



CRIME HEADLINES IN PAKISTANI ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS: SENSATION OR INFORMATION

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Abstract

This study investigates the nature of crime reporting in Pakistani English-language newspapers to determine whether crime headlines primarily function as sources of information or as instruments of sensationalism. In the contemporary digital media environment, newspapers increasingly compete for audience attention, often relying on dramatic and emotionally charged language to attract readers. Focusing on leading Pakistani English newspapers, including Dawn, The News International, and The Express Tribune, this qualitative study examines crime-related headlines published over a six-month period. Data were analyzed using content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the linguistic and ideological features of crime reporting. The findings indicate that sensationalism frequently overshadows factual and balanced reporting, with headlines often emphasizing shock, fear, and emotional appeal rather than objective information. Such reporting practices have significant implications for media credibility, public trust, and societal perceptions of crime. The study concludes that Pakistani print and digital media organizations should adopt stronger ethical journalism standards and prioritize accurate, responsible, and balanced reporting to enhance public confidence and promote informed public discourse on crime-related issues.

Keywords: Crime reporting, sensationalism, newspaper headlines, Critical Discourse Analysis, Pakistani English newspapers, media discourse

1. Introduction

Crime reporting constitutes a significant component of newspaper journalism and plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of safety, justice, and social order. Newspapers serve as one of the primary sources through which individuals learn about criminal activities and the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies. According to Van Dijk (1988), news discourse not only conveys information but also shapes readers' understanding of social realities through linguistic and ideological choices. In Pakistan, English-language newspapers such as *Dawn*, *The News International*, *The Nation*, and *The Express Tribune* are widely read among educated



segments of society and therefore exert considerable influence on public opinion regarding crime and security issues.

Over the past two decades, crime reporting has gained increasing prominence in Pakistani newspapers. The growth of urban populations, rising concerns about public safety, and intensifying competition within the media industry have contributed to the expansion of crime-related coverage. National statistics indicate that Pakistan continues to face challenges related to violent crime, property crime, kidnapping, cybercrime, and other forms of criminal activity (National Police Bureau of Pakistan, 2021). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2013) further reports that crime remains a significant social concern in developing countries, requiring effective public awareness and responsible media coverage.

The emergence of digital journalism has transformed the way news is produced and consumed. Contemporary readers are often confronted with an overwhelming amount of information and limited time to engage with news content in detail. As a result, headlines have become increasingly important in attracting readers' attention. Newspapers and online news platforms frequently employ concise and striking headlines to encourage readership and increase engagement. While headlines are intended to summarize news stories, they may also contain dramatic or emotionally charged language that influences readers' interpretations of events. Surette (2014) argues that modern crime reporting is increasingly shaped by media practices that prioritize audience appeal and newsworthiness, sometimes at the expense of balanced reporting.

The concept of newsworthiness plays a crucial role in determining which events receive media attention and how they are presented. Jiwani (2002) suggests that media organizations actively construct narratives that influence public perceptions of crime and social issues. Consequently, certain crimes are portrayed as more significant or threatening than others. High-profile incidents involving murder, terrorism, kidnapping, or sexual violence often receive extensive coverage and prominent headlines, whereas less dramatic crimes may attract comparatively limited attention.

The language used in crime reporting is particularly important because it can shape public perceptions of risk, fear, and social disorder. According to Van Dijk (2004), discourse functions as a means through which power, ideology, and social inequality are produced and reproduced within society. Newspaper headlines, therefore, are not merely neutral descriptions of events; they are discursive constructions that may reflect broader social, political, and cultural perspectives. The selection of specific words and expressions can influence how readers perceive victims, offenders, and criminal incidents.

Crime itself is a complex social phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of unlawful activities, including murder, robbery, kidnapping, corruption, cybercrime, domestic violence, harassment, and terrorism. Becker (1968) emphasizes that crime is difficult to define comprehensively because it is influenced by economic, social, and legal factors. Similarly, D'Orsogna and Perc (2015) argue that criminal behavior represents a multifaceted social phenomenon that cannot be understood solely through isolated incidents. Given this complexity, the manner in which crime is represented in the media becomes particularly significant.

