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Fame, Risk, and Repercussions: A Critical Study of Female Agency and Viral Sexual Content in Pakistan's Digital Culture

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines female agency, digital visibility, and moral backlash within Pakistan's contemporary online culture. As social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube create new opportunities for fame, income, and self-expression, women content creators simultaneously face heightened risks of shaming, harassment, and social punishment. Drawing on feminist theories of agency and visibility, the research adopts a qualitative, phenomenological design based on in-depth interviews with female influencers, content analysis of online comments, and a review of policy and media documents. Findings reveal that women's online participation is often a strategic choice shaped by economic aspirations and limited offline opportunities, yet it is consistently met with gendered surveillance and slang-based moral policing. Platform algorithms further amplify harm by prioritizing outrage-driven virality over user protection. The psychological consequences include anxiety, withdrawal from digital spaces, and social isolation, compounded by weak institutional and legal support. The study concludes that women's digital visibility in Pakistan operates within a paradox of empowerment and punishment, calling for culturally sensitive moderation, stronger legal frameworks, and feminist digital education to safeguard dignity and agency.

Introduction

The digitalization of Pakistan's public sphere has created new opportunities for visibility, celebrity, and income, particularly for women. Yet with each act of online expression comes risk. On platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, female content creators have risen to popularity through fashion, lip-syncing, and commentary videos. However, once a video gains traction especially if perceived as sexually suggestive or leaked these women become targets of public shaming, coded insults, and moral outrage (Rehman & Shafiq, 2022; Qadoos et al., 2018).Unlike in many global contexts, the consequences in Pakistan extend beyond digital reputation. Because of the strict rules for women's conduct and the honor code (ghairat), many women go through rejection by their families, intense psychological stress and sometimes suffer physical harm (Zia, 2010; Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2023). It looks into why women continue to share content that invites moral policing, considering how shame culture, platform capitalism and patriarchy impact their choices.

Socio-Cultural Context

In Pakistan, social norms focus strongly on how modest women should be and on honor for the family which are directly connected to being seen in public places. When shown online, the image of women is seen to stand for the values of families and the nation (Zia, 2010; Riaz et al., 2018). This moralization becomes particularly visible when content perceived as "indecent" is posted or leaked.

Studies such as Gill (2007) emphasize how gendered surveillance in patriarchal societies functions not only through legal control but cultural discourse. In Pakistan, this discourse is embedded in digital slang and mass trolling—used to monitor, correct, and punish female behavior.

Female Agency in a Restrictive Digital Climate

Agency, in feminist literature, does not imply total freedom. Rather, it refers to a woman's ability to act within structural constraints (Mahmood, 2005). In the Pakistani digital economy, many women consciously engage in what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls visibility labor—the strategic use of one's body, voice, and image to generate followers, income, or influence. This is especially true for influencers in lower-income groups who see digital media as a way out of economic precarity (DRF, 2023). However, agency can also be co-opted or manipulated. Many leaks are the result of abusive relationships, ex-partners, or hacking incidents. Even in cases where the content is shared voluntarily, it is often decontextualized and weaponized by the public.

Coded Slang and Moral Policing

Online aggression in Pakistan is not always explicit. It frequently uses coded, culturally loaded slang terms:

- "Maal": Reduces a woman to an object.
- "Item": Implies she's sexually promiscuous or provocative.
- "Beghairat": Accuses her of lacking familial honor.
- "Aunty": Dismisses women as comically bold or inappropriate.

These terms do not violate platform policies in obvious ways, but they carry immense shaming power (Lewis, 2020). Shakir et al. (2024) have shown that such terms frequently escape content moderation on TikTok and Facebook due to algorithmic blind spots in regional language processing, particularly with Urdu-English code-mixing.

