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Marching Through Contested Ideologies: A Socio-Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis of Aurat March Coverage in Dawn Newspaper (2018–2026)

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the coverage of the Aurat March feminist movement in the leading English language newspaper, Dawn, of Pakistan for the period 2018 – 2026. The Aurat March started in Karachi in 2018. Now it has become prevalent in all major cities of Pakistan. The movement calls for equality for women, autonomy of the body and the elimination of violence from the hands of men. But it also has a lot of opposition from religious organizations, the state and conservative voices. This research was a type of qualitative research. A total of 60 news articles, editorials, opinion pieces and repression reports from Dawn newspaper have been analyzed using Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis shows three major ideological frames that have been used in Dawn's reporting. These are legitimization of the liberal feminists, containment of the patriarchy, and securitization of the state. Results indicate that a supposedly liberal newspaper such as Dawn, establishes feminist activism in conflicting socio-cognitive spaces. The study updates the previous research on the events up to the year 2026 including new and previously unanalyzed events like Sindh NOC (28 conditions) and detentions of feminist activists by Islamabad police.

Keywords: Aurat March, Critical Discourse Analysis, Van Dijk, Socio-Cognitive Model, Feminist Discourse, Pakistani Media, Dawn, Ideological Framing

1. Introduction

The Aurat March is the most prominent feminist movement in Pakistan. It started in March 2018 in Karachi, by a women's group known as Hum Aurtein. It took place on the International Women's Day. Females, males and transsexuals were all involved. They called for equality, a ban on violence, and on public space. The march has been increasing in size yearly since then. It had reached Lahore, Islamabad, Multan, Hyderabad and Larkana by 2019 (Ahmed, n.d.). It's not been a peaceful movement. It has been strongly opposed by conservative groups, religious scholars and right wing political parties. The slogans and placards carried during the march were considered to be derogatory, anti-Islamic and Western. In 2019, the KP Assembly condemns the march unanimously. Courts in 2021 issued FIRs against March organizers for the blasphemy of the Qadiani ban. In 2025 and 2026, dozens of activists were arrested in Islamabad by police. The

Sindh government has given the NOC of the Karachi March 28 conditions on slogans and dress. In May 2026, activist/dancer Sheema Kermani was arrested near the Karachi Press Club.

These events are NOT political. They are very discursive. Language is a crucial component in the comprehension, acceptance or rejection of the Aurat march within the Pakistani society. The movement is reflected in the media discourse, which influences the public's perception of the movement. Dawn is the most liberal and prominent newspaper in the English language in Pakistan. Since its inaugural edition in 2018 it has been covering the Aurat March. It covers easy news items, powerful and supportive editorials and articles of opinion with opposing arguments, as well as extensive reporting on legal battles and the repression by state authorities. But Dawn's coverage isn't just neutral, or completely progressive. It is a space that is ideological. It is a reflection of some of the socio-cognitive assumptions on gender, religion, state authority and what acceptable feminist discourse in Pakistan is. The study of Dawn's language allows us to comprehend the nature of the ideological field of feminist activism in Pakistan.

This paper adopts Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive CDA approach. It analyses 60 Dawn articles from 2018 to 2026. There has never been a study that has applied this framework to the coverage of Dawn's Aurat March and no previous study exists that covers anything after 2024. This study addresses both these gaps.

1.1. Research Questions

This study has three research questions:

1. What ideological representations does Dawn construct about the Aurat March in its news coverage from 2018 to 2026?
2. What socio-cognitive discursive strategies does Dawn use to legitimize or delegitimize the feminist demands of the Aurat March?
3. How has Dawn's discursive framing of state repression against the Aurat March changed across the 2018–2026 period?

2. Literature Review

The media is able to influence the thinking of people in the process of social movement (Munir, 2011). The newspapers in Pakistan traditionally have played an agenda-setting role in the country on sensitive social issues. To compare, Nishat and Hussain (2022) analyzed the coverage of Aurat March in 2020 and 2021 by Dawn and The Nation. They discovered that Dawn has a liberal-radical point of view and The Nation a conventionalist, conservative one. The two newspapers are engaged in strategic framing and agenda-setting with regard to their respective ideology. The three themes they identified from their study were patriarchy, violence and abuse and women's rights. This proves that print media in Pakistan is polarizing the feminist activism.

