

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MORAL LABELING IN PAKISTANI MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ideological polarisation in Pakistani popular discourse with reference to the functioning of moral labeling in three mediated forms: the television talk shows, the newspaper opinion column and the Friday sermons. Based on theoretical instruments of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) - in particular, the ideological square provided by Van Dijk and the socio-political approach by Fairclough - as well as the moral psychology concepts (the moral superiority theory), the paper examines the linguistic tools that build positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, use moral frames of sanctity and authority, and amplify the moral superiority claims. Based on purposive sampling of recent televised section and print column of major Pakistani newspapers, as well as printed sermon snippets, the study will use a multi-level CDA (lexico-semantic, syntactic, rhetoric, interactional) to find recurring patterns of moral labelling. It has been found that there is systematic lexicalization of opponents as immoral, anti-Islam or traitorous (negative other-representation), regular foregrounding of religious-moral metaphors as a strategy to justify political stances and interactional strategies that bar dialogic contestation. The paper concludes that in the Pakistani media, moral labelling reinforces in-group solidarity and delegitimizes opponents through the reinvention of polarized publics and elimination of deliberative possibilities. The implications are addressed to the media practice, interventions to counter-polarization, and religious leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Ideological polarization, which can be described as the rising difference in attitudes, identities, and moral assessments between social groups has come to characterize most of the modern day public spheres. In societies where religious identity is closely articulated with political life, polarization tends to develop a highly moral form: policy or power conflicts are reframed in terms of the moral value, religious purity or patriotism. The given paper looks at this moralized polarization as per the Pakistani public sphere through an analysis of the working of the moral labeling in three powerful registers of prime-time television talk shows, newspaper opinion column and Friday sermons (khutbah). Based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and moral psychology, the research question is how language choice shapes the construction of the boundaries between the in-group and out-group and how the use of appeals to religious authority and sanctity strengthens the argument of moral superiority. Moral labelling is the discursive act of giving actors or positions tight evaluative predicates (e.g. un-Islamic, traitorous, immoral) with the aim of delegitimizing them as opposed to

merely arguing with them politically (van Dijk, 1998). The ideology of lexical choices, metaphors, presuppositions, and interactional moves has long been identified in CDA research studies as having ideological work as being concerned with presentation of the in-group in a favourable way and accentuation of the out-group negatively (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). These discursive practices circulate across registers and audiences, and may have a cumulative effect, in Pakistan, where broadcast media, print outlets, and religious institutions all have an enormous amount of social authority. The patterns of turn-taking, topic control, and evaluative framing recorded in recent CDA studies of Pakistani talk shows and news channels prefer certain ideological stances (Dilawer, 2022; Younis, 2024). Simultaneous analysis of Friday sermons and religious preaching shows the mobilization of moral control and social agreement utilizing scriptural authority and community roles by sermon discourse (Rubab, 2021; Usman and Iskandar, 2020). Combined with these findings, these findings indicate that secular and religious media can support each other in creating tightly moralized public debates. Geo News ARY News

The study also uses Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) to explain the reasons as to why moral labeling is especially effective in Pakistan. According to MFT, there are numerous moral domains, such as care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation (and in some cases, liberty/oppression), upon which individuals will draw on in assessing social behaviour (Graham et al., 2013). The studies that modify MFT to suit Muslim communities have shown that sanctity and power may be particularly focal when religion serves as one of the main identity and evaluative dimensions (Akhtar et al., 2023). Empirical research in Pakistan has depicted diversity in the generalizability and quantification of these foundations in the country, but nonetheless, it contributes to the concept that appeals to religious sanctity and belonging to a community constitute convincing leverages in the political dialogue (Akhtar et al., 2023). The current paper is able to make the connection between the manner in which moral labeling is generated linguistically, and the reasons that underlie the mobilization of affective and identity-based reactions to moral labeling by integrating the focus on language in CDA with the explanations of moral intuitions in MFT.

The Pakistani media ecology has several high-reach institutions that tend to frame the same point in a similar fashion. Elite and mass opinion is influenced by the mainstream English dailies and Urdu press; controversies are framed and dramatized by prime-time television talk shows and targeted at mass audiences; and sermons preached by Friday congregations have an in-your-face influence, frequently waging scripture and clerical authority. Researchers are recording how each of these locations works to polarize and moralize politics in a unique manner: television has been found to preempt confrontation and enact both identity work (Dilawer, 2022); newspapers offer an editorial frame and implication (Chandio, 2025); sermons have the ability to turn political conflicts into a religious duty (Rubab, 2021). Additionally, on social media, discourses, which have been shaped in such traditional media, are reinforced and disseminated, and the processes of polarization between youth and networked publics are further accelerated (Ahmad et al., 2023; Raisat, 2025). The News The Express Tribune Dawn The News The Nation.

