

Vandalism on Advertisement Boards in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: *Women's faces on advertisement billboards are always in danger of being blackened or of being defaced by, so called, moral brigades in Pakistan. These incidents were first noted, in cities like Lahore and Islamabad around 2006 and 2007, during the 'islah (reform) campaign' by the Lal Masjid. However, this vandalism has never been reported to the authorities by the advertisers or clients, which means the damage is not to cause business loss. Advertisements are made, after a thorough research, to cater larger audiences, and these images must have some relevance to the consumers; however, blackening of the images on advertisement boards, reveals that a specific segment of the society has been disagreeing or poling apart from the rest. It seems that, in their point of view, these pictures are harmful for the society in general, or maybe dangerous for themselves in particular. They also want a wider and loud coverage of their message, as the hoardings are placed at the hot spots in a city. This paper deconstruct the act of vandalism with the advertising images of females to decipher the mindset of the vandals.*

Keywords: Images, billboards, vandalism, advertising, Islamist brigade

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No one could ignore the torn hoarding of TUC biscuits, a multinational snack company, while passing by the famous crossing of Shama Metro Station, on Ferozepur Road, Lahore, in the month of October 2017 (fig. 1)¹. The image was captured six days after Mahira Khan and Ranbir Kapoor's controversy broke on social media in September 2017. Mahira Khan became victim of mass trolling after the unofficial release of her photographs during a casual timeout with Ranbir Kapoor in a street of New York. The photos with Ranbir, an Indian star, went viral, and Mahira, a Pakistani celebrity, was accused of ruining her 'sober' image, due to her dressing and a cigarette in her hand. She was declared 'non-Muslim' by a few bashers on social media (I. Khan 2017). This controversy was covered by international media, especially Indian news channels, and declared it a 'national topic' for Pakistani society (Basu 2018).

In Pakistan, the incidents of vandalism with the images of women on the big hoardings were happening occasionally; however, the first planned campaign was noted, around 2006 and 2007, during the '*islah* (reform) campaign' by the Lal Masjid. It is also noted that these attacks have never been reported to the authorities by the advertisers or clients. These deliberate and continuous series of vandalistic attacks and mysterious silence on behalf of advertisers once decoded are rooted into much complex contexts based on a planned fabrication of extreme religious ideologies in this part of South-Asia. Step by step this paper investigates prominent factors which have been playing part in building bigoted narratives against mediation in Pakistani society. These factors are offshoots of Pakistani state's 'ideology' on socio-political and religious formations. Moreover, separation of East Pakistan, various dictatorial regimes and war on terror on the North Western Borders of the country have also played their part.

Damaging the images for religious or political reasons has a history. The carved sculptures and images of kings were defaced and it is categorized as iconoclasm which exactly means "image breaking" (Brooks 2009). The demolition of the biggest rock-cut sculptures of Buddhas at Bamiyan, in 2001 by the Afghan Government, is considered to be "Islamic iconoclasm", and endorsed the popular viewpoint that Islamic culture disapproves figurative arts; however, this disapproval is not based on the Holy Book (Flood 2002). Thus, the disapproval is only attached to a specific school of thought, which was a small segment.

In case of hoardings in the capital city of Pakistan, the images of female models were alone targeted, and messages, such as; “fahashi, bayhayi band karo” (stop vulgarity, immorality), were also written (K. Ali 2015). These messages along with blackening of females’ images on advertisement boards indicate a mindset of a specific religious segment of the society. This act of vandalism reveals that, on the one hand, the specific group is against the representation of women on these boards and on the other hand, they want a wider and loud coverage of their message. Thus they chose hoardings, displayed at major spots, to demonstrate this extreme act. This specific mindset was always existent; however, it was strengthened enough to launch a planned ‘*islah* (reform) campaign’, around 2006 and 2007, for the first time in Pakistan.

Indeed, the demand for Pakistan was from the modernist Muslims of Aligarh University, and most of the religious groups were against the formation of Pakistan; however, after Independence, fundamentalists have dominated, in the Ayub regime and later attained their utmost influence in the Zia era (Talbot 1998). The regime of General Zia had been associated with banning or restricting the images of females in electronic as well as print media. Zia, for getting support for his rule, supported a specific group of Islamists, so the country had to face extreme sectarianism (Riffat 2015). The administration, to outspread its agenda, has ordered that drama scripts should avoid “love stories and close contact with female artists”, and also directed the female presenters to wear *Dopatta*, which caused the resignations of many (Shahid and Shahzad 2005). The administration tried to propagate media and film woman as a symbol of vulgarity, indecency and obscenity (Saleem 2006). It was declared that display of female images were against the God’s will and this has set a whole new example for advertisers all over the world (Ogilvy 1985, 26).