In the analysis Aurat March coverage was studied between the year 2018 and 2024 in eight English language newspapers by Awais and Ali (2025). They applied computational text analysis, sentiment analysis and topic modelling. The most frequently described feeling in the coverage was 'trust'. They came up with five themes: activism and march demands (63.3%), gender equality and rights (21.7%), legal and political dynamics (10.7), social and media narratives (3.5) and public reactions (0.8). Their research represents the largest computational analyses of the news coverage of the Aurat March ever conducted. However, it doesn't explore discourse at the textual and cognitive level and doesn't include events after 2024.

Meghwar (2025) has performed a comparative study between the media reporting of Pakistani and British pro-government on Aurat March 2018 to 2025. The study employed corpus-assisted CDA and AntConc and Voyant Tools to discover that the voices of feminisms are marginalized in both countries' media. Cultural and religious framing is one of the means with which Pakistani media tries to delegitimize the march especially. Akhter and Shah (2024) took the help of two

theories for framing namely micro-level framing theory of Goffman and macro-level framing theory of Entman to analyze the framing of women's rights in Pakistani English newspapers. They discovered different types of framing, which show broader in the social divisions among Pakistanis.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis of Aurat March

News articles and protest posters from 2019 to 2020 were used in their analysis by Baig et al. (2020) using the three-dimensional CDA model proposed by Fairclough. They identified that the print media creates certain sociocultural ideologies about the march. Fairclough's 3D model was also used to analyze 19 slogans of the Aurat March by Ali et al. (2020). They claimed that language of the slogans is against Islamic ideology in Pakistani society. These studies raise important issues and are not related to newspaper discourse. Umar (2024a) employed CDA by researcher Fairclough to investigate the power in Aurat March campaign texts. As revealed in the study, feminist activists play with language to critique taboo discourses and assert agency. Pakistani public resistance towards feminism has been studied by Umar (2024b) through social media comments. The march is viewed as an attack on the Pakistani culture and religion by religious scholars, conservative groups and the people in general. Tarar et al. (2020) conducted a discourse analysis of slogans of the Aurat March and found that the slogans were a mirror of the emerging socio-religious debates in the country of Pakistan.

In this study, Hassan, Riaz, and Zia (2023) employed the transitivity analysis from SFL using UAM Corpus Software to analyze slogans related to Aurat March 2020. The most frequent types of processes that were found were material processes, indicating action-oriented feminist demands. This indicates the direction of the language of the march as resistance and change. Irfan, Iqbal and Rakha (2026) employed Fairclough's CDA in the context of protest slogans in global protest movements such as Pakistani feminism. They came to the conclusion that slogans are of imperative mood, binary opposition and evaluative lexis which establish moral contrast between the oppressed groups and the dominant power structures.

Nisar and Nisar (2024) used discourse theory provided by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) to analyze the editorials of four English language newspapers which appeared in the period 2018-2022. What they discovered is that all newspapers speak of women's rights, but mean something different by the term. They also discovered that transparency issues are a barrier to the march's communication. The findings from this study will build directly on the findings of these studies and will be applied to Dawn alone, as well as extending the time frame to 2026 using Van Dijk's framework of socio-cognitive framework.

2.3 Slogan Discourse and Multimodal Analysis

Malik et al. (2025) adopted multimodal discourse analysis on which three slogans of Aurat March were grabbed from the year 2018. 65% of those who took part in their survey feel that the slogans do not reflect feminist ideals. The slogans were considered too crude, and were seen as disrespecting Pakistani cultural and Islamic values by many of the respondents. This indicates that the use of the language of Aurat March is in dispute with the public. Anwar (2023) did a feminist analysis of the protest art in Aurat March using Visual Semiotics perspective. She looked at posters of protest with symbolic, iconic and indexical signs. Amir (2021) has written about the Lahore High Court's cancellation of the march in 2020 based on its vulgarity, but later in the same year, it determined the march had to be allowed to go ahead as free expression, condensing the condition of decency. This legal tension is directly applicable to this study, when it comes to the analysis of how Dawn covered state repression.

