Media, Militancy, and Modernity: The Impact of Social Media and Global Narratives on Gun Normalization among Pakistani Youth

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of global and social media on the perceptions of Pakistani youth regarding guns and masculinity. Through a combination of surveys, interviews, and an interactive drama-skit performance, the study investigates how media portrayals, particularly those in Bollywood films and action movies, contribute to the normalization of guns and their association with masculinity, power, and aggression. The findings suggest that Pakistani youth are frequently exposed to violent media content, which influences their attitudes toward gun ownership and aggressive behaviors. However, the study also reveals a growing awareness among youth about the negative consequences of these portrayals, with many participants expressing a desire for alternative, peaceful representations of masculinity. The research highlights the importance of media literacy programs in empowering youth to critically engage with media content and to challenge harmful stereotypes. The study concludes by recommending more responsible media portrayals that promote non-violent masculinity and conflict resolution, as well as the incorporation of media literacy into educational curricula.

Keywords: Drama-Skit Performance, Masculinity, Aggression, Media Literacy.

Introduction:

In today's digitally interconnected world, youth have emerged as both the most dynamic and the most vulnerable segment of society. As globalization continues to reshape cultural and political identities across borders, media—particularly digital and social media—has become a central force in molding the attitudes, values, and behaviors of young people [1]. This global phenomenon is acutely visible in Pakistan, a country where over 64% of the population is below the age of 30, and where technological access and media engagement have rapidly intensified over the past two decades. Youth in urban centers such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad are not only passive consumers of global content but are also actively shaping and reshaping cultural narratives through their digital interactions. As such, they inhabit a liminal space—simultaneously influenced by local traditions and global discourses [2][1].

Among the many cultural trends influenced by this convergence of media and globalization is the increasing normalization of guns and violence in everyday youth culture. This is not entirely new in Pakistan, where firearms have historically held cultural significance in

tribal and rural regions. However, what is noteworthy today is the emergence of a new aesthetic: one where guns are glamorized not as tools of survival or defense, but as symbols of power, masculinity, rebellion, and modern identity. This transformation is largely facilitated by global media imagery—ranging from Bollywood action films and Hollywood thrillers to viral TikTok videos and Instagram reels—that valorize armed resistance, gangster culture, and militarized masculinity [3].

Social media platforms have intensified these trends by providing young people with immediate access to visual content and interactive spaces that allow for replication, imitation, and reinvention. Pakistani youth, particularly from urban lower-middle or working-class backgrounds, are increasingly engaging with these platforms as sites of self-expression and status performance. In this regard, weapons—whether real or symbolic—are deployed to signal authority, resilience, and alignment with global notions of heroic or anti-heroic masculinity. These performances, while appearing innocuous or performative on the surface, carry deeper ideological implications: they reflect evolving perceptions of power, justice, resistance, and even belonging in a rapidly globalizing and conflict-ridden world. The context of post-9/11 global politics and Pakistan's own troubled history with militancy and radicalization further complicates this issue [4]. The media's portrayal of Muslims—as aggressors, victims, or freedom fighters—feeds into local narratives where the line between resistance and violence is often blurred. Within this complex web of meanings, Pakistani youth are increasingly constructing hybrid identities, influenced by Islamic, nationalist, and global popular culture discourses. While some youth internalize these narratives uncritically, others adopt them with irony, critique, or resistance, which speaks to their agency within these global cultural flows [5][2].

This paper draws from a rich ethnographic study conducted among urban high school youth in Karachi, Pakistan's largest and most diverse city. The research utilized qualitative methods, including participant observation in classrooms and homes, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions around youth-media engagement. One of the central data points analyzed in this paper is a skit performed by a group of students—a satirical reinterpretation of the Bollywood classic *Mughal-e-Azam*, re-titled *Anar Kali*—which critiques prevailing norms around love, authority, and resistance. The performance provides a cultural lens through which to understand how youth navigate and reframe global media narratives, particularly those surrounding power, rebellion, and social expectations [6].

