



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

Decoding Digital Gender Struggles: An In-Depth Analysis of Sexism in Modern Online Spaces

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Abstract

We are living in the age of social media, which plays a huge role in altering the perspectives of men and shaping their behavior toward oppressive communities to maintain their patriarchal position. Patriarchy manifests through social media platforms in many ways. This research investigates how patriarchal norms and values are perpetuated and reinforced through social media platforms in Pakistan. The study aims to uncover the subtle and overt ways patriarchy is normalized and reproduced by examining the content, interactions, and user behaviors within these digital spaces. The visibility of online comments and sexist remarks on talk shows impacts the normalization and acceptance of patriarchal behavior in broader society. Men develop their perspectives through social media and then exhibit toxic behavior through comments to show dominance and promote a patriarchal structure. Specifically, the research explores how social media reinforces gender stereotypes and promotes discriminatory attitudes. Theories serve as the foundation for framing the study's proceedings, explaining how men learn and perpetuate dominant behaviors. Social media contributes to this process by prioritizing content that aligns with users' beliefs and behaviors. These repeated observations and reinforcement of dominant male behaviors lead to their normalization and the acceptance of sexist remarks as part of patriarchal norms. What was once seen as exceptional becomes perceived as standard. Men often observe influential figures on social media, particularly those who exhibit dominant and assertive behaviors. The study uses both surveys and interviews to gather information. Another key element is a content analysis of the Aurat March and content



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

related to feminism from 2023–2024, examining how the visibility of online comments impacts the normalization and acceptance of patriarchal attributes. Online survey questions, comments, and interview analysis serve as research tools. Through a mixed-methods approach, including content analysis and surveys, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between technology, culture, and gender inequality in Pakistan. The findings contribute to the growing knowledge of the intersection of technology, gender, and culture in Pakistan. Gender issues arise from invisible psychological influences, as men learn from their environment and perpetuate dominant behaviors. The research reveals how media develops patriarchal and dominant perspectives and attributes among individuals. In a patriarchal system, male-dominant groups control social media and shape the minds of people to manifest patriarchy and normalize dominant attributes and sexist behavior on these platforms.

Keywords: Misogynist Remarks, Gender struggle, online Sexism.

Introduction

The main identifying feature of the fourth wave emerges through the feminist utilization of digital media and internet technologies. The fourth wave of feminism operates through digital platforms by using online spaces to discuss feminist issues, as seen through movements like #MeToo that focused on sexual violence. Twitter and Facebook allow quick, substantial dissemination of feminist material worldwide at any moment (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016). Social media is a vital infrastructure for contemporary feminist mobilization because it constitutes “computer-mediated communication software that enables users to create, share, and view content in a publicly networked one-to-one, one-to-many, and/or many-to-many communications” (Salter, 2017).

Social media studies for collective public political actions, from elections to demonstrations, represent an essential research field (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020). Highfield (2017) urges academic researchers to integrate “everyday politics” with how political themes merge with personal lives according to individual interests (p.3). The study investigates ordinary personal behaviours that may not overtly appear political even though “the political can be present within the personal without requiring explicit political framing” (Highfield, 2017).

Scholars of feminist studies believe some digital behaviors including blogging create feminist developments while participants might not make direct feminist connections. According to Davis (2019) women bloggers who stay unmarried participate in feminist activities because they challenge canonical perspectives about heterosexuality in public discourse. People can challenge gender stereotypes while exchanging experience and offering mutual support through digital platforms which reinforce offline feminist activities in the process of daily online interactions. The investigation explores how the regular technological interactions of individuals link to general feminist political ideologies.

Thought research shows that digital media technologies enable women to practice feminism directly and participate in “everyday politics” they also permit misogyny and sexism to persist as women experience it in their offline lives (Tiemann-Kollipost, 2020). McRobbie (2020) establishes that digital “popular feminism” has expanded into parallel with “popular misogyny” that appears online. Feminist females who publish



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

their views online experience recurring attacks and intimidation from the public. Users encounter multiple forms of intimidation together with sexual assaults and murder threats (Jamil et al., 2020). The digital form of sexist and misogynistic behavior targets all women regardless of their feminist affiliation. The Pew Research Center conducted a 2014 survey which showed that young women specifically and all women in general suffered intensely from digital harassment through stalking incidents amounting to 26% and online sexual harassment affecting 25% of participants (Unesco & Oxford, 2018).

