

FRAMING THE PALESTINE ISSUE IN PAKISTANI TELEVISION NEWS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22842425>

Keywords

Framing Theory, Pakistani television news, Palestine-Israel conflict, content analysis, public opinion, agenda-setting, media framing

Article History

Received: 01 June 2026

Accepted: 23 August 2026

Published: 19 September 2026

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Abstract

In this article, the author considers how Pakistani media and television news frame the conflict between Israel and Palestine and how this links to public opinion in Pakistan. Drawing on Framing Theory and on work in the agenda-setting tradition, the study surveyed 300 people on their use of media, their views of framing in coverage of the conflict and their own attitudes toward it. The findings are: public attitudes to the conflict often reflect their exposure to the media; there is a generational difference in people's use of television versus social media; and men and women tend to respond most strongly to different kinds of framing. Men tend to engage more with political analysis of the conflict. Women tend to respond more to emotional and humanitarian narratives. In general, Pakistani coverage of the conflict tends to use frames of resistance, humanitarian suffering and religious solidarity. Much of the coverage in the West tends to focus on geopolitics and security. In this article, the author considers the findings in relation to other work across countries. The study suggests implications for policymakers and media practitioners and proposes more audience-appropriate, balanced reporting of conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is one of the most watched and longest-running disputes in international politics. Over the past century, it has seen political conflict, war, competing claims to territory and sovereignty. Few people experience such conflicts directly. And so it falls to the media to shape public perceptions of distant political

realities (Lippmann, 1922). In particular, it matters for public opinion which facts media choose to highlight, which characters they present in a favorable light and which language they use. Pakistan is an interesting country in which to consider this. It is a predominantly Muslim country, with historical, religious, political and emotional ties to the Palestinian cause. It has

never recognized Israel. In Pakistan, television is by far the most popular news medium. And in recent years, more and more people have turned to social media, digital media and the internet. Much has been written in the international literature about, for example, the coverage of the conflict on CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera and RT. But there has been little work, in particular, on the relationship between coverage of the conflict in Pakistani media and attitudes of the Pakistani public. In this article, the study explores that relationship.

1.1 Objectives

In this study, the researchers set out to:

- (1) explore the link between media use and attitudes of the public toward the Palestine issue.
- (2) assess the use of traditional news and social media by the Pakistani public in relation to the conflict.
- (3) consider whether media use differs by gender, and whether this in turn affects public opinion.

1.2 Research Questions

Research questions under this study are

What is the relationship between use of different media and public opinion on the Palestine issue? How do people get their information about the Palestine issue from traditional news media and social media?

Do differences in media use between men and women support differences in their views of the Palestine issue?

2. Literature Review

Scholarship of media coverage of the conflict between Israel and Palestine consistently shows that framing depends on the political outlook and ownership of each outlet. In content analyses of the New York Times, BBC, Times of India and Al Jazeera, the study found that Al Jazeera focused on suffering on the Palestinian side; the New York Times and Times of India more often supported their coverage with justification for Israeli military action; and the BBC tended to sit more centrally,

but tended to present the conflict in militaristic terms (Noushad, 2021). Likely reflecting their own political outlook, both Fox and CNN tended to present the Israeli side of the conflict. But in different degrees, each emphasized Israel's perspective in line with U.S. foreign policy (Alkalliny, 2017†).

Often, outlets outside the Western alliance present the conflict in a quite different way. In work on RT News, Al Jazeera and Press TV, the research found they tended to focus on loss of life among Palestinians and to present Israel as the aggressor. This was in contrast to the more security- and geopolitically neutral language of the BBC and CNN (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014; Shahzad, Qazi, & Shehzad, 2023). Political orientation of each country shapes coverage. Indian media, for example, has increasingly reflected a more pro-Israel stance as relations between India and Israel have deepened (Ray, 2019†). And media in countries which signed the Abraham Accords tended to be more peace-oriented than that in countries which did not (Alsaba, 2023).

