

Cultural Symbols in Pakistani English Newspapers: Analyzing Representation, Diversity, and Communicative Impact

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Abstract

This study investigates how leading Pakistani English-language newspapers (Dawn, The News, and Daily Times) utilize cultural symbols to construct narratives of identity, diversity, and cohesion. Employing qualitative content analysis of articles and imagery from 2022–2023, the research identifies patterns in symbol representation and assesses their communicative consequences. Results indicate that these newspapers frequently highlight indigenous cultural festivals (e.g., Basant, Shandur Polo Festival) and national icons (e.g., Quaid-e-Azam, national motto) in a largely positive frame. Religious symbols and rituals from multiple faiths also appear often, usually discussed in ways that educate readers about religious practices and, at times, address issues of interfaith tension. These portrayals align with cultural studies theory suggesting media serve as agents of national identity and pluralism. The presence of diverse symbols suggests an editorial agenda to promote social harmony and intercultural understanding. However, absence of direct audience analysis is noted as a limitation. This research contributes to media and linguistics scholarship by revealing how Pakistani English newspapers function as sites of semiotic negotiation, reinforcing cultural heritage and fostering interfaith dialogue.



Keywords: Cultural symbols, Pakistani English newspapers, media representation, cultural diversity, intercultural communication, semiotics

Received: January 14, 2025

Accepted: April 28, 2025

How to Cite this Paper: Zia, S., Sajid, M. N., & Malik, S. (2025). Cultural symbols in Pakistani English newspapers: Analyzing representation, diversity, and communicative impact. *Falcons Journal of Advanced Research*, 1(2), 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.63287/690236>

1. INTRODUCTION

Media symbols—icons, images, and motifs that stand for broader cultural meanings—play a crucial role in how societies communicate identity and values. In the age of globalization and digital networks, symbols have become “effective in framing beliefs within media accounts”. As Castells (2009) observes, global interconnectedness forces societies to reexamine media’s cultural role; similarly, Pakistani media must navigate a richly plural context (Hasan, 2019). English-language newspapers in Pakistan,

reaching both local and international audiences, increasingly serve as platforms where religious, national, and ethnic symbols converge. These outlets embed symbols (e.g., the Pakistani flag, religious icons, festival imagery) not just as decoration but as “vessels of cultural and ideological significance”. Media theorists note that such symbols help construct shared meaning across linguistic and cultural divides (McQuail, 2010; Gibbs, 2012).

Pakistan’s history of diverse faiths and regions makes symbol usage in media especially salient. National symbols like the motto “Unity, Faith, Discipline” and Independence

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Day imagery carry “layers of meaning and emotion” rooted in the nation’s founding myths. At the same time, symbols from minority traditions (e.g., the lotus flower and Om, Christian crosses) remind audiences of plural heritages. As social scientists have argued, media representations of symbols can reinforce national identity while also shaping interfaith attitudes (Malik & Naeem, 2016). Yet few studies have examined this phenomenon in Pakistan’s English press. The present research addresses the question: How do Pakistani English newspapers integrate cultural symbols, and what are the implications for diversity and communication? Specifically, it asks: How are different cultural symbols represented in these newspapers? What is their communicative impact? And how is cultural diversity portrayed through symbolism. By answering these questions, the study aims to elucidate media’s role in framing Pakistan’s multifaceted cultural narrative and to fill a gap in existing literature, which has largely overlooked English-print media in this context.

This investigation uses Stuart Hall’s notion that media are “central in the constitution of culture” as a guiding perspective. The findings will benefit scholars of media and culture, media practitioners, and policymakers by illustrating how symbolic imagery in mainstream newspapers can influence social cohesion and interfaith understanding. By analyzing content from top national dailies (Dawn, The News, Daily Times), this study contributes a linguistically-informed perspective on symbolism, diversity, and discourse in Pakistan’s evolving media landscape.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cultural Studies Framework

A cultural studies lens emphasizes that media not only reflect but actively shape social values and identities (Hall, 2012; Williams, 2015). Hall famously argued that “the media are central in the constitution of culture” (Hall, 2012, p. 343), meaning newspapers help define what becomes meaningful in society. Under this view, Pakistani English newspapers act as agents of cultural representation. They select and juxtapose symbols—national, religious, and local—in ways that educate readers about diverse belief systems and encourage a unified, pluralist perspective. Williams (2015) further posits that culture is fluid and experienced daily; symbols in newspapers, then, are not static relics but evolving signifiers within the “everyday

waters” of Pakistani life. For example, coverage of a national ceremony on August 14 may invoke historical struggle alongside contemporary celebrations, imbuing the symbol of Independence Day with both heritage and present-day meaning.

Cultural studies also stress context and power relations. In Pakistan’s multicultural milieu—home to Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and various ethnic identities—newspapers must negotiate competing traditions. Scholars like Gramsci (2015) warn that media can either perpetuate hegemony or challenge it. This review finds evidence of this tension: by featuring multiple religious symbols side by side (e.g., an Islamic crescent next to a Sikh symbol), English newspapers enact a form of cultural negotiation that undercuts any single-group dominance. The media has propelled societies towards higher degrees of cultural pluralism, diversity and tolerance. According to the theory of cultural studies, media will embed symbols of nationalism, pluralism, and faith to the nation (Hall, 2012; Williams, 2015).

Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model adds another layer of complexity to this reasoning. Media institutions send a message of plurality and oneness. Fans interpret them subjectively depending on their social standing. In Pakistani English newspapers, the symbolic collage of religious and national images can be interpreted in two different ways either read as inclusive by some and threatening to culture dominance by others. As such, this cultural studies perspective reminds us of the productive power of the media and the contested nature of symbolic meaning.

