

Audience Preferences and Popular Program Patterns on News Channels in Karachi

*Erum Hafeez**

Abstract

This research aims to study the factors that influence the viewership of leading Television News Channels including ARY, Geo, Express, Samaa, and Dunya in Pakistan. It examines the impact of content, presentation style, channel positioning and anchors, alongside overall news viewing patterns, on the public image of the identified news channels and their viewership with focus on Express News. Following a qualitative research approach, a representative sample of 51 news viewers are identified and interviewed, with a proportionate weightage to geographical areas and socio-economic classification of audience, based on recent Census and People's meter, an audience measurement tool. The respondents are investigated through a comprehensive questionnaire, comprised both close and open-ended questions. This study focuses on three categories of viewers including Express News Viewers, Express News Lapsers and Competitive Channels Viewers. One-on-one interviews reflect the mindset and viewing patterns of news channels' audience. It is also instrumental to highlight the factors that hinder Express News ratings against its competing channels. Findings of the study indicate that the programme content, presentation style, and cable positioning of news channels significantly influence its viewership that result in the quantum of recall for Express News, and how its viewership and ratings are presumably affected by the very factors.

Keywords: *TV Viewership, Top of mind Recall, News Channels, Channel Ratings, Brand Positioning*

JEL Classification: *A10, D10*

INTRODUCTION

It was early Monday morning. Eilya was sitting in her campus office. She had just arrived and was sifting through her cluttered email inbox when she noticed an urgent email from the head of the department. Reluctantly, she opened the email and read through the message calling for a meeting to discuss an important capstone project regarding Express News channel. It was assigned to Media Studies Department to assess the key factors, identified by Kantar (a

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research, data and insight consultancy) and Media Logic (an exclusive national media rating agency), as the key influencers related to the public image and viewership of Express news and its news competitors.

Eilya knew she had to devise an effective research plan and form an efficient students' team to investigate the issue. She attended a meeting with the Express Management next day and soon an energetic capstone group was formed to come up with a detailed audience study that would help Express to increase its rating with an elevated market position and image.

Background

Since the advent of information technology, a wide variety of news media was introduced and gained popularity. Among the modern mass media, television is considered one of the most popular source of news to household consumers, which has also provided an effective platform to advertisers. Though, news channels have often been criticized for sensational and biased news reporting in recent years, it still remains the main source of news updates for mass audience in Pakistan.

Currently, Pakistan has more than 78 television channels which operate in different regional and local languages with 28 international news channels, having transmission rights in the country. Around 40 of them are news channel. Web News Channels have also been launched here recently by different media groups. (PEMRA, List of licenses issued, 2015, Gallup, 2015). This study is designed to identify overall viewership pattern of news channels audience in Karachi. It studies Express News in comparison to other four leading news channels with respect to the program content, being aired on these channels including talk shows and current affair programs, news bulletins, and infotainment shows. Moreover, it also aims to investigate overall brand image of Express News influenced by its anchors and other dynamics, either directly or indirectly.

Express News is one of the pioneer and popular news channels of Pakistan. It is owned by the Express Media Group that has other TV channels including Express Entertainment, Tribune 24/7 and newspapers including Daily Express, Sindh Express and The Express Tribune (Express News, 2018). As a way forward, recommendations are given to improve the overall quality of programs and thereby the ratings and positioning of the channel among its viewers. The sample included in this study consists of 51 respondents, strategically identified from the 24 localities of Karachi including North, South, East and West regions of the city based on recent Census and People's meter -- an audience measurement tool used to measure the viewing habits of TV and cable audiences. It is a 'box', about the size of a paperback book, which is connected to a television set and is accompanied by a remote control unit.

The data was collected through a structured questionnaire divided into three sections: Express Viewers, Express Lapsers and major Competitive Viewers. The result of this study gives valuable insight about viewership of news channels, particularly Express News, during prime time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

People around the world watch television, particularly news channels, to stay updated

about latest incidents and happenings. Sinha (2013) rightly said that news channels provide more than just news to audience. It is rather emerged as a popular source of infotainment in recent years. In current age, variety of news channels give viewers a comprehensive coverage of latest happenings from diverse perspective. Chaffe and Schleuder (2006) identified that news channels over time build their unique standing and brand perspective among its target audience. Thus, audience feels connected to certain channels as they reflect their viewpoint. On the other hand, easy availability of a wide range of news channels give audience wider choice and leads to limited audience span with frequent channel surfing and snapping tendencies. At times, it is due to poor program quality or presentation, but researchers also indicated another factor called selective perception, signifying that news viewers fail to hook to the channels that do not align with their beliefs and interests (Anke Jung, 2017) In Pakistani context, viewers of news channels are emerged as highly partisan, often prefer the channels that support their favourite political party and mirror their political ideology. Yousuf (2012) rightly said that audience tends to develop loyalty to the channels that synchronize with their political views and give voice to their opinions.

Besides, some other elements are also identified that contribute to audience loyalty to a news channel. One such element is the persona and popularity of news anchors attached to a channel. News anchors are public figures with massive following and their thinking often influence audience perspective regarding any issue. Hence “the combination of a popular news anchor together with strong content that speaks the mind of audience, makes audience loyal to a news channel” (Roel-Vacino, 2008). A good anchor influences audience just like a member of an extended social group. This phenomenon is called para-social interaction (Laken 2009). In the current digital environment, these TV anchors often use social media platforms to represent public sentiments about important issues. They are, therefore, regarded as the key influencers that mould public opinion. Nielsen and Sam brook (2016) established that due to a wide variety of alternative point of views on social media, customized according to audience choice, television consumption has been tremendously declined in recent years. News channels also lose their standing among audience due to exaggerated and sensationalized news that often aim to get higher ratings. Sinha (2013) rightly pinpointed that in its race of breaking news first, news channels hardly bother to check the credibility of news and its sources which often leads to a backlash from audience. Many-a-times news is sensationalized deliberately to trigger audience curiosity so that they remain hooked to a particular news channel.

Other scholars such as Anke, Jung (2017) identified repetitive content as one of the core reasons of channel switching, Repetitive content often leads the audience to the belief that the channel might not have enough fresh content to telecast to its viewers which makes them shift to the alternative news channels. In context of Pakistani news channels some recent studies highlighted other interesting facts. Daily Pakistan, Pakistan’s native Urdu newspaper, published a comparative survey of different TV channels and their programs ratings based on the information provided by Media Logic. This information is collected through specialized devices installed on televisions in homes throughout Pakistan and formed a basis for advertising tariff and volume (Aslam 2016).

