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COVERAGE OF CHILD ABUSE CASES IN PAKISTAN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND URDU DAILIES

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Abstract

Background: *Child abuse is a serious social and public-interest concern in Pakistan. Print media plays a critical role in raising public awareness, shaping perceptions, promoting legal accountability, and influencing attitudes towards victims and perpetrators. However, sensationalised, emotionally charged, or ethically insensitive reporting may expose victims' identities, reinforce stigma, and compromise the safety, privacy, and dignity of affected children.*

Aim: *This study aimed to examine and comparatively analyse the coverage and portrayal of child abuse cases in the Urdu-language daily Jang and the English-language daily Dawn.*

Methodology: *A quantitative comparative content analysis was conducted on 81 valid news items published between 1 May and 31 October 2024. Of these, 43 items (53.1%) were published in Jang, while 38 items (46.9%) appeared in Dawn. The data were coded using categories informed by established ethical reporting guidelines and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations, chi-square tests, and an independent-samples t-test, were employed. Results: The findings showed that 81 child-abuse news items were published during the study period, with Jang contributing 43 (53.1%) and Dawn 38 (46.9%). Sexual abuse was the most frequently reported type (29, 35.8%), followed by physical abuse (26, 32.1%) and abduction/kidnapping (19, 23.5%), with a significant difference between the two newspapers, $\chi^2(4, N = 81) = 12.92$, $p = .012$. Regarding coverage patterns, emotional or sympathetic language appeared in 71 items (87.7%) and an emotional/human-interest angle in 68 (84.0%); however, these differences between newspapers were not statistically significant. Article length also did not differ significantly, $t(77.14) = 0.80$, $p = .428$. Ethical reporting showed significant differences in gender-sensitive reporting, $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 31.96$, $p < .001$, and legal/procedural emphasis, $\chi^2(3, N = 81) = 11.17$, $p = .011$. In sexual-abuse reporting, victim identification was common, with 23 of 29 items disclosing indirect identifying*

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details, while no sexual-abuse report provided helpline or preventive/awareness information. Overall, ethical compliance in sexual-abuse reporting remained limited in both newspapers.

Conclusion: *The findings suggest that ethical reporting practices were only partially and inconsistently reflected in the coverage of child abuse cases. Greater attention is needed to protecting victims' privacy and identities, reducing sensationalism, using gender-sensitive language, and providing helpline and preventive information. Newspapers should also strengthen follow-up reporting beyond the initial stages of legal proceedings. Improved adherence to ethical reporting standards can promote more responsible, child-sensitive, and socially constructive coverage of child abuse in Pakistani print media.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Media is a major source through which individuals and societies receive information, interpret events, and develop perceptions of social issues. By selecting, framing, and presenting information, news media can influence public opinion and shape attitudes towards social problems, victims, perpetrators, and institutions (Baran, 2011; McQuail, 2010). In the context of child abuse, media can play an important role in raising public awareness, promoting children's rights, encouraging reporting, and drawing attention to institutional and legal accountability (Avais, 2020). However, sensationalised or ethically insensitive reporting may expose victims' identities, reinforce stigma, and compromise the privacy, safety, and dignity of affected children.

Child abuse is a serious global social and public-health concern that occurs across cultures and socioeconomic groups. It includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, and neglect, all of which can have serious and long-term consequences for children's well-being (C. Abuse, 2013). The consequences of child abuse may include emotional distress, behavioural difficulties, psychological problems, impaired development, and long-term physical and mental health challenges (Spertus et al., 2003; Smith & Pollak, 2020). Although extensive research has examined child abuse in high-income countries, significant gaps remain in reliable evidence from low- and middle-income countries such as Pakistan (Maul et al., 2019).

In Pakistan, child abuse remains a serious and under-addressed issue. Reported forms include sexual abuse, physical violence, corporal punishment, neglect, abduction, child marriage, and other forms of exploitation. Physical punishment has been reported in homes, schools, and madrassas, despite legal restrictions in some settings, and has been associated with school dropout and long-term psychological harm (Pulla, Tarar, & Ali, 2018). Earlier evidence also indicates substantial regional variation in reported child abuse cases. Sahil's data for 2018, for example, showed that Punjab accounted for approximately 65% of reported cases, followed by Sindh with 25%, while smaller proportions were reported from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Mehnaz, 2018). These figures should be interpreted cautiously because child abuse remains substantially underreported and available statistics are dependent on cases identified through official and media sources (Dar & Hasan, 2018).

More recent evidence further demonstrates the scale of the problem. According to Sahil's *Cruel Numbers 2024* report, 3,364 cases of child abuse were reported across Pakistan, including 1,828 cases of child sexual abuse, representing approximately 54% of the reported cases. The report indicates that around nine children were abused each day, including approximately five children subjected to sexual abuse daily. The data were compiled from 81 national and regional newspapers, demonstrating the importance of the press as a source for documenting and bringing

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child-abuse cases into public discourse (Sahil, 2025).

High-profile cases, particularly the rape and murder of Zainab Ansari in Kasur, generated extensive public attention and intensified debate concerning child protection, law enforcement, and criminal justice in Pakistan. Such cases demonstrate the capacity of media coverage to place child abuse on the public agenda. However, extensive attention to individual and highly dramatic cases may also result in disproportionate emphasis on sensational details rather than the structural causes, prevalence, prevention, and institutional dimensions of child abuse (Lakhdir et al., 2021). Responsible journalism therefore requires a balance between informing the public about serious cases and protecting children's rights, privacy, and dignity.

