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Title: "A Shameless Ideology of Shameless Women" : Positioning the Other in Social Media Discourse Surrounding a Women's Rights Movement in Pakistan

Year: 2022

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Sadaf, S., & Siitonen, M. (2022). "A Shameless Ideology of Shameless Women" : Positioning the Other in Social Media Discourse Surrounding a Women's Rights Movement in Pakistan. *Social Media and Society*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086933>

“A Shameless Ideology of Shameless Women”: Positioning the Other in Social Media Discourse Surrounding a Women’s Rights Movement in Pakistan

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Social Media + Society
January-March 2022: 1–11
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DOI: 10.1177/20563051221086933
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


Abstract

This study analyzes social media (YouTube) discourse related to Aurat March 2019, a women’s rights movement in Pakistan. Using a discourse analytical approach that draws on the premises of Positioning theory, the analysis reveals the following two major storylines from the data: “The women who stray from the path, and the men who will return them to it,” and “Islam under threat from the outside.” Social media platforms allow their users to express opinions in online spaces, often resulting in polarization and clustering of like-minded people in so-called echo-chambers. This study demonstrates how social media users actively participate in the discursive construction of the “other,” and how the women’s rights movement in Pakistan continues to struggle against hegemonic scripts of gender and sexuality.

Keywords

Aurat March, discourse analysis, positioning, social media, women’s rights movement, YouTube

Introduction

Social media has evolved into a key forum for societal discourse across a variety of societies. It allows users to discuss, form opinions, and express their ideas about events that interest them, thereby participating in political action (Shirky, 2011). Social media has allowed global activists to advocate discourses and narratives on pressing issues (Seo et al., 2009). It further allows individuals to engage in discussions with like-minded people (Posner, 2001) which has been shown to lead to an active discursive construction of the “other” (Devlin, 2016). This type of engagement is also prevalent in the activities of online hate groups as they “provide links to one another, and expressly attempt to encourage both recruitment and discussion among like-minded people” (Sunstein, 2007, pp. 57–58). Othering in online spaces is an important phenomenon to understand as it “encapsulates the myriad power contestations and abusive behaviors which are manifested on/through online spaces (including, e.g., as racism, Islamophobia, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism)” (Harmer & Lumsden, 2019, p. 2). One factor feeding into such discourses is people’s tendency to follow and participate in those discussions that are coherent with their preexisting beliefs, which in turn can cause

polarization and clusters of opinion commonly known as echo-chambers (Bessi et al., 2015). This study contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of othering in social media by investigating the discourse surrounding a women’s rights movement in Pakistan—Aurat March 2019—through the lens of Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). We utilize Positioning theory as it offers concrete conceptual and methodological tools for analyzing discourse online (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001).

In current day Pakistan, the women’s rights movement encounters significant resistance. Pakistani women are said to be “structurally disadvantaged and are considered as second-class citizens” (Ashraf et al., 2017, p. 1402). They face discrimination not only at the societal level but also when it comes to legal and economic issues (Agnes, 1996). Mukhtar (2008) asserts that Pakistani women are socially and culturally disadvantaged when compared to the women

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of so-called Western societies. For example, Pakistani women appear in positions of high societal power only rarely. These dynamics of the society, perhaps unsurprisingly, have an impact on the public discourse found online. There has been a wide use of social media platforms for discussions related to the Aurat March among various groups and classes of Pakistani society (Tarar et al., 2020). Over the next section, we will offer a short introduction to the history of women's rights movements in Pakistan, followed by the description of Aurat March. After introducing the reader to Positioning theory, we will move on to present the empirical study and its findings.

The History of Women's Rights Movements in Pakistan

Since its independence, Pakistan has seen several women's rights movements operating in the country. For example, All Pakistan Women's Association was founded in 1949 2 years after the country gained independence and The United Front for Women's Rights followed it in 1955. During General Ayub Khan's era, various policies related to women's rights were introduced in Pakistan. Overall, he was considered liberal in his policies, allowing women to enter different fields of society. After Ayub Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came into power. He promulgated the constitution of Pakistan in 1973, which granted more rights to women than before (A. Khan, 2018). During this era, women were appointed at key positions in various institutions in Pakistan. In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq took over, and led the state campaign of Islamization in 1980 (Zia, 2018). This was the time of religious and military dictatorship and women's rights suffered a major backlash soon after Gen. Zia came into power (Rouse, 1986).