Following the rating race blindly, most TV channels started to produce identical talk shows, current affairs programs and crime series, anything that would increase their ranking. However, it did not work for long as viewers lost interest in news channels due to run of the

mill programs very soon. Rehman et al. (2018) indicated the same factor saying that viewers' attitude towards Express was unidirectional and in absence of brand association they take it as any other average news network. He emphasized unique programming and fresh approach to stand out of the clutter and create an exclusive image of Express as a news channels among its viewers.

METHODOLOGY

This is primarily a qualitative research, conducted to analyze viewership patterns of news channels and the factors affecting the viewership of five leading news channels. The findings were analyzed further for pragmatic recommendations to Express News in order to help it retained its existing audience and attract potential audience respectively. In order to investigate the viewership of top five news channels, the data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of three sections that aim at three different categories of audience which include:

- 1 **Express Viewers** – Individuals who regularly watch Express News and are familiar with its programs
- 2 **Express Lapsers** – Individuals who used to watch Express News, but now they have switched to other channels
- 3 **Competition Channels' Viewer** – Individuals who watch other news Channels instead of Express News

This classification of respondents help us to compare the viewing patterns of each category of audience, including express viewers, lapsers and non-viewers, thereby identify the core factors affecting Express News in comparison with its competitive channels.

Research Questions:

The research questions, based on the two objectives of the study, can be broadly divided into two sections:

General Questions related to overall News Viewing Patterns and Trends

- 1 What are the popular time slots and hours for News Channels' viewership in Pakistan?
- 2 Which are the most popular News Channels in Pakistan?
- 3 Is there any change in the frequency of news channels' viewership recently?
- 4 What are the most sought after features of News Channels in Pakistan?

Specific Questions related to Sampled News Channels' Content, presentation and positioning with focus on Express News

- 5 Which are the most popular programs on Express News and Why?
- 6 What are the core reasons that led Express News viewers to switch to other News Channels?
- 7 Which are the most popular programs on competing news channels and Why?

- 8 Which are the flopped programs on news channels and Why?
- 9 What are the core factors (besides program content) that distinguish news channels among others?

Sample

A strategically derived proportional sample of news viewers, based on their geographical area, socio-economic class and demographics features including age, gender, profession and qualification have been drawn, which is being used to gather data for this research study. Since the study is qualitative in nature, the sample size is kept to 51 individuals including 73% male and 27% female news channels' audience. The age group of the sample ranges from 13 to 60 years, while the prime focus of this study remains the people aged between 20 and 50 years who are identified as the most frequent news viewers.

Data Collection

The data in this study is collected through one-on-one interviews of sampled respondents with the help of a carefully designed questionnaire. A total of 51 responses were initially studied to identify the common responses as a pilot study. Subsequently, 50% of the respondents were re-interviewed in order to develop a deeper understanding regarding the viewership patterns of television news channels. Their overall responses were later quantified in terms of percentages. The data is collected as per the following guidelines;

- Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study.
- Survey questionnaire comprising of three sections along with a complete guideline were explained to them.
- On an average, 15 to 20 minutes interviews were conducted with each individual. In order to ensure quality responses, convenience of respondents in terms of their availability was always kept into consideration.

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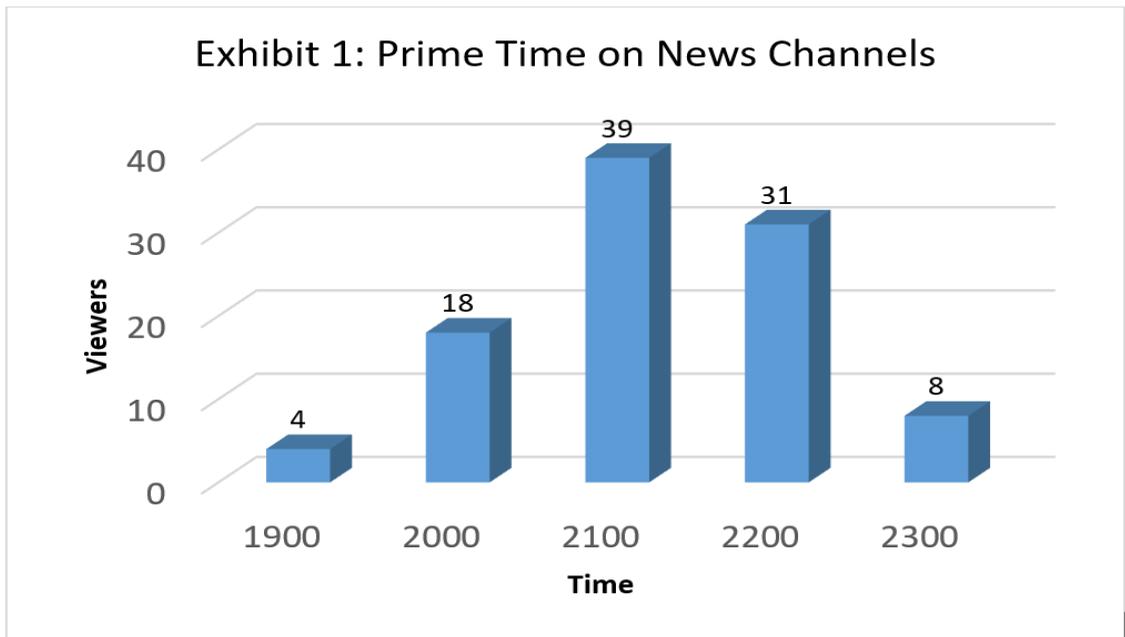
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FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

NEWS VIEWING PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Prime Time for TV News Channels

