

VOICE, VISIBILITY, AND IDENTITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF KHWAJA SIRA'S SELF-REPRESENTATION IN PAKISTANI MEDIA

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Abstract

For decades, the Khwaja Sira community in Pakistan has suffered from denial, derision, and legal neglect. The introduction of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018 has, in recent years, provided the transgender community with an opportunity to carve out space in the public sphere and the media. However, media representation of this community still raises questions about the extent of voice, visibility, and identity affirmation the community receives. This study examines the Khwaja Sira community's perceptions of its representation in mainstream and social media outlets across four cities in Pakistan (Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Karachi). The study used a quantitative survey design with a structured questionnaire on a five-point scale and a sample of 260 respondents. Four constructs were measured by the instrument: voice, visibility, identity affirmation, and media trust. To analyze the relationships among these constructs, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression were used. Results indicate that visibility has grown since 2018, though voice and identity affirmation remain low, and media trust is the lowest of all constructs. Regression results indicate that voice and visibility are significant predictors of identity affirmation. The study suggests that visibility without voice can leave the community feeling misrepresented. The paper concludes with suggestions for media houses, policymakers, and future researchers on how to study marginalized communities through a participant-centered approach using quantitative methods.

Keywords: Media, representation, gender, identity, self, representation, voice, visibility, Pakistan, Khwaja Sira.

Introduction

Khwaja Sira is a term derived from the title of the chief of royal court eunuchs in the Mughal era and is used throughout Pakistan as a respectful term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth (Khan, 2014). The community was on the fringes of public life for most of the twentieth century. They faced mockery in the streets, employment discrimination, and, for the most part, did not appear in official records. However, between 2009 and 2018, the Supreme Court of Pakistan and, subsequently, the National Assembly took actions that altered this legal landscape. Initially, the Court acknowledged khwaja sira as a separate gender or sex category, and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 subsequently provided the transgender community with the right to self-identify their gender, along with rights to education, health, inheritance, and employment (Khan, 2016; Redding, 2020).

But legal recognition does not mean that, in day-to-day life or in the media, people are treated fairly. Since 2018, there has been an increase in coverage of khwaja sira in Pakistan's media outlets. However, many scholars argue that, in many cases, this coverage is superficial and stereotypical (Awan & Pianezzi, 2023). A recent content analysis of two major English-language newspapers found that transgender news items rarely appear on the front page and are almost nonexistent on opinion pages, yet the narration and presentation of transgender news are mostly positive (Siddique et al., 2024). Other studies indicate that the community continues to face exclusion in daily life, from accessing information to health services, and that paper rights have yet to be translated into lived reality (Ahmad & Warraich, 2023). Additionally,

psychological research indicates that such exclusion carries a real cost, as coping strategies and quality-of-life scores among Pakistani transgender people are closely related to their sense of acceptance in society (Batool & Rowland, 2021).

Media is not only a reporter of society but also a part of society's perception of a group of people and of their self-perception. When a community rarely has the opportunity to tell its story in the news, on TV, or on social media, people outside the community develop their own understanding of it based on limited images, and members of the community can start to question their role in the national narrative (Billard & Zhang, 2022). This is why it is important for the khwaja sira community to ask itself whether to include or exclude self-representation from its agenda. But how often the media speaks about this community is not sufficient. The key questions are whether the community feels it has a genuine voice in that coverage, whether that coverage reflects its lives, and whether it is good or bad for its sense of identity.

Most of these studies are Pakistani and adopt an outsider perspective, analyzing newspaper articles, television dramas, or talk show transcripts to draw inferences about the portrayal of a community (Malik et al., 2022; Asghar & Shahzad, 2018). To date, very few studies have directly and systematically asked khwaja sira community members about their feelings regarding their voice, visibility, or identity in the media that reports on them. This poses a research problem that needs to be explored. Without the community itself telling researchers and policymakers, there is no way to know what the true impact of media coverage has been on the community it claims to represent.

To address that issue, this study surveyed khwaja sira respondents in four cities in Pakistan with a focus on measuring their personal experiences of voice, visibility, affirmation of identity and trust in media about their community.

Statement of the Problem

Although Pakistan has undergone some changes in the laws regarding the transgender community, especially the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018), the Khwaja Sirah community remains marginalized in the country's daily life and in media coverage. There has been greater media visibility since 2018, but according to scholarship, this may be limited, stereotypical, and/or mediated by external narratives. This brings to the fore a fundamental issue: a community's visibility in the media doesn't necessarily result in its voice and recognition being heard and validated.