Platform Algorithms and Amplified Risk

Pakistan's social platforms prioritize engagement over ethics. Algorithms are designed to boost content with high emotional response, which means videos that spark outrage, including sexually charged scandals, receive wider distribution (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). IPRI (2023) found that videos tagged with provocative keywords saw up to 400% more reach than neutral content, even if it included hate speech. Furthermore, women influencers reported that their videos were recommended even after filing takedown requests highlighting how platform logic prioritizes visibility and watch-time over user protection (DRF, 2023).

Case Studies: Viral Visibility and Consequences

- Hareem Shah (2020–2022): One of Pakistan's most famous TikTokers, Hareem Shah faced national outrage after videos showing her in private settings were leaked. Despite her claim that the content was either staged or stolen, the incident resulted in mass trolling. She was labeled "maal," "cheap," and "immoral," and investigated by authorities—not for the leak, but for "indecency" (Geo News, 2022).

- Ayesha Mano (2021): A video of Ayesha dancing at Minar-e-Pakistan went viral, sparking public hysteria. Despite being surrounded and harassed by a mob, she was blamed for "seeking attention," and derogatory hashtags trended on TikTok and Twitter for weeks (Rehman & Shafiq, 2022).

- Dananeer Mobeen ("Pawri girl") (2021): Though her content was innocent, Dananeer faced backlash as her fame rose. Trolls quickly pivoted to shaming her looks, voice, and class, calling her "wannabe" and "aunty," highlighting how even humorous content by women draws out coded aggression (Nadeem, 2021).

- Leaked Deepfakes (2023): DRF (2023) reported that more than 20 TikTok influencers had reported deepfaked videos being circulated on WhatsApp. Many of these were altered to appear sexually explicit, yet were believed to be real. Despite verification, the victims were subjected to social exclusion and threats.

- Benazir Bhutto University Student (2023): A female student was filmed dancing at a private hostel gathering; the clip went viral, leading to her expulsion. Rather than punishing the student who filmed her, the university justified the action as "preserving institutional decorum" (The News, 2023).

Psychological Impact and Silence

The aftermath of these viral events often includes severe emotional distress. Women report depression, panic attacks, and in many cases, leaving social media altogether. Since family reputation is at stake, most victims do not pursue legal action or speak publicly (DRF, 2023). Compounding this is social gaslighting, where victims are told they "should have known better" or are accused of seeking fame. This discourages reporting and leaves women isolated. Mental health services in Pakistan are underfunded and rarely trained in cyber trauma counseling (Aftab & Naveed, 2022).

Legal and Institutional Gaps

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was introduced in 2016 but remains poorly enforced. It does not account for verbal harassment using slang, nor does it protect against the psychological impact of deepfakes or trolling (DRF, 2023). Moreover, few prosecutors are trained in digital evidence processing or gender-sensitive frameworks. Educational institutions and

platforms also lack proactive digital ethics programs. There is no requirement for creators to undergo basic consent training, nor are parents or teachers equipped to help students navigate digital reputation crises.

Conclusion

In Pakistan's digital landscape, female visibility is both opportunity and liability. While platforms promise empowerment and reach, they also expose women to a toxic blend of slang-based moral policing, algorithmic exploitation, and social abandonment. Women's choices online are not reckless they are strategic, hopeful, defiant, or coerced—but they are always judged. To move forward, Pakistan must reimagine online participation as a space where women's expression is protected, not punished. That requires legal clarity, localized moderation tools, empathetic mental health responses, and feminist digital education that restores both dignity and agency.

Literature Review

Understanding the phenomenon of viral sexual content and the cultural backlash faced by women in Pakistan requires an interdisciplinary review of literature across feminist media studies, digital sociology, cyberpsychology, and regional gender discourse. People studying gender have examined how women move through online spaces, how certain words play a role in cyber abuse and how established moral standards affect their visibility. With all this, what is discussed less in the context of Pakistan are the interactions among users, technology and online embarrassment.