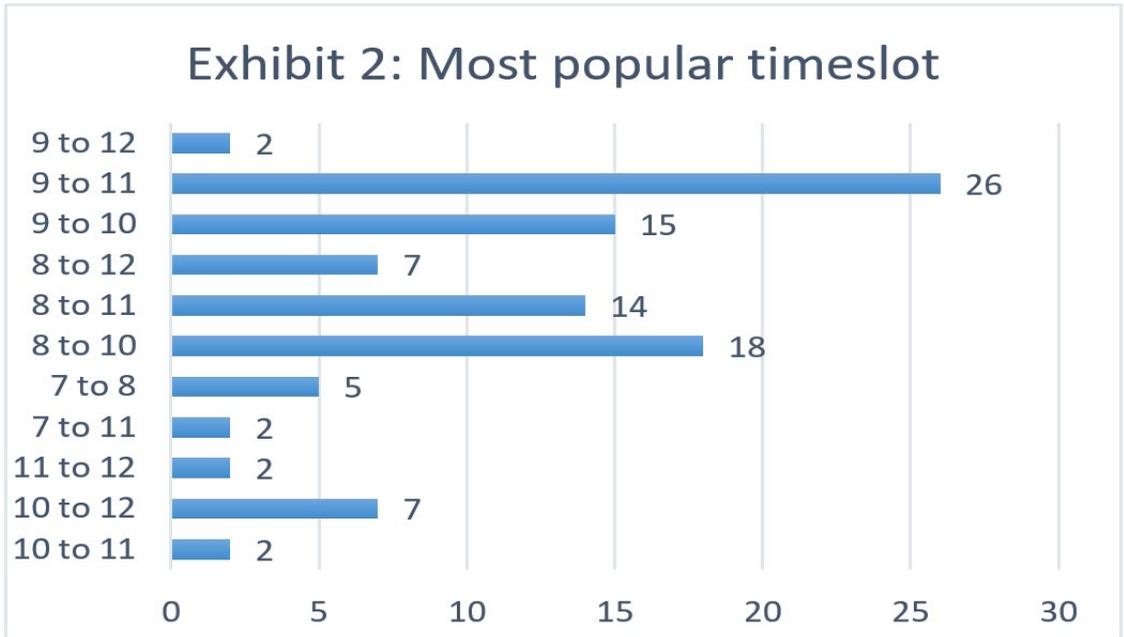
A question is asked regarding the most common time slot and hour for news viewing in order to identify the prime time for news channels. The findings of the study evidently indicate as mentioned in Exhibit 1 that the prime hour at which news channels are mostly watched is 9 pm (39%) followed by 10pm (31%) and 8pm (18%) respectively.



Popular Time slots for News Channels

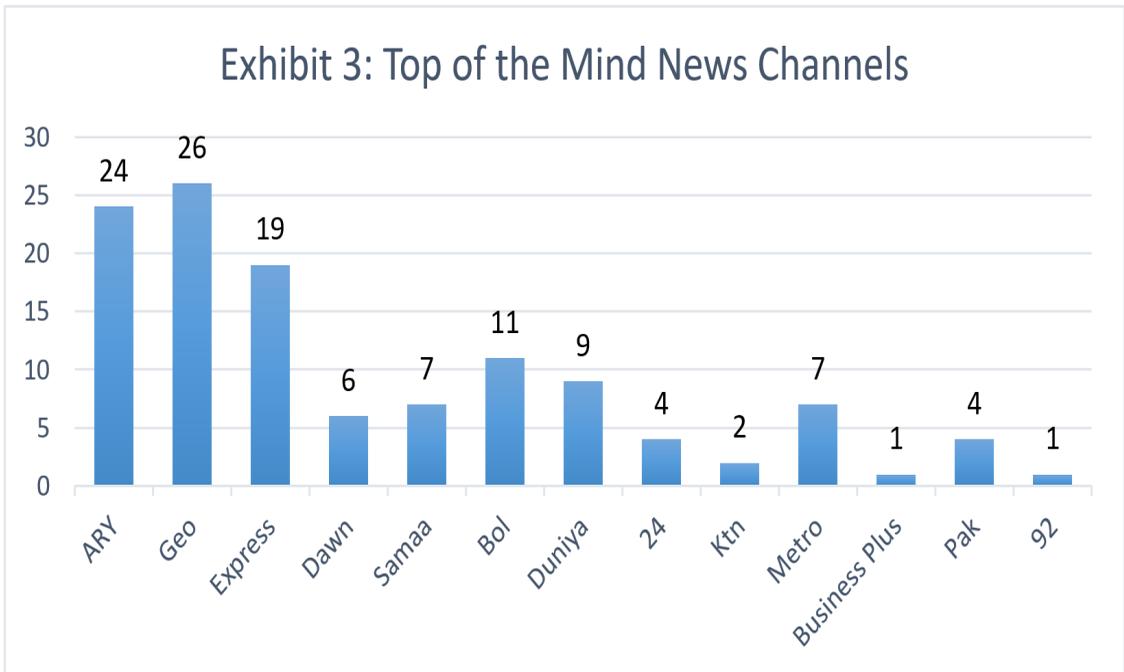
Findings regarding the most popular timeslot is equally significant as it reports continuity in viewership time and pattern of news channels, reported in Exhibit 2. It is found that people mostly watch news channels from 9 to 11pm (26%) followed by the timeslot of 8 to 10 pm (18%) and 9 to 10 pm (15%). Synergyzer Magazine's study (2018) highlighted the same time slots as prime time and post prime time in terms of news channels viewership.

Timeslots of 8 to 12 and 10 to 12 have an equal viewership share of 7% while other time slots have comparatively lower viewership of 2% respectively.



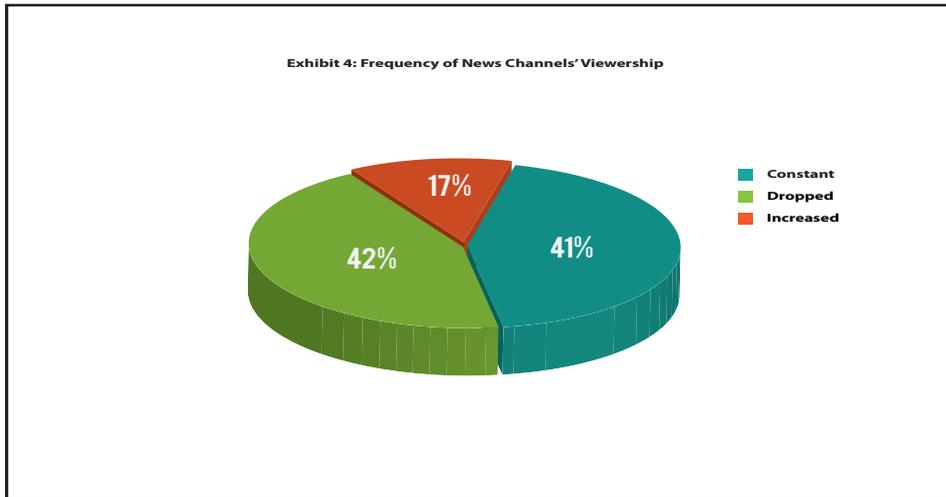
Top of the mind (TOM) News Channel

As per the research findings referred to Exhibit 3, currently top of the mind i.e. the most popular news channel is GEO, which is followed by ARY, Express, Bol and Samaa consecutively. In response to this question, respondents are allowed to mark more than one news channel.



