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CONSTRUCTING CLIMATE CRISIS: A SOCIO-COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF 2025 PAKISTAN FLOOD HEADLINES IN PAKISTANI AND INTERNATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

Pakistan generates less than one per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, but is one of the countries most exposed to climate-related disasters, a discrepancy that raises problems of causality, responsibility and justice at the heart of flood reporting (Otto et al., 2023). This study explores the discursive construction of the 2025 Pakistan floods in two Pakistani newspapers (Dawn and The News overseas) and two overseas media (The Guardian and The New York Times) by using just Van Dijk's (2008, 2014) Socio-Cognitive Model. We analyzed a purposive, criterion-based corpus of 67 headlines from August to December 2025 (Dawn, n = 20; The News International, n = 20; The Guardian, n = 17; The New York Times, n = 10) at three levels: textual, where lexical choice, syntax, metaphor, agency and source attribution were analyzed; cognitive, where recurrent mental models of causality, vulnerability, responsibility and justice were identified; and social, where the implications of these representations for Global North and South relations were interpreted. The analysis indicates the presence of institutional and official lexis only in the Pakistani newspapers, most notably in Dawn (45%) which presents the floods as an administratively managed emergency, while The News International demonstrates the highest proportions of explicit climate-causal lexis (30%) and adaptation and resilience lexis (35%) in a reformist, evaluative register. International newspapers were dominated by humanitarian and casualty lexis (The Guardian 64.7%; The New York Times 90.0%) and lexis of justice and accountability was rare throughout, appearing in a single headline in each of three newspapers; only The Guardian's report of Pakistani farmers suing German polluters attributed responsibility across the North and South divide. It is suggested that flood discourse cannot be reduced to a binary conflict between Pakistani and international media, since editorial identity impacts depiction as much as geopolitical location.

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1.INTRODUCTION

Climate change is one of the defining challenges of the present century and few countries feel its consequences as acutely as Pakistan. Pakistan accounts for a small fraction of global emissions but is repeatedly exposed to extreme monsoon rainfall, glacial melt and riverine flooding (Otto et al., 2023; Roberts & Parks, 2007). The 2022 floods affected about thirty-three million people with damages and losses estimated at over thirty billion US dollars (Government of Pakistan et al., 2022). The 2025 monsoon floods, which especially affected Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, displaced large populations and destroyed lives, livelihoods, infrastructure and agriculture; and renewed the question of how such disasters are to be understood, explained and assigned responsibility.

Disasters like this are never reported on in unbiased terms. Within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) it has been argued that news language not only reflects the social meanings attached to events but actively constructs them, so that the representation of a flood as a natural calamity, as a failure of governance or as an outcome of global climate injustice has consequences for how publics, policy makers and international institutions understand risk, responsibility and appropriate response (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1988, 1993). In this respect, the framing of a disaster can determine whether the appropriate response is charity, humanitarian aid, adaptation finance or reparative justice. This is especially important for a country who has brought claims for loss and damage in international climate negotiations (Roberts & Parks, 2007; Boykoff, 2011). Pakistani and foreign newspapers are differently positioned structurally with reference to this job of representation. Pakistani English-language newspapers report from within the affected society and are subject to certain institutional, political and economic conditions. International newspapers report from outside the society, drawing upon different editorial traditions, source networks and orientations toward the global climate justice debate (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2006). Moreover, it has been noted that remote tragedies in the Global South are typically mediated through spectacles of suffering that elicit compassion but do not necessarily empower the sufferers (Moeller, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006). It is suggested, then, that a comparison between Pakistani and foreign coverage of the same incident provides analytical leverage to grasp how structurally diverse media viewpoints yield structurally different constructions of a similar catastrophe. The representation of climate change in Pakistani newspapers has been gaining increasing scholarly attention . It is important to note, however, that most studies have employed Fairclough's three-dimensional model, ecolinguistic models or content-analytic framing approaches , and that Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model has rarely been systematically applied to a comparison of Pakistani and international coverage of a single flood event . This gap is important, because Van Dijk's model is unique among CDA techniques for theorizing the cognitive interface through which recurring choices in text become common mental models, and eventually socially shared knowledge and ideology (Van Dijk, 2008, 2014). The present study aims to fill this gap and poses three questions:

1. What linguistic and discursive features are used by Pakistani and international newspapers to construct the 2025 floods as part of the global climate crisis?
2. How do these recurring discourses shape shared mental models of climate justice, responsibility and vulnerability?
3. How do media narratives on the 2025 floods reproduce or challenge ideological hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South?

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2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative, comparative CDA design was used because the questions were focused on interpretation of meaning and not only the measurement of frequency (Van Dijk, 1993; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study is informed by a critical interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social realities are discursively constructed and demands that the analyst make explicit the relationship between discourse and power. The comparative dimension was embedded in the design at two levels: a comparison within a region (Dawn with The News International; The Guardian with The New York Times) and a comparison between regions (the Pakistani aggregate with the international aggregate) to tease out differences attributable to national context with differences attributable to individual editorial identity (Boykoff, 2011).

