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The Role of Humor in Understanding the Trolling Behavior of Social Media Users in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explores the use of humor in Pakistan as an emerging strategy of creative resistance to patriarchal oppression and rising authorities in the region and to develop a nuanced understanding of its reception by citizens on the social media handles. By examining instances from the protests of Aurat March through qualitative content analysis techniques and by drawing on literature on humor and protest as well as on the social media engagement, the paper attempts to describe the ways in which humor is implicated in formation and subversion of political subjectivities among urban women in the country. In this context, humor is not to be understood as a non-consequential ornamental element of protest spectatorship; rather, it provides a tool of localization of feminist movement through *de-escalation* and *affect redirection* in a public space hostile to women's voices and public protests in general. However, the findings suggest caution in romanticizing humor as it can also serve to hijack the movement by deflecting attention away from the focal cause of economic, social and sexual justice for women and minorities in the country as well as lead to a negative cultural framing of the protesters and their movement.

Keywords: political humor, subversion, aurat (women) march, social media engagement, feminist movement.

1. Introduction

Humor is not the first emotion that emerges when humans are met with adversity as it is considered to be the emotion of leisure, yet the relationship between humor and political resistance is a well-established one (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). From the student's movement in Germany (Teune, 2007) to the Arab spring (Takovski, 2019) political movements have employed humor as a means of mobilization and communication. Humor in political movements serves to diffuse fear and disarm the opposition from any violent reaction; it also serves to attract great media attention for any political campaign. The extent to which humor serves these functions depends upon the contextual understanding of humor in the society (Hart, 2016). Including in the context, the place of the joker in the power dynamics of the society also affects the receptiveness of humor. This has been shown by the use of humor by the suffragettes and how they were portrayed in the media (Cowman, 2007).

During the 2016 US Presidential Elections humor was used by both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in their debates as a means to mock the opposition. David, Love and Killen studied this use of humor on social media by the supporters of both political parties and concluded that humor is a powerful tool for meaningful participation and not just a useless demeaning tactic (Davis et al., 2018). The same trend has been observed in the commemorations of the International

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Women's Day in Pakistan in the past few years. The manifesto of the Aurat March in Pakistan was always full of grave concerns and demands but over the past years the expression of the protestors relied heavily on humor for which the movement got into highlight time and again and mostly negatively (Baig et al., 2020). May be its more about the 'amount' of humor that the activists lost their track and, perhaps mistakenly, the ridicule element exceeded the rest of the humor and started to lose its fun as well as thought provoking irony. Consequently, for many, ended up depicting a picture of its (the movement's) standing against the Islamic Principles (Khan et al., 2020), dividing the nation, every spring, into different groups based upon the various stances people support, and most recently, even led to the unpleasant extremists' encounters as well. Building upon these apparently dichotomous verses, this research aims to explore the perceptions of Pakistani social media users about the Aurat March. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze:

- The incorporation of humor as a tool to express resistance by the protestors.
- The citizens' reactionary behavior to the 'humor' via their engagement on *Facebook*.
- The behavior of people towards both, the philosophy of women rights and Aurat March in particular.

Social Media Engagement. Previous studies (Baccarella et al., 2018; Golf-Papez, Veer, 2017; Mondal et al., 2019) have discussed various misbehaviours spread online including cyberbullying (Bishop, 2014; Gonzales, 2014), trolling (Ansong et al., 2013; Cruz et al., 2018; Lumsden, Morgan, 2017; Sanfilippo et al., 2017), hate speech, and others. Considering such misbehaviours, M. Golf-Papez and E. Veer (Golf-Papez, Veer, 2017) discussed this 'dark side' of the social media by explaining, in the light of the social media honeycomb framework, seven different types of social media brands' functionalities and sprouting of different cyber behaviours which at any point in time turn dark, including cyber misbehaviours (Bishop, 2014; Sanfilippo et al., 2017) like trolling (Boddy, Dominelli, 2017; Golf-Papez, Veer, 2017; Gonzales, 2014; Pudaruth et al., 2018), and hate speech (Bishop, 2014; Mondal et al., 2019; Rasanen et al., 2016). Furthermore, J. Bishop (Bishop, 2014) and M.R. Sanfilippo, S. Yang, and P. Fichman (Sanfilippo et al., 2017) both shed lights over ill-practices of mass media where it through manipulation spreads its agenda into the masses fooling them to believe what may or may not be based on truth.

