
From Slogans to Reckoning: Analyzing the Aurat March and its Digital Backlash

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1776>

Abstract

This research examines the evolution of the Aurat March from 2021 to 2024, focusing on the changing narratives surrounding gender dynamics in Pakistan. The objective is to analyze the visual and textual elements of placards, social media discourse, and the impact of feminist activism. Utilizing semiotic and discourse analysis methodologies, the study decodes the meanings behind slogans and placards while tracking shifts in online comments regarding the movement. The findings reveal a significant transformation in the narratives presented at the Aurat March, with slogans evolving from direct confrontations of the male gaze to broader calls for gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal structures. Discourse analysis indicates a shift from religious backlash to more nuanced discussions, reflecting increased support for the movement and a growing willingness to challenge misogynistic viewpoints. The research contributes to feminist theory by highlighting the intersectionality of gender oppression and the role of public discourse in shaping societal attitudes. Ultimately, the study underscores the Aurat March as a vital platform for advancing women's rights in Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of solidarity and community engagement in fostering social change.

Keywords: Aurat March, Discourse Analysis, Women March, Semiotic Analysis, Gender Dynamics, Feminist Theory

Introduction

Women have been fighting for equal rights for decades worldwide, it started from the Seneca Falls Convention, where women asked for the right to vote. In this wave, 11 resolutions were presented, of which all were passed but the 9th. The manifesto in this movement was called the Declaration of Sentiments. This was followed by the suffragette movement, which resulted in New Zealand becoming the first sovereign state to give women the right to vote. They used art, debate, and propaganda to convey their messages (Mohajan, Haradhan, 2022). This vocalization is recorded as the first feminist wave. The second wave of feminism is known as the time when feminism was called women's liberation. In this wave, women vocalized how they should be treated as equals and not just as homemakers. As a result of that, the Equal Rights Amendment was passed in 1972 by Congress. In this wave they questioned the systematic racism and also focused on injustices regarding the violations of women for example rape, assault, and their reproductive rights. One of their bigger wins was getting contraceptive pills approved in 1960. The third wave asked for more independence and reproductive rights, and after this, with the rise of social media in the 2000s, the # MeToo movement started in 2014, where Hollywood started a movement exposing the casting couch and many sexist behaviors. Now, every year, on 8th March, Aurat March is conducted all

over Pakistan. It is an example of a social movement that uses a combination of online and offline activism through networked feminist collectives to grow the movement. Many gather to raise their voices against gender discrimination, violence faced by women, and to demand justice and equality. According to (Akhtar, 2021), the protest signs offer a mix of the unmediated voice of the Pakistani women, major issues in Pakistani feminism, and the battles it is fighting against patriarchy. Over the years, the slogans, the performances, and the placards have been heavily criticized. All over Instagram, where we see posts celebrating this union of women, where they join to march for their rights, to find solidarity, and right underneath, we see the hatred of people who disagree with the movement. Critics seemed to ignore the majority of placards entirely, overlooking slogans and images that referred to early and child marriages, gender wage gap, reproductive health, and domestic violence. Instead, discourses on social media focused on a handful of images deemed ‘inappropriate’ in Pakistani society to generate backlash (Kamal, 2021). In Pakistani society, many struggle to accept women's open expressions of anger against patriarchy, often viewing movements like the Aurat March as a Western agenda. Despite facing significant backlash and societal challenges, the marchers continue to advocate for women's rights, highlighting their marginalization in political and economic spheres (Rahim & Riaz, 2023).

Research Questions

RQ1: What meanings and messages are communicated through the visual elements, such as placards, performances, and imagery, associated with Aurat March events?

RQ2: How do social media users interact with and respond to content related to the Aurat March, and what ideologies, discursive strategies, and power dynamics are evident in the surrounding discourse?

RQ3: How has discourse related to the Aurat March changed from 2021 to 2024, particularly regarding dominant ideologies and the nature of the discourse?

Aurat March Unsuccessful?

While many believed that Aurat March was finally giving a platform to women to share their grievances, their issues regarding equality, their fears while living in Pakistan as a woman who always is at danger of being raped, harassed assaulted or more, many believed that it took the light away from the real motive and was unsuccessful. To be sustainable, movements must be sufficiently agile to respond to changing internal dynamics and new external circumstances (Shaheed, 2019). According to Mehmoona (2020), the public thought it would be revolutionary, but it seemed unsuccessful. The public saw it as a distraction from the actual suffering of women. The demands made in the 2019 Aurat March were seen as absurd and nonsense. There were also concerns among the youth that the March promotes vulgarity and advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, which many perceive as a Western agenda (Nadeem et al, 2024). While they tried their best to include all ongoing topics, it was sometimes not possible for the organizers to provide their 2 cents on every scenario, which did not sit right with many. After many women who were PTI supporters or part of the political party got jailed in 2023, many started raising their voice against Aurat March for not playing their part and showing support (Muqadam, 2023).

