

## ROLE OF MEDIA IN INCITING VIOLENCE IN THE SOCIETY: THE CASE STUDY OF AURAT MARCH

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### Abstract

Contemporary society is infested with several social evils such as violence, antagonism, addiction etc. Pakistani media, instead of playing its socially constructive role, i.e., to inform and educate the public while maintaining social harmony in the state, is exploiting its power to inform while reconstructing reality by applying certain strategies, to incite violent acts in society. The study approached the issue by opting case study method while qualitatively analysing the events of “Aurat March”. To analyse social-psychological dimensions of the phenomenon, the study adopted the psychological theoretical framework of “The General Aggression Model”. In context of “incite violence”, study focused on identifying “short-term” effects on the social-psychological domains of individuals, while keeping the expected long-term effects, integral to the attention of the study. The findings exposed the intervening role of Pakistani media between the social issue of “Aurat March” and violent acts. These violent acts are the response to the incitation by media due to extensive coverage and projection and propagation of controversy and negative aspects of “Aurat March” as a movement. Through the case study, it has been proven that “media controls the minds and reconstructs societies”. The study recommends carrying out further studies on the social-psychological impact of media, to spread awareness in the “Public Sphere” to be able to control their minds, instead of being controlled and influenced by media.

**Keywords:** Media, Society, Violence, Public, Aurat March, Women

### Introduction

In the age of information and technological advancements, the world’s connectivity is attributed as a global village. Information based on intelligible meaning is exchanged between individuals and societies through communication. Communication functions when information as a message, is being conveyed from sender to receiver. The source, message, medium, receiver and effects remain the main ingredients of communication.<sup>1</sup> However, communication needs an intervening apparatus to take information from producer to recipient. Media performs the role of mediation between audience’s perceptions (through senses) and the information about the world.<sup>2</sup>

Media has commonly been known through two major categories; “print media” and “electronic media”. From the communication perspective, “print media” is the earliest form of mass communication, which has been functioning to disseminate one-way information, i.e., from producer to recipients. Recipients have played a passive role in such processes as limited groups of people could access and read the newspapers. Conversely, “electronic media” proposed the ways of modern communication models,

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which demonstrate media as a two ways interactive process, i.e., recipient as audience plays an active role as a participant by receiving as well as responding to the information while reshaping the message by involving “active cognitive processing”. “Electronic media” includes radio, television, film, internet and cell phones as the main components which provide easy access to information. This kind of broadcast media has enabled the public to approach social, political and moral issues through access to “electronic media” programmes and to perform their civic role by participation.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, the significance of “public opinion” has also been strengthened which elevates “electronic media” as a powerful instrument to influence power and politics.<sup>4</sup>

The technological revolution in the media has impacted everyone, from common citizens to policymakers and state institutions. The evolving media have further been classified according to their functions, such as informative media, political media, educational media, persuasive media, commercial media, entertainment media and social media platforms. Many scholars and researchers have agreed that media influence the masses and society as well as individual’s minds by co-constructing or re-constructing reality. Hussain has argued that media has grown to influence our political, economic and social aspects of life by controlling our thoughts, beliefs and perceptions by using certain visual images. However, the involvement of the “public sphere” has complicated the media functioning in socio-political and socio-economic domains, for which, media has developed the strategies to psychologically influence its recipients by propagating the reality of the political powers and public participation.

The dominating psychological effects of media have intensified the debates around the world about media as a “social problem”, rather than accomplishing its constructive role of “shaping the society”. The social debates augmented by global connectivity have generated widespread concerns that media effects are promoting “social evils”, i.e., sexism, racism, violence, antagonism and other social harms, though, empirical research on harmful media effects remains divided. A large number of researchers have been trying to explore the compatibility between the role of media platforms and their impact on society. While many studies affirm that media have negative social effects and lead to produce several social problems, few studies have asserted scepticism toward claims of negative media effects.<sup>5</sup> Another dimension brought into the argument has been “digitalization” empowering “public participation spheres” (specifically in social media), which has aggravated the impact of media on “social evils”. In this regard, media plays an activist role in negatively influencing the public psychologically (especially on children and adults), by glorifying the violence, racism, sexism and other “social evils” through provision of excessive exposure to “sensationalist” depiction of reality.<sup>6</sup> One of the social evils induced by media and in media is “violence”. Violence in relation with media has been defined in terms “visual representation” of the physical violent acts or in terms of “media effects” to cause aggression in the behavioural, physical, or non-physical acts.