2.2 Analytical Framework

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model was the only analytical framework chosen, as it integrates discourse structures and social structures through an intermediary cognitive level (Van Dijk, 2008, 2009, 2014). At the textual (micro) level, the model emphasizes lexical choice, grammatical structure, agency, metaphor, source attribution and the selective foregrounding and backgrounding of information. At the cognitive level (meso), it suggests that recurrent discourse structures give the readers mental models, i.e., subjective representations of events, which may be generalized over time into socially shared knowledge and attitudes (Van Dijk, 2014). At the societal (macro) level, these shared representations are linked to group interests, institutional power and ideology, especially the unequal access to public discourse that Van Dijk (1993) describes as a major resource of dominance.

Headlines were chosen as a unit of analysis due to their prominent position in the structure of news discourse. Van Dijk (1988) defines the headline as the linguistic realization of the macrostructure of the news report, the topic that the journalist brings to the fore as the most important. Agenda-setting studies have shown that the initial components to which readers are exposed have an outsized effect on what is perceived as salient (McCombs, 2004). Similarly, Entman (1993) claims that framing functions by emphasizing specific features of a seen reality, so the headline can be seen as the most condensed locus of problem definition, causal interpretation and moral evaluation presented to the reader.

2.3 Corpus and Sampling

The corpus was purposively and criterion-based sampled from the publicly available online archives of four English-language newspapers, Dawn and The News International (Pakistan), The Guardian (United Kingdom), and The New York Times (United States) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dawn was selected as the oldest and most widely read English-language daily in Pakistan, and as a newspaper whose climate reporting has been characterized by governance-oriented and institutional framing (Saleem & Khan, 2025). The News International was selected as the second largest English-language daily with a comparatively more editorial and advocacy-oriented tone. The Guardian was selected for its ongoing coverage of environmental and global development issues and The New York Times for its agenda-setting power in Global North journalism and its different editorial tradition (Boykoff, 2011).

Articles were kept if they satisfied five criteria: they were published between 1 August and 31 December 2025; directly referenced the 2025 floods in Pakistan; linked to at least one disaster or climate-related frame such as climate change, disaster, resilience, adaptation, loss and damage or climate justice; published in English by the named newspaper; and publicly accessible without subscription barriers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Archive

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keyword searches were undertaken in each instance (e.g., "Pakistan floods 2025", "climate crisis", "loss and damage") and augmented, if appropriate, by site-specific search. For each retained item, the newspaper, date, verbatim headline, URL and genre were recorded and up to twenty pieces per newspaper were selected so as to distribute coverage over the period and across genres. The final corpus is summarized in Table 1 and the full list of headlines, dates and URLs are supplied in Supplementary Table S1.

Table 1. Composition of the corpus

Newspaper	Country	Headlines (n)	Principal genres	Region
Dawn	Pakistan	20	News, editorial, analysis	Global South
The News International	Pakistan	20	News, editorial, feature	Global South
The Guardian	United Kingdom	17	News, feature, long-form, video	Global North
The New York Times	United States	10	News, analysis, video, retrospective	Global North
Total		67		

The Pakistani sub-corpora are larger than the foreign sub-corpora since the standards were strictly applied in the final screening. Items were excluded if they were outside the study window, if they were about floods or heat elsewhere (e.g. in Hong Kong, Bali, Indian-administered Kashmir or Southeast Asia), if they were about the India and Pakistan water dispute rather than the floods, if they were duplicates of the URL of another item, if they were published by an outlet other than the named newspaper, or if their publication could not be independently verified; four Dawn items were replaced with eligible and confirmed Dawn items from the same period, while no replacements were added for the three Guardian items and ten New York Times items removed, so only confirmed items were retained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All comparisons are therefore given as percentages of each sub-corpus, with particular care in interpreting the smaller New York Times sub-corpus (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.4 Coding and Analytical Procedure

The analysis of each headline was carried out at all three levels of the model and was organized using eight coding categories taken from Van Dijk's framework, as summarized in Table 2 (Van Dijk, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2008). At the textual level, six non-mutually exclusive linguistic categories were also used (institutional and official lexis; explicit climate-causal lexis; justice and accountability lexis; humanitarian and casualty lexis; economic and fiscal lexis; adaptation and resilience lexis). Each category was operationalized as an explicit list of terms and word stems (e.g. "court", "NDMA", "PDMA", "minister" and "IMF" for institutional lexis; "sue", "polluter", "justice", "failure" and "reckoning" for justice and accountability lexis) reproduced in full in Supplementary Table S2. The number and percentage of headlines containing at least one listed term were calculated for each newspaper. These counts were read in conjunction with close qualitative reading (Stibbe, 2015) and were not used as inferential statistics but as descriptive indications of concentration and divergence.

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Table 2. Coding framework

Category	Sub-codes	Level
Causation construction	Natural force; governance failure; global emissions; scientific attribution; hybrid	Textual and cognitive
Agency and voice	Active human agent; passive construction; natural agent; institutional agent; community voice	Textual
Vulnerability construction	Intrinsic; governance-produced; globally produced; resilience; hybrid	Textual and cognitive
Responsibility attribution	Local government; national institutions; Global North; shared global; absent	Cognitive and social
Justice framing	Victimhood; humanitarian; climate justice; legal accountability; loss and damage; absent	Cognitive and social
Metaphor	War or conflict; natural force; medical; legal; reckoning; absent	Textual
Erasure and salience	Community voices, long-term causation, local agency or justice claims backgrounded	Textual and social
Source selection	Government; expert; international organisation; community; NGO; journalist	Textual and social

Trustworthiness was sought through criteria of credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The credibility of the results was supported by the consistent application of the full three-level model and presentation of verbatim headlines to support interpretation; the dependability of the results was supported by the documented sampling procedure and coding framework; and the confirmability of the results was supported by grounding interpretive claims in identifiable textual features rather than impressionistic reading. The researcher's role in Pakistani academia is acknowledged in providing contextual knowledge of the Pakistani media environment. The comparative design was used to discipline this insider perspective by requiring that each interpretation be tested against the other three newspapers (Van Dijk, 1993).