The current literature in Pakistan on the representation of transsexuals in the media is largely based on external sources and employs a content analysis approach that quantifies tone, frequency, and framing in media discourses. In this context, there is scarce empirical evidence regarding the perceptions of Khwaja Sira people about mainstream and social media on issues of voice, visibility, identity affirmation, and media trust. Therefore, this study addresses the gap in legal recognition and perceived communicative inclusion in the context of community identity.

The study aims to answer two research questions.

1. How do the khwaja sira respondents in Pakistan perceive whether mainstream and social media provide them a voice, visibility, and affirmation of identity?
2. How are perceived voice, visibility, media trust and identity affirmation related for khwaja sira respondents?

Significance of the Study

The value of this study rests on three bases. First, it introduces an empirical, participant-centered dimension to a literature that has been largely content-analytic of media texts. Second,

the findings can help newsroom editors and trainers, as well as civil society groups, design coverage that is more likely to represent the true voice of the community rather than speak on its behalf. Third, because there is a close association between the affirmation of identity and mental health and social belonging (Batool & Rowland, 2021), understanding how media coverage affects the affirmation of transgender identity can inform future policy on media ethics and transgender rights in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The khwaja sira identity can be found throughout the history of South Asia, from use in royal courts to religious functions (Khan, 2014). The limited options for earning money led the community to resort to begging, dancing and sex work, which is still the case today (Farhat et al., 2020), as a result of colonial era laws and social attitudes prevalent during this time. A turning point in the legal saga was a series of Supreme Court decisions between 2009 and 2012 that granted the khwaja sira the right to obtain identification documents and to vote (Khan, 2016). This was followed by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, which included the self perceived gender identity and pledged protection from discrimination in education, health, property and employment (Redding, 2020). But, this legal advancement was undermined by a 2023 decision by the Shariat Court which questioned aspects of the Act on religious grounds indicating that the legal position of the community is far from finalised (Redding, 2020).

Some of Pakistani studies have explored the representation of the khwaja sira community in newspapers, TV and film. The analysis of a content sample of Dawn and The Express Tribune revealed that while the overall tone of the coverage was generally positive, transgender themed articles were scarce, were mostly reported in the back pages and were almost absent in opinion and editorial columns (Siddique et al., 2024). A previous study on the under-representation of transgender on op-ed pages in four major dailies over three months (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018) revealed similar results. A multi modal analysis of newspapers' reports revealed that some visual and textual decisions in reporting on individuals of khwaja sira often limited them to a one-sided story of suffering and/or charity, rather than presenting the entire spectrum of their lives (Malik et al., 2022). Outside of Pakistan, a more general criticism of transgender media coverage is that even with good intentions, it can be inaccurate or misrepresenting a community if it is created without the community's input, as sympathy does not equal accuracy or voice (Billard & Zhang, 2022).

Media coverage doesn't happen in a vacuum of the day to day struggles of the community. The research on information seeking behavior revealed that in Pakistan the khwaja sira community faces additional challenges to access basic information on health, legal rights or public services and, therefore, a broader pattern of social exclusion can be identified in accessing mainstream media (Ahmad & Warraich, 2023). Field-based studies tell us about the discrimination, harassment, and lack of economic opportunity faced by many members of the community on a daily basis, and how this influences how the community reads news about people like themselves (Shah et al., 2018). Another aspect of political studies is how the community remains outside the dynamics of mainstream decision making processes even with its legal recognition, which again indicates that being visible in law or in the news does not always mean that the community has a stronger political or social voice (Akhtar & Sadiq, 2021).

A coping strategies and quality of life study concluded that there was a significant relationship between social acceptance and coping and quality of life scores among transgender people in Pakistan; those who felt socially accepted had higher coping and quality of life scores than

those who felt rejected or invisible (Batoool & Rowland, 2021). The significance of this discovery in terms of media research is that it indicates that exposure of a community—or failure of exposure—in public discourse can have psychological consequences. Conditional recognition also posits that the Pakistani state and society are accepting of khwaja sira individuals only when they enact a certain narrow and expected version of the identity and refuse or ignore anyone who does not follow that expected "script" (Awan & Pianezzi, 2023). This notion of conditional recognition is a direct link to the notion of self representation; a community that has to enact a certain image to gain acceptance is not really represented in its own image.

