



CRISIS OR CHRONIC CONCERN? EPISODIC VS. THEMATIC FRAMING OF WATER SCARCITY IN PAKISTANI MEDIA

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Abstract

Water scarcity poses a severe threat to Pakistan's environmental sustainability, economic stability, and social well-being. Yet public understanding of water scarcity is shaped less by direct experience than by media representation. This study examines how Pakistani media frame water scarcity through episodic and thematic narratives and explores how these framing practices influence public perception, emotional response, and attribution of responsibility. Using qualitative content analysis of 240 media texts and 25 semi-structured interviews, the research identifies five dominant narrative patterns: episodic crisis framing, thematic structural framing, responsibility attribution, representational imbalance, and emotional tone. Findings reveal that episodic framing dominates coverage, constructing water scarcity as a crisis rather than a chronic systemic issue and promoting short-term solutions. Thematic framing, although less common, encourages deeper understanding and support for long-term policy reform. Marginalized voices are largely absent from mainstream narratives, reducing visibility of environmental injustice. The study concludes that media framing plays a critical role in shaping public interpretation of water scarcity and democratic engagement with environmental governance. Effective communication must balance emotional resonance with structural context to foster sustainable public awareness and collective action.

Keywords: Water scarcity; episodic framing; thematic framing; environmental communication; Pakistan; public perception; media representation; environmental justice; crisis discourse; narrative construction

1. Introduction

Water scarcity is one of the most pressing challenges facing Pakistan, with severe implications for public health, agricultural productivity, economic stability, and national security. Pakistan is classified among the world's most water-stressed countries, with rapidly declining per-capita water availability due to population growth, climate variability, mismanagement, and infrastructural limitations. Yet despite the urgency of the crisis, public understanding of water scarcity is shaped not only by hydrological realities but by how the issue is represented and framed within the media landscape. Most citizens do not directly measure water flows or reservoir levels; instead, they rely on mediated interpretations that construct water scarcity as either an immediate crisis requiring emergency action or a chronic structural condition embedded within long-term political and environmental systems. As Goffman (1974) argues, individuals interpret complex problems through framing structures that organize meaning, influencing perception and response.



Media framing plays a central role in shaping public discourse on environmental issues, determining what dimensions of a problem receive attention, how responsibility is assigned, and what solutions are considered possible. Frames function by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while omitting others, guiding audience interpretation through selective presentation (Lakoff, 2002). In the context of water scarcity, media can frame the issue episodically—focusing on specific events, disasters, or moments of visible crisis—or thematically, examining systemic causes and long-term patterns. Episodic framing highlights dramatic incidents such as water riots, supply breakdowns, or drought emergencies, while thematic framing situates water scarcity within broader political, institutional, and structural dynamics such as governance failure, agricultural inefficiency, climate change, and transboundary water politics. The distinction between episodic and thematic framing has meaningful implications for public understanding and policy preference. Iyengar (1991) argues that episodic framing encourages individuals to interpret social problems as isolated events, promoting individualized blame and short-term solutions. Conversely, thematic framing leads audiences to recognize structural causes and support systemic reforms. In Pakistan, episodic framing may lead the public to focus on temporary water shortages, tanker mafia conflicts, or seasonal crises, rather than addressing underlying issues such as groundwater depletion, infrastructure deterioration, and inequitable distribution policies. As a result, episodic coverage can create a perception that water scarcity is unexpected and sudden, rather than a predictable and escalating condition.

The political economy of media further complicates environmental representation. Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that mainstream media often prioritize elite interests, amplifying governmental and industrial perspectives while marginalizing affected communities. Given the sensitivity of water politics in Pakistan—particularly disputes over the Indus Waters Treaty, interprovincial tensions, and accusations of inequitable water allocation—media may frame narratives in ways aligned with political agendas rather than environmental realities. Castells (2009) asserts that power in communication systems determines whose narratives become dominant and whose concerns are silenced. Thus, the framing of water scarcity is not neutral but shaped by institutional priorities, political competition, and economic influence.