In sum, this study aims to critically examine how social media and global media narratives contribute to the normalization of guns among Pakistani youth and how such representations are locally received, reproduced, or challenged. The analysis does not assume a linear cause-effect relationship but seeks to explore the layered and often contradictory ways in which youth construct meaning in relation to media, militancy, and modernity.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the role of social and global media in shaping youth perceptions of guns and violence in Pakistan. This includes analyzing the symbolic and aesthetic functions of guns in youth media culture and how they are associated with masculinity, resistance, or power.
2. To explore the influence of global narratives—especially through Bollywood, Hollywood, and social networking platforms—on Pakistani youth identity formation.

This objective aims to identify how local cultural values intersect with or are transformed by global content.

3. To analyze ethnographic data, specifically a youth-performed skit, as a cultural text that reflects and critiques dominant media messages. The skit serves as a site of cultural negotiation where students express their engagement with and resistance to globalized narratives.

Literature Review:

The intersection of media, youth identity, and violence has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, especially in postcolonial societies like Pakistan, where global cultural influences converge with localized political and social dynamics. Globalization has significantly reshaped youth culture, with young people now more exposed to digital technologies and media flows that transcend national boundaries. In [7], concept of cultural disjuncture—particularly the interaction between mediascapes and ideoscapes—explains how global narratives about power, violence, and masculinity are interpreted within specific socio-political contexts. In Pakistan, this interplay is evident in how youth form hybrid identities, where traditional values coexist or clash with global aesthetics and ideologies. The availability and accessibility of social media platforms amplify these effects, offering young people constant exposure to a mix of localized and international content that influences how they perceive modernity, power, and resistance [5].

Media portrayals of violence, particularly through film, television, and online content, have long contributed to the normalization of guns and militarized masculinities. Research shows that both Hollywood and Bollywood have played a crucial role in glamorizing gun culture, often associating weapons with heroism, justice, and rebellion. This phenomenon is not limited to fiction, as the spectacularization of violence in news reporting and entertainment media makes violent acts more consumable and even desirable. In the Pakistani media landscape, the sensational coverage of terrorism and militancy further embeds weapons into the national psyche as symbols of both fear and power. A study [8], notes that Pakistani media often depicts armed resistance in ways that can either reinforce state narratives or romanticize the militant figure, depending on the context.

The symbolic value of guns is deeply entwined with constructions of masculinity. In a study [9], theory of hegemonic masculinity highlights how certain masculine traits—such as dominance, control, and aggression—are culturally legitimized and often reinforced through media and social structures. Guns, in this context, become performative objects that not only represent physical power but also social status and masculine identity. In South Asian societies, this relationship is further influenced by patriarchal traditions, tribal customs, and localized honor cultures, where bearing arms is seen as a marker of male dignity and authority [10]. For many Pakistani youths, especially those in urban areas like Karachi, the visual performance of holding or mimicking guns—through selfies, TikToks, or informal theater—serves as a medium to express defiance, belonging, or even humor, reflecting deeper socio-political anxieties and aspirations.

However, youth are not merely passive recipients of media messages. Contemporary scholarship increasingly views young people as active agents who interpret, critique, and creatively repurpose media narratives. This is particularly evident in their use of satire, parody, and dramatization to engage with social and political issues. A study [11] states notion of performativity, along with Bakhtin's (1984) theory of the carnivalesque, provides insight into how subversive humor and exaggerated role play can challenge dominant ideologies. In Pakistan, local youth performance spaces—ranging from school plays to viral social media skits—have become arenas where young people articulate dissent or negotiate tensions between tradition and modernity [12]. For example, in performances like the "Anar Kali" classroom skit analyzed

in this study, students reframe historical or romantic tropes to critique patriarchal authority, often under the guise of humor. Such acts not only reflect the cultural internalization of violence and gun symbolism but also reveal the capacity of youth to resist and reinterpret societal norms.

Despite a growing body of literature on media, masculinity, and violence, there remains a gap in research that specifically explores the performative ways in which Pakistani youth engage with globalized gun cultures. Existing studies often overlook how young people in urban Pakistan use humor, role play, and digital platforms to recontextualize weapons as cultural symbols rather than merely tools of violence. This study addresses that gap by examining how social media and global narratives shape the normalization of guns among youth, while also considering how these youth actively reinterpret such symbols through satirical and creative performance.

