

## Language and Religious Ideology: A Qualitative Analysis of Sufi Headlines

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### Abstract

News headlines are designed to present a story in a meaningful way to grab the attention of readers where editor use emotionally charged language as a tool to make the title of story more memorable and responsive. In religious domain, spiritual orientation and attribution to the holiness is often viewed to function influential communication. This research aims to analyze Sufi orientation investigating headlines published in leading national language dailies. We applied qualitative content analysis method in this study to analyze the headlines and used purposive sampling technique to collect the data; for a comprehensive overview, this paper calls attention to the news stories printed on the occasions of death anniversaries of prolific Sufi saints of the region, Punjab, Pakistan, in four leading newspapers, Nawa-i-Waqt, Jang, Express and Khabrain, to contribute to the contemporary studies of religion and press. The study found that editors engaged and encourage readers to want to find out more presenting Sufi as a great preacher and a source of love, peace and divine blessing. This paper argues that in Sufi

headlines divine faith and religious achievements of the saints can be discerned to induce a sense of reverence of the religious mentors and to appeal reader's cognitive connections of their faith.

**Keywords:** Islam, Journalism, Newspapers, Religion, Sufism

### **Introduction**

This paper is an attempt to analyze the communicative functions of mainstream newspapers behind religious news headlines focusing Sufism. News headlines which are the 'media-generated shortcuts for heuristic information' describe crux of a story and present accurate summaries of the reports<sup>1</sup>. These news headlines are planned to capture a wide readers and to retain information by connecting concepts<sup>2</sup>. Mass media uses headlines to advertise, introduce and communicate the story to the audience in a concise and more influential manner that people can pay attention<sup>3</sup>. It works as the handles to grasp for evaluating and analyzing different real-life events. A fundamental principle is that people apply different schemas to understand, retrieve, organize and filter all types of information<sup>4</sup>. These schemas are referred to as the cognitive shortcuts or "mental maps"<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, editors widely used framing techniques processing information before publishing to construct a particular picture or meaning of the issues. They shaped the reports deliberately in order to portray particular context and follow illustrative techniques to classify the story in a particular outlook. They make the report pertinent, prominent and considerable for the readers by using selection of effective words and sentences<sup>6,7</sup>. Previous research has demonstrated that news headlines evoke strong emotions and grab the attention of readers, and give an idea of what the story is about. Moreover, its affective wordings make it memorable and reference to those who are interested to these particular topic. They are often written in a provocative way to appeal readers' emotions and interest using inspirational language that further increase the visibility of the story as well. Newspapers over the years have developed their own conventional style near to the promotional writing to draw attention and to arouse curiosity<sup>8,9,10</sup>. "They also have a very specific thematic function since they usually express the most important topic of the article"<sup>11</sup>. Religious headlines are the one of the most influential headlines in a social context as it covers faiths, ethics, moral events and spirituality etc.

These headlines are the most sensitive ones which are mostly portrayed with the positive diction because it covers all the positive aspects of the religious teachings and practices<sup>12</sup>. They can draw reader's attention to any perspective such as use of religious phrases make audience think in a religious manner<sup>13</sup>. Many studies have been conducted on the increasing importance of religious headlines as it spurs modernization<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, these headlines describes the authentic meaning of religion, real principle of love and peace, which is common in every religion<sup>15</sup>, and we can find its justification with the societal informative needs<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, religious news headlines use themes and titles of divinity by emphasizing religious achievements regarding propagation of religion, divine faith, blessing, success for the eternal life, and other positive emotions associated with religion. Moreover, these headlines are designed to induce a sense of reverence of the religious mentors to portray them as a source of inspiration, and to appeal reader's cognitive connections of their faith. In southern part of the Punjab, Sufism is a very popular phenomenon. Sufi festivities are covered and projected on large scale in leading national dailies. Headlines of the news stories seem emphasizing themes of spirituality and achievement of Sufism to appeal readers' intuitions about Sufi beliefs and faith. The ultimate goal of this approach is to engage the people with the text in a meaningful way. This study has attempted to delineate the potency and frequency of Sufi news headlines published in mainstream press of South Punjab, Pakistan which will contribute to academic and industrial future perspectives.