Moreover, the rise of digital and social media has reconfigured public communication environments. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube function as spaces for participatory discourse, enabling citizens, activists, and local communities to produce alternative narratives about water rights and resource injustice. Papacharissi (2015) conceptualizes these digital collectives as affective publics, where emotional storytelling and symbolic expression organize social engagement. Emotional narratives about women walking miles to fetch water, farmers losing crops, or children suffering illness due to contaminated water circulate widely online, often challenging official narratives that downplay crisis severity. This suggests that water scarcity is both an informational and emotional issue, shaped by competing narrative forces.

Despite the critical importance of water scarcity in Pakistan, academic research has often prioritized technical, hydrological, or policy-based analysis rather than communication-centered inquiry. While environmental communication scholarship has examined climate change and disaster representation globally, studies focusing specifically on media framing of water scarcity in the Pakistani context remain limited. Existing research highlights challenges surrounding water governance, agricultural dependence, climate-induced variability, and regional conflict, yet less attention has been given to how public opinion is shaped through journalistic storytelling and framing practices. This gap is significant because public support



for water management reforms depends on perception, awareness, and trust—all shaped by media discourse.

Understanding the framing of water scarcity in Pakistan is essential for examining how public consciousness and collective action develop. If the media depict water scarcity as an episodic emergency, audiences may demand short-term fixes such as tanker deliveries, temporary rationing, or emergency funding. If framed thematically, the public may support long-term solutions such as investment in water storage infrastructure, improved irrigation practices, anti-corruption reforms, and climate-adaptive policies. Thus, the framing approach influences whether water scarcity is understood as a short-term crisis or a chronic structural challenge requiring systemic transformation.

Public perception is crucial because environmental crises cannot be addressed without widespread civic participation, political will, and institutional accountability. According to Sunstein (2001), risk perception is shaped more by how issues are communicated than by scientific data alone. When framing emphasizes uncertainty, conflict, or blame, audiences may become polarized or apathetic. In contrast, frames emphasizing collective responsibility and structural reform can foster political engagement. Given Pakistan's vulnerability to both climate-driven water shortages and governance-based water mismanagement, media framing may significantly shape national discourse and policy direction.

Therefore, this research investigates how Pakistani media construct the issue of water scarcity through episodic and thematic frames and explores how these framing approaches influence public understanding. The study analyzes print, television, and digital news to examine the relationship between narrative style, assigned responsibility, emotional tone, and public interpretation. By exploring the discursive construction of water scarcity, the research contributes to broader debates concerning environmental communication, political framing, and public engagement in resource governance.

This study aims to fill a gap in scholarship by integrating framing theory, media studies, and environmental governance within the Pakistani context. It examines how the media define the water crisis, who is represented as responsible, whose voices are prioritized or excluded, and what solutions are normalized. In doing so, it highlights the symbolic power of media narratives in shaping national priorities and public actions. By analyzing episodic versus thematic framing, the research contributes to understanding how communication can either obscure systemic causes or illuminate pathways toward sustainable reform.

Ultimately, examining media framing of water scarcity provides insight into how societies conceptualize environmental problems and who benefits or suffers from different narrative constructions. Whether water scarcity is framed as crisis or chronic concern has profound implications for environmental justice, public trust, and policy intervention. Understanding these framing processes is essential for addressing one of Pakistan's most urgent challenges.

2. Literature Review

The representation of water scarcity within media discourse has become a critical area of inquiry in environmental communication research. Water scarcity is both an environmental reality and a symbolic construction mediated through journalistic practices, institutional narratives, and public discourse. How the media frame water scarcity influences public perception, risk interpretation, and political urgency. This literature review synthesizes scholarship relevant to the study of episodic and thematic framing in relation to water scarcity, focusing on five key thematic domains: (1) media and environmental communication, (2) episodic versus thematic framing, (3) risk perception and the public understanding of

environmental crises, (4) political economy and institutional influence in framing water issues, and (5) representation, inequality, and environmental justice narratives in communication.

2.1 Media and Environmental Communication

Environmental crises, including water scarcity, are complex problems that most people do not experience firsthand. Instead, they are learned through mediated narratives that structure public understanding. Media communication plays a central role in defining environmental issues by determining what aspects receive focused attention and what interpretations are legitimized. Castells (2009) argues that communication power shapes public consciousness by determining dominant narratives within the information environment. When media highlight certain environmental dangers, they elevate them in the public agenda; when they ignore or minimize risk, they contribute to silence and inaction.

