

## Pakistani Newspapers Representation of Religious Groups

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**Abstract:** Pakistan is a multi-religious and multicultural society, home to Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and followers of other prominent faiths. This diversity extends beyond religious distinctions to encompass cultural and ethnic variations. Media, particularly newspapers, play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of these religious groups, emphasizing the importance of impartial and responsible journalism. This study conducts a content analysis of 84 news articles from leading Pakistani newspapers to scrutinize the portrayal of religious groups. The Findings reveal an unequal distribution of media coverage, with Christians receiving the highest attention compared to other non-Muslim groups. While the portrayal of non-Muslim groups is predominantly positive (90.5%), instances of anti-Ahmadi content reflect complexity in media narratives. The findings note a significant focus on the well-being of religious groups and their contributions to society, with 85.7% of articles highlighting religious events. The positive representation reflects broader societal discourse acknowledging diverse contributions and cultural expressions. However, the study raises critical questions about editorial decisions, journalistic priorities, and societal dynamics influencing media narratives.

**Keywords:** Print media, religious groups, ethno-cultural diversity, media portrayal

Media portrayals, whether televised or printed, have an impact on society (Baker, 2015; Nasir et al., 2023). The portrayal of distant issues in the media has been a crucial affair for media producers, academics, and philosophers. To a great extent, media plays a key role in shaping and affecting our perceptions and convictions (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015; Rubin & Windahl, 1986). Therefore, representation in the media is quite important. Brand (2018) indicates that media representation is a fundamental aspect of gaining knowledge about diversity. It helps us to acknowledge “others” in a diversified manner. However, the media affects us in different ways through their portrayals of color, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class, thus shaping our convictions (Khosro, 2015). This means that if we view/read sexist, anti-religious, anti-gay, etc.

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topics in the media, we are more likely to believe such information as a result of the way in which they are presented as the media strongly affect views and can potentially alter them (Talbot, 2007).

Religions are also a key part of most societies as a pre-eminent factor for civilization. They provide principles and values that create cohesion and integration in a society. Religious groups have always been a major contributing factor in Pakistani society, as stated in Article 36 of the Constitution, which declares that equal rights and freedom for religious groups are guaranteed (Mehfooz, 2021). However, conflicts between multiracial and religious groups in Pakistan have led to several detrimental outcomes and to violence, with the media and politicians having an influence on such conflicts. For example, false accusations of blasphemy led many religious groups to face life-threatening situations. In 2019, a Hindu doctor, Ramesh Kumar Malhi, was accused of blasphemy in Mirpur Khas in Sindh (Masood, 2019). Protestors attacked his property, and Malhi's family faced violent reactions from local people. The past three decades have witnessed many cases of intolerance of persecuted religious groups in Pakistan (M. Ali, 2013; Tahir, 2021; Xu & Maitland, 2017). In a situation where ethnic groups are under certain threats, their representation in the media is one of the most thought-provoking concerns, as the media, being advocates of basic human rights, bear the responsibility of guiding people to accept/repudiate religious, cultural, and racial heterogeneity in society (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Jeffres et al., 2011). We argue that newspaper representations affect how culture and society interact as consumers follow and depend on the media and its rules and logic (Frostenson & Grafström, 2022; Jabeen, 2020; Raza & Khan, 2017). Religious groups tend to be underrepresented, or negatively represented in most mainstream media, which can influence majority members' attitudes towards the depicted group(s) (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2017). The media representation theory underpinned this study to understand the role of media representations in Pakistan – especially in national newspapers – and to highlight their functional aspects and dimensions.

While numerous studies have explored the representation of religious groups in Pakistani media, these works largely focus on general portrayals, often concluding with broad statements about positive or negative depictions (Craig et al., 2021; Plaisance et al., 2012). However, little has been given to the nuanced variations in representation between different religious groups, such as why Christians are consistently portrayed more positively compared to other groups (Galen, 2012). This study, therefore, addresses this gap by focusing specifically on the disparities in representation among different religious groups, examining whether editorial biases or societal dynamics contribute to these patterns. In so doing, this study specifically investigates the uneven representation of religious groups in Pakistani newspapers, focusing on how certain religious groups, such as Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Sikhs, are often represented. This study is based on analyzing 84 news articles from three major national newspapers and seeks to uncover patterns of favoritism or bias and to understand the underlying reasons for these disparities. The study aims to contribute to broader discussions on the role of newspapers in shaping societal attitudes towards religious groups in Pakistan.

