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If She Rejects, She Deserves Punishment: Tracing Incel Logic in Public Comments on the Murder of Sana Yousaf

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Abstract

This study investigates how entitlement-based and punishment-based narratives, often associated with incel ideology, are reproduced and justified in Pakistani social media discourse, focusing on public reactions to the murder of 17-year-old TikTok influencer Sana Yousaf. Violence against women in Pakistan is embedded within patriarchal structures, gendered power relations, and honor-based social norms. Using a qualitative approach and Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study examines textual, discursive, and social practices within 180 publicly visible social media comments collected from TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X. The analysis identifies recurring patterns of male entitlement, victim-blaming, moral policing, and religious or cultural justification of violence. Comments often frame female autonomy and rejection as provocations deserving punishment, reflecting the intersection of global incel ideology with local patriarchal values. Findings reveal that online discourse not only mirrors offline social hierarchies but also normalizes misogyny and violence against women, highlighting the urgent need for digital literacy, awareness campaigns, and policy interventions. This study contributes to understanding how transnational ideological frameworks, such as incel logic, manifest in South Asian digital spaces, shaping attitudes toward women's autonomy and reinforcing patriarchal control.

Keywords: Incel, Misogyny, Male entitlement, Victim-blaming, social media, Gender violence

Introduction

What could be the possible reasons behind the increasing number of cases of violence against women in Pakistan? The United Nations General Assembly

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defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (UN, 1993). In terms of gender parity, Pakistan ranked last (148 out of 48 countries) according to the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap report (Forum, 2025). According to the Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO), 373 cases of violence against women have been registered in the first half of 2025 (SSDO, 2025). Moreover, Human Rights Watch reports that approximately 1,000 women are murdered in so-called "honour killings" in Pakistan every year (Hassan, 2025). International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) posits violence against women is caused by gender inequality including unequal power relations, ascribing women lower status in society, etc. Social relationships are reciprocal but where society is stratified according to gender and classes, such as Pakistan, they become hierarchical and the power to decide lies in the dominant group. In such a male dominated society, the right to reciprocate in a relationship does not belong equally to both men and women; instead, male entitlement frequently dictates whether females may reciprocate. This issue sparks debates as various people relate it with different factors such as women's empowerment, gender norms, honour and rejection. Gendered based violence cannot be studied only in sociological terms but also through digital discourse patterns that often reproduce entitlement-based and punishment-based narratives towards women.

Entitlement-based and punishment-based narratives in online digital discourse can be understood by Incel ideology. The term "incel" is a neologism combining 'Involuntary' and 'calibate'. Incel ideology centers on beliefs that builds on sexual entitlement, female hypergamy beliefs (the claim that women naturally choose high-status men) and victimhood narratives, positioning women as being responsible for men's lack of intimacy. While Incel ideology has been studied in western sub-cultural contexts, not enough work has been done in South-Asian social media contexts, where patriarchal culture and honour-based morality

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prevail and shape public attitudes, even without a formal 'incel community'. This social media discourse reveals how incel ideology is reproduced through cultural, moral and religious rhetoric. Using the incel lens, the study situates these comments within global patterns of male entitlement and misogyny, while highlighting Pakistani social media contexts.

These attitudes became particularly visible in public comments on the murder of Sana Yousaf, a 17-year-old Pakistani Tiktok influencer who was killed for asserting her right to rejection. Her death sparked widespread discussion with polarized reactions ranging from condemnation to justification on social media. This makes the case academically significant as these social media comments provide enough dataset for the analysis of misogynistic narratives against women and how male entitlement towards women who assert autonomy can lead to extreme violence. These comments therefore offer insight into how entitlement-based narratives are reproduced in digital discourse, especially against women who reject male chauvinism in patriarchal contexts.

This study highlights how 80/20 ideology, which claims that only 20% of men are attracted to 80% of the women, commonly associated with incel communities, appear in these comments and how it is used to justify violence committed against women. It also outlines how narratives of entitlement and punishment are constructed when someone asserts the right to refuse male attention. This study addresses the following questions:

i. How do Incel logic and violence against women is reproduced and justified in public comments on Pakistani social media?
ii. Using the Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, what specific discursive strategies do commenters employ to reproduce entitlement-based and punishment-based narratives that justify violence against women?

