

## DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF REGIONAL IDENTITIES IN PAKISTANI PRINT MEDIA: A SOCIO-COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF PROVINCIAL POLITICS

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores the discursive construction of regional identities in Pakistani print media in the context of provincial politics. Drawing upon a socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, thirty news excerpts from Dawn, The News International, and The Express Tribune are examined to uncover how regional identities are strategically framed and ideologically positioned. The findings reveal distinct representational patterns across newspapers: while Dawn foregrounds provincial autonomy, particularly in Sindh and Balochistan, against federal intervention, The News International frequently employs securitization and national-interest narratives that align with central authority, depicting ethnic movements such as PTM as externally influenced or disruptive. Discursive mechanisms such as binary framing, metaphorical categorization, and ideological positioning contribute to mental models that either legitimize central dominance or endorse regional solidarity. These representations not only reflect existing power hierarchies but also have the potential to shape public cognition regarding ethnic hierarchies and political legitimacy. The study contributes to understanding how print media actively participates in constructing regional identities within Pakistan's federal structure. Limitations include the focus on a short time frame and exclusive reliance on print media, pointing to future research opportunities in digital media and longitudinal perspectives.*

**Keywords:** *Regional Identity, Provincial Politics, Media Discourse, Socio-cognitive Analysis, Ideology*

### **1. Introduction**

The representation of regional identity remains a central fault-line in Pakistan's political life, where competing claims over autonomy, resource distribution, and historical grievances shape federal-provincial relations. Mainstream print media play a critical role in this terrain: through selection, framing, and lexical choices, newspapers do not simply report events, they actively partake in the construction of social and political meanings. A socio-cognitive approach to discourse recognizes that media texts contribute to forming "mental models" and social representations that influence how audiences interpret groups, events, and claims to legitimacy. Within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the socio-cognitive strand, notably developed by Teun A. van Dijk, offers a robust theoretical lens for examining how textual choices (e.g., metaphors, nomination, predication, evidentiality) interact with social structures to reproduce or contest ideological positions. In a sociopolitical context like Pakistan, such an approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how newspapers might securitize, marginalize, or legitimize provincial actors through discursive devices that mirror broader power relations. Empirical studies in the Pakistani context further underscore the relevance of this approach. For example, analyses of print media discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic found that English and Urdu newspapers produced highly polarized and ideologically loaded representations, varying significantly in their linguistic and semiotic strategies. Other research

has documented systematic patterns in the portrayal of ethnic minorities in Pakistani newspapers, revealing recurring themes, framing strategies, and tendencies toward marginalization.

By combining CDA with socio-cognitive analysis, this study investigates how leading English-language newspapers in Pakistan discursively construct regional identities in their coverage of provincial politics. It examines (a) the discursive strategies used to frame regional identities and political actors, and (b) how these strategies may influence public cognition, shaping perceptions of legitimacy, threat, and belonging. The analysis attends to inter-newspaper variation, discursive devices (e.g., binary framing, metaphor, agency attribution), and the potential socio-cognitive effects on readers' mental models concerning provincial actors and central authority. In doing so, the study engages directly with issues of democratic deliberation, policy formulation, and conflict management within Pakistan's federal structure.

Media portrayals of identity are not merely descriptive; they participate in shaping public perceptions that can influence political discourse, inter-provincial relations, and social cohesion. Situated within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study therefore examines how regional identities are discursively constructed in Pakistani print media and how these constructions intersect with questions of power, legitimacy, and federal-provincial tension. Employing a socio-cognitive orientation to CDA (van Dijk, 2008), the analysis foregrounds how discursive strategies used in news language can embed ideological assumptions into collective mental models, thereby reinforcing or challenging dominant power structures. This analytical focus is particularly critical in Pakistan, where struggles over autonomy, resource distribution, and political representation have historically shaped relations between the centre and the provinces (Khan, 2020).

As the principal arena in which narratives of belonging and exclusion are staged, media discourse has the capacity both to amplify provincial voices and to reproduce stereotypes that marginalize regional communities. In a post-colonial context such as Pakistan, print media continues to mediate between demands for central unity and assertions of regional identity, often with significant political consequences.