## **Literature Review**

### **Religion in Pakistan**

Pakistan has settlers from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Burma, Thailand, China, and other countries. According to Laharwal (2023), 96.28% of the population in Pakistan follows Islam. The remaining 3.72% follow Christianity, Hinduism,

Sikhism, and other religions groups, including Kailash and Ahmadis. Table 1 reports the most recent census of national groups in 2017.

**Table 1**

*Religious Groups in Pakistan Based on The Recent National Census Conducted, 2017 (%)*

	Muslim	Christian	Hindu	Ahmadi	Scheduled castes	Others
Pakistan	96.28	1.59	1.60	0.22	0.25	0.07
Rural	96.49	1.10	1.80	0.18	0.34	0.08
Urban	95.84	2.59	1.16	0.29	0.06	0.06

*Note.* Source: (The US Government, 2022)

Pakistan is a pluralist society where dialectal and ethnic diversity exists and certain demographic factors are formed in this diversity (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020). However, the number of religious groups is continuously changing as a result of many factors. As a sense of exclusionary nationalism is rapidly rising, this directly affects the rights of many ethnic groups in Pakistan. Rahman and Akram (2020) state that there has always been a united Muslim voice raised in support of religious rights. Many religious leaders and political parties play a role here as they have been involved in advocating for religious groups and their civil rights in Pakistan.

### **Islam, Constitution of Pakistan, and Religious Groups**

Article 2-A of the Constitution declares all religious, social, economic, and political rights in Pakistan. A brief summary of the Constitution covering religious groups and their rights is given below (Sajjad, 2023):

- Adequate provision shall be made for the [groups] to freely profess and practise their religion and develop their culture; and
- [Groups] shall be guaranteed fundamental rights including equality of status of opportunity and before law, social, economic, and political justice, and freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, and association, subject to the law and public morality.

Islam is clearly a domineering religion in Pakistan. As such, Islam acknowledges the rights of every individual regardless of their color, gender, religion, creed, or race. Similarly, the constitution also gives autonomous rights to all people in the country. Both religion and the charter of Pakistan create no impediment for any ethnic group, yet they still face many problematic situations (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020; Mubeen & Qusien, 2017). Kumar et al. (2017) indicate that Pakistan is a multicultural, multilingual, and multireligious society, but some religious groups still live very disadvantaged lives even though the Constitution and religion both recognize ethnic groups. The demeanor of religious groups is always multiple and different according to the different environments in Pakistan. They have made remarkable contributions to the army, education, politics, medicine, etc., yet they still receive little acknowledgment despite these contributions. For example, many renowned non-Muslims live very restrained lives as most have either left Pakistan or are avoiding the news media (DAWN, 2014; Mehfooz, 2021).

## Religious Groups and Conflicts

Minorities are defined as sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, religious or disability-related, etc. (Mehfooz, 2021). Different countries treat religious according to their policies, culture, politics, and media (Batool, 2018; Batool et al., 2021; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020; Rahman & Akram, 2020). The media, as a means of socialization, shares great responsibility in balancing and equaling the representation of any ethnic group(s) in one society. Their role in shaping our attitudes, perceptions, and convictions cannot be denied. In Pakistan, conflicts and problems of violence, discrimination, and exclusion among religious groups are deeply embedded. Issues range from lack of respect, access to education, transportation to work, discrimination, and more direct experience of violence relating to accusations of blasphemy and abductions, etc. (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020). Religions and faiths (e.g., Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity, and Islam) are a key part of South Asian communities, linked to violent confrontations, sectarianism, extremism, and even regionalism, especially in India and Pakistan (Masood, 2019; Mehfooz, 2021; Saeed, 2017). As noted by Wambui (2017), one major religion governs country but this can contain a number of other ethnic groups if two religions comprise 20% of the population. In 2007, the Minorities Rights Organization declared Pakistan one of the prominent countries where religious groups were facing threats. Rimsha Masih, a 14-year-old girl, was accused of blasphemy in 2012 and subsequently released due to having insufficient witnesses against her (Julius, 2016). Likewise, in 2013, 125 Christian houses, one church, and several shops were burnt down due to religious reasons (e.g., blasphemy) (M. Ali, 2013).