Women in politics are those who have participated in Aurat March, says Alam (2021). The counter-discourses that de-legitimize the march are discursive violence towards women in the

political sphere. The results of the study conducted by Cheema (2025) reveal that there is a divide between conservative and liberal public on the slogan 'My Body My Right' on X. Different discursive strategies are used by the liberal gendered public, and the conservative gendered public to stake their claim.

2.4 Digital and Social Media Discourse

In the context of #AuratMarch 2024, Iqbal et al. (2026) conducted a study of the Twitter discourse using the feminist CDA approach. They discovered that the digital platforms are places of feminism resistance to conservative and patriarchy ideologies. The study demonstrates the use of interdiscursivity and intertextuality in challenging the power structures in the march. In his study, Ahmed (n.d.) investigates the extent to which the Aurat March was amplified by Twittering, and how it unwittingly brought about state censorship. Originally it started with demands to stop violence and harassment but has expanded to transgender rights, period poverty and minority rights.

Waqar et al. (2023) applied Fairclough's model to 200 tweets from hashtags #AuratMarchKHI, #LetHerDecide and #BelieveHer. There was strong patriarchy bias among male users of Twitter. The study validates the notion that Aurat March is reducing the dichotomy between the domestic and social issues by bringing forgotten stories to the fore. Riaz et al. (2025) used Multimodal Discourse Analysis on memes, protest posters and tweets, and social media posts. They discovered the digital content reproduces and challenges gender norms in an ironic and satirical manner.

Thematic analysis of protest materials and a survey (n = 200) from 2018 to 2023 were used to analyze the data in the study conducted by Aslam et al. (2025). They found that 42% of protest materials centre on bodily autonomy. 65% of traditional media's coverage goes in controversial, western or anti-Islamic direction. However, 80% of social media users demonstrate support through social media counter-narratives. Amber (2024) applied Lazar's feminist CDA to Pakistani feminist blogs from the year 2018-2023. The blogs reveal persistent gender disparities in harassment in the workplace, bodily autonomy, transgender rights, and other areas.

2.5 Gender Discourse in Pakistani Print Media

In the study titled "A Content Descriptive Analysis of Express Tribune's Headlines on the COVID-19 Pandemic," Yaseen et al. (2023) used Van Dijk's CDA to analyze Express Tribune news headlines. They identified gendered discourse as being constructed via the following macro-structures in discourse: semantic, local coherence, global superstructure, social cognition, and discourse-society relations. Words are used to paint a picture of women that is negative. The present study's approach has been influenced by the earlier work conducted by Van Dijk, on the gender construction of newspaper discourse in Pakistan.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory for this study is taken from Van Dijk's (1998, 2006) Socio-Cognitive CDA. According to Van Dijk, discourse, cognition and society are in the shape of a triangle. All Three are interdependent. The study focuses on the discourse level, that is, on the language in the articles of Dawn. These include choice of words, semantic macro-structures, local coherence, rhetorical devices and construction of headlines. Cognitions are identified at the cognitive level, and are manifested as mental models and social cognitions. Mental models are unique (individual) representations of certain events. A group's social cognitions are shared beliefs, attitudes, ideologies and knowledge. At the social level the study analyses the dynamics of power in the relations between the feminist activists, the state institutions, the religious authorities and the conservative public.

Van Dijk's ideological square is used as the main analytical instrument in this study. It is comprised of four moves in the discursive process:

1. Positive 'us' presentation: highlight positive aspects of 'us' (the feminist movement, constitutional rights, women's dignity)
2. Other-neglect: discuss negative aspects of 'us' (lack of respect for their differences, failure to accommodate them)
3. Care about avoiding in-group negatives: minimize/suppress negative aspects of 'our' group (e.g., controversy about slogans)
4. Downplaying out-group positives: downplay or ignore positive aspects of 'their' position

Van Dijk also describes a number of discursive strategies which implement these four moves. They include number game (statistics used), authority (quoting reliable sources), victimization (showing victims of injustice), populism (calling on 'the people') and burden (showing the march as a burden or danger to society). The strategies are applied in a selective and consistent manner throughout Dawn's 60 articles.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative critical research design. CDA has an intrinsic critical and interpretive nature. It does not seek to be neutral in its description. It seeks to reveal the constructions, maintenance and contestation of power relations via the medium of language (Van Dijk, 1998). That is in line with the research tradition of the CDA scholarship (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2006).