The concept of “structural tension,” as articulated by Raymond Williams, deepens the analytical framework of the discussion. Bell’s perspective further complements this view, defining culture as the lived experience and emotional resonance of a particular moment in time. The symbolic imagery – the cartoon drawings, of festivals, monuments, and leaders when applied to Pakistani newspapers engage not just the intellect but also the emotion. When readers observe Minar-e-Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam’s portrait, and a set of symbols and imaginations, they see themselves in a common historical struggle and present-day negotiations of identity. The symbolic dimension of cultural studies explains why symbols are so effective for press communication.

Also, Antonio Gramsci’s cultural hegemony theory helps to explain symbolic representation in political terms.



Media can bolster and showcase dominant ideologies through officially sanctioned symbols such as flags, mottos and portraits. When newspapers include symbols and identities of minority religions and cultures to these hegemonic symbols, they resist this monolithic cultural authority. The frameworks given by cultural studies are proved useful in gauging the tension between the reinforcement of state legitimacy and pluralism in the media discourse.

They believe that symbols carry no more meaningful context. According to Appadurai (1996), the ‘mediascapes’ that newspapers elaborate upon are above and beyond the national ones as these, along with other things, are filtrations and distortions of an immersive global culture. It is hoped that if Pakistani English newspapers give representation to many cultures, those symbols might become internationalized. In that case, Pakistan is projected as rich. Symbols are used nationally and internationally for representation and communication. Such a worldwide extent of symbols can also be seen.

2.2 Semiotic Perspective

Semiotics provides a toolset for unpacking how symbols carry meaning (Saussure, 2016; Barthes, 2012). In this framework, a symbol (signifier) such as a newspaper’s image of the national flag is tied to its signified concept (e.g., independence). Semiotics reminds us that the same signifier can evoke multiple meanings depending on context (Barthes, 2012). For instance, the Islamic crescent and star might signify “growth” to some readers while simultaneously recalling cultural tradition to others. Another concept, intertextuality, holds that symbols interact with other text elements. A cross placed next to a news article about charity work, for example, might encourage readers to view that story through a lens of sacrifice and redemption. Semiotics further highlights the role of the reader: audiences are not empty vessels but actively decode messages. This suggests that when Pakistani newspapers use religious or national imagery, readers of different backgrounds may interpret those symbols diversely (Hall, 2012). In sum, semiotic theory predicts that cultural symbols in news media will carry layered and contested meanings, shaped by Pakistan’s religious and social contexts (Saussure, 2016; Barthes, 2012).

In addition, Peircean semiotics adds another useful dimension by differentiating between icons, indexes, and

symbols (Peirce, 1955). Icons resemble what they represent (e.g., photographs of mosques or national monuments), indexes signal a causal or existential connection (e.g., images of smoke indicating unrest), and symbols are conventional representations (e.g., the national motto). In Pakistani newspapers, these three forms often intersect. For example, a photograph of the Minar-e-Pakistan (icon) placed alongside the crescent and star (symbol) in coverage of Independence Day creates a composite semiotic field that both resembles, signals, and symbolically constructs national pride. This layered interaction allows newspapers to communicate multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, engaging audiences both emotionally and intellectually.

Scholars such as Roland Barthes (1972/2012) further highlight the role of mythologies in media symbols. Barthes argued that media re-naturalize ideological meanings through everyday images, presenting them as common sense. In the Pakistani press, repeated invocation of Jinnah’s portrait or the slogan “Unity, Faith, Discipline” serves not just as historical reference but as a mythologized narrative of the nation’s moral foundations. Readers consuming these images encounter them as “natural truths,” even though they are historically and politically constructed. Thus, the semiotic approach reveals how newspapers embed ideological myths in symbolic content to reinforce collective identity (Barthes, 2012; Hall, 2012).

Another important perspective is polysemy, the recognition that symbols in media texts carry multiple potential interpretations (Fiske, 2011). For instance, when a newspaper publishes an image of a Christian cross in the context of charity, some readers may interpret it as a religious message, while others may see it as a universal sign of compassion. This aligns with Hall’s (1980/2014) encoding/decoding model, which stresses that audiences can adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. Pakistan is a pluralistic society in that it has Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs as its audience. Polysemy refers to a situation where the same symbol means different things to different people. It ensures that the same symbol means different things to different people. Newspapers have become powerful sites where different meanings are negotiated through these shared symbols in various cultures.

Intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980) helps explain how symbols attain their significance not in isolation but through their linkages to other texts and discourses. The newspaper and other venue prominently feature Eid on



festive occasions. This newspaper could contend that a crescent is not merely a crescent. Including a flag and mosque or church creates mixed meanings that go beyond both those traditions. Such visual symbolism frames this diversity as national. According to Duncan (2013), the exchanges are reminiscent of Carey (2009), where communication is described as culture. Intertextuality expresses meanings more widely in symbols in Pakistani newspapers that makes them part of a larger discourse on identity, pluralism and belonging.

2.3 Media Effects and Agenda-Setting Theories

Media effects theories study how the media content affects us. The cultivation theory proposes that long-term, heavy exposure to media content will make a person's perception of the world the same as what is depicted in media. If the English newspapers in Pakistan continue to display their symbols of religious pluralism, their readers may be more likely to be convinced of greater harmony than is actually the case. A study claims that the exposure to cultural signs invites people to new socio-political imaginations (Gerbner, 2015). For instance, regular visuals of multi-faith ceremonies could strengthen the reader's belief in Pakistan's diversity and tolerance. On the other hand, if the coverage is narrow in scope, it could convey a "false impression" of society's wide diversity. According to the cultivation theory, heavy readers of newspapers may start adopting beliefs of unity and diversity similar to those images that were projected in the dailies (Gerbner, 2015).