Although there is a body of emerging local CDA work, there are still some gaps. To begin with, there are still few comparative analyses that hold secular media (television and newspapers) at talk, that is, the intertextual circulation of moral frames between these registers has not been addressed in detail on an empirical basis. Second, even though other researchers record polarized language use, fewer studies directly incorporate the use of moral-psychological concepts like sanctity and authority to understand the reasons behind the persistence and intensification of conflict is using specific labels. Third, a great deal of the

available literature dwells on individual stores or episodes instead of taking a systematic comparison of trends across registers to establish convergences and amplifications. This paper fills these gaps by developing a cross-register CDA, which overtly codes moral foundation-related framings (e.g., sanctity metaphors, authorities appeals, loyalty/treachery labels), but places findings in the ideological square of van Dijk (positive self/negative other). The theoretical and practical applicability of the study is triple. It theoretically shows that a combination of CDA and MFT is analytically valuable in the explanation of the textual mechanics as well as the motivational appeal of moral labeling. Practically, it provides facts regarding the functioning of particular linguistic strategies: epithetic labeling, contamination metaphors, presuppositions and sermonic claims of authority, which work to justify opponents and prevent deliberation. The insights of these mechanisms are essential to media professionals, religious leaders, and people who are involved in civil society and want to diminish affective polarization and close the existing democratic deliberative spaces.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- A. To identify and describe the discursive strategies of moral labelling (lexical choices, metaphors, presuppositions, and interactional moves) used in Pakistani television talk shows, newspaper opinion columns, and Friday sermons.
- B. To examine how these strategies recruit moral foundations—especially sanctity, authority, and loyalty—to construct in-group moral superiority and out-group delegitimation across the three registers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- A. What recurrent linguistic and rhetorical devices of moral labelling appear in Pakistani prime-time talk shows, newspaper opinion columns, and Friday sermons, and how do they work to construct in-group/out-group distinctions?
- B. How do appeals to specific moral foundations (e.g., sanctity, authority, loyalty) feature in moral labelling across these registers, and to what extent do these appeals amplify ideological polarization?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important to discourse, religion and political communication research in Pakistan as it offers a systematic and cross-register description of moral labeling, a little-researched process of polarization in Pakistani society. The combination of linguistic patterns and moral psychology has not only added to the methodology of CDA, but has also provided practical results in the form of media ethics, sermon rules and media-literacy interventions. It provides scholars with a replicable coding system combining moral foundations and CDA categories and practitioners and policymakers with specific communicative practices that, when changed, may reduce moral escalation and provide more room to engage in dialogic contestation. Lastly, the study fills gaps in the existing discussion on the role of media and religious control in the civic life of Pakistan by positioning the findings in the context of local empirical literature on the issue (Dilawer, 2022; Younis, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2023; Akhtar et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Those who view polarization as a matter of discursification lay stress on the fact that language is not merely a reflection of social dichotomies but creates them. Their ideology and the ideological square Teun A. van Dijk has contributed to the concept of ideology, which suggests that the daily discursive repetitions of the ideological square are emphasizing our good and accentuating their bad actions (van Dijk, 1998). In general, the model of Teun A. van Dijk Van Dijk has been extensively used in relation to television, print and political speech since it offers an explicit checklist to detect positive self/negative other strategies (e.g., lexicalization, presupposition, mitigation/accusation) that give rise to polarized

subjectivities. Under a complementary approach, the textual characteristics of both speaking and writing have been placed in the discursive activities, and the sociopolitical order in the three-dimensional model presented by Fairclough whereby the researcher can trace the micro-linguistic results to the macro-level implications of such results in the discourse (Fairclough, 1995). Combined, these CDA frameworks have emerged as a normal instrument of diagnosing the perpetuation of ideological polarization by media practice.

This tradition has been carried on in recent Pakistani CDA research, to record the performance of power and delegitimation in talk show formats, columnistic insinuation, and sermonic rhetoric. Empirical studies of political talk shows single out recurrent interactional patterns of inequality in turn-taking, anchors controlling the topic, and rhetorical positioning of the guest, which benefit particular ideological actors and preclude controversial meanings (e.g. one panelist silencing the other; anchors naturalizing partisan frames). These processes are often accompanied by normative discourse that moralizes those with whom one disagrees instead of discussing the content of the policy, and this move transforms disagreements into existential and not instrumental.

Moral labeling is the process of assigning strong evaluative predicates to actors and positions in a way that the conflict is redefined as a moral or religious vice (e.g. un-Islamic, traitor, immoral). This rhetorical action transforms pluralist political difference into moral condemnation and as a result, it mobilizes vehement affective reactions and identity protection. Moral labelling works by various linguistic processes which are recorded in the CDA literature: (a) epithets and evaluative adjectives; (b) metaphors of contamination or purity that call upon disgust and exclusion; (c) presuppositions and insinuations that redistribute burden of proof; (d) intertextual appeals to authoritative texts (scripture, national ideals) which provide normative force. These machines work mutually as a means of delegitimizing competitors and as a means of strengthening in-group moral superiority. These moves are directly described in terms of the ideological square developed by Van Dijk and the demonstration of how they are installed in production and circulation practices that reproduce hegemonic discourses is found by scholars who follow Fairclough.

