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## WHEN LIKES TURN TO LOATHING: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF TOXICITY OF INFLUENCER CULTURE ON INSTAGRAM IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

Social media has provided a space where individuals and groups can present their diverse opinions, but it can also promote prejudice, bias, fear, and hatred, spread misinformation, and provoke violence and harassment through its feedback mechanisms. Keeping in view the mentioned characteristics, the present study inspects the continuous hate speech against a Dubai-based Pakistani social media influencer, Adnan Zafar. The study was conducted on comments on his Instagram account (@ken\_doll\_dubaiiii) comprising of offensive gender-based abuse, monetary condemnation and transgressive allegations using social media Critical Discourse which refers to the language and communication used in social media messages. It involves analyzing the words, phrases, and structure of these messages to comprehend the core beliefs, values, and attitudes being conveyed. The comments extracted using free-of-cost Instagram API, reflect established and firm patriarchal norms and the use of deliberate religious commentary to impose adherence. The findings of the study highlight that social media despite providing a platform for open discussions in conservative societies like Pakistan, also shows the disparity in authority and cultural partiality. The case of Adnan Zafar also reveals the multi-facet perspective of social media to be used to raise a voice against well-established practices in society as well as a tool for intensifying hate speech. The study also signifies the wider discussion regarding the role of social media in mirroring society's practices, along with the pressing requirement to tackle and counter hate speech on digital platforms.

**Keywords:** Speech, Instagram, Pakistan, Patriarchal, Allegations.

## Introduction

Social media, in general, is often regarded as a space for giving populist audience opinions that exist and operate in a wider system of media in a society with strong gender-based values and disproportionate authority use. (Dad, Shabbir, Sultan, et. al. 2023). This can be easily observed in male-dominated societies in which media portrays and strengthens conventional gender roles. Much research, for example, which has been conducted in Pakistan and U.K, has consistently shown how presentations in media strengthen traditional typecasts in terms of males being naturally powerful whereas females being weak and emotional (Allan et al., 2002; Ross & Carter, 2011; Ali & Batool, 2015; Yasmin et al., 2019). This bifurcation seems innate and unavoidable due to the frequent relationship between societal practices and media presentations. However, these established authority lines have been confronted by social media in which well-established gender roles can be dislocated and redesigned by disempowered fractions (KhosraviNik, 2017b). The role of social media in confronting prevailing values and supporting the transformation of society by generating unconventional narratives, producing consciousness, and assisting discussions on societal issues has been recognized by scholars (Minhas & Salawu, 2024). In Pakistan, social media platforms, despite harnessing positive societal transformation, also work to propagate hate speech and online misconduct. These platforms can be used to produce dangerous and damaging narratives regarding gender since they can hide users' identities and present diverse approaches. (Iram, Saleha, 2024), Regardless of these conflicting dimensions, many influencers are now using social media to defy this pessimism by giving space to people to present their stories and differing viewpoints.

## Research Questions

1. What is the role of social media in promoting hate speech?
2. What is the role of social media in strengthening established typecasts in a society?

3. What is the role of social media in dehumanizing users?
4. How does the audience engage with celebrity narratives on social media?

## Problem Statement

Although a lot of studies have been carried out on Pakistani media regarding gender portrayals and hate speech, a gap remains in comprehending the relation between celebrity impact and how the audience engages with them. This research aims to fill this gap using social media–Media-critical discourse Studies (SM-CDS) to investigate the diverse relation among gender, hate speech, and celebrity narrative in social media.

## Significance of the Research

The present study, focusing on the mentioned facts, adopts social media Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) to find out the diverse association among hate speech, celebrity narrative, and gender. It aims to look at social media as a space to reconceive and reconsider gender typecasts and confront dominant viewpoints regarding the same. It focuses on the case of a Dubai-based Pakistani social media influencer, Adnan Zafar, by examining how his content has added to the inception of virtual hatred and how consumers look at those presentations. The study intends to highlight the association between gender portrayal, audience participation, and the creation of confrontation in the digital space.