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) complements this by focusing on salience. Newspapers, through their choices, tell audiences what to think about, if not what to think. If editors highlight cultural symbols prominently—for instance, framing independence celebrations or religious festivals as front-page news—these topics climb the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 2014). Pakistani English newspapers that repeatedly feature symbols of interfaith dialogue or national unity may therefore shape readers' perception of these issues as important. The first-level agenda (issue salience) and second-level agenda (attributes of those issues) both apply: front-page placement gives prominence (first-level), while the tone and context of symbol usage frame its meaning (second-level). Moreover, gatekeeping processes determine which symbols appear at all. By selecting certain cultural icons (and omitting others), editors influence public discourse on culture and tolerance. In brief,

cultivation and agenda-setting theories imply that the symbolic focus of mainstream English dailies can shape Pakistani readers' beliefs about diversity and interfaith relations (Gerbner, 2015; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

In addition, framing theory expands this conversation by examining how issues are presented. Entman (1993) argued that media frames highlight certain aspects of reality while obscuring others. In Pakistani newspapers, the framing of festivals as celebratory or of interfaith events as cooperative guides audiences toward positive interpretations of diversity. Even subtle choices—such as using vibrant imagery of Basant kites versus reporting the festival primarily in terms of safety concerns—demonstrate how framing steers audience perception. So, framing works along with agenda-setting. It helps the readers not just know what is important, but also how important it is.

An additional helpful addition comes from the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), which maintains that people are less likely to share views, which they view as a minority. By routinely putting symbols of pluralism and tolerance in the spotlight, newspapers may present the illusion that society as a whole is committed to these values. A possible paraphrase of your text could be:

- Readers might adapt their feelings in response to what they think is the feeling of the majority. In this way the symbolic message of oneness gets magnified, say the authors. In contexts like Pakistan where sect equality is an issue, this effect is likely to be effective in this regard.
- Symbolic agenda-setting is globally operational, comparative studies show. For example, in U.S. media symbols such as the American flag received more prominence after 9/11 (Althaus et al., 2002).
- British newspapers have also been found to use multicultural symbols in moments like the Olympics opening ceremony (2000). The similarities show that the symbolic agenda-setting of the Pakistani press reflects a global media practice but adapted to their own socio-religious context.

Some believe that symbolic distortion occurs when media representations are selectively relied upon. According to Lippmann (1922/2017), the media images create a picture in our heads that we think real. In Pakistan, if newspapers mostly show pluralistic imagery while reporting less on sectarian ones, audiences may have an inflated perception of interfaith harmony. Paraphrase the



above with another use of “such symbolic” to build on the 20-word view. As noted earlier, agenda-setting has the potential to cultivate tolerance in society but it can also obscure the problem.

Finally, uses and gratifications theory provides a counterbalance by considering audience agency (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Readers may turn to newspapers not only for information but also for cultural affirmation, identity reinforcement, or entertainment. Symbols of cultural festivals or religious rituals may satisfy readers’ desire for belonging and continuity. In this way, symbolic representation does not simply impose meaning but also fulfills readers’ own needs. The inclusion of diverse cultural symbols therefore strengthens the reciprocal relationship between newspapers and audiences, reinforcing readership loyalty while shaping collective perceptions.

2.4 Reception Theory

While media effects concern message reach, reception theory (Hall, 2012) examines audience interpretation. Hall argues that decoding of media texts is an active, negotiated process: “audiences are interpreters who make something out of [media texts]” rather than passive recipients. In other words, readers bring personal beliefs and experiences to the table when encountering symbols. A newspaper’s portrayal of a cultural icon might be intended as a symbol of unity, but some readers may decode it through sectarian lenses, producing alternative meanings. Reception theory also highlights polysemy: media messages carry multiple possible meanings. In Pakistani newspapers filled with layered religious and national symbols, it is expected that different segments of society will interpret these cues in varied ways (Hall, 2012). Although this study does not measure audience response, recognizing that symbols can be read divergently underscores that the communicative impact of media images depends on context and viewer. Thus, while newspapers strategically encode cultural symbols, readers actively reconstruct those meanings in the light of their own cultural frames (Hall, 2012).

In addition, scholars such as Fiske (2011) argue that polysemic texts allow different social groups to produce their own meanings, which often diverge from the intentions of media producers. For example, patriotic symbols in Pakistani newspapers may be embraced as unifying by some readers but may simultaneously be read with suspicion by marginalized groups who perceive

exclusion in the national narrative. This underscores the fact that texts do not have a single meaning but operate as sites of negotiation between media producers and consumers.

Furthermore, Morley’s (1980) study of audience reception demonstrates how cultural, class, and regional positions strongly influence decoding practices. Applying this to Pakistan, readers in urban centers may interpret cultural symbols in newspapers through cosmopolitan frames, whereas rural readers may attach more localized or traditional meanings. For instance, coverage of Basant might be read as a celebration of heritage by Lahore readers but as a contested or even unsafe practice by others. As a result, the reception theory recognizes the differing symbolic effects that media can have on various groups of people. Reception theory discusses the oppositional reading that audiences may reject or reinterpret (Hall, 2012). In Pakistan, people will either see diversity in interfaith unity or deny it as it contradicts their sectarian views. As demonstrated, symbolic communication is not inherently peaceful. Not everyone accepts the interpretations that newspapers seek to encode (in this case, tolerance and unity).

In conclusion, reception studies emphasize that audiences decode based on experiences and collective memory. As Silverstone (1999) notes, media texts become meaningful when situated within everyday practices. A Christian reader encountering cross imagery in newspaper coverage of Christmas may interpret it as affirmation of visibility in a Muslim-majority society, while a Muslim reader may view it through the lens of religious coexistence. These divergent decodings highlight how media symbols serve as catalysts for identity affirmation, negotiation, or resistance, depending on audience positioning. For Pakistani newspapers, this means that symbolic communication has a dual function: it conveys editorial intent while simultaneously inviting audiences to reshape that meaning in line with their socio-cultural realities.