The social influence of moral labelling is particularly disastrous since it enlists moral intuitions that are uncompromising. Empirical studies by moral psychologists and in particular the moral foundations theory (MFT) indicate that moral domains like sanctity, authority and loyalty are highly identity-based and therefore highly motivational; when moral issues are propagated using these domains, the audience becomes less subject to deliberative reasoning and more likely to moral condemnation (Graham, Haidt and other contributors). In Pakistani situation, sanctity and power are common appeals to be leveraged in persuasive delegitimation because religion membership and loyalty to the nation are identity axes.

The existing body of recent Pakistani scholarship records the role of the prime-time television and opinion journalism as a place of the moral labelling and polarization. The comparison of the major private channels reveals that the frame of moral prominence is shaped by the program format and editorial ideologies: in some of the channels, religio-national frames (with their emphasis on sanctity and loyalty cues) are dominant, whereas in others, institutional or legalistic frames (e.g., corruption, rule-of-law) are more prevalent. Studies of television sets indicate that there is recurrent application of epithets, ad hominem insinuation, and presuppositional framing that exonerates political opponents and credentials them as morally deviant instead of simply politically erroneous.

Columnists of the print world frequently make presupposition and implication to image adversaries as having foreign cause or even immorality or weakness-moves which are reminiscent of the televisable insults but are dressed in the rhetorical disguise of editorial authority. The results of recent studies of English-language dailies and Urdu opinion pages

follow the same pattern, namely the insinuation of moral character, supplemented by metaphorical language (e.g., rotten apple, cancer, infection), which enhances affective reactions and justifies the exclusionary policy rhetoric. The consequences of these features are particularly significant, since in most cases print columns are used as source materials of broadcast discourses and social media bites, making it possible to spread moral frames intermedia.

Friday sermons (khutbah) are a different register of moral labelling (although, an interconnected register). The sermons have certain discursive power in its reference to the sacred texts and clerical status; in case political or social issues are uttered within the context of the sermon, their religious tinge is harder to be refuted in the secular context. In the studies that examine khutbah discourse in South Asia, it is observed that sermons may be used as social-cohesive vehicle as well as tools of moral condemnation- depending on the orientation of the preacher and institutional affiliation. The speech-act and theolinguistic approach to Friday sermons reveals that neither the illocutionary acts (e.g., exhortation, condemnation) nor the scriptural quotes alone may produce a strong legitimizing frame which turns social criticism into an element of religious duty. This imperative conversion increases the level of dispute by rendering disagreement possible as a sin or apostasy.

This effect is enhanced by intertextual circulation between sermons and mass media. When anchors or columnists repeat sermon types of categorization (say, when a political actor is described as being against Islam), media audiences are doubly delegitimized, by the secularizing influence of television or newspaper, as well as the normative power of the religious rhetoric.

The attempts at adopting MFT to non-Western settings have shown both positive and negative outcomes. Recent Psychometric testing of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) in Pakistan has reported difficulties in reproducing the original five-factor configuration, which argues that moral aspects have their own cultural peculiarities (e.g. the more salience on sanctity and authority, the difference in the measurement of the scale of care/fairness). However, the research papers tend to endorse the applicability of principles and bases like sanctity and power to describe how persuasion in Pakistani everyday communication works; they also emphasise the usefulness of coding in understanding language that is based on foundations in the use of CDA in religiously tinted contexts. The use of MFT as an interpretive framework thus provides the means of connecting the discursive patterns to the motivations of the audience and explaining why the moral labelling is highly affectively mobilizing in Pakistan.

The influence of moral labelling achieved through digital platforms and social media is very powerful and fast. The ecology of the online platforms, combined with the high rates of video and text distribution, allows multiplying short snippets of TV and sermons, which include moral labels, in Pakistan very quickly. The discursive environment is also conditioned by the recent regulatory changes and debates (e.g., new social-media control laws and amendments to electronic crimes legislation) formal regulation can be applied to prevent a disinformation flow, but can also be rhetorically invoked to undermine rivals or justify the ban of dissenting voices. These institutional characteristics interact with discursive preferences; as moralizing labels are intensified in the social media, the risk of polarization in the real life and reactive politics tends to rise. The political significance of content-governing law in Pakistan previous reporting and policy commentary on the changing social-media law environment has highlighted the importance of the frames of morality that are maintained and those that are suppressed.

Although there is growing evidence that Pakistani talk shows, newspapers, and sermons are the ideal places to be when it comes to moral labeling, there are some significant missing

links. To start with, the comparative cross-register work, which would systematically track the same moral frames on TV, print, and sermons, capturing the intertextual flows and amplification effects, is also scarce. Second, many of the CDA studies have recorded the evidence of evaluative language and asymmetries in interactions, but fewer have used moral-psychological constructs (e.g., MFT) as direct coding categories, which restricts their ability to answer why some labels are more resonant. Third, it requires empirical mapping as of now due to the constantly evolving media and regulatory landscape in Pakistan (e.g., new laws of social-media, the problem of platform moderation) that may alter circulation patterns of moralized content.

