

Patriarchy, Misogyny and Pakistani Women in Cyberspace: Feminist Qualitative Analysis

Maliha Gull Tarar

Assistant Professor at Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha, Pakistan.

Email: maliha.gul@uos.edu.pk

Aaqib Shahzad Alvi

Lecturer at Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha, Pakistan.

Email: aaqib.shahzad@uos.edu.pk

Abida Bajwa

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Pakistan.

Email: abidabajwa999@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study explored women's experiences in cyberspace. The main concern of the research was to understand cyberspace culture and the relationship between cyberspace existence, masculinity and societal gender relations. The study was conducted in the Punjab and four districts (Sargodha, Faisalabad, Lahore, Gujranwala) were sampled to collect the research data. The sample was consisted of 40 women respondents and their age was between 20 to 45 years. Qualitative research methodology was used and in-depth interviews were conducted by designing an interview guide. In-depth interviews were very helpful for the researchers to understand the dynamics and perspectives of gendered societal norms, patriarchy and misogynic believes against women prevailing in Pakistan. After conducting in-depth interviews, narrative and thematic analysis techniques were used to generate conclusions. Research findings explored that patriarchy has digital aspects and majority of the respondents witnessed and experienced patriarchal encounters as well as bullying and violence in cyberspace. Social media platforms were main source of propagating public and private patriarchy. Moreover, feminist analysis concluded that cyberspace represents societal mindset and is propagating misogynistic contents as well.

Keywords: Public and Private Patriarchy, Feminist Discourse, Internet, Cultural Violence.

Introduction

Cyberspace is making the world a global village and providing opportunity to interact, learn, groom and educate. Different organizations are using internet for business related purposes while the users at home are using cyberspace for entertainment and for getting away from domestic communication. However, the use of internet varies person to person (Nie & Erbring, 2002). Since enunciated as a refuge for liberated speech and democracy, internet has developed into an annex of offline gendered substances, hostility and maltreatment. Cyberspace is serving as a wall paper of everyday life for women and girls there (Lewis et al, 2015; Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017). Attitudes and behaviors from the real world can

cross over into the cyber world. For example, online violence towards women is an overt expression of the gender bias and imbalance that exist offline – online, it becomes amplified (Kee, 2017). Cyberspace violence and harassment is frequently omitted even in conversations about violence towards women. Internet offers people a situation and channel to interact with strangers. Moreover, the use of internet repeatedly to meet someone special or to establish special relationship has increased significantly. In this regard, ingenious, considerable and gratifying conversation constructs steady, elongated relationships comparably in person dealings (Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999; Ryan, 1995; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Núñez Puente, 2011).

Women's abuse in cyberspace, predominately against celebrities, is in main stream and well covered rather than the other individuals (Bracchi 2013; McNally 2015). Cyberspace communications have also fascinated the attention of feminist theorists and they have been particularly worried with the relationship of women and new communication technologies (Robin, 1995; Zoonen, 2001). Some women have made major subscription to the creation of computers, particularly to the conception of computer programming. Women are employed at meeting line level in putting these machines together but unfortunately, many are threatened, harassed and exploited at social media and other internet domains. Moreover cyberspace has become a space where women are caused to feel unsafe and compromised. Violence against women is being performed using media, for example, YouTube, messaging, email, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. As of numerous points of views, this brutality is equivalent to diverse types of violence against women, distant from physical maltreatment, or rape. In that, cyberspace violence is serving as a means to maintain male superiority and male domination as a class, as well as to reinforce man centric standards, jobs and structures. Nonetheless, there are a few highlights that make this kind of savagery against women infrequent. It is considered that internet records everything and women are particularly affected by cyberspace experiences. Seeing this appearance of digital violence against women, both as a weapon against women and a domain where women are caused to feel risky, it is needed to look through more profound way to create or investigate this sort of violence and related impacts on women's lives (Irving, 2011; Dredge, Gleeson, & De la Piedad Garcia, 2014; Jane, 2017; Irving, 2017).

Literature Review

Literature suggests that in this era of technology, children and adolescents are the first generation to grow up in a culture where computer literacy is required for effective 21st-century citizenship. With an increase in the number of young people using digital technologies for educational and recreational purposes, there has been an increase in social problems in cyberspace, exposing them to various forms of cyberspace violence (Chisholm, 2006).