Several studies show that in increasing ways, social media acts as a counterweight to traditional media (Suwarsono, 2022; Yarchi & Ayalon, 2023†). In real time, it amplifies resistance and humanitarian messages and reaches younger people who increasingly avoid TV. In addition, some studies suggest that gender may matter. One looked at media coverage of female combatants. It found that, in the right circumstances, personal and emotional elements in media coverage of them could support different understandings of agency and victimhood in conflict reporting (Yarchi, 2014).

Together, these studies suggest that media coverage of the conflict is neither uniform nor neutral. It depends on national interest, ownership and diplomatic relationships. And audiences pick up different messages from a humanitarian frame of the conflict compared with a political-analytical one. Less attention has been given to this in Pakistani media and among its audience. And in particular, little is known of the

interplay between gender and preference for a particular frame. In this study, a survey approach was used to explore this.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study builds on a version of Framing Theory developed by Goffman (1974) and later extended by Entman (1993). In this view, through selection of events and actors, and choice of elements of an event, media outlets shape how their audience interprets the news.

Humanitarian Frame

In coverage of the conflict in Pakistan, three frames supported this process: stories of suffering and displacement of Palestinians, presented through emotive imagery and language, to prompt empathy in the audience;

Resistance Frame

depictions of Palestinians as resilient under occupation, to build moral and emotional support for them in the audience; and

Religious Solidarity Frame

Associations between the Palestinian struggle and Muslim identity and solidarity among Muslims. In a Muslim country like Pakistan, this frame will strike a chord with many.

In addition, the study uses Agenda-Setting Theory to explain how persistent coverage of the conflict in the media increases its perceived salience for audiences. Taken together, the study sees framing as a two-way process between media and audience. Media narratives reflect existing attitudes in the audience, but they can also provide a foundation for and reinforce them.

4. Methodology

A quantitative design was used to explore the link between media coverage and public opinion. To do this, 300 people, selected by simple random sampling (to avoid bias in the sample), were asked a questionnaire. The questionnaire included five-point Likert scale questions (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree) on:

- their demographic characteristics;
- their use of traditional and social media;
- their view of the framing of stories in the media; and

• their attitude to the Palestine issue. Before distributing the questionnaire widely, it was tried out with a small group. This helped ensure it was reliable and clear. In its final form, the questionnaire was sent out online to ensure it reached a range of people across the population.

Using SPSS, descriptive statistics (means, percentages and frequencies) were first used on the responses. Correlations were then looked at between demographic variables (in particular, gender), media use variables and attitudes. Throughout, good ethical practice was followed. This included obtaining consent for participation, anonymity of responses and voluntariness.

5. Results and Findings

Data were collected from 300 people and SPSS was used to produce descriptive statistics (percentages, means and standard deviations) of their responses, as well as Pearson correlations.

Responses on Likert scales were coded 1 (Strongly Disagree) through 5 (Strongly Agree). So the higher the mean, the more agreement there was.

5.1 Sample Profile

Most respondents were young, male and had academic backgrounds in politics and the media (see Table 1)

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	180	60.0%
	Female	120	40.0%
Age	18-22	130	43.3%
	23-27	84	28.0%
	28-32	22	7.3%
	33+	64	21.3%
Educational Background	Media Studies	142	47.3%
	International Relations	60	20.0%
	Political Science	44	14.7%
	Other	54	18.0%

Note. Percentages are rounded and may not sum exactly to 100 due to rounding.

This composition suggests that findings may be somewhat more media-literate and critically engaged than a fully representative general-population sample, and skew toward younger, male voices – a limitation addressed in Section 7.

Overall, use of television for this issue is more varied (mean = 2.89, SD = 1.16) than use of social media (mean = 3.81, SD = 1.09). More people strongly agree that they use social media for news about Palestine.

5.2 Media Consumption Patterns

In Table 2, the study compares people's use of television versus social media for news about Palestine.