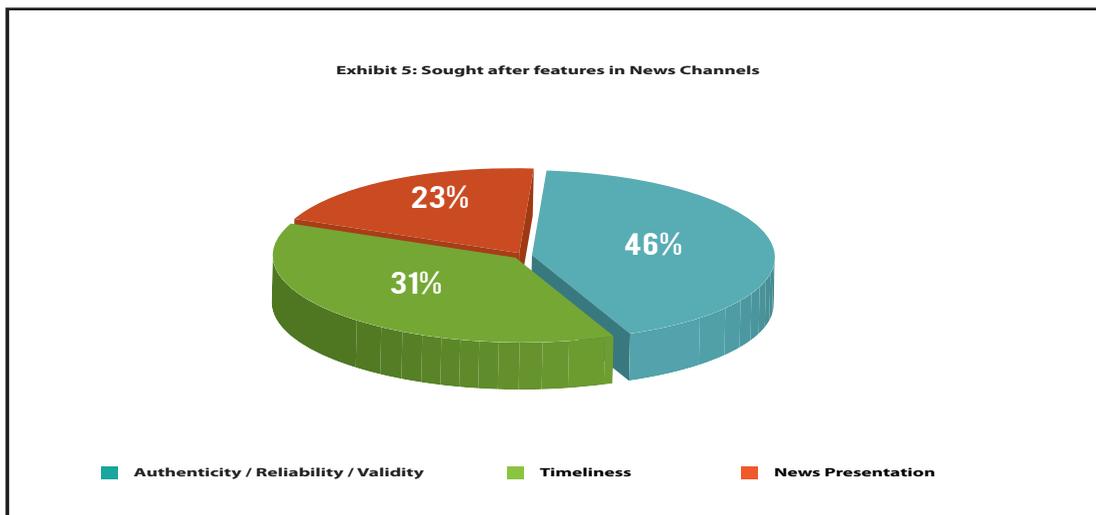
Change in Frequency of News Channels' Viewership

As per this survey, only 17% respondents said that they currently watch news channels more frequently than the past. However, around 41% of the sample said that there is no change in their news viewing habits while 42% of the respondents informed that they watch news channels less frequently than the past, mainly due to the availability of alternative online news sources that are comparatively user-friendly, economical and quick in their news coverage.



Most sought after Features in News Channels

Around 46 % people said that they prefer news channels that give authentic news with reliable sources, be it Express, Geo, ARY or any other news channel. It is further learnt that the credibility of a news channel is largely dependent upon the validity of its news coverage, developed over a period of time among news viewers, and is often connected with the overall image of that news channel. Other most sought after features that are highlighted by news channels' audience include timeliness (31%) in coverage and presentation style (23%).

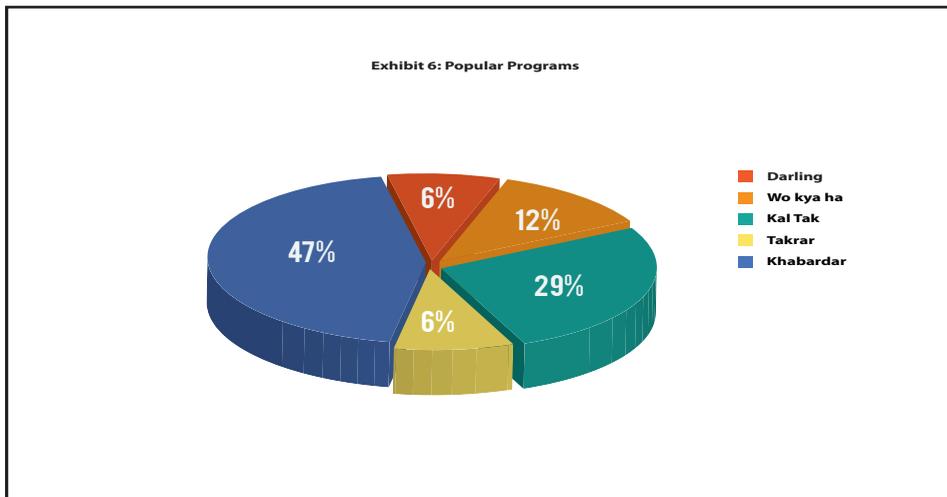


EXPRESS VIEWERS

In the third section of the questionnaire, respondents were divided into three groups based on their channel's preference segregating Express News Viewers from Express Lapsers and Non- Viewers. Multiple questions were asked to the respondents who fall in the category of Express viewers. Responses are recorded and evaluated based on thematic analysis and percentages separately under each question.

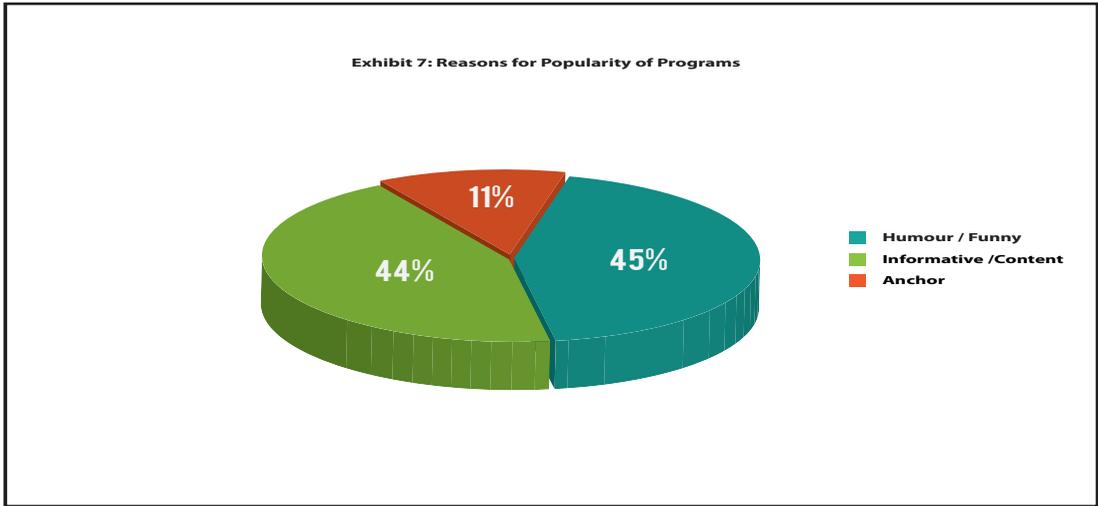
Favourite Programs on Express News

As per the study, around 47 % Express Viewer said that their favorite program on Express News is Khabardar followed by Kal Tak which is liked by 29% of the research sample. Other programs like Wo Kya Hai (12%), Darling (6%) and Takrar (6) are also mentioned by the Express viewers as their favourite programs respectively