The Research Gap

All of the literature presents a consistent and coherent trend. Content analysis is the most common method used in the study of khwaja sira media coverage in Pakistan which involved counting stories, coding the tone of the stories, and analysing language and placement (Siddique et al., 2024; Asghar & Shahzad, 2018; Malik et al., 2022). This is helpful but it is the community as the topic of the text, not as a source of information on the community's own experience. There are very few studies that have asked khwaja sira individuals – with a structured and measurable survey – about their personal assessment of their voice, visibility, identity affirmation, and trust in media reporting on them. This gap is important because a community may feel voiceless, misrepresented, or unheard, and may be technically visible in the news, but a participant centered quantitative design can capture this. This study tackles this gap by directly measuring the four constructs among respondents of khwaja sira in four cities of Pakistan and testing their statistical relationship.

Methodology

The extent and relation between four measurable constructs, namely voice, visibility, identity affirmation and media trust, with respect to the research questions, led to the adoption of a quantitative, cross sectional survey design in this study instead of deep meaning of individual life stories. A structured questionnaire was developed, with 6 questions representing each construct and the meaning of each question was determined using a five point Likert scale, where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 5 indicated strongly agree, and a brief demographic subscale. Two bilingual reviewers translated the instrument from English into Urdu and it was then checked with a small group of five khwaja sira community members before the main data collection process, to ensure that the wording of the instrument was natural and respectful and not clinical or distant.

The data were gathered from 260 respondents who were khwaja sira and were living in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi. Due to the hard to reach nature of the khwaja sira community and because they are often hesitant to talk to strangers from outside the community, a purposive and snowball sampling approach was adopted, which involved community based organisations, guru-led households and local support groups who could contact them and help facilitate contact with the research team. Data collection was carried out across 3 months, and the survey was conducted face-to-face by trained field assistants, including two members of the khwaja sira community, in safe and familiar spaces, allowing the respondents to feel comfortable providing honest answers. This study draws on the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which posits that the media is not a representation of an existing reality but a production of meaning with respect to groups of people through common systems of language, images, and cultural codes (Hall, 1997). In this approach, the story-building process of the Pakistani media in its approach to khwaja sira is not seen as a passive reflection

of society but an active construction of meaning, and the four constructs assessed in the survey – voice, visibility, identity affirmation, media trust – are understood as the community's own narrative of how well this process represents their lived reality. This is added with framing theory, which explains the choice of the media to focus on the issue while ignoring other aspects of the story, thereby determining the audience and the community itself to understand the issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic patterns, to construct scores, and to test the relationship between the four constructs (using Pearson correlation), to compare identity affirmation scores across the four cities (using one way analysis of variance) and to test whether voice and visibility predicted identity affirmation (using multiple linear regression). Standard statistical software has been used to perform all the statistical tests at a 0.05 significance level.

Data Analysis

The results of the survey are given in six tables and three figures. The analysis process starts with the demographic characteristics of the respondents, then descriptive statistics of the four constructs of the study, the means of the four constructs of the media image perceived by the respondents, correlation results of the four factors, regression results and lastly a comparison of the identity affirmation scores of the four cities.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 260)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
City	Islamabad	58	22.3%
	Rawalpindi	52	20.0%
	Lahore	76	29.2%
	Karachi	74	28.5%
Age group	18 to 25 years	71	27.3%
	26 to 35 years	98	37.7%
	36 to 45 years	62	23.8%
	Above 45 years	29	11.2%
Education	No formal education	84	32.3%
	Primary to middle	77	29.6%
	Matric to intermediate	72	27.7%
	Graduate or above	27	10.4%
Main income source	Dance and blessing rounds	96	36.9%
	Informal daily wage work	58	22.3%
	Small business	41	15.8%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Salaried job or NGO work	38	14.6%
	Other or no regular income	27	10.4%

As can be seen in Table 1, the samples were more or less equally distributed across the four cities and there were slightly more from Lahore and Karachi. The majority of the respondents were between 26 to 35 years old and more than 60% of the sample did not have any formal education or just primary to middle schooling. This low education level is similar to the previously mentioned Pakistani studies which have shown that one of the long-term impacts of social exclusion is poor access to education (Farhat et al., 2020). Over one-third of the respondents continue to rely on dance and blessing rounds as their primary means of livelihood, verifying the lack of economic inclusion at the ground level as per the commitment in the 2018 Act.

