EXAMINING VISUAL FRAMING, GENDER REPRESENTATION, AND CLIMATE CHANGE DISCOURSE IN DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract

This systematic review examines the visual framing of disasters in Pakistan. This research studies how media reports disasters and the social effects they create while also studying communication tactics. The study examines how the media outlets in Pakistan show destructive flood events and connected disasters. The analysis finds recurring themes which include the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in which women are predominantly portrayed as passive victims, and the reliance on emotional and human-interest frames to evoke public empathy and drive relief efforts. Ethical challenges, like the portrayal of grief, suffering, and sensationalism in photojournalism, are assessed critically. The coverage often prioritizes immediate emotional appeals over long-term solutions, systemic issues, and policy critique. Another highlighted aspect is the media's dual role as an agenda-setter and watchdog. This systematic review advocates for more enhanced journalist training in adherence to ethical guidelines. There should also be collaboration with environmental experts and the promotion of diverse, balanced narratives that prioritize resilience and policy action. The findings provide much more critical insights into media framing practices and also their implications for disaster communication, public perception, and long-term management strategies.

Keywords: Visual Framing; Disaster; Climate Change.

1. INTRODUCTION

In times of natural calamities, the role of media is to drive public awareness regarding relevant information (Rodríguez, 2017). The public turns to the press for disaster-related details as well as instructions and expects the media to offer accurate representations of reality (Vevea, Littlefield, & Weber, 2011).

In the current era of globalization, it is undeniable that the media is most influential in gathering and disseminating information to the public Kuang (2024). Natural disasters have a significant impact on societies. They disrupt lives, economies, and ecosystems globally. Floods stand out as one of the most devastating types of disasters, particularly in regions like Pakistan, where geographical vulnerabilities and socio-economic challenges exacerbate their effects.

Pakistan's heavy reliance on agriculture and its location in a monsoon-prone region make it highly susceptible to recurrent flooding events (Ahmad et al., 2024). The catastrophic 2010 floods, which affected over 20 million people and caused economic losses estimated at $43 billion, underscored the critical role of media in disaster management and public awareness (Ali, 2013; Zaheer, 2016).

Research shows that visuals play a critical role in disaster coverage, capturing attention, evoking empathy, and aiding comprehension (Dan & Dimitrova, 2022; Diers-Lawson et al., 2023; King & Lazard, 2020). Newspaper visuals are vital in framing disasters by providing context, evoking emotions, and shaping audience understanding (Ruhl Ibarra et al., 2024). The social and political consequences of natural catastrophes are considerable and multi-faceted.

The public's perception of these crises is greatly influenced by how they are covered in the media. Pakistani media underutilizes visuals, limiting their effectiveness in crisis communication (Asgher, Khan, & Anjum, 2022). The year 2022 was marked by a significant number of natural disasters worldwide, which were driven by climate change, extreme weather events, and geological phenomena (World Meteorological Organization, 2022).

However, Pakistan experienced one of the worst climate change-induced disasters in its history. As a country with an extremely low carbon footprint, Pakistan is not a major contributor to global climate change but has seen a series of extreme floods, erratic monsoons, glacial outbursts, deadly heatwaves, and persistent drought—often at the same time (Najam, 2022b; Rannard, 2022; United Nations, 2022).

Unparalleled monsoon rains and glacial melting led to devastating floods that severely impacted the country, highlighting Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change despite contributing less than 1% to global greenhouse gas emissions (UN OCHA, 2022; World Bank, 2022). Pakistan's climate vulnerability is ranked among the highest globally in the Global Climate Risk Index 2021, with the floods reinforcing its precarious position (Germanwatch, 2021).

Media serves as a vital intermediary in disaster contexts, providing real-time information, shaping public perceptions, and influencing policy responses. Its coverage extends beyond immediate reporting, offering insights into societal priorities and cultural narratives. However, studies reveal that media representations often spread biases such as gender stereotypes and a lack of awareness of pre-disaster preparedness (Ali, 2014; Shah, 2024).

Mostly, the bigger picture of climate change, which significantly increases the frequency and severity of floods, is underrepresented in media narratives (Habib & Zahra, 2024). Women are usually depicted in passive roles, overshadowing their contributions and resilience during crises (Mahmood, 2013). This systematic review of seven scholarly publications examines how the media depicts floods in Pakistan.