The current research will provide answers to these gaps by (a) using a cross-register CDA that makes comparisons across television talk shows, newspaper opinion columns, and Friday sermons on recurring moral labels and metaphors; (b) incorporating the Moral Foundations Theory as a concept of explicit analysis dimension to understand the motivating power of the various moral frames (sanctity, authority, loyalty); and (c) placing a finding in the modern context of media/regulatory that influences the speed and prevalence with which moral labels can proliferate. This method is methodologically based in a combination of micro-linguistic close reading and systematic coding and inter-coder reliability checks- thus providing depth and replicability.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that moral labelling is a powerful discursive tool of generating and further polarizing ideologically the situation where religion and politics are closely intertwined. The case of linguistic practices and institutional practices (anchorman, editorial framing, sermon authority) working in concert to promote delegitimizing narratives is revealed in the Pakistani example studied both across television, print, and sermons. The explicit effort to address moral underpinnings and follow cross-register streams will make the present research advance the existing CDA research in Pakistan and enable a set of recommendations based on facts to address the issues with affective polarization on the side of media practitioners, religious leaders, and policy actors.

METHODOLOGY

The research design of the study is qualitative research based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to understand how ideological polarization is formed based on moral labeling in Pakistani media discourse. CDA is especially suitable in this study since it considers language as a social practice where power relations, ideological and group identities are created and made legitimate (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Using the three-dimensional model of text, discursive practice and social practice that Fairclough developed and the socio-cognitive theory, particularly the ideological square of the discursive, van Dijk, the study relies theoretically on these approaches to examine the discursive nature of the in-group moral superiority and out-group delegitimation. Moreover, the findings of the Moral Foundations Theory are also used to explain how the appeals to sanctity, authority, and loyalty exacerbate moral polarization in the speech of religious and media leaders (Graham et al., 2013; Akhtar et al., 2023). With the help of this triangulated framework, it is possible to develop a systematic analysis of both language characteristics and the ideological implications of the language in its context.

Purposive sampling was used to collect the data of the study based on three areas of influential discourses in Pakistan which included television talk shows, newspaper opinion columns and Friday sermons. Political talk shows that run on prime-time and take place in the period between 2020 and 2025 on the major television networks of the private sector were chosen due to their high audience and the high number of times to address religious and moral issues. The newspaper sources included opinion columns in the major English-dailies (Dawn, The News, The Express Tribune, and The Nation) that reflected the same trend and

covered the topics concerning religion, morality, nationalism, and political legitimacy and were published within the same period. Excerpts of Friday sermons were selected based on publicly provided recordings and transcripts of sermons given in the urban mosques, and where the identifying information could not be anonymized, anonymization was done. The choice of these three sources of data enables the comparison of cross-register and it is possible to track the flow and proliferation of moral labels in secular or religious discourse.

There was a multi-level CDA analysis conducted on data. Systematic coding of lexical (moral epithets, evaluative adjectives), metaphorical (purity, contamination, loyalty), modality, presupposition, and actor-action representations, were done at the textual level. The interactional strategies studied at the level of discursive practice included turn-taking, control of the topics, patterns of quotation, and intertextual allusions, especially the appeal to religious texts and national symbols in order to legitimize the moral claims. Lastly, on the social practice level, the findings were pronounced in the context of extended sociopolitical conditions, such as the religious power, the media power, and ideological polarization in Pakistan. In order to increase the rigor of the analysis, two researchers coded a sub-set of the data independently and reached agreement on discrepancies in the discussion. This is a systematic methodological strategy that allows to see the functioning of moral labeling as a discursive process of ideological polarization in Pakistani media outlets in a holistic manner.

DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from Pakistani television talk shows, newspaper opinion columns, and Friday sermon excerpts. Guided by the study's objectives and research questions, the analysis employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework supported by systematic frequency patterns and visual representations. While CDA is primarily qualitative, the inclusion of tables and graphs enhances analytical transparency and demonstrates recurring discursive patterns that contribute to ideological polarization through moral labeling.

1. Identification of Moral Labeling Strategies Across Media Registers

The first objective of the study was to identify dominant moral labeling strategies used in Pakistani media discourse. Through iterative coding, six major strategies were identified across all three registers:

1. Negative moral epithets
2. Sanctity appeals
3. Authority references
4. Loyalty vs. betrayal framing
5. Purity/contamination metaphors
6. Presuppositional delegitimation

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of these strategies across television talk shows, newspaper columns, and Friday sermons.