The ethical dimension of reporting is particularly important when the victims are children. Media reports should avoid unnecessary identification, excessive emotionalism, graphic descriptions, and sensational language. At the same time, reporting can provide useful information about legal procedures, child-protection mechanisms, helplines, and preventive measures. The World Health Organization emphasises the importance of public awareness and effective reporting mechanisms in preventing violence against children (WHO, 2024). Media coverage that includes such information can therefore contribute beyond merely reporting an incident by supporting public education and prevention.

Theoretical perspectives on media effects are also relevant to understanding the potential influence of news coverage. Mass communication theories seek to explain how media messages are produced, received, and potentially influence audiences and society (McQuail, 2005; Nwabueze, Okonkwo, & Communications, 2018). The Magic Bullet or Hypodermic Needle Theory, in particular, assumes that media messages can exert direct and powerful effects on audiences. Although subsequent research challenged the idea of a uniformly passive audience, the theory remains useful for considering how repeated and emotionally framed media representations may influence public perceptions of social issues (McQuail, 2005; Griffin & Dunwoody, 2000). In the context of child abuse reporting, the way newspapers frame victims, perpetrators, legal proceedings, and the seriousness of the issue may therefore contribute to broader public perceptions.

Despite the public significance of child abuse in Pakistan, limited comparative research has examined how English- and Urdu-language newspapers represent such cases, particularly in terms of emotional language, sensationalism, gender-sensitive reporting, victim identification, legal and procedural emphasis, and the inclusion of preventive or support information. English and Urdu newspapers may differ in their editorial approaches, target audiences, linguistic conventions, and patterns of crime reporting. A comparative examination of *Jang*, a leading Urdu daily, and *Dawn*, a leading English daily, can therefore provide important insight into differences in the representation of child abuse in Pakistani print media.

Accordingly, this study comparatively analyses the coverage of child abuse cases in *Jang* and *Dawn* published between 1 May and 31 October 2024. It examines differences in reporting patterns, including emotional and sensational language, gender-sensitive reporting, victim identification, legal and procedural emphasis, article length, and the provision of preventive and support-related information. By focusing on these dimensions, the study seeks to assess the extent to which Pakistani print media follows responsible and ethical reporting practices when covering child abuse and to identify areas for more child-sensitive and socially responsible journalism.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the frequency of child abuse news coverage in Pakistani English- and Urdu-language daily newspapers.
2. To compare the coverage of child abuse cases in *Dawn* and *Jang*, with particular attention

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to follow-up reporting and the prominence given to the issue.

3. To examine the representation of child sexual abuse cases in the selected English- and Urdu-language newspapers, with particular attention to the language, framing, and emphasis used in reporting.

4. To assess the extent to which ethical reporting principles are reflected in the coverage of child sexual abuse cases in the selected English and Urdu newspapers.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1: What is the frequency of child abuse news coverage in Pakistani English and Urdu daily newspapers?

RQ2: How do *Dawn* and *Jang* differ in their coverage of child abuse cases in Pakistan?

RQ3: How are child sexual abuse cases represented in the selected English- and Urdu-language newspapers, particularly in terms of reporting language, framing, and emphasis?

RQ4: To what extent do the selected English and Urdu newspapers follow ethical reporting principles when covering child sexual abuse cases?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it examines how child abuse, a sensitive and pressing social issue in Pakistan, is represented in the country's English- and Urdu-language print media. By comparing *Dawn* and *Jang*, the study provides evidence of differences in reporting frequency, framing, follow-up coverage, victim identification, legal emphasis, sensationalism, and other ethical reporting practices.

The findings may be useful for journalists, editors, media organisations, policymakers, child-protection institutions, and advocacy groups seeking to promote more responsible and child-sensitive reporting. The study also identifies gaps in media coverage, particularly regarding victim privacy, gender-sensitive language, preventive information, and support services. By highlighting these gaps, the research contributes to the literature on media representation, ethical journalism, and child protection in Pakistan and may support efforts to develop more responsible reporting practices and informed media policies.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on Framing Theory, which explains how media select, emphasize, and present particular aspects of an issue in order to construct meaning and influence its interpretation (Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The theory is relevant to the present study because child abuse is a sensitive social issue and its presentation in newspapers may differ according to the selection of information, language, headlines, emphasis, and narrative used by journalists.

In the context of Pakistani print media, Framing Theory helps examine how Urdu and English newspapers portray child abuse cases and which aspects of the cases receive greater attention. A news report may focus on the victim, the alleged perpetrator, police investigation, court proceedings, punishment, or the broader social problem of child protection. Similarly, the use of sensational headlines, emotional language, graphic details, or information about the victim can create different interpretations of the same incident. Previous studies cited in the literature also indicate concerns regarding sensationalism, framing patterns, and ethical challenges in the reporting of child abuse in Pakistani media (Khan & Ali, 2020; Khan et al., 2023).