Core Factors determine Popularity of Programs

Khabardar is the most popular infotainment program and people have different reasons for liking it. As per findings of the current study, around 45% of the respondents said that they like Khabardar because of its humorous format and comic content. While 44% of the respondents mentioned that they like the program as it is informative and give a good analysis of public issues. Around 11% of the respondents prefer the show because of its anchor, Aftab Iqbal.

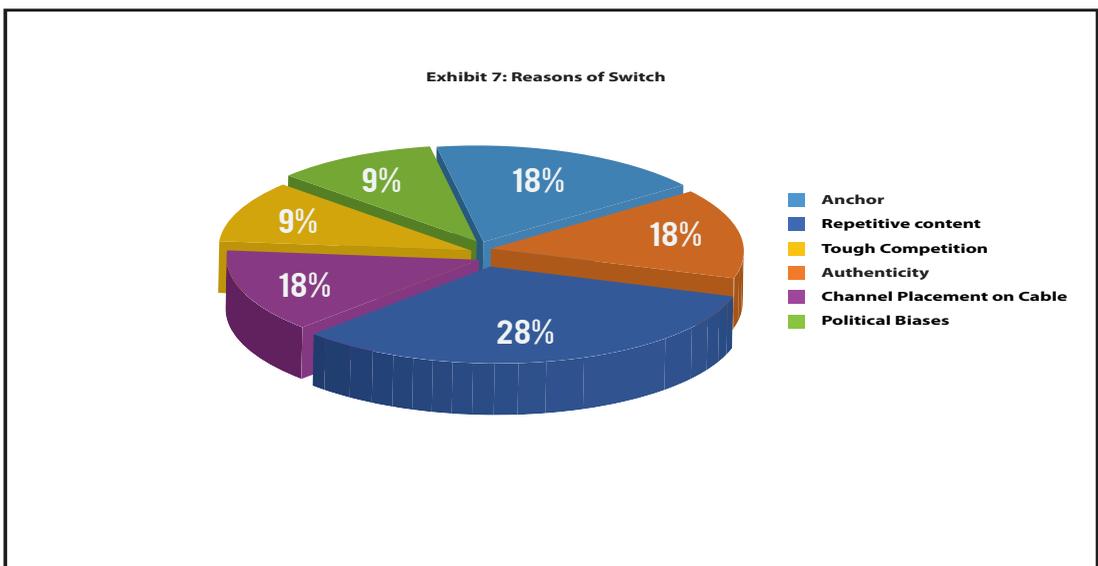


EXPRESS LAPSEERS

Express Lapsers are the viewers who used to watch Express News in the past but now they have switched to other news channels for different reasons.

Core Reasons for the switch from Express to other News Channels

As per the findings of the study, 28 % of the respondents said that they left watching Express News because of its repetitive content and overall deteriorating program quality. Besides, several factors were identified as the important reasons of the shift including channel placement on cable (18%), lack of authentic news (18%) and scarcity of popular anchor persons (18%) on Express News. Political biases of viewers (9%) and presence of tough competition from other news channels (9%) are also mentioned as the other reasons of Express decreasing viewership over a period of time.



VIEWERS OF COMPETITION CHANNELS

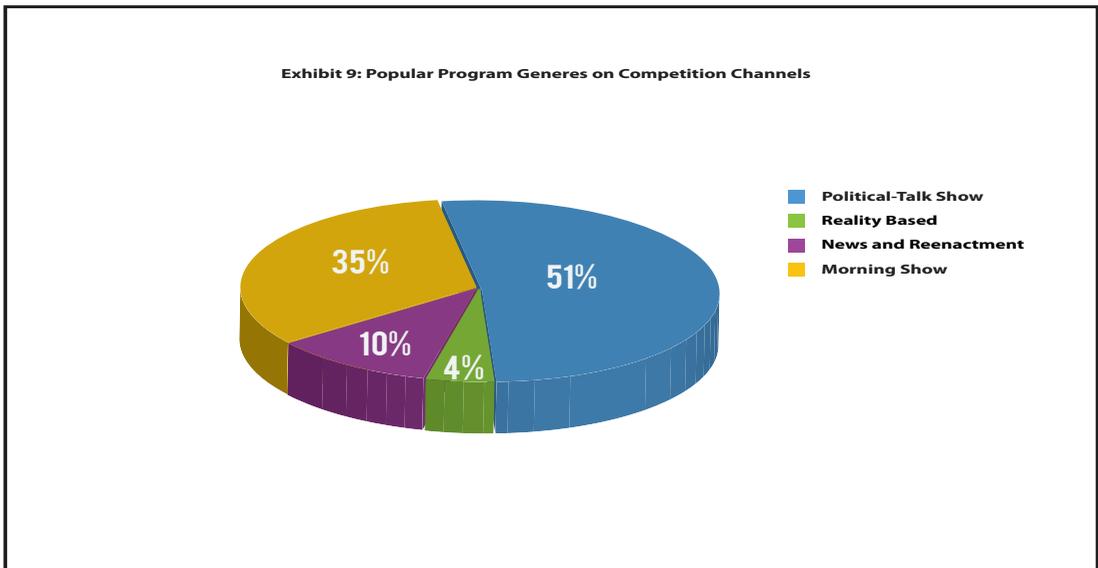
Following questions were asked to the respondents who prefer watching other leading news channels except Express. These are the findings of the study:

Type of programs preferred on Competing News Channels

As per this study, around 51% of the respondents prefer watching political talk shows while 35% like morning shows. Further, there is a comparatively smaller audience segment (10%) who are the viewers of crime reenactment and news shows respectively. Only 4% viewers expressed their interest in reality shows.