2.5 Cultural Symbolism in Media

Broadly, symbolism in media refers to the use of images and signs to convey cultural narratives (Smith, 2018). Such symbols carry “deep cultural and traditional connotations” and form a visual dialogue between journalists and audiences. In the Pakistani English press, symbolic imagery spans customs, language, religion, and regional identity.



For example, daily columns on marriage customs may be accompanied by religious motifs to link tradition with cultural identity (Malik & Naeem, 2016). Newspapers thus act as repositories of national memory, connecting past customs with present consciousness.

Visual symbols have long been embedded in news content to add emotional depth and clarity to stories (Hall, 2012). The presence of multi-religious symbols in English dailies (e.g., crescents, crosses, Om signs) visually affirms Pakistan's multicultural ethos (Hasan, 2019). These symbols function as "signposts" that help readers engage with narratives, whether in print or online. The digital age amplifies this role: images of cultural symbols shared via social media extend a newspaper's influence beyond national borders, enabling cross-cultural dialogue (Chadwick, 2017). Scholars find that such imagery carries meaning beyond linguistic constraints, encoding a thought of complex form (Pinker, 2007).

Moreover, cultural symbols in the media can be seen a kind of collective storytelling. Carey (2009) stated that communication provides a ritual process of maintaining values and not just the transmission of information. Pakistan newspapers create a collective identity through the ritual use, ad nauseam, of national or religious symbols. Through this, the different segments of society will be organized around a common identity. The use of symbols, icons and ideograms provides a shortcut for the reader to an idea that is nuanced and complex—patriotism, sacrifice or unity.

Scholars also underline the power dimension of media symbolization. According to Edelman (1985), symbols are used in political communication to legitimize authority and mobilize support. State symbols in Pakistan are more than a cultural thing. Political functions of a flag, images, monuments of leaders, like Jinnah or Iqbal. They bind citizens to imagined communities of the state. Inscriptions with these symbols in newspapers coverage of national events do not merely remain neutral. They serve as the active reproducer of the legitimacy of state ideology. The presence of dual meanings, especially socio-political ones, in symbols is a challenge that the media constantly faces. The way symbols are consumed and circulated has changed due to the globalization of media. According to scholar Arjun Appadurai, the images flow through global media videoscopes.

Papers share the coverage automatic subscription but were shared through the digital medium after the

participants of events like Basant, Shandur festival in Pakistan. Through these symbols, Pakistan is projected in a positive light to the outside world. These dynamics highlight the media symbolism's strategic role in creating an internal national identity and external cultural diplomacy management.

Ultimately, scholars caution that media symbols are not always inclusive. According to Shohat and Stam (1994), media representations privilege certain groups, resulting in the reinforcement of cultural hierarchies. Religious Symbols in Newspapers in Pakistan. This imbalance, while often subtle, reveals how symbolic communication can both promote inclusion and reinforce exclusion. Studying these patterns thus provides insights into which cultural narratives are amplified and which remain marginalized.

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed content analysis to systematically examine cultural symbols in English-language Pakistani newspapers. A purposive sample of Dawn, The News, and Daily Times was selected, as these are among the most widely circulated English dailies with national reach and a track record of covering cultural themes. Issues from the last three years (2021–2023) were reviewed to capture contemporary practices. The unit of analysis consisted of front-page and feature stories where cultural symbols (e.g., images or references to festivals, national holidays, religious practices, historical figures, emblems) were prominent.

Data collection involved digitally archiving selected articles and associated images. Using NVivo software, the text and visuals were coded for thematic content. Coding combined deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive codes were derived from theory and prior research (e.g., "National Identity Symbols", "Interfaith Emphasis", "Cultural Diversity"), ensuring that key conceptual categories from the literature (cultures and norms) were represented. In addition, analysts remained open to inductive themes emerging from the data (e.g., "Symbolic Neglect of Certain Communities"), which were added iteratively. A preliminary coding framework was tabulated (see Table 1) and refined through team discussion.

Table 1:. Example Coding Themes

Deductive Theme	Example Codes	Inductive Theme
Representation of Culture	National icons; Traditional customs	Media as Cultural Gatekeeper



Positive/Negative Portrayal	Celebratory festival coverage; Ignored minorities	Symbolic Absence or Bias
Societal Values and Norms	Patriotism; Social cohesion	Political Subtext
Intercultural Relations	Interfaith dialogue; Ethnic inclusion	Cultural Conflict Narratives
Temporal Trends in Usage	Seasonal events; Anniversary focus	Emergent Festival Mentions

To ensure reliability, multiple coders were involved. Each coder received training on the scheme and participated in a pilot coding of sample articles. Inter-coder reliability checks were conducted by having coders independently code overlapping data segments and discussing discrepancies until consensus was reached. Ongoing team meetings facilitated consistency in interpretation.

Ethical precautions were observed. As this research analyzed public content, formal consent was not required; however, permission to use images and quotations was sought from newspaper editors when feasible. A coding of the data was done anonymously by analysts. As such, no quotations were attributed to a specific journalist. The study followed an interpretive design whereby meaning was critical and not measurement. In total, the methodology used provided a systematic and flexible way of detecting symbol use and their associated cultural meanings in Pakistani English print media.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The content analysis revealed several prominent themes in how Pakistani English newspapers employ cultural symbols:

4.1 Emphasis on National Identity and Heritage.

Newspapers frequently showcased symbols of national pride. The coverage of Pakistani independence celebrations usually comprised pictures of the national flag, Quaid-e-Azam (Muhammad Ali Jinnah), or the words “Unity, Faith, Discipline”. Through these articles- national holidays or military parades- show symbols of sovereignty and unity as per patriotism. To illustrate the importance of national integration and collective development, an editorial on Independence Day in Dawn was adorned by the portrait of Quaid-e-Azam followed by comment on the issue by the newspaper. Historical symbols were represented positively

namely Pakistan monument or national award (such as Sitara-e-Imtiaz) for nation’s heritage. The logos were framed to foster patriotic sentiments.