The theory is also useful for examining differences between Urdu and English dailies. Newspapers may differ in the frequency and prominence given to child abuse cases, the language used, the aspects emphasized, and the extent of follow-up reporting. Therefore, Framing Theory provides a suitable theoretical basis for analyzing not only how frequently child abuse cases are reported but also how these cases are presented and what aspects are emphasized or neglected.

The Hypodermic Needle Theory discussed in the literature provides an earlier perspective on media influence, suggesting that media messages can

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have direct and powerful effects on audiences (McQuail, 2005). However, this study does not primarily examine direct audience effects. Its focus is on the content and representation of child abuse in newspapers. Therefore, Framing Theory is more appropriate as the main theoretical foundation of this research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is derived from the objectives, research questions, and literature concerning child abuse reporting in Pakistani print media. The study examines the coverage of child abuse cases in Urdu and English dailies through content analysis. The main focus is on the frequency of coverage, differences in reporting, framing patterns, ethical practices, and follow-up news.

The framework considers newspaper language (Urdu and English) as an important basis for comparison. The coverage is then examined according to the frequency and prominence of child abuse news, type of abuse, headlines, language, portrayal of victims and perpetrators, legal or police information, and follow-up reports. These elements help identify the frames used by newspapers in presenting child abuse cases.

The conceptual framework is particularly concerned with whether newspapers portray child abuse as an individual criminal incident or as a wider social and child-protection issue. It also considers whether reporting emphasizes the victim, perpetrator, legal action, social causes, or possible solutions. In addition, ethical aspects such as protection of the child's identity and privacy, avoidance of victim blaming, sensationalism, and unnecessary details are considered important dimensions of the coverage. Thus, the conceptual framework connects the type of newspaper with the frequency, content, framing, ethical treatment, and follow-up coverage of child abuse cases. The comparison between Urdu and English newspapers will help identify similarities and differences in the way child abuse is represented in Pakistani print media

Conceptual relationship of the study:

Dawn (English) / Jang (Urdu)
↓
Frequency and Prominence of Child Abuse Coverage
↓
Characteristics of Reported Cases
(Type of abuse, victim age, victim gender, victim–perpetrator relationship)
↓
Media Presentation and Framing
(Headlines, language, emphasis, victim, perpetrator, police, courts, social issue, prevention and solutions)
↓
Ethical Reporting Practices
(Sensationalism, helpline details, victim identification, perpetrator identification, gender sensitivity, reporting language, victims' photographs)
↓
Follow-up Coverage
(Investigation, arrest, court proceedings, conviction, official/institutional response)
↓
Overall Portrayal of Child Abuse in Pakistani Print Media

The conceptual framework directly corresponds with the objectives of the study. The frequency and prominence components address the objective of determining how frequently child abuse cases are

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reported. The comparison between Urdu and English newspapers addresses the objective of identifying differences in coverage. The framing, content, and follow-up components address the importance and continuing coverage of the issue. Finally, the seven ethical reporting categories provide measurable indicators for assessing whether child sexual abuse cases are reported according to responsible and child-sensitive journalistic practices.

This framework directly supports the objectives of the study by measuring the frequency of child abuse cases, comparing Urdu and English newspaper coverage, examining the importance and follow-up of the issue, and assessing whether ethical guidelines are followed while reporting child sexual abuse cases.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a quantitative comparative content analysis to examine the reporting of child abuse in Pakistani English- and Urdu-language newspapers. Quantitative content analysis was considered appropriate because the study focused on measurable patterns, including the frequency, prominence, framing, and ethical treatment of child abuse coverage. A comparative design enabled systematic comparison of the reporting practices of two newspapers with different linguistic and editorial contexts.

3.2 Sample and Unit of Analysis

The study examined Dawn, an English-language daily, and Jang, an Urdu-language daily, over a six-month period from May to October 2024. The sample consisted of child abuse-related news items published on the main, city, and back pages of the selected newspapers. The individual child abuse case was used as the unit of analysis, allowing each case to be coded separately even when a single article reported multiple cases or when a case received coverage over several days. Cases were included according to the operational definition of child abuse used in the study, covering intentional maltreatment, physical or sexual abuse, exploitation, or other serious harm involving children below 18 years of age.

3.3 Coding and Instrument

Data were collected through a structured content-analysis coding sheet, which served as the main research instrument for systematically recording and classifying the textual and visual elements of child abuse coverage in the selected newspapers. The coding sheet included basic variables such as newspaper name and type, publication date, frequency of coverage, type of abuse, age of the victim, relationship between the victim and perpetrator, headline language, reporting language, and follow-up coverage. These variables enabled the researcher to identify and compare patterns in the reporting practices of Dawn and Jang.

For assessing ethical reporting, the coding categories were developed with reference to UNICEF (2019) guidelines for reporting cases involving children and the ethical principles considered in the study, including guidance associated with the National Children's Advocacy Center. Seven major ethical dimensions were coded: (1) sensationalism, referring to exaggerated or dramatic presentation; (2) helpline details, referring to the inclusion of relevant support information; (3) identification of victims, including names, addresses, photographs, or other identifying details; (4) identification of perpetrators, including identifying information about accused persons; (5) gender-sensitive reporting, examining gender bias or stereotyping; (6) reporting language, assessing whether the vocabulary and tone were respectful and appropriate; and (7) victims' photographs, assessing whether published images compromised the child's privacy or dignity** (UNICEF, 2019).