Aurat March Used to Push Elitist Agenda

While the debate of it being successful came from people who were hopeful of it revolutionizing change in Pakistan, many became hateful of the March and said that it was just pushing the agenda of the elite. According to Manj (2020), “The vulgar and disgusting placards have drawn the narrative that the Aurat March was the vile elitist agenda of the specific privileged class.” People called it exploitation of the term Feminism, and it was assumed that the plaques were made vulgar on purpose to gain attention. March was belittled, and people were angered by the performances, deeming them too provocative for a protest like this. Even imposing “*Mera Jism, Meri Marzi*”

(My body, my choice) was seen as “western debauchery” by many who opposed its popularity (Hamdani, 2021). The word feminist was then used as a derogatory term, and all feminists were belittled as people who were spreading the hatred had no actual knowledge of how to differentiate between them. Many also perceived that there is diversity in class, but it only reflects inclusion and not equality (Saigol, 2020).

The extremists who were against the March labeled it a Western conspiracy and claimed that it is determined to destroy and corrupt the cultural, social, and religious values of Pakistan, an Islamic society. They called the women “Feminazis” and said that they projected their values on other women too who had no interest in being included. Another term for Aurat March that was used to belittle the movement was “imported ideology”. They were accused of being a product of “foreign funding” and were also accused of being a part of the “Jewish lobby” (Azmat, 2022).

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory can provide a very valuable theoretical framework for this research, analyzing the hate received by the Aurat March. The theory focuses on understanding the gender inequalities and power dynamics in society. In the context of the Aurat March, feminist theory helps analyze the hate received in the comments as a manifestation of patriarchal norms, misogyny, and resistance to women's empowerment. The ideological polarization of Pakistani society on the question of the rights of women is an outcome of the role played by the ideologically polarized mainstream media and their power to control the mind of the target audience by strategic use of language (Nishat, 2022). Discourse, whether in written, spoken, or visual form, is frequently employed to establish or uphold power structures within society (Fairclough, 2000). Semiotic theory shows that recurring signs and signals form a cohesive message that appeals to supporters (Zaib et. al, 2024). Through semiotics, we can decode the underlying meanings being conveyed through signs, symbols, colors, languages, and more. All of these theories serve as sub-theories supporting the feminist theory framework and helping in decoding the backlash and hate produced against Aurat March.

Methodology

This research employs two distinct methodologies to delve into the complexities surrounding the backlash faced by participants of Aurat March, as well as the movement itself. Semiotic analysis serves as a powerful tool for dissecting visual and symbolic elements to uncover underlying meanings and messages. It reached a significant milestone in the late 19th century with the seminal contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes (Riabko & Williams, 2024). In this study, a rigorous content analysis is conducted on the theatrical performances and placards exhibited during Aurat March events. The goal is to unravel the nuanced narratives embedded within these displays and slogans. Data for semiotic analysis is sourced from Instagram, utilizing the hashtag #auratmarch to identify the most popular posts from the years 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Selection criteria prioritize posts with significant engagement, including likes, reposts, and overall popularity. From each year's Aurat March, two pictures of placards and one video showcasing different displays are shortlisted for analysis. Additionally, one picture per year featuring a celebrity is selected based on its virality and potential impact on public discourse. The semiotic analysis focuses on visual elements such as placards, performances, and imagery associated with Aurat March. Discourse analysis offers insights into the public discourse surrounding Aurat March, particularly through social media interactions. Feminist movements like the Aurat March focus on activism and equality, aiming to drive significant social change through empowerment and inclusivity (Awais & Ali, 2025). By examining comment sections on platforms like Instagram, the researcher aims to shed light on the varied responses and sentiments elicited by Aurat March-related content. The data collection

process involves scouring comment sections of Aurat March-related posts on social media platforms. This includes posts featuring placards, performances, or images of women participating in the movement.

Findings and Discussions

Semiotic Analysis of Aurat March Displays

The findings present a detailed analysis of the visual and textual elements observed in the Aurat March placards and displays from 2021 to 2024, employing semiotic analysis as the primary approach. The evolution of slogans and themes over the years reflects shifting narratives and growing awareness around gender issues in Pakistan.