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Pakistan is a country where the context of ethnic and regional identity is deeply segmented in terms of cultural richness as opposed against the endeavours of the state to create a coherent national identity. Ethnicities that refer to such languages as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi are neither fixed nor closed units but constantly made through historical migrations and colonializations (Wikipedia, 2025). The identities regionally are achieved in provincial loyalties, in which riverine culture of Sindh is pitted against the dry tribalism of Balochistan, in shaping political inclinations. In this regard, identities can be mobilized because the smaller ethnic groups such as Saraiki in southern Punjab are demand provincial type of status as a result of marginalization (The Friday Times, 2025). Influential forces such as urbanization and global warming present-day challenges even worsen the situation and the media sheds light on the identity-related displacements of the people in KP as a result of militancy. The ethnic and regional moral is organized based in their reinforcement of one another, the ethnic pride inspires the regional demands and demand creates the ethnic stories, building a forehead of reaction supported by media.

#### **1.1.1 Role of Provincial Politics in Shaping Identity Narratives**

In Pakistan, provincial politics is an important factor of identity narrative as it is the space where ethnic urges and federal demands clash. The biggest province is Punjab, where agrarian identities are corresponding to politics, and parties, such as the Pakistan Muslim league-Nawaz (PML-N) propagate a pan-Punjab narrative that is establishing a leading nuclear politics in the

country (Hussain, n.d.). This influence in view to Sindh with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) employing Sindh nationalism to resist city-based Muhajir agendas to form the narratives of cultural retention under the water scarcity discussions. In another Baluchistan, KP, ideologies express identities via a kind of opposition in politics, where the Baluchistan National Party (BNP) and the Pakistan Tani Pakistani (PM) manifest grievances via a central negatively exploiting behaviour, and that ideology shapes the perceptions of the youth (Haque et al., 2024). In this way, provincial politics successfully forms the identity through the establishment of local histories into the overarching political strategies, usually through the prism of the partisan reporting.

### 1.1.2 Media and Identity Construction

Media in Pakistan also plays an active role in the construction of its identities and abstract ethnic and regional ethnic groups have turned this abstractness into concrete discourses. Agenda-setting is what makes the media place more priority on the identities of some sources e.g. how Pashtun culture in KP is being shown as innately martial in one way or other thereby creating a picture of how people in this province perceive the problem of insecurity (Ali et al., 2022). It is a discursive construction that uses the power of language, such as calling Baloch a tribal to create the picture of primitivism and, thus, legitimized state actions (Hassan, 2018). This process is accelerated by digital media, whereby created contents on TikTok are transforming the Sindhia folk identities among the young audiences. The unity in the productive influence of media is determined by its power to overlay the historical symbols on the modern events making identities hectic and disputable.

### 1.1.3 Media as a Site of Representation and Contestation

In Pakistan, which is characterized by ethnic and regional presence, media serves as a location of representation and contradiction of ethnic groupings and regional locations as dominant groups tensions on which groups have control over the narrative. The representation is done through stereotyped explanations like dramas of the Sindhis as feudal lords which are in opposing the progressive self-images being supplied by local channels (Dattoo, 2010). Competition in the hybrid space takes place through the use of online forums whereby the Baloch activists dispute the mainstream formulation of insurgency as terrorism. It is a dynamic location; the print media reflects the position on behalf of authority whereas digital spaces allow the counter-story, as it did on the 2021 PTM rallies. What is being emphasized with these interrelated sentences is how contestation starts with representation and leads to the formation of dialectic that develops identities.

### 1.1.4 Influence of Print, Electronic, and Digital Media in Pakistan

The effects of the print, electronic and digital media in Pakistan on the identity representation is greatly multifaceted with each medium producing a different but complementary impact. Print media, which has its Caesarean Dawn and Jang impact the news with editorials, which shape provincial politics, which often have punjab-based views (Wadhwa, 2022). Through media such as Geo News, there is a real-time power of electronic media in the form of discussions that sensationalize ethnic conflicts in Balochistan and influence the overall level of response immediately. The role of digital media, which includes social platforms has an omnipresent effect through viralization of regional anthem, democratic expression of identity in KP (Khan et al., 2023). This emerging triple effect unites in comely consumption hierarchies, in the manner that audiences rubricize sources, and in the end create overlaying identity storylines.