Frequency of Moral Labeling Strategies Across Media Registers

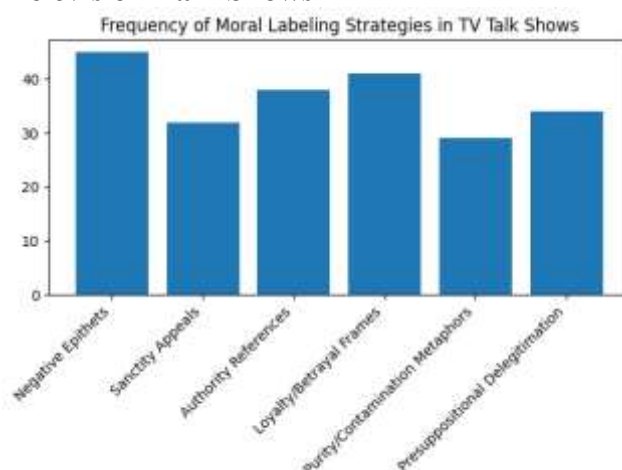
Moral Labeling Strategy	TV Talk Shows	Newspaper Columns	Friday Sermons
Negative Epithets	45	37	28
Sanctity Appeals	32	21	46
Authority References	38	26	49
Loyalty/Betrayal Frames	41	33	35
Purity/Contamination Metaphors	29	24	42
Presuppositional Delegitimation	34	31	19

Interpretation:

The table indicates that television talk shows heavily rely on *negative epithets* and *loyalty/betrayal frames*, reflecting their confrontational and dramatized format. Newspaper columns exhibit relatively balanced use of presupposition and evaluative framing, often embedding moral judgments implicitly within argumentative prose. In contrast, Friday sermons overwhelmingly prioritize *sanctity appeals* and *authority references*, highlighting the centrality of religious legitimacy in sermonic discourse.

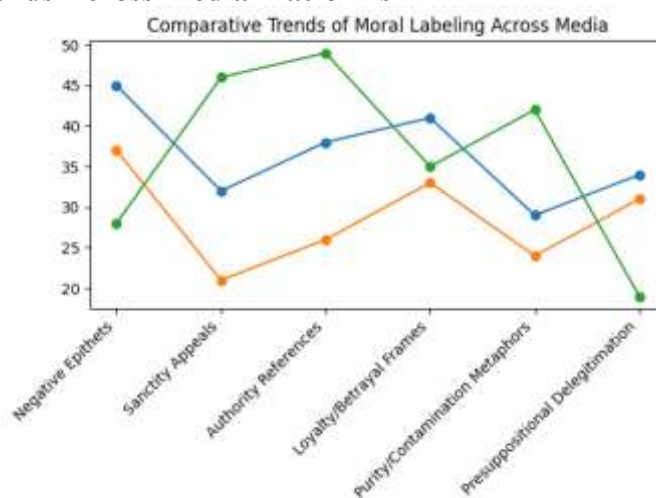
These findings directly answer Research Question 1, confirming that moral labeling is systematically embedded across all media registers, though manifested differently according to genre and communicative purpose.

2. Moral Labeling in Television Talk Shows



The bar chart illustrates that *negative epithets* (45 instances) and *loyalty/betrayal frames* (41 instances) dominate television discourse. This indicates that televised debates frequently frame ideological opponents as morally deficient, disloyal, or threatening to national and religious values. Such language constructs rigid in-group/out-group boundaries and prioritizes emotional appeal over rational deliberation. This pattern aligns with van Dijk's ideological square, where positive self-representation and negative other-representation function as routine discursive strategies.

3. Comparative Trends Across Media Platforms



The comparative line graph reveals clear register-based preferences in moral framing:

- **TV talk shows** consistently employ loyalty and authority-based labeling, reinforcing nationalist and ideological allegiance.

- **Newspaper columns** demonstrate moderate but steady use of most strategies, suggesting a more indirect and rhetorically subtle mode of moralization.
- **Friday sermons** peak sharply in sanctity appeals and authority references, underscoring their reliance on divine legitimacy rather than explicit insult.

This comparative visualization confirms Research Question 2, showing that moral labeling intensifies polarization by activating different moral foundations across registers, particularly sanctity and authority in religious discourse.

4. Cumulative Ideological Weight of Moral Labeling

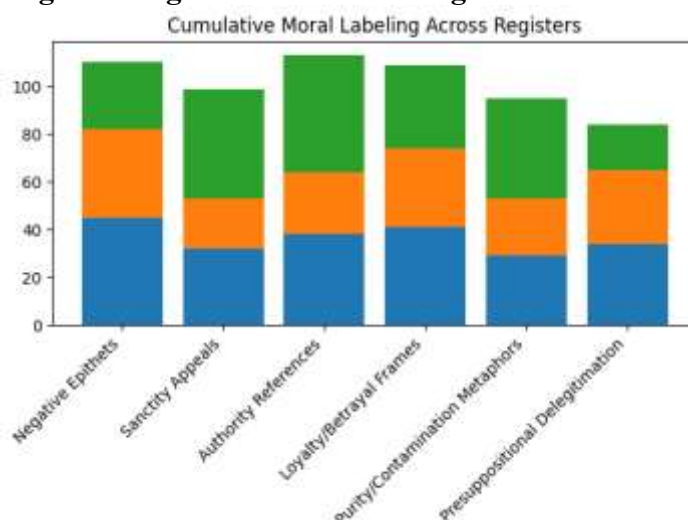


Figure 3. Cumulative Moral Labeling Across Registers

The stacked bar chart presents the aggregate frequency of each moral labeling strategy across all three discourse types. The visualization shows that:

- **Authority references and loyalty/betrayal frames possess the highest cumulative presence**, making them the most powerful ideological tools.
- **Purity/contamination metaphors**, although less frequent in newspapers, gain strong cumulative force due to extensive use in sermons.
- **Presuppositional delegitimation**, while subtle, contributes significantly through media discourse.