Traditional mass media have historically framed environmental problems through expert-driven reports, emphasizing scientific authority and institutional messaging. However, research shows that audiences often struggle to understand scientific complexity without contextual or emotional framing (Sunstein, 2001). Environmental communication scholars contend that the media do not merely inform the public but actively construct environmental meaning by organizing ecological issues within culturally recognizable storytelling patterns. Goffman's (1974) assertion that framing structures social interpretation is foundational in understanding how media transform abstract environmental issues into public discourse.

Water scarcity coverage across global media systems reflects this narrative construction. News reports frequently translate hydrological and climatic data into stories of disaster, conflict, and crisis. Yet environmental degradation is a slow-moving problem, often lacking dramatic visuals, leading media to privilege episodic events—floods, droughts, water disputes—over long-term structural realities. The literature suggests that environmental crises gain visibility primarily during dramatic peaks, despite being ongoing systemic threats.

2.2 Episodic Versus Thematic Framing

The distinction between episodic and thematic framing provides a critical lens for understanding how media structure public meaning. Iyengar (1991) differentiates episodic framing as the presentation of issues through specific events, individual experiences, and momentary incidents, while thematic framing presents issues in broader historical, structural, and societal contexts. Episodic frames tend to generate emotional immediacy and focus on personal narratives, but they also encourage audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals rather than institutions.

Research demonstrates that episodic framing promotes reactive thinking, intensifies emotional responses, and reinforces short-term policy preferences. Audiences exposed to episodic framing are more likely to believe that problems stem from personal or community behaviors and less likely to recognize systemic causes such as governance, infrastructure, and policy failures. Thematic framing, however, encourages structural attribution by situating issues within broader political, economic, and environmental systems. Thematic frames enable audiences to understand long-term patterns, institutional responsibility, and the need for coordinated reform.

In the context of environmental communication, episodic framing emphasizes dramatic moments—such as drought emergencies, water protests, crop destruction, or tanker mafias—while thematic framing addresses long-term issues such as mismanagement, climate change, groundwater depletion, agricultural inefficiency, and interprovincial water allocation. Scholars

argue that episodic framing may obscure structural causes by presenting water shortages as unforeseen crises rather than predictable consequences of systemic failure.

In countries facing chronic water insecurity, including Pakistan, episodic and thematic framing have profound implications. When water scarcity is framed episodically, the public perceives it as a temporary disaster rather than a national developmental crisis. When framed thematically, the public is more likely to support structural reforms rather than temporary relief measures.

2.3 Risk Perception and Public Understanding of Environmental Crises

Public perception of environmental crises is shaped not only by factual information but also by emotional and narrative interpretation. Sunstein (2001) argues that risk perception is socially constructed through communication flows rather than objective measurement. People respond to environmental threats based on emotion, cultural meaning, and trust in institutions. When threats appear remote or invisible, risk is underestimated; when portrayed dramatically, risk is amplified.

Environmental crises that develop slowly over time, such as groundwater depletion or increasing water salinity, often fail to receive sustained coverage because they lack spectacle. Therefore, public understanding becomes fragmented, with people more likely to respond strongly when water scarcity becomes visible, such as during severe shortages or conflicts (Ahmad et al., 2021; Faizullah et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2021). Emotional communication styles can motivate collective action, but they may also lead to panic, misinformation, or political manipulation.

2.4 Political Economy, Power, and Media Influence in Water Communication

The political economy of media significantly shapes how environmental issues are reported. Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that media systems often align with institutional and elite interests, filtering environmental narratives to protect political and economic power. In contexts where water management is linked to political conflict, military control, or industrial development, media may avoid challenging powerful institutions. Water governance in Pakistan is highly political, shaped by disputes over provincial distribution, canal management, hydropower projects, and transboundary water agreements. Therefore, media framing may reflect political agendas rather than objective environmental analysis.

Economic framing frequently positions water conservation and environmental protection in conflict with industrial progress and agricultural productivity. When policy reforms are framed as threats to economic growth, public resistance increases. Conversely, thematic framing emphasizing sustainability and long-term stability can foster support for change.

Political framing can polarize public perception by presenting water scarcity as a partisan issue rather than a collective challenge. This has consequences for public unity, institutional trust, and long-term policy outcomes.