The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis, using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, to analyze publicly visible comments under social media posts, collected through purposive sampling. Fairclough argues that language is social and carries ideologies closely linked to power, which contribute to the

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domination of some people over others. Hence this framework is appropriate for analyzing misogyny, patriarchy and male entitlement in digital comments. These digital comments reproduce social hierarchies, inequalities and justify violence against women. Fairclough divides CDA into three dimensions; textual analysis, discursive practice and social practice. Where textual analysis examines vocabulary, evaluate language, metaphors, and discursive markers of entitlement, discursive practice interprets how comments are produced, shared and normalized. Social practice on the other hand, connects comments to broader structures of patriarchy and incel ideology. This approach enables the study to reveal hidden ideologies embedded in digital social media discourse and analyze the reproduction of such ideologies in social attitudes.

This study analyses public comments on social media posts on Sana Yousaf's murder through Critical Discourse Analysis, employing Fairclough's-Three-Dimensional Method to trace the presence of incel ideology, examine how violence against women is justified and construct narratives of entitlement and punishment when someone asserts the right to refuse male attention.

Literature review

The term *"incel"* (involuntary celibate) originated in the late 1990s as part of an online support initiative created by a Canadian woman to provide a safe and empathetic space for individuals experiencing loneliness, romantic rejection, and sexual inexperience. In its earliest form, the incel identity was not gender-exclusive and lacked the hostility that later came to define it. According to its founder, the space was initially intended to be supportive, inclusive, and focused on emotional connection rather than blame, with discussions centered on social isolation rather than resentment toward women (Alana, 2018) .The term itself was a linguistic abbreviation of *"involuntary celibacy,"* later shortened to *"incel"* for ease of use.

Over time, however, the meaning and ideological orientation of the term underwent a significant transformation. As incel communities migrated to male-dominated online platforms associated with the broader *manosphere*, personal experiences of rejection increasingly became reframed as collective grievance.

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Scholars note that these spaces began to promote rigid gender binaries and hierarchical sexual economies, dividing men into "alphas" or "Chads" and women into "Stacys," while constructing incels as a marginalized and oppressed group within a supposedly gynocentric society (Ging, 2019)This ideological shift marked the transition of inceldom from a descriptive identity to a politicized worldview grounded in resentment, entitlement, and misogyny.

Empirical research highlights that contemporary incel ideology is closely associated with psychological distress, emotional suffering, and social alienation, which are then externalized as hostility toward women. A large-scale review by Sparks, Zidenberg, and Olver (2022) documents that incel communities have been linked to multiple acts of mass violence, including the Isla Vista killings in 2014, the Toronto van attack in 2018, and the Plymouth shooting in 2021. These attacks have collectively resulted in the deaths of more than fifty individuals, with perpetrators frequently framing their actions as retaliation against women and society for perceived sexual exclusion. Elliot Rodger, the perpetrator of the Isla Vista attack, has been widely glorified within incel spaces as a martyr, reinforcing the normalization of violence as a legitimate response to rejection.

Beyond acts of extreme violence, quantitative studies reveal severe mental health vulnerabilities among self-identified incels. An international survey of 272 incels found that 48% reported suicidal ideation, 64% exhibited depressive symptoms, 60% experienced anxiety, and approximately 25% displayed autism-related traits (Macro DeVettor, Gabriele Lo Buglio, Allice Barsanti, 2025). These findings indicate that incel ideology is sustained not only by misogynistic belief systems but also by collective narratives of suffering, despair, and emotional deprivation. Within incel discourse, suffering functions as both an identity marker and a unifying force, reinforcing in-group solidarity while justifying resentment toward women.

Thematically, incel discourse constructs women in deeply dehumanizing terms, often portraying them as morally inferior, emotionally shallow, and responsible for male suffering. (Macro DeVettor, Gabriele Lo Buglio, Allice Barsanti,

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2025) demonstrate that women are frequently described as "non-persons" who benefit from unearned privilege within a gynocentric social order. Women are accused of prioritizing physical appearance, wealth, and status (LMS theory) over emotional connection, while incels frame themselves as morally superior yet socially excluded. This narrative reinforces a sense of aggrieved entitlement, where women's autonomy and rejection are interpreted as unjust acts warranting punishment.