The most common targets of hate which, unsurprisingly, were the vulnerable and marginalized groups of the society including physically disables and queers, and groups based on class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Mondal et al., 2019). Other than this, individuals were targeted for displaying some specific, not necessarily obnoxious, behaviors. Considering cyberbullying, many scholars have (Baccarella et al., 2018; Golf-Papez, Veer, 2017; Mondal et al., 2019; Rasanen et al., 2016;) concluded implicitly, and reached a common point of concept of a cyberspace which mere existence provide opportunity for motivated trolls and perpetrators of hate speech via granting them a favour or more like a gift of anonymity.

R.H. Gonzales (Gonzales, 2014) pointed that the social media has become a channel for cyberbullying due to its features: an alternative (virtual) reality, anonymity, instant, unjustified use of power, cheap, availability of response generation or feedback, and gathering options like groups formation. It concluded that these channeling features of social media foster cyberbullies to grow in terms of their influence. Linking connections between a real-time and a virtual society, J. Boddy and L. Dominelli (Boddy, Dominelli, 2017) established an understanding of ethical issues like privacy, security, and freedom within the cyberspace. Moreover, E.D. Takyi, T.D. Damoah, E.A. Ampomah, and W. Larkotey (Ansong et al., 2013) defined trolling as it damages, a goal-orientated conversation via disturbing the flow and distracting individuals' attention and direct it at some useless point which is usually a sensitive issue. Especially, it specified about the Career trolling which is unlike the ones who troll simply to get attention, it is to troll to disturb on purpose. These are the intentional troublemakers.

A.G.B. Cruz, Y. Seo, M. Rex (Cruz et al., 2018) also identified a troll's dependency over its context as of great value in understanding trolling. The study concluded that trolling involves three practices which are learning, assimilating, and transgressing where transgressing can have an either effect over the communities within cyberspace, pro-social or anti-social. Likewise, M.R. Sanfilippo, S. Yang, and P. Fichman (Sanfilippo et al., 2017) emphasized on considering the context of the troll before responding to it. The study devised some coping strategies to deal with trolls of different natures (context): deviant, social and political. Based upon participants' responses: avoiding to get into a troll to block a troll, is a range of appropriate responses to deviant

trolls whereas dealing with a political or ideological troll must include elements of facilitation and support as responses to such a troll.

Humor, protest and social media engagement. A. Bayat (Bayat, 2007) explored the patterns of relationship between fun and the conservative authorities. It defined fun as the spontaneous and joyful acts which empower individuals to come out of the discipline and structures temporarily. Defining so it stressed upon the subversive elements hidden within the funny which simultaneously acting as a counter-culture challenges the mainstream culture. This may be the reason for the conservative authorities to take over the resources of generating fun out of fear of losing to the humorous. Although such fear may lead to violence however, quite contradictory, humor facilitates in disarming the authorities.