## Literature Review

The rise and popularity of social media have certainly redefined patterns of communication. According to Androutsopoulos (2008), an idea called "presumption" exists on the social web which not only helps in utilizing content but also paves the way for users to create it as well. Conversely, this "democratization" also has its disadvantages. Baker (2001) points out the possibilities of inter-web disagreements and how it has eased users to create misleading and fake recognitions (Rheingold, 1993). As a result of these diversities, Critical Discourse Studies have come out as a vital tool to analyze the

dimensions of authority and establishment of characters in the digital realm. Using language and semantics to create and portray social identities can help to dig out the hidden causes of power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). The concept of reliability and the possibility of misleading portrayal of oneself online have raised questions keeping in view the flowing and discursive nature of digital space (Baer, 2016). KhosraviNik (2018) & Papacharissi (2015) have highlighted that social media can intensify individual politics and worsen already present differences despite having the power to motivate communal action and defy hegemonic narratives. KhosraviNik & Esposito (2018) have presented a double contextualization approach to counter this complication which accommodates the technological aspects as well as the wider social circumstances in which social media works. The consistent portrayal of gender in stereotypical roles in conventional and digital media has been connected to the growth of hate speech and male domination (Banks, 2010; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Biased practices and online persecution in the form of negativity and insults can be seen (Pickering, 2001). KhosraviNik & Esposito (2018) are of the view that hate is not only created, but rather it is a socially constructed phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the cultural, economic, and political dimensions of a society. These constructs are used to shape up and mirror society using a developed language system and meaning-making mechanism called discourse. According to Cochran et al. (2014), and Lassen & Brown (2010), social interaction patterns have been transfigured by platforms like Instagram through which individuals interact at the world level and take part in online activities. Instagram has speedily gained popularity as it allows the sharing of visual material (photographs and videos) by multiple senders to multiple receivers at the same time (Kozinets, 2015). It also possesses traits of hashtags and live stories which augment the participation of

and by the users and the distribution of miscellaneous discussions (Ghaffari, 2019). Instagram persuades users to represent themselves idealistically by providing features like filters and means for editing. Also, the ease with which fans can access and connect to celebrities using this platform has changed the aspects of relationships between fans and celebrities (Giles, 2017; Guschwan, 2015; Phelps, 2011). Direct interactions, in the form of likes and comments with celebrities, are now possible for people who admire them, but they can also be emotion-driven and derogatory, especially in terms of gender. Media, including social media, has strengthened existing roles of gender in their presentations, especially the depiction of women as victims or objects of sexuality (Ali & Batool, 2015). Social media platforms such as Facebook depict these broader inclinations with cultural standards being reconstructed and opposed (Salam, 2021). Pakistani male writers, particularly, portray women negatively in digital media which shows deep-rooted prejudice present in digital space (Noor et al., 2024). According to Siddiqua et al., (2023), this portrayal is not only limited to misrepresentation, but it also encompasses substantial damages like female journalists being harassed online. The derogatory and insulting language used by political leaders to build narratives on X (previously Twitter) and Facebook also worsens the situation (Rafi & Shafiq, 2024). Abid et al., (2021) & Adnan et al., (2020) argue that there is a sturdy relation between religiosity and giving hate-based comments on Facebook under the influence of religious beliefs. (Irum, Shamsi, 2023), Due to these reasons, people try to hide their online activities and be traditional to the existing social, cultural, and religious gender-based narratives.

#### **Data Collection**

The data used in this study is based on 6854 comments on Instagram images uploaded by Adnan Zafar. These comments were extracted employing Instagram's API which allows users