The increasing reliance on digital platforms has further intensified competition among news organizations, encouraging the use of attention-grabbing headlines designed to generate clicks and audience engagement. Although such practices may increase readership, they also raise concerns regarding sensationalism and journalistic ethics. Excessively dramatic headlines may



exaggerate the severity of criminal incidents, contribute to public anxiety, and distort perceptions of crime prevalence. Conversely, balanced and fact-based reporting can promote a more informed understanding of social realities and strengthen public trust in media institutions.

Against this background, the present study investigates crime headlines in Pakistani English-language newspapers to determine whether they primarily function as sources of information or as instruments of sensationalism. Drawing upon Van Dijk's (1988, 2004) framework of discourse analysis, the study examines the linguistic and discursive features of crime headlines to explore how crime is represented in Pakistani print and digital media. By analyzing patterns of headline construction, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between media discourse, crime representation, and public perception.

2. Literature Review

Crime and its representation in media have long been central concerns in communication, criminology, and discourse studies. In developing contexts such as Pakistan, crime rates have shown fluctuations over time, with media coverage playing a significant role in shaping public awareness and perception of crime-related issues. According to Becker (1968), crime is a socially constructed concept that cannot be defined in absolute terms, as it is influenced by legal, economic, and cultural frameworks. This complexity makes its representation in media particularly significant, as news discourse often becomes the primary lens through which the public interprets criminal activity.

In contemporary media studies, Van Dijk's (1988, 2004) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is widely used to examine how language constructs social meaning. His framework emphasizes three interrelated dimensions: textual analysis, cognitive processing, and social context. Textual analysis focuses on linguistic features such as vocabulary, syntax, and style; cognitive analysis examines how audiences interpret and internalize media messages; and social analysis explores how discourse reflects and reinforces power relations within society. Through this model, media texts are understood not as neutral representations of reality but as ideologically structured narratives that shape public understanding.

Empirical data on crime in Pakistan indicates a persistent presence of various forms of criminal activity. The National Police Bureau of Pakistan (2021) reported over 13,000 murder cases and approximately 25,000 robberies in urban areas, along with a noticeable rise in kidnapping and cybercrime incidents. Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2013) highlights that homicide rates and violent crimes remain a significant concern in developing countries, including Pakistan. More recent reports also suggest that urban centers such as Karachi face substantial challenges related to street crime, while cybercrime and digital fraud have increased due to technological expansion (National Police Bureau of Pakistan, 2021).

Media representation of crime does not merely reflect these realities but also constructs them through selective reporting and framing. Surette (2014) argues that contemporary crime reporting is less about investigative journalism and more about the dissemination of official press releases, which can influence how crime is framed and perceived. This shift has contributed to a standardized and often simplified portrayal of crime in the media. Similarly, Jiwani (2002) emphasizes that newsworthiness is not an objective criterion but a socially constructed process influenced by institutional priorities and ideological positions.



Several studies have shown that media language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of crime. Van Dijk (2004) explains that discourse is a mechanism through which power relations and ideological meanings are produced and reproduced in society. In crime reporting, linguistic choices such as adjectives, metaphors, and evaluative terms can significantly affect how readers perceive the severity and nature of criminal incidents. Sensationalized language, in particular, has been shown to increase emotional responses such as fear and anxiety among audiences.

Research in media criminology also highlights the importance of representation patterns in crime reporting. D'Orsogna and Perc (2015) describe crime as a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon that cannot be reduced to isolated incidents. Tseloni (2007) similarly emphasizes the importance of understanding victimization patterns within broader social and structural contexts. However, media coverage often simplifies these complexities by focusing on high-profile violent crimes while underreporting everyday crimes such as fraud, theft, and corruption.

In the Pakistani context, newspapers continue to serve as influential sources of information despite the rapid growth of digital and social media platforms. Youssefi, Kanani, and Shojaei (2013) note that traditional newspapers remain widely read and continue to shape public opinion, particularly among educated audiences. However, the increasing competition within the media industry has led to a shift toward attention-grabbing headlines and sensationalized reporting styles.