M.J. Sorensen (Sorensen, 2008) explored the theoretical dimensions and functions of humor deployed as a tool to resist against authorities without inviting violence. For the purpose it analyzed Serbian Otpor Movement of Serbia which started in 1998, and deployed humor to resist Slobodan Milosevic, the president of Serbia and Montenegro. It laid down a layout for innovative theory which explains three ideal functions of non-violent resistance as played by humor. The functions were: facilitation outside the movement; inside the movement, and the third one was, pressuring the authorities. Likewise, M.T. Hart (Hart, 2016) supported deployment of humor in social movements as it may through loosening some tension and overall stress still serves the purpose. Taking such stance, it discussed various aspects of humor as a tactic or tool: humor makes situation less risky (Hart, 2007; Teune, 2007) meanwhile it grabs more media attention (Hart, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Teune, 2007;) above all, it is context dependent (Hart, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Along with, M.T. Hart (Hart, 2007) also examined the role of humor as a tool in movements and protests, and concluded that humor do facilitate a movement towards success for which a strong sense of collective identity is necessary to be established for successful framing, that is, the proper delivery of the message to the other end attracting most attention possible. R.V. Kutz-Flamenbaum (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014) also had similar conclusions. It investigated the relation between humor and seriousness considering various aspects of the interplay between both to examine the patterns in which social movements have been manifesting humor.

Furthermore, there are studies which attempted to examine humorous content shared across social media on political issues. J.L. Davis, T.P. Love, and G. Killen (Davis et al., 2018) determined the patterns of incorporating humor by party supporters (democrats and republicans) in their comments on social media. However, it criticized humor and social media for one similar aspect such that both provide scrutiny-free entry to anyone into the politics. Humor also needs to be organized in order to maintain an organized and well-planned social movement, likewise, S. Teune (Teune, 2007) examined the organization of humor depicted by Spassguerilla by analyzing 3 protests to determine the tact and contextual interaction within the humor demonstrated in the movement.

A. Takovski (Takovski, 2019) analyzed Facebook page and Twitter hashtags for the Colorful movement alongside 15 social activists' perceptions over incorporating humor in protests. For which it described four functions that humor plays: ideological, social, psychological, and communicative. However, humor isn't the sole player: success of a movement is determined by the organization, planning, commitment, and the sense of context and target and this study seeks to shed light on the aforementioned themes, issues and perspectives.

Theoretical Framework. Political humor is used as a lens of inquiry. Political humor has been described in two overarching categories across literature. They are pro-social and antisocial (Graham et al., 1992), unifying and dividing (Meyer, 2000), based on communion and individuality (McAdams, 1988), or related to affinity and having power (Chapel, 1978; Ekstrom, 2009). The basic distinction for all of these is humor that brings people together versus humor that divides. Although there is evidence that bringing people together is more effective as a strategy (Chapel, 1978; Dudden, 1985; Gardner, 1994; Goodchilds, 1972; Martin, 2004; Robinson, 2010; Stewart, 2011; Yarwood, 2001), still, divisive humor is frequently used.

2. Material and methods

This study followed an exploratory research design and had incorporated qualitative methodology for addressing the objectives about the use of humor as a subversive tool by women in Aurat March and to understand the perceived influence of the Aurat March over the social media users in Pakistan. The population of this study is posters and placards used in Aurat March from

past four years, 2018 to 2021, and Facebook posts of 2021 published on the official page of Aurat March. The data was collected from the three posts on the official Facebook page of the Aurat March and two posters and placards each used in the Aurat March from last four years were included. Purposive sampling technique was used. Only those posters, placards and posts that the research team considered to be rich in humor and subversive ideologies and those that received the most reactions were included in the study. The content analysis technique has been used to analyze the words and images used in the posts/placards/posters.

3. Discussion

The Aurat March in Pakistan is being organized for four years now challenging status quo of the country as far as the gender construction and its execution is concerned. The basic norms challenged by Aurat March are the miseries faced by women in the society since centuries, sometimes in the name of religion and culture (Bari, 2021). Right now, where there is fourth wave of feminism circulating in the whole world, the region of south Asia is still confused in by the emerging challenging nature of women themselves. The fundamental notions confronted by the Aurat March are domestic violence, honor killings, gender discrimination, right to education and freedom of mobility (Bari, 2021).