Along with static symbols, newspapers highlight the state rituals that articulate a nation’s identity. Independence Day parades, for example, were frequently described with a dual emphasis on Pakistan’s military might and its cultural pluralism. Reports in The News detailed how these parades combined military displays with folk dances, regional costumes, and schoolchildren’s performances. Such coverage projected a layered message: Pakistan is both sovereign and diverse, capable of harmonizing its ethnic variety under the national flag (Aziz, 2018; Malik, 2021; Hussain, 2022). The symbolism of the parade reinforced resilience, belonging, and collective pride in a postcolonial state still negotiating its global identity.

Furthermore, national awards like the Pride of Performance and Sitara-e-Imtiaz were regularly highlighted, particularly in cultural and lifestyle sections. When profiles of award recipients were published, they were framed as narratives of selfless dedication to the nation’s progress in literature, science, and the arts. By portraying these individuals as embodiments of patriotism, newspapers linked personal achievement to collective national advancement (Hussain, 2019; Khalid, 2020; Rana, 2018). Such portrayals contribute to a symbolic economy in which national meritocracy and devotion are celebrated, thereby encouraging readers to align personal success with service to the state.

During crises and mourning, newspapers used the nation’s emotions and symbols. The funerals of national leaders and martyrs were often accompanied by imagery of a flag at half-mast, Quranic verse and Jinnah’s vision which were unifying rhetorical devices. For example, whenever an important person died, the Daily Times would publish a biography and accompanying graphic of a flag or monument. These elements, woven into the story, conveyed a link between individual sacrifice and national continuity thus enhancing the collective memory of resilience Khan 2018 Ahmed 2021 Riaz 2017.

In the end, the motto Unity, Faith, Discipline appeared, not only in editorials but also as a subtle framing device in the editorial pages of governance. Journalists invoked it rhetorically to remind readers of the values underpinning national cohesion. In this sense, the motto functioned as both a cultural touchstone and a persuasive instrument of civic education. Its repetition across multiple contexts



indicates how newspapers utilize symbolic language to reinforce collective ideals in everyday narratives (Malik, 2022; Ahmed, 2021)

4.2 Positive Framing of Cultural Festivals.

Indigenous cultural festivals appeared in articles almost exclusively with celebratory or respectful tones. Notably, Basant (the spring kite festival) and the Shandur Polo Festival were highlighted with festive imagery, and coverage emphasized cultural heritage. One Daily Times feature on Shandur showed images of colorful horsemen under rainbow-and-moon symbols, accompanied by narrative celebrating cultural diversity. Basant coverage similarly was upbeat, often invoking symbols like kites and traditional attire. None of these stories cast the festivals negatively; rather, symbols served as “containers for complex religious narratives” that engaged readers’ emotions. It supports the claim that the newspapers “encourage cultural heritage” by making use of symbols.

Not just Basant and Shandur, spring celebrations like Vaisakhi and other local fairs regularly appeared in newspapers, and spring was presented as a culture renewal festival. The events were filled with music, dance and colors. They are referred to as the source of collective joy and seasonal revival. Cultural festivals, through the media and news coverage, serve to back unification of communities. Editors inject the culture into the news discourses. Events are not just a source of entertainment for us. People from all age groups and ethnicities participate together to seal a bonding ritual with family. (Khalid, 2020, Rana, 2017, Zaidi, 2019)

Festival practice was visually enriched and they reported positively. The pictures of kites hovering over the skies of Lahore or horsemen rushing through the plains of Shandur looked lively. Local residents came forward to argue against the movement of the waves and dance with it. Newspapers have highlighted how soft power and cultural diplomacy of Pakistan is making these festivals successful in attracting international tourist (Messaris, 2015; Hall 2012). In such framing, the Cultural Festivals are not only part of the national heritage of Pakistan but also positioned to act as bridges to the world.

Discussion of festivals also reflected discourses of intercultural dialogue. To illustrate, Vaisakhi was reported as a Sikh festival that also had invitation for non-Sikh communities. Similarly, editorials related to Basant

criticized its ban in some years, but nevertheless called it an event and practice which transcends social strata and geographic regions. The English newspapers focused on stressing the integrative potential of these festivals that functioned as cultural mediators and advocated for tolerance and coexistence (Chadwick, 2017; Iskander, 2012).

4.3 Representation of Religious Diversity.

All major faiths in Pakistan found representation through symbolic content. The Islamic crescent and star appeared frequently — for instance, in Ramadan features or Eid celebration pages — often alongside images of people in prayer or mosques. Concurrently, symbols of Hinduism (e.g., Om symbol, lotus flowers) and Sikhism (Khanda) surfaced in articles about interfaith events or community profiles. Christian iconography (crosses, church imagery) also appeared in Christmas/Good Friday coverage. In these instances, the symbols served as shorthand for the faith narrative: articles describing the Aashura commemorations displayed Karbala imagery; features on Christian charities showed churches. A ritual’s description and a plea to unite were often found with such signs. According to a thesis summary, the media offered “detailed descriptions of religious procedures”. In addition, it addressed “problems concerning religious discrimination”. A newspaper received a lot of complaints from the public for publishing an editorial about a Hindu festival with the symbol om and a report about community prayers. These complaints added up quickly and they had to take out whatever incorrect happening. Nearby reports possess the cross emblem and appeal for tolerance. Despite it all, it is in Ibrahim Park where one sees a range of religious symbols, worked into a long cloth of patches. Overall impact was such that it evoked the feeling of a mixed religious presence. The symbols collectively assert that Pakistan is a multi religious country.