2.5 Representation, Inequality, and Environmental Justice

Environmental justice scholarship demonstrates that the effects of environmental degradation disproportionately impact marginalized groups, including low-income communities, rural populations, and women responsible for domestic water labor. Yet mainstream media often privilege elite and governmental voices while minimizing marginalized perspectives. Herman and Chomsky (1988) emphasize that communities lacking institutional power are frequently excluded from media visibility.

Human-interest framing that represents vulnerable groups can transform moral understanding of environmental harm. Visual narratives showing the lived experience of communities facing contaminated water or displacement may establish pollution as a human rights issue. Emotional

narratives have the potential to disrupt dominant political framings and mobilize public support.

Thus, water scarcity coverage that excludes vulnerable voices may contribute to public apathy and policy stagnation, while inclusive representation may foster environmental justice and ethical responsibility.

This study extends existing scholarship by examining how Pakistani media construct water scarcity through episodic vs. thematic frames and how such framing influences public interpretation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Framing Theory and Social Constructionism, supported by insights from political economy of communication and risk perception scholarship.

3.1 Framing Theory

Framing Theory asserts that the way issues are presented influences how they are understood (Goffman, 1974). Frames function by selecting aspects of perceived reality and constructing narratives that emphasize causal attribution, moral evaluation, and recommended solutions (Lakoff, 2002). This theory is essential for understanding how media framing shapes meaning around water scarcity by directing attention toward specific explanations and solutions. Episodic frames organize meaning through short-term crises, while thematic frames emphasize structural causes.

3.2 Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism asserts that realities are produced through discourse rather than objective facts. Environmental crises become “public problems” when they are symbolically constructed through communication practices. Water scarcity exists materially, but its social meaning and urgency depend on how it is talked about in the media. Thus, framing determines whether water scarcity is interpreted as a disaster, a political struggle, or a governance failure.

3.3 Political Economy of Media

Political economy perspectives explain how power structures influence environmental narratives. Media may reproduce elite interests by amplifying official statements and minimizing dissenting perspectives, especially in politically sensitive contexts.

4. Research Questions & Hypotheses

4.1 Research Questions

RQ1: How do Pakistani media frame water scarcity through episodic and thematic narratives?

RQ2: What framing strategies dominate coverage, and how do they shape public understanding of causes, consequences, and solutions?

RQ3: How does episodic versus thematic framing influence audience perception of responsibility and urgency in addressing water scarcity?

RQ4: Which actors and social groups are given voice or excluded in water scarcity coverage?

4.2 Hypotheses

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework:

H1: Pakistani media predominantly utilize episodic framing, focusing on short-term crises rather than long-term structural causes.

H2: Thematic framing is more likely to emphasize governance, institutional accountability, and policy solutions.

H3: Episodic framing leads audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals and local community behavior, while thematic framing encourages attribution to systemic and institutional factors.

H4: Media coverage marginalizes the perspectives of vulnerable communities most affected by water scarcity.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using content analysis and semi-structured interviews to examine how Pakistani media frame water scarcity through episodic and thematic narratives. A qualitative interpretive approach was selected because framing is a meaning-making process that requires analysis of language, discourse, and context rather than numerical measurement. Creswell (2013) notes that qualitative inquiry is appropriate for examining social processes, symbolic representation, and lived interpretation, particularly when exploring how people understand and communicate complex societal problems. The research aimed to analyze how different narrative strategies construct public meaning around water scarcity and how audiences interpret these frames.

5.2 Sampling and Data Sources

Two primary datasets were collected:

(1) Media Content Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 240 media texts from January 2020 to June 2023 across:

- National newspapers: *Dawn*, *The News International*, *Express Tribune*, *Nation*, *Daily Pakistan*
- Television news transcripts from major channels
- Digital news platforms: *Geo.tv*, *Bol News*, *ARY Digital*, *Samaa Digital*

The sample included:

Media Type	Quantity
Print & digital articles	160
TV news transcripts	60
Editorials & opinion pieces	20

These texts were selected using keywords such as *water scarcity*, *water crisis*, *drought*, *water shortage*, *Indus Water Treaty*, *irrigation*, *climate change*, and *groundwater depletion*. Articles were selected to achieve diversity in geographic focus, ideological positioning, and type of framing.

