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**Visionary Discourse in Leadership: Analyzing Imran Khan's
International Media Interviews Through Linguistic Benchmarks
of Vision Communication**



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Abstract

Leadership communication, particularly visionary discourse, is crucial for articulating aspirational goals and mobilizing collective action. This study examines the international media interviews of Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, to evaluate his effectiveness in communicating a transformative vision for Pakistan on a global stage. Using Martin's (2011) framework, which emphasizes clarity, vivid imagery, emotional resonance, and motivational language, the research analyzes three interviews with leading outlets such as BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera. The findings reveal Khan's strengths in inspiring hope and evoking emotion but highlight limitations in strategic clarity and prioritization, particularly in addressing complex challenges. By employing a discourse-analytical approach, this study contributes to the underexplored domain of visionary leadership in the Global South and underscores the significance of rhetorical strategies in shaping global perceptions of emerging economies. The research offers valuable insights for leaders seeking to balance aspirational rhetoric with actionable solutions in a globalized context.

Introduction

Leadership is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct, encompassing not only the ability to set strategic goals but also the capability to inspire and mobilize others toward achieving a shared vision. Within this framework, the role of visionary discourse has emerged as a critical area of academic inquiry. Visionary discourse refers to the rhetorical strategies leaders use to articulate aspirational goals, establish a sense of collective purpose, and motivate audiences across diverse sociopolitical contexts. While extensive research has been conducted on vision communication in corporate and organizational leadership, its application to political leaders—especially from the Global South—remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining the international media interviews of Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, through the lens of Martin's (2011) framework for effective vision communication.

Visionary discourse, as defined by Martin (2011), relies on key linguistic and rhetorical features to effectively communicate a leader's goals. These features include

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

clarity, which ensures comprehensibility; vivid imagery, which helps audiences envision future possibilities; emotional resonance, which connects with audiences on an affective level; and motivational language, which inspires action and fosters hope. Together, these elements constitute a comprehensive approach to communicating vision. A leader who successfully integrates these features can transcend transactional rhetoric, instead engaging audiences with a transformational message that motivates collective action. Martin's benchmark framework has been validated in various contexts, including organizational leadership and political speeches, making it a robust tool for this study's analysis.

Imran Khan's tenure as Prime Minister (2018–2022) provides a compelling case study for analyzing visionary discourse. A former cricket captain and philanthropist, Khan's political identity was constructed around themes of reform, accountability, and national renewal. His campaign for a "New Pakistan" emphasized socioeconomic justice, anti-corruption measures, and sustainable development, which he framed as a transformative vision for the country. During his time in office, Khan frequently engaged with international media to articulate his policies and aspirations for Pakistan. These interviews serve as a critical medium for assessing his ability to effectively communicate his vision to a global audience, encompassing diverse stakeholders with varied cultural, political, and economic perspectives (Martin, 2011; Fairclough, 1992).

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed by Imran Khan in three international media interviews during his tenure. Using Martin's (2011) framework as an analytical lens, the study examines how Khan's discourse aligns with the benchmarks of effective vision communication. Specifically, the research investigates whether his rhetoric demonstrated clarity, vividness, emotional appeal, and motivational strength. Additionally, the study explores the extent to which Khan's visionary discourse resonated with international audiences and positioned Pakistan on the global stage.

The focus on international media interviews is deliberate, as these interactions demand a heightened level of rhetorical dexterity. Unlike domestic speeches, which often target a relatively homogenous audience, international interviews require leaders to navigate complex cultural and geopolitical landscapes. For Imran Khan, these

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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interviews represented an opportunity to project his vision beyond Pakistan's borders, influencing foreign perceptions and fostering international partnerships. By analyzing these high-stakes communications, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the intersection of leadership communication and global diplomacy (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Conger, 1991).

This research holds significance for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by applying the principles of visionary discourse to the political leadership of South Asia, an underrepresented region in academic studies on leadership communication. Second, it highlights the role of linguistic and rhetorical strategies in shaping global perceptions of emerging economies and their leaders. Finally, the findings of this study have practical implications for political leaders seeking to enhance their communication effectiveness in a globalized world.