In 2013, an extreme group attacked all Saints Church in Peshawar, resulting in 80 casualties and several injuries (Associated Press, 2013). During the same year, at least 16 people were on death row for blasphemy, while 20 were imprisoned for the same accusation (Weatherred, 2017). In 2015, an extremist group labeled Tehreek Taliban, Pakistan, attacked a church in Lahore, killing 15 people and injuring more than 70. In 2018, a mob attacked a Christian boy named Waheed Masih and his family, who were accused of being involved in the abduction of a Muslim girl and her conversion to Christianity. News media reported forcible conversion of Hindu men and women in 2019.

During 2017, local law enforcement authorities arrested almost 77 Ahmadis under discriminatory laws. Note that the number of Ahmadis in Pakistan has been variously estimated at between 0.22% and 2.2% of the Pakistani population (Mehfooz, 2021). In 2019, news media reported that a fellow Muslim employer and his friend murdered a man called Javed Masih for his religious beliefs after Javed had decided to change his job due to discrimination by his colleagues (Khokhar, 2019). Despite the reporting of several cases of intolerance against persecuted religious groups in Pakistan, Muslims and other religious, such as Christians, usually co-exist amiably enough without frequent outbreaks of animosity (BBC, 2018). This intolerance and violence has mainly been found in areas where people are comparatively less educated or where a specific group of religious scholars (who have been active) in their sermons and media (Mehfooz, 2021). In a situation where ethnic groups are under threat, their representation in the media is one of the most thought-provoking concerns as the media, being advocates of basic human rights, bear the responsibility of guiding people to accept or repudiate religious, cultural, and racial heterogeneity in society. According to Bender et al. (2013), the media reshape our opinions and bring about a new shift in culture in terms of perceptions of ethnicity. The media supports self-representation and recognition of religious diversity.

Newspapers representation of religion is fundamental in creating certain perceptions and recognitions regarding ethnicity (Batool, 2018). In this regard, both media and religion have

integrated themselves into each other. However, the media stands accused of representing negative portrayals of different races, ethnicities, and other groups. Pinker (2018) states that news mostly *distorts* the way in which people perceive the world, but that this process has become more negative over time. The outcomes of negative news are quite adverse. Far from merely receiving information and education, viewers are being deceived due to distorted and biased news reporting. This portrayal is not an exception, as an external and internal command of the media delimits how certain phenomena or ethnic groups are represented.

The media, therefore, is responsible not only for consolidating democracy, but also for bringing socio-cultural unity to different races, religions, and people from distant dialectal backgrounds (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2005). This is only possible, however, if the media represent every sect in an equally positive way. According to Mubeen and Qusien (2017, p. 98), “respect for minorities’ rights is reckoned as an icon for democracy, which is measured by respecting the declarations of human rights.” The media should highlight both the contributions and the plight of marginalized groups. The media cannot only inform people about ethnic diversity, but must also create harmony among the entire nation (Bender et al., 2013). The complex question is how the media portrays and creates perceptions about religious groups existing in society. Shoemaker and Cohen (2005) point out that news coverage in most of the media focuses on political conflicts which underrepresent the issues of ethnic groups, women, LGBT groups, education, human rights, and marginalized groups in general.

### **Media Representation Theory (MRT)**

The MRT supports the conceptual background of this inquiry, as developed by Stuart Hall (2005). It encompasses various aspects and perspectives that examine how media texts construct meaning and shape perceptions within society. It indicates that media representations are not neutral reflections of reality but are constructed through a series of choices and interpretations by media professionals and producers. However, sometimes, media use phrases such as “people’s right to know,” they are referring to the modification of the old libertarian theory as the newly proposed concept has established not only the “public’s right to know” but also the moral responsibilities of those who own and run newspapers. Naqvi (2019) states that the theory proposes an interconnection between the media and consumers. The print media in Pakistan are valuable only when they perform their duties as a true watchdog by keeping in sight the interests of the common people and by supporting basic individual rights. Performing these responsibilities thereby makes the media eligible for the public’s trust and justifies their existence (Batool, 2018; DAWN, 2014). Acknowledging religious groups is a fundamental factor in supporting peace in any society. The media has a responsibility to bring religious and cultural harmony in any society, including Pakistan (Mubeen & Qusien, 2017).