Earlier research also suggests that crime reporting is often shaped by ideological and institutional factors. Wakefield et al. (2003) argue that media organizations play a key role in setting public agendas by emphasizing certain issues over others. This agenda-setting function is particularly evident in crime reporting, where violent and high-profile cases receive disproportionate attention compared to other forms of crime. As a result, public perception of crime may become distorted, with increased fear of specific types of offenses that are more frequently reported in the media.

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into media discourse and crime representation, there remains a gap in research specifically focusing on linguistic and discursive patterns in Pakistani English-language newspaper headlines. In particular, limited attention has been given to how sensationalism operates at the level of headline construction and how it shapes public perception of crime in the Pakistani context. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing crime-related headlines through a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective to understand the interplay between language, ideology, and media representation.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the linguistic and discursive features of crime-related headlines in Pakistani English-language newspapers. The primary aim is to investigate whether crime headlines function as neutral information sources or whether they reflect sensationalist tendencies in media reporting.

3.1 Research Design

The study is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing primarily on Van Dijk's (1988, 2004) model of discourse and ideology. This framework is appropriate for analyzing how language constructs meaning and reflects underlying social and ideological structures. CDA enables a detailed examination of how crime is represented through lexical choices, framing strategies, and stylistic patterns in newspaper headlines.



3.2 Data Collection

The data consist of crime-related headlines collected from three leading English-language newspapers in Pakistan: *Dawn*, *The News International*, and *The Express Tribune*. These newspapers were selected due to their wide readership, national influence, and established credibility within Pakistani media discourse.

The corpus includes headlines published over a six-month period. Crime-related news items were identified and compiled from both print and digital editions of the selected newspapers. The dataset includes headlines covering a range of criminal activities such as murder, robbery, kidnapping, cybercrime, corruption, harassment, and terrorism.

3.3 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select relevant headlines. Only those headlines that explicitly referred to criminal incidents or law-and-order situations were included in the dataset. Routine political, economic, or non-crime-related headlines were excluded to maintain focus on crime discourse.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using two complementary qualitative techniques: content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Content analysis was used to identify recurring linguistic patterns, thematic categories, and stylistic features in crime headlines. Particular attention was given to the use of emotionally charged vocabulary, exaggeration, and lexical intensity.

CDA was then applied to interpret how these linguistic features contribute to meaning-making processes and ideological framing. Following Van Dijk's (1988, 2004) model, the analysis was organized into three levels:

1. **Textual level** – examination of vocabulary, syntax, and stylistic devices used in headlines.
2. **Cognitive level** – interpretation of how headlines may influence readers' perception, memory, and emotional response.
3. **Social level** – exploration of broader socio-political and institutional factors shaping crime reporting practices.

3.5 Analytical Framework

The study specifically focuses on identifying sensationalism in crime headlines through indicators such as:

- Use of emotionally charged adjectives (e.g., "brutal," "horrific," "shocking")
- Hyperbolic or exaggerated expressions
- Selective emphasis on violent or high-profile crimes
- Framing strategies that prioritize attention over factual neutrality

These indicators were used to assess whether headlines lean toward objective reporting or sensationalized representation.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Since the study is based on publicly available newspaper data, no direct human participants were involved. However, care was taken to ensure accurate representation of media content without distortion or misinterpretation.



3.7 Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to three English-language newspapers and a six-month time frame, which may not fully represent the entire landscape of crime reporting in Pakistan. Future research may expand the dataset to include Urdu-language newspapers and a longer duration for more comprehensive findings.

4. Results

The analysis of crime-related headlines from *Dawn*, *The News International*, and *The Express Tribune* over the selected six-month period reveals clear patterns in linguistic framing, thematic emphasis, and stylistic choices. The findings indicate that crime reporting in Pakistani English-language newspapers frequently incorporates elements of sensationalism alongside factual reporting.