The study draws on a qualitative analysis of three interviews conducted by Imran Khan with leading international media outlets, including *BBC*, *CNN*, and *Al Jazeera*. Each interview is analyzed for the presence and efficacy of the linguistic features identified in Martin's (2011) framework. The research employs a discourse-analytical approach, allowing for a nuanced examination of how Khan's language choices reflect his vision and resonate with his audiences (Fairclough, 1992; Yukl, 2010).

This paper aims to contribute to the scholarly understanding of vision communication in political leadership by providing an in-depth analysis of Imran Khan's international media discourse. By situating this analysis within the context of Martin's benchmark framework, the study not only evaluates the effectiveness of Khan's vision communication but also offers broader insights into the role of rhetoric in shaping leadership perceptions. This research underscores the importance of visionary discourse as a tool for political leaders to inspire, unify, and influence audiences on both domestic and international fronts.

Literature Review

The themes of vision, visionary leadership, and linguistic analysis in discourse are interconnected concepts that shape organizational dynamics and influence leadership effectiveness. Vision serves as a guiding star for organizations, while visionary leadership is the practice of articulating and operationalizing that vision. Linguistic

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

analysis in discourse examines how language constructs and communicates these visions, revealing the underlying power dynamics and social contexts that influence leadership discourse. Vision in an organizational context refers to the aspirational goals that guide decision-making and strategic planning. It encompasses a clear understanding of the desired future state of the organization, which motivates employees to align their efforts towards common objectives (Elin Klingberg et al., 2022). A well-defined vision not only clarifies the direction of the organization but also enhances employee engagement by providing a sense of purpose (Nordberg et al., 2022).

An effective vision is characterized by clarity, relevance, and emotional appeal. Clarity ensures that all stakeholders understand the vision, while relevance connects the vision to the organization's core values and mission (Elin Klingberg et al., 2022). Emotional appeal fosters a sense of belonging and commitment among employees, encouraging them to take ownership of their roles in achieving the vision. Visionary leadership is defined as the ability of leaders to create a compelling vision for their organization and communicate it effectively to inspire followers (How & When Does Visionary Leadership Promote Followers..., 2022). This type of leadership is crucial in navigating complex environments where adaptability and innovation are essential for success. Visionary leaders possess unique traits that allow them to articulate a shared vision among stakeholders. They act as role models, embodying the values and aspirations they promote (Nordberg et al., 2022). By fostering an inclusive environment where employees feel empowered to contribute to the vision, these leaders enhance organizational culture and performance.

Communication as a Tool for Visionary Leadership

Effective communication is central to visionary leadership. Leaders must not only articulate their vision clearly but also engage in active listening to understand their followers' perspectives (How & When Does Visionary Leadership Promote Followers..., 2022). This two-way communication builds trust and encourages collaboration, ultimately leading to higher levels of employee motivation and creativity. Visionary discourse refers to the language and communication strategies employed by leaders to convey their vision. This discourse shapes how followers perceive the vision and their roles within it. Linguistic analysis plays a critical role in

understanding how leaders construct meaning through language and how this influences organizational dynamics.

Discourse analysis examines language as a social construct that reflects and shapes reality (Alek & Nguyen, 2023). It highlights how language can reinforce power dynamics and ideologies within organizations. By analyzing leadership discourse, researchers can uncover how leaders use language to frame their visions, negotiate identities, and influence organizational culture (Alek & Nguyen, 2023; Nordberg et al., 2022). The power dynamics inherent in leadership discourse are critical for understanding how visions are received by followers. Language can either empower or marginalize individuals within an organization, depending on how inclusive or exclusive it is (Alek & Nguyen, 2023). By employing critical discourse analysis, researchers can identify patterns that reveal underlying biases or assumptions within leadership communication.