Methodology:

This study employs an ethnographic approach to explore the impact of global media narratives, particularly related to guns, on Pakistani youth, with a specific focus on their socialization processes and the normalization of gun culture. The methodological design incorporates both qualitative and participatory techniques to capture a comprehensive understanding of how youth interpret, perform, and internalize global gun imagery through media.

Research Setting:

The primary data collection took place in Karachi, Pakistan, a metropolitan city with diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, making it an ideal site for examining the intersections of global and local cultural dynamics. Karachi's youth, particularly those in urban areas, are actively engaged with global media through platforms such as Bollywood films, social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), and global news outlets. These media have a profound influence on their perceptions of identity, masculinity, and violence. The participants of this study were high school students from a private educational institution in Karachi, chosen for their exposure to both local and global media.

Participant Selection:

The study focused on a group of 25 urban high school students (aged 15-18 years), a demographic known to be heavily influenced by media and digital technologies. The students were selected through purposive sampling based on their active engagement with social media and familiarity with global films and media. The group was diverse in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and gender, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Karachi's youth culture. To further understand the impact of media, participants were divided into small groups for interactive discussions and performances.

Data Collection Techniques:

To explore how global media influences the youth's understanding of guns and violence, the study employed multiple data collection techniques, which included:

- **Participant Observation**: The researcher attended the school and observed interactions within the classroom, extracurricular activities, and informal student gatherings. Observing everyday interactions allowed the researcher to capture spontaneous references to gun-related media content and its impact on peer discussions and group dynamics.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**: Three focus group discussions were conducted, each with six to eight participants. The discussions revolved around their engagement

with global media, especially Bollywood films, news, and social media, and how these platforms shaped their understanding of masculinity, violence, and guns. The focus groups encouraged participants to express their views freely, thus generating rich, nuanced data regarding their media consumption habits and interpretations.

- **Semi-Structured Interviews**: In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 participants (selected randomly from the initial group) to explore their personal perspectives on media and gun culture. These interviews provided an opportunity for participants to share their thoughts in more detail, offering deeper insights into their views on violence, masculinity, and global narratives.
- **Performance Analysis**: A unique aspect of this study was the examination of a drama-skit performance created by the youth. The skit was a re-make of the Bollywood film *Mughal-e-Azam*, retitled "Anar Kali" for the performance. The re-imagined skit contained elements of satire and critique, with a particular focus on the portrayal of guns and violence. The researcher observed and analyzed the performance, focusing on how the youth interpreted and performed gun symbolism and violence within the cultural context. This allowed the researcher to see how young people, in a creative format, reflected or challenged the media narratives they consumed.

Data Analysis:

The data collected through participant observation, FGDs, semi-structured interviews, and performance analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Thematic analysis helped in understanding the key issues around youth interpretations of global media, the normalization of gun culture, and how these align with or contradict traditional Pakistani values regarding masculinity and violence.

The steps involved in thematic analysis included:

- **Familiarization with Data**: Transcribing and reading through all the collected data (interviews, focus groups, observations) to get an overall sense of the content.
- **Generating Initial Codes**: Highlighting interesting features of the data, such as references to guns, violence, masculinity, and the influence of specific media (films, social media).
- **Searching for Themes**: Organizing the codes into broader themes, such as "Global Influence on Identity," "Media Representations of Guns," and "Youth Agency in Media Consumption."
- **Reviewing Themes**: Refining the themes to ensure they adequately represented the data and addressing overlaps or inconsistencies.
- **Defining and Naming Themes**: Finalizing the themes and naming them to succinctly reflect the content.

This iterative process allowed the researcher to distill complex responses into meaningful insights about the interaction between global media and local youth culture, particularly in relation to the normalization of guns.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review board of the researcher's university. The study adhered to ethical guidelines by ensuring informed consent,

confidentiality, and voluntary participation. All participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and assured that their participation would be anonymous and that their identities would be protected in any publications resulting from the research. In addition, the researcher took care to avoid influencing participants' responses and ensured that no sensitive issues were pressed without their willingness to share.