(2) Audience Interviews

To capture public interpretation, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants aged 18-65 from different provinces. Participants included:

- Students (6)
- Teachers/instructors (5)
- Farmers and rural community members (4)
- Urban residents experiencing municipal shortages (6)
- Journalists and activists (4)

Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and were conducted in Urdu or English, depending on participant preference. Sampling used snowball and convenience approaches.

5.3 Data Collection Procedure

Media texts were accessed through news archives and online search databases. Interviewees were recruited through social media networks and university contacts. Before interviews, participants signed informed consent forms and were assured anonymity.

Interview questions explored:

- Understanding of water scarcity severity

- Perceptions of causes and responsibility
- Media influence on understanding and expectations
- Emotional reactions to coverage
- Preferred solutions and policy expectations

5.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **thematic analysis** following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process:

- (1) Familiarization with data
- (2) Generating initial codes
- (3) Constructing themes
- (4) Reviewing themes
- (5) Defining and naming themes
- (6) Analytical reporting

Media texts were coded for:

- Type of framing (episodic vs. thematic)
- Tone (urgent, neutral, sensational, hopeful)
- Attribution of responsibility
- Actors represented (government, experts, public, victims, activists)
- Emotional language and narrative style
- Suggested solutions

Coding was both inductive (emerging patterns) and deductive (guided by theoretical framing categories). Two researchers independently coded 30% of the sample to ensure reliability.

Interview transcripts were analyzed iteratively to examine alignment or divergence from media narratives.

5.5 Trustworthiness and Research Validity

Credibility and trustworthiness were strengthened through:

- Triangulation between media texts and audience interviews
- Cross-coding for reliability
- Member checking with selected interviewees
- Rich contextual descriptions to enable transferability

5.6 Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines: voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymized reporting of interview quotations.

6. Results

The results reveal significant differences between episodic and thematic framing and illustrate how these frames shape public interpretation of water scarcity. Five dominant thematic patterns emerged from the media analysis:

- (1) Episodic Framing: Crisis Events and Emergency Narratives
- (2) Thematic Framing: Structural Causes and Systemic Governance Failure
- (3) Attribution of Responsibility and Blame
- (4) Representation Gaps and Marginalized Voices
- (5) Emotional and Cultural Dimensions of Coverage

6.1 Episodic Framing: Crisis and Spectacle

Episodic narratives accounted for 64% of the media sample and emphasized immediate crises including:

- Municipal water cuts in Karachi



- Protests against tanker mafias
- Drought emergencies in Tharparkar
- Urban water riots
- Crop destruction in Sindh and Punjab

Such stories often highlighted drama, conflict, and urgency, featuring sensational headlines and focusing on public suffering rather than causes or solutions. Coverage relied heavily on visuals of long queues, conflict at water points, and angry citizens. Episodic framing frequently portrayed water scarcity as sudden and unpredictable.

Interview participants reflected this perception:

“The news always shows water riots or people fighting. It feels like chaos, like it just happened out of nowhere.”

Respondents described emotional reactions such as fear, frustration, and helplessness, but lacked clarity about systemic causes.

6.2 Thematic Framing: Long-Term Political, Environmental, and Institutional Context

Thematic framing represented 36% of articles and addressed:

- Climate change and declining glacial melt
- Groundwater depletion
- Mismanagement and corruption in irrigation
- Population growth and urban expansion
- Agricultural inefficiency and crop choices
- Indus Water Treaty and interprovincial disputes

Articles used expert interviews, policy analysis, and structural discussion. Thematic reports framed water scarcity as a predictable and chronic condition with identifiable systemic roots rather than temporary disaster.

Participants expressed appreciation for thematic content:

“When experts explain how the system works, it makes sense. It is not just shortage, it is mismanagement.”

Thematic framing increased support for long-term reform rather than temporary relief measures.

6.3 Attribution of Responsibility

Responsibility framing showed clear distinctions:

Episodic framing	Thematic framing
Blamed public misuse, encroachers, and local officials	Highlighted institutional failure, structural inequality, climate change
Emphasized short-term solutions	Emphasized reforms, governance, investment, and sustainability

Interviewees exposed to episodic framing tended to assign blame to citizens and communities, whereas those aware of thematic framing assigned responsibility to government agencies and policy structures.