In recent years, the struggle of women has concentrated especially under a movement called Aurat March. Aurat March refers to "a series of campaigns for reforms (sic) the problems of the society, such as women's suffrage, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and equal pay in the workplace, maternity leave, sexual harassment, and sexual violence" (Baig et al., 2020, p. 414).

In Pakistan, as well as elsewhere in the world, the issue of women's autonomy and development cannot be viewed in isolation from the global impact of the feminist movement. This struggle has, over the past three decades, gradually come to be acknowledged as one of the core issues of modern Pakistan (Lakhvi & Suhaib, 2010).

International Women's Day

The idea of an international women's day was first initiated in 1908. In total, 15,000 women marched in New York City, demanding shorter working hours, better pay, and the right to vote. A year later, the first National Woman's day was

declared by the Socialist Party of America. The National Woman's day was later made international on the suggestion of Clara Zetkin. The celebrations of international women's day reached Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland in 1911. The contemporary "official day for women's rights and world peace," held on 8 March, was agreed upon in 1977, by the United Nations (UN) and its member states (N. Khan et al., 2020).

According to Petter (2021), the International Women's day carries the explicit theme of female empowerment throughout the world but is celebrated differently from country to country. In Pakistan, there is a long tradition of celebrating the day (N. Khan et al., 2020), but recently, there has been a shift in how the day is celebrated. Since 2018, demonstrations and marches were carried out in major cities under the title of "Aurat Azadi March" (Shaheed, 2019). Aurat March has stirred up heated debate across societal classes and intellectual groups (Tarar et al., 2020). For example, there is an ongoing discussion where feminism in Pakistan is charged with "Westernization," and promoting an "alien" agenda (Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020). This argument connects "modernization" to Westernization, and makes the claim that since Aurat March promotes modernization, it simultaneously proposes ignoring the Islamic values. This discourse also positions Westernization as being the main cause of "vulgarism" and "dehumanization" in Pakistan (Baig et al., 2020).

Positioning the "Self" and the "Other"

In this study, we use the concept of positioning as a lens through which we explore the dynamics of othering. Hollway (1984) introduced the concept of positioning in social psychology. Davies and Harré (1990) further expanded the use of positioning in interactive exchanges, while relating it to narratives. Deeply rooted in a social constructionist viewpoint, the process of positioning is like a thread that weaves social interaction and wraps the entire interactive situation together. "Positions are features of the local moral landscape" (Harré et al., 2009, p. 9). They emerge according to the context of interaction and are dynamic in nature (Pihlaja, 2014). Studies using positioning analysis are "concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realized in the ways that people act towards others" (Harré et al., 2009, p. 5). Davies and Harré (1990) further explain,

Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (p. 46)

Positioning is a discursive process that happens in interaction (Harré et al., 2009). It refers to the discursive production

of the self, as positioning is the rudimentary course by which people acquire identities for the self and the other in social interactions (Davies & Harré, 1990). Positioning the self is also inherently connected to positioning the “other,” which is the second key concept guiding our analysis.

In defining othering, we follow Lister (2004), who sees it as a “process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’—between the more and the less powerful—and through which social distance is established and maintained” (p. 101). In the process of othering, one group reinforces the distinction and dominance against another group. This process is typically deeply related to issues of power (Al-Saji, 2010). The “other” group is not simply singled out as different, but also defined as morally and intellectually inferior (Schwalbe, 2000).