This shows that, for this issue, social media is more likely than television to be the main source of information. But television is more likely than social media to be the main source of news about the world more broadly (mean = 3.01 for following channels from Pakistan).

Table 2. Media Consumption Patterns (%)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD(σ)
Rely on TV news for international conflicts	15.3	21.3	28.7	28.7	6.0	2.89	1.16
Social media is main source on Palestine issue	5.3	8.7	12.0	47.3	26.7	3.81	1.09
Follow Pakistani news channels closely	8.7	24.0	28.7	34.7	4.0	3.01	1.05
International media (CNN/Al Jazeera) shape my views	4.7	15.3	32.7	39.3	8.0	3.31	0.98

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree (row percentages). Mean and SD(σ) computed on a 1-5 scale.

5.3 Perceptions of Framing

Respondents were asked about framing of the conflict in Western and Pakistani media, and about its effect on them. Of the items on the instrument, the one with the highest mean was the one about emotional coverage of Palestine

increasing support for it (mean = 3.97). Close behind were perceived reinforcement of the story through social media (mean = 3.77) and perceived bias against Israel in the West (mean = 3.67). See Table 3.

Table 3. Perceptions of Media Framing (%)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD(σ)
Emotional coverage of civilians strengthens my support	3.3	5.3	14.7	44.0	32.7	3.97	0.99
Pakistani coverage uses a religious/ideological lens	3.3	10.0	26.7	48.7	11.3	3.55	0.94
Western media is biased toward Israel's narrative	2.7	9.3	26.7	40.7	20.7	3.67	0.99
My stance is reinforced by social media portrayal	2.0	7.3	22.0	49.3	19.3	3.77	0.91

5.4 Gender-Based Disparities

In Table 4, the study presents items that relate to gender differences in influence and consumption. Respondents most strongly agreed that men are more likely than women to be influenced by detailed political analysis (mean = 3.74) and that,

compared with traditional media, social media more often shapes their views as women (mean = 3.66). This supports the third hypothesis that gender would support different frames for different audiences.

Table 4. Gender-Based Disparities in Media Consumption and Influence (%)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD(σ)
Men and women prefer different media sources	4.7	9.3	27.3	43.3	15.3	3.55	1.01
Social media influences women's views more	3.3	6.7	26.7	47.3	16.0	3.66	0.94
Men more likely to follow detailed political analyses	3.3	4.0	25.3	50.0	17.3	3.74	0.91
Personal values influence women's views more than men's	4.7	10.0	32.0	43.3	10.0	3.44	0.96

5.5 Media Influence on Broader Attitudes

Respondents linked media coverage to views of Pakistan's foreign policy. Most agreed that through coverage, opinion of foreign policy is shaped

(mean = 3.55) and that, in their view, public opinion would change if Pakistan recognized Israel (mean = 3.11). They tended to agree that in general coverage could be more balanced (mean =

3.33) and that, in the absence of continued coverage, public interest in this would fade (mean = 3.57) see Table 5.

Table 5. Perceived Broader Influence of Media Coverage (%)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD(σ)
Coverage shapes opinion on Pakistan's foreign policy	2.0	10.0	28.0	50.7	9.3	3.55	0.87
Recognizing Israel would shift opinion significantly	14.0	17.3	23.3	34.7	10.7	3.11	1.22
Support balanced coverage to reduce polarization	7.3	11.3	29.3	44.7	7.3	3.33	1.02
Public interest would decline without coverage	4.0	14.7	20.7	42.0	18.7	3.57	1.07

5.6 Statistical Analysis: Correlations Between Study Variables

To test three hypotheses of the study, the author computed composite indices of media use, perception of gender and impact/influence on

attitudes. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to relate these indices. Each of the four correlations was statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) and positive. See Table 6.