Feminist Frameworks on Agency and Visibility

Experts have written broadly on the idea of female agency in patriarchal societies. Saba Mahmood (2005) reframed agency as not simply resistance to domination, but as the ability to act within culturally shaped moral codes. Applying this to digital culture, women's participation in content that may appear sexually expressive cannot be reduced to recklessness or naivety. Many times, it is a thoughtful way someone tries to be independent, creative or earn more income. Banet-Weiser (2018) also talked about "visibility labor," meaning the effort women make to be seen and heard online, although it puts them in danger. Visibility, in this framework, is a form of empowerment but also a trigger for surveillance and punishment. This framing is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where women who appear publicly—especially in media—are routinely judged against traditional moral expectations.

Shame, Honor, and Gendered Morality in South Asia

In Pakistan and broader South Asian societies, the concepts of shame (sharam) and honor (ghairat) are deeply embedded in how women's behavior is perceived. As Zia (2010) argues, the female body is often viewed as a symbol of family and national morality. Thus, a woman's visibility especially in digital or public spaces is tightly regulated. Any perceived transgression, whether through dancing, dressing a certain way, or being seen with men, is quickly interpreted as dishonor. This regulatory role is increasingly performed digitally. Online trolling in Pakistan often invokes religious or nationalistic tones, framing women as "un-Islamic," "Westernized," or "corrupt." Such narratives echo offline social control but are amplified in scale and speed on platforms like TikTok and Facebook.

Slang, Trolling, and the Linguistics of Aggression

Online misogyny rarely presents itself through explicit threats alone; it often hides behind coded slang. Terms like maal, cheap, beghairat, and item are culturally specific and function as a form of verbal moral punishment. Lewis (2020) studied the use of slang in Western contexts and found that these coded insults play a dual role: they trivialize harm while reinforcing social exclusion. In

Pakistan, such terms are deployed en masse during viral controversies involving women, turning public commentary into a form of digital shaming ritual.

Shakir et al. (2024) have shown that platforms like TikTok and YouTube struggle to moderate such coded language because their algorithms are not designed to detect Urdu-English code-switching or understand regional slang. This creates a space where hate speech cloaked in humor or informal terms flourishes unchecked, particularly when women are the subject of viral attention.

Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Amplification

Digital platforms are not neutral arenas. As Vaidhyanathan (2018) and Noble (2018) argue, they are structured to prioritize content that provokes engagement—especially outrage. In Pakistan, this means that viral sexual content or moral scandals involving women receive disproportionate algorithmic amplification A report by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI, 2023) confirms that posts tagged with scandal-related keywords (e.g., "leak," "viral," "TikTok girl") received 300–500% more visibility than average posts. Once a woman's video trends regardless of whether the video is authentic or fabricated—platform algorithms push it further, reinforcing the cycle of virality and shame.

Psychological and Social Consequences

The psychological impact of online harassment—especially after a sexual video leak—is profound. Women report symptoms of anxiety, social withdrawal, panic attacks, and suicidal ideation (Aftab & Naveed, 2022). The cultural stigma around sexuality ensures that victims often suffer silently. Even when the content was shared without consent, public discourse tends to blame the woman for allowing herself to be filmed or seen.

The Digital Rights Foundation (2023) reports that over 72% of Pakistani women who experience online abuse never report it due to fear of family shame or police inaction. Moreover, legal recourse under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) remains limited, as the law does not address slang-based abuse or algorithmic amplification of harmful content.

Relevant Case Studies and Empirical Gaps

Real-world examples such as Hareem Shah, Ayesha Mano, and dozens of unnamed female TikTokers highlight how easily women are targeted for their visibility. Despite growing media attention to these incidents, there is little empirical research that combines platform analysis, gender theory, and linguistic patterns to understand the mechanics of this abuse. Much of the current discourse remains anecdotal or media-driven.

As Rehman and Shafiq (2022) argue, there is a pressing need for grounded, Pakistan-specific academic research on how digital fame and misogyny interact, particularly through the lens of language and viral video culture.