4.2 Data

The total articles are 60 and published in Dawn from 2018-2026. The samples were taken from the online archive Dawn by purposive sampling. A search was done using the following keywords: Aurat March, Women's March Pakistan and feminist march. Articles were chosen to include a variety of article types, cities and time periods. The sample includes all major categories of news coverage of the Aurat March in Dawn.

Table 1 Distribution of Dawn Articles by Year and Type

Year	News Reports	Editorials	Opinion Pieces	Repression Reports	Total
2018	2	1	1	0	4
2019	5	1	4	1	11
2020	6	2	2	1	11
2021	3	1	1	4	9
2022	2	1	1	1	5
2023	4	2	2	1	9
2024	3	1	1	0	5
2025	2	1	1	2	6
2026	4	2	2	2	10
Total	31	12	15	12	60

4.3 Analytical Procedure

There are three steps in the analysis. First, the text features are read in each article. This includes headlines, lead sentences, quotation patterns and main lexical selection. Secondly the level of cognition is examined. The goal is to determine mental models and social cognitions that are present in the text. What is Dawn's understanding of feminism, women in Pakistan, state power and religion? Thirdly, the social level is examined. What is the relationship between power

between feminist activists, state institutions and the religious opponents of feminism in the discourse?

The 60 articles make use of van Dijk's ideological square and his discursive strategies. The results are presented in five analytical tables along with an interpretation.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Dominant Ideological Frames

Among the 60 Dawn articles, three main frames of ideology are identified. The first is liberally feminist legitimization. This frame frames the Aurat March as a lawful, constitutional and social movement. The second is the patriarchal containment discourse. When Dawn mentions conservative or state voices that narrowly contain a feminist demand, this frame comes up. State securitization is the third option. The march is the focus of this frame and a target of administrative and policing control. The distribution and characteristics of these frames are given in Table 2.

Table 2 Dominant Ideological Frames in Dawn's Aurat March Coverage (2018-2026)

Ideological Frame	Frequency	Key Lexical Markers	Dominant Article Type	Primary Years
<i>Liberal-Feminist Legitimation</i>	26 articles (43%)	rights, freedom, azadi, solidarity, constitutional right, justice, dignity	Editorials, Opinion pieces	2018-2020, 2023
<i>Patriarchal Containment</i>	19 articles (32%)	vulgar, controversial, anti-Islamic, honour, decency, cultural values, moral values	News reports	2019-2021
<i>State Securitization</i>	15 articles (25%)	Section 144, NOC, detained, arrested, FIR, conditions, restrictions, manhandling	Repression reports, Editorials	2021, 2025-2026

The most common frame is a liberally feminist legitimization (43%). This reiterates the overall editorial stance of Dawn that is pro-Aurat March. As for the combination of two strands, that of patriarchy and securitization by the state, it is responsible for 57% of articles. This indicates that the coverage of Dawn is not continuous and continuous. The biggest evidence of the patriarchy containment frame was in 2019-2021 when the slogan controversies and FIRs were on the peak. The state securitization frame is significantly boosted during 2025-2026 when the police detentions and NOC conditions are the main feature of the story.

5.2 Van Dijk's Ideological Square in Practice

All four moves of Van Dijk's moves of ideological square are represented by direct textual evidence found in Dawn's articles, which is shown in table 3.