According to Schraa (2016) the revived feminist movement encounters similar opposition toward public female involvement that feminism has encountered since its nineteenth-century beginnings. Digital interactive technology serves as the main catalyst for the modern conflict between feminist and anti-feminist movements. Through Internet-enabled dialogue women achieve their first opportunity to directly encounter backlash movements (Dwivedi et al., 2019). Social media serves as the central point of my research since it both enables and restricts women regarding their perception of popular feminism alongside popular sexism. Analyzing the benefits offered by digital media technologies enables understanding of complex technological-user interactions within a patriarchal social framework.

Hypothesis

1. The visibility and virility of online comments impact the normalization and acceptance of toxic masculine behavior in broader society.
2. Online media platforms shape and develop the patriarchal attributes among men.
3. Men develop their perspectives through social media and then exhibit toxic behavior through comments to show dominance and promote a patriarchal structure

Theoretical Framework

In social structure, gender discrimination and biases are social issues, while social issues are deeply rooted in psychological problems. Gender and psychological issues are interlinked, as men learn from their environment and perpetuate dominant behaviors. We are currently in the age of social media, which plays a huge role in altering their personalities and shaping their behavior toward oppressive communities to maintain their patriarchal position.

Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1999, 2001) posits that the dynamics between men and women are characterized by significant ambivalence. While gender hierarchy and power disparities lead to feelings of hostility, heterosexual closeness and interdependence foster benevolent attitudes (Gaunt, R., 2013). Ambivalent Sexism Theory states that sexism exists in two forms: hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism is overtly expressed through threats, misogynistic and sexist comments, and harassment. It is a direct form of aggression toward women.

At the same time, benevolent sexism appears positive but ultimately reinforces gender inequality by treating women as delicate or in need of protection, thereby restricting their independence. While these actions might seem positive, they ultimately reinforce