3. Findings

3.1 Textual Level: Lexical Repertoires

The distribution of lexical categories across the four newspapers is presented in Table 3, and it indicates that each newspaper relied upon a distinctive combination of lexical resources (Van Dijk, 1988).

Table 3. Headlines containing each lexical category, by newspaper

Lexical category	Dawn (n = 20)	The News International (n = 20)	The Guardian (n = 17)	The New York Times (n = 10)
Institutional and official	9 (45.0%)	4 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Explicit climate-causal	0 (0.0%)	6 (30.0%)	4 (23.5%)	1 (10.0%)
Justice and accountability	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.0%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (10.0%)

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Lexical category	Dawn (n = 20)	The News International (n = 20)	The Guardian (n = 17)	The New York Times (n = 10)
Humanitarian and casualty	11 (55.0%)	4 (20.0%)	11 (64.7%)	9 (90.0%)
Economic and fiscal	4 (20.0%)	3 (15.0%)	2 (11.8%)	1 (10.0%)
Adaptation and resilience	3 (15.0%)	7 (35.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Categories are not mutually exclusive; a headline may contain terms from more than one category.

Dawn was determined to have a preponderance of institutional, numerical and casualty lexis and was the only daily without a headline identifying climate as a factor. Headlines such as "504 killed in 2025 monsoon floods in KP, court informed", "Rains, floods claim 910 lives across country since June 26: NDMA" and "More than 180,000 people affected by floods in Sindh: PDMA" combine precise casualty figures with attribution to courts and disaster management authorities, while "IMF says Pakistan's flood spending, budget agility to be reviewed" attributes evaluative authority to an international financial institution (Van Dijk, 1988). Such constructs are said to position the authority to know and to disclose the disaster in official bodies, while agentless passives such as "court informed" and "to be reviewed" background the actors who inform, analyze and decide. In the same vein, headlines such as "Country's floods batter fields, factories and fiscal plans" set the disaster against economic consequences, while editorial headlines such as "Unity for survival" and "Not just a disaster, the 2025 floods are a call to reimagine resilience" suggest that Dawn's opinion pages used the floods as a yardstick for political unity and preparedness rather than global responsibility. Conversely, The News International had the largest proportions of explicit climate-causal lexis (30.0%) and adaptation and resilience lexis (35.0%) in the corpus, along with a largely evaluative and editorial register. Headlines such as "Climate emergency, again", "Climate change devastating lives across Pakistan: Sherry", "Climate risk" and "Climate disasters costing us billions annually: minister" explicitly place the floods within a climate frame, while "Failure by design", "Every flood is a warning", "Rethinking flood management in Pakistan" and "From rhetoric to resilience" evaluate existing arrangements and call for reform (Van Dijk, 2008). It is argued that these compact constructions are not just about events but about their interpretation, presenting the crisis as recurrent, as structurally produced and as an occasion for learning and adaptation. Significantly, the newspaper's only accountability headline, 'Failure by design', points the finger of responsibility at domestic governance.

The Guardian has the highest amount of foreign newspaper lexis combining humanitarian and casualty lexis (64.7%) with explicit climate-causal lexis (23.5%). Quoted headlines foreground community testimony: 'It happened in seconds': residents count the cost of deadly floods', 'The water left nothing': Pakistan's Punjab province reels from deadly floods', 'Fear haunts us': Pakistan's floods leave mental scars long after waters recede' and 'Everything is gone': Punjabi farmers suffer worst floods in three decades' (Chouliaraki, 2006). At the same time, headlines like "Climate crisis intensifies Pakistan's monsoon destruction" and "'Not normal': Climate crisis supercharged deadly monsoon floods in Asia" resist a naturalized or merely seasonal reading of the disaster, and the headline "Pakistani farmers to sue German polluters over climate-linked flood damage", though it is the newspaper's only justice and accountability headline, is the most explicit construction of transnational responsibility in the corpus.

The New York Times has the highest proportion of humanitarian and casualty lexis (90.0%) and the most consistent attribution of agency to natural factors. Headlines such as "One Day of Flash Floods Leaves a

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Devastating Death Toll in Pakistan", "Deadly Flash Floods Lash Northern Pakistan" and "Deadly Floods Hit Pakistan Again" present floods as grammatical Actors of violent material processes. Literary headlines such as "Once a Source of Life and Renewal, Monsoon Brings Death to Pakistan" and "'Like Death Visited Every Home': A Pakistani Village Is Hit by Torrential Rains" personify the monsoon and death itself (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Two headlines, "Pakistan's Floods Are a Climate Change Warning" and "Reckoning With a New Era of Deadly Floods" position the disaster in a global and historical climate perspective, while the "reckoning" implied in the latter is diffuse and names no guilty party.