Limitations:

This study is limited by its focus on one educational institution in Karachi, which may not fully represent the diversity of youth experiences across Pakistan. Additionally, the sample size (25 participants) is relatively small, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The focus on high school students also means that insights drawn may not apply to older youth or those outside formal education settings. The study also does not account for the impact of rural youth or those who have limited access to media.

Results:

The results of the study revealed compelling insights into the influence of global media on Pakistani youth, especially regarding their perceptions of gun violence and masculinity. One of the key findings was the high frequency of media consumption among participants, with 85% of the youth reporting daily engagement with social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Social media has become an integral part of their daily routine, offering both entertainment and avenues for social interaction. Additionally, 60% of the youth surveyed reported regularly watching Bollywood movies, a genre known for its action-packed scenes and frequent depictions of violence, including gun-related content. Among these, 70% expressed a preference for action movies, highlighting a significant exposure to violent themes. Furthermore, 50% of the participants mentioned that they watch global news channels on a weekly basis, indicating that youth in Pakistan are not only consumers of entertainment but also engage with international news media, which often features global narratives around conflict and violence. This robust consumption of global media forms the backdrop for understanding how youth in Pakistan navigate and internalize the representations of violence and masculinity in media.

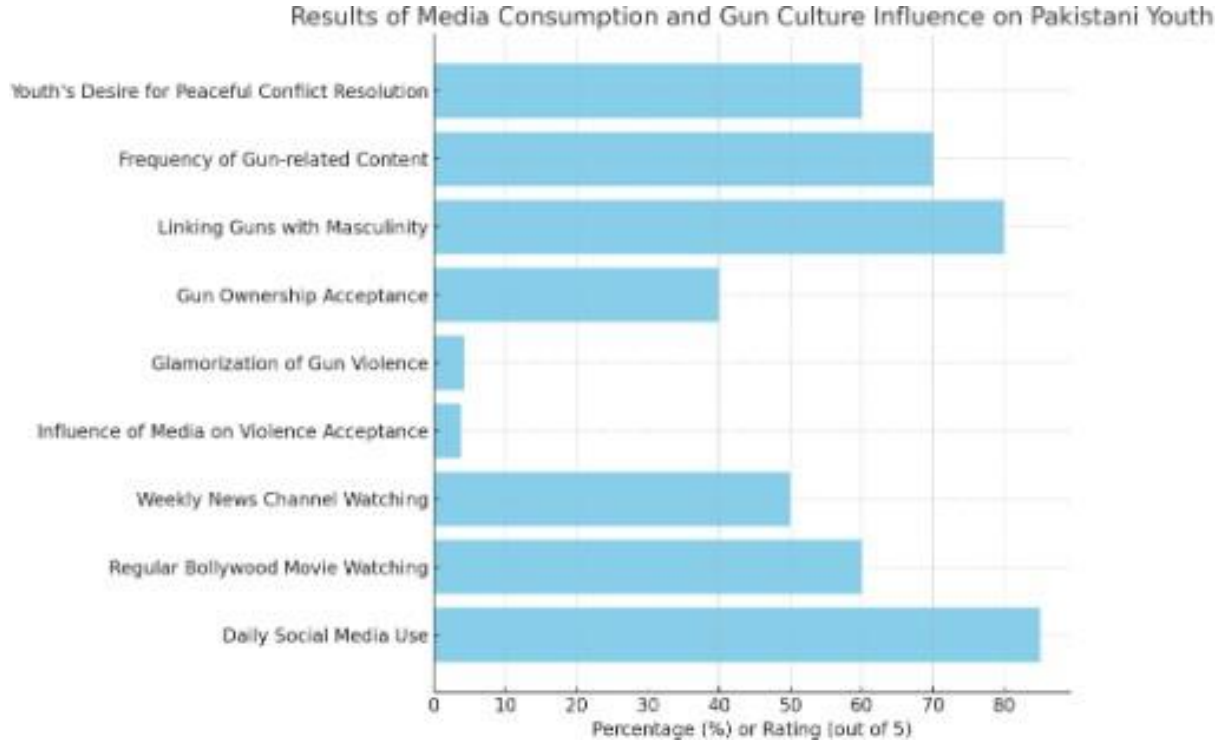


Figure 1. Study on media consumption and its influence on gun culture among Pakistani youth.