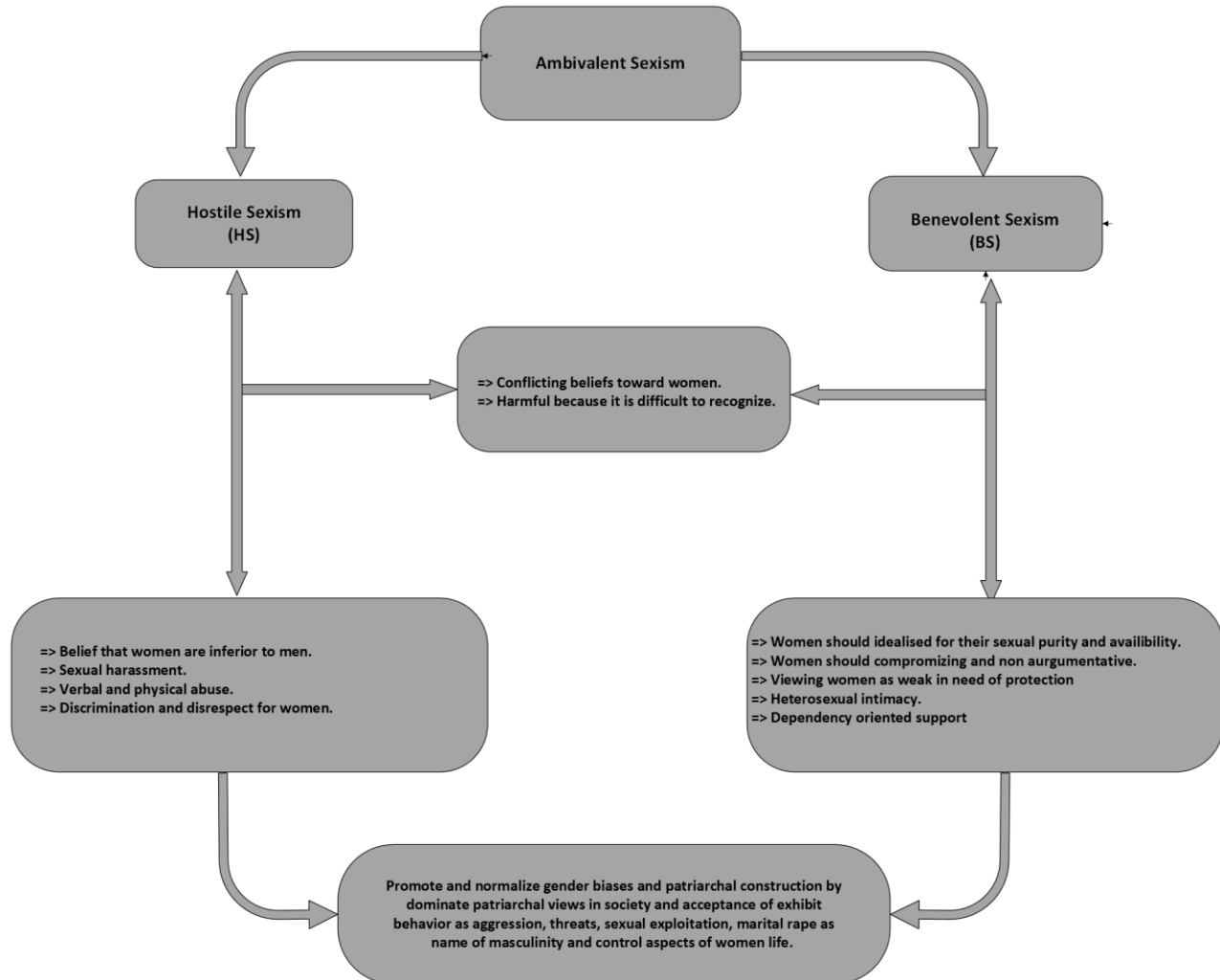
Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

gender stereotypes and limit women's autonomy. These two forms often coexist and can be intricately linked. On social media platforms, men may exhibit both forms of ambivalent sexism in their interactions with women.

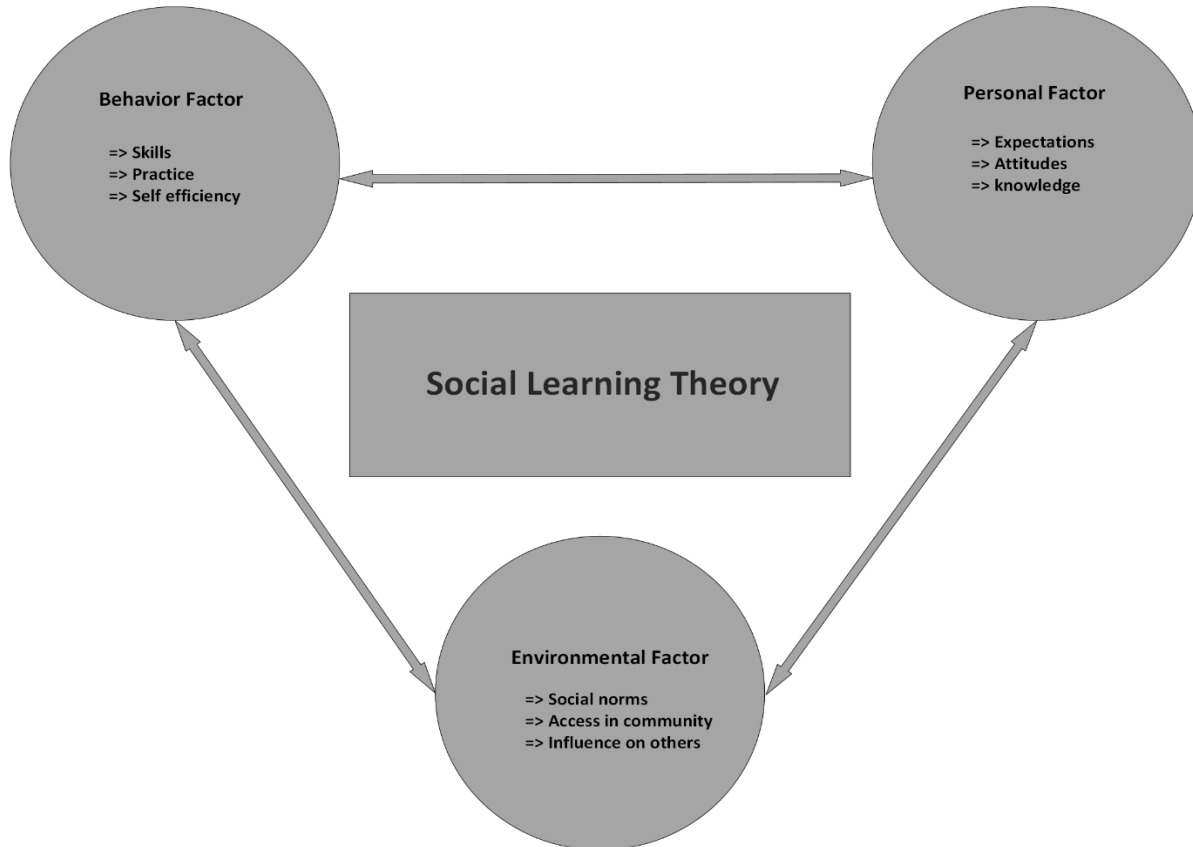
Albert Bandura introduced the concept of social learning, which involves the processes of observation and imitation (Byron-Cox, H., 2023). According to Social Learning Theory, individuals acquire knowledge and skills by watching the behaviors of others and subsequently replicating those actions. This form of learning takes place through an observational process.