Another conceptual background supporting this inquiry is stereotyping (Nisbet et al., 2008). This theory relies on the fact that people and groups possess power for their own particular benefit. For example, Hall believes that media often explores how certain groups are stereotypically portrayed in the media, reinforcing existing cultural norms and prejudices (Bajnaid & Elareshi, 2018; Campbell, 2016). The media, as the state’s fourth power, represents religious groups in this regard as being largely governed by the majority. Bender et al. (2013) indicate that media portrayals of immigrant groups in different Western countries promote stereotyping and racism. For example, the British media depicts Romanian immigrants as hardworking, submissive, and destitute because they mainly own scrap businesses. This portrayal encourages many enterprises to hire them with low wages and to get monetary benefits from their abilities and efforts. Similarly, portrayals of

Blacks, Native Americans, Muslims, and Asians have always been dubious (Ford, 1997). Representing them as hardworking, proactive, and tractable, and attributing them to the lower classes encourages many corporations to use them for attaining disparate advantages as they are mainly what Karl Marx describes as “proletariats” (Tukachinsky et al., 2017). This study extends the existing literature by highlighting this issue in the light of media representation theory. Based on the above discussion, the study is underpinned by the following research questions:

1. **RQ1:** How do some Pakistani newspapers represent ethnic and religious groups?
2. **RQ2:** How do Pakistani newspapers compare the (mis)representation of various ethnic and religious groups?

## Research Methods

This study is based on the content analysis as analytical method how newspapers in Pakistan portray that country’s religious groups. In order to do so, the study gathered news articles from three prominent national newspapers in Pakistan—*the Daily Jang*, *the Daily Express*, and *Daily Khabrain*—through, focusing on their coverage of religious groups for almost eight months. While these newspapers are among the largest and most influential in terms of readership, their selection may introduce potential bias as they do not fully represent the diversity of the Pakistani media landscape. The mentioned newspapers’ news articles were accessed through their websites from December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018, to July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, using terms such as “religious groups” and “ethnic groups” in order to identify news articles about the topic. For content analysis, a systematic sampling technique was used, in which one of the co-authors first divided the newspapers into two categories, dependent mainly on their language (Urdu, English), and then chose the Urdu newspapers for further examination.

Given their large circulation statistics and their popularity, three Urdu newspapers were selected for scrutiny. The decision to focus exclusively on Urdu newspapers in this study is rooted in their wide reach and significant influence on the majority of the population in Pakistan. Urdu is the national language, and Urdu newspapers, such as *Daily Jang*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily Khabrain*, have the highest circulation, reaching millions of readers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Focusing on Urdu newspapers, therefore, this study captures the media representation most accessible to the general Pakistani population, thereby offering insights into how religious groups are portrayed to the broader public in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the study acknowledges that the exclusion of English-language newspapers may limit the generalisability of the findings, as their representation of groups could differ. Furthermore, while this study focuses on Urdu newspapers due to their extensive readership, we recognize that this choice may introduce a bias, as English-language newspapers might present a different portrayal of religious groups. Moreover, all news stories, editorials, columns, articles, and letters to the editor were included in the content analysis. The reason for conducting this systematic sampling technique was to generate large articles from these newspapers for content analysis (Weatherred, 2017).

## Coding

The coding sheet was developed based on previous research about media representation for social problems by extracting recurring themes and patterns in newspaper content. According to Rummel (1966), it enables us to understand how different issues are represented, uncover media biases or political orientations that may not be apparent to readers, and study how coverage of issues or media discourse has changed over time, allowing for a deeper and more accurate

understanding of the issues raised in Pakistani newspapers. It also enhances the replicability and verifiability of the findings. The whole news story was the coding unit of this investigation (Batool, 2018; Elareshi et al., 2021). A codebook was developed to provide detailed definitions of the terms and operationalization's of the variables as they applied to the content of the study (Weatherred, 2017), which is available upon request from the author.