The analysis assesses the role of visual framing, gender patterns, and climate storytelling to reveal crucial areas for improvement that will boost disaster communication effectiveness. This study joins existing scholarly efforts that push for ethical and inclusive media practices in disaster coverage.

2. OBJECTIVES

This research examines disaster news coverage, including media presentations of natural disasters, to identify missed opportunities.

The analysis tracks media trends across disaster events in Pakistan, particularly floods, to show how these stories get reported and shaped. This research looks at both how specific groups in danger are demonstrated by the media and at the differences based on gender and social class.

The analysis illustrates how well these various groups get mentioned in media coverage. The study examines how disasters are reported and how reporters discuss climate change-related information within their reports.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Review studies support research because they deliver factual evidence about what happens during specific events. They want to help people understand more by looking at published research and directing how to think about the data.

To find research on our subject the investigation team used literature review methods suggested by (Ali et al., 2021). This review combines the results of research that studied media content about natural disasters.

Our analysis centers on how media presents visual content plus storytelling techniques alongside gender demographics in climate change explanations. Through thematic analysis, the project found both similarities and unique elements across all chosen research papers to help explain the complete topic.

Our research analyzes the visual presentation of natural disasters while studying gender representation to understand their effects on public thinking and government decision-making.

The research seeks to find missing information about disaster prevention through media and reviews ethical duties in disaster news handling. PRISMA acts as a structured plan to find relevant research for our review through effective study selection.

Searches for relevant studies begin at Google Scholar ResearchGate and Elsevier databases. Before proceeding further, we removed three duplicate entries and 18 irrelevant records from our dataset.

We assessed 18 research papers during screening and removed two unsuitable records based on their titles and abstracts. All 16 target reports were successfully downloaded from their published sources.

Our team examined 16 full-text reports through the eligibility phase and eliminated two studies because they followed different plans. During the inclusion period, seven new studies were added to our research, bringing the total to 7 studies.
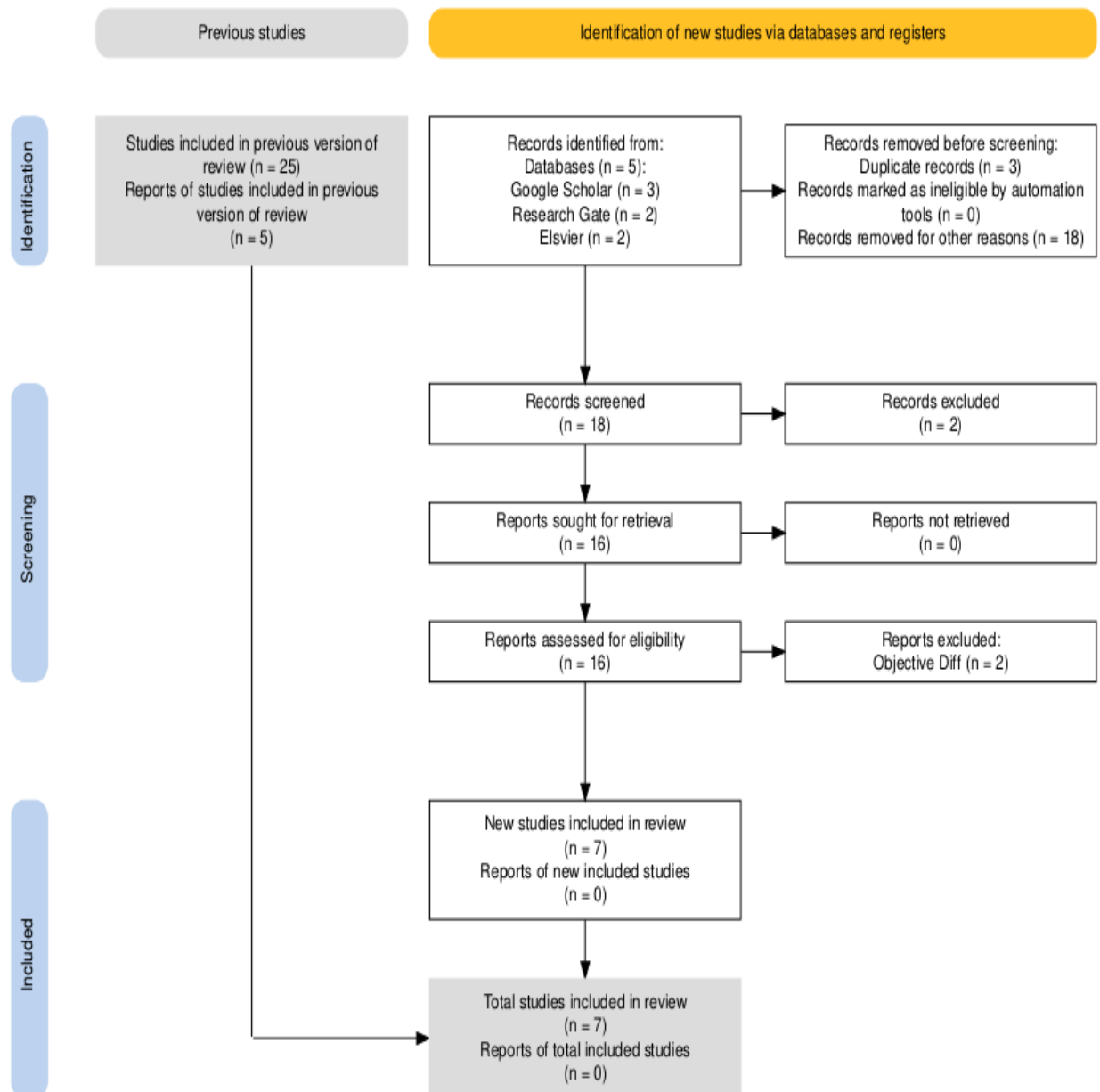