Both theories shape men's perspectives on exhibiting patriarchal attributes in society. Sexism exists in two forms: one is a direct form of control toward the oppressed, such as explicit sexist comments, and the other is an indirect form that appears positive but reinforces gender stereotypes. The latter uses the mask of protection and portrays women as weak, thereby restricting their independence and freedom. Both direct and indirect forms create fallacies on social media regarding women. They make women more oppressed while strengthening perceptions of men as dominant and controlling, ultimately normalizing patriarchal culture on media platforms.

Framework of AMBIVALENT SEXISM THEORY



Framework of Social Learning theory



Research design

The study uses both surveys and interviews to gather information. First, an online survey will be conducted on Facebook with 300 participants (50% male and 50% female), including students and professionals, aged 25 to 40, who are active users of social media.

Facebook is a popular social media platform. I chose Facebook because of the continuous interactions people have through comments on content. Through these comments, participants exhibit their perspectives, which, based on their mentality in offline life, they are often unable to express. These sexist comments are often written anonymously, offering a space with less accountability for misogynistic statements.

Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) was chosen because its diversity brings together individuals from different cultures, traditions, ethnicities, and values. People from various provinces are connected here, sharing diverse perspectives and ideas shaped by their cultural values and the environmental structure.

The second element of the study is a content analysis of the Aurat March and content related to feminism from 2023–2024. This analysis will examine how the visibility of



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

online comments impacts the normalization and acceptance of patriarchal attributes. Using a mix of research approaches, we aim to strengthen the study's credibility through detailed interview analysis. The analysis of sexist comments will reveal how men perceive patriarchy and manifest power dynamics through misogynistic and hate-filled remarks. Online survey questions, comments, and interview analysis will serve as the research tools.

Sample size and Technique

The study consists of a mixed-method approach, comprising both qualitative and quantitative analysis. It will be conducted in two stages. The first stage includes an online Google survey with a sample size of 300 respondents, which will be shared online with my friends from different universities and their mutual friends. A stratified random sampling technique will be used, ensuring that participants are between the ages of 25 and 40 and are active users of the Facebook platform.

In the second stage, in-depth interviews will be conducted with ten participants from the university, including two BS students, two MPhil students, two administration staff members, and four teachers. Participant selection will be based on their occupational status within the university—students, faculty, and staff. Purposive sampling will be used for this selection. A mixed-method approach was chosen to strengthen the study's credibility by conducting a precise interview analysis.