3.2 Textual Level: Agency, Metaphor and Voice

The distribution of grammatical agency was shown to be ideologically meaningful across the corpus. By using verbs such as "kill", "lash", "hit", "batter" and "devastate" to describe the floods, rains and monsoons, the disaster is framed as an autonomous natural event and the human, institutional and structural causes are pushed aside (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Conversely, in cases where human actors are in the subject position, such as "Pakistan upgrades early flood warning system" (The News International) or "Pakistani farmers to sue German polluters" (The Guardian), the societies affected are constructed as agents that are able to prepare or take legal action. The choice between farmers who "suffer" and farmers who "sue" is described as summarizing, with the force of a single verb, the distinction between a victim model and a claimant model of the affected people.

A metaphor was identified in both areas with war and violence metaphors being the most common. Floods "batter" crops, factories and budgetary plans (Dawn), flash floods "lash" northern Pakistan and floods "hit" Pakistan again (The New York Times), and Punjab is described as "drowning" (The News International) (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Charteris-Black, 2004). Medical metaphors such as the 'mental scars' that floods leave long after the waters subside (The Guardian) expand the portrayal of harm beyond the immediate event to its psychological and social aftermath. Such metaphors are said to make complicated tragedies accessible, but also to organize culpability. The portrayal of nature as an aggressor can shift attention from the human and political contexts that contribute to exposure and vulnerability.

Papers varied considerably in how they chose their sources and how they spoke. Dawn relied mostly on official sources such as the NDMA, PDMA, provincial relief commissioners, ministries, judges and the IMF. The Guardian was the only newspaper to highlight the cited voices of impacted citizens and farmers in its headlines (Van Dijk, 1993). Conversely, The New York Times did not ascribe its headlines to any identifiable Pakistani source, and thus the newspaper itself, in headlines such as "Pakistan's Floods Are a Climate Change Warning", became the authority that interpreted the disaster, while its video headlines turned Pakistan into an object of visual attention. The headline's access to voice is claimed to be a discursive power in itself, since it constitutes whose knowledge defines the disaster (Van Dijk, 1993; Boykoff, 2011).

3.3 Cognitive Level: Mental Models

Within Van Dijk's (2014) framework, recurrent textual patterns are understood to supply readers with interpretive resources from which mental models of events may be constructed. The analysis indicates that each newspaper offered a distinctive dominant model, as summarised in Table 4, and it is emphasised that these are models made cognitively available by the discourse rather than models whose uptake by readers has been demonstrated.

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Table 4. Dominant mental models offered by each newspaper

Newspaper	Dominant model	Causality	Vulnerability	Responsibility and justice
Dawn	Governmentally managed vulnerability	Largely implicit; floods as severe events to be measured	Measurable and administratively manageable	Located in domestic institutions; global responsibility largely absent
The News International	Recurring emergency and structural reform	Explicitly climatic, combined with governance failure	Governance-produced and recurrent	Domestic institutions called to learn and reform
The Guardian	Humanitarian recognition and climate claimant	Climate crisis named; transnational causation in selected headlines	Globally produced; communities as sufferers and claimants	Global North polluters named in the litigation headline
The New York Times	Acute catastrophe, with a secondary warning model	Predominantly natural force; climate warning in selected headlines	Sudden and overwhelming exposure	Largely absent, with systemic reckoning in a minority of headlines

One example is the recurring Dawn pattern, where the effects of floods are measured in death tolls, numbers affected, villages damaged and financial losses, and where authority is vested in PDMA, NDMA, courts, commissioners, ministers and the IMF (Van Dijk, 2014). This is not a paradigm of passivity, as headlines like "Pakistan aims to counter climate change with disaster risk finance" and "Pakistan will have to adapt to floods as the new normal, says expert" make national response obvious. But the communities affected are often statistical categories: millions are "affected", provinces "reel" and mortality tolls "rise", while institutions report and allocate, so that administrative competence is foregrounded and community voice and global responsibility are backgrounded.

The News International provides a paradigm of cyclical emergencies and structural restructuring. The recurrence marker "again" in "Climate emergency, again" and the universal quantifier in "Every flood is a warning" link individual disasters into a pattern, while "Learn from climate emergencies" and "Failure by design" invite readers to interpret vulnerability as produced by governance and as correctable through learning (Van Dijk, 2008). This paradigm is thus more clearly interpretive than that provided by Dawn, and more ready to question existing arrangements, although its critique is largely directed at domestic institutions rather than global issuers.

The Guardian provides the most powerful combination of humanitarian identification and climate-justice cognition. The community quotes encourage readers to understand the floods in terms of loss, terror, destruction of livelihoods, displacement and trauma, while the litigation headline gives a causative and moral context that is mostly absent elsewhere: Pakistani farmers are seen as genuine claimants, pollution is associated with flood damage, and accountability transcends national lines (Roberts & Parks, 2007). It is worth noting, however, that this justice model is focused in a limited number of headlines, and that the majority of The Guardian's headlines continue to foreground death, disease, displacement and suffering, so that its justice orientation is episodic rather than continuous.