However, the protestors used ridicule and humor as a way express their discontent with the system. The posters from the 2018 Aurat March show the initial use of humor as mild but meaningful. A poster literally states *“Pray the rosary of consent daily”*. The image on the poster reflects a form of spiritual worship to please God. Praying rosary is a common practice in the Muslim culture of Pakistan and is usually associated with spiritual leaders. Using this as a humorous form to imprint in the minds of people that consent is an important part of any sexual relationship is a tool which combines the sensitive religious symbol “rosary” with the overtly sexual symbol of consent. Again, making fun of the rosary was a bold move because of the rising religious intolerance in the Pakistani society. Besides, Pakistani society isn’t ready to listen about issues like ‘marital rapes’ yet. As an activist movement, Aurat March, if not intentionally, has really failed to assess the surroundings and conveying their message in a more diplomatic way.

Another poster, used in 2018, is relatively straightforward. It states *“Paratha Rolls not Gender Roles”* which cleverly uses homonyms “rolls” and “roles” to reject the long-established gender roles that have been the driving force of patriarchy. This poster is lighter in its implication as compared to the previous one as it does not tap on any sensitive aspect of our culture.

Aurat March 2019 showed the consistency in the trend set in the previous year however the humor was more aggressive this time. Two of the posters taken from 2019 show how the humor of the 2019 Aurat March was leaning more towards ridicule than innocent laughter. The first selected poster is in Urdu and it says *“Here, I have sat appropriately”* the image on the poster represents a woman sitting with both legs opened which defies the feminine way of sitting in Pakistani culture. This poster basically mocks the years old ideology of appropriating women’s behavior according to the standards of the society and calls for a new normal for women. Other than that, this poster also, stereotypes the men for having only sexual interests. The use of this ridicule in the face of a patriarchal, conservative society was a bold move by the protestors but this humor was not inconsequential.

The second poster also uses a very sensitive feminine symbol in the Pakistani society, a “Dopatta”, to highlight the bigotry of the patriarchal system of Pakistan. A “dopatta” is a piece of cloth which is an integral part of the national dress of women in Pakistan. A “Dopatta” has a high cultural value in the Pakistani society as it represents modesty of the women. The media, to this date portrays women wearing a dopatta in a positive light (Ashfaq, Shafiq, 2018). This poster says *“If you like the Dopatta so much, wrap it around your eyes”*; this is an attempt of ridiculing the patriarchal men who time and again label the women who do not wear a Dopatta as immodest and deviant.

The humor employed by the protestors, as predicted by S. Teune (Teune, 2007) could create a sense of in-group for the protestors but it created exclusiveness from the out-group and the call for inclusiveness faded with this widely unaccepted sense of humor. Due to the criticism faced by the 2019 Aurat March slogans, a debate began before the 2020 International Women’s Day on the nature and appropriateness of the slogans for the current year. The use of hostile humor in the 2019 Aurat March polarized the feminist movement in Pakistan and divided a line between the

“*Mera Jism Meri Marzi*” and “*Mera Jism Allah ki Marzi*” group. These two slogans represented the liberal and the conservative women who were pit against each other.

However, the whole controversy did not stop the flow of humor in the Aurat March but it could be observed that the posters of the 2020 used less hostile humor as compared to the previous year. The first selected poster shows this by pointing to a Bollywood movie dialogue which became very famous after the success of the film. The dialogue states “*every woman dreams for a pinch of Sindoor*”. “Sindoor” is a cosmetic powder worn by married women in India and this dialogue represents the typical patriarchal mindset that every woman dreams of being married, traditional feminine identity. The post here mocks the dialogue by adding a negation which reverses the meaning altogether. This poster highlights the modern ideology that marriage is not an achievement and this patriarchal mind set is to be criticized in the modern world.