Research studies reported that in the last few years, social media has become a major reason which has directed youth towards violence and created the environment for aggressive behavior (Patton et al, 2014). Different forms of violence and aggression are regular part of our everyday online life. Research studies also reported that harassment, cyber bullying and threatening as well as sexual messages are common. Moreover, at the same time, social media has introduced different forms of aggression and violence that eventually happen online as well as offline. Studies also reported that juvenile population is particularly involved in cyber bullying, threatening, harassment or sexual messages via social media (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Lim, Vadrevu & Basnyat, 2012). Another study indicated that women are victims of cyber violence but also perpetrators (Chisholm, 2006). Online abuse, like offline violence against women and girls, has a visible impact. In broader debate, both are standardized in ways which promote overriding patriarchy and gender relations. Additionally, display of patriarchal and misogynic beliefs in cyberspace can lead to the symptoms of post-traumatic anxiety disorders in women (Hlavka, 2014).

Mantilla (2013) also reported that deviants are using cyberspaces, specifically social media platforms because they have also discovered that social media is anonymous, allowing for trolling, name calling, and swearing to flourish. Misogyny is clearly visible at these platforms and these online behaviors include sexist versions known as “gender trolling” in the context of harassment of women across online platforms. Trolls have sadistic impulses, gaining joy from humiliating and shaming their targets, as well as engaging in disruptive, egotistical behavior, which can lead to conflicts among users. As a result, they frequently obtain emotional fulfillment at the expense of people with whom they disagree. Such obnoxious, anti-social behavior displays unhealthy traits. Anonymity and accessibility of the internet via cell phones and other computer devices has exacerbated sadist-misogynic behavior in the cyberspace (Citron, 2009; Buckles, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Hardaker, 2010; Shachaf & Hara, 2010; Rego, 2018).

Irving (2011) explored women’s violence experiences and said that appearance of digital savagery against women has brutal consequences and needs viable solutions by changing women’s status in cyberspace as well as in the society. Shaw’s study (2014) also contributed to the gendered discussion of internet spaces and state security measures by emphasizing upon the diversity of Pakistani women’s internet experiences. Online harassment cannot be dismissed as insignificant because it occurs in a virtual space. Abbasi (2021) reported that Pakistani women are facing patriarchy at social media sites like Facebook and Twitter etc. Moreover, women victims of cyberspace related violence are leaving cyberspace even in this era of technology. A study was conducted to measure Pakistani women’s experience of online violence and concluded that 70% of the women in Pakistan were frightened to share their pictures online and 40% of women reported that they were harassed and stalked through messaging Apps

(Digital Right Foundation, 2017). Zimmerman and Ybarra (2016) also reported that anonymity may make people more violent and aggressive social modeling makes this effect worse in anonymous people.

Research Methodology

Nature of the study was qualitative and forty women were interviewed for this study. From Pakistan, Punjab province was selected as universe of the study and four districts were selected by using simple random sampling technique. Sampled districts were Sargodha, Faisalabad, Lahore and Gujranwala. From each sampled districts, the target population was approached by using purposive and convenient sampling techniques. Moreover, due to the nature of study, literate women were selected to share their experiences in cyberspace and representation was given to urban and rural women. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews of women respondents. For that purpose, an interview guide was developed purposefully by the researchers. Total number of interviews was depending upon saturation of data.

Results & Discussion

Respondent's Demographic Profile

Tables below present participants' demographics;

Table: 1. Details about the location, number and in-depth interviews

Sr. NO	Districts of the Punjab	No. of In-depth Interviews
1	Faisalabad	10
2	Gujranwala	08
3	Lahore	12
4	Sargodha	10
Total		40

This table shows that the data was collected from 4 districts of the Punjab province. According to the table, the total number of participants was 40 women using internet and 10 participants were interviewed from Faisalabad, 08 from Gujranwala and 12 from Lahore and 10 women were from Sargodha.

Table: 2. Respondent's Age

Sr. NO	Age	Frequency
1	20-25	10
2	25-30	8
3	30-35	8
4	35-40	9
5	40-45	5
Total		40

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The research participants were from different age groups. The data indicated that 10 respondents were 20-25 years old, 08 were 25-30 years old, 8 were 30-35 years old, 9 were 35-40 years old while 5 were 40-45 years old.

For having better understanding of women's cyberspace experiences, minimum age of the respondents was 20 years and maximum age was 45 years.

Table: 3. Respondent's Residential Background

Sr. NO	Residential Area	Frequency
1	Rural	18
2	Urban	22
Total		40

In the research study urban and rural women shared their experiences in cyberspace and 18 participants were from rural areas while 22 were from urban areas. Urban and rural representation was very helpful to understand the dynamics of cyberspace culture and Pakistani society.

Table: 4. Respondent's Family System

Sr. NO	Family System	Frequency
1	Joint	14
2	Nuclear	26
Total		40

Majority of the respondents, 26 were from nuclear family system and only 14 were from joint family system.

Table: 5 Respondent's Marital Status

Sr. NO	Marital Status	Frequency
1	Single	18
2	Married	20
3	Widows	02
Total		40

This table provides detail about respondent's marital status. According to this table, 18 research respondents were single, 20 were married and only 2 were widows.