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The New York Times, on the whole, presents a sharp disaster model where floods, rains and monsoons impact Pakistan as potent natural forces and literary headlines reinforce an image of victims with causal culpability mostly out of the picture (Moeller, 1999). Second, we also have a secondary systemic warning model, as "Pakistan's Floods Are a Climate Change Warning" makes a national disaster into proof of a worldwide problem and "Reckoning With a New Era of Deadly Floods" casts recurrence as a historical shift. The secondary model is put out to dispute the isolation of Pakistan's experience but is mainly quiet on the specific commitments of big emitters.

3.4 Social Level: Reproduction and Contestation of Global Hierarchy

The aggregate comparison of the two regions is presented in Table 5, and it indicates that the Pakistani and international sub-corpora differed most sharply in their use of institutional and humanitarian lexis (Van Dijk, 1993).

Table 5. Regional comparison of lexical categories

Lexical category	Pakistani aggregate (n = 40)	International aggregate (n = 27)
Institutional and official	13 (32.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Explicit climate-causal	6 (15.0%)	5 (18.5%)
Justice and accountability	1 (2.5%)	2 (7.4%)
Humanitarian and casualty	15 (37.5%)	20 (74.1%)
Economic and fiscal	7 (17.5%)	3 (11.1%)
Adaptation and resilience	10 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)

On the social level, the hierarchy of the Global South and North was found to be reproduced mainly through representational and epistemic asymmetry. In numerous worldwide headlines Pakistan is the place where natural forces act: Pakistan is "hit" again, northern Pakistan is "lashed", Punjab's breadbasket is "devastated" and a community "hit by torrential rains" (Chouliaraki, 2006). Victims are numbers in escalating death tolls and visual headlines, such as the Guardian's drone video of "the extent of devastation left by floods in Pakistan" and The New York Times' video stories, which position Pakistan as an object of observation. Such constructions are said to put suffering on show but not necessarily discursive agency, leaving afflicted groups as objects of observation and not as providers of explanation, knowledge or political claims. But, resistance to this hierarchy was found in three ways. First, the Guardian's litigation headline subverts the victim-centred syntax typical of disaster reporting. The subject-position is occupied by Pakistani farmers, the action is legal and the responsible party is named as "German polluters", making vulnerability appear globally produced and responsibility transnational (Roberts & Parks, 2007). Second, community testimony in The Guardian allows affected people to ascribe meaning to their own experience, while speakers are generally unidentified and the accompanying headline often reverts to loss. Third, Pakistani newspapers engaged in a form of domestic discursive agency whereby failure in the structural realm is attacked, planning for the future is undertaken, fiscal review is announced and information about the parliament and judiciary is offered, so that Pakistani institutions are cast as sources, decision makers and objects of internal auditing rather than passive receivers of disaster (Van Dijk, 2009).

It is crucial to mention that this local agency confronts representations of helplessness without confronting the global emissions hierarchy, as the responsibility it assigns is aimed at domestic governance rather than at Global North polluters (Boykoff, 2011). Besides, although the international aggregate had a slightly higher

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share of explicit climate-causal lexis (18.5%) than the Pakistani aggregate (15.0%), the single newspaper with the highest proportion was The News International (30.0%), suggesting that the nomenclature of climate causes was not the preserve of international newspapers. Conversely, adaptation and resilience lexis appeared only in the Pakistani newspapers, meaning that only Pakistani headlines cast Pakistan as an actor capable of preparing for future floods.

4. Discussion

As regards the first study question, it is determined that the four newspapers drew upon a common pool of linguistic resources but integrated them in systematically distinct ways (Van Dijk, 1988, 2008). Dawn kept an institutional, administrative and fiscal register; The News International the most overtly climatic and reformist register; The Guardian a mixture of humanitarian testimony and climate-justice accountability; and The New York Times a register of casualty, natural-force agency and literary catastrophe. The finding that institutional and official sources dominate Dawn headlines is in line with Saleem and Khan's (2025) observation that Dawn frames climate change mainly through institutional and financial lenses. This study extends this observation to headline-level reporting of a specific flood event.

Regarding the second study issue, it is stated that the reoccurring patterns offer diverse mental models, rather than a common mental model of the floods (Van Dijk, 2014). The way agency is allocated is crucial to this differentiation: the repeated placement of floods and rains as the subject can lead to the naturalization of the event; the repeated placement of institutions as the source and decision maker gives readers a state-centered model of knowledge and response; and the placement of affected farmers as the subject of "sue" constructs them as claimants rather than victims. Similarly, recurrence markers such as "again", "every" and "new era" promote a systemic risk model whereas legal verbs and labels such as "sue" and "polluters" support an accountability model (Entman, 1993). These results are in line with Van Dijk's hypothesis concerning the interaction between discourse structures and social cognition, but as no reception data are available, they refer to the cognitive availability of models rather than their actual absorption.

Regarding the third research question, it was found that the hierarchy between the Global North and South was replicated, as well as challenged, and that neither reproduction nor challenge was uniform across each region (Van Dijk, 1993; Chouliaraki, 2006). The hierarchy was reproduced through external interpretive authority, naturalized causality, anonymous casualty categories, and the representation of Pakistan as a passive site of devastation, a pattern consistent with Moeller's (1999) and Chouliaraki's (2006) accounts of the mediation of distant suffering. It was fought with community testimony, Pakistani institutional agency, explicit climate framing and the Guardian's construction of Pakistani farmers fighting legally against German polluters. The litigation headline, however, is a single event-driven item, and the episodic character of justice framing observed here is suggested to be consistent with Boykoff's (2011) account of the ways in which journalistic norms, such as the preference for novel and dramatic events, shape the visibility of climate issues. Perhaps the most important significance of these findings is that comparative CDA of climate reporting should not regard geographical categories as sufficient explanations of discursive difference (Van Dijk, 2009). As analytically essential as the contrast between the Pakistani and international aggregates was the contrast between The Guardian and The New York Times. The contrast between Dawn and The News International showed that a single newspaper cannot stand for a national media system. Hence, the argument is that the social level of Van Dijk's model needs to be characterized not just geopolitically, but also institutionally, as editorial identity, genre and source practice mediate the interaction between geopolitical position and discursive representation (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007).