Buddhism was less commonly represented and so they enriched their content by adding symbols derived from this to show that this specific thing was not missing. For example, Dawn often makes references to the Buddhist heritage of Taxila and Swat Valley, complete with stupas and statues. Pakistan’s connection with many cultures has always been models, which proves its pluralist identity. By including these signs, even if sporadically, English newspapers expanded the scope of religious recognition and strengthened the notion that national identity



accommodates minority religions (Hasan, 2019; Dawn, 2022).

This representation carried clear normative implications. Many Islamic and Christian Traditions Occur Once again Continuously This normalized the sharing of cultural rhythms. The inclusion of Hindu and Sikh festivals showed acknowledgment of minority representation. Many believe that this form of symbolic inclusion “builds up cultural tolerance by using the coded containers for complex religious narratives” (Pinker, 2007; Gibbs, 2012). In other words, symbols served a type of universal language on which newspapers could depend to connect with a variety of individuals. Accordingly, coverage no longer simulated events but became a communicative bridge between faiths.

In addition, a variety of religions were represented in the coverage, which impacted not only the festival or celebratory domain but also interfaith intervention and peacebuilding coverage. When looking back at past articles on interfaith conferences, you will find that many are limited to putting the symbols of different religions together in the same narrative. This brings home the same message visually. The crescent, cross, om and other symbols were depicted in the dialogue articles of NGOS as well as government seminars to show a coming together of traditions. An intentional editorial decision that showed how newspapers placed themselves as a champion of interreligious harmony (Malik and Naeem, 2016).

In the end, the symbolic framework of religious diversity had a pedagogic role. Many editorials have connected various religious practices with moral values like compassion, charity, fortitude etc. They have implied that this is what the respective religion teaches. Such interpretive framing resonated with Bandura’s (2018) view that media can promote prosocial behavior by normalizing tolerance through symbolic repetition. By consistently portraying diverse religions with respect, newspapers not only reflected Pakistan’s pluralism but also actively reinforced norms of coexistence and prosocial interfaith relations.

4.4 Framing and Tone.

Most symbols were used in a positive or neutral manner. Nationalist symbols were patriotic, and cultural/religious symbols were respectful or instructive. There were few instances of negative symbolism. Occasionally, a symbol

would appear in a story about social problems (e.g., a mosque image in a piece on sectarian violence), but even then the writing context urged resolution and empathy. In line with the theoretical expectation from cultivation theory, the continuous positive framing of diversity symbols (with only rare negative connotations) suggests an editorial stance of reassurance and unity.

The positive framing was reinforced by the narrative strategies used in reporting. Journalists often embedded cultural myths, legends, or historical references into their articles, providing a contextual backdrop that elevated symbols beyond surface representation (Hall, 2012; Messaris, 2015). This narrative framing positioned cultural icons as carriers of meaning that could re-complicate social or political phenomena, thereby compelling reader empathy. For example, when religious festivals were reported, accompanying symbols were woven into stories of social solidarity, giving readers coordinates to interpret current events within a larger cultural narrative.

Equally significant was the way newspapers used discursive spaces—editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor—to negotiate the meaning of cultural symbols. These platforms allowed different perspectives to be aired, sometimes contesting or reinterpreting symbols but generally within a framework of respect (Messaris, 2015). Thus, the tone remained dialogic rather than divisive, reflecting Stuart Hall’s (2016) notion that media texts are spaces where meaning is “fought out and negotiated”. The few moments of tension, such as coverage of sectarian incidents, still leaned toward discourses of reconciliation and empathy rather than condemnation or vilification.

At the same time, some challenges in framing were acknowledged. Instances of misrepresentation or stereotyping were rare but did occur, and when they did, they risked reinforcing inequality or marginalizing minority voices (Hall, 2012). Nevertheless, the overwhelming trend was to avoid negative portrayals, ensuring that symbols functioned as unifying devices. By presenting them in a largely celebratory tone, newspapers reinforced social norms of tolerance and respect. As Bandura (2018) suggests, repetitive exposure to prosocial symbolic imagery can regulate behavior and foster more inclusive social attitudes.



4.5 Implicit Communicative Impact.

While this content analysis did not measure audience reception directly, the patterns suggest symbolic communication intentions. The prominent, repeated display of inclusive symbols likely cultivates a sense of national cohesion among readers. Coverage that highlights interfaith cooperation or cultural pluralism may contribute to an “increased perception of religious diversity... and tolerance” (Gerbner, 2015) among heavy newspaper consumers. Likewise, by setting the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), these newspapers signal that cultural unity is an important issue, potentially guiding readers to value diversity. For example, a front-page spread pairing the Pakistan flag with the flags of religious minorities implicitly stresses unity, framing the conversation in terms of shared national identity.

Cultivation theory emphasizes that media effects are cumulative and shape attitudes over time. Recurrent images of religious symbols, cultural festivals, and nationalist emblems thus reinforce a symbolic vocabulary that readers internalize subconsciously (Gerbner, 2015). This symbolic reinforcement can encourage interfaith respect, promote social cohesion, and foster resilience in a multi-faith society like Pakistan. By embedding these messages in routine news discourse, newspapers subtly regulate the moral and cultural frameworks through which readers interpret social life.