Table 6 Respondent's Economic Class

Sr. No.	Economic Class	Frequency
1	Low class	02
2	Middle class	27
3	Higher Class	11
Total		40

This table shows that majority of the respondents, 27 were from middle class and 11 were from higher class. As the research was about women's experiences in cyberspace, there were only 2 respondents from lower income class who shared their experiences.

Table No. 7 Respondent's Educational Status

Sr. NO	Educational status	Frequency
1	Literates	40
Total		40

All the respondents were literate and they were able to access internet and social media platforms.

Pakistani Women's Experiences in Cyberspace

In-depth interviews were very helpful to explore women's experiences in cyberspace. A married respondent (Age 32), from a middle class family shared,

“I faced cyber bullying on WhatsApp. I frequently receive wrong calls from spam numbers and received codes which were used for inappropriate website links. I blocked some numbers but after blocking those, got messages and calls from many new numbers. In fact, I usually do not attend unknown numbers as in Pakistan men use to call again and again if they hear female voice at the other end”.

Another respondent (married, age 34) shared that smart phones and internet packages are so cheap in Pakistan. All those who cannot even get education, have access to cyberspace. Such users cannot understand laws and policies related to cyberspace.

Literature also highlighted that cybercrimes happen to women because of their known identity as women. Although cyberspace is anonymous, it is used by cybercriminals to exploit women's vulnerability to sexuality and social construction that places women in unequal relationships. Because of the unequal

relationship, violence against women in cyberspace occurs (Gagliardone, Alves, & Martinez, 2015).

Some previous studies also reported that boys and girls both were victims of cyberspace bullying; boys were facing physical bullying but women were bullied by sexual comments. Moreover, boys were the main perpetrators of cyberspace bullying against girls (Nansel et al. 2001; Rodkin & Berger, 2008; Underwood, & Rosen, 2010).

A respondent (unmarried, age 25) shared that she was preparing for competitive exam and joined some social media platform for academic discussion. However, she got more bullying, harassment and violence than education while her time at those forums. She said “cyberspace is providing anonymity so social media platforms represent real mindset of patriarchal world. Even in 21st century, Pakistani men are unable to digest difference of opinion especially of opposite gender. Whenever I shared something different from many other’s perspectives, men only had slut shaming as answer”.

According to another respondent (married, age 28), “the experience of cyber bullying and violence against women is said to be more intensified as compared to the bullying done in-person because the predator has the advantage of hiding his identity behind the screen and therefore is able to act without the fear of punishment”.

According to one of the respondent (married, age 35),

“I am an active user of Twitter and a victim of online abuse which include offensive, insulting, abusive language. I believe that cyberspace represent societal values. Pakistani society is patriarchal as well as misogynic, same culture is prevailing in cyberspace. Women are facing violence in society as well as in cyberspace. Due to cheap technology, concealed identities and internet access, everyone can abuse women more easily in cyberspace. Cyberspace represents negative and harmful stereotypes against women”.

Similarly, a respondent (married, age 37) shared,

“I am very fond of social and political issues. I am using Twitter to be updated about latest trends. I used to tweet about social issues but experienced that men do not value and respect women’s opinion. If you courage to disagree with them.....you must have to face bullying, slut shaming, harassment and troll. Even Twitter trends also represent women’s low status in Pakistani society”.

Research studies also support that women comprise almost half of the world population but many among them are discriminated in different domain of life. Some women are even more subjected to harm in many features because of gender and social structure. Moreover, in Pakistan, like other Asian countries, men have the dominance over women in every field of life. Women have low status as compared to men and are considered intellectually imperfect and physically weak who need protection of father, brother, husband and son. Women also have to face gender inequalities in household decision making and have limited opportunities to get education and skill (Naz & Chaudhry, 2011; Riaz, & Pervaiz, 2018). Tarar and Pulla (2014) also reported that Pakistani women are facing public and private patriarchy. Furthermore, patriarchy is serving as a tool to control women.

Another respondent (married, age 35) supported this and shared,

“Cyberspace is full of bullying and violence against women.....people use to abuse women to attack men and families. Even if we talk about political differences.....Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz supporters are abusing Jamima Goldsmith and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf supporters use to abuse Maryam Nawaz. Even political discussion is not possible in Pakistan without abusing women and cyberspace is providing outlet to Pakistani men to express their misogynic believes”.