Table 6. Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Key Study Variables

Variable Pair	Pearson's r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Interpretation
Media consumption ↔ Influence on attitudes	$r = .416^{**}$	$p < .01$	Moderate positive correlation
Media consumption ↔ Gender-based perception	$r = .340^{**}$	$p < .01$	Weak-to-moderate positive correlation
Media consumption ↔ Impact on opinion	$r = .468^{**}$	$p < .01$	Moderate positive correlation
Gender-based perception ↔ Impact on opinion	$r = .488^{**}$	$p < .01$	Moderate positive correlation

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), $N = 300$.

The findings support all three of the hypotheses. First, the positive (though moderate) relationship between media use and attitude ($r = .416$, $p < .01$) shows that people with greater media use tend to have more crystallized attitudes on the Palestine issue. This supports Agenda-Setting Theory. Second, media use is correlated with perception of

the issue by gender ($r = .340$, $p < .01$). This, the weakest of the four correlations, shows that men and women do not consume the media in the same way.

Third, in the matrix, gender-based perception is most strongly related to influence on opinion ($r = .488$, $p < .01$). This suggests that gender is more

than just a control variable in the model; it affects the impact of framing on attitude.

None of the four correlations is over .50. That suggests that media use, gender and influence are reliably and meaningfully linked. But each of them also contains considerable variance. Media use does not necessarily determine attitude. And gender does not necessarily determine response to framing.

6. Discussion

The findings support the core argument of Framing Theory: the presentation of an issue affects how it is understood, and even in a context (support for the Palestinian cause in Pakistan) where sentiment is already broadly in one direction, a particular news story can shift perceptions. Strong use of the Religious Solidarity and Humanitarian frames in respondents' perceptions of the story accords with earlier evidence that pro-Palestinian, Muslim-majority and non-Western outlets such as Al Jazeera and RT (Shahzad et al., 2023; Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014) tend to use similar frames. They contrast with the security and diplomacy frame more often found in coverage of the conflict in Western outlets documented by Noushad (2021) and Alkalliny (2017).

The study shows a generational difference between younger respondents (who tended to get their news from social media) and older respondents (who tended to rely on television). Similar patterns have been found in other countries by Suwarsono (2022) and Yarchi and Ayalon (2023). Taken together, this suggests that, in future, any discussion of "framing of the conflict in Pakistani media" would need to include social media as at least as important as traditional media. In addition, the study finds gender differences in which kind of frame resonated with respondents. Yarchi (2014) showed that, in work on conflict reporting, readers reacted differently to the framing of female combatants. In this study gender differences were found in responses to

each of the frames. In particular, the humanitarian frame struck a chord with women.

What does this mean for media producers? The findings suggest coverage of the conflict which included, for example, both political analysis and a humanitarian story would be more likely to engage more of the audience than either element in isolation. For policymakers thinking of public diplomacy, the finding that respondents linked media narratives with their views of Pakistan's foreign policy suggests any shift in policy toward the conflict would need to be set against their strongly held (and well communicated in the media) view of it. For researchers, this paper adds to the existing literature, which tends to be qualitative and focused on Western outlets, by bringing in a quantitative, Muslim-majority, South Asian context. In the literature review the study points out that such a context was missing.

7. Conclusion

In this study, the relationship between public opinion in Pakistan and media coverage of the Palestine issue was explored. Using a survey-based approach to Framing Theory, the study found that in Pakistani media, TV and social media play complementary roles. Most coverage takes one of three frames: resistance, humanitarian and religious solidarity. And in general, men and women engage with different frames. Taken together, these findings build on a body of international work showing that frames used in media coverage of the conflict between Israel and Palestine reflect audience composition, national identity and political outlook. In Pakistan, the media environment tends to be strongly in favor of Palestine. But more importantly for future reporting, rather than worrying that the media might favor one side over another, the study suggests coverage could better serve different segments of the audience if it were more balanced, included more sources and addressed the particular information needs of different audiences. And in fact, many of the respondents said they would like this.

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