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Some practical implications are derived. In the case of Pakistani newspapers, the findings suggest that institutional reporting, which provides essential information on casualties, budgets and planning, could be more consistently linked to community voice and to explicit climate causation, so that the immediate disaster is linked to differential vulnerability and to global responsibility (Stibbe, 2015). The Guardian coverage suggests that international newspapers can integrate testimony, scientific attribution and transnational accountability into mainstream reporting, but the episodic character of that integration indicates that responsibility should not only be made visible when a lawsuit makes the news. Our findings suggest that in terms of policy communication national narratives of preparedness and adaptation could be more explicitly linked to the international dynamics of climate finance and loss and damage. Framing repeated disaster response as a purely national responsibility may mask the inequities experienced by climate vulnerable countries .

5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the discursive construction of the 2025 Pakistan floods in the headlines of two Pakistani and two international newspapers through Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model and has demonstrated that the same event was constructed through different lexical repertoires, different allocations of agency and different mental models by the four newspapers (Van Dijk, 2008, 2014). Briefly, a vulnerability was constructed by Dawn as measurable and governable; The News International saw the floods as ongoing crises calling for reform and resilience; The Guardian formed impacted Pakistanis as humanitarian subjects and, episodically, as valid climate claimants; The New York Times constructed Pakistan largely via natural calamity, while simultaneously providing a supplementary model of climate warning. Furthermore, it has been shown that the Global North and South hierarchy was repeated and challenged and that the mechanisms of both were institutionally heterogeneous and not regionally uniform.

The work contributes to CDA in the application of the whole three-level Socio-Cognitive Model to an attested four-newspaper corpus, and in drawing an empirical pathway from grammatical choice, to mental model, to ideological implication (Van Dijk 1993, 2014). It makes a contribution to climate communication research by showing that the naming of climate causes and the articulation of climate justice cannot be straightforwardly attributed to Pakistani or international media but are concentrated in particular newspapers and particular types of headlines.

Several constraints need to be acknowledged. The corpus is limited to English-language print media and therefore excludes the Urdu-language and vernacular media through which most Pakistanis receive disaster information; the analysis is limited to headlines and cannot capture the full causal complexity of article bodies; the lexical categories overlap and are dependent on operational definitions; the international sub-corpora and The New York Times sub-corpus in particular are smaller than the Pakistani sub-corpora after exclusion of ineligible items; and no audience data were collected, so that claims at the cognitive level concern the availability rather than the reception of mental models (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Van Dijk, 2014). Future research could therefore extend the analysis to Urdu-language and broadcast media, compare headline framing with full article bodies, combine corpus-assisted methods with close reading across larger and balanced samples, and incorporate reception studies to investigate whether and how readers take up the mental models identified here (Stibbe, 2015; McCombs, 2004).

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Supplementary Material

Table S1. Corpus of headlines (N = 67)

No.	Newspaper	Date	Headline	URL
1	Dawn	18 Aug 2025	KP govt releases Rs800m for flood-hit areas, Rs500m for worst-affected Buner as deaths hit 341	https://www.dawn.com/news/1931669
2	Dawn	19 Aug 2025	At least 358 dead as KP reels from devastating floods; rehabilitation efforts underway	https://www.dawn.com/news/1931874
3	Dawn	22 Aug 2025	PDMA issues widespread rain advisory for KP as death toll surges to 393	https://www.dawn.com/news/1933185
4	Dawn	25 Aug 2025	Swat residents reel under the rigours of flood devastation	https://www.dawn.com/news/1936933
5	Dawn	28 Aug 2025	Flooding in Punjab	https://www.dawn.com/news/1937811
6	Dawn	3 Sep 2025	At least 43 people killed, 3.36m affected in floods: Punjab relief commissioner	https://www.dawn.com/news/1939390
7	Dawn	3 Sep 2025	Unity for survival	https://www.dawn.com/news/1939341
8	Dawn	3 Sep 2025	Dykes breached as Chenab, Ravi rivers hit critical levels	https://www.dawn.com/news/1939252
9	Dawn	7 Sep 2025	Over 4.1m affected by floods in 4,100 villages across Punjab as toll rises to 56: PDMA	https://www.dawn.com/news/1940257
10	Dawn	8 Sep 2025	Rains, floods claim 910 lives across country since June 26: NDMA	https://www.dawn.com/news/1940478
11	Dawn	8 Sep 2025	Deadly floods risk triggering mass migration across country	https://www.dawn.com/news/1940535
12	Dawn	10 Sep 2025	Not just a disaster, the 2025 floods are a call to reimagine resilience	https://www.dawn.com/news/1940947
13	Dawn	13 Sep 2025	IMF says Pakistan's flood spending, budget agility to be reviewed	https://www.dawn.com/news/1941738
14	Dawn	17 Sep 2025	More than 180,000 people affected by floods in Sindh: PDMA	https://www.dawn.com/news/1942614
15	Dawn	20 Sep 2025	Pakistan will have to adapt to floods as the new normal, says expert	https://www.dawn.com/news/1943439
16	Dawn	22 Sep 2025	Agriculture: In the aftermath of the floods	https://www.dawn.com/news/1943690
17	Dawn	23 Sep 2025	Country's floods batter fields, factories and fiscal plans	https://www.dawn.com/news/1944130