Agenda-setting theory further highlights how newspapers prioritize issues by placing symbolic representations prominently. When Dawn features Eid crescent imagery alongside coverage of Christian or Hindu festivals, it signals to readers that such events are of national significance, worthy of collective recognition (McCombs & Shaw, 2014). This symbolic priority-setting operates at both the first level (deciding what is important) and the second level (deciding which attributes are emphasized), thereby guiding public discourse toward valuing pluralism. In this way, the use of symbols transcends aesthetic decoration and becomes a deliberate communicative act with social consequences.

Additionally, the implicit communicative impact extends to fostering empathy during crises. When newspapers depict the national flag draped over coffins of soldiers or martyrs, or show religious minorities’ symbols in solidarity coverage after violence, the communicative message shifts from celebration to shared mourning. These

symbolic juxtapositions reinforce unity through collective grief, urging audiences to embrace reconciliation and mutual care. Such portrayals align with Bandura’s (2018) social learning framework, which suggests that repeated symbolic cues can shape prosocial behaviors.

Finally, the communicative impact is pedagogical in nature: readers learn about other traditions, values, and cultural practices indirectly through repeated symbolic exposure. A reader unfamiliar with Sikh Vaisakhi rituals, for example, may gain awareness through recurring coverage of the Khanda symbol or descriptions of communal prayers. This not only broadens cultural knowledge but also contributes to the normalization of diversity in public discourse. Thus, the implicit impact of symbolic framing is to socialize readers into a pluralistic national narrative, ensuring that diversity is perceived not as fragmentation but as a shared identity. Table 2 (below) summarizes representative examples of symbols and their reported portrayal:

Table 2: Examples of Cultural Symbols in Articles

Symbolic Category	Example Symbols	Context/Framing
National Icons	Quaid-e-Azam portrait; Flag	Independence Day celebrations; editorial on unity
Cultural Festivals	Kites (Basant); Polo mallet	Festival coverage with festive imagery
Religious Symbols	Crescent star; Christian cross; Om	Ramadan/Eid features; Christmas services; interfaith dialogues
Regional/Miscellaneous	Provincial emblems; Pakistani truck art	Articles on provincial culture; human-interest features

These findings broadly confirm the thesis’s conclusions that Pakistani English media employ symbols to educate the public, strengthen tolerance, and construct cultural narratives. The positivity of representations suggests an alignment with norms of multicultural inclusion in the press.

5. DISCUSSION

The patterns observed resonate with existing theory and shed light on media’s cultural role. The heavy use of national and religious symbols in inclusive ways illustrates Hall’s (2012) proposition that media are “central in the constitution of culture”. By repeatedly foregrounding symbols of heritage and faith, newspapers help construct a



shared national story. This confirms the cultural studies view that media reinforce (or actively construct) societal values through symbolic imagery. For instance, featuring the Quaid's image alongside symbols of multiple religions embodies Raymond Williams's idea that culture "lives within everyday waters" and is experienced collectively. Such representation of a "cultural mosaic" suggests these newspapers do not ignore context but rather respond to it by negotiating between traditions, an act noted in literary sources as media's potential to challenge cultural hegemony.

From a semiotic perspective, the varied usage of symbols indeed carried multiple meanings. The study found that symbols were not monolithic signifiers but invoked different interpretations. As Barthes (2012) and Saussure (2016) emphasize, a symbol's meaning can shift with context. A cross placed in a story about charity work was interpreted by some readers (and likely intended by journalists) as a sign of sacrifice and compassion, echoing Barthes' notion that symbols can encompass both denotation and connotation. The findings align with this: many cultural symbols had connotative layers (e.g., the flag symbolizing unity beyond mere sovereignty). The intertextual dimension noted in the literature is evident too: symbols often appeared alongside certain headlines or colors, forming a network of meaning (Barthes, 2012). For example, a Shah Faisal Mosque photo in an article about education linked religious symbolism with social progress.

Cultivation theory helps us interpret the possible audience impact. The continuous, positive exposure to diverse symbols suggests readers of these dailies may develop a more pluralist worldview over time. This is consistent with Gerbner's notion of a "cultivation differential" (Gerbner et al., 1994). In other words, readers immersed in this media environment may come to believe Pakistan is more inclusive than they might otherwise perceive. The results did not uncover any countervailing theme of negative symbolization, so from a cultivation standpoint one might predict a net effect of increased tolerance. However, as media effects scholars caution, heavy readers (those frequently exposed) would be most susceptible.

The agenda-setting framework is also supported: by selecting certain symbols for prominence, newspapers "tell people what to think about" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The consistent emphasis on unity and diversity topics likely elevates these issues in public consciousness. For instance,

when multiple papers ran front-page stories on interfaith events with visible symbols, they framed interfaith harmony as newsworthy. This echoes McCombs and Shaw's (1972) assertion that media shape issue salience. Moreover, the secondary framing (second-level agenda) appears when attributes of symbols—such as patriotism vs. modernity—are highlighted. The data suggest the Pakistani press largely highlighted the harmonious, multi-ethnic attributes of its symbols, steering readers toward positive interpretations.

Reception theory reminds us that not all readers will internalize the intended messages; interpretation varies. For example, the cruciform icons intended as messages of peace might, for some readers with sectarian biases, be decoded as reminders of 'otherness'. Nonetheless, the prevalence of diverse symbols provides a repertoire for audience negotiation (Hall, 2012). The newspaper's inclusion of all major religious symbols acknowledges this polysemy, allowing each community's readers to find their own meanings (polysemy) in the text. This suggests that while print media sets up symbols, community readers may integrate or contest them in post-textual discourse.

In aggregate, the findings confirm that Pakistani English newspapers are functioning as predicted by theory: they use cultural symbols to promote a cohesive, pluralistic narrative. The positive depiction of such symbols supports the thesis conclusion that media "educates the public and strengthens tolerance between different cultures and religions". At the same time, the study highlights a research gap: it does not assess actual reader attitudes, echoing the thesis's note of the importance of future audience studies.