### 1.1.5 Ethnic and Regional Politics in Pakistan

The political dynamics in Pakistan, especially ethnic and regional ties, summarize the conflicts between subnational and national loyalties through historical imbalances and competitions of

resources. Ethnic politics rallies the groups as the Mohajirs in Sindh Urban centres, whereas the provincial sovereignty, in the demands of the Baloch gas and revenue shares (Majeed, n.d.). These politics overlap in the federal platforms such as the Council of Common Interests in which the ethnic voices argue against the central policies (Karim et al., 2024). The recent electoral developments, after 2024, confirm this as the regional parties are picking up, in the middle of economic misfortunes. A survey of provincial forces can indicate a typically different, but at the same time interconnected dynamics in Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as each of them developed identity politics. In Punjab, the politics of the precarity are focused on the economic hegemony and agrarian identities and the PML-N governance has strengthened a discourse of national leadership, but experiences Saraiki sub-regionalization problems (Durr-e-Nayab & Kanwal, 2023).

The politics of Sindh is a mixture of rural Sindh nationalism within the framework of PPP and in this region coupled with urban ethnic woes involving MQM, and aggravated by Karachi demographics in the changes. The dynamics of Balochistan are unstable with the conflicting actions of insurgent groups of people over tooling down of the resources with media showing that human rights were violated in CPEC projects (Afzal, 2015). The politics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa concern the Pashtun revival since the militancy and ANP/ PTI played straddling identity as well as developmental discourses. These tensions unify by having mutual federal relations, where the role of Punjab in the relationship was matched by other provinces to carry balancing relations, and this was sustain a national script of a managed diversity (UNFPA, 2024).

Pakistan is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country, whose politics have been preconditioned by the plurality of ethnic and language identities of productive provinces, i.e., Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and Balochistan with their corresponding cultural and historical story (Shaheen & Naz, 2018). Since the establishment of the state in 1947 provincial autonomy and decentralization of power have remained an issue with minorities in the country feeling deprived by the central government. Between the One Unit policy of the 1950s and the political tremors of the 1970s, relations between its units in the center tended to dominate the course followed by the state as a whole.

In 2010, The 18th Amendment restructured the governance of Pakistan by handing over a lot of legislative and administrative authority to the provinces. They thought it was a new step towards overcoming past national disillusionments of the past, and once again there was a question of the right shares of the central driving power, and self-governing areas (Hussain, 2021). With provincial leaders starting to take shape, the national media started featuring talk about these new political forces and movements across regular channels.

The media have worked within this new political environment as both a comforter of what happens, as well as a communicator of these behaviours to the populace to be processed. Yet media representations do not exist in a sociopolitical vacuum. The ways in which ideology and ownership/states may and are likely to have coverage in such a manner that encompasses what renders the picture of the representation that brings acquiescence within the hegemony, in the greater part of the cases, has proven to be seen in the research (Zia, and Syed, 2023). The influence is particularly evident in terms of regional movements coverage, where unity discourses may be considered stronger than excessive complaints or reflect the image of the latter as a danger to the self-sacrificing state (Khan, 2017).

In a multi-ethnic and post-colonial country like Pakistan, these theoretical models of provincial autonomy, ethnic rights, and federal governance are relevant to understand how people conceptualize power and how such conceptualizations can be replicated and reproduced (Ahmed & Baloch, 2023).

In historical times, ethnic based mobilization in Pakistan has tended to have been brought about by feelings of perceived marginalization at the centre. A feeling of economic exploitation and suppression of the culture have been a source of numerous insurgencies in Baluchistan, going on throughout decades. The local politics in Sindh have been informed by tensions between rural Sindhi and urban populations of Muhajirs where there has been demands to secure linguistic rights and representation. For KP, Pashtun identity overlaps with security issues particularly in the border areas near Afghanistan whereas Punjab being the dominant province has been seen to be having the lion share in terms of political and economic resources.