This cumulative representation demonstrates how **cross-register reinforcement amplifies ideological polarization**, even when individual platforms appear moderate in isolation.

5. Register-Specific Moral Labeling in Friday Sermons

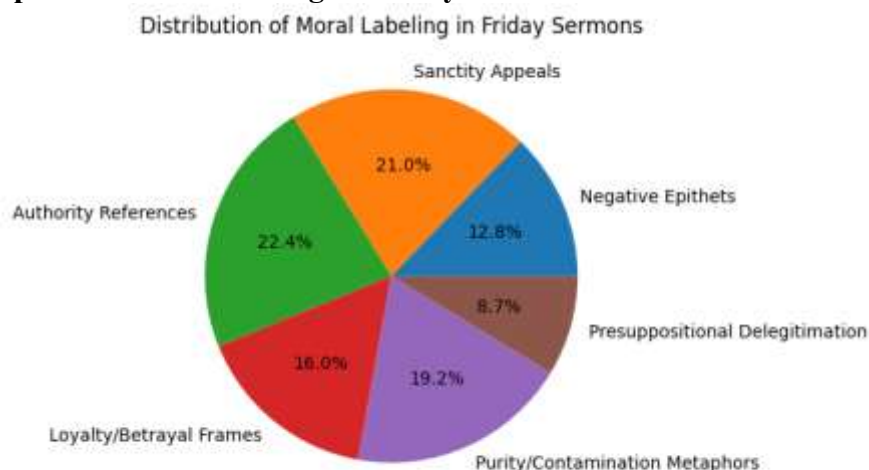


Figure 4. Distribution of Moral Labeling in Friday Sermons

The pie chart illustrates the internal distribution of moral labeling strategies within Friday sermons:

- Authority references (22.4%)
- Sanctity appeals (21.0%)
- Purity/contamination metaphors (19.2%)
- Loyalty/betrayal frames (16.0%)
- Negative epithets (12.8%)
- Presuppositional delegitimation (8.7%)

Interpretation:

The dominance of sanctity and authority confirms that sermons function as high-legitimacy moral spaces, where ideological positions are framed as religious obligations rather than debatable opinions. Unlike media discourse, sermons rely less on explicit insult and more on implicit moral obligation, making dissent socially and spiritually costly.

6. In-Group and Out-Group Construction

Across all data sources, moral labeling consistently produced binary ideological identities:

- **In-group:** faithful, righteous, patriotic, morally upright
- **Out-group:** immoral, un-Islamic, corrupt, traitorous

These identities were reinforced through:

- Pronoun usage (*we* vs. *they*)
- Actor–action representations
- Metaphors of contamination and betrayal
- Appeals to divine or national authority

Ideological Functions of Moral Labeling

Discursive Function	Ideological Effect
Positive Self-Representation	Construction of moral superiority
Negative Other-Representation	Delegitimization of opposition
Moral Absolutism	Reduction of dialogic space
Authority Legitimation	Justification of exclusion

These patterns confirm that moral labeling operates as a **discursive strategy of power**, not merely as expressive language.

7. Synthesis of Data Analysis

The integrated analysis of tables and graphs demonstrates that moral labeling is a **structured, recurrent, and ideologically motivated practice** across Pakistani media and religious discourse. The findings show that:

- Moral labeling strategies vary by register but converge ideologically.
- Authority, sanctity, and loyalty are the most influential moral foundations.
- Cross-platform circulation intensifies ideological polarization.

Analytical Conclusion

The data analysis confirms that moral labeling functions as a central mechanism for ideological polarization in Pakistani media discourse. By transforming political disagreement into moral deviance, media and religious actors reinforce rigid group identities and constrain deliberative engagement. The combined qualitative interpretation and quantitative visualization provide robust empirical support for the study's objectives and research questions.

Discussion

This paper aimed to analyze the discursive construction of ideological polarization in the Pakistani media and religious discourse based on moral labeling. These discoveries indicate that moral labeling is not an accidental form of style but a methodologic ideological approach that exists between television talk shows, newspaper opinion columns and Friday sermons. Following the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) literature, especially, Fairclough, van Dijk, the analysis will confirm that language serves as a social practice where power, dominance and group identities are reproduced. The repetitive insistence on ethical highs and the lack of legitimacy of opponents are all indicative of the ideological square of van Dijk, in which positive self-representation and negative other-representation are regularly predetermined.