Survey findings

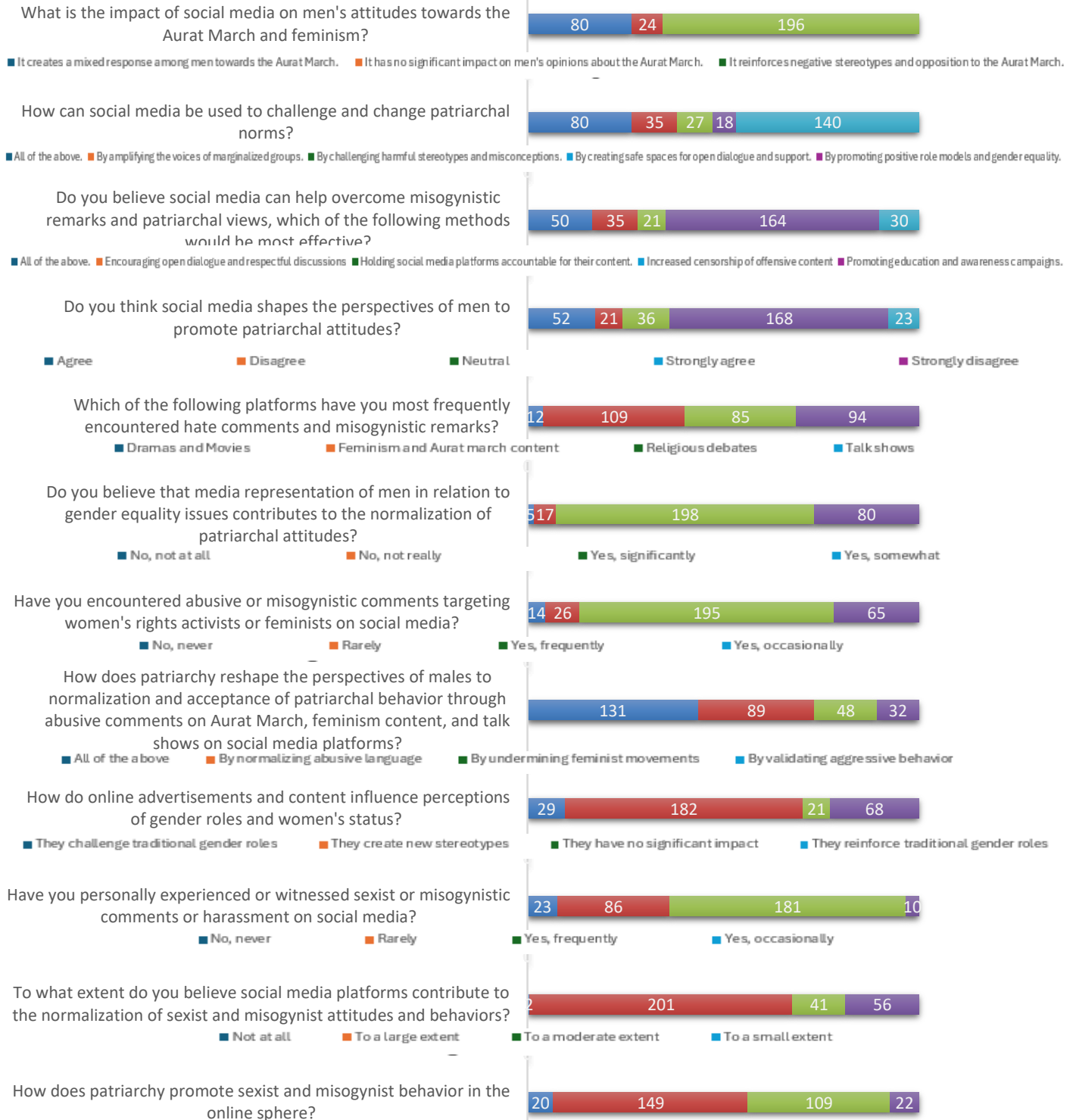
These repeated observations and reinforcement of dominant male behaviors lead to their normalization and the acceptance of sexist remarks as part of patriarchal norms. What was once seen as exceptional becomes perceived as standard. Men often observe influential figures on social media, particularly those who exhibit dominant and assertive behaviors.