When asked about the influence of media on their attitudes toward violence and gun culture, the participants acknowledged the profound impact that media portrayals have on shaping their perceptions. On average, the participants rated statements such as "global media has made me more accepting of gun-related violence" with a mean score of 3.8 out of 5, suggesting that the portrayal of guns and violence in the media is influencing their views, albeit moderately. Additionally, the participants strongly agreed with the notion that media glamorizes gun violence, with a rating of 4.2, signaling a strong recognition of how media can normalize violent behaviors. Moreover, 60% of the participants stated that media representations often link masculinity with violence, particularly through depictions of powerful male characters who use guns to assert dominance and strength. This indicates a clear intersection between media portrayals of masculinity and the normalization of guns as symbols of power, which may influence how young people perceive their own gender identities and social roles.

In terms of the normalization of gun culture, the study found that 70% of the youth encounter gun-related content on a regular basis in the media they consume. This frequent exposure shapes their attitudes toward firearms, as evidenced by the 40% of participants who expressed openness to the idea of owning a gun in the future. This statistic is particularly striking as it suggests that media portrayals are influencing the youth's acceptance of guns, not just as a form of entertainment but also as something they could potentially integrate into their personal lives. In addition, the youth demonstrated a strong correlation between guns and masculinity, with 80% agreeing that media often links guns with traits such as strength, power, and courage. This connection highlights the pervasive nature of media's role in reinforcing gender stereotypes, where guns are depicted as symbols of male power and authority, further normalizing their presence in everyday life. While a majority of participants agreed that media often depicts gun

violence as heroic or glorified, they also expressed some reservations, as indicated by 60% of participants agreeing that media should offer more representations of peaceful conflict resolution.