Positioning and othering can be analyzed utilizing an approach called Positioning theory. Positioning theory helps to explain how participants discursively construct the characters of themselves and others (Jones, 2012). It also looks at how intergroup relations are developed (Tan & Moghaddam, 1999). Communicative practices in positioning theory comprise positions, speech acts, and storylines. The triangulation of these three components is used as units of analysis to approach discourse (Warren & Moghaddam, 2016). Discourse in our study is operationalized as purposeful and action-oriented communication (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Studying discourse means focusing on talk and interaction in a given situation along with the outcome of the interaction (Sinclair, 2007). Here, we align with Potter (2004) who asserts that discourse analysis has an “analytical commitment to studying discourse as texts and talk in social practice” (p. 203). Discourse analysis focuses on language as a medium of interaction and the analysis of discourse thus is the analysis of what people do. Our study offers a micro-analytic understanding of how people discursively advance, orient to, and challenge certain meanings and practices through interaction in social media (cf. Sutherland, LaMarre & Rice, 2017).

Based on this theoretical foundation, the goal of this study is to apply the concept of positioning into understanding how people discursively co-construct the “other” in social media. Focusing on the YouTube video on Aurat March 2019 and its comments, we ask the following research question:

RQ1. How are women and the women’s rights movement discursively positioned in the social media discourse related to the Aurat March?

Methodology

The data for our study comes from a YouTube video dealing with the 2019 march titled: “Aurat march 2019—Women day in Pakistan 2019—Waht is real Purpouse this march ?” (sic). This video was posted on 10 March 2019, only 2 days after the event. By the time of this study, the video had

approximately 217,000 views, and 1,800 comments, making it by far the most popular of the videos discussing the event. The so-called top comments, that is, comments that had received the most “likes,” and their own comments, were mostly from near the time the video was first posted. Still, the video had continued to attract comments more than a year since its launch.¹

We consider the video as an example of the public discourse surrounding the march, and its comments section gives an in-depth view into how people positioned themselves as well as the march-goers. As the largest online video platform of the world, YouTube represents one of the more open platforms of social media. The service is by default accessible by anyone with an Internet connection, and one does not need to create a user ID or log in to view its contents. Commenting requires registration, but many, if not most, users opt to use a pseudonym. Despite the apparently public nature of social interaction on YouTube, there are always certain ethical considerations to be made when researching social media (Eynon et al., 2017; Golder et al., 2017). In our case, we opted for anonymizing the already pseudonymized participant’s commentary for the purposes of reporting this study. Also, as suggested by Benton et al. (2017) in their guidelines of “user de-identification in analysis,” we removed any personal and sensitive information of the users that could have been used to identify them.

As the first step of the analysis, we engaged in a form of data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We transcribed the narration of the video and made notes of the imagery used in the video. We then organized the comments according to their popularity with the help of YouTube’s own sorting algorithm and read through some hundreds of comments to get an overview of the kind of discussion taking place. As a result of this step, we shortlisted nine comment chains, since they had the highest number of counter-comments and rebuttals. Based on our initial analysis, the other comment chains either did not have enough comments to be included in the analysis, or only contained comments that briefly reinforced the original commenter’s viewpoint, for example by stating that the poster supported the original comment. After reducing the data to nine comment chains, we ended up with approximately 273 comments for analysis, consisting of 6,680 words. The whole process was followed in order to keep the size of the data manageable and have enough information in order to draw rigorous findings (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017). The first author translated parts of the shortlisted comment chains that were in Urdu language to English to enable joint analysis. In the report that follows, the data excerpts are numbered, with the first number denoting the comment chain, and the second number denoting the order of the comment in that chain.

In the analysis, we used both individual sentences as well as whole comments as a starting point and sought to recognize those speech acts that demonstrated positioning. The first author did the initial round of interpretation, after which

the analysis proceeded through a series of discussions between authors toward recognizing overarching storylines in accordance with the premises of Positioning theory. Due to the nature of the data, we drew on the premises of multimodality in our analysis (see Jewitt et al., 2016). This means that in addition to considering the visual and auditory elements of the video, we also extended our interpretation to matters such as the way certain names or expressions were written, and how emojis were used as semiotic resources (cf. Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018).

Analysis and Findings

The “Analysis and Findings” section first presents a description of the video and how it sets the tone for the comment section. After the analysis of the video, we move on to analyze positioning as it takes place within the comments.