According to Husain Haqqani, “Establishing Islam as the state ideology was a device aimed at defining a Pakistani identity during the country’s formative years”(Haqqani 2004). Thus, state was a partner with the forces who had disowned the collective past of Hindus and Muslims; hence, introduced a ‘Saudi Islamic Version’ of culture, while tearing off the country from its roots and drifting it towards Arabian peninsula.

This continental drift is not physical but cultural, driven by a belief that Pakistan must exchange its South Asian identity for an Arab-Muslim one. Grain by grain, the desert sands of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are replacing the rich soil that had

nurtured a Muslim culture which produced magnificent Mughul architecture such as the Taj Mahal, the poetry of Asadullah Khan Ghalib and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, and so much more (Hoodbhoy 2017).

Suppression of liberal ideologies at every level enabled Islamists to fill the gap with extreme dogmatic narratives. Resulting in their stake in government structures, 'the Islamists are not content with having a secondary role in national affairs and have acquired a momentum of their own' (Haqqani 2004).

Pakistan has had radical demographic changes over the seven decades of its existence; their ramifications have fed into already highly competitive and volatile inter-community relationships (Malik 2002). This repudiation has allowed the outrageous beliefs nurture on mushroom growth resulting in a half-liberal and half-conservative, confused society. Image making and music are the most accused and so called un-Islamic acts according to dominant sets of Muslim theologians from the very beginning. They place music into the category of *malahi*; diversion which has the same root as *lahwa*, a keyword for Ibn abi'l-Dunya: To spend time with diversion (*lahw*) is to indulge in sin (Otterbeck and Ackfeldt 2012).

Most of these sentiments amalgamated with 'Saudization', where a stricter take on prohibition of imagery have influenced amateur minds at enormous level. The society has paid the price of Saudization, as middle classes had lost every expression of happiness; for example, the traditional festival of Basant (Kite flying), classical music and traditional kathak dancing (Hoodbhoy 2017). Ideological basis of the specific version of religion had instigated a fanatic hatred for images, and thus for art and culture. Authoritarian regimes, as well as the partnership with the United States, particularly after the WoT in 2002, had further malformed the society with extremism (F. Shaikh 2009). The expansion of specific religious groups, in last two decades, has been attached to the US War on Terror (WoT) after 9/11 in Afghanistan. Pakistan's government wanted to become an active partner with the US; however, the major political parties had rejected the idea; thus, the establishment had to acquire the support from the religious groups, as a result they enjoyed a mainstream position in Pakistan (Riffat 2015). The society has been suffering with a few very basic issues, which have been aggravated by socio-political actions.

Deliberate selection of billboards for vandalism is a loud reflection of the unaddressed fallacy beliefs about image as element of contradiction to Islamic values. On the one hand, a segment of society finds this act of defacement awfully offensive, and on the other hand, a section of the society may not dislike it rather endorse it. In Peshawar, the blackening of hoardings was also reported in 2010, whilst Shabab-e-Milli, the youth wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, had warned the authorities and advertisers to remove the pictures of females from billboards, as these were “spreading vulgarity”. Conversely, the students of the University of Peshawar disapproved the move of damaging the boards, as according to them there was nothing indecent in the pictures (The News 2011). This indicates the divide in the society, and specifies much larger and intense factors behind the act of vandalism. Here another question arises that if the vandals are against ‘the image’ only and its positioning as contradictory element in their so-called Islamic beliefs, then why do they choose women images only and why not men. In case of Mahira Khan’s image, is it something to do with patriarchal mindset or is it due to their take against objectification of women in advertising.

Before analyzing the torn-off image of Mahira Khan, objectification is needed to be considered. Long before objectification of women in advertising there comes sexual objectification faced by millions of women every day around the globe since ages. The common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is experience of being treated *as a body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others (Fredrickson 1997). Objectification comes from both genders and applies to both, giving a right to the people to judge a human through ‘accuracy’ of his/her body parts in terms sexual vernaculars. Women objectification, a worldwide phenomenon over the course of history, is least addressed in third world countries like Pakistan whilst empowering the ‘doers’ over ‘objectified’ resulting in extreme desire to control and treat women as objects and confining them to sexual uses only.

