

High-Context Low-Context Communication in Pakistani News Channels: A Comparative Study

Nazra Zahid Shaikh

Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hamdard University Main Campus, Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract

This research explores high-context and low-context styles of communication used in Pakistani news-television programs by employing Edward T. Hall's model of culture. Pakistan's media operates within an environment of indirect regulation, where news coverage is often shaped by unspoken narratives, political pressures, and audience demand. This qualitative study examines the language used by Pakistan's most prominent TV news channels i.e. Geo News, ARY News, Dawn News, and Samaa TV to analyze how high-context (indirect, relational) and low-context (direct, factual) communication styles emerge in news reporting. The results of the study show that political orientation, regional prejudice and audience literacy level all play an important role in the adoption of high or low context approach by channels. The paper concludes with suggestions of how media professionals can contribute to the more clear and objective dissemination of news.

Keywords

High-context Communication, Low-context Communication, Media Framing, News Bias, PEMRA Guidelines

1. Introduction

Subsequent to Geert Hofstede's, Edward T. Hall's [1] ground-breaking theory of high context (HC) and low-context (LC) communication is an important referent for understanding the influence of cultural norms on information sharing. High-context communication that involves covert message transmission, obfuscated by indirect reference and assumes shared cultural knowledge stands in stark contrast to the low-context culture of explicit, direct and rules-based information [2]. This binary is especially pertinent to media studies from where the communication of news is impregnated by culture and socio-political context [3].

Pakistan is home to a highly polarized, vibrant and ever-evolving media landscape that has been moulded by a multitude of external factors, such as political interference, language diversity and entrenched social and cultural practices [4]. Pakistani news channels often tread a thin line between being gatekeepers of informed narratives, and playing to the expectations of an audience that is defined largely by regional, language and political loyalties. For example, news channels in Urdu, such as Geo News and ARY News, often use high-context communication strategies, using emotion-laden appeals, symbolic visuals and culturally evocative stories to attract an audience. English-language platforms such as Dawn News on the other hand, are more low-context, focusing on a hard, fact-first, data-driven approach with an objective, middle-of-the-road tone, appealing to an audience for which truth and accuracy are paramount.

The polarized nature of the Pakistani media, where the distinction between pro-government and opposition aligned channels is very clear makes it difficult to use HC and LC communication channels. The directness is likely to be determined by political bias, or rather the style that the political bias insists upon: some channels want drama and implicit preaching to the converted to suit a particular ideological world view, and some just want to be transparent. In addition, regulatory constraints (eg, those by Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority [PEMRA]) affect the way news is formatted, resulting in reasonable approach and expressing in an indirect way that could indirectly discourage some of the people to speak up or report [6].

To understand these dynamics, this article aims to examine the expression of high- and low-context communication among Pakistani news channels. The study aspires to uncover patterns of storytelling, audience engagement, and political framing by analyzing prime-time news stories across leading Urdu and English television channels in the country. Results will provide insight into media practices in multicultural societies and also help us to understand how to promote more balanced and more effective news communication in Pakistan.

This introduction paves the way for an in-depth look into intersecting cultural communication styles and media practices, with Pakistani news channels as a point of convergence for global media theories and local sociopolitical conditions [7].

2. Research Objectives

- To examine the application of HC and LC style by Pakistani news channels.
- To assess the role of political bias, regionalism and audience demographics in news framing.
- To draw comparisons between English language (i.e., Dawn) and Urdu language (i.e., Geo) channels in HC/LC orientations.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Hall's High Context vs. Low Context Theory

Edward T. Hall's seminal distinction between high context (HC) and low context (LC) communication is essential for understanding how markers of cultural variation influence the way information is exchanged. According to this theory, in high-context cultures, communication styles fall on a continuum that is at one extreme indirect rather than explicit and explicit and at the other end which emphasizes the use of common situational cues, as well as dependent on shared meanings [8]. In this type of society, sense and significance are left in non-verbal signals, associations and cultural contexts—and not in straightforward verbal expressions. Yet, Hall [1] observed that both Japanese and Arab cultures, along with many other Asian cultures, are high-context; meaning, media communication for them is more implicit, relationship-oriented, and symbolic. For example, one way in which Japanese journalism handles controversial issues is to subtly frame the issue, not always by what is said, but more often through what is not said.