**Research question:** What are themes of expressions present in Sufi headlines?

#### **Literature review**

Headlines are the distinctive form of text which is referred as the main heading of the story communicating through different platforms of media which allow audience to recapitulate its important features. Newspaper headlines are the collection of wisely selected highly effective words with structure and meaning<sup>17</sup>. These words are carefully crafted with use of phrases and connotations to make the opinion of readers<sup>18</sup>. It contain following attributes dictating its shape, structure and content that it should be catchy, concise, punchy and most importantly written in journalistic language<sup>19</sup>.

Headlines usually involve key information to communicate and draw attention of the audience<sup>20</sup>. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), headlines are described as the relevance optimizers which means that headlines act as textual negotiators between story and readers<sup>21</sup>. It helps explaining the construction of headlines require understanding of both story and reader's cognitive style; belief, knowledge, expectation<sup>22</sup>. Headlines basically characterized as short summarization of news story which grab the interest of readers based on their emotions and understandings<sup>23</sup>, moreover, make an influential impression on the readers to read that particular article to the end<sup>24'25'26</sup>. It is evident that popularity and individuality of any article depends on its headline which is considered as the most important and representative part of the journalistic feature. Some scholars cited that headlines perform double-function which include both roles; to summarize the meaning of the story and to alert the audience to read the full context of the story. There are two types of headlines found on the basis of thematic role<sup>27</sup>; one is subject headline having subject of the story only and other one is thesis headline where writer can express the subjective point of view. Saxena indicated other types as well, e.g. commentative (includes the comments), descriptive (main idea of the article is provided along with comments) and label (where subject is more prominent)<sup>28</sup>. The most preferred headlines are label headlines where writer's subjective opinion is not present and it should be designed on the basis of general and cultural knowledge of readers. The interpretation of news articles depend on these ideological beliefs. People usually prefer that information which intensify their pre-existing views and eliminates the contradictory statements<sup>29</sup>. Since, the title usually stands alone, it doesn't contain any definition and explanation so it is necessary to keep the cultural preferences for the reader's evaluation of the article<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, the headlines are shaped according to the beliefs, culture and expectations of the domestic audience even during the transfer of language from another it focuses on the contextualization and selection of information for the home spectators<sup>31</sup>. It also comprises with the use of culturally and nationally constructed images, norms, values and symbols for the representation of any headline<sup>32</sup>. The most essential element in constructing the headlines is dominant language keeping in mind social practices and the depiction of real

world<sup>33</sup><sup>34</sup>, as after analyzing carefully, it was noted that headlines play different functions under semantic and pragmatic roles of language. Semantic function means introducing the topic present in the article to grab the reader's interest according to the journalist's style of writing and cultural values which help readers to evaluate and comprehend the particular story<sup>35</sup> while pragmatic role focuses the depiction of hard news in a more engaging format according to the preferences of audience<sup>36</sup><sup>37</sup>. The use of these two functions depends on the quality of newspaper as semantic function is more focused by quality newspapers and pragmatic one is by popular or tabloid newspapers because the agenda of larger number of audience is directly linked to sensationalism which helps in prominence of different issues<sup>38</sup>. This prominence is achieved by using linguistically-inspired heuristics such as adverbs, questions, metaphors and quotations<sup>39</sup><sup>40</sup>. Reader's curiosity increases with these attractive linguistics as use of question mark make audience inquisitive about the whole article<sup>41</sup>. Such types of headlines work as a 'Hook'<sup>42</sup>, and audience prefer creative headlines with stylistic features like forwarding referencing which make them curious to dig out more about the story<sup>43</sup><sup>44</sup><sup>45</sup><sup>46</sup>. Headlines reach viewers more widely than the whole article because most of the readers go through the headlines first where linguistic features make them memorable. Further, use of gags, alliteration, emotive vocabulary and rhetoric features help headlines to be presentable and effective<sup>47</sup>. The font, titles, position and structure play an additional inspiring role in the depiction of headlines<sup>48</sup><sup>49</sup>. These headlines are constructed with good idiomatic and thought provoking linguistics of one dominant culture thus it can satisfy the expectations of readers<sup>50</sup>. In addition, representation of headlines constructed for the specific event use connotations according to their socio-cultural beliefs<sup>51</sup> to help in determining the utilization of particular headline in certain targeted culture. These "Functionalists"<sup>52</sup> reflects the "Publicistic register" and its major function is to influence, communicate, depict the state of society and change public opinion. The characteristics of publicistic register includes; accuracy and lucidity of language, use of common terms, indirect phrases and expressions, journalistic platitudes which mainly focuses on cultural and situational framework. This register contains positive and negative persuasive adjectives, common and emotional expressions,

