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**MEDIA COVERAGE OF A FATAL TRAFFIC INCIDENT  
INVOLVING AN UNDERAGED DRIVER FROM AN  
INFLUENTIAL FAMILY IN PAKISTAN: A STUDY OF  
PRINTABLES, E-NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA  
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

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## Abstract

**Background:** Road traffic accidents remain a major public health concern in Pakistan. Media coverage influences public understanding of responsibility, justice, and accountability in such incidents.

**Objective:** To examine how Pakistani electronic, print, and social media portrayed a fatal traffic incident involving an underage driver from an influential family and to explore how media discourse shaped perceptions of accountability, social inequality, and road safety.

**Methods:** A qualitative study using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was conducted. Content from two television news channels, two national newspapers, and two social media platforms was purposively selected and analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework. Analysis focused on language use, framing strategies, attribution of blame, and representations of power and accountability.

**Results:** Television coverage primarily emphasized individual behavior and responsibility, while print media focused on legal proceedings and accountability. Social media discourse expressed strong public outrage and frequently highlighted issues of elite privilege, institutional failure, and unequal access to justice. Across all platforms, the perspectives of victims' families, road safety experts, and child protection advocates were largely absent.

**Conclusion:** Media representations of the incident reflected distinct discursive practices and power relations. Mainstream media largely framed the event through individual blame, whereas social media challenged dominant narratives by emphasizing systemic inequalities and institutional accountability. More balanced reporting that incorporates broader social and policy contexts may contribute to a deeper public understanding of road safety and justice.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis, underage driving, traffic fatalities, television news, media framing, elite privilege, media narratives, power relations.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Context

Road safety is a significant public health challenge in Pakistan and globally. It costs thousands of deaths, injuries, and disabilities due to road traffic accidents (RTAs) per year (Irfan, 2024). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including Pakistan, most drivers lack knowledge about traffic regulations and often violate road safety rules (Abbas, 2024). Media coverage of these incidents plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding. The phrase "fourth pillar of the state" emphasizes the media's enormous impact on many aspects of society. Information dissemination, which is of great importance in our increasingly globalized world, is primarily accomplished through mass media — which includes traditional sources like books, newspapers, and magazines, and contemporary digital channels like television, radio, and the internet. These representations influence how responsibility, justice, and reform are understood by the public (Abbasi, 2024). However, media portrayals of traffic accidents are more than merely informational; they are part of larger social power structures. Pakistan's socioeconomic structure has been influenced by political, cultural, and historical factors. Colonial legacies created elitist traditions that are still present in modern institutions, particularly in governance and education (Nisar & Raza, 2025).

## **1.2 Research Problem**

The recent media coverage of a fatal incident involving an underage driver from an influential family in Islamabad generated public outrage but yielded no consistent debate on policy enforcement and institutional accountability. Electronic media mainly framed the incident as an unfortunate accident or moral lapse, while print media offered limited contextual critique. Social media showed a stronger public reaction but lacked structured policy discourse. There is limited academic research on how Pakistani media discursively constructs underage driving cases, particularly those involving elite families.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

- How do media accounts' wording, attribution of blame, and depictions of the victims, the underage driver, and their families affect the public's perception of the fatal traffic incident?
- How do media reports relate the incident to broader social issues such as age, privilege, justice, and the duty of law enforcement?

## **2. AIM OF THE STUDY**

To examine how perceptions of accountability, social injustice, and road safety are shaped by the way Pakistani media portrays a fatal traffic incident involving a young driver from an influential background.

## **3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study demonstrates how social media challenges mainstream narratives by drawing attention to structural flaws and fairness concerns, while Pakistani media frames a high-profile traffic tragedy by accentuating individual guilt and indirectly replicating elite privilege. Additionally, it reveals important silences in mainstream coverage — such as the under-representation of victims' families, traffic experts, and policy discussions — demonstrating how discourse impacts public perceptions of social inequity, accountability, and justice. These findings provide insightful information for enhancing media responsibility, increasing public consciousness, and expanding academic knowledge of power, framing, and discourse in the Pakistani context.