of the application to get basic profile information, photos, and videos in their Instagram accounts. This free-of-cost API can be used to access any type of Instagram account but only provides read access to basic data about published media, the comments made, identify @ (mentioned) and hashtagged media, or get data about other Instagram users. A compilation of Zafar's Instagram posts was made initially, prioritizing those with high levels of engagement (response rate higher than 3%) to ensure that the sample included popular public interactions. These posts were then methodically scraped by conforming the API access, asking for the comments endpoint of each post, and browsing paginated responses to retrieve the comments. The complete linked information was kept for each comment, such as timestamps together with user IDs to perform end-to-end analysis. The data, eventually, obtained provided a mix of positive and negative feedback. There were several reasons as to why Adnan Zafar became the perfect case study for this article. As a Pakistani fashion model and social media influencer in Dubai, his situation is relatively novel to study the perception and resistance of non-normative behaviors within these digital realms. Adnan Zafar, with his uncanny resemblance to the Ken Doll's profile which he attained via a painstaking diet and presenting himself aesthetically using trendy costumes and make-up, breaks all traditional male stereotypes used in Pakistan (and the Middle East also). Also, considering Zafar's vast fan base on social platforms with over 2.2M followers across Instagram, 1.4M TikTok followers, and around 15K YouTube subscribers provide a strong foundation to use him as a case for conducting research. The duality of his influence promoting self-care and individuality on the one hand, while being accused of perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards on the other is apparent in how he draws both admiration and condemnation. Such dichotomy presents a great potential for

studying how people popular in public (and hence controversial), often alternative to their gender expectations, are targeted with hate speech online but also defended by their supporters. Though Zafar straddles the line between Dubai and Pakistan himself, his work offers unique perspectives about gender in different regions that can be used to create a better understanding of the cultural norms of different regions. This cross-cultural view provides helpful insights into the larger context of gender representation and online abuse. While this influence is not only limited to social media, it also sees him signed as a global ambassador for various brands and snapped up by agencies.

### **Process of Developing Themes and Data Analysis**

After collecting 6,854 comments from the Instagram posts of Adnan Zafar using the Instagram API, analysis was conducted to detect hate speech in the influencer's comments. Thematic analysis was conducted in line with the steps given by [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#) to ensure that the exploration of data is methodologically rigorous and nuanced. This thematic analysis began with the researchers immersing themselves in the comments, reading and rereading them as they marked down preliminary notes. The second step involved creating preliminary codes that were logically coded for important characteristics across the dataset. It meant recognizing certain expletives, repeated slurs, and forms of hate that were pointed towards Zafar. The third stage was to then group these codes into possible themes. Researchers collected all the data that were related to each theme to identify the major trends in meaning across them. At the fourth level, the themes were reviewed and refined. The coherence of the themes with both coded extracts and the entire dataset was maintained by checking back to avoid misinterpretation. Every theme was then improved in terms of exclusivity and exhaustiveness so that an inclusive insight into



the data could be done. Finally, in step five, the researchers carefully defined and named each theme to capture the essence of every point. Using [Braun & Clarke's \(2006\)](#) process of thematic analysis, this study revealed the surface-level explanations represented in the data as well as underlying meanings, including recurrent patterns that were present within participants' thoughts about Adnan Zafar. The method provides a more detailed examination and tools for the systematic organization of the data in an inductive manner. It enables the researcher to correlate findings from material, that one might consider different apparently. This helps in creating a precise explanation of descriptions against participants' statements. ([Khan, Shahzad, et. al. 2023](#)), The comments analyzed in the following sections of this study are not only confined to some online occurrences, but they act as indicative markers and patterns that recur time after time in popular societal attitudes present within Pakistani society. Notably, the features of language within these categories have a high degree of consistency, emphasizing how methodical propagation of hatred and degrading rhetoric has been done. In this context, the data is themed as follows:

- i. Gender-based Insults
- ii. Accusations of immorality and religious policing
- iii. Economic criticism and perceived inauthenticity
- iv. Personal attacks and dehumanization

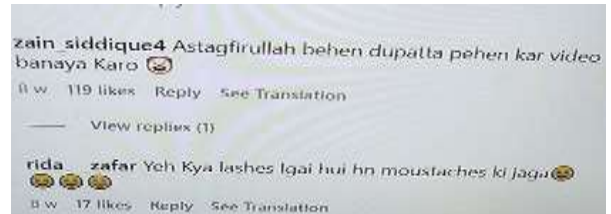
**i. Gender-based Insults**

A total of 2742 comments (40% of total retrieved data) placed under this theme expose persistent abuse which confronts and mocks Zafar's observance of established gender norms by expressing deeply entrenched male dominance and manliness. The data illustrates the connection between cultural and communal standards in defining conversations on gender expression by questioning Zafar's manliness and ridiculing his public persona. This is reflected in comments 1 and 2 as:

**Comment 1**



**Comment 2**



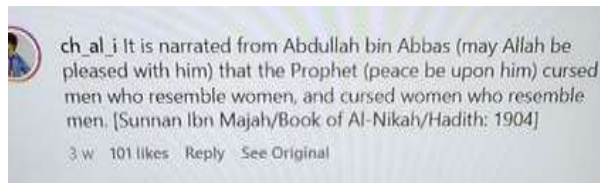
The words used in the displayed comments like “khusra”, which has historically been used to stigmatize certain people, are part of the broader dehumanizing language used in digital narratives to exert power and uphold societal order, as observed by [KhosraviNik \(2023\)](#). The ironic deployment of “behan” and the ridiculing of Zafar’s appearance in the comments not only degrade Zafar’s manliness but also reinforce harmful stereotypes about femininity and masculinity. These observations relate to the findings of [Spallaccia \(2017\) & Saresma et al., \(2020\)](#). Moreover, the comments suggest that Zafar is intentionally deviating, thereby, reemphasizing the hegemonic gender norms which frame deviance as a matter of choice and blame. This is consistent with [KhosraviNik’s \(2017a\)](#) observations which highlight that such narratives are vital to upholding societal order as they depict being different and improper both on moral and social grounds.

**ii. Accusations of immorality and religious policing**

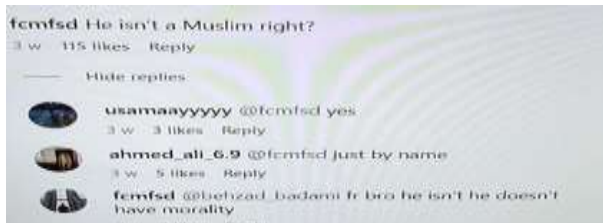
The analysis of the 2056 comments (29.9% of the retrieved data) shows a common theme that they use religious principles and straitlaced language both to condemn and discredit Zafar for his individuality and actions. This illustrates the way that cultural and religious norms are used as a justification to coerce assimilation on one hand, while attempting to socialize or stigmatize opposing

opinions into whitewashed versions of status quo expectations.

### Comment 3



### Comment 4



The comments mentioned in the pictures above use religious guidelines as part of an argument not just to criticize Zafar's gender characteristics but also to attack his morals and religiosity. Invoking the Prophet (P.B.U.H) hadith to curse those who deviate from more standardized gender roles, the commentator uses religion as weaponry to critique and distance themselves further away from Zafar. The use of religious texts in a similar manner has also been found by researchers such as [Awan \(2016\) & Evolvi \(2017\)](#), who are of the view that social media platforms utilize religious scripts for prejudice motives. The further questions about whether Zafar practices Islam or not, and again the dismissive responses spin a narrative of attacking his faith simply for how he looks. The research published by [Ramponi \(2022\) & Mathew et al., \(2018\)](#), highlighted this as a broader scheme, where the rhetoric of religion is weaponized to further distance marginalized groups. Since these comments are engineered based on religion and stem from a question as basic as, how 'Muslim' or not is Zafar? It is in line with the argument of [Siegel & Badaan \(2020\)](#) that religious hate speech predominantly appeals to moral-ethical evaluations when it seeks justification for exclusivist practices. To sum up, the abusive comments on Adnan Zafar along with wearing religion at his sleeves and lack of

faith become a perfect fit to unveil meshed ego-religion-hate speech nexus.

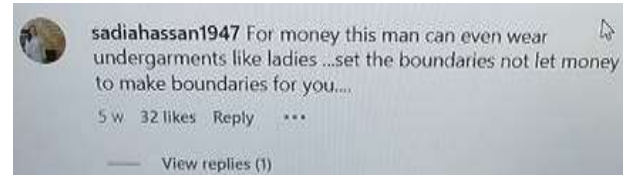
### iii. Economic criticism and perceived inauthenticity

The analysis of 685 comments (9.9% of the retrieved data) tends to assume that Zafar is only motivated by financial incentives and has no real representation of himself in the public eye. The data illustrates the economic motives in the appraisal of social media influencers. Such comments have often accused Zafar of cultivating an image-presentation to keep the cash flowing in.