Table 3 Van Dijk's Ideological Square: Textual Evidence from Dawn Articles

Ideological Move	Discursive Strategy	Direct Textual Evidence (Dawn)
<i>Positive Self-Presentation (Aurat March)</i>	Foregrounding constitutional rights; victimization strategy; amplifying feminist voice	'Women demanding their rights are, by definition, a threat to male privilege' (March 2, 2020) 'Passionate cries for freedom and demands for an end to patriarchy resounded' (March 9, 2019)
<i>Negative Other-Presentation (Opponents)</i>	Naming patriarchal strategies; quoting threats; calling opposition 'spurious'	'Even for a society that views most form of rights-based activism with suspicion, the backlash against Aurat March has been particularly acrimonious' (March 19, 2019) 'Defenders of the patriarchy spring into action with spurious arguments' (Feb 19, 2022)
<i>De-Emphasize In-Group Negatives (Controversial Slogans)</i>	Ironic quotation marks around 'vulgar'; publishing feminist defences of slogans; omitting condemnation	'Should feminists claim Aurat March's 'vulgar' posters? Yes, absolutely' (March 15, 2019) 'The Aurat March is not a sanitised, polite, controlled version of a narrative of women's rights' (March 8, 2023)
<i>De-Emphasize Out-Group Positives (State and Religious Claims)</i>	Framing state action as 'double standards'; calling religious opposition 'moral panic'; minimal positive framing of opponents	'The Sindh government's 28-point list of restrictions is a distressing example of familiar double standards' (May 10, 2026) 'In a perverse way, there is a silver lining to the moral panic that afflicts authorities' (March 6, 2023)

Dawn always performs the four moves in the ideological square. Dawn always performs all four moves in the ideological square. Positive representations of self for the march are found in news reports and editorials. The other-presentation of opponents is a negative phenomenon, which is most apparent in editorials. In-group negative words are de-emphasized via irony. Dawn uses the word 'vulgar' in quotation marks. It prints opinion articles that support an opinion on controversial slogans. It doesn't often comment on the methods of the march. Out-group positives are de-emphasized by including state responses in terms of 'double standards' and religious opposition as 'moral panic'. This is an ideological square that demonstrates that Dawn's message is not balanced. It is a liberal constitutional, pro-feminist perspective.

5.3 Discursive Strategies across Article Types

Table 4 provides details of the Van Dijk discursive strategies found in Dawn's four types of articles.

Table 4 Discursive Strategies by Article Type in Dawn's Aurat March Coverage

Strategy	News Reports	Editorials	Repression Reports
<i>Number Game</i>	'Hundreds of women marched' (March 9, 2019)	'More than 32,500 cases of gender-based violence reported in 2024' (March 8, 2026)	'Over 40 participants released' (March 10, 2026); '28 conditions' in NOC (May 2026)
<i>Authority</i>	Quoting LHC rulings, HRCR statements, PPP chairman support	Invoking constitutional rights and law as authority	Quoting National Commission on Status of Women condemnation
<i>Victimization</i>	Reporting death and rape threats against organisers (March 17, 2019)	'Women demanding protection from GBV were rounded up by the very state meant to safeguard them' (March 10, 2026)	Reporting manhandling of detainees; activists forced to sign affidavits
<i>Populism</i>	'Women, men, transgender persons, workers, peasants, minorities all attended' (March 2023)	'Societies progress when women are able to shape them' (March 8, 2026)	Invoking constitutional right to peaceful protest
<i>Burden/Threat</i>	Reporting KP Assembly resolution calling march 'shameful' (March 20, 2019)	Not used in editorials	Reporting Section 144 denial of NOC as legal threat to activists

There are different ways of organizing discourses for different purposes throughout Dawn's articles. The number and authority strategies of news reporting enable the march to be portrayed as a big and legitimate public gathering. The victimization and populism strategies are used for establishing the moral argument for women's rights in editorials. Repression reports are based on victimization and number game to present the magnitude and gravity of the state's actions. The burden/threat strategy seems to be most frequently found when Dawn is reporting or quoting conservative opposition. Dawn does not make use of this strategy when characterizing the march.

5.4 Shifts in Socio-Cognitive Representations (2018–2026)

Table 5 presents the changes in Dawn's dominant mental models of the Aurat March in four time periods.

Table 5 Shifts in Dawn's Socio-Cognitive Representations of Aurat March (2018-2026)