While incel ideology has been most visibly studied in Western contexts, scholars emphasize that it should not be understood as geographically confined. Instead, incel logic functions as a transferable ideological framework that can intersect with local patriarchal norms, religious morality, and honor-based value systems (Sugiura, 2021). In societies such as Pakistan, where women's behavior and visibility are already subject to moral regulation, incel ideology may not appear through explicit self-identification but rather through localized discourses of victim-blaming, entitlement, and justification of violence. Social media platforms provide spaces where these global ideological patterns merge with local cultural narratives, allowing incel logic to circulate and normalize misogyny even in the absence of organized incel communities.

Scholarly research on violence against women has consistently emphasized that such violence is embedded in gendered power relations and male entitlement rather than being the result of isolated individual behavior. Feminist scholarship argues that patriarchal societies normalize men's perceived right to women's attention, affection, and compliance, framing female refusal as a challenge to male authority rather than a legitimate expression of autonomy (Manne, 2018), (Kimmel, 2017). Studies on gender-based violence suggest that rejection often functions as a trigger in contexts where masculinity is constructed around dominance and control (Manne, 2018).

Research further indicates that men socialized within rigid gender hierarchies may interpret rejection as humiliation imposed by women, thereby legitimizing retaliatory responses. In such narratives, women are positioned not as autonomous subjects but as moral agents obligated to reciprocate male desire

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(Kimmel, 2017). This logic is particularly visible in societies where honour, gender conformity, and moral regulation of women's behaviour remain central to social organization (Sardar, 2016) . South Asian scholarship has highlighted how women's refusal, whether in romantic, marital, or moral contexts, has frequently been associated with social punishment, ranging from symbolic shaming to physical violence. However, much of this work has focused on familial or community settings, leaving digital spaces comparatively underexplored (Pakistan, 2023).

Recent academic literature has increasingly examined incel ideology as a framework for understanding entitlement-based hostility toward women. Incel discourse frames men's lack of sexual or romantic success as a consequence of women's alleged hypergamy and moral failure (Ging, 2019). Empirical studies of incel forums and online discussions reveal recurring themes of victimhood, sexual entitlement, and resentment toward women, who are positioned as responsible for men's deprivation (Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, Travis G. Coan)

Scholars argue that incel ideology does not merely express frustration but actively legitimizes violence by framing it as justified retaliation or moral correction. Women who reject male advances are frequently portrayed as deserving of punishment, while men are positioned as victims of an unjust sexual hierarchy (Ging, 2019), (Manne, 2018). Although incel communities have been predominantly studied in Western contexts, researchers caution against viewing incel ideology as geographically bounded. Instead, incel logic is understood as a transferable ideological framework that can intersect with local cultural norms and patriarchal values, even in the absence of explicitly organized incel communities (Sugiura, 2021).

Social media platforms have been widely recognized as significant sites for the reproduction and normalization of misogynistic ideologies. Studies of online discourse demonstrate that anonymity, algorithmic amplification, and collective reinforcement enable entitlement-based narratives to circulate with minimal social consequence (Weiser, 20106). Misogynistic commentary often operates

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through moral judgment and victim-blaming, particularly in cases where women are perceived to have violated gender norms related to modesty or obedience (Nina Henry and Abigail Powell, 2018)

From a discourse-analytic perspective, online comments function as spaces where ideology is both produced and normalized. Research indicates that responses to violence against women on social media frequently shift responsibility from perpetrators to victims, framing women's autonomy as provocation rather than a right (Weiser, 20106). These discursive patterns are especially significant in patriarchal societies, where digital spaces become extensions of offline moral policing rather than sites of resistance.

Existing scholarship on violence against women in Pakistan has largely focused on honour killings, domestic violence, and legal inequality, situating these practices within patriarchal and honour-based moral systems (Pakistan, 2023). Scholars argue that women's bodies and choices are often treated as markers of family or community honour, making female autonomy a site of social regulation and control (Sardar, 2016).