Objectification of women starts from the perception of female body parts as mere instruments to provide men with pleasure. Desire for this pleasure can be emotional or physical or both. One of the most common and ‘harmless’ type of objectification is regarded as ‘gaze’ or ‘sexualized staring’, where woman is an Image, and man as an owner of the look (Mulvey 1975). Women experience this harassment mostly at public spaces, may it be in presence of many people. They face heterosexually from men in routine consisting vulgar disgrace in form of

abusive shouting, blowing and sexualized gaze. Then it extends to touching breast or buttock as if the woman is a totally under controlled sex object. For this harassment men have very simple reasons the woman was so alluring, and that it wasn't their fault to commit all the abusive acts intervening into a woman's personal rather respectful space. This disgrace has commonly been neglected somewhat accepted by both civilized and uncivilized societies as a routine 'thing'.

This neglect is regrettable. In women's lives, public harassment abuses are frequent reminders of the ever-present relevance of their gender. Public harassment reinforces the basic division between the sexes and prescribes the conduct or mere presence of some while punishing others (Gardner 1995).

In underdeveloped societies, 'the neglect' reaches to its extreme, and men start considering a woman their property as any other object or possession and endeavor to control their sexuality and finally their lives. In the South-Asian region there is a well-known proverb *zan, zar, zameen* (woman, wealth and land) and it is generally believed that the honor of a man is associated to these three 'things' (Ashfaq and Ali 2013). This primitive belief has further authenticated by indulgence of Saudi culture regarded as 'the Holy Culture' in Pakistani society for over four decades. Instead of enlightening people about the respect of women given by Islam, this culture has constantly been focusing on overpowering sexuality of women; viewed a threat to all Muslim-hood.

In *Saudization of Pakistan* Hoodbhoy quotes Kamel Daoud, describing Wahabism (Saudi Islamic Narrative) as "Born in massacre and blood, it manifests itself in a surreal relationship with women, a prohibition against non-Muslims treading on sacred territory, and ferocious religious laws. That translates into an obsessive hatred of imagery and representation and therefore art, but also of the body, nakedness and freedom" (Hoodbhoy 2017). This melancholic transformation from moderation to extremism has empowered abuse over logic and more ironically has segmented society in intolerant rather fanatical spheres. Saudi women represent 50 percent of the university strength, they are getting more and more educated yet majority of them is still unable to work. This is because they can only be driven to the workplaces by 'male' chauffeurs, and for this facility they must belong to the elite class (Prokop 2003).

Animosity for the images and visual representations has also been reflected in the advertisements of Saudi Arabia. 'Ads in Saudi

Arabia be designed to be compatible with religious standards, the socio-economic environments and government priorities¹(Luqmani and Quraeshi 1989). Moreover, characters in the ads must be males and parental figures; substitute women with cartoon characters in sexually sensitive ads (Luqmani and Quraeshi 1989). For example, an advertisement a father, a mother and three children are shown in the pool; however, in its Saudi version the mother was replaced with a cartoon character (Akbar 2017). Similar approach was observed when the government of MMA² proposed Shariat Bill 2003, based on a specific version of Islamic regulations which restricted women to their biologically determined roles, in the North Western Frontier Province³ of Pakistan(S. S. Ali 2003).

Religious extremism and Islamist politics has been deep rooted in KPK. Firstly, it was Khudai Khidmatgar (KK) in power before partition; secondly, the Soviet-Afghan war, in 1979, the message of Jihad was promulgated by the religious parties, which allowed them to strengthen their power base in rural Pakhtoons areas alongside the Pak-Afghan border; and this religious politics was further intensify after 9/11 (J. Khan 2015). The bill of 2003 had, on the one hand, segregated women, and introduction of women coaches in sports, and on the other hand, it had closed television networks and cinemas. The student wing of JUI-F and JI had launched an “anti-Obscenity campaign”, and within no time, all outdoor advertising boards having pictures of female models were eliminated (J. Khan 2015). Although the action had been highly criticized by the international media and at that time chief secretary and inspector general of police had to lose their seats for their failure to stop the activists from smashing hoardings with female figures, it had condensed the space of females (Amin 2018). Indeed, this had reinstated the subjects relating to the rights of women, and exposed the mindset of a minority who is trying to impose their ideas on the masses (Saleem 2006).