The coding sheet provided a systematic and replicable procedure for analyzing the two newspapers. Each identified report was reviewed against the operational definition of child abuse and then coded according to the established categories. Where a report contained more than one child abuse case, each case was treated

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separately in accordance with the study's unit of analysis. This structured approach reduced subjective interpretation and allowed consistent comparison of the frequency, framing, and ethical treatment of child abuse coverage across the two newspapers.

3.4 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

The coded data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and distributions, were used to identify patterns in child abuse coverage, while the Chi-square test was applied to determine whether differences between Dawn and Jang were statistically significant. The findings were presented through comparative tables to show differences in coverage and ethical reporting practices. Because the study dealt with a sensitive subject, particular attention was given to privacy, confidentiality, and protection of victims' identities. Identifying information about child victims was not reproduced in the research report, and the collected data were handled confidentially.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the comparative content analysis of child abuse coverage in the Pakistani print media, focusing on the Urdu daily *Jang* and the English daily *Dawn*. The analysis is based on 81 valid news items published between 1 May and 30 October 2024. The coded data were analyzed using IBM SPSS through descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, and inferential tests, including the Pearson chi-square test and independent-samples *t*-test. The results are presented in three sections, beginning with the descriptive characteristics of the sample, followed by findings related to the three research questions. The results are presented through tables and figures for clear comparison and interpretation.

As shown in **Table 1**, Jang (Urdu) accounted for a slightly higher proportion of the sampled news items (53.1%) than Dawn (English), which contributed 46.9% of the total coverage. Regarding the type of child abuse reported, sexual abuse was the most frequently covered category (35.8%), followed by physical abuse (32.1%) and abduction/kidnapping (23.5%). In contrast, psychological abuse received considerably less coverage (4.9%), while awareness-oriented reporting constituted only 3.7% of the sample. Overall, Table 1 indicates that the selected newspapers placed greater emphasis on incident-based forms of child abuse, particularly sexual and physical abuse, whereas psychological abuse and preventive or awareness-oriented reporting received comparatively limited attention.

Table 1 Frequency and Percentage Distribution of News Items by Newspaper and Type of Child Abuse

Variable	Category	*n*	%
Newspaper	Jang (Urdu)	43	53.1
	Dawn (English)	38	46.9
	Total	**81**	**100.0**
Type of Child Abuse	Physical abuse	26	32.1
	Sexual abuse	29	35.8
	Psychological abuse	4	4.9
	Abduction/kidnapping	19	23.5
	Awareness-oriented	3	3.7
	Total	**81**	**100.0**

Note. N = 81. *Percentages are based on the total number of sampled news items.*

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Figure 1 illustrates the monthly distribution of child abuse news items published by *Jang* and *Dawn* between May and October 2024. Coverage was highest in May, with 14 items in *Jang* and 8 in *Dawn*, while the lowest overall coverage occurred in June, with 1 and 4 items, respectively. Coverage increased again in July and August, followed by a moderate rise in October. Overall, the figure shows fluctuations in monthly coverage rather than a consistent trend. The chi-square test further indicated that the differences in publication dates between the two newspapers were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(61, N = 81) = 67.62$, $p = .262$. Thus, the observed monthly differences should be interpreted as descriptive variations rather than statistically significant differences