The study also applied a reliability check of the instrument using two coders, the second author and a research assistant. They coded articles which involved refining, expanding, adding, and rewording until they were satisfied with the final coding sheet. Six categories emerged from the coding process. These were: Religious identity, news placement, portrayal, welfare of ethnic groups, contributing roles, and religious events. These terms were used interchangeably within the news articles.

Furthermore, the intercoder reliability was run by double coding a randomly selected sample size using Krippendorff's (2019) alpha test, who suggests a range of 0.67 to 1.0 to achieve acceptable reliability measurement. An average of 0.78 across variables was found, inducting the coding sheet was consistent with other published content analysis studies (S. Ali et al., 2020; Gouse et al., 2019; Weatherred, 2017). To this end, 84 news stories were gathered relating to religious groups, as follows: Daily Jang = 40 news stories, Daily Express = 20 news stories, Daily Khabrain = 24 news stories. All of these were entered into SPSS to be analyzed. Frequencies, group statistics, and chi-square tests were run.

Furthermore, in addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistical techniques such as regression analysis were run to better understand the factors influencing the portrayal of religious groups. regression analysis was used to determine whether certain ethnic groups are more likely to be represented positively / negatively based on specific factors such as the political orientation of the newspaper or the socio-context at the time of publication.

## Results

The frequency of news coverage given to religious groups in the selected newspapers indicated that the Daily Jang led the coverage by publishing ( $n = 40, 47.6\%$ ), followed by the Daily Khabrain ( $n = 24, 28.5\%$ ), and the Daily Express ( $n = 20, 23.8\%$ ). Altogether, the selected newspapers published  $n = 84$  articles concerning ethnic groups in Pakistan during the collection period.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for Portrayal of Religious Groups in Selected Newspapers (n = 84)*

Variable	Portrayals of religious groups			
	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Std
Religious Identity	82	97.6%	1.02	.153
Portrayals	76	90.5%	1.10	.295
Religious events	72	85.7%	1.14	.352
Placement	53	63.1%	1.37	.485
Welfare	51	60.7%	1.39	.491
Contributions	21	25%	1.75	.436

Based on the selected sample size, the analysis showed that an uneven distribution of media attention among different religious groups, with Christians received the majority of coverage ( $n = 57, 67.8\%$ ). This may stem from various factors, including their status as the largest religious

minority in Pakistan, their historical contributions to the country's social and educational sectors, and the prevalence of reports on violence or discrimination against them such as church attacks. However, smaller groups like Hindus received minimal coverage ( $n = 2$ , 2.4%). This limited representation might be due to their concentration in rural areas, reducing their visibility in national media narratives, and their relatively low political representation (Habes et al., 2022). The focus on Christians suggests potential trends in media editorial choices shaped by demographic, social, or policy-related factors. Furthermore, Ahmadis represented the second-largest group in terms of coverage ( $n = 12$ , 14.2%), indicating a notable but smaller media presence compared to Christians. Sikhs followed closely ( $n = 11$ , 13%). The inclusion of Sikhs and other groups reflects an effort by the newspapers to acknowledge the pluralistic nature of society and diversify their media narratives. Finally, the category labeled as "other groups" hints at the existence of smaller, less represented religious groups not specified in the mentioned categories. A more detailed breakdown of this category could provide insights into the inclusivity of media coverage (Table 2). The following section explored in detail the six categories that emerged in this study:

### **Religious Identity**

The results unveiled a clear emphasis on news reporting, with a substantial majority of news articles explicitly focusing on specific religious communities. This pronounced concentration on particular groups signals a noteworthy pattern in media coverage, pointing towards a potential lens through which news stories are filtered or prioritized. The primary focus on Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Kailash is evident in the data. These religious groups collectively form the core subjects of the news articles under scrutiny. The calculated mean further underscores the consistency and centrality of this focus across the analyzed articles. This can suggest that, on average, the emphasis on these specific religious groups was slightly above the midpoint on the scale. This indicated a substantial concentration of these communities in the news articles, portraying a scenario where the media attention was skewed towards particular religious affiliations. The standard deviation of .153 signifies a relatively low degree of variability around the mean. In other words, the focus on Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Kailash was consistent across the majority of news articles, with minimal deviation from this central tendency.