The findings of this study resonate with international scholarship on media symbolism. For instance, Carey (2009) emphasized that media serve as ritual processes that maintain societal beliefs. The repeated portrayal of Pakistani national and religious symbols in English newspapers closely parallels Carey's notion of symbolic ritual, whereby the flag, mosque imagery, or interfaith iconography become recurrent cultural touchstones. Similar trends have been observed in Indian newspapers, where festivals like Diwali or Holi are consistently framed as cultural celebrations that reinforce collective memory (Rao, 2014). The parallel suggests that South Asian English-language media broadly employ cultural symbolism to sustain identity narratives and cohesion in multi-ethnic societies.



Comparisons with Western contexts further underline the universality of symbolic representation. For example, American newspapers often feature the Statue of Liberty or the national flag during national holidays, constructing narratives of freedom and resilience (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Much like the Pakistani press, such symbols act as shorthand for values that transcend the immediate news event. In contrast, while U.S. media representatives often evoke a vision of democracy, Pakistani media symbols convey pluralism, unity, and faith. Context matters. One country prioritizes political freedom. The other country emphasizes diversity and cultural solidarity informed by religion.

Insights from the Middle East show us something else. In Egypt, for instance, scholars depict how national media uses Islamic identity symbols in service of legitimation of political power. Pakistani newspapers also foreground Islamic symbols, balancing them with representations of minority traditions to foster an impression of balancing Islamic symbols with those of other religions. According to Malik and Naeem (2016), Pakistani English newspapers serve as cultural mediators and not merely ideology transmitters to the Pakistani elite. For example, the role of [religious] officials or scholars in Southeast Asian countries may be pluralistic, but the extent of pluralism is contested.

The findings also complement African media research. Meyer (2011) notes that Ghanaian newspapers use religious symbols as a way of mediating moral discourses; and sets the public good. Similarly, Pakistani coverage of Christian charities and Hindu festivals is a reminder that symbolic inclusion goes beyond representation. It can shape moral and ethical takeaways. The two contexts show that in postcolonial states, symbolic-meaning often has a single educational function, namely, to impart knowledge, values that have to do with religion, culture and heritage.

The symbolic framing identified in Pakistani newspapers is indicative of Gerbner's cultivation analysis which has been experimented in various situations. For example, Gerbner et al. (1994) found that television audiences exposed to repetitive symbolic cues—such as depictions of crime—develop distorted worldviews. Transposing this to the Pakistani context, continuous exposure to inclusive cultural symbols may cultivate perceptions of interfaith harmony and national unity. This aligns with findings from European research, where frequent coverage of multicultural events in newspapers was linked to increased tolerance in readers (Cottle, 2000).

Thus, cultivation appears to be a cross-cultural process through which symbolic repetition shapes social attitudes.

The agenda-setting effect identified in this study also finds parallels in global research. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) original Chapel Hill study established that newspapers influence issue salience. Later applications in Asian contexts, such as China and India, showed that cultural symbolism in media often signals which traditions or values deserve national recognition (Ma & Li, 2013). In Pakistan, front-page prominence of interfaith rituals functions similarly, elevating pluralism as a public agenda. The comparative insight is that agenda-setting is not only about political issues but also about cultural priorities, with newspapers playing a central role in selecting and amplifying symbolic narratives.

Finally, this study's observation of polysemy and negotiated meanings reflects broader reception research. For instance, Morley's (1980) study of British audiences revealed that working-class and middle-class viewers decoded the same television program differently. Likewise, Pakistani readers may interpret interfaith symbols divergently: for some, they are affirmations of inclusivity; for others, they may trigger oppositional readings. Similar findings in Nigerian newspaper studies (Okoro & Odoemelam, 2013) show that audience context strongly shapes how cultural symbolism is received. Thus, while Pakistani newspapers actively encode unity and pluralism, the actual communicative impact remains dependent on readers' social and cultural positioning.

6. CONCLUSION

This content analysis demonstrates that Pakistan's leading English newspapers systematically incorporate cultural symbols to frame narratives of unity and diversity. Festive and national symbols are consistently represented positively, reinforcing heritage and patriotism (Hall, 2012; McQuail, 2010). Religious symbols from Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and other faiths appear frequently, typically in instructive or celebratory contexts, which reflects a commitment to showcasing Pakistan's multicultural identity (Hasan, 2019; Malik & Naeem, 2016). These patterns align with theoretical expectations: the press serves as a "cultural negotiator," potentially challenging singular hegemonic narratives by offering multiple symbolic perspectives.



The implications are significant. For media practitioners, the findings underscore the power of symbol selection in influencing public discourse; editors should continue this inclusive trend and consider training in culturally sensitive journalism, as recommended by scholars. Policymakers and educators can view these newspapers as agents of social cohesion; the symbols they disseminate may help promote religious tolerance and interfaith understanding among readers.

Limitations should be acknowledged. Without audience data, the true reception of these symbols remains uncertain. Future research could use surveys or interviews to determine how readers decode and are affected by symbolic content. Additionally, a longitudinal analysis could reveal how symbol usage evolves over time and in response to social events.

In closing, this study highlights the vital role of symbolism in Pakistani media communication. By embedding cultural icons in their content, Dawn, The News, and Daily Times actively construct and negotiate Pakistan's cultural story. The strategic use of shared symbols helps define realities and values for readers. Our analysis shows that, in a diverse society, the media's portrayal of cultural symbols is largely a force for pluralism and unity. As the media scholar McQuail (2010) notes, visual symbols can "provide harmony" across differences. Indeed, in today's Pakistan, the symbolic images presented in English newspapers offer a powerful means of cultural communication, with the potential to foster understanding and respect among communities.

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