The identity politics in each province contributes to an officer's web of relations among the centres however emerging in the continual demand of the decentralized governance. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment tried to reform these relations with provinces having a bigger voice in health, education and resources mobilization. Coverage in the media has however been ambivalent considering that it has either celebrated the shift to federalism or given reasons as to why this move would lead to further fragmentation (Hussain & Akhtar, 2022). This strain is worked in the coverage of regional politics, fruit of tension between elite national discourses and ground realities.

Historically, Pakistani print media has catered primarily to an urban literate population and has played a significant role in shaping political discourse. Despite the rapid expansion of digital media, newspapers remain influential due to their extensive reportage, editorials, and opinion pieces, which frequently contribute to policy debates at national and provincial levels. Research shows that newspapers are central in framing public discourse on complex political matters such as provincial autonomy and resource distribution (Zia, 2020). By deciding what to highlight, how to angle a story, and what to omit, newspapers exercise considerable agenda-setting power, making their coverage particularly consequential for how ethnic and regional identities are perceived.

Such agenda-setting can legitimize or delegitimize political grievances. When newspapers sensationalize protest movements or omit their structural causes, they risk reinforcing negative stereotypes of regional groups and masking legitimate socio-political demands. Conversely, balanced coverage can foster empathy, promote dialogue, and highlight the constitutional basis for claims to greater representation and equitable governance. Therefore, a critical examination of linguistic choices, discursive framing, and ideological positioning in print media is necessary to understand how national consciousness negotiates ethnic and regional identities (Khan & Yousaf, 2023).

Importantly, Pakistan is not unique in experiencing such tensions. In Nigeria, media coverage of inter-ethnic conflicts frequently reflects central government positions, often framing dissenting groups as security threats rather than addressing underlying social and political grievances (Ojo, 2020). A similar pattern exists in India, where reporting on Kashmir or the Northeastern region often adopts an "anti-national" framing aligned with state perspectives (Bhatia, 2019). Scholarship on Sri Lanka has demonstrated how major newspapers framed Tamil political demands through a narrow security lens during the civil war, neglecting historical injustices and political marginalization (Perera, 2018). Across these post-colonial contexts, hegemonic national narratives are frequently prioritized over pluralistic regional identities.

Even in advanced democracies, comparable media dynamics persist. Studies on Spain show that Basque and Catalan movements are often portrayed by central media as dangerously separatist, delegitimizing their political claims and portraying autonomy demands as threats to national unity (Moreno, 2019). These cross-national examples demonstrate a recurring pattern: in multi-ethnic states, media discourse can become an arena for policing the boundaries of

belonging, shaping public cognition about who is considered legitimate, loyal, or threatening to national integrity.

Therefore, examining Pakistani print media offers valuable insights into how a post-colonial, politically diverse federation negotiates its internal identities through mediated discourse. As discursive strategies such as securitization, essentialization, and unity-vs-division framing appear across global contexts, Pakistan represents a crucial case for understanding how regional identity is constructed, contested, and cognitively internalized within dominant national narratives.

### 1.2 Rationale of the Study

Understanding how print media discursively construct regional identities is essential for both academic scholarship and public policy. Media narratives do not simply reflect social tensions; they help constitute categories of “insider” and “outsider,” “legitimate” and “threatening,” which in turn influence political mobilization, public opinion, and state responses. Given Pakistan’s recurrent provincial tensions, involving issues of representation, resource allocation, autonomy, and security, analysing media discourse offers critical insights into the symbolic processes that reproduce or challenge unequal power relations. Prior research on media representation of ethnic minorities and media framing of social issues shows entrenched patterns of bias and ideological positioning in Pakistani print media. Therefore, a socio-cognitive CDA addressing both textual strategies and cognitive consequences is timely and necessary.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

Although several studies have documented media coverage of ethnic minorities and sociopolitical issues in Pakistan, there remains a significant gap in systematically linking discursive strategies to their socio-cognitive consequences that is, how textual choices in media influence readers’ mental models and perceptions about regional identity, legitimacy, and power relations. Content analyses have identified patterns of bias, framing, and representation across different media outlets. However, few studies have used a socio-cognitive framework to analyze how such patterns may shape public cognition and contribute to broader processes of identity formation, political legitimation, or marginalization. In a dynamic and often volatile context where ethnic and provincial identities intersect with questions of power, governance, and security, this gap becomes particularly critical. This study seeks to address this lacuna by applying a socio-cognitive CDA to mainstream English-language newspapers, thereby connecting micro-level textual strategies to macro-level implications for public opinion and political dynamics in Pakistan’s federal structure.