The survey findings collectively underscore the pervasive influence of social media in shaping gender dynamics and perpetuating patriarchal norms. Social media platforms act as both a catalyst and a mirror for societal gender inequalities, revealing the extent of sexist and misogynistic behaviors that predominantly impact women.

The research, which included a survey of 300 participants who provided detailed demographic and study-related information, unveiled critical patterns and correlations. This empirical evidence substantiates the research hypotheses and enriches our understanding of how social media perpetuates patriarchal norms.



Questionnaire Data Chart





Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

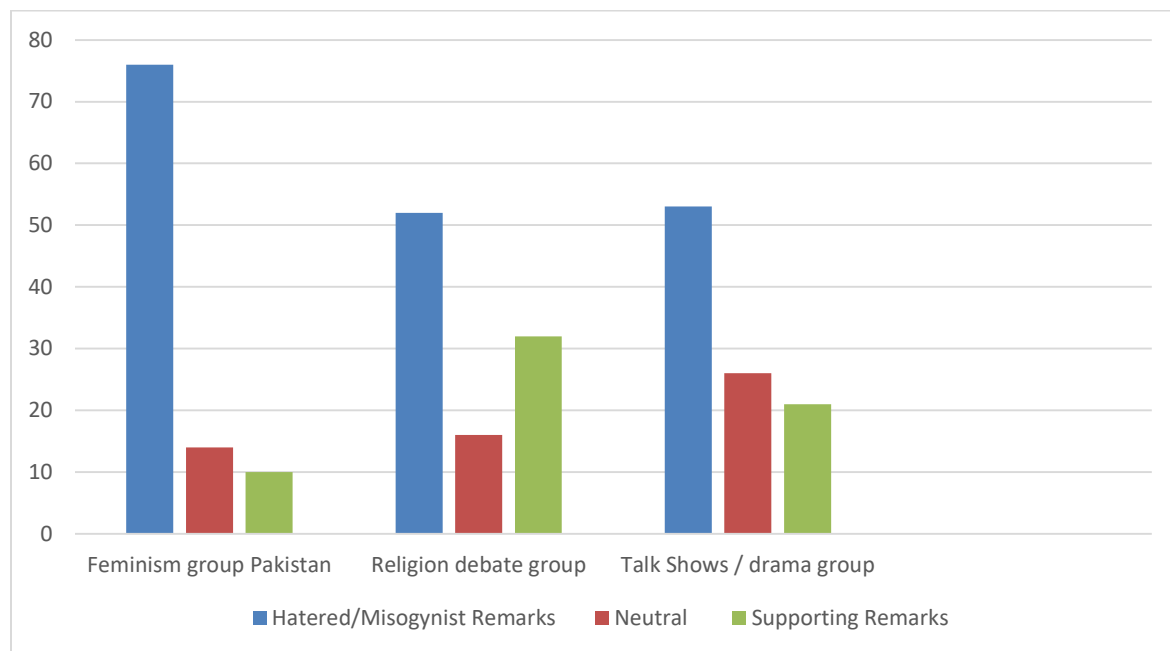
Comments analysis

In the feminism/Women's March group 76% of people remarks based on hatred and misogynist reviews, while 10% supported the content of feminism, and 14% had a neutral response,

Religion debate group 52% was hateful/sexist remarks, 32% supported remarks and 16% were neutral,

Regarding talk shows / drama-related content, 53% of people comment on hatred or sexist remarks, while 21% support remarks and 26% are neutral. Hatred comments were like abusing and using women's private parts bad words, words like *kanjrian*, *and Randian*, for women who participated in the Women's March in Pakistan.