Low communication style is characteristic of societies where people are expected to be more to the point with their language, more concise and unambiguous. In such cultures, the communication is more direct meaning that it can be taken on its own merit as far as the speaker is concerned and is not subject to interpretation through the nuances of each colour, which is unlike communication in cultures that are cues based, where the surrounding environment supports words. This is reflected in Western news media, including British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Cable News Network (CNN), where news is understood as being accurate, presented neutrally as per established conventions of news presentation [9]. This LC style is particularly prevalent in AngloAmerican news styles, which focus on a technique called the "inverted pyramid" in which the most pertinent information is provided as early as possible and is fleshed out with further details. This is consistent with a culture that values efficiency, transparency and individual perspective in the interpretation of information.

The differentiation between HC and LC communication has far-reaching implications for media analysis and for the study of how news is made, shaped, and consumed in different cultural contexts. Narratives resonate through the use of shared infrastructure and collective moral discourse in many HC media story-telling forms—while, in contrast, LC stories more commonly exhibit elements of an empirical presentation: stories are about given facts and how they relate to other given facts. This binary becomes particularly important when it is applied to the media in transitory societies such as Pakistan, where the two communication modes coexist and play off each other in complicated ways. These hybridized patterns of news media communication in Pakistan can certainly be analyzed using Hall's useful theoretical apparatus.

3.2 Application of HC/LC to Media Studies

Hall's [1] original model has been revised recently by scholarly work focused on examining contemporary media ecologies. Studies have revealed how HC/LC communication styles appear in news production (e.g., selection, framing) as well as in audience interaction strategies. In highcontext media spaces, news stories typically include historical allusions, cultural metaphors, and implicit value judgments that assume a strong context and connection with cultural memory. (Arab news stations like Al Jazeera often report international events through the prism of pan-Arab identity and post-colonial discourse, and hence, viewing them often is presuppose and requires a certain amount of cultural awareness on the part of the watcher.

In contrast, low-context media systems value information being both accessible and transparent, presuming an absence of assumed shared knowledge among message recipients. You can see this in the pat formats of international news agencies (such as Reuters) where they have the news stories 'structured' so they are instantly comprehensible by diverse peoples from different cultures the world over - even while the people from those two cultures will often interpret the text differently. While the LC method allows for information sharing and discussion across cultural traditions it may also at times forsake some of the depth of cultural understanding and the locally held knowledge and reciprocity.

The digital age also has complicated this framework; global media nowadays tend to mix HC and LC features more and more. For example, social media journalism combines the directness of LC communication (brief factual posts) with HC (contextual memes, cultural allusions). This development suggests that Hall's [1] argument while still valid, needs new updates to cope with current media convergence and hybridity. Recent investigations, in particular, have stressed how media systems in transition, including that of Pakistan, which comprises of both HC and LC dimensions, result in unique communication patterns that mirror the country's social and cultural dichotomy.

3.3 Pakistani Media Landscape

Polarisation: Pro-government vs. opposition-inclined (e.g., Geo vs. ARY) channels.

Language Divide: Urdu channels (HC sentiments) vs English channels (LC) sentiments.

Sensationalism: Sentimental-appeal based (HC) and data dominated reporting (LC).