The concerns about the negative effects of prolonged exposure to violent TV programmes emerged after broadcasting began in 1946. In 1972, based upon accumulation of sufficient empirical evidence, the US Surgeon General commented that, “..... televised

violence, indeed, does have an adverse effect on certain members of society”.<sup>7</sup> Six major professional medical societies in the USA, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Paediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Psychiatric Association, have concluded that it has been evident from the findings that there is cause and effect relationship between violence in media and arousal of “aggressive behaviour” in children.<sup>8</sup>

Violence as a “social evil” incited by the media has similar intensity as the violence in media. Within the political and social dimension of media, media implies certain strategies to propagate, reconstruct and present reality in a way which can incite violence in masses. Such violence is incited to gain certain political and power benefits to extend their power imposition, in competition to their opponents, such as during elections. Jaconnelli defines “incitement of violence” as, “a person incurs inchoate criminal liability when he incites another person or other persons to commit a crime”.<sup>9</sup> In practice, such kind of violence involves expertise in psychological as well as in communicational domains. Through using psychological tactics and communication skills media covers news, projects reality or propagates information to incite violence.

In Pakistan, the contemporary media is still evolving. Till the start of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the country had only one state-owned TV channel, few odd radio channels and few newspapers. In less than two decades, the number of private TV channels has increased enormously to more than one hundred, radio channels exceeding hundred and thirty channels and large number of newspapers in addition to digital media platforms which include “social media forums”.<sup>10</sup> This mushroom growth of media has also affected the media strategies and content of reporting has also changed with the passage of time, particularly, compromised quality of journalism and reporting norms.<sup>11</sup> This results into sensationalism and biased reporting of news-event, which ultimately leads to inciting violence in society.<sup>12</sup> The propagation of reality is mainly being practiced by informative or persuasive programming, on electronic and digital media platforms such as news, talk shows, live or recorded coverage of political rallies and conferences, etc.<sup>13</sup> Media promulgates issues in such a way that the public is sensationalised immediately after the news bulletin, whereas the remains is unaware about their role to react in that particular issue.<sup>14</sup> Graber has defined the phenomenon as, “neither citizens nor media are capable of performing the roles expected of them”.<sup>15</sup>

The present study with the focus on “incitement of violence” as the effect of media on society, finds “short-term” media violence effects more appropriate. However, social situational encounters can lead “short-term effects” to the “long-term effects”. “Media violence” as the phenomenon of “social evils” also exist in Pakistan. Many scholars and researchers have studied violence as an outcome of aggression. Yet, the process of “incitement” by politicians on “electronic and social media” through verbal or non- verbal language, requires a systematic study to analyse how Pakistani media moves through its strategies to “incite violence” in “public sphere” by psychologically, socially and politically influencing the audience.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The phenomenon of “incitement” in media violence is multidisciplinary and integrated in nature. Therefore, “The General Aggression Model” is adopted as best suited theoretical framework to achieve the desired goal of present study. “The General Aggression Model”, abbreviated as GAM has been revised by Anderson & Bushman in 2018, specifically to analyse media violence. However, the theory of GAM originally proposed as “General Affective Aggression Model” by Anderson, Deuser & Deneve in 1995 to study the impact of media images, violence, weapons and agony, on the aggressive behaviour. The original theory as explained by Anderson & Bushman, has focused on the integration of societal aspects and psychological responses. Whereas, its revised version integrates social environment (exposure to media texts, images, or narratives), biological differences (individual diverse personality), psychological variables (cognitive development, i.e. negative or positive) and cultural or communal change (effects of violence on cultural or communal values).