Fig 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Selection in Systematic Review

The review utilized a range of academic articles as data sources, including studies on the visual representation of gender in disaster media, research on framing and semiotics in disaster coverage, and comparative analyses of media portrayals across different disaster contexts. For example, key references included Ali (2014) on gender representation, Javed (2021), Habib & Zahra (2024) on semiotics, and Shah (2024) and Ali & Mahmood (2013) on comparative media studies.

A carefully constructed search strategy was employed, using keywords such as "media coverage," "visual framing," "natural disasters," and "Pakistan." The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles discussing visual media representations of disasters in Pakistan, mainly through case studies on floods, earthquakes, and droughts.

Articles lacking a media portrayal focus, unrelated to natural disasters or media framing, or non-peer-reviewed and non-English publications were excluded. The study selection process was structured and systematic. Initially, the articles were screened by title and abstract, followed by a full-text review to ensure relevance. Any discrepancies in study inclusion were resolved through discussion among reviewers. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the review.

All data were sourced from publicly available academic literature, and proper attribution and citation practices were adhered to, ensuring acknowledgement of original contributions. This review advances the understanding of media portrayals of disasters and offers critical insights into their societal and policy implications.

Table 1: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria Regarding Literature Selection

| Sno	Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
1.	Study Focus	Examines media portrayal of natural disasters (e.g., floods, earthquakes).	Studies unrelated to natural disasters or media coverage.
2.	Media Type	Focus on print, electronic, or social media representations.	Studies without a focus on media or communication strategies.
3.	Themes	Analyzes visual framing, gender representation, semiotic analysis, or disaster communication.	Articles do not address visual or thematic elements in disaster reporting.
4.	Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles or reputable academic studies.	Non-peer-reviewed articles, editorials, or opinion pieces.
5.	Language	Published in English.	Articles in languages other than English.
6.	Publication Date	All articles related to the topic.	Articles published before 2010 or after 2024.
7.	Geographic Scope	Focus on disasters covered by Pakistan media.	Studies not geographically relevant to the focus of the systematic review.
8.	Data Completeness	Provides sufficient data for analysis, including methodology and findings.	Studies with incomplete or insufficient data for thematic analysis.
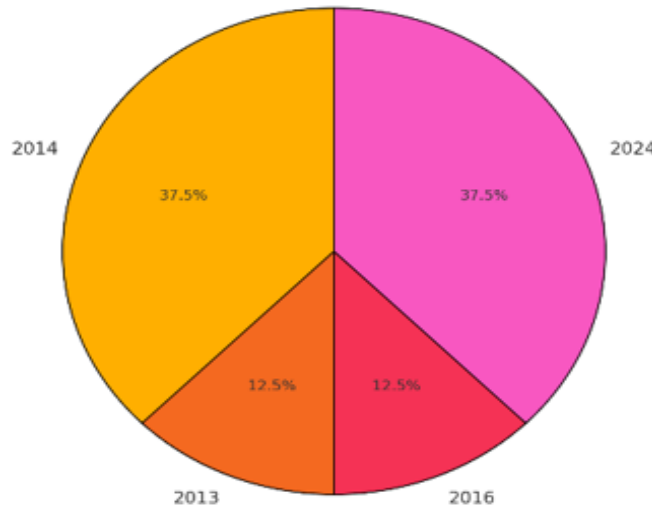
Figure 2: Frequency of Articles According to Years of Publication