Positioning in the Original Video Material

The 6 min and 23 s-long video opens with a shot of the Aurat March, where demonstrators can be heard shouting “mera jism, meri merzi” (my body, my choice). In the video, images of women carrying placards appear, depicting the kind of statements that the marchers presented during the demonstration. The video then cuts into a still shot that presents a kind of cartoon-style library, and the image and name of the author of the video (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The shot introducing the author.

The combination of a name, image, and voice work to position the author as male. After greeting his viewers in a manner similar to talk show hosts, he begins the narration by presenting questions, and then proceeds to answer those questions with the help of hand-picked examples from video material and still photos taken from the march. The calm voice and word choices used in the narration can be seen as an attempt to position the author as someone who is analytical and trustworthy. The narrator does not straight away reject the problems highlighted in the march. Rather, he swiftly moves over them to present the “real problems” faced by Pakistani women. In the video, he refers to the women of

Pakistan as “our women” and “Eastern women.” He then narrates the problems:

Because the problem of our women is education, the problem of our women is getting due rights at in-laws. The problem of our women is physical abuse. And the decisions taken for their future without consulting them. The problem of our woman is to safeguard her respect and safety at her workplace.

Later on, he continues the argument by stating that

The natural desire of a woman is to feel safe and in order to feel safe, she has to stay under the shadow of a man in various ways.

The verbal argument is backed up by the visuals of the video showing a stock-photo of a veiled woman bowing her head (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A veiled woman bowing her head.

From here on and throughout the video, Aurat March is discursively constructed as an event where women have been asking for rights that are not important in reality. The narrator suggests that while issues such as honor killing, excessive dowry, and so forth exist, the women participating on the march have missed them and are fighting for the wrong cause. This argument works to position the narrator as someone who knows and understands more of the world than the “subjects” he is looking at. In his narration, he also propagates the idea of other actors as the “real” outgroup. According to his argument, the very idea of the Aurat March originates from and plays into the plans of these outside forces. For example, when a woman who forms the base of a family will become, according to his words, “the plate at every table,” then the depopulation agenda of “the Jews” will be accomplished.

The arguments in the video are built by combining spoken narration and either still images or video footage from the march. The still images used in the video range from stock photos (men and women hugging, an elderly woman caressing the cheek of a younger man, men doing physical labor, soldiers aiming with their guns, etc.) to photos taken during the march, where demonstrators can be seen holding up placards stating things such as “my body is not your battle ground,” and “freedom over fear” (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Aurat March demonstrators with placards.

Next, we will analyze the positioning taking place in the comment section of the video. Overall, few commenters directly disclosed their religion or geography. However, nine commenters positioned themselves as Muslims, while eight commenters alluded to being Pakistani. No commenters positioned themselves as coming from outside of Pakistan. Most of the comments were written in Urdu language, either in Roman alphabet or the Urdu alphabet.

Our analysis illustrates how the commenters position themselves and “others” using various modes that include reflexive positioning, first-order and second-order positioning, moral and personal positioning, and self and other positioning (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991). Together, these modes of positioning work to create two main storylines in the data. We have labeled them as “The women who stray from the path, and the men who will return them to it,” and “Islam under threat from the outside.” There were 48 comments related to the first storyline, while the second storyline comprised 54 comments. Since the video sets the backdrop for the storylines, the subsequent discussion is not uniform nor uncontested. In our data set, there were only six comments that supported the march. This number was too small to either constitute a storyline of its own or challenge the two major storylines. Over the following sections, we will explore both main storylines in more detail and illustrate what modes of positioning are used in their discursive construction.

“The Women Who Stray From the Path, and the Men Who Will Return Them to It”

The first major storyline in the data is that women supporting the women’s rights movement in Pakistan have deviated from the “righteous path,” and men not only have the right but the duty to bring them back to the path of virtue. Since positions are considered fluid and dynamic, they are

understood as “a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5). In positioning, the modes of action are restricted because of the designated rights and duties (Badarneh & Migdadi, 2018). In the comments, several commenters position themselves as individuals who are following the correct path and are therefore responsible for bringing the supporters of the Aurat March back in line (Excerpt 1):

Excerpt 1.