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample Selection and Research Design

This was a qualitative research wherein prime-time news packages were purposively selected from four big news channels of Pakistan, including Geo News, ARY News, Dawn News, and Samaa TV [10]. The sample was based on time periods from September through November 2023, which, politically, was a very important time period as it was during election preparation and policy announcements. The prime-time segments (7:00 PM to 11:00 PM) were chosen because they usually are flagship news broadcasts that garner the most viewers and establish the agenda of the respective networks. The four channels included represented a cross section of Pakistani media, Geo and ARY being the largest Urdu-language TV network with polarized political preferences, Dawn as totally independent and influential English-language outlet and Samaa as upcoming independent voice.

4.2 Analysis Framework and Coding Categories

The present work adopted a systematic coding framework to identify high-context (HC) vs. lowcontext (LC) communication features in news items. For HC features, the analysis examined three main categories: (1) use of cultural stories and symbolic language, (2) hidden political and ideological implications, and (3) elite discourses and passing on of meaning in an indirect way. LC criteria were established for prevalence of fact-based headlines and lead paragraphs, use of statistics and verifiable evidence, and a neutral, impersonal stance in reports.

4.3 Data Collection Procedures

Fifty prime-time news segments (approximately 12-13 segments per channel) were monitored and transcribed by researchers systematically. We analyzed each 30-minute package in its entirety, focusing on story choice, order, linguistic features, graphic detail, and the hosts' additional comment. The data analysis that was guided by the qualitative content analysis was organized in three different analysis stages: First round open coding to capture inductive themes, focused coding supported by the HC/LC framework, and in the final stage cross-channel comparison. In order to assure reliability, the 20% of sample was coded by two independent coders and intercoder agreement was found to be 0.85 (Cohen's Kappa), which demonstrated a strong agreement.

4.4 Ethical Issues and Limitations

The research followed strict ethical guidelines and used publicly broadcast material with full acknowledgment. However, certain limitations should be taken into consideration: the sample size, which is adequate for qualitative analysis, might not represent the entire spectrum of Pakistani news media; the 3-month period represents a particular political climate that may not be indicative of the news reporting throughout the year; and also the focus on prime time may not represent different communication modalities at other times. These limitations provide directions for future research including larger sample sizes and longitudinal study designs.

5. Findings & Discussion

5.1 High-Context Domination in the Urdu News

It was found that a higher concentration of usages of high-context communication techniques were present on Urdu TV news channels and was more concentrated in political news coverage. As for the reporting on political rallies on Geo News, it is a case in point on how symbolic representation is far more dominant than empirical emphasis. For example, the channel always gave visual prominence to the crowd size and the people's enthusiasm and other visual cues as indirect evidence of public favor, and rarely showed independent opinion polls and statistical samplings. This symbolic method also pervaded the lexicon, as instead of objective standards of political popularity, such as the number of supporters, emotionally charged words like "jan-saazi" (public passion) and "awami hujoom" (the people's surge) were used to describe mass participation.

The prevalence of high-context communications in Urdu Journalism is also due to a number of structural, cultural and demographic reasons. Urdu-speaking viewers, especially in the semi-urban and rural locations, are more reactive to stories that touch upon common cultural norms and emotional triggers. The channels are loaded with religious allusions, poetic litanies and historical analogies that correspond directly with the cultural sensibilities of their viewers. Political metaphors, such as likening current rulers to despotic figures from Mughal times or freedom struggle luminaries, and other references to events or personalities from Indian history and culture make a regular appearance in the commentary sections, and any interested viewer is expected to be in the know to take in the implied meanings fully. Whilst this HC approach establishes a shared identity between the broadcaster and the audience, it may result in a loss of factual accuracy [11].

The study also found remarkable differences in HC use between pro-establishment, and opposition-leading Urdu channels. While ARY News was seen by most as government-leaning and utilized a more subtle, high-context approach to cues via selective framing and expert commentary, Geo News adopted a more explicit approach with its use of symbolic communication and emotive storytelling. Both methods however were related in that they built on the expectation of knowledge of the context rather on knowledge as given from the current position in the task model. This result is consistent with previous study in high-context society in which media serves as a culture broker rather than a source of objective information.