6.4 Representation and voice

Media content commonly prioritizes elite actors such as government officials, scientists, engineers, and politicians. Voices of those most affected—rural farmers, informal workers, Indigenous communities, poor urban households—were significantly underrepresented.

Only **14%** of sampled articles included direct quotations from affected communities.

Participants criticized this exclusion:

“The ones who suffer the most rarely get a chance to speak.”

This finding aligns with research arguing that marginalized perspectives are systematically silenced in mainstream media systems (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

6.5 Emotional Tone and Cultural Expression

Episodic framing generated intense emotional reaction—fear, anger, anxiety—while thematic framing fostered critical reflection and analytical engagement. Participants described emotional fatigue from repeated crisis framing, suggesting a risk of desensitization.

Narrative effects observed:

Narrative Type	Public Reaction
Episodic	Panic, frustration, media distrust
Thematic	Critical thinking, support for reform
Emotional suffering	Empathy, mobilization
Political blame	Division and polarization

6.6 Summary of Results

The findings demonstrate that:

- Pakistani media predominantly employ episodic framing (64% vs. 36% thematic).
- Episodic framing constructs water scarcity as sudden crisis, promoting short-term responses and individual blame.
- Thematic framing constructs water scarcity as chronic structural problem requiring systemic reform.
- Marginalized community voices are largely absent from mainstream narratives.
- Emotional effects shape motivation, trust, and participation.

Interpretive Conclusion from Results

Episodic framing reduces public understanding of water scarcity complexity, while thematic framing deepens systemic awareness and enhances support for policy reform. The dominance of episodic framing may impede sustainable action and reinforce cycles of crisis management rather than long-term planning.

7. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Pakistani media frame water scarcity and to analyze the implications of episodic versus thematic framing on public perception and understanding. The findings reveal a significant imbalance in framing practices, with episodic narratives dominating media coverage. This imbalance plays a critical role in shaping how the public interprets water scarcity, assigns responsibility, and evaluates potential solutions. The results underscore the importance of framing theory for understanding communication dynamics in environmental crises and demonstrate the social and political consequences of representational choices.

The predominance of episodic framing in Pakistani media suggests that water scarcity is frequently portrayed as a temporary emergency rather than a persistent structural crisis. This pattern aligns with the view that episodic framing prioritizes dramatic events, human suffering, and conflict-based storytelling. The emphasis on crisis-driven imagery, such as lines of people waiting for water, tanker confrontations, or dried-up canals, creates a perception that water scarcity suddenly erupts rather than gradually develops. The public, therefore, may perceive water scarcity as a matter of chance, fate, or local mismanagement instead of the predictable outcome of systemic failures in governance, infrastructure, and environmental planning.

The reliance on episodic framing has several consequences. First, it encourages audiences to focus on individual-level explanations rather than structural causes. Interview participants who primarily consumed episodic coverage tended to blame citizens, local officials, or poor



household management for shortages (Adnan et al., 2019; Aslam et al., 2020; Aslam & Ahmad, 2019; Riaz et al., 2021). This mode of interpretation reduces pressure on institutional actors responsible for long-term planning, resource distribution, and policy decisions. Second, episodic framing promotes short-term reactive solutions—such as emergency tanker supplies, rationing, and short-term political interventions—rather than long-term reforms like sustainable irrigation policies, investment in water infrastructure, and climate-adaptive strategies.

In contrast, thematic framing encourages audiences to situate water scarcity within structural, historical, and political contexts. Articles employing thematic framing connected water scarcity to broader forces, including population growth, climate change, glacier reduction, groundwater over-extraction, and transboundary water disputes. Participants exposed to thematic narratives expressed greater awareness of institutional failures and supported systemic reform. This suggests that thematic framing contributes to deeper public understanding and may increase political will for long-term solutions.

However, the relatively low proportion of thematic framing in the sample indicates an underdeveloped structural discourse within Pakistani media. Given the complexity of water management systems, thematic framing is essential for generating informed public engagement and policy support. Without this framing, the population remains vulnerable to misinformation, emotional burnout, or political manipulation.