More recent studies examining Pakistani media and online discourse suggest that public responses to violence against women frequently involve moral evaluation of victims rather than sustained condemnation of perpetrators. Women who are visible in public or digital spaces are often subjected to intensified scrutiny and blame. Despite growing attention to online harassment, limited research has examined how global ideological frameworks, such as incel logic, intersect with local patriarchal norms in Pakistani social media discourse (Nina Henry and Abigail Powell, 2018)

The literature establishes that violence against women is closely linked to male entitlement, rejection, and patriarchal power structures. Research on incel ideology provides insight into how entitlement-based narratives legitimize hostility toward women (Ging, 2019), (Manne, 2018) while studies on digital misogyny highlight the role of online discourse in normalizing such ideologies (Weiser, 20106). However, there remains a significant gap in examining how

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incel logic operates within Pakistani social media contexts, where honour-based morality and patriarchy shape public responses to women's autonomy.

This study addresses this gap by employing Critical Discourse Analysis to examine public comments related to the murder of Sana Yousaf, tracing how narratives of entitlement and punishment are discursively constructed and justified within Pakistani digital spaces (Fairclough, 1995).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA**)** to examine public comments on the murder of Sana Yousaf. CDA is suitable for this research as it allows for the identification of hidden ideologies, power dynamics, and social hierarchies within digital discourse (Fairclough, 1995). The study applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which enables analysis of textual language, discursive practices, and the broader social context in which misogynistic narratives are produced and normalized.

The dataset originates from 180 publicly visible comments collected by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF, 2025) across TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X, following the murder of Sana Yousaf. For this study, a representative subset of comments was selected using purposive sampling**,** focusing on those that directly addressed male entitlement, female rejection, or moral judgments regarding the murder. Comments that were irrelevant, neutral, or off-topic, such as those expressing general sympathy without engaging with gendered narratives, were **omitted** from analysis. This approach ensures that the analysis captures recurring patterns of entitlement, punishment, and victim-blaming without compromising the validity of the findings.

The analysis involved systematic coding of comments for themes including male entitlement, punishment for rejection, victim-blaming, and glorification of violence. Using Fairclough's CDA framework (1995), the study interprets how language reflects societal norms, patriarchy, and cultural morality, connecting digital discourse to broader patterns of male entitlement and misogyny (Ging, 2019), (Sugiura, 2021)Only publicly accessible comments were analyzed, and

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no personal identifiers were disclosed to maintain ethical standards (Nina Henry and Abigail Powell, 2018).

This methodology allows the study to explore how incel logic and entitlement narratives are reproduced and justified in Pakistani social media contexts, highlighting the intersection of digital misogyny with local patriarchal and honor-based norms**.**

Data Analysis

The selected Facebook comments, along with the broader dataset collected by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF, 2025), reveal entrenched patterns of entitlement, victim-blaming, and justification of violence. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework (Fairclough, 1995) these comments can be analyzed at textual, discursive, and social practice levels, showing how misogynistic narratives are reproduced and normalized in Pakistani digital spaces.

Textual Analysis

At the textual level, both the DRF dataset and the selected Facebook comments frequently employ derogatory labels, moral judgment, and causal constructions to dehumanize the victim and justify her murder. For example, DRF (2025) reported comments reducing Sana Yousaf to sexually objectified labels and linking her online visibility to punishment. Similarly, Facebook users wrote: *"Mujhe Sana Yusuf ke personal mamlaat lagte hain"* and *"Jo hua behtar ho gaya. Gand ta dhair ho gaya. Bure kaam ka bura anjaam…"*, framing the victim's behavior as the cause of her death. Such lexical choices reflect sexual entitlement and moral policing, where the language itself encodes the right to judge.