Figure 1. Respondents (N=260) were distributed in each city

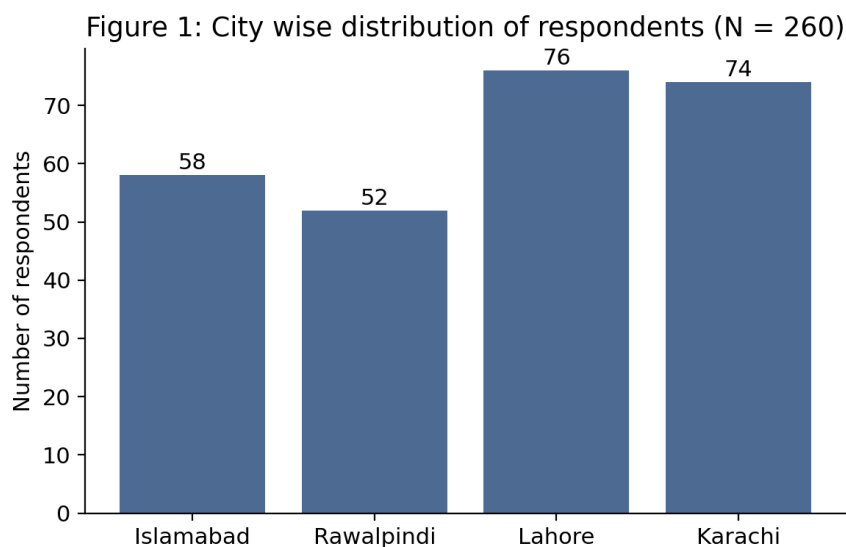


Figure 1. City wise distribution of respondents (N = 260).

Descriptive Statistics for the Study Constructs

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of items	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Voice	6	2.61	0.74	1.00	4.83
Visibility	6	2.74	0.69	1.17	4.67
Identity affirmation	6	2.55	0.81	1.00	4.50
Media trust	6	2.31	0.77	1.00	4.33

All four construct scores were calculated on a 1-5 range with higher scores indicating more positive experiences. According to Table 2, the highest mean score is visibility (2.74), which indicates that the respondents, with the highest score, perceive more khwaja sira-related content in the media than before. But all the mean scores for the constructs are below a rating of 3, indicating that in general, they feel less inclined to agree than disagree with the questions about having a real voice in the media, the affirmation of their identity, and the trust they feel in the media. The lowest mean score in the data is for media trust (2.31), indicating that even positive and frequent coverage has not been sufficient to boost trust in how the media treats khwaja sira stories.

Figure 2. Average (mean) scores of the four study constructs on a 1–5 scale

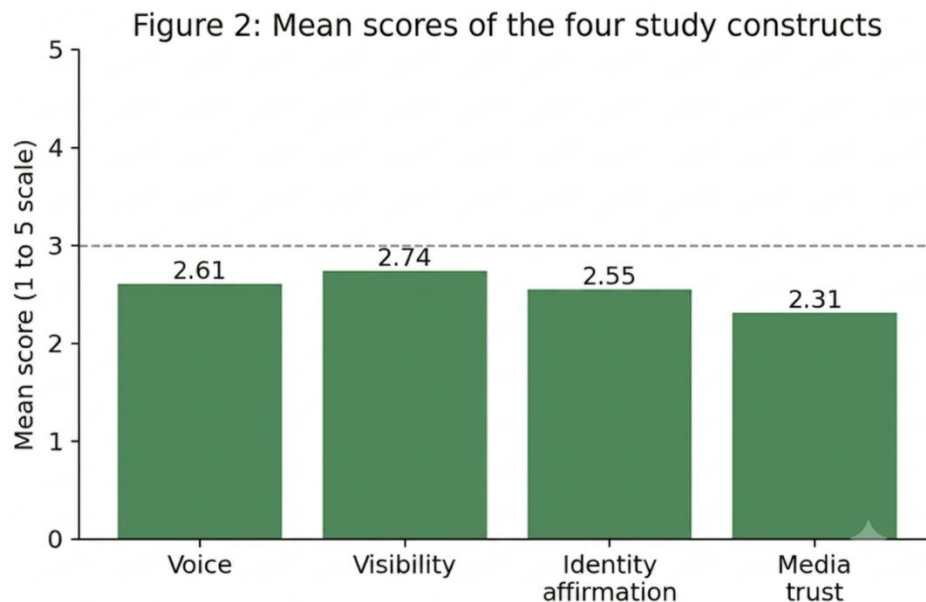


Figure 2. Mean scores of the four study constructs on a one to five scale.