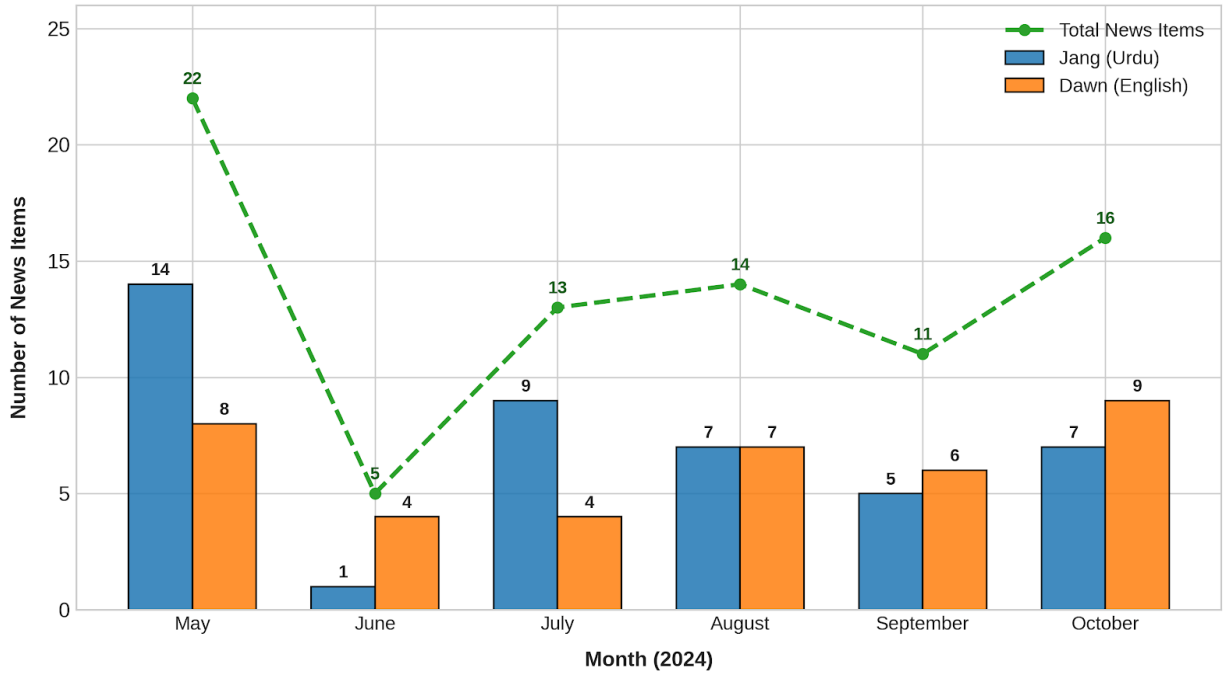

Figure *1*Monthly distribution of news items across both Jang (Urdu) and Dawn (English) throughout May–October 2024

Table 2 presents the cross-tabulation of newspaper category (Jang/Urdu and Dawn/English) with major child abuse reporting characteristics, including type of abuse, sensationalism, reporting language, gender-sensitive reporting, emotional/human-interest framing, and legal/procedural coverage.**Type of abuse** refers to the main form of abuse reported. Sexual abuse was most frequent (29, 35.8%), followed by physical abuse (26, 32.1%) and abduction/kidnapping (19, 23.5%). Jang reported more abduction cases (16), while Dawn reported more sexual-abuse cases (19). The difference was significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 81) = 12.92$, $p = .012$.**Sensationalism** refers to dramatic

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or exaggerated wording. Mild sensationalism was most common (42), followed by highly dramatic wording (35). Although Dawn had more highly dramatic reports (20 vs. 15), the difference was not significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 81) = 2.94$, $p = .230$.**Reporting language** refers to the overall tone of the report. Emotional/sympathetic language appeared in 71 items (87.7%), compared with 10 neutral/factual items. The difference between newspapers was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 2.44$, $p = .118$.**Gender-sensitive reporting** refers to the use of gender-neutral and responsible language. Dawn used gender-neutral language in all 38 items, compared with 18 items in Jang. The difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 31.96$, $p < .001$.**Emotional/human-interest framing** refers to emphasis on victims' families and emotional experiences. It appeared in 68 items (84.0%). The difference between Jang (39) and Dawn (29) was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 3.10$, $p = .078$.**Legal/procedural action** refers to reporting FIRs, arrests, investigations, and court updates. FIRs were most common (34), followed by arrests (24), court updates (17), and investigation progress (6). Jang reported more FIRs (21), while Dawn reported more arrests (18). The difference was significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 81) = 11.17$, $p = .011$.

Table 2 Cross-Tabulation of Newspaper Category by Child Abuse Reporting Characteristics between the newspapers.

Reporting characteristic	Category	Jang (Urdu), *n*	Dawn (English), *n*	Total, *n*	χ^2	*p*
Type of abuse	Physical abuse	12	14	26	**12.92**	**.012**
	Sexual abuse	10	19	29		
	Psychological abuse	3	1	4		
	Abduction/kidnapping	16	3	19		
	Awareness-oriented	2	1	3		
	Total	**43**	**38**	**81**		
Sensationalism	Mild sensational wording	25	17	42	**2.94**	.230
	Highly dramatic/exaggerated	15	20	35		
	Not present	3	1	4		
	Total	**43**	**38**	**81**		
Reporting language	Neutral, factual tone	3	7	10	**2.44**	.118
	Emotional/sympathetic tone	40	31	71		
	Total	**43**	**38**	**81**		
Gender-sensitive code	Gender-neutral language used	18	38	56	**31.96**	**< .001**
	Perpetrator-focused responsibility	25	0	25		
	Total	**43**	**38**	**81**		
Emotional/human-interest angle	Present	39	29	68	**3.10**	.078
	Absent	4	9	13		
	Total	**43**	**38**	**81**		
Legal & procedural action	FIR mentioned	21	13	34	**11.17**	**.011**

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	Arrest mentioned	6	18	24		
	Investigation progress mentioned	4	2	6		
	Court updates mentioned	12	5	17		
	Total	**43**	**38**	**81**		

Note. N = 81. *Values represent frequencies* (n) *of news items.* χ^2 = *Pearson chi-square statistic.* p *values are two-tailed. Bold values indicate statistically significant associations at* $p < .05$.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of child abuse news items by type of abuse. Sexual abuse represented the largest proportion of coverage, with 29 items (35.8%), followed by physical abuse with 26 items (32.1%) and abduction/kidnapping with 19 items (23.5%). Psychological abuse accounted for 4 items (4.9%), while awareness-oriented coverage was the least reported category, with 3 items (3.7%). Overall, the figure indicates that media coverage focused mainly on child sexual abuse and physical abuse, while psychological abuse and awareness-oriented reporting received comparatively limited attention.