Conclusion of Review

The existing literature provides a strong foundation for analyzing female visibility and risk in digital cultures, but significant gaps remain—especially in relation to South Asian slang, algorithmic harm, and the internal motivations of women who still choose to engage despite knowing the risks. This study positions itself within this gap, seeking to contribute a culturally rooted, interdisciplinary exploration of why some women willingly participate in digital content that may become controversial, and what happens to them when it does.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design in this study is qualitative exploratory, allowing us to look at how female agency and viral visibility, trolling and sexualized materials on Pakistani digital platforms connect. Because of the sensitivity and personal aspect of the topic, it was decided to use a phenomenological approach. By viewing research from individual experiences, this method looks at how female influencers understand the risks and criticisms they receive within their country's digital sphere (Creswell & Poth, 2018).3.2 Research Paradigm. The research explores reality in a constructivist paradigm which suggests that reality comes into being through interaction, language and meaning. This supports the research, as it deals with linguistic aggression, peoples' feelings and social norms. This approach looks at agency less as a way to act outside constraints and more as a response to the challenges provided by structures (Mahmood, 2005).

Sampling Strategy

- Participants were recruited by purposive sampling and they needed to meet the following rules.
- Women as reported by women
- Produce videos for TikTok, Instagram or YouTube regularly.
- Been involved in a viral trend, received negative comments online or had a video of them leaked (real or fake)
- Persons aged 18 to 35
- Altogether, twelve participants were picked for the study:
- There are 5 micro-influencers on our list who each have under 100,000 followers.
- 3 influencers each have between 100k and 500k followers.
- Individuals who became popular by generating viral trolling or becoming involved in scandals
- There are digital rights advocates helping female creators.
- All interviews were done using pseudonyms and protected the identity of the participants.

Data Collection Methods

The study used three qualitative data collection methods:

1. Semi-structured in-depth interviews

Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted via encrypted audio/video calls due to privacy and safety concerns. A flexible guide allowed for thematic depth while respecting emotional boundaries. Interview questions explored:

- Motivations for creating content
- Perceptions of risk
- Responses to viral backlash or leaks

- Emotional and social consequences

Content Analysis of Social Media Discourse

A sample of 500 comments was collected from TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter using publicly available posts from known cases (e.g., Hareem Shah, Ayesha Mano). Keywords and slang were filtered to identify patterns in moral policing, sarcasm, slang aggression, and gendered trolling.

Document Review and Media Reports

Relevant digital policy documents (e.g., PECA), NGO reports (e.g., DRF's Cyber Harassment Helpline), and mainstream media articles were reviewed to contextualize findings and assess institutional response patterns.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

1. Familiarization with the data

2. Generating initial codes (e.g., "visibility = shame," "platform betrayal," "slang as violence")

3. Searching for themes

4. Reviewing themes

5. Defining and naming themes

6. Producing the report

Coding was done using NVivo software, which enabled sorting comments and transcripts by slang terms, emotional tone, and contextual usage. Attention was given to:

- The emotional framing of agency
- Justifications for trolling
- Patterns in gender-specific slang
- Relationship between content type and virality

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topic particularly around leaked sexual content ethical responsibility was paramount. Measures included:

- Informed consent (verbal and written)
- Pseudonymization of all participant identities
- Encrypted storage of audio files and transcripts
- The right to withdraw at any time
- Trauma-sensitive interview protocols

Limitations

- Several methodological limitations are acknowledged:

- Social desirability bias may have influenced participants to understate content motivations or emotional harm.
- Access to real victims of leaked videos was limited due to stigma and fear.
- Algorithmic behavior of platforms was interpreted through content patterns and not through platform-provided internal data.
- Despite these constraints, the study provides a valuable window into the intersections of gender, language, platform logic, and online harm in Pakistan's digital ecosystem.