The implications for media literacy and political discourse are profound. Although this style of communication creates engaged viewers and cultural relevance, it can also promote misinformation through inferred meanings and unsupported symbolic claims. There's also hardly any fact-checking segments on most Urdu primetime shows, and the lack of rigorous fact-based reporting means viewers are often forced to grapple with complicated political realities filtered through emotionally captivating but potentially misleading representations.

5.2 Low-Context Trends in English News

As opposed to the Urdu channels, Dawn News use a low-level of context elements throughout the way of reporting. Political coverage often led with verifiable facts and clearly attributed quotes, followed by contextual analysis. For example, the channel's election coverage emphasized data from the electoral commission, policy stands of candidates and pundit predictions, rather than symbolic crowd representations. This LC strategy was especially noticeable when it came to business and economic journalism in which complicated financial information was isolated into bits of digestible factoids through the use of infographics and expert professorial explanations.

That seeming distaste for high-context discourse, among viewers of an English-language station, suggests a channel with an urban, educated audience. These groups are more likely to appreciate information efficiency and transparency, with a desire for raw access to the facts rather than the culturally refracted narratives that reality is bent around. Few programs manage the balance of content and presentation as well as Dawn's - after all, it's hard to beat prettiness when it comes to maintaining a viewer's attention span. But the study also indicated that at times even Dawn makes use of high-context cues when addressing culturally sensitive themes, consequently indicating that pure low-context communication may not necessarily appeal to Pakistani readers.

This disjoint in communication styles in Urdu and English channels can create two parallel information ecosystems that may lead to diverging political perceptions across language lines in Pakistan. The results indicate that such low-context reporting may lead to an increased factual accuracy but may lose the cultural connections required to attract a wider audience, emphasizing the difficulties of balancing journalistic objectivity with cultural relevance in the Pakistani media context.

5.3 Low-Context Features History English News before the 18th Century was Thematic in Style

The findings highlighted clear low context communication in English language news channel, Dawn News being the example of low context and analytical/factual news. Its financial reporting for example was particularly low context in that it operated rationally with abundant use of international financial institutions' bankable data such as the IMF and World Bank, and detailed graphs, charts, and interviews with the experts, the economists. Another was Pakistan's debt crisis, which was covered in on-screen infographics showing external significant break down debt figures owed to different creditors per percentage of GDP per compared to regional levels - with little interpretive context. This was in stark contrast to the Urdu channels' metaphoric discourses of economy in terms of "national purse" or "economic quicksand".

The preference for high-low context in English news mediated by several demographic and psychographic variables. The predominance of low context in English news is mediated by several demographic and psychographic variables. Dawn News' morning show appeals to educated, working mothers, college students with a morning schedule along with others who want to be informed, smart, and accurately updated. These consumers are generally more media literate and have more choices available to them for information, so that they demand honest, straightforward reporting. This demure approach (restrained visuals, measured tonality, no dramatic music or effects) fits what communications theorists would describe as "information-seeking" versus "experience-seeking" media consumption.

However, this was not the case and the study found variations to this low-context method in the Pakistani context. While remaining pragmatically contextless, Dawn occasionally includes some level of contextual form when addressing culturally sensitive issues such as religion and national security. For instance, newspaper coverage of blaspheming merges legal facts with detailed explications of religious affect, illustrating what we might call "contextualized low-context" communication. This hybridity also suggests that even Pakistan's most LC-oriented outlet knows what its audience has for cultural expectations.

The comparison also highlighted several intriguing differences between English news shows. Whereas headline snippets followed pure LC practices, other talk-based programming and commentary employed higher-context features such as implying political alliances and making insider references. This kind of variation amongst program types suggests that communication styles are as much supply- as demand-driven and that different formats may cater to different information and persuasion roles.