The publications have followed a specific distribution across four distinct years, as shown in the pie graph presented. The period from 2014 to 2024 maintained equal dominance, with 37.5% becoming the highest category in published articles. All these years mark the highest point in scholarly productivity. The publications that were published in 2013 and 2016 collectively make up a combined total of 12.5% of the annual document count. The research output data reveals notably reduced levels of productivity for 2013 and 2016. Research productivity may have reached its peak points during 2014 and 2024 because of heightened academic priorities coupled with additional funding and breakthroughs within specific fields. The lower publication figures in both 2013 and 2016 indicate that these periods had limited research activity.

Table 2: Design and Paradigm Models of Selected Literature

Title	Year	Design	Paradigm/Framework	Details
Visualizing Victims of Disaster: A Comparison of Associated Press Images of Hurricane Katrina and Pakistan Floods	2014	Content Analysis	Media Framing Theory	Explores visual framing in disaster coverage through thematic and configurational frames.
Photojournalism and Disaster: Case Study of Visual Coverage of Flood 2010 in National Newspapers	2013	Content Analysis	Framing Theory and Visual Analysis	Analyzes photographic framing of disaster coverage, including human interest and political frames.
Media Coverage of Natural Disasters in	2016	Mixed-Methods	Social Responsibility Theory	Evaluates pre- and post-disaster

Pakistan: The Case of Earthquake (2005), Flood (2010), and Famine (2014)				reporting, emphasizing ethical disaster journalism.
A Comparative Analysis of Prime-Time News Coverage on Public and Private Channels During the 2022 Flash Floods in Balochistan	2024	Mixed-Methods	Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory	Compares state and private media narratives on disaster reporting, focusing on government versus public perspectives.
Visual Coverage of Climate Change in Pakistani Print Media	2024	Content Analysis	Visual Semiotics	Assesses print media's depiction of climate change, using semiotic analysis of images.
Visual Representation of Gender in Flood Coverage of Pakistani Print Media	2014	Qualitative Analysis	Feminist Theory and Visual Framing	Examines gender stereotypes in visual flood coverage, highlighting cultural and societal biases.
Eco-Linguistic Analysis of Flood Representations in Selected Print Media: A Case of Climate Change Semiotics	2024	Qualitative (Eco-Linguistics)	Semiotics and Eco-Linguistics	Investigates linguistic and visual semiotics in disaster reporting, focusing on societal impacts.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Public understanding of disasters depends heavily on visual ways of framing these events. Pakistan regularly endures both natural and artificial disasters, yet its visual documentation profoundly shapes the comprehension of these events among citizens and viewers worldwide. This review synthesizes existing literature on the visual framing of disasters in Pakistan to identify prevailing patterns, gaps, and implications for research and practice.

4.1 Semiotics and Disaster Coverage of Media

Through its deep examination of signs and symbols, semiotics leads us to essential knowledge about how people understand their daily experiences and share their findings. Semiotics helps us understand how people cope with disaster situations. Professors Danladi (2020) and Nazar Ud-Din (2022) examined disasters using sign analysis in their work. Through their research, Danladi (2020) and Nazar ud din (2022) investigated how disaster survivors use signs to create their stories and manage emotional trauma. Scientists examine natural disasters from the perspective of Eco semiotics. Semiotics teaches us how media works in disaster reporting. Research about Hurricane Katrina shows how disasters appear in their representations, according to Baker (2011). Morimoto (2015) studied how news organizations reported about earthquakes in Japan

and Mexico in 2017. The studies from 2011 demonstrate how media content with words, pictures, and videos affects how people respond to disasters. Events. In disaster coverage, Semiotics helps us analyze signs, symbols, and communication methods. Communication scientists study how messages transmit their point. Broekman (2017) highlights several facets of semiotics in disaster reporting: Semiotics studies the communication tools used during disaster reporting. Visual and written content guides people's understanding and emotional reactions. It considers cultural media companies work with agreed-upon meanings and symbols to reshape audience understanding. The research explores how information gets its context by using framing and explains how powerful groups influence what information gets shared. The situation shows how important players shape media content and public communication.