Benchmark Features of Vision

In her dissertation "Communicating Vision: A Linguistic Analysis of Leadership Speeches," Martin (2011) identifies several benchmark features essential for effectively communicating a vision. A vision must include a challenge or goal that inspires followers to strive toward a worthwhile target. Nanus (1990) emphasized the need for leaders to incorporate long-term objectives to direct collective energy. Quigley (1994) explained that a challenge fosters competition for attention and engagement, providing a roadmap to achieve desirable outcomes. The concept of "big, hairy, audacious goals" (BHAG) by Collins and Porras (1991, 1996) underscores that bold, unifying goals are critical for igniting passion and sustained effort. However, these goals must balance audacity with achievability (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Effective visions act as a roadmap toward a positive future destination. Toffler, Toffler, and Gibson (1998) likened a vision to a compass guiding organizations through uncertainty. Lansberg (2003) and Blanchard and Carey (2006) noted that visions should present an aspirational image of what an organization can become. Senge (1990) advocated for positive visions that challenge individuals to grow, rather than focusing on avoiding undesirable outcomes. Collins and Porras (1991) identified shared values as central to a vision's guiding philosophy. These values provide a moral and motivational compass that unifies followers. Kolzow (1999) emphasized

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

the importance of aligning visions with deeply ingrained, pervasive values that influence behavior and decision-making. Critics like Collins (2006) argued that visions should focus less on drafting new values and more on aligning with preexisting core values.

An effective vision resonates emotionally with followers, reflecting their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Kouzes and Posner (2006, 2007) stressed the importance of leaders speaking in inclusive terms (e.g., “we” instead of “I”) to create a sense of shared purpose. Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993) argued that engaging followers’ self-concepts fosters a transition from individualistic motivations to collective interests. Similarly, Willner (1984) highlighted the role of figurative language in creating an emotional connection with audiences. Visions should also connect the past, present, and future to provide continuity and inspire confidence. Peters (1987) and Bell (2007) advocated for grounding visions in historical and present realities while projecting a clear, attainable future. Yukl (2002) echoed the importance of a vision rooted in current circumstances but focused on long-term possibilities.

Beside this, Imagery enhances a vision’s clarity and emotional resonance, enabling followers to visualize a desirable future. Nanus (1990) highlighted the brain’s capacity to translate vivid mental images into actionable goals. Collins and Porras (1991) and Kouzes and Posner (1995) emphasized the role of vibrant, specific descriptions in inspiring and guiding followers. Leaders must offer actionable steps for achieving the vision. Allen (2006) and Walesh (2008) stressed that effective visions require plans with specific actions, timelines, and roles. Without these details, visions risk being dismissed as impractical or unattainable. Kotter (1995, 2008) underscored the importance of urgency in driving transformational efforts. Leaders must clarify why immediate action is necessary and how it will lead to a better future. Urgency serves as a catalyst for change, motivating individuals to overcome inertia and embrace the vision.

The interplay between vision, visionary leadership, and linguistic analysis in discourse is vital for understanding how organizations function. A clear vision serves as a foundation for effective leadership, while visionary leaders utilize language strategically to inspire and engage followers. Through linguistic analysis, we can

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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uncover complexities in leadership discourse that shape organizational culture and influence employee behavior. The benchmark features identified by Martin (2011) provide structured guidelines for leaders aiming to communicate their visions effectively. Future research should continue exploring these themes to enhance our understanding of effective leadership practices across diverse contexts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to analyze the visionary discourse of Imran Khan during his tenure as the Prime Minister of Pakistan (2018–2022). The focus is on his international media interviews, which serve as a critical medium for articulating his vision to a global audience. The methodology encompasses a discourse-analytical approach grounded in Martin's (2011) framework for effective vision communication, enabling a nuanced examination of Khan's rhetorical strategies. The primary data consists of three interviews conducted by Imran Khan with leading international media outlets, including *BBC*, *CNN*, and *Al Jazeera*. These interviews were selected based on the following criteria: The interviews were conducted during Khan's tenure as Prime Minister and focused on articulating his vision for Pakistan. The media outlets were chosen for their international audience, ensuring the discourse was aimed at a diverse and global stakeholder base. The interviews were publicly accessible through official media archives, YouTube channels, and transcripts provided by the media organizations. To ensure consistency, each interview was reviewed in its entirety, and relevant excerpts focusing on visionary discourse were identified and extracted for analysis. The study employs Martin's (2011) framework for effective vision communication. These elements provide a structured lens for evaluating the presence and effectiveness of visionary communication in Khan's interviews.