Moreover, the theory of GAM unites all the previous psychological theories which used to address sociological problems, i.e., “Social Learning Theory”, “Cognitive Neo Association Theory”, “Script Theory”, “Excitation Transfer Theory”, “Cognitive Processes of Desensitization Therapy” etc. The revised version of GAM has been considered as reliable because it has presented a meta-theory applied on “Media Violence”. Moreover, this theory presents a detailed explanation of psychological effects of violence, specifically media violence, by extending them into two categories; according to the degree of intensity of violence and temporal and spatial social exposure to causes of inciting aggression. The first category explains the “short-term effects” of media violence, which are more intense and immediate in nature but less enduring. Whereas the second category of “media violence” explains the “long-term effects” that can be enduring and compounded.

Anderson & Bushman further explains “short-term psychological effects” of “media violence” in terms of “priming”, “mimicking” and “arousal”. “Priming” from the perspective of “neuroscience and psychology”, is referred to the cognitive process of forming concepts (knowledge, structures and scripts) linked with each other like a “network in the mind”. The individuals unconsciously prime the concepts in their minds with exposure to the real social world as a stimulus. “Mimicking” is deduced from the function of “Social Learning Theory”, which studies the process of learning through observing the behaviour of other members of the society. Moreover, such imitative behaviour involves immediate response because of arousal. “Arousal” is one of the last “short-term effects” but can be the cause of the extreme kind of immediate, direct and most focused “short-term effect” of media violence. These kinds of behavioural causes become severely dangerous when they involve the process of “excitation transfer” through the process of “incitement”. However, the “long-term media effects” involve two processes, as explained by Anderson and Bushman, “observational learning process” and “desensitization of emotional process”.<sup>16</sup> Many studies, especially longitudinal, found these two psychological developmental behaviours in longer period of time to react violently, by getting exposure to media violence in episodic and continuous way. It takes

time to develop such aggressive behaviours as well as the effects of such aggression remains for longer period of time. For instance, smoking a single cigarette cannot cause harm to the health, but smoking more cigarettes for days and months can cause many diseases, i.e., lung or mouth cancer, etc.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, owing to long-term process of observing violence on TV or through playing video games, children or youth keep on inducing the violent behaviour in their personalities or mindset, which may be expressed occasionally but with the passage of time become aggressive or extremists. Moreover, such continuous induction of media violence develops “desensitization feeling” in children and youth, specifically toward victims on screen as well as in real life. They become less empathetic towards the individuals’ suffering in the society. Thus, these individuals develop such personality traits which can be exploited and exploded through a single shot of “arousal” or “incitement”.

## Methodology

The present study is descriptive in nature; therefore, “the case study” method has been selected to analyse the role of media to “incite violence” on a socio-political issue, and its psychological effects on society instigating violent acts. A case study method incorporates the analysis of relevant dimensions as well as the emerging consequences of the issue being studied to describe and analyse multiple dimensions of the selected case. A case study of “Aurat March” has been selected to assess the media coverage of the event and its impact on society which contributed in “incitement of violence”. The case of “Aurat March” has suitability for number of reasons. First, “Aurat March” is one of the movements initiated to address the “social evil” of gender discrimination in Pakistan. Second, it has been observed that with the passage of time, the movement has become a socio-political issue. Third, the shift from movement to phenomenon has its strong social-psychological relevance. Lastly, from linguistic perspective, it involves the use of verbal and non-verbal language which can “incite violence” within the society. Moreover, the case study of “Aurat March” is suitable to endeavour in presenting an essential qualitative depiction of the “role of media in inciting violence in the society”.

The case study of “Aurat March” has been structured by using primary data (from TV programmes, talk shows and news coverage) and secondary data (from various-newspaper, websites and blogs). During extracting and compiling information for constructing case study, no method was implied to limit the process of inferring, as stated by Rehman, “this type of open coding is acceptable in qualitative studies and has been used in other studies on hate speech as well”.<sup>18</sup> However, during analysis the use of certain lexical expression to create “psychological effect to incite violence” has been discussed along with other dimensions of the phenomenon.