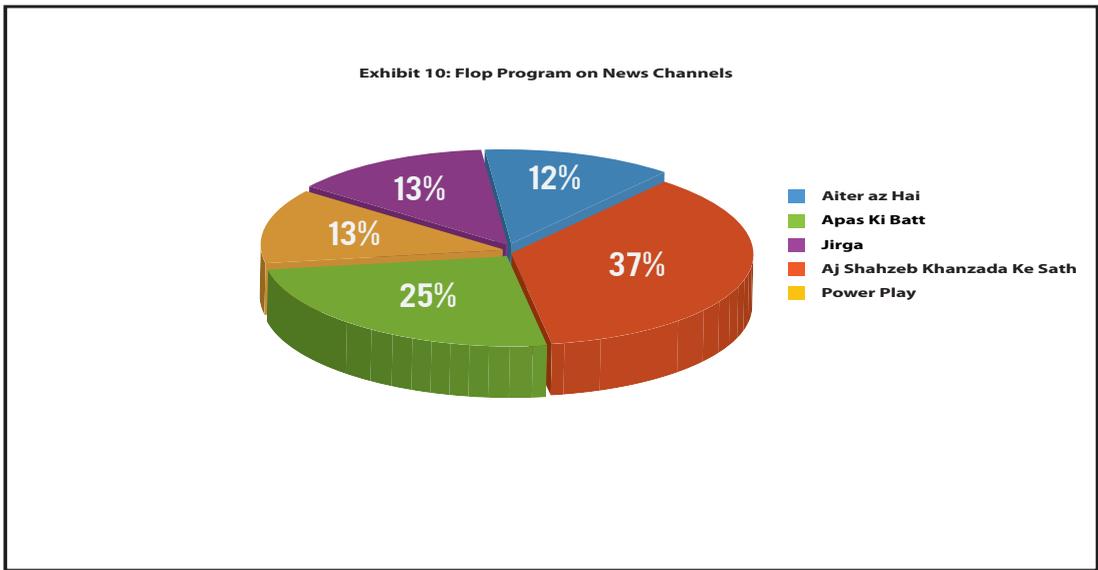
Overall analysis of news viewers shows that most adult male viewers switch in between news channels to watch their favourite political and current affair talk shows. On the other hand, female and young viewers prefer watching crime re-enactment and morning shows

Besides, it is evident that viewers of news channels often have top-of-mind recall for their favourite anchors such as Waseem Badami, Shahzaib Khanzada, and Hamid Mir and most viewers candidly share that they watch news shows because of their favourite anchors rather than the content or format.



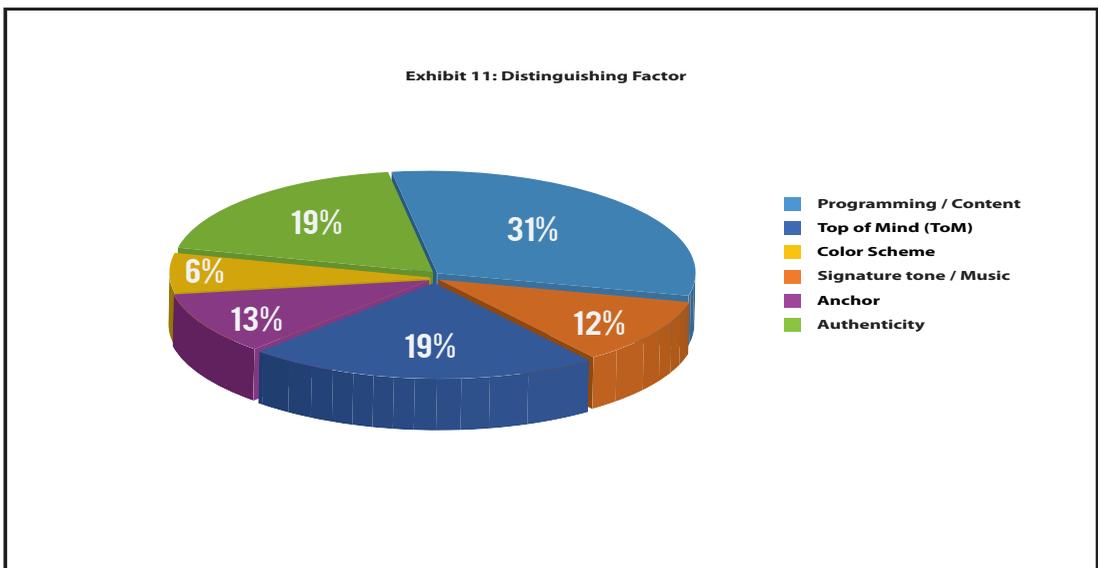
Flop Programs on News Channels

As per the study, around 37% respondents said that they dislike Shahzab Khanzada's Show on Geo News because the anchor doesn't have his unique style, rather he copied Kamran Khan. Besides, around 25% of the respondents criticize programs such as Aapas ki Baat, Power Play, Jirga and Aiteraz Hai due to the choice of panelists and guests who often argue and even fight but fail to give any constructive solutions to the public issues discussed in the program.



Factors that distinguish news channels among others

As per the current study, 31% of the respondents are of the opinion that program formats and content quality are the key feature that distinguish a news channel among others. About 19% of the sample surveyed highlighted that credibility of a channel, with its complementing top of the mind recall value among viewers, also play a significant role in its standing. Other factors that contribute to the popularity of a news channel include public image and reputation of its anchor persons (13%) and audio-visual elements such as sound quality, signature music (12%) and color scheme etc. So overall audio-visual quality of a news channel is crucial in attracting and retaining viewers to any news channel.



DISCUSSION

A continuous competition amongst news channels to achieve better ratings has posed a serious threat to the news industry, which consequently mar the quality of news and its delivery style. However, there are still certain news channels that are able to set the higher performance benchmark for other news channels and attain popularity among audience despite rate race for rating.

Analysis of our findings indicates that there is a marked difference between public feedback and Kantar's report regarding viewership of news channels in Karachi. For example, as per Kantar's report, Express News ranks at number four among national news channels but this study indicates that it stands at number 3 and Bol enjoys 4th position, which is not even mentioned in Kantar's report.

Further, this research shows that the prime time of news channels is from 9pm to 10pm whereas this time slot is reportedly showing the least gross rating points in Kantar's report

Besides, the current study highlights the factors that presumably deter Express news from being the most popular news channel in Pakistan. Among them includes the issue of news credibility and repetitive content in different programs on Express News that led many of its viewers to switch to competition channel. For example, programs like "Woh Kia Hai" and "Khabardar" used to have a large fan following in the past but now due to its repetitive content, it has lost its popularity.