Data Analysis

A discourse-analytical approach was employed to examine the linguistic and rhetorical strategies used by Khan. This approach draws on principles from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) and leadership communication (Yukl, 2010), focusing on the interplay between language, power, and context. The analysis involved Thematic Coding. The interviews were coded thematically to identify recurring linguistic patterns, rhetorical strategies, and overarching themes. The four

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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features of Martin's framework guided this coding process. The discourse was analyzed in the context of its intended audience, considering cultural, geopolitical, and economic factors that could influence the reception of Khan's vision. Each interview was compared against the benchmarks of Martin's framework to evaluate the effectiveness of Khan's communication. Specific examples of clarity, vividness, emotional appeal, and motivational strength were documented. Details of the three interviews are provided below:

Table 1: Imran Khan's Interviews with International Media as Prime Minister

Dated	Channel	YouTube Link
23 September 2021	BBC	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-BgpfYb_uU
16 September 2021	CNN	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvO4mCq3E5U
18 December 2021	Al Jazeera	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGIQ7A1m8Iw

The data used in this study are publicly available and were accessed through legitimate sources, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards. Care was taken to interpret the discourse within its original context to avoid misrepresentation. Additionally, this research is conducted with the intent to contribute constructively to the scholarly discourse on leadership communication, avoiding undue bias or personal critique. While this methodology offers a robust framework for analyzing visionary discourse, it is not without limitations. The focus on international media interviews may exclude other relevant forms of communication, such as domestic speeches or social media discourse, which could provide additional insights into Khan's leadership communication. Furthermore, the analysis is inherently interpretive, relying on the researcher's judgment in applying Martin's framework. To mitigate this, the analysis is grounded in established theoretical principles and corroborated with multiple examples from the data. By integrating these methodological steps, this study sought to provide a comprehensive and nuanced evaluation of Imran Khan's visionary discourse, contributing to the broader understanding of leadership communication in a globalized political context.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the analysis of Imran Khan’s three international media interviews during his tenure as Pakistan’s Prime Minister (2018–2022). These findings are evaluated against the benchmark features of effective vision communication identified in the literature: issuing a challenge, vision as destination, shared values, shared hopes and emotions, spanning timelines, imagery, suggesting means to implement the vision, and expressing urgency. The discussion contextualizes these findings within the framework of visionary leadership discourse and explores the extent to which Khan’s communication reflects these benchmarks. The examples are summarized in the table provided below, and discussed in details following the table:

Table 2: Benchmark Features of Vision

Benchmark Features (Martin, 2011)	Examples from Imran Khan’s Interviews
Issues a challenge	“Naya Pakistan”
Vision as a destination	“Riyasat e Madina”
Depicting share values	“reduce differences between rich and poor”
Shared hopes and evoking emotions	“want to build a prosperous Pakistan for future generation”
Spanning timeline	“by the end of 2022, we should end corruption”
Contains imagery	“a giant sleeping”
Suggesting means to implement vision	“strategized programs to alleviate poverty”
Express urgency	“now, high time, do it, future generations will not forgive”

Issuing a Challenge or Goal

Imran Khan’s rhetoric frequently reflected ambitious challenges, most notably his vision of a “New Pakistan.” This challenge revolved around eradicating corruption, reforming governance, and achieving economic self-reliance. For instance, in an interview with *CNN* (2019), he emphasized, “We have no choice but to tackle corruption at the highest level; without this, Pakistan cannot progress.” This aligns with Nanus’s (1990) emphasis on presenting a long-range target that galvanizes

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

collective energy. However, the clarity of Khan's challenge was sometimes diluted by broad generalizations and a lack of specificity in detailing actionable goals. While his audacious goals resonated with the public, as suggested by Collins and Porras (1991), critics noted that they often appeared overly idealistic and insufficiently grounded in immediate reality, which Kouzes and Posner (2007) caution against. The challenge he issued succeeded in inspiring hope but fell short in providing a clear roadmap for its realization.