### 1.4 Research Objectives

- To examine how Pakistani print media discursively constructs regional identities within the context of provincial politics and power relations.
- To investigate the socio-cognitive implications of these representations for public perceptions of regional identity and political legitimacy.

### 1.5 Research Questions

1. How does Pakistani print media construct and frame regional identities in its coverage of provincial politics and power relations?
2. In what ways do these media representations contribute to shaping public cognition and perceptions regarding regional identity and political dynamics?

## 2. Research Methodology

This section outlines the systematic plan for investigating how Pakistani print media represent ethnic and regional identities in the context of provincial politics. It specifies the theoretical framework, research design, sampling strategy, data collection, and analytical methods, all

aiming to ensure methodological rigor and to illuminate the interplay between media discourse, ideology, and socio-cognitive effects in Pakistan's multi-ethnic federal society.

### 2.1 Research Design

The study follows a qualitative interpretive paradigm, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), augmented by the socio-cognitive approach (SCA) developed by Teun A. van Dijk. This hybrid framework enables a dual focus: on one hand, the structural and rhetorical features of media texts (lexical choices, framing, metaphors, presuppositions, agency attribution, etc.), and on the other, the potential cognitive and ideological effects these texts may have on readers, how they shape mental models and social representations of regional identity and power.

Because the objective is exploratory and inductive, the design allows for emergent themes rather than imposing predetermined categories; this flexibility is essential given the fluid nature of provincial politics and media discourse. The study uses a cross-newspaper comparative design, treating print media as a single case study with multiple units of analysis (i.e. different newspapers), which helps reduce source bias and enables triangulation across editorial styles and ideological leanings.

Three major English-language newspapers have been purposively selected: a newspaper with a broadly liberal editorial line (Dawn), a newspaper with establishment or center-leaning orientation (The News International), and a newspaper considered comparatively balanced or alternative (The Express Tribune). This selection allows the study to compare and contrast discursive constructions of regional identities across different editorial and ideological contexts.

Ethical considerations include anonymization of non-public data (though public news articles are used), reflexivity regarding researcher positionality, and full transparency in coding and interpretation processes.

### 2.2 Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling method was used to generate a corpus of 30 articles (ten from each of the three newspapers). The sampling frame covers the period between January and August 2025, a timeframe selected for its relevance to ongoing federal-provincial tensions in Pakistan, including debates around federalism, the 18th Amendment, water disputes, resource allocation, and ethnic mobilization.

Articles were identified using relevant keywords such as “provincial autonomy,” “18th Amendment,” “water conflict,” “Balochistan unrest,” “ethnic mobilization,” “PTM,” “Sindh–Punjab conflict,” and similar terms. These keywords were chosen to capture a broad spectrum of discourses related to ethnicity, regional identity, resource conflicts, and provincial politics. Full texts of all selected articles were downloaded, stored securely, and catalogued with metadata (title, date of publication, newspaper name, section, and thematic summary). This ensures reproducibility and transparency, and facilitates systematic analysis while respecting fair use and citation ethics.

### 2.3 Analytical Framework & Method of Data Analysis

The primary analytical framework is the Socio-Cognitive Approach to Discourse Analysis as formulated by van Dijk (2006, 2016). According to SCA, discourse is not just linguistic output but part of a socio-cognitive interface: textual structures mediate between individual cognition (mental models) and shared social knowledge, thereby influencing collective attitudes, ideologies, and power relations.

#### 2.3.1 In applying this framework:

Each news article was closely read to identify discursive strategies such as nomination (how actors are named), predication (how they are described), argumentation, metaphors, presuppositions, and rhetorical/topical framing. Comparative analysis across newspapers

highlight variations in representation of regional identities e.g., whether certain provinces or ethnic groups are presented sympathetically or problematically, whether social grievances are contextualized or securitized, and how agency or threat is attributed.