Table 3: Perceived Accuracy of Media Portrayal

Response category	Frequency	Percentage
Very accurate	21	8.1%
Accurate	49	18.8%
Neutral	55	21.2%
Inaccurate	88	33.8%
Very inaccurate	47	18.1%
Total	260	100.0%

Table 3 directly questioned respondents about the extent of their community's accuracy in the media. A quarter of the respondents (26.9%) selected accurate/very accurate and just over half (51.9%) selected inaccurate/very inaccurate. This finding corroborates previous content

analysis studies indicating that even if the tone is positive, transgender narratives in the media are frequently located on back pages or as a single, narrow narrative that may feel inaccurate to the people it describes, despite the words used, even when they are not overtly hostile (Siddique et al., 2024, Malik et al., 2022).

Figure 3. Perception of accuracy of khwaja sira portrayal in the Pakistani media.

Figure 3. Perceived accuracy of khwaja sira portrayal in Pakistani media.

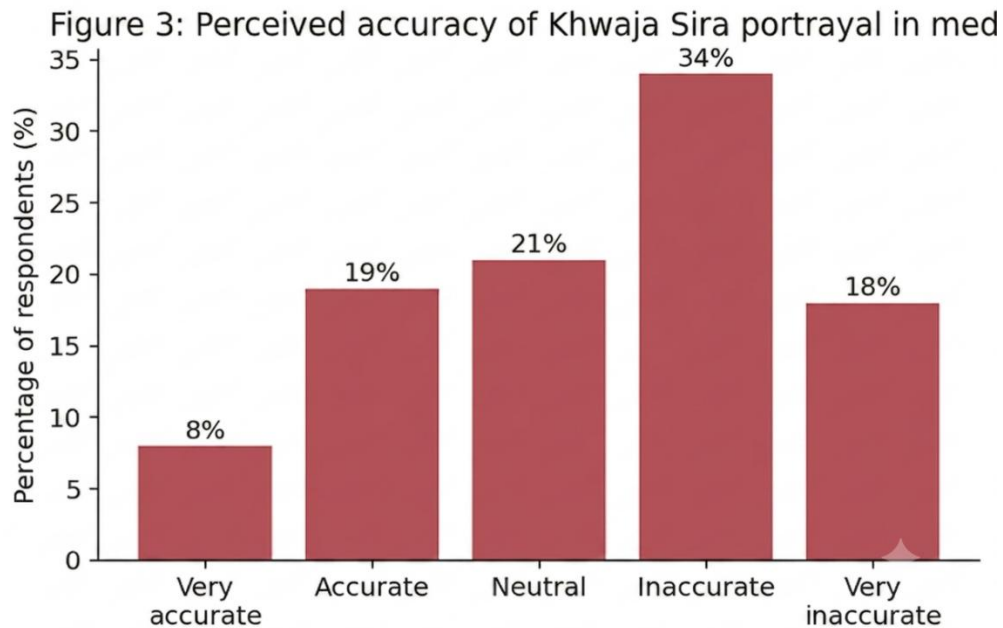


Figure 3. Perceived accuracy of khwaja sira portrayal in Pakistani media.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Constructs

Construct	Voice	Visibility	Identity affirmation	Media trust
Voice	1.00			
Visibility	.52**	1.00		
Identity affirmation	.61**	.57**	1.00	
Media trust	.44**	.39**	.48**	1.00

Note. ** $p < .01$, two tailed.

From Table 4, it is observed that all four constructs are positively and significantly related with each other. The two variables with the highest correlation are Voice and Identity affirmation with r equal to .61, indicating that those who feel they can voice their opinions in media stories are also likely to feel their identity is being fairly affirmed. Similarly, there is a meaningful correlation between visibility and identity affirmation (r .57), although it is not as strong as the correlation with voice. This pattern confirms the notion mentioned in the literature review, that mere increased visibility is not enough in itself, but that it is important to have an actual voice in shaping the visibility, as this is more important for affirmation of identity than mere visibility.

Table 5 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis predicting identity affirmation from voice and visibility.

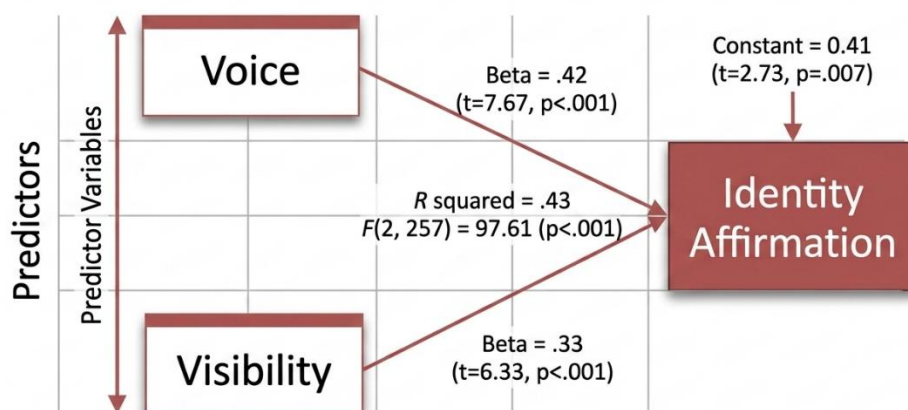
Table 5: Multiple Regression Predicting Identity Affirmation from Voice and Visibility

