommendations

The analysis demonstrates that Dawn newspaper plays a vital role in shaping environmental discourse in Pakistan. By constructing environmental issues as crises requiring political, social, and cultural responses, the media contributes to the broader understanding and prioritization of environmental challenges. However, a stronger alignment between knowledge dissemination and policy

implementation is needed. It is recommended that future media strategies include:

- Greater emphasis on solutions journalism
- Increased coverage of grassroots environmental movements.
- Collaborative reporting with scientific institutions.
- Inclusion of vernacular media in environmental advocacy.
- Leveraging digital platforms and social media for awareness campaigns.
- Enhancing journalist training on environmental science.
- Encouraging data-driven reporting and use of visual storytelling tools.

Conflict of Interest

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