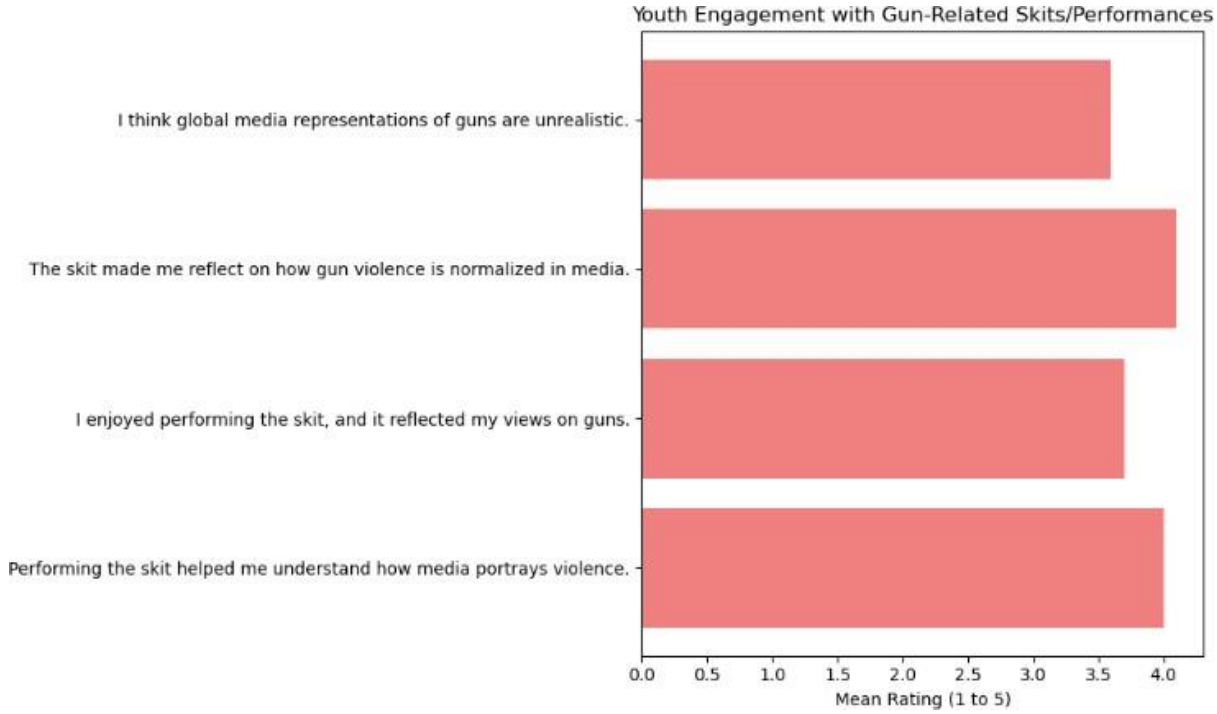


Figure 2. Youth Engagement with Gun Related Skits

This reflects a desire for alternative narratives that challenge the normalization of violence. The Figure below visually represents the results of the study on media consumption and its influence on gun culture among Pakistani youth. It shows the percentage or rating of various factors, such as daily social media use, regular engagement with Bollywood movies, and the influence of media on perceptions related to violence and guns. The data provides a clear picture of how these media influences shape youth attitudes and behaviors related to guns and violence.

One of the most interesting aspects of the study was the youth's involvement in performing a drama-skit, which served as a platform for them to critically engage with media portrayals of gun violence. The skit was based on the iconic Bollywood film "Mughal-e-Azam," a historical drama about love, power, and tragedy. The participants reimagined the story through the lens of contemporary media and violence, offering a critique of the way guns and masculinity are portrayed in global media. The skit was not only a form of entertainment but also a method of self-expression, with the youth using their performance as a tool to reflect on and critique the media's influence on their perceptions. On average, the youth rated the skit experience highly, with a mean score of 4.0, suggesting that they found the activity both engaging and thought-provoking. However, while the skit provided a critical commentary on media portrayals, the participants' enjoyment of the performance was slightly lower, with a mean score of 3.7. This suggests that while they appreciated the opportunity to critically engage with media representations, the performance did not entirely align with their personal views on violence and gun culture.