4.1 Lexical Choices and Sensational Language

A prominent finding of the study is the frequent use of emotionally charged vocabulary in crime headlines. Words such as “brutal,” “horrific,” “shocking,” and “gruesome” appear repeatedly in headlines related to violent crimes, particularly murder, assault, and kidnapping. These lexical choices intensify the emotional impact of headlines and contribute to heightened reader engagement.

In contrast, headlines related to non-violent crimes such as fraud, theft, and corruption tend to employ more neutral and descriptive language. This uneven distribution of emotional vocabulary suggests a selective application of sensationalism, primarily associated with violent crime reporting.

4.2 Thematic Representation of Crime

The findings further indicate that violent crimes receive significantly more prominent and dramatic coverage compared to other categories of crime. Murder cases, terrorism-related incidents, and kidnapping reports are more frequently highlighted in headline positions and are often framed in ways that emphasize shock value and urgency.

On the other hand, crimes such as white-collar offenses, cyber fraud, and institutional corruption are reported in comparatively subdued language. This thematic imbalance suggests a media preference for crimes that generate emotional response and higher readership attention.

4.3 Geographical Framing

Another notable pattern is the concentration of crime reporting in major urban centers, particularly Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Headlines frequently emphasize incidents occurring in densely populated urban areas, while rural crime incidents receive comparatively limited attention.

This urban-centric framing may contribute to a skewed public perception of crime distribution, reinforcing the idea that crime is predominantly an urban phenomenon.

4.4 Representation of Actors

The analysis also reveals consistent patterns in the portrayal of individuals involved in crime. Perpetrators are often generalized, with frequent references to unidentified “suspects,” “gunmen,” or “attackers.” In contrast, victims are more specifically identified, particularly in cases involving women, children, or high-profile individuals.

Such representational asymmetry reflects broader discursive tendencies in media reporting, where certain social groups are more prominently highlighted than others.



4.5 Framing and Ideological Patterns

The results also indicate that crime headlines often reflect framing strategies that prioritize immediacy and impact over contextual depth. Headlines tend to isolate incidents from their broader socio-economic causes, such as poverty, unemployment, or systemic inequality.

This absence of contextual framing aligns with findings in Critical Discourse Analysis literature, which suggests that media discourse often simplifies complex social issues into event-based narratives (Van Dijk, 1988; Van Dijk, 2004).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that sensationalism is a recurring but selective feature of crime reporting in Pakistani English-language newspapers. While not all headlines are sensationalized, there is a clear tendency to amplify violent crime through emotionally charged language and dramatic framing. This pattern suggests that crime headlines function not only as informational tools but also as mechanisms for attracting readership in a competitive media environment.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that crime reporting in Pakistani English-language newspapers is characterized by a complex interaction between information delivery and sensational framing. While newspapers do provide factual accounts of criminal incidents, the linguistic construction of headlines often introduces emotional intensity that shapes reader perception beyond the informational content of the news.

One of the most significant patterns identified is the consistent use of emotionally charged vocabulary in headlines describing violent crimes. Expressions such as *“brutal killing,”* *“horrific murder,”* and *“shocking incident of violence”* are frequently employed in reports of murder and assault cases. These lexical choices not only describe events but also intensify their perceived severity. For example, headlines such as *“Brutal murder of young man shocks city”* and *“Horrific killing of woman in domestic dispute”* illustrate how evaluative adjectives are embedded within ostensibly factual reporting. Such linguistic strategies align with Van Dijk’s (1988, 2004) notion that discourse is never neutral but is shaped by ideological and cognitive framing processes.

In contrast, headlines related to non-violent crimes often adopt a more neutral tone. For instance, expressions such as *“Man booked in fraud case”* or *“Police arrest suspect in theft incident”* demonstrate a lack of emotional amplification. This contrast suggests a selective application of sensationalism, where violence becomes a trigger for heightened linguistic dramatization, while financial or administrative crimes are reported in comparatively restrained language.