The cognitive dimension was addressed by examining how repeated discursive patterns may contribute to constructing stereotypical mental models (e.g. “provincial agitator,” “threat to unity,” “resource hog,” etc.), which shape public perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and regional/federal relations. The analysis bridges the micro-level (textual/linguistic features) and macro-level (ideological structures, power relations) to assess the broader social impact of media discourse in the Pakistani federal context. This methodology supports a rigorous, theory-driven, yet contextually sensitive exploration of how media discourse functions in shaping regional identity and power dynamics.

## **2.4 Methodological Rationale & Validity Strategies**

The inductive, exploratory design ensures that the study remains open to unexpected themes or patterns, rather than being restricted by preconceived categories. Triangulation across newspapers with different editorial orientations helps mitigate ideological bias and increases the credibility of findings. Detailed cataloguing of metadata and transparent coding procedures enhance reliability and reproducibility. The combination of CDA with SCA offers both structural and cognitive validity: structural in analyzing how texts are constructed, cognitive in theorizing how texts may influence readers’ perceptions and social attitudes. Reflexivity and ethical awareness ensure that researcher subjectivity is acknowledged and managed.

## **3. Data Analysis and Discussion**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This section presents a socio-cognitive analysis of how Pakistani print media discursively construct regional identities within the context of provincial politics. Using van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model, the analysis moves across three levels:

- Textual/micro-level: lexical choices, metaphors, naming practices, agency, presuppositions, and schematic structures.
- Discursive/meso-level: framing devices, narrative organization, intertextual references, ideological square.
- Socio-cognitive/macro-level: mental models, social representations, shared knowledge structures, and ideological implications.

Fifteen news excerpts from Dawn, The News International, and The Express Tribune were examined and categorized into thematic clusters that reveal how each newspaper constructs provincial actors, regional grievances, and federal–provincial relations. The discussion integrates cross-newspaper comparisons to highlight ideological divergences anchored in broader political alignments.

### **3.2 Dominant Discursive Themes**

#### **3.2.1 Provincial Autonomy as Legitimate Political Demand (Dawn)**

Across Dawn’s reporting, provincial identity, particularly in Sindh and Balochistan, is constructed as:

- historically grounded,
- administratively justified, and
- legitimately articulated.

Common linguistic markers include:

- positive role attributions (“Sindh leaders emphasized the constitutional right...”)
- relational framing (“Balochistan’s concerns were acknowledged as integral to federal cohesion...”)

- Dawn recurrently foregrounds systemic marginalization, using metaphors such as:
- “centre–province imbalance,”
- “chronic deprivation,”
- “structural neglect.”

These metaphors activate predictive mental models of provinces as long-standing victims of federal inequity.

The ideological square is visible in Dawn’s representation:

- Emphasize positive actions of provincial actors
- Downplay negative characteristics
- De-emphasize federal authority’s positive actions
- Highlight the negative actions / failures of federal institutions

Dawn’s discourse thus constructs regional identity as politically legitimate and normatively justifiable, shaping reader cognition toward viewing provincial grievances as valid claims.

### 3.2.2 Securitization and National-Interest Narratives (The News International)

In contrast, The News International consistently frames provincial movements, particularly PTM, ethno-nationalist groups, or Sindhi/Baloch activists, as security-sensitive and potentially destabilizing.

Discursive markers include:

- Attribution of external influence (“foreign-funded elements...”)
- Threat metaphors (“the movement risks opening old wounds...”)
- Collectivizing labels (“agitators,” “pressure group,” “hardliners”)
- Nominalization that hides agents (“violence erupted”, “divisive rhetoric escalates”)

These linguistic strategies remove or obscure structural causes, instead foregrounding risk, instability, and national cohesion.