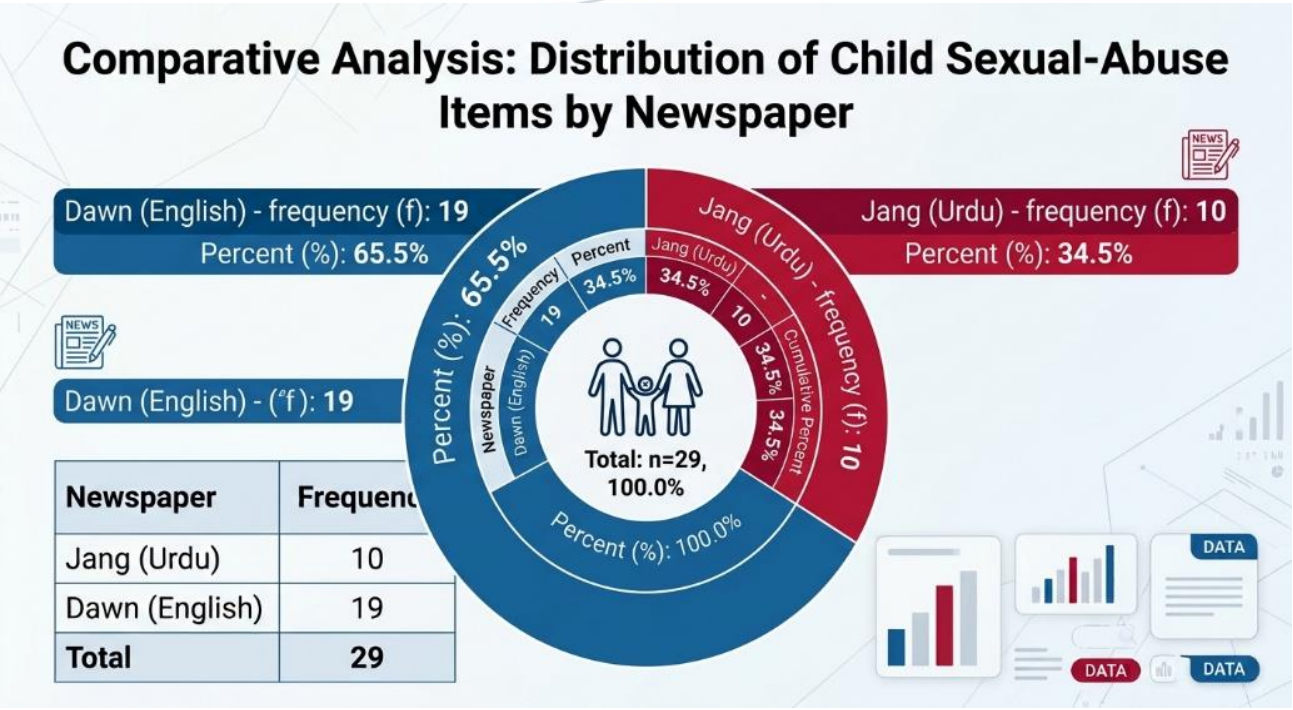

Figure 2 Child Sexual-Abuse Items by Newspaper (N = 29)

Table 3 presents the ethical reporting characteristics of the 29 sexual-abuse news items. **Victim identification**, referring to the disclosure of names or indirect details such as age, school, or address, was found in 25 items, while only 4 items did not identify the victim. **Perpetrator identification**, referring to disclosure through name, occupation, or relationship, was present in 17 items, while 12 items did not identify the perpetrator. **Helpline details**, meaning contact

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information for support or child-protection services, were absent from all 29 items. Similarly, **preventive/awareness information**, referring to safety advice or information about child-protection measures, was not included in any report. **Sensationalism**, measured through dramatic or disturbing wording, was present in all 29 items, with 15 using highly dramatic wording and 14 using mild sensational wording. **Reporting language**, referring to the overall tone of the report, was emotional or sympathetic in 26 items and neutral/factual in only 3 items. Finally, **overall ethical compliance**, which assessed the combined ethical quality of reporting, classified 5 items as mostly ethical, 18 as mixed, and 6 as mostly unethical. Overall, the findings indicate that sexual-abuse reporting in both newspapers had significant ethical limitations, particularly in relation to victim privacy, absence of support information, preventive guidance, and the use of emotional and sensational language. No victim or perpetrator photographs were published in any of the sexual-abuse items.

Table 3 Ethical Reporting Characteristics of Sexual-Abuse News Items by Newspaper

Reporting Variable	Category	Jang (Urdu)	Dawn (English)
Victim identification	Name revealed	1	1
	Age/school/address revealed	6	17
	Not identified	3	1
Perpetrator identification	Identified (name/occupation/relation)	8	9
	Not named/unidentified	2	10
Helpline details	Present	0	0
	Absent	10	19
Preventive/awareness information	Present	0	0
	Absent	10	19
Sensationalism	Mild sensational wording	5	9
	Highly dramatic/disturbing wording	5	10
Reporting language	Emotional/sympathetic tone	10	16
	Neutral/factual tone	0	3
Overall ethical compliance	Mostly ethical	0	5
	Mixed	6	12
	Mostly unethical	4	2

Note. *N = 29 sexual-abuse news items. Values represent frequencies* (n)*. Jang = Urdu-language daily; Dawn = English-language daily. No victim or perpetrator photographs were published in the sexual-abuse items. No helpline or preventive/awareness information was reported in either newspaper.*

Article length was measured by the total number of words in each news item. As shown in **Table 4**, Jang published slightly longer articles ($M = 48.47$, $SD = 18.71$) than Dawn ($M = 45.55$, $SD = 14.08$). However, the difference was not statistically significant, $t(77.14) = 0.80$, $p = .428$. Thus, both newspapers devoted a broadly similar amount of textual space to child abuse coverage.