## **4. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **4.1 Portrayal of Fatal Accidents by Electronic Media**

Television news plays a significant role in shaping public perception and discourse around road traffic incidents, particularly in the reporting of fatal crashes and driver behavior. Studies show that television coverage often emphasizes dramatic elements of traffic incidents while providing limited information about underlying causes or preventive measures (Beullens & Roe, 2008).

Research examining motor-vehicle crashes in television news broadcasts found that many stories focus on human interest angles and assignment of responsibility, often using emotive language and highlighting individual actions rather than public health perspectives. Coverage frequently mentions the age of the drivers involved, indicating that media emphasize factors related to driver characteristics, which can influence audience perceptions of risk and accountability (Beullens & Roe, 2008).

Comparative studies of media reporting and official crash data reveal systematic biases in television coverage of fatal road incidents. Television media disproportionately covers crashes involving younger drivers and visually dramatic incidents, while underrepresenting common crash types. Media narratives also tend to misattribute responsibility, emphasizing individual fault over systemic

factors such as vehicle safety standards and regulatory enforcement. These patterns demonstrate how editorial choices shape public understanding of road safety issues and deviate from evidence-based reporting practices (Chand, 2025).

#### **4.2 Portrayal of Fatal Accidents by Print Media**

Scheffels, Bond, and Monteagut (2019) analyzed newspaper reports of fatal bicycle crashes using Critical Discourse Analysis. They found that most articles used an episodic frame, focusing on the specific crash and individuals involved rather than broader social or systemic factors. Newspapers often highlighted the bicyclist's actions and behaviors, implicitly shifting responsibility onto them, while drivers and structural safety issues received less attention. Only a minority of reports employed a thematic frame, discussing traffic safety policies, advocacy, or preventive measures. Overall, newspaper coverage tended to individualize blame and minimize systemic perspectives (Scheffels et al., 2019).

#### **4.3 Impact of Social Media on Public Views of Crime**

Social media has become an important channel connecting people to news from around the world and significantly influencing public mindsets regarding crimes (Akash, 2025). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram provide real-time updates, eyewitness reports, diverse viewpoints on criminal activities, and allow people to share content widely. Although social media platforms raise awareness regarding crimes, they also raise concern regarding unverified information and fear amplification without adequate fact-checking (Akash, 2025).

According to Imran and Kazmi (2025), social media campaigns regarding crimes — especially murder and rape cases — have created public pressure on law enforcement institutions, encouraging the implementation of public policies and heightened security discourse in the arrest and prosecution of those involved. This public pressure also calls for tougher laws. Simultaneously, public policy institutions have increasingly framed social media discourse as a national security threat, invoking measures such as censorship and cyber laws to constrain freedom of expression (Imran & Kazmi, 2025).

Hafeez (2021), writing in the *Journal of Media Studies*, discussed digital activism — also known as 'digilantism' — a type of activism that uses digital media platforms for civil action and online protests. Hafeez (2021) explored how social media empowers civil society to mobilize against crimes and corruption.

### **5. METHODOLOGY**

#### **5.1 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how electronic, print, and social media construct and frame a fatal underage driving incident, with particular attention to language use, media framing, responsibility attribution, and underlying power relations. CDA was employed to examine how media discourse builds meaning, assigns responsibility, and reflects power relations and societal ideologies in the coverage of the incident.

#### **5.2 Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select media content relevant to the research objectives. The sample comprised two Pakistani television news channels (Channel A and Channel S), two national newspapers (Newspaper D and Newspaper P), and two social media platforms (Platform I and Platform F), selected due to their broad audience reach, agenda-setting function, and impact on public conversation. Newspapers were selected for their reputation in national-level

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reporting and policy-oriented analysis, while television channels were chosen for their prominence in crime and breaking-news reporting. Social media platforms were used to record user-generated discourse, counter-narratives, and public participation related to the occurrence. In line with the depth-focused principles of Critical Discourse Analysis, this multi-platform sampling strategy allowed for comparative analysis across media types and guaranteed a comprehensive assessment of institutional and public discourses.