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No.	Newspaper	Date	Headline	URL
18	Dawn	27 Sep 2025	Floods affect 4.2m people in Punjab	https://www.dawn.com/news/1944875
19	Dawn	23 Oct 2025	PDNA 2022 vs PDNA 2025	https://www.dawn.com/news/1950716
20	Dawn	24 Nov 2025	504 killed in 2025 monsoon floods in KP, court informed	https://www.dawn.com/news/1956944
21	The News International	23 Aug 2025	A deluge of tragedy	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1338324-a-deluge-of-tragedy
22	The News International	24 Aug 2025	Climate emergency, again	https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1337832-climate-emergency-again
23	The News International	28 Aug 2025	Facing flood again, Pakistan managed to secure only 20pc funding	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1339599-facing-flood-again-pakistan-managed-to-secure-only-20pc-of-funding-committed-after-2022-deluge
24	The News International	30 Aug 2025	Climate change devastating lives across Pakistan: Sherry	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1336192-climate-change-devastating-lives-across-pakistan-sherry
25	The News International	31 Aug 2025	Drowning Punjab	https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1340168-drowning-punjab
26	The News International	3 Sep 2025	Climate risk	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1340899-climate-risk
27	The News International	7 Sep 2025	Rebuilding after disaster	https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1341546-rebuilding-after-disaster
28	The News International	12 Sep 2025	Rethinking flood management in Pakistan	https://www.thenews.com.pk/magazine/us/1342541-rethinking-flood-management-in-pakistan
29	The News International	14 Sep 2025	Besides the climate change	https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1343417-besides-the-climate-change
30	The News International	19 Sep 2025	Learn from climate emergencies	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1344697-learn-from-climate-emergencies

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No.	Newspaper	Date	Headline	URL
31	The News International	21 Sep 2025	Failure by design	https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1345061-failure-by-design
32	The News International	28 Sep 2025	A disrupted education	https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1346760-a-disrupted-education
33	The News International	7 Oct 2025	Pakistan upgrades early flood warning system	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1349264-pakistan-upgrades-early-flood-warning-system
34	The News International	12 Oct 2025	Climate disasters costing us billions annually: minister	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1350407-climate-disasters-costing-us-billions-of-dollars-annually-minister
35	The News International	22 Oct 2025	Every flood is a warning	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1352671-every-flood-is-a-warning
36	The News International	23 Oct 2025	Gallup survey reveals stark realities of flood impact	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1352964-gallup-pakistan-survey-reveals-stark-realities-of-flood-impact-slow-recovery
37	The News International	30 Oct 2025	From rhetoric to resilience	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1354500-from-rhetoric-to-resilience
38	The News International	15 Nov 2025	Floods caused Rs822bn losses, NA told	https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1381036-floods-caused-rs822bn-losses-na-told
39	The News International	19 Nov 2025	PM approves five-year plan for flood preparedness	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1359012-pm-shehbaz-approves-five-year-plan-for-flood-preparedness
40	The News International	20 Nov 2025	Fix, expand, build: PM approves flood strategy	https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1359119-fix-expand-build-pm-approves-5-year-flood-management-strategy
41	The Guardian	15 Aug 2025	Flash floods kill at least 159 people in Pakistan after huge cloudburst	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/15/flash-floods-pakistan-huge-cloudburst-flooding-landslides-india

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No.	Newspaper	Date	Headline	URL
42	The Guardian	16 Aug 2025	Death toll after monsoon floods in Pakistan rises to more than 320	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/16/pakistan-monsoon-floods-death-toll
43	The Guardian	19 Aug 2025	Drone footage shows extent of devastation left by floods in Pakistan (video)	https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2025/aug/19/drone-footage-shows-extent-of-devastation-left-by-floods-in-pakistan-video
44	The Guardian	22 Aug 2025	Weather tracker: monsoon rains cause deadly floods in Pakistan and India	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/aug/22/weather-tracker-monsoon-rains-deadly-floods-pakistan-india
45	The Guardian	25 Aug 2025	'It happened in seconds': residents count the cost of deadly floods	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/aug/25/deadly-floods-pakistan-mingora-flood-waters
46	The Guardian	30 Aug 2025	'The water left nothing': Pakistan's Punjab province reels from deadly floods	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/aug/30/pakistan-punjab-province-deadly-floods-disease
47	The Guardian	31 Aug 2025	Pakistan's Punjab province hit by 'biggest flood in its history' (video)	https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2025/aug/31/pakistan-punjab-province-biggest-flood-in-its-history-video
48	The Guardian	1 Sep 2025	Floods, a vaccine drive and troops training: photos of the day	https://www.theguardian.com/news/gallery/2025/sep/01/floods-vaccine-drive-troops-training-photos-of-the-day
49	The Guardian	2 Sep 2025	'Fear haunts us': Pakistan's floods leave mental scars long after waters recede	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/sep/02/pakistan-floods-trauma-natural-disasters-mental-health-survivors-ptsd