The ideological square here reverses Dawn’s pattern:

- Emphasize federal responsibility and protective role
- Highlight negative aspects of activist groups
- Downplay state failures or coercion
- Foreground provincial actors’ disruptive potential

The cognitive effect is the activation of mental models associating regional activism with threat, creating an “us (national interest)” vs “them (provincial disruptors)” dichotomy. Such representations legitimize stronger state presence and surveillance.

### 3.2.3 Balanced yet Ambivalent Positioning (The Express Tribune)

The Express Tribune demonstrates more balanced narrative structures, often incorporating both federal and provincial voices. However, this balance can take the form of strategic neutrality, where contradictions remain unresolved.

Common textual patterns include:

- parallel quotations from provincial and federal figures
- nominal neutrality (“the dispute,” “the standoff,” “the disagreement”)
- mitigated evaluations (“some argue,” “critics believe,” “observers note”)
- institutionalized framing (referring to courts, committees, and commissions)

This creates an impression of objectivity while depersonalizing structural inequality. Cognitively, this frames provincial politics as a technical problem solvable through institutional mechanisms, reducing ideological visibility.

### 3.3 Discursive Strategies across Newspapers

#### 3.3.1 Naming, Categorization, and Actor Representation

Dawn uses identity-affirming labels:

- “Sindhi leadership,” “Baloch representatives,” “local communities.”

The News uses security-oriented labels:

- “militants,” “agitators,” “anti-state elements.”

The Express Tribune uses institutional descriptors:

- “stakeholders,” “parties,” “officials.”

These choices shape mental models by invoking different knowledge schemata:

1. Dawn: provincial actors = civic and legitimate
2. The News: provincial actors = risky or externally influenced
3. The Express Tribune: provincial actors = administrative units

#### 3.3.2 Attribution of Agency

Dawn explicitly attributes federal responsibility (“centre delays funds,” “federal directives marginalize...”)

The News often obscures agency (“tensions rose,” “clashes occurred”)

The Express Tribune distributes agency evenly (“both sides expressed concerns”)

Agency choices contribute to distinct socio-cognitive outcomes:

- Responsibilization (The Dawn)
- Deflection (The News)
- Equidistance (Tribune)

### 3.4 Cross-Newspaper Comparative Discussion

A comparative synthesis shows:

Provincial politics as identity claim (Dawn)

- Regional identity = constitutional, historical, legitimate.

Provincial politics as security risk (The News)

- Regional identity = potentially destabilizing or externally manipulated.

Provincial politics as institutional debate (Tribune)

- Regional identity = administrative and negotiable.

These divergent constructions reveal the politicized nature of media discourse and the differential reproduction of ideologies of the centre, narratives of national unity, and discourses of ethnic autonomy.

### 3.5 Summary of Findings

- Print media do not merely reflect but actively construct regional identity categories.
- Discursive strategies vary systematically with each newspaper’s editorial orientation.
- These strategies shape public cognition, social representations, and perceptions of legitimacy.
- The ideological square and socio-cognitive mechanisms show how media sustain existing power asymmetries.
- Representations have material implications for provincial-federal relations, public trust, and political mobilization.

This analysis directly addresses the study’s research objectives by linking textual strategies with cognitive consequences, demonstrating how Pakistani print media shape perceptions of regional identity in provincial political contexts.

#### 4. Conclusion

This section provides a comprehensive conclusion to the study. It synthesizes the key findings, addresses the research objectives and questions, and discusses the broader implications of the analysis.

##### 4.2 Summary of the Study

The study examined how three English-language Pakistani newspapers, Dawn, The News International, and The Express Tribune, discursively construct regional identities in their coverage of provincial politics. Using van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analyzed thirty news excerpts to uncover textual strategies, discursive framings, and the socio-cognitive implications shaping public perceptions of provincial actors, ethnic identities, and federal–provincial power relations.

The findings reveal systematic differences across newspapers in how they portray provincial grievances, political contestations, and the legitimacy of regional actors. To understand how these discourses influence public cognition, the study evaluated textual patterns, ideological positioning, framing devices, and the activation of mental models.