4.2 Visual Framing in Disaster Communication

Visual framing involves the use of imagery to present information in ways that emphasize certain aspects over others, thereby influencing interpretations and reactions. Studies by Entman (1993) and others highlight that frames operate by selecting and highlighting some aspects of reality while obscuring others. In the context of disasters, visual framing can highlight human suffering, resilience, or governmental inefficiencies. Catastrophic events such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, etc., are often given a pervasive visual representation in print media, which can leave lasting impressions in the minds of the public. Considering much simpler and far-reaching implications, the simple act of selection is visual framing. It includes choosing one view to make a photograph instead of another, editing or cropping in a way while leaving other options, or displaying one image out of others taken at the same time (Messaris & Abraham, 2001; Borah & Bulla, 2006). However, as discussed earlier and as posited by Matthes (2009), research on visual framing is very little, especially those that are related to the disaster. Downey (2012) quoted Borah & Matthes (2009) as saying, "Visual framing is lacking in existing research as compared to textual analysis." He further quoted Fahmy, Kelly, and Soo (2007), saying that although various studies were conducted on the frequency of photographs appearing in media, most of them were related to the war on terrorism. To understand the coverage of any disaster, an in-depth understanding of photographs can help to understand media frames deeply. This was explained by Faux & Kim (2006) that sometimes, media use images of disaster to create a 'pseudo reality' which, while giving many perspectives, fails to record events objectively.

4.3 Patterns of Visual Framing in Pakistan

4.3.1 Natural Disasters

Pakistan is prone to natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, and droughts. Research by Khan et al. (2015) suggests that visual coverage of these disasters often emphasizes human suffering, with images of displaced families, destroyed homes, and inundated fields dominating media reports. This humanitarian focus can mobilize international aid.

4.3.2 Terrorism and Conflict-Related Disasters

Pakistan continues to confront serious problems with terrorism and warfare. According to Ali's 2017 research data, visual elements in news media show scenes of destruction and disorder while emphasizing injured people and brave figures. The repeated use of frames creates stories of strength but can also carry harmful stereotypes about regional armed conflicts.

4.3.3 Climate Change Disasters

People notice climate-triggered events like melting glaciers and urban flooding because they want to learn more about these images. According to Ahmed et al. (2020), Pakistani media does not link climate change-related visuals to their proper context instead choosing to focus on immediate impact.

4.3.4 Conclusion

Viewing how disasters are displayed in Pakistan shows us how society handles these emergencies. Our current methods show immediate impacts well but we need to develop better ways that include everyone and explain systems at work. Through improved storytelling efforts we can help public audiences make better disaster decisions and propel effective resiliency development.

5. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Visual reports about disasters usually show how strongly victims live through challenges before recovering. Media depictions show harmless people who need mercy while also showing their pain. The media chooses to show victims based on their sex, age, and ethnic background with the results mainly featuring women, kids, and members of underserved groups. These visual displays show how disasters affect people firsthand while tracking their changing needs for a long time. Institutions and media companies use visual information to adapt disaster stories according to their own goals and interests. Media organizations prefer using intense emotional pictures because they want readers to react strongly and interact with their content. Organizations outside the government create visual elements that invite viewers to share emotions while they give donations. Depending on the setting the visuals show the faces of suffering victims or show institutions that failed to stop the accident in its tracks. Disaster images reflect both its type and magnitude. Natural disasters typically show us scenes of nature's wild power that destroys environments and leaves residents without homes. For infrastructure destruction and human accountability, manmade disasters draw our attention away from natural forces towards responsible humans. Different visual styles help people understand where the disaster started and what it means. The impact disaster visuals have on emotions and minds influences how they are shown on screen. Photographs of emotionally distressed people and their families near the viewers build sympathy and relate to them better. When the camera shows us destruction from above, people respond

with a mix of emotional reactions. Visual storytelling tools in color grading and focus changes strengthen emotional reactions that stay in a viewer's mind.