Rw Rw1 [1; 1]

Women do not want freedom, they want liberalism.

Pushpa Kamal [1; 5]

They do not have any families, most of them are characterless.

N R1 [1; 7]

Well said. These particular class just want to fulfill their sexual lust nothing else. Shame on all participants and organizers or this shameful March.

Masroor Zakir [1; 8]

Not all the women, but just this kind of women.

In excerpt 1, the commenters discursively position themselves as being eligible for defining the purpose of the whole movement. One commenter uses the metaphor of ownership by using the expression, “our mothers, sisters and daughters.” Furthermore, the participants position supporters of the movement as disrespectful and therefore as someone who can be loathed and despised. If we take the case of personal positioning in which individual particularities ranging from general to very particular personal characteristics are targeted,

the characteristic of not coming from a “good family” and not having the “right up-bringing” is highlighted.

Excerpt 2, coming from another discussion chain, shows the same storyline being constructed from a different angle. Again, the march-goers are positioned as the “other” and characterized as shameless:

Excerpt 2.

Mahnoor Aizaz1 [5; 1]

You dress up immodestly and want me to have some shame? You shameless women, you do not like to cover yourself with the scarf then wear it around your neck. As only bitches wear a strap around their neck. This body belongs to Allah and we have to follow his orders. If you do not want to follow the orders then you should leave this religion forever. This is not freedom, rather this is shamelessness. It's so awkward that you call yourself characterless and immoral.²

Pathan Haidri Badar1 [5; 3]

No brother, these women are our mothers, sisters and daughters who are astray by the propaganda by the media. We need to educate them and this nurturing starts from our homes.

Athar Ziman1 [5; 10]

Zareen sister, you are right. But I feel that their families are also like this and when they will get in their senses, then it would be very late. May Allah have mercy on you and give these women the wisdom to be right.

In the first comment above, the supporters of the movement are deliberately positioned as immodest and shameless women. The commenter continues on to evoke religion and its teachings as the standpoint that gives them the moral right to control these “others.” This discursive construction of the “other” is in line with what Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) suggested in saying “when people are positioned or position themselves, this will always include both a moral and a personal positioning” (p. 22). They further elaborated that personal positioning becomes more prominent when the actions of the person positioned are not intelligible with reference to the suggested roles.

In Excerpt 2, the division between the self and the “other” is finalized in the form of a wish: to have the “others” leave Islam “forever,” thereby severing whatever threads may otherwise be seen connecting the two. The third commenter positions themselves as standing with the second. Here, it is notable that the third commenter refers to the first one as “sister.” This is most likely based on the username of the second commenter (here changed), which is identified as a female name in Pakistan. The manifestation of the self and the “other” in this storyline is strengthened by utilizing a metaphor that ties into the cultural practices and lived histories

through which metaphors and characters are learned (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990). The first commenter refers to the “others” as “bitches (who) wear a strap around their neck.” In the Pakistani context, using metaphors of animals when describing people is generally considered demeaning. By using this metaphor, the commenter deliberately positions the “other” as someone low in social hierarchy.

In its most extreme forms, the discursive construction of the division between the self and the “other” can be seen in comments where the “other” is positioned as someone worthy of inhumane treatment (Excerpt 3):

Excerpt 3.

Abdul Baseer Ansaar [9; 5]

The woman who says my body, my choice, there should be a bomb blast on women's day so that such immoral women directly and immediately go to hell fire . . . Amen

Em creator [9; 6]

haha where is taliban (terrorists)! 😂😂😂

Aquib Masroori [9; 8]

Brother you said what's true and right Allah bless you

Here, the first commenter lays out a violent fantasy, which the other two commenters then validate and support. The laughing emojis, connected to the comment wishing for the interference of the “taliban (terrorists)” can be seen as evoking hate toward the “other” despite being disguised as light-hearted jest. Throughout these and similar comments, the posters evoke time and again the idea that women's bodies (and minds) are not theirs to command, but rather belong to external powers, here religion and men as its primary representatives.