These results also have implications for media development in transitioning societies. They indicate that low-context communication allows for transparency and accountability, but is probably of less use to masses of signatories unless rich with cultural referents. The problem for Pakistani English media is how to be factual and at the same time tell the kind of stories that can leap the USA-movies divide (of Pakistan's own making) in terms of literacy and cultural knowledge – a balance few have managed. ## 4.3 Media Framing and The Shift in Framing Contexts

The study found strong underpinnings of political orientation and communicative form in the Pakistani news channels indicating how organisational imperatives drive situational strategies in journalism. State-coercive propaganda in pro-government media such as BOL TV demonstrates that in Pakistan, consistent use of high-context strategies were used to promote state narratives, which were expressed through subtle framing rather than overt endorsement. Their reporting on sensitive policy issues approached certain topics from a selective position but they didn't address them from a balanced perspective, making viewers need to decode the whole picture from context cues. For example, civil-military relations stories would mention a diplomacy-heavy encounter, but sidestep any discussion of power dynamics, hoping readers already understood the Pakistani political shorthand and would fill in the blanks.

Independent channels presented an alternative model, as Dawn News provided low-context communication despite operating within similar regulatory conditions. Their coverage of contentious issues - press freedom, say, or human rights abuses - adhered to the typical LC pattern (direct quotation from primary sources, provable numbers, spare interpretive comment.) But the study also found some noteworthy shifts when the researchers focused on the context of increased political pressure, when even independent media was cautious and used more implicit language to avoid the censors. This expressed itself in greater reliance on passive voice, the use of unnamed sources, and the burying of sensitive stories in less-watched time slots.

The results indicated three profiles of contextual adaptation:

Strategic Ambiguity in Pro-Government Media: Channels that were aligned with establishment perspectives often used culturally coded language in messages the statements critical of particular institutions or individuals have alternate interpretations for the politically literate viewer. Their economic dispatches often rendered intricate crises into nationalist tales of resilience and sacrifice.

Defensive LC in Independent Media: Publications such as Dawn worked on developing their capacity for fact-checking and data journalism as some sort of resistance to HC narratives that predominated the scene and to use empirical evidence not just as a journalistic instrument but also as some sort of body armor (proof against the charge of bias).

Hybridisation in Crises In contrast to geopolitical events, all channels also showed some fluidity of style under such major political developments of similar issues, even LC-minded broadcasters talked in more narrative terms when the stories dealt with military and religious issues indicating red lines in Pakistani journalism.

These results imply that news communication in Pakistani drama plays a cultural role, however, it also functions as a set of strategies for survival in a shrinking media space. The distinction instead is rendered not a simple cultural preference but a tactical decision that reflects the tension between journalistic principles, audience demands, and political logics. This has major direct and indirect implications for media literacy, as viewers need to decode not only content, but also the layers of context as well as omissions that give meaning to politically charged reportage.

The study also noted that these communication styles have considerably transformed after Pakistan's 2018 widening of online digital media, where the newer online platforms are coming up with novel hybrids of HC and LC forms in order to bypass traditional strictures while retaining the relevance of culture. This emerging trend indicate towards the possibly disruptive changes in the nature of contextual communication in Pakistan's developing media landscape [12].

6. Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Synthesis of Findings

This research shows that Pakistani news channels have innovated a sophisticated moshing of high- and low-context (HC/LC) modes of communication, generating a media ecosystem perfectly tailored to the complex socio-political landscapes of the nation. The study further exposes how the Urdu media relies largely on HC strategies employing symbolic messages, emotional stories and culturally in-grained references, while English media evidences relatively more LC features of presenting news in facts and figures and in a critical framework. That said, this dichotomization is not rigid – our analysis had revealed substantial contextual malleability, with channels dynamically varying their communicative manners according to content, political circumstances, and audience's anticipations.