The study also reveals significant gaps in representation. Voices of marginalized communities—those disproportionately affected by water scarcity—were noticeably underrepresented. While media frequently quoted government officials, experts, and politicians, only a small percentage of articles included the perspectives of farmers, rural populations, informal laborers, or urban slum dwellers directly experiencing scarcity. This representational imbalance shapes public understanding by privileging expert and elite viewpoints while silencing the lived experiences of affected communities. This aligns with political economy perspectives suggesting that media systems tend to amplify institutional narratives while marginalizing powerless groups.

Underrepresentation weakens the moral force of environmental justice narratives, which emphasize inequality and human rights dimensions of water scarcity. When environmental harm is represented through distant or abstract discourse instead of personal testimony, it loses urgency. Conversely, human-interest framing that centers affected voices can humanize the crisis and expand public empathy. The absence of these voices indicates missed opportunities to frame water scarcity as a matter of equity and social justice rather than solely a technical or political issue.

The emotional dimension of media framing further illustrates its significance. Interview participants exposed primarily to episodic framing reported emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and frustration. Crisis framing can initially motivate attention but may lead to disengagement when repeated without meaningful explanation or solution. Continuous exposure to shocking imagery may numb audiences to urgency, producing a cycle of crisis fatigue. Conversely, thematic framing, which contextualizes the problem and explains pathways for reform, fosters empowerment and sustained public engagement. This highlights the need for balanced framing that neither sensationalizes nor obscures complexity.

The findings also show the growing role of digital media in shaping narrative environments. Social media functions as a competing communicative space where alternative narratives—including grassroots activism and citizen journalism—circulate. While digital platforms can amplify marginalized voices, they also intensify emotional and conflict-driven messaging.

Competing narratives online may contribute to confusion, distrust, and polarization. Participants reported difficulty distinguishing credible information from politicized rhetoric, particularly surrounding issues such as interprovincial water disputes or infrastructure failure. These results point to the importance of developing communication strategies that emphasize transparency, clarity, and credibility.

Overall, the findings suggest that media framing significantly influences how the public understands water scarcity, evaluates responsibility, and supports policy interventions. Framing determines whether water scarcity is understood as a natural disaster, a political conflict, an environmental injustice, or a structural governance issue. Therefore, the media have substantial narrative power in shaping the trajectory of environmental policy and public mobilization in Pakistan.

To address water scarcity effectively, communication strategies must integrate scientific explanation, structural analysis, and human-centered storytelling. Media must expand thematic framing and improve representation of affected communities to foster public awareness aligned with long-term environmental sustainability. Additionally, journalists and policymakers must recognize the dangers of crisis-only framing, which can reinforce reactive politics and inhibit meaningful reform.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of responsible media framing in environmental governance. Water scarcity is not merely a hydrological issue but a communicative process through which meaning, priority, and responsibility are negotiated. Understanding how media construct the problem is essential for developing socially informed and sustainable solutions.

8. Conclusion

This study examined how Pakistani media frame water scarcity through episodic and thematic narratives and analyzed the impact of these framing practices on public perception. The research demonstrates that episodic framing dominates mainstream coverage, presenting water scarcity as an event-based crisis rather than a chronic structural failure. As a result, public understanding is shaped by short-term emotional responses rather than comprehensive recognition of systemic causes.

Thematic framing, although less prevalent, provides deeper contextualization and encourages the public to attribute responsibility to institutional actors and long-term governance challenges. The imbalance between episodic and thematic framing therefore, has significant implications for environmental awareness and political engagement.

The study also found that marginalized communities most affected by scarcity are underrepresented in mainstream discourse. This absence contributes to narratives that downplay social inequality and environmental injustice. Furthermore, emotional responses to episodic crisis framing may lead to fatigue and disengagement, weakening public capacity to participate in sustainable reform initiatives.

These findings highlight the need for more responsible environmental communication practices that prioritize thematic analysis, equitable representation, and constructive engagement. Journalists, policymakers, educators, and activists must collaborate to communicate water scarcity as a long-term national priority rather than a cyclic emergency.

Ultimately, whether water scarcity in Pakistan is understood as a crisis or a chronic concern depends on media framing. The choices made in media storytelling influence national consciousness, shape public expectations, and determine support for reform. Strengthening thematic framing and environmental justice discourse can help transform awareness into



action, enabling communities and governments to address one of Pakistan's most urgent challenges.

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