metonymic concise sentences<sup>53</sup>. News headlines are fully transformed to attract the reader by reshaping and construct their opinions. Language is now serving the role of creating reality rather than presenting it<sup>54</sup> because words used by writers shift from traditional focus to social as it is based on their own opinion<sup>55</sup>.

### **Methodology**

This study has used a qualitative method of content analysis as a discovery tool to explore the themes of Sufi news headlines of leading national language newspapers published from two major cities, Lahore and Multan, of Punjab, province of Pakistan. The data used in this study was collected from four leading Urdu language dailies, Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt, Express and Khabrain. The researchers selected the time period of three years from January 2020 to December 2022 for this investigation. We opted purposive sampling focusing on death anniversaries of revered Sufis of both regions; Ali Bin Usman Hujwiri alias 'Data Ganj Bakhsh' from Lahore, and Bahauddin Zakariya, and Shah Rukn-e-Alam from Multan. Newspapers cover ceremonies of these ancient saints of 11th and 13th centuries prominently due to their importance and fame among the masses. Urdu newspapers publish frequent news stories for the intimation and information of these Sufis' death anniversary celebrations. These news stories are published on front and back pages of the newspapers with photos of ceremonies. The content was analyzed in a meaningful way, and each headline was considered a unit of analysis to investigate themes associated with Sufi portrayal.

### **Results**

The result of the analysis shows that news headlines are the succinct information generated by media about religious principles. Religious headlines are depicted and designed according to the individual's analytical thinking such as dogmatic individuals and religious fundamentalists get easily attracted because their interest and cognitive belief is being satisfied<sup>56</sup>. In such case, themes of expressions present in any headline is important to which people can relate emotionally and is up to their cognitive heuristics. There are following themes of expressions have been analyzed in different Sufi headlines includes:

#### **Role in Preaching**

Preaching is the communication of religious notions derived from historical events and conveyed by using powerful grammatical or literary context. It is known to be the belief and experience of the preacher which is then transmitted to their followers and listeners<sup>57</sup>. Thus, it gives rise to the guiding values to understand the faith of life related to the experiences of oneself. These understandings generate different assumptions which relate people to one another and allows pragmatic decision-making. This agenda creates particular ethical and cultural values as faith of people. However, headlines are used as the transmitter for cultural information. Headlines are serving as those shortcuts and faith leaders who are helping community in their greatest needs to understand while encouraging them to believe cultural knowledge through the modeling of reality presented. According to previous experimental researches, headlines are categorized as the most influential to mold the opinions and attitudes of people<sup>58'59'60'61'62</sup>. As preaching used in religious headlines doesn't rely on the texts of skills, tips and tricks but the path of guidance, learning and teaching disciplines by using addressing and preaching words which is persuasive for entire culture to concur such as, "infidelity", "bath of grave" and "elimination of bigotry". These type of headlines usually depend on the reader's acknowledgement of the references, fields and cultural allusions which they can relate with and agree upon the ideology to follow up the entire content because they cannot resolve the bridge of faith and what they're hearing around. They thus count on the cultural knowledge which is being presented and models of reality given by known references that is assumed pervasive in the society. "Sufi preaching eliminated darkness of infidelity: Sahibzada Kazmi" Sufi headline has been analyzed which is playing a major role of preaching with culturally believed reference. It is designed in an addressing manner which claims that infidelity can be eliminated by Sufism. This headline has used the reference of religious scholar which is believed to resolve the misunderstanding and misperception of the follower's religious faith. Jitsuo Morikawa stated that when people are confused and they need hope then preaching usually help people to understand<sup>63</sup>. It shows the meaning of real preaching in which religious words have been used to fulfill human needs.