The singling out of these religious communities in news coverage raises questions about the factors influencing editorial decisions, journalistic priorities, or the broader societal dynamics that may drive such concentrated attention. It prompts a critical inquiry into whether this focus is reflective of demographic composition, political dynamics, or societal interests, thereby necessitating a more in-depth exploration of the contextual factors shaping media narratives. Moreover, the identification of Kailash as one of the central focuses adds a layer of complexity and specificity to the findings. Understanding why this particular group receives attention alongside more established religious communities can provide insights into the nuanced dynamics of media representation.

### **Portrayal**

The examination of news articles in the study delved into the portrayal of non-Muslim groups, revealing intriguing patterns in the representation of these religious groups within the media landscape. The findings provided a better understanding of the tone and nature of media coverage, shedding light on both positive and negative dimensions. A substantial majority of news articles were identified as presenting non-Muslim groups in a *positive* light. This overwhelmingly



positive portrayal indicated a generally favorable orientation in the media discourse towards these religious groups. However, a noteworthy portion of the coverage ( $n = 89.5\%$ ) featured articles that were overtly critical of the Ahmadi community. These articles often included derogatory language or negative framing, positioning Ahmadis as ‘outsiders.’ It suggested that, on average, there was a tilt towards a positive representation. However, the result indicated a degree of variability around this mean, signaling that there were variations in the extent and intensity of both positive and negative portrayals across different news articles. Batool (2018) situates the findings within a broader scholarly context, indicating a continuity or evolution of trends observed in previous research. The temporal dimension adds significance, highlighting that the dynamics of media portrayal of non-Muslim groups, particularly the Ahmadi community, have persisted over time.

### **Religious Events**

The study extends its scrutiny to yet another dimension of media representation by examining the coverage devoted to religious affairs and events related to religious groups. The findings indicated that the sampled articles provided coverage of religious events associated with religious groups. This overwhelming majority suggested considerable attention to and acknowledgment of the religious activities and observances of communities within the media landscape. The mean value enhanced the interpretative depth by offering quantitative insights into the distribution and intensity of this coverage. These events were given a noteworthy level of attention and significance within the news stories. The emphasis on the significance of groups in Pakistan, as conveyed by the large number of stories focusing on their religious events, resonates with broader themes of inclusivity and recognition (Jafri et al., 2022). This thematic focus aligns with the societal discourse that acknowledges the multifaceted contributions and cultural expressions of communities, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of religious diversity within the national context.

### **News Placement**

Regarding the placement of news articles concerning religious groups, the findings revealed a nuanced perspective on how these stories are presented to the readership. Contrary to expectations, the study indicated that a significant portion of the news coverage did not secure placement within the first two most prominent pages of newspaper. This suggested that, despite the substantial volume of coverage dedicated to religious groups, they were marginalized in terms of prime placement within the newspaper layout. The mean value further illuminated the nuances of this placement pattern. With a mean slightly above the midpoint on the scale, the findings implied that, on average, the placement of news articles about religious groups tends towards the less prominent sections of the newspapers. The standard deviation of .485 indicates a moderate degree of variability around this average, signifying that while there is a tendency for these articles to be placed less prominently, there were variations in the degree to which this trend was manifested across different news items. Batool et al. (2021) suggested a continuation or reinforcement of the trends observed in previous research. This temporal context underlines the persistence of certain patterns in news placement concerning religious groups, emphasizing the need for sustained attention to these dynamics.

## The Welfare of Ethnic Groups

The findings indicated the special consideration to religious groups, emphasizing the importance of their well-being within the societal discourse. The sampled news articles were identified as actively highlighting the well-being of religious groups. This positive trend suggested that there was a recognition within media narratives of the significance of promoting the welfare of religious groups. The emphasis on well-being implies a thematic focus on issues such as healthcare, education, socio-economic conditions, and other facets contributing to the overall welfare of these communities. Mubeen and Qusien (2017) explored the media's role in advocating for the welfare of communities, suggesting that the focus on well-being is not an isolated or sporadic theme but an ongoing discourse within the media landscape.