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Discursive Practice

At the discursive level, these comments illustrate how justification of violence is co-constructed in conversation. One Facebook interaction shows this clearly: a user speculates that there must be a reason behind the murder (*"Bina reason kuch nahi hota…"*), while other responds that killing cannot be justified (*"Maarna hal nahi tha janab"*), and the first user partially retracts but continues to frame female behavior as suspicious. DRF (2025) found similar patterns in their analysis of TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X comments, where discussions often link morality, female visibility, and punishment, normalizing male entitlement in digital spaces. Another example is: *"Tamaam Pakistani bhaiyon se guzarish hai ki apni behnon ko apni had mein rakhle… Unko social media mein istaha viral hone ki ijazat mat de"*, reinforcing paternalistic surveillance and collective moral authority over women, as also highlighted in the DRF dataset.

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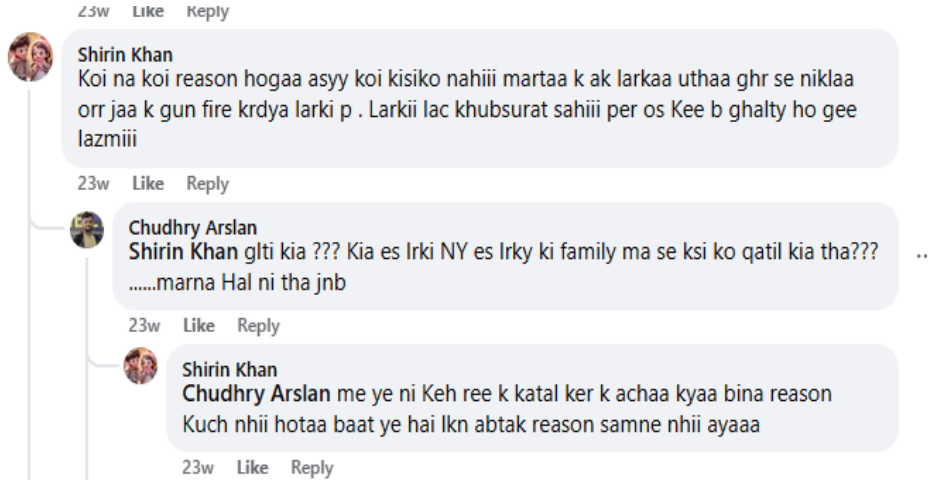
Social Practice

At the social practice level, these comments reproduce and reinforce broader patriarchal hierarchies and incel logic. Both DRF (2025) and the Facebook comments embed narratives of punishment and moral correction in religious and cultural discourse: *"Phir jab khuda ko koi cheez pasand na aaye, toh uska anjaam aisa hota hai"* and *"Allah ta'ala tamaam TikTokers ke bhaiyon, cousins ko ghalazat saaf karne ki himmat de"*. The platforms become spaces where male entitlement, moral policing, and victim-blaming intersect, effectively normalizing gendered violence in online and offline contexts. DRF (2025) highlighted that such discourse was widespread across TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, showing consistent themes of entitlement, punishment, and glorification of violence toward women who assert autonomy.



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Across both DRF's dataset and the selected Facebook comments, several recurring themes emerge:

1. **Entitlement and moral policing** – the victim is blamed for asserting autonomy or being visible online.
2. **Justification of violence** – murder is framed as a morally sanctioned or inevitable outcome.
3. **Patriarchal surveillance** – men are positioned as protectors or regulators of female behavior.
4. **Integration of religious morality** – Islamic references are used to legitimize punishment.
5. **Normalization of online misogyny** – such discourse circulates widely, reinforcing cultural hierarchies and patriarchal norms.

In sum, the combination of the (DRF, 2025)dataset and selected Facebook comments shows how **incel logic, male entitlement, and punitive narratives** are reproduced and justified in Pakistani digital spaces, highlighting the urgent need to address online misogyny and its real-world consequences.

Data Discusion

The data analysis shows clear patterns of male entitlement, moral policing, and victim-blaming in Pakistani social media, especially in response to the murder of Sana Yousaf. Both the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF, 2025) dataset and the selected Facebook comments show that many people blame women for the violence they face, seeing their autonomy, online presence, or behavior as a reason for punishment. This connects with incel ideology, which presents women's refusal or independence as a provocation that "deserves" retaliation (Ging, 2019; Manne, 2018).