The reporting format of the present study would combine interpretation of findings with the analysis of case study. The case study on qualitative ground can provide a context to support findings, hence, would be more comprehensible. It has been observed in many case studies, e.g., Rehman, that results are described in combination with the discussion (parts merged) to represent their practical implications. However, the case study of “Aurat March” is reported by building an argument in qualitative analytical

structure, while addressing the research questions, as well as by establishing the relevance of findings with previous studies.

### **Case Study: Aurat March**

On the occasion of International Women's Day, on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018, "Aurat Foundation", "Women Democratic Front", "Women Action Forum" supported by Women Human Rights Organizations in Pakistan organized and conducted "Aurat March" in Karachi to raise awareness against gender discrimination, honour killing, pay gaps, sexual violence, enforced change of religion and harassment against women. Hereafter, the event has been organized every year. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019, the event was organized in multiple cities of Pakistan with major events at Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. The theme for 2019's event has been "Sisterhood and Solidarity": for 2020's event, it has been "Khudmukhtari" and for 2021's event, it has been "Patriarchal Violence, Women Health Care and Crisis". However, the event has become controversial owing to the media coverage of the conduct of the event based on the outlook of the event which incited violence against the organizers, participants and supporters of the event. In this background, first research question is how media uses media strategies to incite violence in society, while propagating a social issue?

### **Agenda-Setting**

In 2018, the criticism on Aurat March has been for the reason of one play card that wrote "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" which was projected by the media as an objectionable slogan in a moderate society. Thematically the event of 2019 has been different from the 2018 event as depicted through play cards, slogans and participants' outlook which were projected as liberal minded feminists by the media. The event of 2020 became more controversial owing to media coverage focusing on the objectionable play cards and language used during the event and during the media talk shows and programmes. Lakhani has blamed mainstream media for controversial coverage and projection of the event as if "women have gone crazy". While 2018's Aurat March made efforts to raise concerns with respect to women rights in the society, the 2019's Aurat March changed the manifestation to Women's Independence "Aurat Azadi March", with the controversial slogan like "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" being propagated as women right. The events' display and propagation, projected by the media attached the agenda of Liberal ideological setting based on Radical Feminism. An interesting factor of deviation from original cause of the "Aurat March" as projected by the media has been "French Flag" during the event which resonated Ultra Liberalism and Blasphemy; whereas, it was the flag of Women Democratic Front. The new outlook to the "Aurat March" has been on Human Rights Issues and Radical Feminism with the theme of "Emancipation of Women in Pakistan's Suppressed Society". The controversial event and its coverage, propagation and projection by the media created divisiveness among the women and within the segments of the society on the issue along gender, religious, political and cultural lines setting a counter agenda which resulted in holding of "Haya March" on International Women's Day – 2021, in opposition to the "Aurat March". Thus, two agenda-setting has been done by the media owing to their ideological biases; both having negative effects on the society.

## Framing and Priming

The event of 2018 has been covered by the media as an extension of event in context of International Women's Day. However, during 2019 event, media made an extensive coverage of the event with special programs and talk shows. Within the mainstream media, some journalists criticised the event while some favoured the event by conducting talk show and participated in the event during 2020. The organisers of "Aurat March" have framed the event on the lines of Human Rights and blamed mainstream media for "Sexist Coverage owing to Gender Discrimination in Journalism". However, the coverage of the event by the media also agitated and created rifts within the society including the political leadership owing to the propagation of Ultra-Liberalist bias of the event. Though, a violent exchange of arguments occurred between Hafiz Hamd Ullah, Religious Cleric and Marvi Sarmad, Ultra-Liberal Women Right Activist during live talk show on News One channel in 2016, yet, during "Aurat March events 2018, 2019, 2020 & 2021", mainstream media channels conducted talk shows inviting participants with diverging ideological biases, which often resulted in violent language and gestures. The combined effect of ideological bias, sensationalism and rating consciousness divided media and programmes and interviews have been broadcasted against and in favour of "Aurat March" which also divided the recipients giving space to radical elements on both sides to exploit the existing sentiments and exert power to carry forward the agenda. This resulted in unidirectional communication and broadcasting in mainstream media channels alienating larger segments of the society from representation or communication to express their opinion or criticism. One of the reasons for this has been the alignment of International Media in favour of the "Aurat March". The controversial event has been framed by the international media in context of Human Rights and propagated the "Aurat March" as "Rising of Radical Feminism" in "Conservative Male Dominated Society", particularly by BBC and DW. This has further minimised the impact of those few channels who attempted to highlight the negativities related with the event in moderate lexicons. Hence, an important assertion has been that during 2019-2021, none of the media channel attempted to frame or prime the "Aurat March" as news-event focusing on its original cause.