In 2007, reform movement was launched by the female students of a madrassa⁴ called *Jamia Hafsa*, which is part of the *Lal Masjid* mosque in Islamabad. The movement is considered to be a transformation or “at least ‘flattening out’ of Islamic militancy”; which has three significant features. Firstly, it was launched by female students; secondly, the language and vocabulary used by students were similar to the secular groups and civil society officials; and thirdly, it is casual and kind of extracurricular activism, which seems to be different from traditional fundamentalism (Devji 2008). The *Lal Masjid* incident

clarified that women support is exploited by the religious groups to support the patriarchy system and religious agendas. The movement also identified that the women of *Jamia Hafsa*, embraced the localized idea of the modernity to support the religious plans; while paradoxically challenging the Islamic state of Pakistan for being dictatorial for women (Rasheed 2016). This means a complete chaos and confusion about the conflicting fields of modernity, religion and nation-state.

The chaos can be further observed in the recent tearing off the hoardings of a multinational snack company with image of Mahira Khan. Initially, the reaction reflects on social media where people suggested a protection squad for the veteran actress, declared her cheap and immoral due to her dressing, and even questioned her religious beliefs, in their comments (S. Shaikh 2017). On the other hand, some of the fans have written “Why? What's so important with these "specific" pictures? Just bcz (because) she is wearing a short dress and smoking? Bhai It's her personal space”; while celebrities like Usman Khalid Butt also reacted and posted his own picture with a cigarette to criticize the double standards of the society, and Ali Zafar posted a letter in his handwriting to address the issues in a personalized way (I. Khan 2017).

The loud and clear reaction burst, in less than a week's time, on the huge billboard by tearing off the image. The damaged image of Mahira Khan reminds iconoclasm with one of the historical image; Diego Velazquez's *The Rokeby Venus*, popularly known as the “Venus with the Mirror”. In 1914, this master piece was slashed, with a sharp edged tool, at seven spots all over the figure and the most dangerous cut was at the neck (The Times 1914). It reflects that, in case of historical painting, the attack on the pictorial representation of a female was reported and considered as an act of injuring the actual female. In case of Mahira Khan's image it was not reported as an act of violence against the actual female; however, the cuts on the image demonstrated that vandals have expressed their aggression as if they were attacking the actual female. They have made sure that some part of the face of victim must remain intact so that people can recognize the ‘alleged’ properly and can read the louder message. The message is for women, who make around 50% of the population in Pakistan, to remain cautious after wearing dresses of their own choice.

Vandals have also damaged the picture of the product, so that the advertiser and client should also feel the threat, and remove the advertisement as well as eliminate the model from the campaign. Indeed, the whole campaign was removed soon after the act of vandalism, and

the manufacturers did not even record their protest. The silence on behalf of advertiser and client reflects that they were also not in support of the female model, and wanted to remain out of the controversy. This hypocritical approach of the businessmen reconfirms the dominance of specific religious groups, which has further marginalized the females in the society. It reflects that women are absolutely powerless, and have no support even in the media and in advertising industry.

Conclusion

The damaged image on the advertising board reflects complexities involved in building common and unfortunately bigoted narratives in Pakistani society. These extreme ideologies are too inflexible to give space to the actual and imaginary presence of women at any progressive platforms whether it is at workplaces, co-education institutes, markets, streets or billboards. Until and unless the realization of sabotaging policies occurs on immediate bases at state and social level, no one knows how many female images on billboards will be blackened. If this practice carries on and remains unnoticed by authorities and society, there is a fear that soon or later extremists will blacken real women while walking on streets, working at places and studying in universities. Every act of censorship is also an act of iconoclasm, as the “fear of art and love of art are two sides of the same coin” (Freedberg 2016). However, in case of Pakistan, the act of iconoclasm is directing the image makers to implement self-censorship and avoid the images which are not wanted by the vandals.

Notes

1. The image was captured by Aysha Bilal
2. An alliance of Religious Parties
3. Now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
4. A religious school

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Figure: 1

Source: Captured by Bilal, Aisha A. October 2017