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Table 4 Independent-Samples t-Test for Article Length by Newspaper

Newspaper	*n*	*M* (words)	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Jang (Urdu)	43	48.47	18.71	0.80	77.14	.428
Dawn (English)	38	45.55	14.08	—	—	—

Note. *N = 81. Article length was measured by word count. Levene's test indicated unequal variances (F = 4.006, p = .049); therefore, the unequal-variances-not-assumed result is reported.*

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that child-abuse reporting in *Jang* and *Dawn* was characterized by an incident-based approach, emotional framing, and uneven adherence to ethical reporting principles. Although both newspapers covered child abuse during the six-month period, the patterns of coverage suggest that the issue was generally presented through individual incidents rather than as a broader social, institutional, and child-protection concern. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that media coverage of child abuse in Pakistan tends to provide limited representation of the actual scale and complexity of the problem (Avais, 2020).

Regarding the first research question, the study found 81 child-abuse news items, with 43 published in *Jang* and 38 in *Dawn*. Sexual abuse was the most frequently reported category (29 items), followed by physical abuse (26) and abduction/kidnapping (19). However, the distribution differed significantly between the newspapers, $\chi^2(4, N = 81) = 12.92$, $p = .012$. *Jang* reported considerably more abduction/kidnapping cases, whereas *Dawn* reported more sexual-abuse cases. Psychological abuse was particularly underrepresented, with only four items overall. This finding is important because it suggests that the newspapers do not provide a comprehensive picture of child abuse. Instead, the visibility of particular forms of abuse depends partly on the newspaper.

The limited attention to psychological abuse is consistent with earlier child-protection literature, which identifies psychological and emotional abuse as comparatively less visible and more difficult to detect and report (Mehnaz, 2013; Herrenkohl, 2005). The findings therefore suggest that Pakistani print media may reproduce the wider invisibility of less visible forms of abuse by concentrating on incidents that have a clear crime event, police action, or immediate news value. In contrast, sexual abuse and physical violence are more easily framed as newsworthy incidents because they usually involve identifiable events, victims, accused persons, and police action.

The findings further show that coverage was not evenly distributed across the study period. Monthly reporting fluctuated considerably, indicating an episodic rather than continuous pattern. The date-by-newspaper analysis was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(61, N = 81) = 67.62$, $p = .262$. Similarly, article length did not differ significantly between the newspapers, $t(77.14) = 0.80$, $p = .428$. These findings support the argument that the two newspapers generally devoted similar amounts of space to individual cases while responding to particular incidents rather than maintaining sustained coverage of child abuse.

This episodic pattern is significant from a media-framing perspective. Framing theory suggests that the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of an issue influence how audiences understand social problems (Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele &

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Tewksbury, 2007). When child abuse is predominantly reported as isolated criminal incidents, audiences may perceive it as a collection of individual events rather than as a continuing structural problem requiring prevention, institutional reform, and public intervention. The absence of sustained follow-up reporting strengthens this tendency.

The second major finding concerns the ethical character of the coverage. Sensationalism was widespread across both newspapers: 42 items contained mild sensational wording and 35 contained highly dramatic or exaggerated wording, while only four contained no sensational elements. However, the relationship between newspaper category and sensationalism was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 81) = 2.94$, $p = .230$. Similarly, emotional or sympathetic language appeared in 71 of the 81 items (87.7%), and the difference between *Jang* and *Dawn* was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 2.44$, $p = .118$.

These findings challenge the assumption that sensational or emotional reporting is primarily associated with Urdu-language newspapers. Instead, the results indicate that both language categories relied substantially on emotional framing. The human-interest angle was also present in 68 items (84.0%), with no statistically significant difference between the newspapers, $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 3.10$, $p = .078$. The widespread use of emotional and human-interest framing may increase audience attention, but in child-abuse reporting it can also shift attention away from prevention, institutional responsibility, and the rights and dignity of the child.

A particularly important difference emerged in gender-sensitive reporting. The association between newspaper category and gender-sensitive reporting was highly significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 31.96$, $p < .001$. All 38 *Dawn* items used gender-neutral language, whereas *Jang* used gender-neutral language in 18 items and perpetrator-focused responsibility in 25 items. This finding suggests that the two newspapers differed substantially in their language practices. It may reflect differences in newsroom conventions, editorial policies, professional training, or audience expectations. The finding is also relevant to ethical reporting guidelines that emphasize respectful and non-stigmatizing language when reporting violence against children (UNICEF, 2019).

The significant difference in gender-sensitive reporting should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that *Dawn* was completely ethical. The sexual-abuse findings demonstrate that ethical compliance involved several dimensions beyond language. In the 29 sexual-abuse items, indirect victim identification was particularly common. Twenty-three reports disclosed information such as the victim's age, school, grade, or locality, while only four reports left the victim genuinely unidentifiable. Although only two reports revealed the victim's name and no victim photographs were published, indirect identifiers can still make a child recognizable within a local community. Thus, the findings support the broader ethical principle that protecting a child requires preventing indirect as well as direct identification.