The political economy of Pakistan's media is a key determinant in these communicative trends. Pro-establishment channels use HC devices for conveying establishment stories in the form of framing in implicit and selective emphasis, while non-pro-establishment media resort to LC methods as the latter practice is journalism principle and a defense strategy to avoid censorship. This leads to parallel information worlds catering to different sectors of Pakistani society, and thus may contribute to fragmented public discourse and rival interpretations of national issues.

6.2 Practical Recommendations

6.2.1 For High-Context Urdu Channels

Resonant culture vs. Reportage Slack finally seemed to give way in the Trump era to the idea that as well as keeping you entertained with culturally resonant stories, channels need to do work in the form of real information and expert analysis in their reports.

Create a fact-checking franchise: Create new features with an agenda of checking politicians' claims and metaphors against reality.

Mitigate sensationalism: Moderate the use of exaggerated imagery and raw rhetoric which deforms comprehension.

Improve media literacy elements: Integrate informative elements which facilitate the viewer's decoding of implicit messages and contextual signals.

6.2.2 For Low-Context English Channels

Cultural accommodation without selling out: Developing reporting styles that neither distort truth nor limit cultural accessibility for new audiences.

Frame complicated issues: Give your audience enough to fill in gaps if you have a complex issue that involves technical or specialized material.

Contact dialect reporting: Imagine bilingual or Urdu-language supplements to fill the gap between elite and mass knowledge.

Boost investigative power: Build on those LC strengths to do deeper, fact-based accountability journalism.

6.2.3 For Regulatory Bodies (PEMRA)

Modify news: Create policies that allow for balanced coverage but in conformity with cultural communicational norms.

Support media-literacy programs: Financially support programs in public schools to teach us about different kinds of communication and how we interpret them.

Fair enforcement: Enforce the rules in a fair manner, irrespective of political leaning, on all channels.

Foster industry conversation: Host gatherings for the industry to collaborate on cross-platform journalistic standards and practices.

6.3 Future Research Directions

There are a few lines for future work in the current study:

A longitudinal study examining how HC/LC style of communication varies in the course of political transition

Comparative Research with Other Hybrid Media Systems in South Asia

How media framing of HC versus LC news content is perceived by different demographic groups Audience Reception Studies of the extent to which HC and LC news items are perceived to be fair.

Analysis of the impact of digital-native media on traditional HC/LC usage

It is concluded that the media in Pakistan can make progress if it can evolve to a more critically conscious articulation of communication styles that combines the strengths of both HC and LC traditions and at the same time reduces their respective weaknesses. It is by mixing that cultural register with factual precision that Pakistani journalism might better serve its multiple diverse publics, while also helping to cultivate more informed public discourses. In the final instance, this study underlines the necessity of considering media communication as simultaneously a cultural practice and a political act in transitioning democracies such as Pakistan.

References

- [1] Hofstede, G. (1984). Cultural Dimensions in Management and Planning. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 1, 81-99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01733682>
- [2] Livingstone, S. (2019). *Audiences and publics: When cultural engagement matters for the public sphere*. Intellect Books.
- [3] Gudykunst, W. B., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). *Culture and interpersonal communication*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452253722>
- [4] Riaz, S. (2020). *Media Bias in Pakistan: A Political Economy Analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- [5] PEMRA Reports (2023). *Content Regulation Guidelines*.
- [6] Riaz, S. (2017). *Media dynamics in Pakistan: Journalistic practices, regulatory frameworks, and conflicts*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62713-5>
- [7] Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Books.
- [8] Waisbord, S. (2013). *Reinventing professionalism: Journalism and news in global perspective*. Polity Press.
- [9] Esser, F., & Hanitzsch, T. (Eds.). (2012). *The handbook of comparative communication research*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203149102>

- [10] Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- [11] Thomas, P. N. (2010). *Political economy of communications in India: The good, the bad and the ugly*. SAGE Publications India.
- [12] Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority. (2021). *Code of conduct for media broadcasters/cable TV operators*. <https://www.pemra.gov.pk/>