Period	Dominant Mental Model	Key Theme	Discourse	Representative Dawn Text	Social Cognition Activated
2018–2019	March as feminist celebration	Sisterhood, solidarity, street power, azadi	street	'Aurat March to highlight Sisterhood and Solidarity' (March 7, 2019)	Women as rights-seeking citizens exercising constitutional freedoms
2020–2021	March as ideological battlefield	Slogan controversy, FIRs, blasphemy allegations, disinformation		'Media: The March of Disinformation' (March 21, 2021); 'Peshawar court orders FIR against organisers' (March 26, 2021)	Feminism as contested, legally risky, and religiously sensitive
2022–2023	March as intersectional demand space	Manifesto of justice, economic demands, minority rights, political demands		'Aurat March organisers want health, education budgets raised' (March 7, 2023); 'Stand with the women' (March 6, 2023)	Feminism as broad social movement extending beyond gender
2024–2026	March as target of state repression	NOC conditions, arrests, Section 144, manhandling, silencing		'Silenced March' (March 10, 2026); 'Sheema among Aurat March organisers whisked away by police' (May 6, 2026); '28-point NOC conditions' (May 9, 2026)	Feminism as threat to state order; activists as security risk

It is evident and substantial that Dawn's mental models have changed. The march is a feminist moment for hope in 2018–2019. It is enthusiastically covered by Dawn. The controversy and legal disagreements come into play by 2020–2021. Controversy over slogans and FIRs reign. The march now has more demands by 2022–2023. In addition to gender issues, Dawn's interests include economic justice, minority rights and political demands. The discourse shifts the most 2024-2026. Now the state is the active antagonist. Dawn is responsible for arrests, NOC conditions and constitutional violations. This newspaper's editorials are very telling in their use of language: 'distressing', 'heavy-handedness', 'troubling pattern', 'silenced'. This is a qualitative change in the process of socio-cognitive construction of Dawn's relationship between feminist activism and the Pakistani state.

6. Discussion

6.1 Ideological Representations

In the meantime, Dawn builds three main ideologies of the Aurat March: firstly, as a legitimate feminist movement, secondly, as a culturally contested space, and from 2024, as a space where the state conducts its repression. The most prevalent frame (43%) is the liberal-feminist legitimation. The other two frames make up over 50% of the coverage, however. That's a significant piece of information. Even the liberal Dawn newspaper does not build feminist activism in a simply positive fashion. Provides room for the conservative and state perspective. It does so, even if it is an editorially "progressive" march, endorsing patriarchy in social cognitions. In general, this conclusion is in line with Nishat and Hussain (2022) who draw a liberal-radical conclusion about Dawn's stance. However, there's some nuance in the current study. Dawn is a liberal of a limited scope. It works under the rule of law. Does not attack the religious or the patriarchal social fabric of Pakistan in the very basics. It supports women's rights, but it does so in a way that it sees them as more legal and constitutional rights than radical feminist rights.

6.2 Discursive Strategies

In Dawn's coverage, it is clear that Van Dijk's ideological square is playing out. The newspaper is consistently positive about its march and negative about its opponents. It is ironic and emphasizes feminist defenses and thus de-emphasizes slogan controversies. It marginalizes claims of the state and religion by denouncing them as 'spurious', 'moral panic' and 'double standards'. However, victimization is a very strong line of coverage in Dawn. Dawn represents feminist women as victims of state and patriarchal violence, from death threats to activists being manhandled by the police in 2026. This resonates with Alam's (2021) claim of discursive violence against women in politics when opposing discourses are voiced against the march.

A significant discovery is the quotation marks around words such as 'vulgar'. This ironic distancing is a discourse-entailing move, albeit subtle. Dawn doesn't specify that the slogans are OK. It also doesn't state "they are wrong. It provides a distance from the conservative framing. However, Cheema (2025) observed such a repurposing of Aurat slogans in the liberal digital discourse around X. The results of this study are in line with the findings of Yaseen et al. (2023) who used Van Dijk's model on Express Tribune headlines. That study has revealed that discourse produces negative images of women. The opposite situation is indicated by Dawn's coverage, as far as the feminist activists of the march are concerned. The same kind of bad publicity is applied to conservative and state critics of the march. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive tools are effective both ways.

6.3 Changes in State Repression Framing

The biggest shift in Dawn's framing of state repression in this study occurred in the years 2018–2026. The state plays a minimal role in the discourse in 2018–2019. It is not possible to stop the march as per the constitution says Lahore High Court. This is considered as comforting. The state is in the picture, but doesn't care by 2021. The government states that it is 'with strings attached' to the march. FIRs are the ones that are filed in Peshawar. Dawn tells all this but in measured terms.