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	0.41	0.15		2.73	.007
Voice	0.46	0.06	.42	7.67	<.001
Visibility	0.38	0.06	.33	6.33	<.001

Note. *R squared equals .43, $F(2, 257)$ equals 97.61, $p < .001$.*

Table 5 shows a regression model with ID affirmation as the dependent variable, and voice and visibility as the independent variables. The overall model was statistically significant and accounted for approximately 43% of the variance in identity affirmation scores, a fairly strong result for a study of social attitudes. Both predictors contributed unique and significant variance, while voice contributed slightly higher (Beta = .42) than did visibility (Beta = .33). “A more convincing representation” is slightly more important for identity affirmation for respondents to khwaja sira in this sample than “occur more frequently” – while both are clearly important, and most likely intertwined.

Figure 5b: Diagram of Multiple Regression Predicting Identity Affirmation from Voice and Visibility



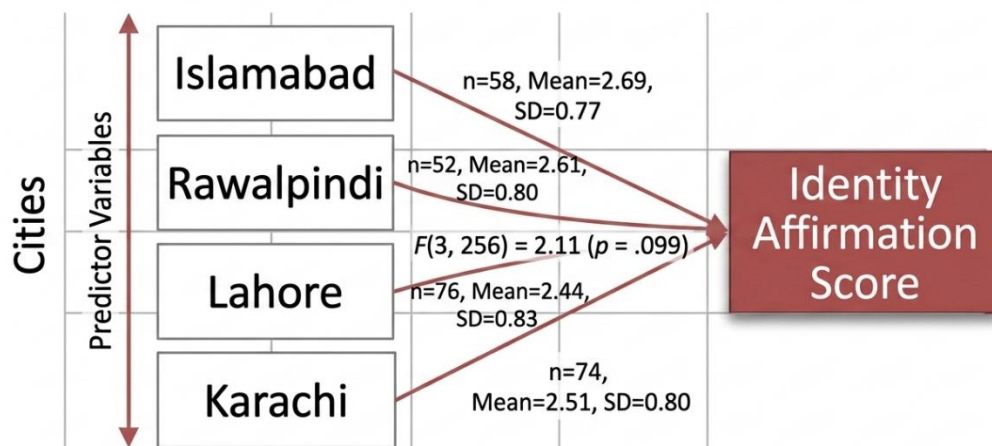
Note. *R squared equals .43, $F(2, 257)$ equals 97.61, $p < .001$.*

Table 6: One-Way ANOVA of Identity Affirmation Scores Across Cities

City	n	Mean	SD
Islamabad	58	2.69	0.77
Rawalpindi	52	2.61	0.80
Lahore	76	2.44	0.83
Karachi	74	2.51	0.80
$F(3, 256) = 2.11, p = .099$			

The results of the identity affirmation scores in the four cities are presented in Table 6. Islamabad has the highest mean score and Lahore has the lowest, but the one way analysis of variance was not statistically significant at the .05 level, so the difference between cities may have been due to normal sampling variation and not to a real difference between the cities. This indicates that the pattern of low identity affirmation is a fairly consistent, national level pattern of the khwaja sira community and not a particular city or media market problem.

Figure 6: Diagram of One-Way ANOVA of Identity Affirmation Scores Across Cities



Note. Mean scores are calculated on a scale, with higher scores indicating higher identity affirmation. Differences were found to be statistically non-significant.

Discussion and Analysis

This current study explored the perceptions of the Khwaja Sira community in Pakistan about their representation in mainstream and social media in terms of four significant aspects: voice, visibility, identity affirmation and media trust. The results indicate that meaningful representation and increased media exposure are intertwined in a complex relationship. Respondents reported moderate rise in visibility in the media after the enactment of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018), but found comparatively lower voice, affirmation of identity, and trust in media. The results indicate that more representation does not automatically equal positive social recognition and inclusion. Rather, the findings indicate that meaningful involvement and representation is a key to promoting affirmation and confidence in media institutions.