“Islam Under Threat From the Outside”

The second major storyline in the data discursively constructs the image of Islam being threatened by outside forces. This storyline is set against the context of Islam being Pakistan's state religion. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (<http://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/population-religion>), approximately 96% of the population follows the Islamic faith. Aurat March in Pakistan has been facing criticism since its inception from religious scholars, political leaders, media, and common people. Since there is a general sensitivity toward cultural norms and religious values in modern-day Pakistan (Nazir et al., 2019), some see initiatives such as this as opposing existing cultural, social, and religious values (Zafar, 2016). Moreover, this storyline has two main dimensions. First, the idea that Islam is

threatened from the outside, that is, “the West” (and other sources), and second, that it is the moral right and duty of the good Islamic citizens of Pakistan to combat this threat.

The part of the storyline that focuses on the outside threat to Islam is evident in comments that position, for example, “Jews,” “Zionists,” international non-governmental organizations, media, and “the West” as the masterminds behind the Aurat March (Excerpt 4). Several commenters explain the role of these “masterminds” as that of morally weakening the Pakistani society:

Excerpt 4

The Ring [1; 11]

Don't worry, they are the paid employees of NGOs, who want to be the bitches on the streets. Our mothers, sisters and daughters are not shameless and they know how to respect relationships.

Mehman Yonus [3; 28]

Sister this is the strategy of the West who want to make Muslims shameless. In the name of freedom, this day is celebrated to ruin this life and the life hereafter. I only pray that these so called Muslim girls understand the reality before its too late.

Newman Eikh [3; 57]

@Start Scientific Wurdu

Oh no there is another one with freedom movement. [referring directly to a previous commenter defending the marchers.]

You are immodest and you should die or else if you need freedom, you should go to India. Get lost. There is a law in India as well that you can sleep with other men after marriage. Useless women, curse be on you for you want nudity in the name of freedom . . . And if you wish to get nude, then go work in a porn film, you can also earn money from there. You will also get what you want in freedom.

H W [6; 5]

So true. What a shame these hidden agendas of Zionists getting served by these ignorant souls.

In the first comment earlier, the commenter positions the supporters of the march as employed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and further positions NGOs as the enemy of the Islamic faith. The commenter also uses a dehumanizing strategy of calling the marchers “bitches on the streets,” which evokes a reference to a stray dog. In the second comment of the excerpt, the vocabulary employed by the commenter clearly indexes their religious belonging. Evoking the concept of praying, the commenter positions themselves as someone who is religiously sound and hopes the misled “others” will return to fold. In these and other

similar comments, India, the West, and Zionists are all brought forward as suspicious sources of outside influence. By associating them with the concept of pornography, these outside forces are depicted as detrimental to moral order. The implied connection between the West and pornography is something that is created already in the video itself, where the author suddenly turns to speak of a porn star. It is a familiar trope used when speaking of the “dangers of the West” also in the context of other countries where Islam is the main religion, such as Afghanistan (see, for example, Rostami-Povey, 2007).

The dimension of the storyline that focuses on the good Islamic citizens of Pakistan defending Islam takes especially the form of what could be called religious policing. Since positions are relational (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991), in order for the commenters to engage in such policing, they have to position themselves as being on the right and guided by virtue, while positioning the “other” as someone lacking direction and piety, as seen in excerpt 5 below:

Excerpt 5

Haroon Muhammad [5; 4]

You are absolutely right. These shameless women have crossed all limits. They do not have fear of Allah, neither they are worried that they will have to be answerable in the grave.

Aqeel Aman Aqeel [7; 20]

Hello Madam Shahana. You said the words God forbid and God has saved you from the satanic tactics of Dajjal.

Shahana Balooch [7; 14]

@Ahmar Muhammad May Allah show the righteous path to everyone.

These and similar comments in the data imply that there are boundaries in the minds of the commenters that have been crossed by the women supporting the Aurat March. In the first comment, the commenter positions the “other” as someone who is shameless and does not follow the religious belief of “fearing Allah.” The commenter thereby positions themselves as someone who is on the correct (Islamic) path. In the second comment, the commenter directly positions themselves as a kind of religious guide, who has the power to approve the actions of other commenters.