## Cultivation

The framing and priming of "Aurat March" as news-event and the discourse reconstruction by the media incited the conservative segments of the society and the criticism against the "Aurat March" grew on religious pretexts. Interestingly, the moderate segment of the society aligned themselves with the conservative segment owing to Cultural differences with "Aurat March". This incited hatred against the organisers, participants and supporters of the event, threatening them of death, rape and other violent actions. While violent groups like "Ghairat Brigade" trolled and shamed prominent activists, journalists and supporters; Terrorist outfit like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan threatened the organisers of dire consequences blaming them for Blasphemy. Religious parties also held protests against allowing the "Aurat March" to be held and supported the "Haya March", for which in 2021, police have been deployed to avert any violent clash between the two events. Moreover, a complaint in the court and an FIR has

also been lodged against the organisers of “Aurat March” at Karachi and Peshawar in 2021, blaming them for offending public sentiments and beliefs.

## **Findings**

The “Aurat March”, which in its original theme, has been for societal benefit, has become controversial owing to three main reasons; one, basing on the institutional ideological basis, media covered and projected the event amply highlighting its negativities and controversies which offended moderate and conservative segments of the society and incited violence owing to psychological effects: two, the event has been hijacked by the organisers with Ultra-Liberal ideology having ideological support from within the national and international media: three, domestic media did not fulfil its social responsibly to present and communicate the event through media strategies formulated after critical discourse analyses.

## **Media and Violence**

Second research question is how media is intervening between the social issue and its short-term psychological impact to incite violence in society through verbal or non- verbal language? The case study of “Aurat March” expresses the thematic shift from March 2018 to March 2021 and the active involvement of media. Since 2018, media has promoted “Aurat March” as a social phenomenon through talk shows, programmes and news-coverage. Through its framing strategies, media has promoted “Aurat March” in various ways, based on the ideological foundation of each media house. However, in response to the coverage of the banners with the extreme language expression by liberal women right activist, and the language and gestures used during talk shows by media, triggered the aggressive feeling among the conservative and to some extent moderate segments of Pakistani society. It also aroused gender antagonism and contempt towards “freedom of expression”. Mengu & Mengu have found the similar irresponsible media behaviour towards social issues. They found that social media reconstruct news in a way to cause violence in society. However, the “short-term effect” of media in inciting violence regarding “Aurat March”, has excited the cognition of individuals with conservative mindset or gender complex, to act violently. Some of the instances observed and discussed in case study can also be attributed as a reaction to the psychological disturbance. The “short-term media effects” are discussed in three ways suggested by the General Aggression Model of Anderson & Bushman i.e., priming, mimicking and arousal.

“Gender discrimination” is one of the “social evils” residing in the minds of individuals, bio-regionally. However, its adverse effects on the real life depend on the personality traits and social environment. In the case of “Aurat March” media promoted the concept of gender discrimination to ‘priming’ in the network of mind which contradicts to the original cause of “Aurat March”, which was to remove gender discrimination.

It is evident from the language and behaviour of individuals, who have learnt the expressions from the exposure to the media coverage of “Aurat March” event. Hence, the



research studies conducted to analyse the effects of violent media exposure to the children exhibit the similar findings.