“We should follow the teachings of Bahauddin Zakariya for communal harmony” This headline contended the message of unity and harmony for the peace of the community with the reference of Bahauddin Zakariya, a venerated Sufi scholar from Multan. The headline is designed in an obligatory manner by using texts “we should” to convince people that this is the only way people can find peace and concord between them. Preaching headlines act as the guidance and hope in the life of listeners who are searching for the conclusion. “Bahauddin Zakariya played vital role for the propagation of Islam: Shah Mehmood” This headline has preached the message of dissemination of particular religion by following the path of a religious scholar. It gives the memo to be the follower for the growth of their religion by sharing the history of communal believed scholar. This message has been intensified by adding the reference which shows another personal experience shared to believe easily. “We could be successful only to follow the path of Sufis: Religious scholars” Another headline has been analyzed in which requisite textual form has been used to make audience persuade by using the reference of several scholars. It makes this headline easily preachable by using the commanding text such as “we could ONLY be successful”. As the curiosity about the reality and faith can make people consider these headlines influential because it could help them filling the gaps. “Practice of Sufi teachings is necessary for the elimination of bigotry” This headline is strongly claiming without any reference that Sufism is necessary to eliminate bigotry and biasness. It gives this headline an imposing sense of style which make audience concerned and curious about the whole article to find out ways to understand. It acts as the optimizer to enhance the processing effort of the audience.

### **Propagation of Love and Peace**

Mass media is the most powerful and effective platform in dispersal of positive thoughts, ideas and ideology rather than only diffusing denunciations, false, sensitizing news and defamation<sup>64</sup>. Positivity through news media mainly characterizes by spreading peace, harmony and love which is indorsed by using journalistic style. This type of journalism is supported by framing theory. However, framing is defined as the selection of perceived reality which is communicated in a more prominent textual form to promote



an ideology and moral appraisal<sup>65</sup>. Headlines play the important role in encouraging media frame which is described as the fundamental establishing idea for news content and what the crux is about by using the elaboration, selection, segregation and emphasis. This is done by adding staple and common opinion, phrases and images to support the particular understanding. These particular interpretations becomes stronger by recurrence, fortification and placements of different texts and images<sup>66</sup>. The convincing textual placement is considered important to make the religious headlines powerful and persuasive such as words like “communal harmony”, “solidarity” and “centers of peace”. Religious headlines involves the magnitude of representation of the actual story and the pursuit to grab the audience’s attention according to their common belief and cognitive style. As it is a general assumption that religion is all about teaching and learning which highly promotes the idea of harmony, unity, peace, armistice and love. Thus, religious headlines usually designed to propagate the idea of concord so it can grab the attention of different audiences rather than the only dogmatic ones. “We should follow the teachings of Bahauddin Zakariya for communal harmony” Religious headline usually covers all the aspects of proliferating the ideology of peace. This headline is also serving the equivalent role of spreading the message of communal harmony which is defined as the unity between different communities and societies. It is universally believed that religion teaches us love and commonality which is being promulgate in this headline by using the reference of societal believed scholar. It is also serving the factor of satisfaction and hope for peace by using influential words. “Celebrations of Shah Rukn-e-Alam’s death anniversary commence. Lodges of Sufi saints are centers of peace: Shah Mehmood” The phrase “centers of peace” is playing the important role in this headline to make it more powerful and influential. Phrases make the headlines more attractive to the audience and provide them key proclamations and assumptions about the main idea presented in the headline which triggers the curiosity level in viewers. It also contains the powerful reference to make the statement trustworthy and catchy for the audience. “Death anniversary celebrations of Shah Rukn-e-Alam ended; prayers for national and Muslim solidarity, and for the independence of Kashmir and Palestine” This headline is aiming to spread the message of

peace broadly as it is encouraging the concept of societal bond and unity in the absence of enmity and war by using different optimistic words such as solidarity and independence. This type of headline propagates the message of universal happiness and positive impression of particular religion globally. “Khawaja Farid always asked to respect humanity” This headline is promoting the ideology of humankind and mortality provided with the strong reference of a famous Sufi poet and religious scholar. These kind of strong words make the headlines influential to proliferate the idea which is being appreciated and needed in the society. “Shaukat Hussain Gilani always urged for love and peace” Love and peace is being promoted in this headline with the reference provided. It is religiously believed that faith is completed when we love each other as a creation so this headline is designed in a manner by using enthusiastic words. “Participants of peace march welcomed in Multan; they chanted slogans of Pak-India friendship” In this headline, the major issue has been raised to propagate the idea of peace. As Pak-Indo long run conflict has been popular since decades which was being lightened and fired during different depiction of news and events but Sufi headlines are taking it in a different direction by promoting the peace and unity between these two countries. Multan is famous for the Sufism and different Sufi shrines are located over there. By using the reference of Multan, it is cleared that this headline is giving the thought of religion and mysticism.