Aurat March 2021

Placard 1:



Figure 1: Placard from Aurat March 2021

Placards Analysis:

Table 1: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2021

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The placard has a mask drawn on it, indicating towards the time of Covid, and the precautionary signs that used to be displayed to remind people of the importance of keeping their distance. The eyes drawn on the placard represent the lust and greed in the eyes of the men who make women feel uncomfortable and unsafe.
Textual Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main text reads “<i>Mask uper, Ankhain neechay</i>”, demanding a safe space from men, and asserting the importance of a lowered gaze, reminding them of etiquette that should be observed. The text on the border reads “<i># aurat azaad, samaaj azaad</i>”. It is a reminder that until women are freed of all the oppressions in this patriarchal society, the society itself can never be free.
Design Elements	The placard is made on white chart paper, and a red marker is used to make the border of text that reads “ <i># aurat azaad, samaj azaad</i> ”. The eyes are shown to have red pupils to really make it look like the eyes are staring at someone. The mask is colored in with a light green to resemble the masks that were available to all during the times of COVID.
Cultural Icons	None present.
Connotation	The placard in its entirety represents the men who gawk at women it be in the street, any other public space, or any event. It represents the danger women feel because of these stares, and the uncomfortable feelings felt by many women.

Placard 2:



Figure 2: Placard of Aurat March 2021

Placard Analysis:

Table 2: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2021

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	None present.
Textual Content	The text reads “ <i>Nafs ko kabu karo, Aurat ko nahi</i> ”. This slogan indicates to men that the thing that needs to be controlled is their ego and their impulses, not women. This statement represents that men need to control their selves rather than the women around them.
Design Elements	The slogan is written with black marker in bold on pink chart paper, and the slogan has 3 exclamation points at the end to assert its importance.
Cultural Icons	The placard with this slogan is held by Momina Munir, who is a famous content creator in Pakistan and is a young woman with a large youth following.
Connotation	The slogan represents the oppression faced by women, where men would rather dictate women how to dress, behave, and whom to talk to, rather than changing their behaviors and suppressing their impulses, which could make women feel safer and would result in the decline of harassment or assault cases.

Video link: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMKwIJun8Jx/?igshid=MTc4MmMlYmI2Ng==>

Link 1: Display and performance from Aurat March 2021

Video Analysis

Table 3: Semiotic Analysis of display and performance from Aurat March 2021

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Composition	The video is shot with a smartphone in vertical. It has no cuts and is in one flow.
Narrative Structure	The visuals that can be seen are many shirts hanging on ropes, a transgender person dancing, and a crowd cheering them on.
Audio Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The transgender can be seen dancing to the song <i>Ishq Nachaya</i> by Sona Mohapatra. • Other than the song, the only other audio element present in the video is the cheering of the crowd.
Symbols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The shirts displayed on ropes, marked by age and size, symbolize victims of rape and assault, challenging the notion that clothing determines vulnerability and highlighting that the real issue lies with the perpetrators. • The ages written on the shirts are written in red to indicate the crime.
Cultural Context	The videos show a transgender dancer in front of the crowd, not for money, but as a symbol of freedom, as a symbol of being seen, being acknowledged as a complete being, and not just as the third gender that is shunned by society only to hide in its dark corners.

Placards Analysis:

Aurat March 2022

Placard 1:



Figure 3: Placard from Aurat March 2022

Table 4: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2022

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	None present.
Textual Content	The placard stating “ <i>Inko masla Jism se nahin, Marzi se hai</i> ” critiques the backlash against “ <i>Mera Jism Meri Marzi,</i> ” emphasizing that the real issue is women's autonomy and the demand for consent, not their bodies or how they choose to dress.
Design Elements	The slogan is written on purple chart paper with black marker, with the words <i>Jism</i> and <i>Marzi</i> written in red for emphasis.
Cultural Icons	None present.
Connotation	This slogan shows the issues that this patriarchal society has when women tell them off and tell them that they cannot be objectified or treated as property or be told what to do. It shows how men get frustrated when the power is taken back.

Placard 2:



Figure 4: Placard from Aurat March 2022

Placards Analysis:

Table 5: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2022

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	None present.
Textual Content	The text in this placard reads “Akeli aurat Zimedari hoti hey, Moqa nahin”. This slogan serves as a reminder that if a man sees a woman alone, they should not see it as an opportunity to commit heinous crimes but should actually realize that it is their responsibility to make that woman feel safe and secure.
Design Elements	The slogan is written on a red chart paper and is written in Urdu with black maker. The combination of colors makes the slogan even more serious.
Cultural Icons	The placard got famous because it was held by the famous actress Mahira Khan, who joined the Aurat March that year in Karachi.
Connotation	This slogan represents the frustration faced by most women in their society, where they try to only stay in crowded places, so they won't risk falling into a traumatic situation. It serves as a reminder for men of their duty and their responsibility, rather than taking advantage of a woman just trying to reach a destination.

Video link: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca4UNLtv3NC/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng==>

Link 2: Display from Aurat March 2022

Video Analysis

Table 6: Semiotic Analysis of display from Aurat March 2022

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Composition	This is seemingly a horizontal video shot using a smartphone. The visual elements that can be seen in the video are the multiple standees, holding statements said by them, and a female journalist can be seen reporting on the display.
Narrative Structure	In this video we can see how the female journalist reads the statements given by many journalists, and she can be seen reading them and commenting on the men who have made it to the display because of their sexist remarks onscreen.
Audio Elements	The audio element present in this video is the voice of the journalist reporting and reading the placards in the hands of the standees.
Symbols	The symbols in this video are the standees, which were displayed to name and shame all those men who have made sexist remarks onscreen, or have victim-blamed blatantly.
Cultural Context	If we see this in the broader context, this display was a step towards calling out and canceling all misogynists who have been given platforms with huge followings, but are never held accountable for their discriminatory remarks.