The state is now an active repressor by 2025–2026. International Women's Day 2026: Pakistan's police arrest more than 40 activists in Islamabad. The Sindh government gives out an NOC with 28 conditions and some of them are restrictions on slogans and clothes. Sheema Kermani is being arrested outside the Karachi Press Club. Dawn's style changes dramatically in her writing. These are 'distressing', 'heavy-handed', 'troubling' and a 'familiar double standard', it says. This is a new and qualitative position. Now Dawn isn't only reporting repression. It is definitely against it. This

move supports also the results of Awais and Ali (2025) which revealed that legal and political aspects are 10.7% of the coverage of the Aurat March in the eight newspapers between 2018 and 2024. As state repression has increased, the current study reveals that this percentage has been increasing significantly since 2025 in Dawn in particular.

This study has findings which complement and extend several previous studies. According to Awais and Ali (2025) the most important emotion in the coverage of the Aurat March in the Pakistani English press is 'trust'. This is the case with Dawn during earlier years, as confirmed by the current study. However, the 2025-2026 data reveals that there is a trend of alarm and condemnation in Dawn's editorials. This qualitative change cannot be extracted from computational sentiment analysis as it involves a long time period of averaging over years. Baig et al. (2020) ended that there is an intentional construction of ideology in the discourse in the media. The present study builds on this, but adds in another dimension. It demonstrates that Dawn's ideology is not solid. It changes according to political and social changes. While Baig et al. have used Fairclough's 3D model of mental models, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework takes into consideration how the changes in social conditions influence the mental models and discourse.

According to Nisar and Nisar (2024), a lack of transparency makes it difficult for the march to get its message across. This study has one new finding. The issue of transparency isn't the only one that stretches from 2025 to 2026. It's a form of state action to stop the march's voice. Dawn reports this suppression as being unconstitutional. This is a new discursive position that has not been observed in previous studies, as only 2022 was reached. According to Aslam et al. (2025), 65% of the coverage of the Aurat March was sensationalized in the traditional media, as being controversial and Western or anti-Islamic. This is partially corroborated by the present study of the news reports on slogans in 2019-2021 of Dawn. However, Dawn's editorials don't sensationalize. They have a very clear position of a constitutional-feminist. Aslam et al.'s conclusion would be more valid in the case of conservative newspapers than Dawn.

This study has three original contributions to the literature. First, it is the most longitudinal and single-newspaper analysis of the media discourse of the Aurat March that has been done so far. It is for the period 2018-26, and extends beyond this to events in 2025 and 2026 that have not been analyzed by an academic study. Second, it brings for the first time in his research to the fore the socio-cognitive CDA approach developed by Van Dijk and the case of Dawn's Aurat March coverage. This framework brings to light cognitive and ideational aspects which cannot be captured by research based on Fairclough. Thirdly, it records the shift of the concept of 'state security' from its marginal status to it becoming the main frame of ideology in Dawn's Aurat March discourse in the years 2024-2026. Empirically new finding and of great importance for feminist media discourse scholar in South Asia.

7. Conclusion

The selected articles in this study were 60 articles from the Dawn newspaper (2018–2026) which were analyzed using Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive CDA. The three dominant ideological frames that were found are: 43% liberal-feminist legitimation, 32% patriarchal containment, and 25% state securitization. The ideological square of Van Dijk was evident in all types of articles. Dawn's positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation of opponents, ironic de-emphasis of slogan controversies and editorial condemnation of state repression are all positive strategies used for the march. Dawn's socio-cognitive representations of the Aurat March have undergone tremendous change from 2018 to 2026. Early coverage puts the march in a positive light as a feminist moment. In 2020 – 2021 it is an ideological battle ground. It becomes a space of intersectional demands by 2022-2023. It is targeted as a state-controlled group by 2024-2026.

This is an important story of what feminist activism is like in Pakistan. The movement has picked up momentum and the State has become more repressive. It has been a steady progression, as repression has increased, and Dawn's editorial role has become even more critical of the state. The study should be compared with Urdu language newspapers in future with the coverage of Dawn. Dawn's target audience is an educated, mainly urban, English-speaking audience. Urdu newspapers have enormous circulation among all classes of the society. A comparative study would show that there exist very different socio-cognitive frameworks in understanding the Aurat March movement in Pakistan through the different language media.

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