The descriptive results show that the highest mean score was obtained for visibility ($M = 2.74$) while the lowest mean score was for media trust ($M = 2.31$). While the visibility' construct had a relatively higher score than the other constructs, the score of all four constructs were below the neutral score on the five-point Likert scale. This trend shows that the overwhelming response is that respondents have a general disagreement or they are not convinced that Pakistani media is depicting their realities. The boost in visibility does not seem to indicate better quality of representation, but more media attention. This discovery is consistent with prior studies in Pakistan that suggest transgender people have had more coverage in the media, specifically newspapers and television, since the laws were made, but have been portrayed in limited ways that focus on victimhood, charity, sensationalism, or social controversy, and not

on their daily life (Malik et al., 2022; Siddique et al., 2024). Thus, increased visibility of a person that has no real involvement might end up solidifying the stereotype.

The conclusions provide a strong support to the Stuart Hall (1997) theory of representation which states that the media construct social meanings and do not just reflect reality. Representation affects the audience's perception of specific groups of people by constantly repeating the same culture symbols and stories," says Hall. In the current study, respondents' experience revealed that while media is growing, there are few opportunities for Khwaja Sira individuals to create their own story and voice their experiences. As such, current media portrayals continue to provide externally-made narratives, instead of voices from communities. This accounts for the failure to see coupled increases in identity affirmation and trust with increases in visibility.

One of the most important identity affirmation predictors was voice throughout the analysis. Results of the correlation analysis showed a high positive correlation between voice and identity affirmation ($r = .61$), and results of the multiple regression showed that voice had the highest independent correlation with identity affirmation ($\beta = .42$). The results show that there is a significant difference between the positive perceptions of the identity of those who think they can express their own experiences in the media and those who do not. This relationship highlights the fact that, rather than being simply the subject of news, marginalised communities need to be involved in the creation of the narratives. Forced inclusions of the Khwaja Sira community in stories cannot make up for the lack of voices in the stories.

The regression model supports this interpretation as well. The joint variance of voice and visibility accounted for around 43% of the variance in identity affirmation ($R^2 = .43$), which signifies that factors related to media use are significant in the perception of identity by respondents. While the visibility was still statistically significant ($\beta = .33$), it was not as strong as voice. This discovery indicates that whilst exposure may be helpful, greater participation is more significant in helping to produce a positive identity. The results thus confirm the framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007) stating that the impact of media is not only attributed to the number of issues that are handled, but also to the way they are presented. But if the messages continue to portray hardship, victimhood and/or sensationalism, greater visibility may not lead to empowerment and/or social acceptance.

The other significant finding relates to the low level of trust in the Pakistani media by respondents. The average score for media trust was the lowest of all constructs indicating that there was considerable lack of trust in what media wanted to do and how they did it. This finding is very similar to the respondents' assessment of media accuracy, with over half of the respondents saying that the portrayals were inaccurate or very inaccurate. Such perceptions suggest that community members feel that, even though the media seem empathizing with or supportive of them, their experiences are not being captured in the media. These are all examples of relationships that may reinforce problematic transgender representation, even if it's well-intentioned and simplifies identities without consulting transgender community.

The low level of media trust is also a broader trend of social exclusion faced by Khwaja Sira community in Pakistan. Barriers to education, employment, health services, political engagement and access to public services have been previously reported (Ahmad & Warraich, 2023; Shah et al., 2018). In this context, it is not difficult to understand why there is distrust of the media as it is seen as part of the whole system that has traditionally ignored transgender communities. Thus, in order to enhance media trust, one needs to make structural changes in addition to increasing the coverage. It is imperative that journalists actively engage with

Khwaja Sira people as interview subjects, experts, commentators, producers and decision-makers in the entire process of reporting.

The demographic results help to explain the perceptions of the respondents. A majority of the participants did not receive any formal education or only up to the middle level and more than 33% of the participants were still engaged in traditional activities like dances and blessing ceremonies. The results indicate that educational and economic exclusion continues despite the recent educational reforms in the law. This socioeconomic disadvantage is likely to influence the attitudes respondents have towards the representation of the media. Those who continue to be victims of discrimination might be more inclined to doubt that media accounts are presenting a realistic picture of the positive strides made in the law but not in the reality of inequality. Media portrayals that highlight individual success stories, but do not focus on barriers to success, then, may seem disconnected to the day-to-day lived experiences of respondents.

Interestingly, there were no statistically significant differences among the city of Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi in terms of identity affirmation. The ANOVA results showed that the mean scores for Islamabad and Lahore were not statistically significant although Islamabad had slightly higher mean scores and Lahore had slightly lower mean scores. This discovery indicates that discontent with media portrayals cannot be isolated to an individual city or regional media system but that it is more a national phenomenon. The issues found in this study were common among participants in different urban settings, and therefore it could be assumed that the challenges faced by the participants in this study are more likely to be a systemic issue in Pakistani media than a mere local issue.