## Contributing Roles

The findings delved further into the qualitative aspects of news articles, highlighting the positive and constructive contributions of non-Muslims to the advancement and prosperity of Pakistan. This is to understand how newspaper narratives shape the perceptions of religious groups within the broader context of Pakistani society. The analysis of published articles revealed that the sampled news ( $n = 21$ , 25.0%), actively accentuated the positive and constructive contributions of non-Muslims. This thematic focus on contributions aligns with the broader narrative of acknowledging the diverse roles played by communities in the progress and prosperity of the nation. It signified a conscious effort within media discourse to counterbalance narratives that may perpetuate stereotypes or marginalize non-Muslim communities.

**Table 3**  
*Summary of OLS Regression Results*

Variable		$R^2$	Adj. $R^2$		
Dep. Variable	coverage_percentage	0.248	-0.128		
Method	Least Squares (F-statistic)	0.6591			
	Prob (F-statistic)	0.502			
		coef	std err*	t-value	p-value
const		5.6551	25.836	0.219	0.847
population_percentage		18.4999	22.788	0.812	0.502
Skew		-0.014			
Kurtosis		1.932			

*Note.* \*Standard errors assume that the covariance matrix of the errors is correctly specified.

Regression analysis was run using dependent variable (coverage percentage in relation to media coverage of religious groups) and independent variable (population percentage in relation to religious group populations from the 2017 census). The analysis reveals that with  $R^2$  (0.248) meaning that approximately 24.8% of the variability in newspaper coverage can be explained by the population percentages of the religious groups. However, this is a relatively low value, which indicates that other factors likely contribute to newspaper coverage beyond population size. In other words, the analysis suggests that population size alone does not significantly explain the variation in newspaper coverage of the religious groups in Pakistan (Jafri et al., 2022). Other factors, such as newspaper biases, political dynamics, or even editorial policies might play a more significant role in determining newspaper coverage (Saeed et al., 2023).

## Discussion

As mentioned earlier, religious groups are an integral part of Pakistan, and it is therefore important to determine the portrayal of these religious groups in Pakistani newspapers. This study attempted to scrutinize the ways in which Pakistani newspapers portray these groups, using content analysis of news articles explicitly depicted. Not only did these news media focus on matters of religious groups, but they also portrayed them in a relevant manner by highlighting their contributions and cooperation. There is an indication that the selected newspapers allocated different types of news stories to different religious groups (**RQ1**). Studies have verified the efficacious representation of non-Muslim groups and the exposure of their problems, helping the portrayal of ethnic groups in Pakistan (Dilawn et al., 2014; Mubeen & Qusien, 2017; Rahman & Akram, 2020). Rahman and Akram (2020) have indicated that newspapers tend to give prominent space to ethnic/religious groups in Pakistan. They prefer to highlight groups' issues and to raise their voice in support of their rights in general. Although the media still stereotype groups in a particular way, portrayals have been much improved.

The results also revealed that the selected newspapers portrayed religious groups in different ways (**RQ2**). Overall, the extent of the coverage of religious groups in the selected newspapers was considerable. Each newspaper published a peremptory portrayal of religious groups by not only throwing light on their issues, but also by highlighting their significance and their contribution in terms of the progress and prosperity of Pakistan. Choudhury (1956) views these groups as a fundamental part of our society. Religious groups have made great contributions in education, science, performing arts, and other fields. Since sovereignty, they have followed the principles of peace, unity, and brotherhood in Pakistan.

Furthermore, the religious identification of groups represented in news articles was not reserved solely for Christians. While Christians received overwhelmingly positive coverage, the negative portrayal of other groups highlights a persistent issue in Pakistani media. The media's reproduction of these narratives not only reflects societal bias but also reinforces it, further isolating the Ahmadi community. This type of coverage can contribute to hostile public attitudes, potentially legitimizing violence and exclusion against Ahmadis (Shaheen et al., 2021). Khoso (2015) also affirms that Pakistani newspapers have portrayed violence against Ahmadis in two leading newspapers. Similarly, Dilawn et al. (2014) have pointed out the similar portrayals of religious groups in elite newspapers in Pakistan. The results revealed that more coverage was given to Christians, and slight coverage was also given to Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. The patterns of newspapers coverage found in this study are indicative of the complex socio-political landscape of Pakistan, where – of course – religious and ethnic identities are tightly interwoven with national politics.