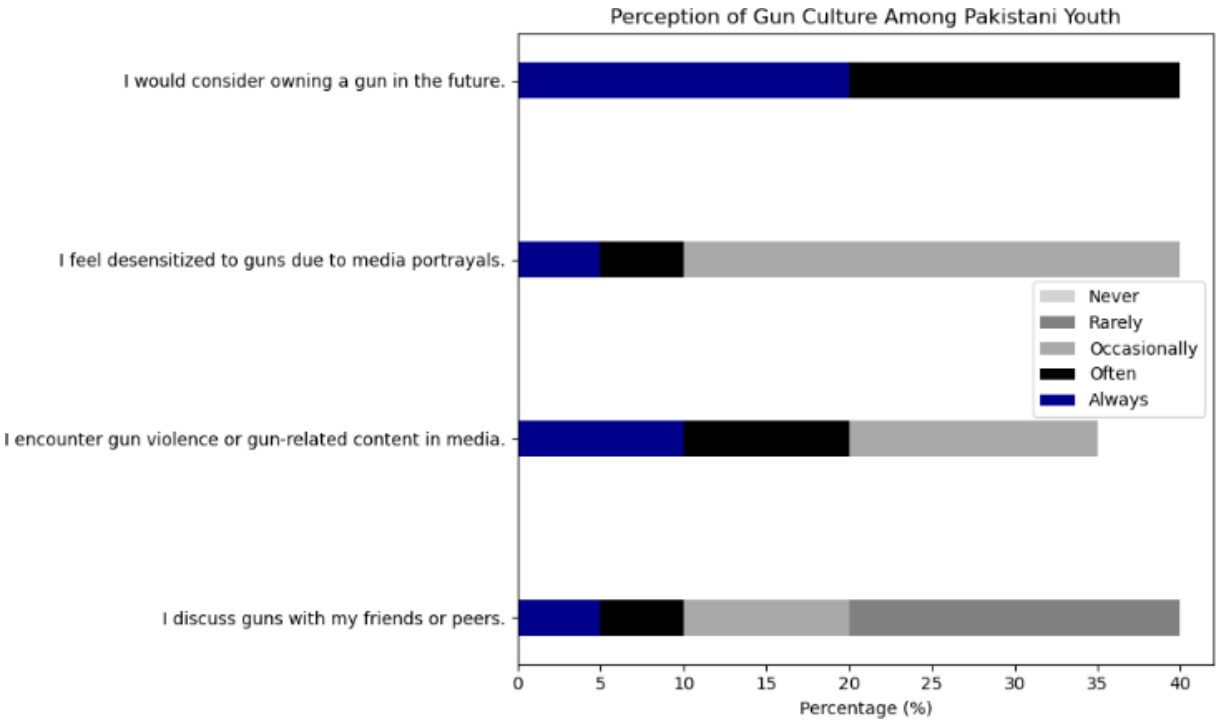


Figure 3. Perception of Gun Culture Among Pakistani Youth

Additionally, the analysis of the data revealed that the youth were generally more critical of media portrayals of violence than they might have been willing to admit in casual conversation. When asked about their perceptions of guns in media, the participants rated their agreement with the statement "media makes guns look like an attractive and necessary part of life" with an average score of 4.1, indicating a strong awareness of how media can influence their views on guns. This is a crucial finding, as it suggests that while media may normalize the idea of guns in their worldviews, there is also a growing recognition among the youth that these portrayals are problematic. This ambivalence is further supported by the fact that 80% of the youth agreed that the media should offer more nuanced representations of masculinity that do not rely on violence or weapons.

The results of this study indicate that media, especially global media, plays a significant role in shaping the attitudes of Pakistani youth toward gun culture and masculinity. The findings suggest that media portrayals of violence and guns are normalizing these elements within the youth's worldview, making them more accepting of gun culture. However, the study also highlighted a critical awareness among youth about the problematic nature of these portrayals. Many participants expressed a desire for alternative narratives that promote peace and challenge the glorification of violence. This complex interplay between media, identity, and socialization underscores the need for more responsible media representations that offer a broader range of role models and conflict resolution strategies.

Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into how media, particularly global media and social media, shape the perceptions of Pakistani youth regarding guns and masculinity. The findings suggest a significant normalization of gun culture, with a noticeable shift in youth attitudes towards violence and masculinity. This section compares the study's

results with existing research to understand the broader implications and contextualize the findings.

One of the key findings of the study is the high frequency of media consumption among Pakistani youth, especially on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. This aligns with the findings of previous studies, which emphasize the central role of digital media in the lives of young people globally [13]. These platforms provide an unfiltered window into global narratives, and in the case of Pakistan, the frequent exposure to action-packed movies and violence-laden content contributes to the normalization of violent behaviors. As noted by [14], social media platforms often act as a double-edged sword—while they facilitate global connectivity and cultural exchange, they also reinforce harmful behaviors, especially among impressionable youth. In our study, the youth's strong connection to media is not only a reflection of a globalized world but also a signal of the increasing blurring of boundaries between the global and local. This resonates with [14] concept of "disjuncture," where global cultural flows intersect with local realities, causing ruptures in youth identities, especially when dealing with the intersection of traditional values and global media influences.

The study's finding that 60% of participants regularly consume Bollywood movies and 70% have a preference for action films is also consistent with existing literature on the influence of Indian cinema on Pakistani youth. Bollywood films have long been a popular source of entertainment for Pakistanis, with its action sequences, portrayals of masculinity, and themes of heroism often centered around violence and the use of firearms [15]. The fact that these films often glorify gun-related violence and associate masculinity with power, dominance, and control through violence supports the notion that the youth internalize these portrayals, as seen in the study's results. Previous studies [16], [17] have highlighted how Bollywood's glorification of violent masculinity is increasingly being adopted by youth across the region, including Pakistan, and is directly influencing their perceptions of gender roles and violence.

A significant contribution of this study is the finding that 70% of youth encounter gun-related content on a regular basis in the media they consume. This frequency of exposure is striking, particularly because it reflects the pervasiveness of gun violence in global media and the normalization of guns in entertainment, which may contribute to their acceptance among youth. This finding is supported by the work of [18], who argue that repeated exposure to gun violence in media not only desensitizes youth but also redefines their understanding of safety, conflict resolution, and masculinity. The fact that 40% of the participants expressed openness to owning a gun in the future further supports the idea that media portrayals are contributing to a normalization of gun ownership among youth, transforming what might be considered dangerous or taboo into something acceptable or even desirable. This aligns with previous studies by [9], which found that repeated exposure to violent media influences youth to adopt attitudes that favor aggression as a response to conflict.