Highlighting the role of anchorpersons in the popularity of any news channel, it is evident that famous anchors such as Javed Chaudary hosting a talk show 'Kal Tak' on Express is followed by large audience due to the selection of public interest issues, often covered with intellect and reasoning. News channels need such anchors whose ideas resonate audience concerns, making them believe they are their spokespersons.

The insights from the survey point out that the excessive use of Punjabi on Express news is perceived as a barrier by some Karachiites. For any news channels, language of its target audience is a powerful hook that enables them to understand and connect to their viewpoints. Express needs to cater to its Urdu-speaking audience in Karachi to get rid of its Punjabi touch

CONCLUSION

Sensationalized news coverage and repetitive run-of-the mill content are identified as core reasons of declining viewership of Express News. Sensationalism nullified the credibility of any news channel. It might attract mass audience for a shorter period of time during crisis and emergency situations, which often leads to public panic. However, in the long run, it results into the permanent loss of loyal viewership.

Besides, this study also indicates that poor positioning of Express News on cable networks is one of the key factors that result in its decreased viewership. Due to the presence of numerous news channels, audience generally believe that the strategic positioning of a channel at initial numbers on cable resonate its better standing and reputation. So better positioning of Express news on cable networks is likely to increase its viewership.

During the study, some express news lappers disclosed that they switch to the competing news channels due the colour scheme of the channel which is perceived as overwhelmingly loud by some audience. It is therefore recommended that Express news should conduct a comprehensive study to investigate the audio-visual preferences of its news viewers and modify its channels presentation accordingly.

LIMITATIONS

Our study was limited to Karachi only targeting sampled socio-economic classes as per the requirement of the channel. Thus the scope and findings of this research is limited to the sampled viewers within one city. In order to make it more representative, we might need to conduct the same study with diverse and relatively larger samples, following diverse method of study in other cities of the country as well.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended to conduct a follow up quantitative research on the same topic to validate the findings and recommendations of the current study independently. A subsequent research to understand the audience psyche in terms of audio-visual elements that often attract news viewers to certain channels while repel them from others is also crucial for better understanding of the fast-changing news viewing patterns of Pakistani audience in the current digital age.

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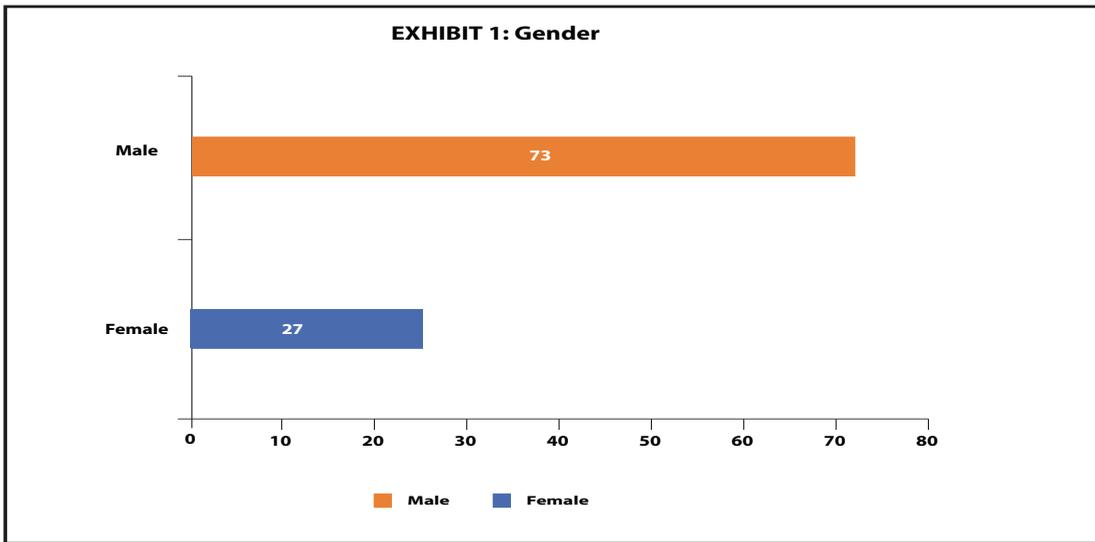
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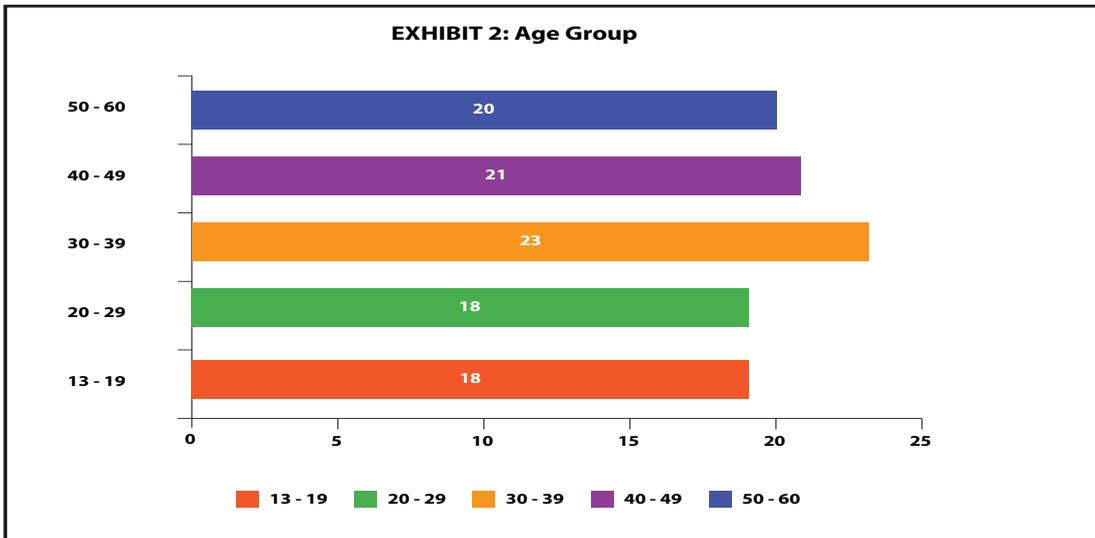
APPENDIX

Demographic

The sample of the current study comprises of 51 respondents, 73 percent of them are male and 27 percent are females as indicated in Exhibit 1. The process of attaining representative sample revealed that both male and female TV viewers are inclined towards news channels, however, men watch news and current affairs programs with greater interest compared to women and that is why they are having higher representation in this sample.