Table 3: Summary Table of Themes

Theme	Description	Examples from Media	Implications
Human Interest Frames	Focus on emotional aspects to evoke sympathy.	Images of women and children in distress, grief-stricken visuals.	Mobilizes aid but perpetuates victim stereotypes.
Gender Stereotypes	Women are depicted as passive, men as active.	Women caring for children, men building barriers or leading relief efforts.	Reinforces cultural norms of male dominance.
Economic and Political	Emphasis on economic losses and political figures in relief.	Urdu newspapers showing government-led aid; English focusing on infrastructure loss.	Editorial biases influence public perceptions.
Visual Framing	Use of specific visual techniques to guide narratives.	Close-ups of victims, long shots of destruction.	Shapes audience empathy and editorial alignment.
Pre-Disaster Neglect	Minimal focus on preventive measures.	Coverage only after disasters occur.	Limits public preparedness and education.
Cultural Sensitivity	Adherence to cultural norms in coverage, such as purdah for women.	Women in traditional attire even in displaced settings.	Balances cultural respect but may restrict empowerment.

This analysis highlights the thematic trends in media coverage, offering insights into the framing strategies and their societal implications. Let me know if you need further details or adjustments!

6. DISCUSSION

This systematic review provides critical insights into how media representation shapes public understanding, policy responses, and societal perceptions during natural disasters. By synthesizing themes of visual framing, gender representation, and media ethics, the analysis highlights significant patterns and gaps in the current literature.

6.1 Visual Framing in Disaster Coverage

In the reviewed literature visual framing emerged as a dominant frame. The research papers emphasized the power of images in shaping public awareness and triggering emotional responses. Ali and Mahmood (2013) put a lot of emphasis on human-interest frames dominating disaster visuals, often focusing on suffering to elicit sympathy and mobilize aid. Visual semiotics studies reveal that media frequently use very selective imagery to frame disasters, which has a strong influence on public perception of affected populations and their needs (Habib & Zahra, 2024) . The examination of distressing imagery risks contributing to stereotypes that may obscure the strength displayed by affected populations. Shah et al. (2024) state private media generally examines government actions, but their disaster reporting occasionally becomes adorned with

impactful slogans that distort the true nature of events. Balanced representation becomes essential because it should identify vulnerabilities together with empowerment in disaster situations.

6.2 Gender Representation and Stereotyping

The print media often reinforce the traditional gender roles that are prevalent in societies. Ali (2014) reviews the portrayal of women as submissive and passive victims who are often portrayed as merely confined to caregiving roles or awaiting rescue. Such representations not only disseminate stereotypes but also tend to marginalize women's active participation in disaster response and recovery. Some studies suggest that nuanced portrayals are possible. For example, gender-sensitive coverage in some of the print media has also brought women's resilience and leadership during crises forward, which challenges traditional narratives (Habib & Zahra, 2024) . It was noted that there is a lot of inconsistency across media, and there is a dire need for ethical frameworks guiding gender representation in disaster reporting.

6.3 Media Ethics and Responsibility

Media ethics play an integral role when disaster reporting occurs. Research examples confirm that the media serves dual functions because it tests government performance yet frequently chooses provocative stories above truthful information delivery. Javed (2021) points out that media agenda-setting and framing follow corporate goals more often than they serve the public interest, which produces unbalanced reporting. The use of distressing visual content in reporting creates ethical and moral dilemmas because it potentially exploits victims' dignity (Ali & Mahmood, 2013). Shah et al. (2024) recommend that a proper code of conduct should be adopted for disaster reporting emphasizing accuracy, empathy, and inclusivity in narratives. Such measures are essential to ensure media acts as a constructive force in disaster management.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this review have several implications:

1) Policy Development: Policymakers must collaborate with media professionals to establish ethical guidelines that prioritize balanced and inclusive reporting.

2) Training for Journalists: Media practitioners should be trained in ethical disaster reporting, with a focus on visual framing and gender sensitivity.

3) This analysis of media practices operates with narrow parameters that potentially overlook numerous global media practices. Additional research should extend this topic by studying the roles of new media platforms within disaster representation.

Further research is needed to explore underrepresented themes, such as the impact of cultural contexts on disaster narratives or the role of digital media in disaster communication.

7. CONCLUSION

The systematic review demonstrates how media creates disaster stories while stressing the requirement for better responsible, communicative practices in disaster coverage. Organizations should boost media literacy while also teaching reporters to present stories that showcase feminine strength and autonomy alongside linking disasters to environmental issues in their base context. Pre-crisis communication systems should be developed with more substantial preparedness objectives. The introduction of ethical framework guidelines is necessary to ensure balanced and accurate reporting, which prevents sensationalism and bias. Future research should analyze disaster reporting across different geographical areas to develop common ethical standards for disaster media coverage that will promote a globally informed society better equipped to handle crises.

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