Aurat March 2023

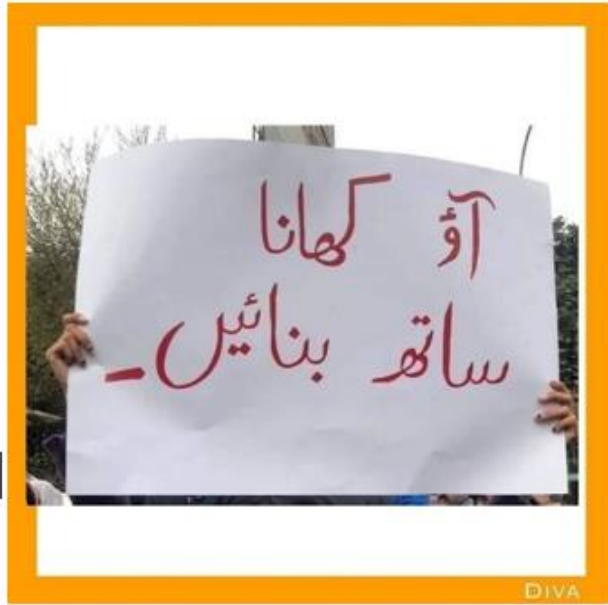


Figure 5: Placard from Aurat March 2023

Placard Analysis:

Table 7: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2023

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	None present.
Textual Content	The slogan written on the placard reads “ <i>Ao khana saath banayen</i> ”. This slogan serves as an olive branch, because the original viral slogan “ <i>Apna khana khud banao</i> ” had received a lot of criticism and hate. The new slogan promotes equality by promoting to work together.
Design Elements	The slogan is written with a red marker on a white chart paper.
Cultural Icons	None present.
Connotation	The slogan from which this new one originated, “ <i>Apna khana khud banao</i> ”, was commentary on the cultural implications in our society where it is assumed that women have to take the sole responsibility of the house, and that men cleaning up the house or cooking is not seen a norm. The slogan demanded that women have so much more potential than just cleaning or cooking all day, and that women should not have to cook for men as if they were children. The new slogan “ <i>Ao khana saath banayen</i> ” invites men to join the women in their household, help them out in cooking, and realize that they would not become any less of a man by working in their own house.

Placard 2:



Figure 6: Placard from Aurat March 2023

Placard Analysis:

Table 8: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2023

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	The placard shows an angry woman in desi clothes holding up a placard of Aurat March. It shows a bended knee, as if the woman was ready to attack something.
Textual Content	The text on the placard reads “ <i>Pidarshahi Ki deewar ko ek Dhaka or do</i> ”. This slogan encourages women to push and topple the patriarchal society that keeps them in constrains and objectifies women. This slogan represents a future without the patriarchal hold.
Design Elements	The placard has a brown background, with dark green leafy design on it. The text is written in Urdu and in yellow to make it stand out. The woman made on the poster can be seen wearing chapel, with green shalwar kameez and mustard dupatta. She can also be seen wearing golden bangles and hoops with open hair and is holding a slogan that is also dark brown with mustard writing on it.
Cultural Icons	The cultural icon that can be identified in this poster is the dressing of the woman, which shows the usual <i>desi</i> woman, fighting against the norm made by men. Mira Sethi, an actress and activist can be seen holding the poster, attending the 6 th Aurat March in Karachi.
Connotation	The cultural implication in this poster that can be identified is that in our culture, women retaliating against men is seen as a sin. This poster depicts the change coming in our society, where housewives, sisters, mother, women in general are realizing the power of unity, and are furious about the constraint put on them by the patriarchal society and are finally ready to bring it down.

Video link: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CqDLqv3pAni/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng==>