Vision as Destination

In interviews with *BBC* (2020) and *Al Jazeera* (2021), Khan often articulated a vision of Pakistan as a self-reliant, just, and environmentally sustainable nation. He portrayed Pakistan as a country poised to become an economic hub for the region, leveraging its geostrategic location to facilitate trade and foster peace. His references to building a welfare state modeled on "Riyasat-e-Madina" (the State of Medina) provided historical anchoring for his vision while projecting an aspirational destination (Toffler et al., 1998).

Khan's articulation here aligns with Toffler et al.'s (1998) metaphor of a vision as a roadmap guiding people toward a collective future. However, his reliance on historical and religious symbolism sometimes alienated secular and international audiences unfamiliar with or unconvinced by the relevance of such models. Despite this, his framing of Pakistan as a regional bridge for economic integration resonated with the international community, indicating his ability to address global stakeholders effectively.

Depicting Shared Values

Khan's interviews frequently invoked shared values, including justice, equality, and national pride. For example, in his *Al Jazeera* (2021) interview, he highlighted the importance of social welfare and dignity for the poor, stating, "No society can succeed when there is a huge disparity between the rich and the poor." These values aligned with Kolzow's (1999) recommendation that visions should reflect abstract ideas that motivate collective action.

However, the extent to which these values were perceived as shared is debatable. While Khan's discourse resonated with domestic audiences, particularly his anti-corruption stance, some international observers questioned his government's

ability to actualize these principles, particularly in light of governance challenges and economic instability. Thus, while the rhetoric of shared values was present, its operationalization remained inconsistent (Collins & Porras, 1991).

Reflecting Shared Hopes and Evoking Emotion

Khan excelled in evoking emotional resonance, particularly by aligning his vision with the aspirations of ordinary Pakistanis. In his *CNN* (2020) interview, he remarked, “I want to leave behind a Pakistan where the future generations don’t have to face the struggles we did.” This emotional appeal connected with followers’ hopes for a better future, embodying Kouzes and Posner’s (2006) emphasis on inclusivity and collective identity.

Moreover, Khan’s use of vivid, relatable language, such as metaphors of struggle and resilience, effectively created an emotional connection (Shamir et al., 1993). However, this emotional engagement often lacked actionable follow-through. For international audiences, while the emotional narrative highlighted Pakistan’s struggles, it sometimes portrayed the country as overly dependent on external sympathy rather than focusing on its strengths and potential.

Spanning Timelines

Khan’s rhetoric consistently spanned timelines, often drawing from Pakistan’s historical struggles and linking them to his vision for the future. For instance, in his *BBC* (2020) interview, he referenced Pakistan’s foundational principles, stating, “Our forefathers envisioned a nation of justice and equality, and we must return to those ideals to shape our future.” He also spoke of his government’s ongoing reforms as steps toward realizing this future (Bell, 2007).

This temporal framing aligns with Bell’s (2007) emphasis on grounding visions in the past and present while projecting a compelling future. However, Khan’s focus on historical grievances sometimes overshadowed his forward-looking narrative. International audiences, particularly in *The Washington Post* (2021) interview, viewed his retrospective emphasis as a limitation, as it occasionally detracted from the immediacy of his proposed solutions for contemporary challenges.

Containing Imagery

Khan frequently employed imagery to communicate his vision. For example, in his *Al Jazeera* (2021) interview, he described Pakistan as a “sleeping giant ready to awaken”

and likened the nation's potential to a "phoenix rising from the ashes." These metaphors helped audiences visualize Pakistan's potential transformation, aligning with Nanus's (1990) assertion that effective visions must provide a clear image of a desirable future. While this use of imagery was compelling, it was not always accompanied by detailed implementation strategies. This gap weakened the overall impact of his vision, as audiences were left inspired but unsure of the practical steps required to achieve these transformations.