### Comment 5



### Comment 6



The comments attached above suggest that his behavior is only based on economic upheaval, rather than what he believes in doing and saying. This is consistent with the results of [Hudders et al., \(2021\)](#), according to which defensiveness against negative comments by influencers can even lead them to be perceived as less trustworthy especially when their motives are suspected. In labeling Zafar's behavior response to financial incentives, the comments attempt to discredit authenticity in gender nonconformity and further reinforce stereotypes about gender. Continuing the same line, in comment 5 by @ayasha-husainn, Zafar's gender expression is criticized as an inauthentic representation of monetary growth. Perceived authenticity has, after all, been a key point of attraction for audiences with influencers and arguably, can damage genuineness ([Lee & Johnson, 2021](#)).

This comment not only undermines the authenticity of Adnan Zafar but also propagates traditional gender roles, stating that men do not portray themselves to act in such ways. The first part of comment 5 by @sherry-arrain sarcastically critiques Zafar in terms of gender bias, effectively suggesting that his form of manliness is nothing more than a money-making hoax. This situation is consistent with Pöyry et al., (2019), Martikainen & Pitäknen's (2019) study regarding perceived authenticity which demonstrated that the more genuineness of the influencer builds a trust in their audience under whose influence their purchasing trends alter. This matches up well with Huddlers et al., (2021) claim that such kind of responses can damage trust towards an influencer, especially when they are not able to address authenticity directly. Using self-concept to embody an identity might suggest that social media influencers are selectively deploying authenticity as a brand-related strategy (Hurley, 2019; Maeres, 2020). Zafar's participation in this exchange shows the pressure between maintaining his credibility and addressing criticism over money. In "The Holy Grail", Van Driel & Dumitica (2020) describe it as a calculated way of setting up standards by influencers through which they can balance personal expressions with commercial interests so that they can become more sellable. Zafar's financial success is held against him too. This reframes his money-making as opportunistic and exploitative, someone who would get the money by doing anything. Such shaming betrays a wider social anxiety at the plain sight of someone becoming rich in ways that dissociate themselves from traditional pathways.

#### iv. *Personal attacks and dehumanization*

A sum of 1371 comments (20% of the retrieved data) show a pattern of personal attacks and dehumanizing comments aimed at Adnan Zafar on Instagram using expletives and derogatory words, depriving him of his dignity

and practically making him an object of online hate-speech. As per comments 7 and 8:

#### Comment 7



#### Comment 8



The comments demonstrate using vulgar and dehumanizing speech, is meant to attack Zafar's gender identity and undermine his dignity. For example, the use of the word "ghaste," which means prostitute and has a connotation of moral condemnation and social stigma is consistent with the assertion of Neshkovska (2017) that hate speech promotes dehumanization by mentioning the targeted ones through insulting typecasts. "Chup oye bhen k lo..." is an example of a sentence that focuses on gender-related vulgarisms. Such words according to Wahlström et al. (2020), are part of the role of language as a punishment factor to maintain the harmful normalized notions. The rude language is disgusting not only to Zafar but also to a wide range of sidelined communities. The last comment, "Haa Chakaa Jaya," is another sentence used to feminize and abuse Zafar by comparing him to a eunuch, thus questioning his gender-based recognition. This is consistent with the study conducted by Kennedy et. al., (2023) which says that narratives built around modesty and commitment are brought into question to rationalize elimination and marginalization. Peters (2020) suggests that there should be a strong international regulatory framework to protect human dignity. These vulgar words cause harm not only to Zafar but to people of marginalized communities as well.