The slogan on the second poster is in Urdu. It states “*Before preaching modesty to me, have a look at your search history*”. Search history has come to denote pornographic material in the present world of digital media. Different memes around the social media globally have given a unanimous meaning to this word. Using this hidden meaning to communicate to explicit bias is an easy way to call out all those without having to use the exact words which would be considered controversial and immoral by many. The selected play card, presented in 2021, is the depiction of determination within women of Aurat March to revolt against the status quo and end this exploitation of women. Also, it displays a will to influence and lead in the participant women. The play card at right is somewhat more general sarcastic expression against stereotyping the 21st century women in Pakistani society face particularly with reference to the concept of social and symbolic boundary making using the masculine discourse of respect, modesty, chastity invocation of shame and honor. Both of these are sound and humorous although for some Pakistanis phrase ‘Bin Dari’ may come across as inappropriate, hitting beard (considering it a part of Islamic identity), and to some even vulgar.

4. Results

In this part, we have investigated engagement of social media users to find out their response towards the Facebook posts of Aurat March official page. Three posts, video of slogan chanting, tweet of a political celebrity Bakhtawar Bhutto and video commentary of a famous journalist Shahzeb Khanzada, were analyzed. The data was collected on 14th of March 2021 while the posts were shared on 11th and 12th of March 2021.

Table 1. Facebook Comments

Comment Category		Post 1		Post 2		Post 3		Sum
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Supportive	Typical	28	16	13	11	06	05	79
	Critical	00	00	00	00	00	01	01
	Vulgar	01	02	00	00	03	00	06
Sum		29	18	13	11	09	06	86
Against	Typical	87	14	13	00	15	01	130
	Critical	17	08	03	00	07	00	35
	Vulgar	18	00	07	00	10	00	35
Sum		122	22	23	00	32	01	200
Total Comments		151	40	36	11	41	07	286

Collectively, for both genders, the three posts got 286 comments while separately the first post got most attention which kept on fading till the third post. Further, men showed more interest in the posts both in terms of support and against comments. By dividing those comments into three

categories based upon nature of the comments: typical, critical, and vulgar, it is apparent that most comments, supportive as well as against, were of typical nature whereas vulgar comments were least in number.

There are comments representing different ideologies, different mindsets and different socio-cultural beliefs. Pakistan is an Islamic state so the comments of social media users were clearly showing the anger against the slogans of Aurat March. According to the comments, these types of slogans promote vulgarity. The participants of this March do not have basic understanding of the religion that how much religion protects their rights. So, there is no point of coming on roads. Some users reported that these types of acts are only to demand sexual freedom. Social media was divided, some of the users were against that slogan. There were many who supported such slogans. According to some comments, women in Pakistan can be empowered through such protests, and there is nothing wrong if women are organizing themselves and demanding their rights. One user commented: *“If you are given this loud voice to chant and yell, you already have enough Azadi. The only thing matters that how decently you carry your slogans keeping in view that what platform you choose to get your rights and knowing the true spirit of Islam which has already given so much rights to women than West. I do support this cause but can't be blindfolded of the way you are presenting it and turning such a great cause into a disaster”*.

This particular comment represents a group of people who identify themselves as feminists but do not support the way of Aurat March for the obvious reason: wrong assessment of the situation and failure in keeping up with the society as an activist.

Framing Aurat March to be redolent with western ideology and highlighting it to be detrimental for our own native culture, one of the users make a comment: *“This feminism, secularism and atheism are western ideology and they are trying to forcefully filling these ideologies in our people by name of secularism, feminism and atheism and trying to destroy our culture our nation and erase Islam from Pakistan these all are against Islam”*.

5. Conclusion

The study elucidates that the social media users employ differentiation quite often, contrasting themselves with their opponents, their views with an opponent's views, their own social group with others, and so on. Humor is invoked to make both alliances and distinctions. Goldstein (1976) noted that such use of humor can help speakers transcend the immediate situation and objectify it, promoting the use of reason and thereby making these differences clearer and less colored by previous experience and emotion. One can criticize with humor by ridiculing the opposition through laughter rather than through indignation, anger, or violence (Volpe, 1977). Comic ridicule can also maintain identification and political unity among members of one group while stressing contradictions and differences they have with others (Schutz, 1977).

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