Another doctor respondent (married, age 42 years) shared,

“I believe cyberspace is making the world a global village but women are losing their respect and status. Cyberspace do not need any validation or permission to share contents so everyone is sharing everything.....women’s privacy is badly suffered.....they are suffering because of abusive language, violent misogynic threats and bullying. Just remember Ayesha Gulali, and Reham Khan case.....what social media did with themEven Malala Yousafzai and prominent women in media are facing troll and abuse on daily basis”

The mainstream media has extensively reported online harassment directed at female celebrities and feminist activists (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017; Bracchi 2013; McNally 2015). O’Sullivan and Flanagan (2003) argued that rather than giving a monolithic examination of misogynistic online communication, it is needed to understand that calling women ‘a bitch’, ‘dumb broad’, ‘ignorant little slut’ are not simply ‘name-calling’; these terms are inherently gendered and have sexist features.

A chemist respondent (married, Age 40) shared,

Analysis

“Digital platforms and social media allows both of the genders to be engaged in politics, debates and platforms where they can give their opinion. However the increasing cases of cyber bullying and online abuse have restricted both the genders, but especially women, from taking part in political discussions or online debates. The short term effect of this might be negligible however, in the long term; such circumstances might limit the number of female leaders who come forward”.

Another respondent (unmarried, age 21) shared her experiences as, “I started a petition at Facebook and Twitter about equal pays and land rights in Pakistan but my post was deleted by the authorities who claimed that I was demanding something against what religion allowed women. Patriarchal mind-set of our society is a becoming an evident threat to the future women leaders”.

According to one of the respondents (married, age 28), “I was forced to delete a blog I wrote about male dominance in society because of the amount of backlash that I received from the opposite gender. Our men are not socialized to tolerate women’s presence at social media. Societal patriarchal structure is also exiting in cyberspace”.

Another respondent (unmarried, age 21) stated,

“I was forced by my parents to delete all of my social media accounts after my Facebook account got hacked a few years ago. According to my parents, internet is not safe for women in Pakistan as we cannot even complaint anyone if have some issue. They also think that it is not morally appropriate for unmarried girls to have internet related accounts”.

Another respondent from rural areas (married, age 30 years) shared,

“I was having a social media account but closed that after my marriage as my husband don’t like it. He thinks social media is not safe for women and people have negative opinion about women’s internet use. I am totally agreed as I personally witnessed that even women do not like women’s internet/ social media use. When I had an account, I also experienced that women are even more vulnerable in cyberspace as they can easily become a victim of identity theft, bullying and harassment”.

Family’s opinion regarding women’s use of internet must not be ignored. A married respondent (age 24) who was belonging from rural Punjab stated that “I

do not own a single social media account, the reason for this deep rooted fear among my parents is that I too might become a victim of cyber bullying. Stories like these are more common in the rural areas of Pakistan, and are one of the reasons why the rural women have limited access to internet”.

Previous studies also supported that sexist, vicious, sexualized, intimidating online behavior against women remarks gendered group boundaries in cyberspace. Moreover, it can limit women’s community engagements (McCosker 2013; Lee 2005; Citron and Norton 2011). A UK based study (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017) concluded that abuse directed at visible and audible women demonstrates that cyberspace, once heralded as a new, democratic public sphere, suffers from gender inequalities similar to those found in the offline world. Furthermore, it proposed that, rather than being viewed as a kind of communication, cyberspace abuse should be viewed as a type of abuse or violence against women and girls.

Conclusion

The current study concluded that internet is a part of our everyday life and women are using it to organize their bank accounts, financial records, to explore work, to get education but many are facing violence against them in cyberspace. Cyberspace related technologies do have positive impact on women’s life but they are also prone to abusive language, misogynic behaviors and comments, harassment, induced suicides, sexual assaults and rape threats. Cyberspace represents societal values and women are facing violence in society as well as in cyberspace. Women’s cyberspace experiences represented many negative and harmful stereotypes against them. Pakistani women are prone to patriarchal and misogynic culture in cyberspace. Moreover, due to cheap technology, concealed identities and easy internet access, everyone can abuse women more easily at cyberspace. The research concluded that cyberspace is making the world a global village but women are losing their respect and status. Men do not value and respect women’s opinion and if they courage to disagree with them, they must have to face bullying, slut shaming, harassment and troll. Even political discussion is not possible in Pakistan without abusing women and cyberspace is providing outlet for Pakistani men as well as women to express their misogynic believes.

Recommendations

On the basis of research findings, the study draws following recommendations;

- i. Awareness campaigns are needed at community level about the impacts of cyber crimes and cyberspace violence.
- ii. Cyberspace platforms should introduce mechanism for mandatory permissions from women before uploading stuff related to them.
- iii. Social media sites should adopt zero tolerance policy regarding violence against women.

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- iv. It is recommended to start a joint venture of private as well as government sector to prevent and address cyberspace violence against women.
- v. Social safety nets should be encouraged to empower women victims of cyberspace violence and strict actions should be taken by law enforcement agencies.
- vi. It is suggested to recognize and address public and private patriarchy prevailing in cyberspace.

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