#### Discussion

The comments targeting Adnan Zafar on his Instagram signify the point of how social media, gender, and power dynamics intersect. Drawing upon the tenets of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), one can understand these as instances where language and semiotic resources serve to uphold existing gender orders in online spaces. The mocking and disparaging remarks towards Zafar's manliness vary from normative constructions of gender by men in patriarchal societies. Baker (2001) apprehends the possibility of online confrontation and amplification of societal prejudice. The string of religious principles used to criticize Zafar's actions through moralistic language can be related to the research work that has shown traditional gender roles and looks at women as objects within Pakistani media (Ali, 2015; Rasul, 2013). The comments illustrate how SNSs can be employed to sustain and even increase inequalities that pre-exist online (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Not only are the comments directed towards Zafar openly homophobic and filled with hateful language, but they also play a broader role in promoting a culture of hate speech and discrimination. Kopytowska (2017) is of the same view that social media might be a channel encouraging hate speech and intolerance, supported by its global penetration worldwide and participatory and interactive dimensions. The reality was, that Zafar got dehumanized through vulgar language and personal attacks making him a victim of online anger which can be observed in the exploitative set-up of power imbalances in Pakistani society (Noor, 2024). These forms of social media platforms present the possibility for such alternative expressions and transformational placement within these power hierarchies, as described earlier via Instagram posts etc.; yet still very much connected to physical encounters - this would be an example where Zafar can upload his content (utilizing existing and new digital technologies, AI specifically) but then online comments become reminders that age-old

preconceptions extend themselves into cyberspace too. According to Mishra & Basu (2014), the conservative nature of Pakistani society is reflected online, which enforces traditional gender identities and relationships. This study is one of the few explorations that help in understanding how social media serves to generate and reinforce power configurations embedded within issues such as gender, emphasizing that more research in related areas would be useful.

### Conclusion

This research serves to further illuminate the role of gendered forms of harassment in online spaces and calls for a more nuanced interrogation into what social and cultural conditions add to hate speech and persecution. This study serves as a reminder of the work that still needs to be done in Pakistan to achieve parity and liberate communities of prejudiced notions about gender. The findings provide a body of evidence that shows although social media has the potential to break down barriers - by encouraging connection and expression - it can also act to strengthen dangerous and damaging stereotypes. This requires a comprehensive approach including enhancing public understanding of this phenomenon and enforcing regulations to limit the flow and spread of online hate speech. This study, on a larger scale, adds to a body of literature that utilizes online communication to examine identity recognition. The results underscore the importance of moving beyond a mere focus on affordances to consider how technologies interact with cultural and social norms in particular ways, affecting online behavior. Nevertheless, the study has its drawbacks. By providing a detailed analysis through an in-depth case study, the narrow focus could be expanded to a broader generalizability in the larger Pakistani social media space. Second, the bulk of the analysis is based on text and could miss forms of online harassment that are not primarily textual like visual or audio-based attacks. Future research can utilize these



conclusions to study more social media platforms and use different methods (e.g., interviews or surveys) for a wider view. There would be a significant value in evaluating the impact of interventions around online hate speech or gender equality promotion in digital spaces. However, it could be said that to make a comprehensive image of the issue both platform policies and algorithms that influence online discourse should also be explored.

### Research Gap

The research studies on influencer culture mostly utilize quantitative analysis. This study, however, focuses on using a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences and perceptions of Instagram users in Pakistan. Also, most of the studies done on social media influencers are carried out in a Western context, and therefore, are not directly applicable in the Pakistani context. Thus, this study provides a local context about influencer culture in Pakistan in terms of gender biases, social classes, and the dynamics of existing power structures and typecasts and their impact on relationships, cultural values, and norms in Pakistani society.

### Recommendations

1. It can be studied how influencer culture connects with existing patterns of gender, class, religion, and other social categories in Pakistan, and what impact this connection generates in terms of experiences of toxicity.
2. The responsible role of Instagram or other such platforms in adding or neutralizing toxicity about social media influencers can also be studied and recommendations for accountability of these platforms can also be given.
3. In-depth interviews and other such methods can also be done to find out and comprehend the stimuli, demands, and experiences of social media influencers in terms of contribution to toxicity.
4. Focus group interviews or surveys for collecting data from Pakistani Instagram users can be done to comprehend what they think

about social media influencer culture, perceptions of toxicity, and their expectations from influencers.

5. Comparative studies with other platforms popular in Pakistan like TikTok or YouTube, can also be conducted to find out the commonness and nature of influencer culture and toxicity.

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