#### **Source of divine blessings**

Generally, it is believed that ‘Blessing’ is the foremost attribute of God which is referred as the buffet of his love bestowed upon on the basis of grace. The bestowal of blessing can either be the act of providing material goods (benefaction) or linguistic (benediction). The linguistic form of blessing is the strategic term to disseminate the good news or religious announcement to the receptor audiences. The depiction of religious cultural events in electronic and print media are considered as the divine blessing for the viewers. As it promotes individual’s feelings and shape their beliefs by sharing religious practices, rituals, compassion and empathy. However, the contextual meaning and appropriate speech language is the basic principle to execute the function of spiritual blessing bestowal. The ceremonial intervention of a blessing usually associated with special gestures and mythological words which are

important for the human being to express emotions and intelligence. The use of certain mythic words in headline are considered to be the reason of divine blessing such as, “centers of divine blessing”, “Door of Paradise” and “need of hour”. Blessing is the negotiation between human worlds and divine that involves three aspects: worship, human behaviors and self-interest of sacred being and human life. These three aspects helps in designing religious headlines to grab the attention of people whose cultural beliefs can get stronger and reshaped on the basis of ritual blessings. Therefore, media is not only the medium that universalized religious beliefs and rituals but it also promote, propagate and expand the certain optimism by the use of convincing images, references, texts and phrases. “Celebrations of death anniversary of Shah Rukn-e-Alam begin”. In different communities and cultures, different references are believed to be the source of divine blessings that the spiritual blessing is being conveyed through them and different occasions are held to celebrate to show the love and devotion. In this headline, the particular religious reference is being used which is believed by community as a whole, so audience can relate their emotions and participate in the following celebrations. It depicts the sentiments of a community who believes in the sacrament by using the text, ‘death anniversary’, these type of terms hype the religious emotions of the audience. “Shrines of saints are centers of divine blessing and love and peace: Shah Mehmood”. “Urs of Data Ganj Bakhsh started, religious poetry took audience in state of ecstasy”. Divine blessing means which is favored and loved by God. Blessings is believed to be direct association with the God. It can also be expressed as conferring a wish to someone or something that already experienced the favor of God. These types of references and texts used are considered as the source of blessing. In this headline, it is clearly stated with the help of religious reference that divine blessing can be attained by visiting shrines which is religiously believed by different communities. It is also believed that saints were most likely to be favored by God and now it is a source for the entire cultural society. It is like a shortcut to the audience and people seek shortcut and concise information to process, synthesize, understand and remember the world. “Lawyers’ strike against local holiday cancellation at death anniversary of Bahauddin Zakariya” In different cultures, religious holidays are considered

as the time of divine blessings and thankful to the God. It is believed as the act of respect given to the religious personality. The calamity to the celebrations and these holidays raises the sentiments of the believers which in results to the adverse reaction and higher attention. This headline covers that aspect by covering the calamity of religious cultural event which is believed to be the source of blessing for the community.

### **Conclusion**

Headlines are the most important and representative part of the journalistic writings that summarize the meaning of the story keeping social and cultural frame of reference and encourage the audience to read the whole story. Headlines of the selected leading national language newspapers were wisely constructed with highly effective and meaningful words. Editors created them with praising complimentary words and phrases. Headlines adeptly used religious references to communicate and draw attention of the readers. We can identify that content negotiate emotionally to relate and construct cultural bindings with local social and religious beliefs which can further encourage people to follow Sufi ideology. Study found that headlines focused most prominent and conventional ideology of Sufism using words of love, peace and divine blessing. Editors highlighted loving and caring approach of Sufi saints while propagating Islam in the region, and knocked spiritual cognitive sense and connections to their faith. They also emphasized their moral conduct in terms of humanity, simplicity and harmony as their achievements to construct Sufi headlines more appealing.

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