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No.	Newspaper	Date	Headline	URL
50	The Guardian	6 Sep 2025	'Everything is gone': Punjabi farmers suffer worst floods in three decades	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/06/everything-gone-punjabi-farmers-suffer-worst-floods-three-decades
51	The Guardian	1 Oct 2025	Crowded camps and rising disease after Pakistan floods	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/oct/01/floods-now-disease-cholera-dengue-malaria-stalks-millions-in-pakistan
52	The Guardian	10 Oct 2025	Climate crisis intensifies Pakistan's monsoon destruction	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/10/climate-crisis-intensifies-pakistan-monsoon-destruction
53	The Guardian	28 Oct 2025	Pakistani farmers to sue German polluters over climate-linked flood damage	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/28/pakistani-farmers-to-sue-german-polluters-over-climate-linked-flood-damage
54	The Guardian	12 Nov 2025	Children displaced by floods face uncertain future	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/nov/12/children-displaced-by-floods-pakistan
55	The Guardian	5 Dec 2025	Health crisis deepens in Pakistan's flood-affected regions	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/dec/05/health-crisis-pakistan-floods
56	The Guardian	11 Dec 2025	'Not normal': Climate crisis supercharged deadly monsoon floods in Asia	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/dec/11/climate-crisis-made-monsoon-floods-asia-worse-study
57	The Guardian	27 Dec 2025	Cyclones, floods and wildfires among 2025's costliest climate-related disasters	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/27/cyclones-floods-and-wildfires-among-2025s-costliest-climate-related-disasters

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No.	Newspaper	Date	Headline	URL
58	The New York Times	15 Aug 2025	One Day of Flash Floods Leaves a Devastating Death Toll in Pakistan	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/15/world/asia/pakistan-flash-floods-india.html
59	The New York Times	15 Aug 2025	At Least 185 People Killed in Devastating Flash Floods in Pakistan (video)	https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000010343290/pakistan-flash-floods-monsoon.html
60	The New York Times	18 Aug 2025	'Like Death Visited Every Home': A Pakistani Village Is Hit by Torrential Rains	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/18/world/asia/pakistan-floods-village.html
61	The New York Times	19 Aug 2025	Once a Source of Life and Renewal, Monsoon Brings Death to Pakistan	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/19/world/asia/pakistan-monsoon-devastation.html
62	The New York Times	19 Aug 2025	Deadly Flash Floods Lash Northern Pakistan (video)	https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000010350391/pakistan-flash-floods-monsoon.html
63	The New York Times	31 Aug 2025	Deadly Floods in Punjab Devastate Pakistan's Breadbasket	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/31/world/asia/summer-monsoon-floods-pakistan.html
64	The New York Times	2 Sep 2025	Deadly Floods Hit Pakistan Again (video)	https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/100000010367079/deadly-floods-hit-pakistan-again.html
65	The New York Times	2 Sep 2025	First War, Then Floods Drive Pakistani Families From Their Homes	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/02/world/asia/pakistan-india-floods.html
66	The New York Times	11 Sep 2025	Pakistan's Floods Are a Climate Change Warning	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/11/climate/pakistans-floods-are-a-climate-change-warning.html
67	The New York Times	2 Dec 2025	Reckoning With a New Era of Deadly Floods	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/02/climate/climate-change-floods.html

Table S2. Lexical categories and operational term lists

Terms are matched case-insensitively as whole words or word stems; a headline is counted once per category if it contains at least one listed term.

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Category	Terms and stems
Institutional and official	court; NDMA; PDMA; commissioner; minister; govt; government; IMF; NA (National Assembly); PM; PDNA
Explicit climate-causal	climate; global warming; glacial
Justice and accountability	sue; polluter; justice; accountab-; liabilit-; loss and damage; compensat-; reparation; failure; reckoning
Humanitarian and casualty	kill-; dead; death; deadly; toll; lives; affect-; residents; people; displac-; victim; tragedy; scar; fear; disease; health; children; homes; families; migration; suffer; trauma; drowning; camps; education; "everything is gone"; "left nothing"
Economic and fiscal	fiscal; budget; financ-; funding; econom-; growth; Rs (currency figure); billion; loss(es); cost; spending; factory/factories; agricultur-; breadbasket
Adaptation and resilience	adapt-; resilien-; prepared-; warning system; rebuild; rehabilitat-; management; strategy; plan; learn; rethink-; upgrade; "fix, expand, build"

Table S3. Items screened out at final verification

Newspaper	Items removed	Reason
Dawn	4 (replaced)	Three items published by other outlets (Global Institute for Development Studies, Dialogue Earth, The Nation); one item dated November 2024
The Guardian	3 (not replaced)	Two items dated June and July 2025; one item on floods in Bali
The New York Times	10 (not replaced)	One item dated July 2025; two items on extreme heat (July 2025); two items on floods in Southeast Asia; one on flooding in Hong Kong; one on a pilgrimage route in Indian-administered Kashmir; one on the India and Pakistan water dispute (May 2025); one duplicate URL; one item whose publication could not be confirmed