Link 3: *Display of Aurat March 2023*

Video Analysis

Table 9: Semiotic Analysis of display from Aurat March 2023

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Composition	The video is shot by a professional camera and is shot horizontally. In this video, we can see the display that was done for men to walk through. A tunnel was built, covered with black cloth and printed eyes of men.
Narrative Structure	This display was especially made for men so they could step into the shoes of women who have to go through this daily. The eyes represent the men who look at women walking on the street with lust and greed. They also represent all the men who catcall them and make them feel uncomfortable.
Audio Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A woman can be heard guiding the men through the tunnel and explaining the purpose of the display to them. • The second audio element present in the video is the sound of the cat calling showing men what women have to endure on a daily basis. Some of the cat calls were “<i>Kia bachi hey yaar</i>”, “<i>Boyfriend tou nahi apka koi?</i>”, and “<i>Very nice, Ankhen thakk gai hen</i>”.
Symbols	The eyes glued to the cloth represent the gawking men in the streets that make even walking on the street a task. The eyes can be seen staring, and they portray the sadistic nature of the men who put women through this.
Cultural Context	In a broader context, we see that women are told to not walk alone outside at night, or are told to not go anywhere alone, but the men who put them through this uncomfortable interaction are never questioned or restricted. In Pakistan, a woman rarely feels safe because of all the men who act like the eyes depicted, and make it hard for them to breathe, let alone walk alone. The purpose of making men walk through the tunnel is so they understand why women are done being quite, and are raising their voices against these men who make their life a living hell.

Aurat March 2024

Placard 1:



Figure 7: Placard from Aurat March 2024

Placard Analysis:

Table 10: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2024

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	None present
Textual Content	The slogan reads <i>Tu khud o badal tabb hi tou zamana badle ga</i> . This slogan serves as a reminder to all the people who criticize women to change rather than changing themselves for the betterment of the society.
Design Elements	The slogan in is written in black color on a plain white chart paper.
Cultural Icons	None present.
Connotation	The slogan is a taunt at all the men who school women on how to dress up, how to behave, when to leave their homes, and tell them to just stay hidden. It serves as a daunting reminder that if only men learn how to behave in this society, if they lower their eyes, and keep their malice hidden, and treat women with respect, then women would not even have to take any precautionary measures and would not have to get mansplained on how to present themselves in society.

Placard 2:



Figure 8: Placard from Aurat March 2024

Placard Analysis:

Table 11: Semiotic Analysis of placard from Aurat March 2024

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Symbols	The placard shows a face, with their brain visible, and it looks like a man blurting things.
Textual Content	The slogan on the placard is <i>mard bano, sir ka dard nahi!</i> This is a statement hinting at men creating problems in the life of women, and burdening them with tensions, making them miserable and unable to live their lives in peace.
Design Elements	The slogan is written on a green chart paper with black marker. On the side of the page is a man talking, with his brain showing too, and with curly hair.
Cultural Icons	None present.
Connotation	This placard encapsulates toxic masculinity and its effects on women, where men try to control every aspect of their lives by controlling how they dress, talk, and behave. This serves as a plea for men to abandon misogynistic behaviors and make the lives of the women around them easier.

Video link:

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4VfE-pic1y/?igsh=MXN0aWY5cG9lbnhxA==>

Link 4: Display from Aurat March 2024

Video Analysis

Table 12: Semiotic Analysis of display from Aurat March 2024

Element	Semiotic Analysis
Visual Composition	The video is shot on a professional camera in vertical framing. It shows the march happening, people chanting for Palestine, and kites hanging on the ropes.
Narrative Structure	We first get to see the marchers chanting for free Palestine, and then frames switch to the white kites hanging on the ropes, the number of kites is same as the number of days of genocide in Palestine leading up to the march. The video in the end shows that this display was inspired by the poem "If I must die" by Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer, who lost his life in the genocide on 6 December 2023.
Audio Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We hear chants regarding the genocide taking place in Palestine like "<i>falasteeni awaam ka katleyaam, band karo, band karo</i>" (stop the killings of civilians in Palestine. We also hear the chant "from <i>the river to the sea, Palestine will be free</i>". "<i>Free, free Palestine</i>" can also be heard.• Then we hear a volunteer describing the display. "that these kites mark 155 days since the Palestinian genocide started, that these kites bear the names of newborn martyred babies, and that today we march in their memory."
Symbols	The kites are white, with red flowers on them. The flowers embody the innocence of the babies who were martyred, the color red represents the blood that has been shed, and the white color of kites represents the shrouds in which these martyrs were buried.
Cultural Context	The display holds a lot of importance because of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. This display showed the solidarity of Pakistani women who stand with the innocents in Gaza who are being killed brutally, and this display serves as a symbol of protest against all who support the genocide. It also serves as a haunting reality check of how many days the genocide has continued for and how many innocent lives have been lost in the process.