In some rare occasions, religious policing was even extended to the apparent ingroup (Excerpt 6):

Excerpt 6

Sheraz Jaan [1; 2]

You have beautiful thoughts, this is a good woman.

Pathan Ch Haider [1; 3]

No brother, these women are our mothers, sisters and daughters who are astray by the propaganda by the media. We need to educate them and this nurturing starts from our homes.

Defensive woman [1; 4]

@Sheraz Jaan write name of ALLAH in capital letters.

The third comment in Excerpt 6 appeared in various comment chains, always reminding the other participants that people should “Write [the] name of ALLAH in capital letters.” This type of commenting, while not accepting or rejecting previous content, directly positions the commenter as religious and therefore morally superior to the other participants. In the above excerpt, the initial comment is mentioned for reference to show how the third commenter positions themselves as morally superior. Instead of taking part in the discussion, the third commenter simply gives their opinion on how the name of Allah should be written.

Finally, while the majority of the comment chains included a kind of positioning where commenters positioning themselves as male were talking about marchers positioned as (mostly) female, there were some instances where this was not the case. In these cases, the commenters position themselves as women and make it clear that they do not agree with the ideology of the women’s rights movement (Excerpt 7). In doing so, they construct an image of a “good Muslim woman” who can judge the “other women” from the vantage point of moral superiority:

Excerpt 7

Areeb Faiq [1; 6]

I wonder if most of them are Muslim??

MK Creations [9; 1]

I am girl but i don’t like them. I do not need such freedom. I always feel safe with my brother father and husband around me.. ALLAH bless them

In the first comment, the pseudonym again positions the author of the comment as a woman. The commenter verbally self-positions themselves against the supporters of the Aurat March and questions their religious beliefs. The second commenter first positions themselves as a “girl,” and then not only removes themselves from the story of needing “freedom,” but also strengthens the idea of “safety” by positioning the roles of males (“brother, father and husband”) as the source of safety for Muslim women.

In summary, our analysis revealed two main storylines in the data, “the women who stray from the path, and the men who will return them to it,” and “Islam under threat from the

outside.” These storylines echo the negative stance toward the Aurat March that the video narrator established. The two storylines were constructed in the comments through active discussion between the commenters.

Conclusion

Our study contributes to the growing understanding of the discursive construction of the “other” in social media in several ways. Public online user comments provide a rich source for examining how commenters position themselves and “others” in relation to social events. We utilized Positioning theory in our analysis, as this theory is concerned with “how people use words (and discourses of all types) to locate themselves and others” (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 2). We propose that Positioning theory offers a useful tool for understanding the dynamics of othering in social media, especially in how it focuses attention on how participants create the self and the “other” through everyday discourse.

In the Pakistani context, Aurat March represents a sensitive issue, highlighted by the ensuing discussions on social media and how they build upon the notion of “otherness.” As Staszak (2008) argues, the creation of otherness, or othering, follows a principle of classifying individuals into two hierarchically ordered groups. The self (us) is valued as it submits to and follows a certain set of norms, while the “other” is devalued due to deviating from the “right,” and therefore being at fault (Staszak, 2008). Our analysis demonstrates how individuals supporting the idea of Aurat March are positioned as the “other” in a way that “reinforces ‘otherness,’ marginalization and exclusion” (Udah & Singh, 2019, p. 855). This is also in line with Kumashiro (2002), who supports the notion that otherness and deviation are known and maintained in contrast to the norm.

Positioning in social media discourse is guided by the articulate structure of fluctuating storylines. Storylines can be defined as episodes that are created through speech acts and positions (McVee, 2011). Our analysis revealed two main storylines from the data.