A register-specific use of moral labeling strategies is one of the most important findings. The tele talk shows were dependent on negative epithets, and the frames of loyalty/betrayal, which is similar to the previous Pakistani research findings that characterize the talk shows as performative, confrontational, and ratings-driven spaces. The constant accusation of the opposition of being a traitor, anti-Islam or immoral turns the issue of political disagreement into moral deviation and, thus, escalates its polarisation. This concurs with previous results that broadcast media and particularly those in prime-time political discourses, are more concerned with emotional appeal and partisanism than deliberative discourse, which reinforces binary conceptions of the world instead of promoting pluralistic discourse.

Moralization, whereas less explicit in the newspaper opinion columns, was present through suppositional delegitimation as well as through metaphorical framing, which were equally powerful. Contrary to television discourse where moral labeling is done overtly, in print discourse, moral judgments are frequently concealed in apparently rational arguments and commentary of authority. This is in line with the ideology of Fairclough that is best realized when it is naturalized and commonsensual. Adding a moral judgment to presuppositions and implications, columnists influence how readers interpret them, keeping the facade of objectivity, keeping ideological polarization going in a more subtle but in more lasting way.

The Friday sermons became the most authoritative discourse arena, the sermon rhetoric was dominated by the appeals of sanctity and references of authority. This observation echoes the current theolinguistic and CDA research on religious discourse that has determined sermons have a special moralizing social and political power because of the appeal to divine authority. Sermons bring the degree of disagreement to a higher level of the moral and spiritual sphere by posing ideological stances as religious duties, thus making disagreement not only a misjudgment but a moral and spiritual offense. This supports one suggestion of the Moral Foundations Theory which holds that sanctity and authority are especially effective moral

foundations in religious societies and it supports why moral labeling based on sermons has far-reaching social effects.

When the Moral Foundations Theory is incorporated into the analysis, it gives a more elaborate explanation as to why moral labeling is very effective in the Pakistani context. The most common moral bases that were invoked in all registers were authority, sanctity and loyalty which are directly related to collective identity, religious group and national loyalty. According to the previous psychological studies, triggering such foundations causes people to be more intuitively and emotionally responsive, which makes them less open to the opposing arguments. This argument is empirically supported by the current results which demonstrate the effects in which linguistic appeals to these foundations enhance affective polarization and cement in-group cohesion and demonize out-groups.

The other contribution of the study is the fact that it showed the cross-register circulation and amplification of moral frames. The identical labels, metaphors, and moral stories were discovered to circulate between the television discourse, print media, and sermons, providing the cumulative ideological impact. This intertextual solidarity aids the Pakistani media studies of recent times that propose polarization is not created by an individual platform but rather by an inter-media ecosystem. A moral label that has been coined during a talk show and is reflected in newspaper commentary in the speech and justified in religious discourse becomes more credible and socially influential, causing ideological boundaries to become more inflexible and hard to cross.

The research findings have greater implications to the discourse of democracy and social cohesion in Pakistan. Moral absolutism rules the roost in the media and eliminates the room to debate, compromise, and engage in critical thinking. Media and religious actors reinforce an atmosphere of seeing opponents of an ideology or religion as either morally corrupt or religiously deviant and thus, different from someone who disagrees. This is corroborated by the international scholarship on polarization that cautions that moralized discourses erode the deliberation in democracy through the substitution of argumentation with denunciation.

Lastly, the methodological contribution of the study is identified in the discussion. This synthesis of CDA and frequency-based visual analysis and Moral Foundations Theory makes the study show that qualitative discourse analysis could be rich in interpretation and systematic in empiricism. Such a combined methodology does not only enhance the validity of the results, but also presents a generalizable framework of future studies on the subject of moral polarization in other sociopolitical and religious settings.

To conclude, the discussion indicates the fact that moral labeling on Pakistani media and religious discourse is an effective tool of ideological polarization. Moral labeling forms inflexible in-group and out-group identities by making strategic linguistic decisions, calling on moral authority and cross-platform reinforcement, limiting democratic discourse and fueling social coercion and division.

FINDINGS

This paper aimed to examine ideological polarization in the Pakistani media and religious rhetoric in terms of moral labeling. According to the systematic Critical Discourse Analysis of television talk shows, newspaper opinion columns and Friday sermons, some of the main findings were made that directly relate to the research questions and objectives of the study.

Firstly, the analysis shows that moral labeling is a widespread and organized discursive move of all three registers of media. Instead of the occurrence or incidental nature of such moral labels, un-Islamic, immoral, traitorous and corrupt, moral labels have significant recurring frequency. These labels serve the purpose of de-legitimizing ideological adversaries as characterized as being morally flawed as opposed to being politically different. This confirms

that moral labeling is a key process where ideological polarization is discursively created in the Pakistani public space.