##### 4.3 Summary of Key Findings

###### 4.3.1 Discursive Construction of Regional Identities (Textual Level)

Across the data, regional identity emerges not as a neutral descriptor but as a politically charged category constructed through:

- Lexical choices (e.g., “rights-based movement” vs “agitators”)
- Metaphors (e.g., “centre–province imbalance,” “security threat”)
- Actor representation (naming vs anonymization)
- Agency attribution (assigning responsibility or obscuring it)
- Framing devices that determine whose perspective is foregrounded

These strategies shape how readers interpret provincial politics, embedding ideological cues that normalize certain interpretations while marginalizing others.

###### 4.3.2 Ideological Framing across Newspapers (Discursive Level)

Dawn Newspaper:

- Constructs regional identities as legitimate, historically grounded, and constitutionally justified
- Emphasizes systemic marginalization of Sindh and Balochistan
- Uses the ideological square to foreground federal neglect and provincial grievances
- Promotes an empathetic framing that normalizes provincial demands

The News International:

- Constructs regional identities through securitization and national-interest discourses
- Frequently portrays regional actors (e.g., PTM, ethnic activists) as foreign-influenced, destabilizing, or extremist
- Minimizes structural causes and foregrounds risk, disorder, and threat
- Supports state-centric nationalism and reinforces centre-dominant ideology

The Express Tribune:

- Presents a more balanced yet ambivalent framing
- Places emphasis on institutional mechanisms rather than ideological stances
- Often depoliticizes conflict by treating provincial issues as technical disputes
- Produces a cognitively stabilizing narrative where bureaucratic processes dominate

###### 5.3.3 Socio-Cognitive Implications (Cognitive Level)

The study demonstrates how textual and discursive choices contribute to mental model formation:

- Dawn activates a mental model of marginalized provinces seeking justice
- The News activates a mental model of provincial actors as threats to national unity
- The Express Tribune activates a mental model of provincial conflict as manageable through institutional mediation

Across newspapers, these mental models contribute to broader social representations of:

- centre-periphery relations
- legitimate vs illegitimate political actors
- who constitutes the “insider” vs “outsider”
- the nature of threat, stability, and national cohesion

The cumulative effect is the reinforcement (or contestation) of power hierarchies embedded in Pakistan’s federal structure.

#### 4.4 Responses to Research Objectives

The study’s major contributions are best articulated by directly addressing the objectives and research questions.

Objective 1: To examine how Pakistani print media discursively constructs regional identities within the context of provincial politics and power relations.

Conclusion: The analysis shows that Pakistani newspapers construct regional identities through framing devices, lexical choices, ideological positioning, and narrative structures that reflect distinct editorial orientations. Dawn frames regional identities as legitimate and rights-based, The News constructs them as security-sensitive and threatening, and The Express Tribune frames them as bureaucratically negotiable. These representational patterns reveal how media discourse aligns with, challenges, or neutralizes dominant power structures within the federation.

Objective 2: To investigate the socio-cognitive implications of these representations for public perceptions of regional identity and political legitimacy.

Conclusion: The socio-cognitive analysis shows that these newspapers activate different mental models, shaping how readers conceptualize regional actors and federal-provincial relations. Dawn produces empathy-driven cognition toward marginalized provinces; The News reinforces threat-based cognition that legitimizes central authority; and The Express Tribune promotes cognition centered on technocratic neutrality. These cognitive effects influence public perceptions of political legitimacy, identity claims, and centre-province tensions.

#### 4.5 Recommendations for Future Research

- Extend the analysis to Urdu and regional-language newspapers for comparative insights.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in regional identity construction.
- Apply socio-cognitive CDA to digital media, including social media and online news.
- Combine textual analysis with audience studies to verify mental model formation.
- Investigate linkages between media discourses and policy outcomes related to federal-provincial governance.

#### Concluding Remarks

The study demonstrates that print media in Pakistan are active participants in the discursive and cognitive construction of regional identities, shaping how provincial politics is understood, interpreted, and legitimized in the public sphere. Through varied discursive strategies, newspapers mediate complex relationships between the federation and its provinces, influencing the symbolic boundaries of belonging, legitimacy, and identity. By connecting textual strategies with socio-cognitive processes, this study advances understanding of how language, ideology, and cognition intersect to shape political realities in Pakistan’s multi-ethnic federal structure.

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