The first storyline is related to the idea of women who stray from the right path, and the men who are responsible for bringing them back to it. This storyline resonates with Jafar’s (2005) assertion that in Pakistani society, men are considered the guardians of women, while women are considered as vulnerable targets in need of protection by men. As argued by Gelfand et al. (2013), Pakistan being a “tight” patriarchal society provides “strong norms and monitoring systems to detect deviations, which are severely punished” (p. 499). The conduct of women is not only monitored but also policed by the socio-cultural norms, and these norms compel men to act according to stereotypical gender models of masculinity that include the traits of being rational, brave, and aggressive (Salam, 2021). In this storyline, the commenters discursively position themselves as experts eligible for defining the purpose of the movement. Various

metaphors used by the commenters like “our mothers, sisters and daughters” position them as the (active and powerful) self.

The second storyline poses Islam as being under threat from the outside. This storyline has two main dimensions. The first one centers on identifying the outside threat, which includes suspects such as “the West” and “Zionists.” Our analysis illustrates how the concept of the West is positioned as a threat by using speech acts like “Western format of education,” and “Western women brainwashing Muslim women.” Using the concept of the West as an allegory of freedom and modernization and as something contrary to the idea of true Islamic traditions and customs is echoed in other contexts as well (e.g., El-Dine, 2016). Hassan (1996) proposed that Westernization for Muslims is undesirable as it is “associated with promiscuity and all kinds of social problems ranging from latch-key kids to drug and alcohol abuse” (p. 57). This narrative is something that both storylines share. Using personal positioning, speech acts where Aurat March participants are labeled as “characterless,” “shameless,” “immodest,” “immoral,” “wanting nudity,” and not belonging to a good family are used to invoke the idea of the “other” that stands morally apart from the self. Such a narrative of the West and Westernization can be understood as a form of Occidentalism, which according to Woltering (2011) is a collection of “anti-Westernism” ideologies that refuse to accept ideas, objects, and processes labeled as Western. Thus, Occidentalism “establishes the West as source and locus of modernity, as well as possessor of the power to define” (Roth, 2017, p. 102).

The second storyline also builds a narrative implying that the “good” citizens of Pakistan have a duty of combating the threat to Islam. Jafar (2005) suggests that in the Pakistani context, this idea is deeply rooted in General Zia’s imposition of “Islam as a universal code of conduct” (p. 36) in his political era, during which he also constructed “the West” as the “other.” Moreover, in the same political era, women were used as a tool and symbol in transforming Pakistan into an ideal Islamic state, supporting the belief that it is the position of the women that differentiates Muslim culture from the “Western” culture. While this focus on gender was argued to be based on religion, scholars such as Mir-Hosseini and Hamzić (2010) argue that “sheer military power and political calculations were the decisive factors in the institutionalization of gender injustice with an ‘Islamic’ label” (p. 157). Indeed, the gender discrimination evident in Pakistani political, legal, and social systems are deeply rooted in a patriarchal normative history.

Since gender is viewed in a binary and stereotypical manner in Pakistan’s patriarchal system (Salam, 2021), men are typically positioned within the public domain, while women are positioned within the private domain. This kind of misogynistic patriarchy has the effect of confining women to their homes, and not allowing them to become a part of the public and political spaces (Anjum, 2020). Our analysis illustrates

this dynamic in social media discourse as well, and draws attention toward how traditional, heterosexual masculinity plays a role in defining rigid gender ideology that gives power to men. Our study shows how such regulatory practices are (re)created in social media discourse in the Pakistani context.

A clear limitation of this study is that it is based on a relatively small data set. It would be important to apply Positioning theory and the ideas of metaphors and storylines to larger data sets as well. Future research that taps into various social and critical issues taking place at different societal levels using the lens of Positioning theory could help better evaluate the phenomenon of othering in social media, as well as contribute to the development of the theory itself. We propose that the potential of Positioning theory in studying social media discourse remains mostly untapped. Another self-critical point is that in the end, multimodality did not factor into the analysis as much as we originally planned. We see potential for future research in exploring the many ways in which discursive positioning may utilize the affordances of multimodal social media. More research is needed to analyze the impact of multiple modes in social media discourse, and how discourse in one societal sphere may end up intersecting and interacting with those taking place in other contexts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. The video was later on removed by its producer and cannot be found online anymore. Only a trace of it remains on The Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine.
2. Here, the commenter apparently refers to one of the placards seen in the video, where the placard states, “Fine, I am characterless and immoral.”

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