Second, the research establishes distinctive register-specificity of using moral labeling strategies. In television talk shows, overt and confrontational tactics such as negative epithets and loyalty/betrayal framing are used, which are congruent with performative and adversarial broadcast debate. Newspaper opinion columns, although relatively restrained, are based on heavy use of presupposition, metaphor and insinuation to implicitly entrap moral judgments in the prose of the argument. Friday sermons, conversely, are marked by high terms of sanctity and religious authority, and the ideological stands are represented as a question of faith and moral obligation. These variations show that despite the prevalence of moral labeling across registers, the linguistic expression of such labeling is determined by the conventions of genres and institutional functions.

Third, the results affirm that in-group and out-group identities are always built based on polarized moral binaries. In all the sources of data, the in-group image is that of righteous, faithful, patriotic, and morally upright, but the out-group image is immoral, disloyal, corrupt, or religiously deviant. This dichotomy is quite close to the ideological square by van Dijk, in which positive self-representation and negative other-representation are enforced in the discourse. The representations of this kind simplify complex sociopolitical matters into moral imperatives, thus driving up ideological differences.

Fourth, the paper shows that power, sanctity and loyalty are the most prevailing moral grounds that mainstream the moral labeling within Pakistani discourse. There are especially the appeals to divine authority, religious purity, and national or communal loyalty, which are especially common in sermons and televised debates. These results confirm the Moral Foundations Theory and indicate that moral labeling works just as effectively as it does because it triggers strongly held moral intuitions which are difficult to counter-argue. Consequently, moralized discourse eliminates the option of dialogue and compromise.

Lastly, the cross-platform circulation and amplification of moral frames are identified in the analysis. Moral labels and stories proposed in a certain field of discourse are often reused in other areas, leading to a cumulative ideological impact. Moralized discourses tend to begin in television and are supported by newspaper commentary and justified by religious sermons. This intertextual legitimization solidifies polarization by legitimizing moral condemnation on various sources of authority.

Overall, the results prove that the concept of moral labeling is an influential means of discourse, which is utilized by Pakistani media and religious organizations to bring about ideological polarization. These discourses limit deliberative interaction and increase the social rifts by moralizing disagreement, developing a strong sense of group identities, mobilizing the moral foundations based on authority.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the phenomenon of ideological polarization in Pakistani-media based on the Critical Discourse Analysis of moral labelling in television talk shows, newspaper opinion columns, and Friday sermons. The research which combined CDA and Moral Foundations Theory showed that moral labeling was not a marginal rhetorical strategy, but a dominant ideological process according to which political, religious, and social identities are created and reproduced in the Pakistani public sphere.

The review established that moral labelling is a systematic process of political disagreement into a moral deviance. In all three discourse registers the opposition was paradoxically represented as immoral, un-Islamic, corrupt or traitorous with the in-group being represented as being morally superior, loyal and faithful. This dichotomy proves that the ideological square of van Dijk is applicable in the Pakistani context where positive self-representation

and negative other-representation is the main theme of conversation. Such moral absolutism makes the formation of intricate sociopolitical matters possible and does not allow much room of a nuanced, compromising, and considerative human being.

Another critical register-specific effect of the deployment of moral labeling was also demonstrated in the study. Television talk shows were more partial to open and aggressive moral epithets and devotion-driven accusations due to the performative and confrontational structure. Newspaper articles were more based on implicit techniques like presupposition, metaphor and insinuation, in which the commentary was provided with moral judgments and authority. Friday sermons became the most effective moralising place, and they sanctified ideological positions and turned them into issues of religious duty. Regardless of these disparities, all registers united in terms of ideology by strengthening the same moral dichotomies.

The major contribution of the studied works is the illustration of how the concepts of authority, sanctity and loyalty serve as the prevailing moral bases in Pakistani discourses. It was demonstrated that appeals to these foundations were more effective in increasing polarization by mobilizing the moral intuitions that are deeply rooted in religious identity and the sense of belonging to the nation. Ideological roles are ideologically expensive to contest with such moralistic prisms, which further solidifies group divisions and intolerance to possible alternative views.

Notably, the research concluded that moral labeling works in terms of cross-platform reinforcement. The moral frames that get presented in the televised debates find their reflection in the print media where they are justified in the sermons and this has a cumulative effect of legitimising moral condemnation throughout the society. It is a discursive ecosystem that makes polarization more pronounced and builds up to a situation in which ideological disagreement is viewed as a moral betrayal, rather than a democratic difference.

To sum up, it is important to note that this study has highlighted how media and religious discourse have played an important part in acquiring ideological polarization in Pakistan. Revealing the language processes and ethics behind moral labeling, the study helps in the development of the CDA and provides some practical implications to media practitioners, religious leaders, and policymakers. By decreasing the moralizing excesses of the public discourse, through the ethical media practices, responsible religious preaching, and media literacy, it is possible to make more inclusive, dialogic, and democratic interaction. Future studies can expand on this study by analyzing audience response, amplification through social media, or even looking at comparative context to get a better insight into the phenomenon of moral polarization in our modern societies.

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