## 5.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

### *Inclusion Criteria*

- Content published by Channel A and Channel S, Newspaper D and Newspaper P, and Social Media Platforms I and F, as these platforms were among the first to report and disseminate information.
- Material that was publicly available and easily accessible, without the need for subscriptions, private permissions, or restricted access.
- Content presented in Urdu and English within the predefined study period.
- Reports, posts, and articles with direct discursive relevance addressing responsibility.

### *Exclusion Criteria*

- Content from media outlets or platforms that did not report the incident during the initial news cycle or whose coverage emerged significantly later.
- Texts lacking sufficient substance for CDA (very brief posts, superficial headlines, or empty comments).
- Non-public or inaccessible content (private posts or subscription-only articles without access).
- Duplicate reports, reposts, or syndicated material lacking original framing or commentary, to avoid repetition and analytical redundancy.

## 5.4 Data Collection and Transcription

Data was collected from the selected media platforms: Channel A and Channel S, Newspaper D and Newspaper P, and Social Media Platforms I and F. The materials were gathered and recorded verbatim, including news bulletins, headlines, feature articles, and public social media content. Special attention was paid to vocabulary, framing techniques, tone, and responsibility assignment, as well as the portrayal of victims, the underage driver, and institutional actors. All materials were de-identified using descriptive labels, except in cases where the recognition of prominent journalists, media organizations, or public figures was necessary for accurate contextual interpretation.

Channel A first reported the incident: "Teenage son of [Name Withheld] held after crash kills two women in Islamabad. Police say 16-year-old was filming a Snapchat video when his speeding vehicle hit victims."

Channel S also reported on the same case: "On December 2, 2025, a 16-year-old driver struck and killed two girls in Islamabad when his luxury car collided with the scooter they were riding in the [Location Withheld] area of the city."

Newspaper D published a news article on December 2, 2025 on its website: "Son of [Name Withheld] sent on physical remand over fatal car accident that claimed two lives."

Newspaper P published very close in time to Newspaper D on the same date: "Teenage son of [Name Withheld] arrested for fatal accident that killed two women."

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A post from Social Media Platform I stated: "A tragic hit-and-run near [Location Withheld] left two young women dead, struck by a black [Vehicle Type Withheld] allegedly driven by the teenage son of [Name Withheld]..."

A post from Social Media Platform F stated: "[Name Withheld] Son's Vehicle Hits Scooter in Islamabad — Two Women Killed, Suspect Arrested in Islamabad, a tragic accident at [Location Withheld]..."

## **5.5 Analytical Framework**

Analysis followed Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model (Fairclough, 2003) comprising three levels:

- **Textual Analysis:** Language, tone, and headlines were analyzed to convey urgency, accountability, and narrative emphasis.
- **Discursive Practice:** The creation and interpretation of texts was examined, including how the underage driver, families, institutions, and moral-legal judgements were framed.
- **Social Practice:** Discourse was connected to under-represented viewpoints, governance, power dynamics, and larger social structures.

## **5.6 Ethical Considerations**

The study used only publicly available media and social media content. Social media posts were anonymized unless the identities of public personalities or media outlets were crucial for context. In order to prevent sensationalism or misunderstanding, the materials were properly cited, accurately represented, and handled with sensitivity toward the victims and their families.

## **6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **6.1 Responsibility and Blame Attribution**

The way the media outlets framed accountability differed significantly. With no mention of institutional or parental accountability, Channel A focused on individual behaviors such as speeding and distracted driving. Channel S, on occasion, highlighted shortcomings in enforcement. Newspapers D and P, on the other hand, highlighted the arrest and remand procedures in order to place the incident within legal and structural contexts. Users attacked the accused and his family directly on Social Media Platforms I and F, portraying the situation as a moral failure made possible by institutional privilege.