The sexual-abuse findings also reveal an important difference between the two newspapers in perpetrator identification. The alleged perpetrator was identified through name, occupation, or relationship in 17 of the 29 items. This occurred in eight of *Jang*'s ten items and nine of *Dawn*'s 19 items. While identifying an accused person may sometimes serve public-interest purposes, such identification requires caution when proceedings are still ongoing. It may also indirectly reveal the identity of the child when the accused is a family member, teacher, neighbour, or other person closely connected with the victim. Therefore, responsible reporting requires a balance between public accountability and the protection of the child.

The absence of support and prevention information represents another major weakness. None of the 29 sexual-abuse reports included helpline or child-protection contact information, and none provided preventive or awareness information. This finding suggests that the newspapers primarily treated sexual abuse as a

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crime-reporting issue rather than an opportunity for public education and prevention. The lack of such information is particularly significant in the Pakistani context, where media coverage can potentially connect families and communities with available child-protection resources.

The findings regarding legal and procedural reporting further support the incident-based nature of coverage. FIR registration was the most frequently reported legal action, followed by arrests and court updates. The relationship between newspaper category and legal/procedural action was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 81) = 11.17$, $p = .011$. *Jang* placed greater emphasis on FIR registration, whereas *Dawn* reported arrests more frequently. However, neither newspaper consistently followed cases through later investigation, prosecution, or final court outcomes. This suggests that news value was concentrated around the initial stages of a case rather than its longer-term resolution.

This pattern is particularly important because previous literature has identified weaknesses and discontinuities within Pakistan's child-protection and legal-response systems (Pulla et al., 2018). When media coverage stops at the FIR or arrest stage, it provides little information about whether justice was ultimately achieved or whether institutional mechanisms protected the child. Follow-up journalism could therefore play an important accountability role by examining investigation progress, prosecution, court decisions, and institutional responses.

The comparison with national child-abuse statistics also illustrates the limited visibility of the problem in the sampled newspapers. Sahil's *Cruel Numbers* reports document a much larger number of child-abuse cases in Pakistan than the number appearing in the two newspapers. This difference should be interpreted cautiously because the national statistics and newspaper sample do not cover identical populations or periods, and newspapers cannot be expected to report every registered case. Nevertheless, the substantial gap supports the argument that newspaper coverage represents only a small and selective portion of the documented child-abuse problem. This finding is consistent with Avais (2020), who reported that Pakistani media coverage of child sexual abuse does not adequately reflect the scale of recorded cases.

Overall, the findings suggest that neither newspaper can be described simply as more or less ethical across all dimensions. *Dawn* performed more consistently in gender-neutral language, while *Jang* and *Dawn* showed similar levels of sensationalism, emotional framing, and human-interest reporting. In sexual-abuse coverage, both newspapers demonstrated ethical weaknesses, although the form of the weakness differed: *Jang* more frequently identified alleged perpetrators, while *Dawn* more frequently disclosed indirect information that could identify victims. The findings therefore point towards a broader need for child-sensitive reporting practices across both Urdu- and English-language journalism rather than focusing ethical reform on only one newspaper or language category.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that child abuse reporting in *Jang* and *Dawn* was largely incident-based, emotionally framed, and only partially compliant with ethical reporting principles. Although differences existed in abuse type, gender-sensitive language, and legal emphasis, both newspapers showed weaknesses in victim protection, preventive information, and follow-up reporting. The sexual-abuse findings particularly highlight the need for stronger protection of child identity and dignity. Overall, Pakistani print media should move towards more ethical, child-sensitive, preventive, and socially responsible reporting.

7. Preventive Measures and Recommendations for Media Practice

Based on the findings, the following measures are recommended to improve child-abuse reporting in Pakistani newspapers:

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- ✓ **Protect victim identity:** Newspapers should avoid both direct and indirect identifiers, including names, photographs, schools, addresses, localities, and family details that may reveal a child victim.
- ✓ **Use child-sensitive language:** Reporters should use neutral, gender-sensitive, and non-stigmatizing language and avoid victim-blaming or unnecessarily graphic descriptions.
- ✓ **Reduce sensationalism:** Headlines and reports should avoid exaggerated, dramatic, and emotionally exploitative language, particularly when reporting sexual-abuse cases.
- ✓ **Provide preventive and support information:** Reports should include verified helplines, child-protection services, legal assistance, and relevant guidance for victims, families, and the public where appropriate.
- ✓ **Strengthen follow-up reporting:** Newspapers should follow cases beyond FIR registration and arrest by reporting investigation, prosecution, court proceedings, and final outcomes.
- ✓ **Increase awareness and context:** Individual incidents should be connected with information on child protection, prevention, relevant laws, prevalence, and institutional responses.
- ✓ **Strengthen newsroom training and policies:** Media organizations should provide regular training on child-abuse reporting and establish clear written guidelines covering victim privacy, gender sensitivity, sensationalism, and the identification of accused persons.
- ✓ **Improve editorial attention:** Child-abuse issues should receive appropriate and responsible prominence and should not be treated only as routine crime stories.
- ✓ These measures can help Pakistani print media move from predominantly incident-based and sensational reporting towards ethical, preventive, and socially responsible journalism that prioritizes the safety, dignity, and rights of children.

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