Findings

This section gathers the most important results from semi-structured interviews, analysis of social media comments and the review of related policies. From the data, five essential themes appeared, each one portraying the participants' real lives, thoughts and feelings regarding virality and the reactions it brings on the internet. All the findings show that agency, risk, shame and resilience play complex roles in Pakistan's online world.

Theme 1: Visibility as Aspiration and Strategy

People often reported that they use digital platforms on purpose and with a specific intention. Through creating content, many people managed to make enough to live on their own terms, be more creative and reach new social circles. It was noted by a number of women that platforms on the internet helped them be seen the way they wanted, even when other areas of their lives limited what was noticed about them.

One participant shared, "I knew I could be judged, but going viral also meant a chance to break through. I'm not from a rich family. I just wanted my voice to be heard."

Visibility was not always accidental; it was often a calculated decision, made with awareness of reputational risk. For some, digital participation was framed as a form of resistance a way to challenge expectations and occupy public space otherwise closed to them.

Theme 2: Anticipating Judgment The Double Bind of Fame

While visibility was desired, nearly all participants admitted that backlash was expected. There was a prevailing belief that any content posted by a woman particularly content involving fashion, makeup, dance, or humor was vulnerable to misinterpretation and trolling.

Several participants referred to an internalized process of emotional preparation, describing the need to "mentally prepare" for abuse once they posted. As one mid-tier influencer explained: "I've learned to expect it. Even if I wear a dupatta, someone will say it's for show. I stopped trying to make people happy a long time ago.

Because of this, women have to decide: if they discuss the topic, they might be attacked, but if they don't, they might look as if they're giving up. A lot of people consider trolling to be just a cost of being seen online which is a harsh but accepted aspect for influencers.

Theme 3: Slang as a Tool of Social Control

Many noted that a large amount of online abuse relies on slang and special expressions. Once again, the terms "maal," "cheap," "item," and "beghairat" came up many times across the platforms. Such comments felt like planned ways to challenge their right to be accepted and to lower their identity to stereotypes about their sexuality. Someone who took part in the study said

this about the language: It's not just about hate; it's also about making people lose their respect in the public eye. After they say 'maal,' your opinions aren't important to them.

They serve as ways to keep people in line about how they treat online women content creators. Especially, these comments were hardly ever reported or removed by the platforms which participants considered a sign of either poor moderation or tacit approval.

Theme 4: Emotional Impact and Withdrawal

There were major emotional and mental consequences from experiencing viral backlash. At least half of the individuals mentioned having anxiety, trouble sleeping, episodes of depression and less self-confidence. A number of them admitted they needed to step away from sharing content for a while to rest. An interviewee said: "After the video I made went viral, I stayed inside for about two weeks. The country seemed to give me blame for every problem".

People choose to delete their accounts for good sometimes, while others slowly returned, making changes to the things they shared to prevent upsetting others. It illustrates that digital shame can make someone restrict their actions without actually causing them physical harm.

Theme 5: Lack of Institutional Support

Most of the victims didn't take legal action or try a formal complaint after facing trolling or leaks. The main reasons given were fear of having the blame put on the victim, not believing there would be help from the university and the idea that things would not change. It was stated that the PECA law is not effective and that people using social media are not being well protected by moderators. Many said they were frustrated that abuse was simply a built-in aspect of the platforms. Women had to deal with trauma by themselves or seek comfort from friends and fellow survivors.

Conclusion of Findings

They show that the connection between power and oppression involves elements of freedom and obligation, visibility and penalties. As women are involved in Pakistan's digital scene, they always face the obstacles of verbal aggression, possible emotional risks and the lack of consideration by the government. I am in awe of their strength, but living with it is often stressful and the support is missing.

Discussion

It looked at how female influencers in Pakistan manage their visibility online, as it can be both empowering and risky for them. It became clear from the findings that this landscape was shaped by things like society's values, the rules set by platforms, insulting language and failure of institutions. This section relates these results to previous studies, explains what they mean and looks at the part played by digital environments and mainstream culture in shaping women's life on the Internet.