Different age groups are covered in the current research for better representation of the native news viewers. Exhibit 2 shows that around 23% population of the sample are aged between 30 and 39 years, whereas 21% of the respondent are aged from 40 to 49 years. Further, around 18% of the respondents fall in the age bracket of 13 to 19 and 20 to 29 respectively. Comparatively a higher percentage of news viewers i.e. 20% fall in the age group of 50 to 60 years. Therefore, overall the current research covers a wide range of age groups that spread from 13 to 60 years. Around 53% of the respondents are employed in different capacities with different organizations while 19% of the respondents are reportedly self-employed.



The rest of the 28% of the respondents include students (12%) housewives (8%) and senior citizens (2%) as manifested in Exhibit 3.

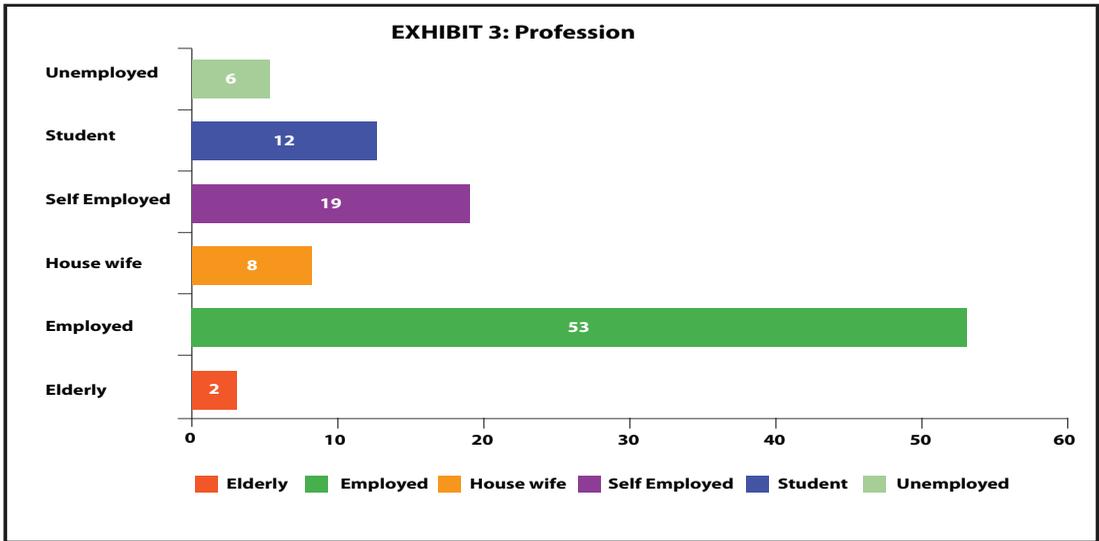


Exhibit 4 clearly depicts that out of 51 respondents, 27% of the respondents mentioned that their household income is more than PKR 150,000 and similar percentage is found for the salary bracket ranged between 21 and 40 thousands respectively. It is followed by 16% of the respondents, having a household income from PKR 100,000 to 150,000. Whereas rest of the 30% of the sample have a varied household income ranged between PKR 41,000 and 70,000 (10%), 71 to 100 thousands (3%) and 5 to 20 thousands (17%) respectively.

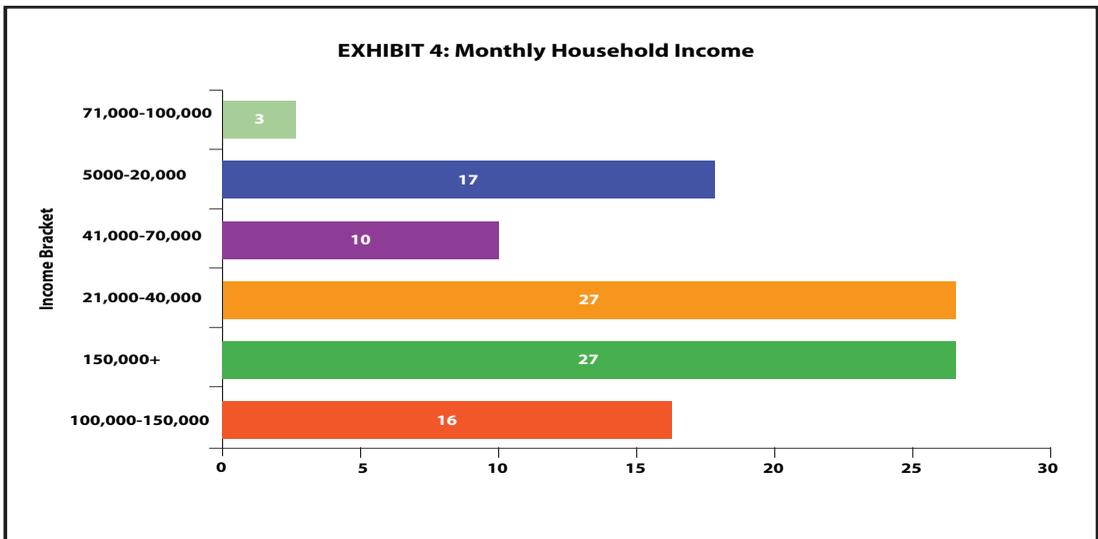


Exhibit 5: Area wise Division of Sample

The current study is conducted in Karachi, covering 24 major areas of the city. These areas are geographically divided into various zones known as the North, South, East, and West regions that are duly covered in this research as mentioned in Exhibit 5 below. Thus, the research findings are expected to be diversified with an inclusive representation of the target audience of

the news channels viewers in the city.

<i>Ancholi</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Gulshan-E-Iqbal</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Askari 4</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Gulzar-i-Hijri</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Bahadurabad</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Malir Cant</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Buffer Zone</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>North Nazimabad</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Clifton</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Orangi town</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>DHA</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>PECHS</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>F.B. Area</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Qaidabad</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Garden East</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Saddar</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Garden West</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Shamsi Society</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Gizri</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Sharfabad</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Golimaar</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Soldier Bazar</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Gulistan - e - Jaubar</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>Tariq Road</i>	<i>1</i>