At the textual level, comments use causal language and moral judgment. For example, phrases like **"Jo hua behtar ho gaya. Bure kaam ka bura anjaam…"** and DRF's examples of reducing Sana to sexualized labels suggest that her death was seen as a deserved outcome. In Pakistan, these words are often mixed with religious or cultural ideas, like **"Phir jab khuda ko koi cheez**

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pasand na aaye, toh uska anjaam aisa hota hai", giving moral and religious approval to punishment.

At the discursive level, the conversations show how people create and support this logic together. In one Facebook comment, a user says **"Bina reason kuch nahi hota…"** suggesting there must be a reason behind the murder, while the other replies that killing cannot be justified (**"Maarna hal nahi tha janab"**). Even when challenged, the first user still hints that female behavior is suspicious. DRF (2025) found the same patterns across TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X, where discussions connect morality, women's visibility, and punishment, making male entitlement seem normal. Comments like **"Tamaam Pakistani bhaiyon se guzarish hai ki apni behnon ko apni had mein rakhle…"** show how people position men as protectors and rulers of women's behavior, reinforcing the idea that women must follow social rules.

At the social level, these comments reflect wider patriarchal ideas and local honor-based norms. Both DRF and Facebook examples show that punishment for women is seen as a moral or social duty. Comments like **"Allah ta'ala tamaam TikTokers ke bhaiyon, cousins ko ghalazat saaf karne ki himmat de"** show how religion is used to justify men controlling women's behavior. Social media platforms become spaces where male entitlement, moral judgment, and victim-blaming come together, making violence against women seem acceptable.

From both DRF's dataset and the selected Facebook comments, some main themes appear:

1. **Entitlement and moral policing** – blaming the victim for being visible or independent.
2. **Justification of violence** – suggesting murder or harm is a fair or natural result.
3. **Patriarchal surveillance** – positioning men as protectors or controllers of women.
4. **Use of religious morality** – using Islam or cultural ideas to support punishment.
5. **Normalization of online misogyny** – these ideas spread widely and become part of social behavior.

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Overall, the comments show how male entitlement and punishment-based thinking are repeated and accepted in Pakistani social media. They make it clear that online spaces reflect and strengthen social ideas about controlling women, punishing rejection, and linking morality to female behavior. These patterns show why it is important to address online misogyny and to teach people about women's rights and autonomy.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media commentary on the murder of Sana Yousaf reflects clear patterns of male entitlement, victim-blaming, and justification of violence. Analysis of both the DRF (2025) dataset and selected Facebook comments shows that women's autonomy, visibility online, or behavior is frequently interpreted as a legitimate reason for punishment. Comments often position women as responsible for men's actions, suggesting that rejecting male attention warrants retaliation. Religious, cultural, and moral justifications are repeatedly invoked, making such violence appear acceptable within these digital spaces.

The findings further reveal that incel ideology, including ideas of sexual entitlement, female responsibility for male frustration, and punishment for rejection, is present within Pakistani social media discourse even in the absence of formally organized communities. These patterns intersect with local patriarchal norms, creating a digital environment where misogyny is normalized and victim-blaming becomes a socially accepted response. Social media platforms, through algorithmic amplification and public visibility, further reinforce these narratives, highlighting how online discourse can reflect and strengthen offline patriarchal structures and moral policing of women.

Overall, the analysis emphasizes that these discussions are not merely textual or online phenomena; they represent and reinforce real-world social practices that regulate women's behavior and autonomy. By framing rejection or visibility as morally punishable, these digital narratives perpetuate entrenched power hierarchies and highlight the urgent need to address the normalization of gendered violence in both online and offline contexts.

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Based on these findings, it is important to take action to reduce these harmful narratives. Social media platforms should remove posts that promote violence or blame women. Awareness campaigns and education should teach users about women's rights, consent, and online responsibility. Women should also have safe spaces and easy ways to report threats and harassment. Finally, research and policy should work together to use findings from online discussions to guide laws and social programs that prevent online harassment and gender-based violence. Addressing these issues is necessary to make online spaces safer for women and challenge the culture of misogyny.

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