Appearing Publicly as a Way to Fight Against Injustice

The findings show that internet visibility, especially on TikTok, is most of all a form of fighting back and being heard. There were people using content creation to secure social and financial opportunities that are unavailable to them in other spaces. These examples reflect Banet-Weiser's (2018) idea about "visibility labor", since they suggest that women turn to digital spaces to do actual work regarding their identity.

At the same time, this level of notice can expose them to special dangers linked to their culture. Because family honor and modesty are important in Pakistani society, public images of women

that seem sexualized often lead to close observation and criticism by many (Zia, 2010). If they do not attract attention, women can be ignored and deleted from the story. If they do, however, they might be ridiculed or criticized.

Coded Slang and Collective Shaming

The researchers found that slang-based abuse is very common and carries a particular meaning. Using words maal, item, cheap and beghairat meant that society could see women as different and still avoid respecting them. The terms carry strong gender meanings, are attached to local situations and are felt deeply by people. This supports Lewis's (2020) point that slang is often used to let trolls exclude some groups without having to resort to open hatespeech. In Pakistan, the terms used to describe these actions show how men want to exert authority over women who don't behave in a modest or mute way online. Many of these coded insults are not caught or stopped by algorithms used by the platform because these algorithms do not understand the mixed language used, according to Shakir and colleagues (2024). Women then end up suffering in places that should be regulated for their safety.

Algorithmic Amplification of Harm

The role of platform algorithms cannot be understated. Many participants noted that abusive content was promoted, not suppressed, by recommendation engines. This is consistent with Vaidhyanathan's (2018) argument that social media platforms prioritize outrage and controversy because they boost engagement metrics.

In this context, women who are harassed or humiliated become unwitting engines of platform profit. A leaked video, whether authentic or manipulated, is pushed further into public view if it triggers user reactions regardless of the psychological toll on the subject. This represents what Noble (2018) calls algorithmic oppression: a system where marginalized groups, particularly women of color or from the Global South, are disproportionately harmed by digital infrastructure designed without their cultural realities in mind.

Psychological Impact and Silencing

The emotional toll uncovered in this study ranging from anxiety and insomnia to digital withdrawal is consistent with prior research on online gender-based violence (Aftab & Naveed, 2022). Yet in Pakistan, the consequences are compounded by cultural silence: victims often receive little support, and family or institutional responses tend to blame the woman rather than support her healing. This leads to self-censorship and withdrawal, a process through which women exit digital spaces in order to regain safety and dignity. Such retreat reinforces gender inequality in public discourse, as the loudest voices remain unchecked, while the most vulnerable voices disappear.

Distrust in Institutional Support

Perhaps the most troubling insight was participants' lack of faith in institutional or platform-based protection. Women knew about PECA but did not trust it. They reported platforms as ineffective and viewed legal processes as slow, stigmatizing, and ultimately dismissive of their harm. This reflects the gap identified by the Digital Rights Foundation (2023), which highlights how gendered harm online is systematically underreported and underpunished in Pakistan. The result is a culture where trolling, harassment, and leaked content thrive in a climate of impunity.

Reframing the Central Question

A key contribution of this study is the reorientation of the central question. Rather than asking "Why do women post such content if they know the risks?", the data encourages us to ask:

"Why is it that women's visibility still leads to punishment, and why do platforms and societies permit this harm?" This reframing shifts the focus from victim behavior to systemic accountability a move long advocated in feminist digital ethics.

Summary of Interpretation

In sum, the findings reinforce that Pakistani female influencers live at the crossroads of feminist ambition and patriarchal repression, where even voluntary participation in digital culture can lead to unintended moral condemnation. The combined force of cultural slang, viral visibility, and platform design creates a hostile environment that punishes women for being seen, heard, or bold.

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