The semiotic analysis of the Aurat March from 2021 to 2024 unveils a profound evolution in the narratives and themes surrounding gender dynamics in Pakistan. Each year's placards and displays

serve as poignant reflections of the changing landscape of feminist discourse and activism in the country. In 2021, the placards exhibited a strong emphasis on confronting the issue of the male gaze and the discomfort it imposes on women in public spaces. Visual symbols like masks and eyes were ingeniously employed to convey the message of women's safety and autonomy. Through slogans like *Mask upper, Ankhen neechay*, the Aurat March demanded a reevaluation of societal norms and etiquette, challenging men to respect women's boundaries and lower their gaze. The following year, in 2022, the placards continued to challenge patriarchal attitudes and behaviors, particularly addressing misconceptions surrounding women's autonomy and consent. Slogans like *Inko masla Jism se nahin, Marzi se hai* and *Akeli aurat Zimedari hoti hey, Moqa nahin* confronted the societal norms that perpetuate gender-based violence and restrict women's freedom in public spaces. By 2023, the Aurat March had further expanded its narrative to encompass broader issues of gender equality and dismantling patriarchal structures within households. Placards advocating for shared responsibilities in household chores and calling for the overthrow of patriarchal constraints symbolized a growing consciousness among activists about the interconnectedness of gender oppression across various spheres of life. In 2024, the Aurat March intensified its critique of toxic masculinity and its detrimental impact on women's lives. Placards like *Tu khud ko badal tabb hi tou zamana badle ga* and *Mard bano, sir ka dard nahi!* Served as bold challenges to men, urging them to introspect and change their behaviors for the betterment of society as a whole.

Throughout these years, the Aurat March emerged as a pivotal platform for women to assert their agency, demand equality, and challenge oppressive norms. The strategic use of visual and textual elements in placards and displays conveyed powerful messages, sparking conversations and provoking societal introspection. Moreover, the solidarity exhibited by the Aurat March with marginalized communities, such as the display in 2024 advocating for justice for victims of the Palestinian genocide, underscored the intersectional nature of feminist activism and its commitment to social justice on a global scale. Indeed, the analysis of the Aurat March displays from 2021 to 2024 highlights the evolution of the movement, its slogans, and its impact on Pakistani society. One of the most notable aspects is the changing tone of certain slogans over the years. As slogans like *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* gained viral attention and faced criticism, they were rephrased into softer or even more assertive tones in subsequent years, reflecting the movement's adaptability and response to feedback. Moreover, the analysis reveals the deliberate effort put into raising awareness about specific issues faced by women in Pakistan each year. From addressing the male gaze and public harassment to advocating for shared responsibilities in household chores, the Aurat March consistently highlights pressing gender-related issues and challenges societal norms that perpetuate inequality and violence against women. An intriguing aspect is the symbolic inclusion of men in the Aurat March displays, allowing them to experience, even momentarily, the daily challenges and dangers faced by women in public spaces. This tactic serves to foster empathy and understanding among men, encouraging them to become allies in the fight for gender equality.

Discourse Analysis of Comments on Aurat March 2021-2024

Aurat March 2021

The top comments under the placards and displays of 2021 unveil our cultural, religious, and ideological biases. In the comments, we can clearly identify some prominent ideologies such as patriarchy, religious conservatism, and cultural conservatism. By using phrases like “*deen say duri*” (distancing oneself from their religion) and by quoting different Surahs and Hadith, the religious extremists can be seen leaving no room for a conversation and can be seen schooling women, mostly with examples that don't even apply on Aurat March. The word “*Behayai*” (indecent) can be seen being repeated multiple times by religiously conservative men, sometimes calling the women “*behaya*” (indecent) and sometimes accusing them of spreading “*behayai*” (indecent). The religious extremist can be seen marginalizing Aurat March by accusing them of

leading women away from Islam, and justifying by sharing a narration by Ibn' Abbas (RA) that the Prophet (PBUH) said : “ I was shown hell-fire and the majority of its dwellers were women who were ungrateful.” By sharing references like these many conservatives accused the women who joined Aurat March of being ungrateful to their husbands and fathers, and called their disobedience a sin. (Tribune, 2021), A judge opened an investigation against Aurat March to investigate the alleged blasphemy allegations on them. The petition was lodged by a group of lawyers who called the march “un-Islamic and obscene”. The cultural conservatism can be identified in the comments made by women against the Aurat March. In the comment section the clothing is criticized more by women who used words like “*Beghariti*” (shamelessness) to convey their disgust. Women can be seen criticizing the women in Aurat March for asking for their rights and respect, as in their thinking the women who join Aurat March or identify as feminists are what is wrong with this society and deserve neither. An example of the harsh comments left is “*In auraton ko apni harkaten dekhni chahiye, saari beghartian karalo inse.*” (These women should look at themselves and see how shameless they are.) Many comments embody Pakistan’s socio-cultural and socio-political ideologies that are linked with the patriarchal system of Pakistan. Many men can be seen complaining about why women need power in the first place, when they are supposed to be good, submissive wives who look after their homes and nourish their children, as our culture expects them to. Patriarchy seems to be restricting women’s freedom and mobility, and by doing so is controlling the lives of Pakistani women (Akhtar et.al, 2021). A man commented, “*Mujhey shuru say hi beti ki khwaish hey, or men apni beti ko is galazat door rakhunga, ek essa baap banunga jo inkey baap jese nae hoga*” (I have always wanted to have a daughter, and when I have one I will keep her away from this foulness, and won’t be like their fathers), insinuating that women and daughters who participate in Aurat March disgrace their family by doing so. Many comments also portrayed a misogynistic mentality where men tried to belittle women by calling them toxic and shameless.