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of media representation theory. Hall (2005) indicates that media representations are not neutral; they are constructed through a series of editorial choices that reflect and reinforce societal power dynamics. The positive portrayal of Christians and the marginalization of other religious groups in Pakistani newspapers reflect the broader socio-political power structures within the country (Ittefaq et al., 2023). The selective representation of religious groups aligns with Hall's assertion that media plays an active role in constructing public perceptions and reinforcing the status quo. Our findings have significant implications for media policy and editorial practices in Pakistan. The underrepresentation of certain groups highlights the need for more equitable media coverage that aligns with the principles of inclusive journalism. Media regulators such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) should develop guidelines to ensure fairness and legality of all religious groups in the

press by providing flexible, non-binding guidelines, promoting training and self-direction within media institutions in Pakistan, supporting diversity and transparency in media coverage, and relying on independent oversight rather than government interference or coercive regulation of the journalism profession.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlighted the rights of ethnic/religious groups arising from their cardinal existence and their considerable contributions to Pakistan. It also highlighted their media portrayal and their plight in Pakistani society. Newspapers should represent religious groups in a diverse and fair manner and cover all the rights of these groups. The theory of media representation provided the conceptual strengths and foundation for these respective analyses. Most communication themed media campaigns have a pivotal mission to change the public's perception of different phenomena. Although newspapers in Pakistan are still performing this duty, they need to strengthen this role so that no ethnic or cultural group faces violence, inequality, disparities, threats, or prejudice as diversity in any form is of greater significance for the rectitude of a society. Certain strategies (e.g., PEMRA) (Anjum, 2021; Rasul & McDowell, 2012) can help media practitioners to eliminate cynicism, hatred, and intolerance towards other religious groups in Pakistan. Pakistan is a country where Muslims are in preponderance (96% vs. 4% from diverse ethnic backgrounds). Due to this religious and cultural heterogeneity, it is important to acknowledge and value everyone with distant ethno-cultural backgrounds as groups not only live in Pakistan but also subsidize the creation and development of the country. Malik (2002) sees Pakistani society as pluralistic and divergent. If political bodies, along with the media, play their role in abolishing intolerance and discrimination against other religions, cultural and religious harmony will be inevitable.

The role of the media in educating people is of greater pertinence as it can potentially alter people's basic perceptions and convictions about diversity. When non-Muslim communities are suffering, the media can play their part in supporting their basic human rights. Partisanship and fabrication of facts can have detrimental outcomes, resulting in social injustice and unrest. The media can be pre-eminent in spreading peace and harmony among the masses. Protecting religious groups and their rights is an exercise in adopting tolerance and intercultural dialogue. In short, it can help to promote peace, fraternity, progress, and cohesion among members of society. This study is conducted on a limited level with certain financial and time restraints. Moreover, we used the content analysis technique with a self-proposed coding pattern that further narrows its scope. Moreover, both traditional and new media are working in Pakistan, although the authors selected only newspapers as a subject of this study, further adding to its limitations. However, every probable step has been taken to gather and interpret the usable data carefully. Therefore, it is prescribed that more investigations on the portrayal of religious groups be conducted so that other aspects of this phenomenon can be examined. Thus, further research should take these points into consideration.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This research contains several limitations. First, the geographical consideration is a prominent limitation as the applicability of the results elsewhere is questionable. Second, this research was based only on the qualitative approach (content analysis). The study's findings and generalisability are limited to the selected newspapers' articles. Other limitations may be affected by the personal understanding or initial positions of the authors on the interpretation of the data. In

addition, the coverage of the subject of religious groups in the Pakistani press varies according to the beliefs and cultural backgrounds. Of course, it will be difficult for the authors to evaluate/interpret behaviors/viewpoints belonging to another culture, which is what we tried to avoid in the current study to ensure objectivity and transparency in the information and to be scientific and without personal, religious or intellectual bias in the Pakistani context. Future research is needed to examine the same topic across other forms of media, such as digital platforms and social media, using other methods, and on a larger scale in terms of the sample, sociodemographic features, and diversity. Thus, more studies are needed to re-examine those that might be affected by ethnic issues and to investigate respondents' perceptions of such people's relationship with other ethnic/religious groups in Pakistan. For example, given the particular focus on Urdu newspapers, future studies should compare Urdu and English-language newspaper coverage to provide a more comprehensive view of media representation in Pakistan and to minimize the potential for language-based bias.

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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