In light of the explanation provided by theoretical framework, and also confirmed by the analysis of “Aurat March” case, that “arousal” has the most extreme impact to “incitement”. In this regard, the language used through the “banners” by Liberal Woman Right Activist, played its part to incite both genders, but differently. Media has taken advantage to sensationalise the issue by its coverage and projection of obnoxious banners which acted as a trigger to incite violence. The study shows that the liberal female activists and conservative male member of society exhibited violent acts as a reaction to incitement, for example, liberal women tried to behave negatively against social norms and culture, partly to get highlighted in front of camera, whereas, conservative men, threatened, the female participants of “Aurat March”.

## Findings

The analysis has provided enough justifications and facts to explain the increase of “short-term effects” specifically “arousal” in both genders of society, due to extensive and propagating coverage by media of the “Aurat March” event while projecting verbal and non-verbal language expressions. The findings resonate with many studies focused to analyse relationship between “media violence” and “real world violence”. However, the findings contradict with the studies which relate “incitement” through only hate speech. Rao has shown similar findings to the findings of present study, regarding the media role in “incitement” of violence. Moreover, the present study confirms that incitement can take place through use of “explicit” or “oblique” language use. However, the negative language depicts negative thoughts and spreads negativity.

## Media & Psychological Effects

The third question is how media is contributing to the transformation of short-term psychological effects into long-term psychological effects? “Long-Term effects” of media violence, is that in which the continuous exposure to the media and violence develop the individual personality or the social environment in a way which is expressed either through “observational learning” or as “desensitization”.<sup>19</sup> However, the present study is not directly linked to the “long-term effects” of media violence; rather it has focused on immediate effects of “incitement”. The episodic occurrence of the case of “Aurat March” since March 2018, and gradual increase of its psychological influences on society, has exhibited violent reaction. The aspect of “observational learning” to develop long-term psychological impact of continuous exposure to social and media violence, exhibited in “Aurat March”, may desensitize our next generation or generations. Many longitudinal studies focused on long-term media violence effects through exposure of violence seen on “electronic or social media”, and through playing video games. However, no study examined the shift from “short-term effects” to “long-term effects” of media violence.

## **Finding**

The present study about “Aurat March” has found that “short-term effects” of media and social violence can be transformed into “long-term effects” of media and social violence while encountering the episodic occurrence of violence. However, the “long-term” psychological effect can influence the individual’s personality as well as can cause more enduring damage to societies.

## **Conclusion**

Media is the cause of great revolution in the fields of information and communication. It holds greater responsibility in the current era of digitized world with informationalised environment and expanding “Public Sphere”. Media, on the contrary, is leveraging the communicative power, manipulating information and producing contents which are politically and socially exploited. The power of media has been extended to the limit that it cannot only reconstruct reality but it can also reconstruct societies, by controlling the minds and psychologically influencing individuals. The aim of the present study has been to identify the role and strategies of contemporary Pakistani media to psychologically affect society while inciting aggression to act violently through verbal or non-verbal language. With the help of reconstructing the case study (by various resources) of “Aurat March”, the study satisfactorily achieved the explanations to the research questions. The findings from the case study have exposed that media is not fulfilling its social responsibility to inform public without any propaganda. The study has presented the facts that media exploits the social issues and promote them in a way that incites public psychologically to act violently. Moreover, if this practice continues, the society as well as public would face more enduring social-psychological effects. The present study is significant because no study has yet been carried out to identify the role of media to incite violence. In addition to that, no study has yet explored that “short-term effects” of media violence could transform into “long-term psychological effects”. The study intends to contribute to increase public awareness regarding role of contemporary media and its strategies to enhance individuals’ and societal social and psychological strengths. However, the study has faced the financial as well as time limitations. Moreover, the quantitative analysis could not be held, because of non-availability of the complaints against the media houses in public domain. It is recommended to carry out further studies to explore more about the effects of long-term exposure to media violence, such as “socialization”, “school performance”, “active ingredients of media violence effects”, etc. However, it is obligatory to spread public awareness regarding how media controls minds and psychologically and socially influences, so that individuals within the society can hold their mind control by themselves, before the “short-term effects” shift to “long-term effects”.

## Endnotes

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