Another key finding relates to thematic prioritization. Violent crimes such as murder, kidnapping, and terrorism are consistently foregrounded in headline positioning. Examples such as *“Kidnapping of child triggers citywide search operation”* and *“Terror attack leaves several injured in Lahore”* reflect the media’s tendency to emphasize urgency and emotional disruption. In comparison, white-collar crimes such as corruption or cyber fraud are often framed in less dramatic terms, for example: *“Officials accused in corruption inquiry”* or *“Cybercrime case registered in Islamabad”*. This imbalance suggests that news value is strongly influenced by emotional impact rather than social or structural significance.

The geographical framing of crime also reveals a distinct pattern. Urban centers such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad dominate headline coverage, reinforcing their association with crime prevalence. Headlines such as *“Street crime incident reported in Karachi’s busy market”* and



“Armed robbery in Lahore residential area” illustrate the concentration on metropolitan areas. In contrast, rural crime incidents are rarely foregrounded, which may contribute to a skewed perception of crime distribution across Pakistan.

The representation of actors in crime headlines further reflects asymmetrical discursive practices. Perpetrators are often anonymized through generalized labels such as *“gunmen,” “unknown attackers,”* or *“suspects,”* whereas victims are frequently individualized and humanized. For example, headlines such as *“Gunmen shoot dead businessman in targeted attack”* highlight victims with social identity markers, while obscuring offender identities. This selective visibility contributes to a discursive imbalance that shapes public empathy and moral evaluation.

From a broader ideological perspective, these patterns reflect the media’s role in constructing crime as a spectacle. As Van Dijk (2004) argues, discourse reproduces power relations by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality while marginalizing others. In the context of Pakistani newspapers, sensational framing appears to serve both commercial and cognitive functions: attracting readership while simultaneously shaping emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, and concern.

Furthermore, the absence of contextual depth in many headlines limits public understanding of the structural causes of crime. Social factors such as poverty, unemployment, and institutional weaknesses are rarely reflected in headline construction. Instead, crime is often presented as isolated incidents rather than outcomes of broader socio-economic conditions. This observation aligns with Surette’s (2014) argument that modern crime reporting is increasingly influenced by media logic and audience appeal rather than investigative depth.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that while Pakistani English newspapers maintain a level of factual reporting, the linguistic and discursive construction of headlines often introduces elements of sensationalism. This duality reflects the tension between journalistic responsibility and competitive media practices in the digital age.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether crime headlines in Pakistani English-language newspapers function primarily as sources of factual information or whether they exhibit tendencies of sensationalism. The findings indicate that while newspapers do report crime events with a degree of factual accuracy, the linguistic construction of headlines often introduces emotional intensity, selective emphasis, and dramatization, particularly in cases involving violent crime.

The analysis demonstrates that emotionally charged vocabulary, such as *“brutal,” “horrific,”* and *“shocking,”* is frequently used in headlines describing violent incidents, whereas non-violent crimes are generally reported in more neutral and descriptive language. This uneven distribution of lexical intensity suggests that sensationalism is not uniform but selectively applied depending on the nature of the crime.

Furthermore, the study reveals that crime reporting is heavily concentrated in urban centers, with limited attention given to rural areas. This urban bias may contribute to distorted public perceptions of crime distribution. In addition, the representation of actors in crime narratives shows asymmetry, as victims are often individualized while perpetrators are generalized or anonymized, reflecting broader discursive strategies in media reporting.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings align with Van Dijk’s (1988, 2004) model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which emphasizes that media discourse is not neutral but ideologically



constructed. Similarly, Surette's (2014) argument regarding media-driven crime narratives is supported, as headlines increasingly reflect audience-oriented framing rather than contextual depth.

Overall, the study concludes that crime headlines in Pakistani English newspapers operate at the intersection of information and sensationalism. While they fulfill the basic function of reporting events, their stylistic and linguistic choices often enhance emotional appeal, which may influence public perception of crime and social reality. It is therefore recommended that media institutions adopt more balanced and ethically grounded reporting practices to ensure accuracy, reduce sensationalism, and strengthen public trust in journalism.

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