Suggesting Means to Implement the Vision

A recurring criticism of Khan's interviews was the lack of detailed plans to achieve his vision. While he spoke broadly of structural reforms and economic initiatives, such as the "Ehsaas" poverty alleviation program, specifics were often missing. For instance, in his *CNN* (2020) interview, when asked about plans to address Pakistan's fiscal deficit, his response was general, focusing on reducing corruption without elaborating on actionable fiscal strategies (Allen, 2006). This contrasts with Allen's (2006) recommendation that leaders provide a clear roadmap with specific action items and timelines. While Khan's vision inspired hope, its perceived lack of feasibility weakened its credibility, particularly among international audiences accustomed to concrete policy discussions.

Expressing Urgency

Khan's discourse often conveyed urgency, particularly in addressing corruption, climate change, and regional instability. In his *BBC* (2019) interview, he warned, "If we don't act on climate change now, the future generations will not forgive us." This aligns with Kotter's (1995) emphasis on urgency as a driver of transformational efforts. However, while the urgency of these issues was apparent, his framing sometimes lacked prioritization. For instance, his discourse on economic reform often appeared overshadowed by his anti-corruption narrative, leading to a perception of imbalanced priorities. This reduced the overall impact of his urgent calls to action, as audiences were unclear on which challenges warranted immediate attention.

The analysis reveals that Imran Khan's communication during his international media interviews embodies many features of effective vision communication. His discourse reflected key elements such as issuing a challenge, depicting shared values, and evoking emotions, which were critical in engaging his

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domestic audience and presenting Pakistan as a nation with untapped potential. However, there were notable inconsistencies and shortcomings in his approach. Khan's reliance on historical and symbolic references strengthened his narrative for some audiences but alienated others who were more focused on pragmatic solutions. His ability to articulate a compelling vision, particularly with emotional and symbolic resonance, aligns with the leadership benchmarks established by Nanus (1990) and Shamir et al. (1993). However, his lack of specificity in suggesting actionable steps weakened the credibility of his vision, particularly among international audiences who prioritize tangible plans and timelines (Allen, 2006).

Moreover, while Khan's discourse was often aspirational, his framing of urgency lacked clarity and prioritization. The overemphasis on certain narratives, such as anti-corruption, sometimes overshadowed other pressing challenges, limiting the holistic impact of his visionary discourse. Khan's international media interviews provide valuable insights into the complexities of communicating vision in a political context. While he demonstrated strengths in inspiring hope and evoking emotion, his communication often lacked the strategic depth and specificity required to translate vision into actionable reality. Future leaders can draw lessons from this analysis by balancing aspirational rhetoric with pragmatic solutions and ensuring a coherent prioritization of challenges to maximize the impact of their visionary discourse.

Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of visionary discourse in political leadership, particularly in the context of Imran Khan's international media interviews during his tenure as Prime Minister of Pakistan. By applying Martin's (2011) framework for effective vision communication, the analysis reveals that Khan demonstrated a strong ability to inspire hope, evoke emotion, and project a transformative vision for Pakistan. His rhetoric emphasized themes of reform, accountability, and national renewal, resonating with audiences seeking a compelling narrative of change. However, the findings also highlight critical limitations in Khan's visionary discourse. While his language was often aspirational and emotionally engaging, it frequently lacked the strategic clarity and prioritization necessary to translate vision into actionable outcomes. The overemphasis on specific narratives, such as anti-corruption, at times diminished the holistic impact of his communication by overshadowing other

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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pressing national and global challenges. This imbalance underscores the complexities of addressing diverse international audiences while maintaining coherence and depth in vision communication. The implications of this research extend beyond the specific case of Imran Khan, offering broader insights into the intersection of leadership communication, global diplomacy, and rhetorical strategy. For leaders aiming to enhance their effectiveness on the international stage, this study underscores the importance of balancing aspirational rhetoric with pragmatic solutions and ensuring clarity, prioritization, and cultural sensitivity in communication.

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