Aurat March 2022

The ideologies embedded in the comment section could be identified as patriarchy, religious conservatism, and feminism. Patriarchy can be seen dominating the other ideologies, while an undertone of mockery could be identified in religious conservatives' comments. The comments sections were heavily dominated by patriarchy, in the form of mocking, framing, and silencing the supporters of Aurat March. The harsh finality of their words left no space for counterargument or discourse, and so there were rarely any comments with replies on them. “*Auraton kay naam pey dhaba ho tum sab, Na gharon men chain hey Na bahir, bus apney jism ko dikhaney men lagi ho sab, actresses k kapre bhi kam ho rahe hen din ba din, or tum sabb unko follow karahi, ajeeb drama hai yeh Aurat March.*” (You all are stains in the name of women, you don’t have any peace in your homes or outside, you are all just interested in showing off your bodies, the clothes of actresses are also decreasing day by day and you all follow them, Aurat March is just a stupid drama) comments like these can be seen framing Aurat March projecting an image of them as women who promote indecency, and calling the movement a sham. Women are expected to tolerate performative displays of masculinity and be inconvenienced or uncomfortable as a result (Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018). To judge the women in the socio political context, comments like these were made “*Yeh jitney sarak wale card hen ye tou mardon ko pakarne chahiye they kiunke aurten drive karti hen tou sarak pe mard ko bohot hi dheyan say driving karni parti hai.*” (all the placards related to roads should have been held by men because men have to drive very carefully because of the women who drive) this comment can be seen calling women drivers incompetent, completely disregarding the fact that men are the ones who confuse them on the roads. Every woman who drives in Pakistan has heard an insult against her, either underlying in a joke, or just mockery. The comments with the underlying religious ideology were very few, but were daunting

nonetheless. These comments were not dominated by any gender as both males and females left these comments. “*Kafir ban kar nanga bhi dhoru, koi nae rokega*” (Accept that you are disbeliever, then no one will stop you even if you run naked) comments like these can be seen insinuating that women who don’t fully cover their bodies should stop complaining about being harassed or assaulted because it is their fault, and that if they were to just say that they were non-believers no one would raise any questions. In the socio-political context, this comment serves as a reminder of what women have to suffer from every day based on their clothing preferences and how religious extremists hold themselves to a higher regard and think they have the right to shun any person from society who does not oblige by their rules. According to (Khan S. A., 2022) the emergence of *Haya March* is also demonstrative of the fact that Aurat March is considered against the religious and cultural sentiments of the society. The first sighting of comments of support with the underlying ideology of feminism can be found in 2022. The hashtag “*March tu hoga*” (March will happen) can be seen many times, and comments like “*Louder for the people in the back*” can be seen showing support and agreeing with the placards and displays. These comments were the fewest that could be found, as mostly comments filled with hatred and disagreements dominated the space.

Aurat March 2023

Under the posts of 2023, the most rage encapsulated in the comments can be seen being delivered by people who strongly believe in patriarchy. Under placard 2 of 2023, the actress carrying the placard, Meera Sethi, received a lot of backlash. “*Tu maar daddu Sethi ko laot or phenk usay hindustan men*” (you kick frog looking Sethi, and throw him into India) “ *Tum jeson kay pidar sirf documents men hotay hen wesay bhi konsa pidar ko mantey ho, jo shareef larkiyon ko behka rahey ho ye bakwasiat apney takk hi rakho, rastey say bhatki hui larkion*” (your men are only written in documents, other than that when do you even acknowledge them, stop misdirecting innocent women, keep your bullshit to yourself you women who have strayed from the path) these kind of comments were done that framed the actress and created propaganda against her to tarnish her image. These kinds of comments silenced any support that could have been generated in the comment section in favor of the actress or the placard, as their harshness provided such finality to their words that there was no room left for debate.

“*Sath kamaney jao tou kuch share na karo. Phir sari zimadari mard pe dal do. Nikammi nikhattu auraten besharam*” (both of you go earn but you won’t share. Then you will put all the responsibility on men good for nothing, indecent women) comments like these mirror the socio political ideology and its implication on Pakistani society. This comment was made by a female, framing women who, as their husbands, were to cook with them, “good for nothing indecent women”. The insinuation that women want to earn too and want their husbands' help in the kitchen too, but won’t share their money, can be seen framing feminist values as selfish and financial independence as a problem.