The study also found a significant correlation between media portrayals of masculinity and the normalization of guns, with 80% of participants agreeing that media often links masculinity with traits such as strength, power, and courage. This is consistent with the research of [7], who suggests that media play a crucial role in constructing gender identities, particularly through the depiction of hegemonic masculinity. The study's findings resonate with [19] theory of "hegemonic masculinity," where men are depicted in the media as being dominant, powerful,

and in control—traits often associated with the use of weapons and violence. The portrayal of male characters as powerful and heroic because of their use of firearms serves to reinforce this construct, making guns a symbol of masculine strength. This cultural link between guns and masculinity was clearly evident in the responses of youth in this study, particularly in their recognition of the link between guns and male identity.

However, it is important to note that while the media's influence on youth was undeniable, the study also revealed a growing awareness among participants about the problematic nature of these portrayals. A substantial portion of the youth expressed a desire for more peaceful narratives, with 60% agreeing that media should provide alternative representations of conflict resolution. This indicates that, despite the overwhelming influence of media in shaping their perceptions, the youth also recognize the potential harm caused by glorifying violence. These findings echo the work of [20], who posits that while media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of violence, there is a growing counter-narrative among young people that challenges these representations, especially when they become aware of the negative consequences of violence. This critical awareness is particularly important, as it suggests that media literacy programs could help youth navigate the complex media landscape and develop more nuanced understandings of violence, masculinity, and conflict resolution.

The study's focus on the performance of a drama-skit as a form of critical engagement with media is another significant aspect of the research. The youth's involvement in creating and performing the skit, which critiqued the media's portrayal of gun violence, is a form of media literacy and an active attempt to negotiate and resist the influences of global media. This is in line with the work of [21], who highlights the importance of participatory culture, where young people not only consume media but also create and interpret it in ways that reflect their own values and concerns. The skit provided an avenue for youth to voice their critiques and reflect on their own relationship with the media, suggesting that creative engagement with media content can be an effective strategy for developing critical media literacy.

In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the significant role of media in shaping youth perceptions of violence, masculinity, and gun culture. The findings are consistent with existing literature on the global impact of media on youth, particularly in regions like Pakistan, where the convergence of local cultural values and global media influences creates complex dynamics. While media portrayals of guns and masculinity continue to normalize violent behaviors, the study also highlights the potential for critical engagement and media literacy to challenge these representations and encourage alternative, peaceful narratives. The study calls for more nuanced media portrayals of masculinity that move beyond the glorification of violence, providing youth with a broader range of role models and conflict resolution strategies.

Conclusion:

This study aimed to explore the role of media, especially global media and social media platforms, in shaping the perceptions of Pakistani youth regarding guns and masculinity. The results indicate that Pakistani youth are significantly influenced by media portrayals, particularly through movies, social media, and online content, in shaping their understanding of guns and their connection to masculinity. The findings suggest a high level of exposure to violence, particularly in Bollywood films and action movies, where guns are often associated with

masculinity, power, and heroism. This normalization of guns, along with the frequent portrayal of violent behaviors, influences youth attitudes toward owning firearms and adopting aggressive behaviors.

Moreover, the study reveals that while the media's influence on youth is undeniable, there is also a growing awareness among youth about the harmful consequences of such portrayals. Many participants recognized the need for alternative, peaceful representations of masculinity, highlighting the potential for media literacy programs to empower youth to critically engage with the media content they consume. The performance of a drama-skit by the youth further demonstrated the potential for active participation and reflection as a means of counteracting the negative effects of media portrayals.

The study calls for a more responsible approach to media content, particularly in the portrayal of masculinity and violence. It suggests that media creators should focus on depicting alternative role models who emphasize non-violent masculinity and peaceful conflict resolution. Moreover, educational programs that promote media literacy and critical thinking should be integrated into the curricula to help youth better understand the impact of media on their perceptions and behavior.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex interplay between media, youth, and perceptions of masculinity and violence. While global media and social media play a significant role in shaping these perceptions, there is also an opportunity for youth to challenge and transform these portrayals through critical engagement and media literacy initiatives.

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