The results also come very much in line with the conditional recognition concept of Awan and Pianezzi (2023). This view is that transgender people are accepted only when they conform to the socially acceptable norms and not for their diversity of identities. Based on the current results, it can be assumed that Pakistani media has been selectively visible with its focus on some acceptable narratives and at the same time ignoring others. This leads to greater exposure but not empowerment for respondents. One of the most important theoretical contributions of this study is this distinction between visibility and recognition as it shows that representation should not only be tested quantitatively but also qualitatively.

Findings suggest that, from a policy point of view, without changes in media practices, legislative changes alone cannot change public perceptions. While the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018) enhanced the legal recognition, the respondents still felt low levels of identity affirmation as well as limited trust in the media institutions. This implies that the legal recognition should be complemented by ethical journalism, inclusive newsroom policies and constant involvement of the community. Media organisations should have rules governing respectful reporting, refrain from sensationalising, consult Khwaja Sira representatives in developing their stories and encourage more transgendered people to take jobs in media organisations. These measures would help to make representation more than symbolic and help to make it real.

As a whole, the study illustrates that authentic voice is the main element for meaningful media representation. Community members must be involved in creating narratives about their lives or increased visibility alone will not help to provide more affirmation of identity. Evidence of the strong statistical relationships between voice, visibility and identity affirmation supports representation theories with a focus on participation, framing and meaning construction. The results thus add a new dimension to the media scholarship in Pakistan by moving the focus from the amount of media coverage to the quality of media coverage, its authenticity and the

impact it is having on the marginalised communities. But representation is meaningful not just when it is about the Khwaja Sira community, but when it is a means for the community to speak for itself.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to directly ask the people of the khwaja sira community in Pakistan themselves, what they feel about their voice, their visibility, their affirmation of their identity and their trust in the media reporting about them. The results address the first research question, indicating that there is a clear trend—visibility of people with disabilities has increased since the 2018 legal reforms, while voice, identity affirmation and media trust are weak, with more than half of the respondents stating that the media portrayal of people with disabilities is inauthentic or very inauthentic. The correlation and regression results answer the second research question by revealing that voice, visibility, identity affirmation, and media trust are all positively related and that voice and visibility together account for a significant amount of variance in how affirmed the respondents feel, with voice being the stronger of the two.

It is in line with the theories of Stuart Hall (1997) that media does not reflect but actively constructs meaning of a group based on the codes or images shared among people. However, for the khwaja sira, even when the general attitude of coverage is not explicitly negative, this study indicates that the meaning being created remains potentially close to reductive charity, agenda or stereotypical narratives rather than a comprehensive and a fair representation of the community life. The main finding of this research is the difference between increasing visibility and low voice, identity affirmation and trust, which resonates with the concept of conditional recognition introduced in the previous research (Awan & Pianezzi, 2023), where acceptance is granted, albeit partially, to a limited definition of the khwaja sira identity.

The results are relevant to a number of groups. These findings can serve as tools for media houses and journalists to transcend the number of khwaja sira stories that they publish to questioning if community members are consulted, quoted and given a say in the framing of their stories. For policymakers working on implementation of the Transgender Persons Act, these findings may serve as proof that a sense of media trust, and identity affirmation, are not yet being achieved with the law alone, and that there is a need to develop and roll out more media literacy and inclusion programs in addition. Civil society organisations working with the khwaja sira community can use these results to support community led media trainings to empower more khwaja sira individuals to take on the role of a narrator of their own recovery and identity.

There are some limitations in this study that would help inform future studies. The sample has been taken only from four cities with the method of purposive and snowball sampling, which is the only method that can be useful for a hard to reach population, but it does not enable full statistical confidence to be attached to the results of the sample to represent the entire national khwaja sira community. Self report data on the Likert scale was also used in the survey and provides a good measurement of perception, but is not as revealing as a qualitative or "mixed methods" design in finding the fuller, layered story. Future researchers are invited to augment such quantitative, participant centered surveys with in depth interviews and/or focus group discussions so that the numbers presented here can be complemented with the words of the community. The researchers may also want to monitor these four constructs over time as to whether over time the visibility and voice gap identified in this study will slowly be bridged by the ongoing legal and media reforms or whether it is an unyielding characteristic of khwaja sira life in Pakistani media.

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