Ghashtyan, Heera Mnadi ki Paidawar, Zanna Kaar , Baddkaar ,



Analysis of comments in Facebook Groups of Pakistan 2023-2024



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

Interview analysis

Media provokes youth to exhibit hate speech against feminism and Women's March content. Apart from misogynistic remarks, some individuals condemn sexist behavior and acknowledge that women's rights are human rights. However, many interviewees believe feminism is a Western agenda where the concept of family has collapsed. The problem lies in the fact that we live in a society with culturally rich values, while much of our literature is based on Western concepts, leading to societal conflicts. These conflicts often revolve around social media. Many respondents support women's rights but distance themselves from feminism and the Aurat March.

Feminism in Pakistan has remained controversial from the beginning for various reasons. Factors contributing to this backlash include a vocal Islamic lobby, deeply rooted patriarchal structures, socioeconomic challenges, and a prevailing anti-Western sentiment. These elements have collectively fostered a negative public perception of feminist ideals (Jibran, S. F., 2020, March 8).

It is not surprising that the term *jism* carries negative connotations and is often associated with vulgar undertones in our society. As a result, the slogan *Mera Jism, Meri Marzi* is frequently misinterpreted and perceived in an overly sexualized manner (Images Staff, 2020, March 7). Many respondents misunderstand its meaning, assuming it to advocate for promiscuity rather than bodily autonomy. Social worker and activist Shehzad Roy highlighted this misinterpretation on Facebook, stating:

"I don't understand the problem so many are having with 'Mera jism, meri marzi.' If not mine, then whose will it be? 'My body is mine' is a critical component of the life skills-based education classes we teach to help children protect themselves from abuse and harassment."

Mera Jism, Meri Marzi does not advocate for immorality; it calls for bodily autonomy, equal rights, and a woman's right to make decisions concerning her own body. However, many critics emphasize Islamic teachings to justify patriarchal structures and suppress women's agency.

To maintain a socially acceptable image, many men create dual personalities on social media. They behave differently in public and online while holding contrasting views in private. Some scholars and their followers use social media platforms to harass women's rights activists or those who challenge traditional gender roles. Additionally, certain scholars selectively interpret Islamic texts to justify discriminatory practices against women while disregarding verses that promote gender equality. A strong male-centric structure and a mask of hypocrisy contribute to the asymmetrical power dynamics in society.

Passive aggression is a subtle yet damaging form of hostility that manifests online. Men often use social media platforms to exert power and control over women through indirect means, such as sarcastic remarks, public shaming, and victim-blaming. The prevalence of victim-blaming continues to rise, shifting the blame onto women for negative situations—even when they are not at fault—while absolving perpetrators of responsibility.

Conclusion

Both online and offline, people display patriarchal behaviors in numerous ways, reflecting how deeply ingrained these ideologies are in societal norms and gender dynamics. The examples provided highlight how cyberviolence upholds male



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

dominance and perpetuates gender inequality, creating a hostile digital environment for women. Damaging stereotypes and victim-blaming reveal the entrenched nature of misogyny, while resistance to feminist movements—often justified as cultural preservation—further strengthens patriarchal power structures.

This landscape undermines women's rights and agency, as societal expectations lead to negative responses toward assertive women. Men, feeling threatened by independent voices, frequently resort to indirect aggression, such as public shaming, sarcasm, and passive hostility, reinforcing patriarchal dominance and creating a toxic atmosphere for advocates of equality. The study uncovers a stark contrast between men's public personas and their private actions, particularly on social media, revealing how misogynistic behavior often stems from positions of power and privilege. The disconnect between professed values and actual conduct sustains patriarchal structures, emphasizing the deep-rooted gender biases that persist in society.

Men's internalized beliefs about the effectiveness of patriarchy—often rooted in historical and cultural contexts—play a crucial role in maintaining gender inequality. The widespread acceptance of these beliefs and the dismissal of feminist ideologies perpetuate harmful norms, creating a cyclical pattern that impedes progress toward gender equality.

Ultimately, this research highlights the urgent need for awareness, education, and digital accountability to challenge and dismantle patriarchal norms embedded in online spaces. Addressing these issues requires a collective effort to foster a more inclusive and equitable digital environment where diverse voices can be heard without fear of backlash. By exposing these systemic patterns, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and the critical role social media plays in shaping societal perceptions and behaviors.

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Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

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Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

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