### **6.2 Legal and Accountability Discourse**

By emphasizing official remarks and legal proceedings, television coverage primarily supported institutional perspectives. Print media gently questioned the administration of justice while providing a more comprehensive legal framework. Discussions on social media frequently raised issues of elite privilege and unequal legal treatment, reflecting widespread skepticism toward selective accountability.

### **6.3 Class and Power Representation**

Channel A addressed class privilege in an indirect manner, while Channel S and print media addressed it more openly. Social media engaged with these issues most forcefully. Platforms I and F emphasized socioeconomic inequality and power disparities in access to justice by framing the case as an illustration of elite injustice and institutional failure.

### **6.4 Silences and Marginalizations**

Important viewpoints — such as those of victims' relatives, road safety specialists, and child protection advocates — were largely absent across all platforms. The public's comprehension of

systemic causes was limited by the lack of attention given to structural problems such as enforcement of underage driving laws, regulatory errors, and long-term societal impact.

## **7. DISCUSSION**

Media narratives surrounding a high-profile traffic incident in Pakistan are shaped by emphasizing prominent individuals while ignoring structural causes and policy critique, and by presenting decisions in a way that reflects social power systems. Television and print media focused on episodic reporting, emphasizing the teenage driver's personal moral failings while largely disregarding systemic problems such as elite privilege, poor regulation, and underage driving enforcement. Social media platforms (I and F), on the other hand, contested these prevailing narratives by emphasizing issues of justice, institutional responsibility, and elite impunity. This is consistent with research demonstrating that public views of blame and preferred solutions are significantly influenced by media framing.

Studies carried out in international contexts have found similar discursive strategies. Newspapers in Nepal frequently focus on individual drivers when covering traffic incidents, while occasionally incorporating institutional backdrop and policy context, reflecting a selective framing of blame (Paudel, 2024). Additionally, Indian media coverage shows little consideration of structural risk factors, frequently concentrating on episodic stories of incidents (Gupta & Singh, 2021). Similar to the trends observed on Pakistani social media, mainstream media reporting in a number of African nations primarily focuses on driver error and current events, while social media conversations emphasize concerns of justice and elite accountability (WHO, 2025).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while episodic reporting and individual blame attribution are commonplace worldwide, Pakistani mainstream media shows particularly limited systemic critique and primarily relies on moralized framing. Social media, by contrast, provides a more critical discourse addressing institutional failures and elite influence. The interplay between mainstream and social media framing is observed globally, but it is particularly apparent in Pakistan where institutional problems and elite impunity intersect.

## **8. LIMITATIONS**

- Focus on a single incident and selected media (two TV channels, two newspapers, two social media platforms) limits generalizability.
- Only publicly accessible content was analyzed, potentially omitting other relevant sources or perspectives.
- The interpretive nature of CDA and the short time frame of data collection may overlook longer-term discourse patterns and introduce analytical bias.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

This study finds that Pakistani media coverage of the fatal incident is shaped by power and framing rather than neutral reporting. While downplaying structural problems such as underage driving policy and elite privilege, television and print media primarily place blame on specific individuals. Social media, in contrast, challenges these dominant narratives by highlighting systemic flaws, elite impunity, and concerns of fairness. In general, the way that media language constructs blame raises the risk of ignoring systemic accountability and the need for policy reform.

## **10. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **10.1 For the Media**

Media organizations should promote media literacy by distinguishing between facts and opinions, and should offer fair, data-driven coverage that takes into account both systemic and individual aspects of incidents.

### **10.2 For State Establishments**

State institutions should organize safe driving awareness programs, improve communication between law enforcement and educational institutions, and guarantee uncensored, responsible media coverage of public safety issues.

### **10.3 For Future Research**

Future researchers should analyze public attitudes and behavioral responses, compare youth-related accident coverage across cultures, and investigate how social media algorithms affect narrative amplification and public discourse.

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