Aurat March 2024

Aurat March 2024 showed a surprising turn, where some resistance in the form of discourse was present. Even the dominant ideologies did not get to implement the finality of their words. The ideologies that can be observed in the comment section are patriarchy as the most dominant, religious, and then feminism. The underlying dominant ideology, patriarchy, was in no way subtle in the comments. Men left laughing emojis, mocking the movement, and left comments like “*thu*” signaling to spitting motion. But this time, their comments were contradicted in discourse, or the men trying to defame or frame these women were put into place. “*Auraton kay masaail mard na btaye to mard say yeh demand bhi na karo ke wo is ka hal nikale, apne masle khud hal karo*” (if men are not to tell what women’s issues are, then don’t demand solutions from them, find the

solutions yourself) This comment was greeted with mockery: “*Tere se koi hal nikalwa raha hai? Tu pehle apni nokri dhund le*” (is anyone asking you for a solution? You should go and find yourself a job first). “As we’ve learnt, a woman’s wit is offensive. She can be the subject of many sexist jokes, but if she cracks one, your masculinity does as well” (Mohyidin, 2019). The socio-political context can be seen as a sub-ideology with patriarchy, framing women who participate in the Aurat March as indecent. “*Aurat March may sarey pakistan ki auraten nae hen, bus ghatiya nasal ki auraten hen. Alhamdulillah shareef khandan ki auraton ko apney ghar kay mardon kay barabar nae hona hai, na hi ho sakti hen*” (women from all over Pakistan don’t join Aurat March, only atrocious women do. Alhamdulillah women belonging to decent families don’t want to be equals with the men of their family, nor can they be). Comments like these can be seen creating propaganda against equality, showing it as a sign of disrespect to men, and by calling the women who join the Aurat March indecent and atrocious, marginalizing them and creating a negative perspective against them. Religious comments were few, but still very much present. One same narration that was narrated from Imran Ibn Hussain was written multiple times in the comments, that the prophet (PBUH) said “*I looked into paradise and I saw that the majority of its people were the poor. And I looked into hell and I saw that the majority of its people were women*”. These comments were framing the women who participated in Aurat March as sinners, and were schooling how the movement is godforsaken. Under the Palestine display, in the comments, a man wrote “*Allah aap ko hidayat de*” (May Allah guide you) and was replied with “*especially Israel ko*” (especially to Israel). This comment showed that no matter what issues are raised in Aurat March, what atrocities are spoken up about, people who want to oppose or malign them will stay blind to all their positive aspects. Placards that question even societal appropriations portray that women participating in the march are stubborn enough to stand against Islam (Irfan, 2020). The comments with support had a subtle hint of feminist ideology in them. Many sent emojis like hearts, fire, heart eyes, showing appreciation. In the comment section of 2024, the feminist ideology was not portrayed by only females but by males too. According to (Khan A. A., 2024) a 24-year-old student named Hamza said, “Women are here to march as a testament to the ongoing struggle for fair wages, for equal rights. It’s 2024, and they still have to discuss the grasp of patriarchy in their daily lives through such protests. This is a reminder that systemic barriers still exist”. Both genders equally showed support and wrote inspirational comments. A man wrote “*wujud e zan say hai tasweer e kayinat men rang, isi kay saaz say hai zindagi ka soz darun*” (the universe has colors because of the existence of women, with their instrument life is burning.” The discourse surrounding the Aurat March from 2021 to 2024 reveals a notable evolution in the dominant ideologies present in online comments. Initially, in 2021, religious backlash was predominant, with comments characterized by harsh language and sensationalism. The discourse lacked room for dialogue, as the finality of words stifled any potential conversation. Moving to 2022, both patriarchal and religious ideologies produced significant backlash against the Aurat March. While discourse remained limited, signs of support began to emerge, albeit sparingly. By 2023, religious commentary waned, but patriarchal backlash persisted strongly, often accompanied by socio-political undertones. Despite this, comments in support of the Aurat March showed a positive shift, with discourse becoming more apparent.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This longitudinal study highlights significant shifts in the perception and discourse surrounding the Aurat March from 2021 to 2024. Through semiotic analysis, we uncovered how placards and slogans evolved to reflect changing narratives about gender dynamics in Pakistan. The use of language and visual symbols has adapted, showing an awareness of societal backlash and a desire to present a more inclusive image. For instance, the shift from “*Apna Khana Khud banao*” to “*Ao khana saath banayen*” illustrates participants' efforts to soften messages while still advocating for

women's rights. Discourse analysis revealed a transformation in online comments, moving from religious extremism to more nuanced discussions about patriarchy and gender equality. The presence of supportive voices has grown, indicating a willingness to challenge misogynistic narratives. This evolution demonstrates the increasing engagement of both genders in conversations about gender justice, marking a positive trend toward more robust public discourse. In contributing to feminist theory, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding the intersectionality of gender oppression and the role of public discourse in shaping societal attitudes. The Aurat March stands as a powerful example of how grassroots activism can influence broader conversations about gender equality and social justice. By examining the changing ideologies and strategies employed by participants, we gain insights into the ongoing struggle for women's rights in Pakistan.

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