

# Is it possible to have freedom of expression? Religious Minorities' Perceptions of Social Media in Pakistan

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## Abstract

This research article aims to understand that why social media is being perceived for freedom of speech by religious minorities in Pakistan. This qualitative study is based on four in-depth interviews of Christian activists in Pakistan. The study found that there are some crucial issues in giving media coverage to the religious minorities in Pakistan. The results demonstrate that religious minorities in Pakistan are facing segregations due to the prejudiced mindset of higher administration decisions, sponsors and lack of information with respect to religious minorities and their religious rituals. Besides, that absence of resistance from both minorities and larger part is playing the part in wrecking peace. The researchers found that English media whether print or electronic are giving adequate scope to the religious minorities in Pakistan. Furthermore, religious minorities in Pakistan are more inclined towards using social networking sites like Facebook to exercise their freedom of speech and expression as its more convenient in conveying the message without any mediated angling.

**Keywords:** Minorities, Freedom of Expression, Facebook

## Abstrak

Artikel penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami mengapa media sosial dipersepsikan sebagai kebebasan berbicara oleh minoritas agama di Pakistan. Studi kualitatif ini didasarkan pada empat wawancara mendalam tentang aktivitas Kristen di Pakistan. Studi ini menemukan bahwa ada beberapa isu penting dalam memberikan liputan media kepada minoritas agama di Pakistan. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa agama minoritas di Pakistan menghadapi segregasi karena pola pikir berprasangka dari keputusan administrasi yang lebih tinggi, sponsor dan kurangnya informasi sehubungan dengan agama minoritas dan ritual keagamaan mereka. Selain itu, tidak adanya perlawanan dari minoritas dan sebagian besar adalah bagian dari perusak perdamaian. Para peneliti menemukan bahwa media Inggris, baik cetak maupun elektronik memberikan ruang lingkup yang memadai kepada minoritas agama di Pakistan. Selain itu, agama minoritas di Pakistan lebih cenderung menggunakan situs jejaring sosial, seperti Facebook, untuk menggunakan kebebasan berbicara dan berekspresi, karena lebih nyaman dalam menyampaikan pesan tanpa perantara apapun.

**Kata Kunci:** Minoritas, Kebebasan Berekspresi, Facebook

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## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan emerged on the globe and was guaranteed to be an ideological and Islamic state that appeared to practice Islam. Muslims of sub-continent were succeeded to take their homeland from the British's rule after almost 100 years of rule in the leadership of Quaid Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who always preaches a homeland where everyone will have equal rights and privileges. Pakistan was considered as an express that will "enable" and not "enforce" individuals to practice Islam. In his first address to the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, Pakistan's founder, Quaid Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, endorses this notion (Bourdieu, 1987). He said that it was the obligation of every person to overlook all relations based on shading, cast and belief and take pride to be nationals of this state with equivalent rights, privileges and commitments. That is the means by which Pakistan can advance as a country among other countries in the world (Eijaz, 2010).

Pakistan was cut out of India to be a state where Muslims could be free from the abominations of Hindu lion's share (Saeed, 2013). Being a pioneer of the Muslims of India who were a minority in unified India the establishing father of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah was additionally aware of the privilege of minorities that is the reason in the first deliver to the constituent get together he expressed "You are free, you are permitted to travel to your sanctuaries, mosques, or whatever other places of love you choose in the state of Pakistan." (Khan et al., 2014).

In recent years, the assassination of Governor of the Punjab on January 4, 2011 is an endeavor of those individuals who need to "enforce" their own interpretation and ideology of Islam. Truth be told, regularly content has a tendency to be polysomic that's why frequently the same content is translated in diverse behavior. Social implications rely on the way a "text" in a general public is comprehended and deciphered specifically setting, the issue of face veiling of the Muslim ladies in France (Eijaz, 2010).

Minorities in Pakistan are the developing casualty of radicalization and Talibanization in the nation. As of late an increment in the recurrence of savagery related law violations propagated against minorities has been seen. When compared to 2011, the Pakistan Organization of Peace Study estimated a 53% increase in criminal actions against minorities in 2012 (PIPS, 2013).

However, as a Hindu author portraying the outcome of partition of the Subcontinent effectively brings up "one man's religion gets to be another man's poison"(Khan et al., 2014). Since the partition, Pakistan is an ethnically differing, (Sidhwa, 1989) politically separated (Javaid et al., 2012) and religiously divided nation has "contaminate", fizzled its minorities and neglected to set a case of resistance for its whole individuals (Rizvi, 2011).

Religion can't generally fault for brutality in all cases (Khan et al., 2014). According to Juergensmeyer (2000), religion can serve as an oral motivation that could be a panacea for the contemporary ills of the religious roughness. Religion offers soul to open life and gives a signal to good request. In the meantime, it needs the temper of sanity and reasonable play that edification qualities provide for common society (King, 2007).

Nevertheless, Islam, which is in the outlook of western feedback for being the radicals' religion or fundamentalists is additionally confronted with an all the more overwhelming test of the distinction in the middle of conventional and present-day Islamic thought (Khan et al., 2014).

### Definition of Minorities

A minority, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is a smaller group in a community or nation that differs from others in terms of role, religion, and language. "Contemporary sociologists often describe minorities as relatively lacking in power and hence, are subjected to certain exclusion, discrimination, and are thought of by others as a differentiated group with negative connection," (International Encyclopedia of Social Science, 1968, p. 365). Minorities are seen

as important members of any society. They have a significant impact on society. They are well-known educators, judges, government officials, journalists, and business leaders (Ali, 2010).

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To understand the filtration steps in traditional media while covering the religious minorities that are being observed by the religious minorities in Pakistan?
2. To investigate that why social media is perceived to be a platform for freedom of speech by the religious minorities in Pakistan?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In current digital age, billions of individuals all over the world are connected through online social networking sites (Ross et al., 2009). According to Hamburger and Vinitzky (2010), living on social networking sites on the internet encompasses all social instruments. Social networks are an addition to the online communication sources that already have an impact on people's lives in a variety of ways (Jalalian et al., 2010). Social media is a collection of web-based apps that are built on the conceptual and technological underpinnings of web 2.0 and allow users to create and share user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

However, fast changes in society and societal trends that provide individuals with individuality and freedom can lead to strong feelings of loneliness and isolation (Schneider, 1998). Simultaneously, new digital technology has provided pupils with a plethora of new options. Every user is self-sufficient enough to fully profit from the media. People may engage, produce, distribute, and consume media material through social media; moreover, the digital era allows for complete participation, involvement, and self-expression. Everyone, particularly minorities, is making the most of internet. They may share their work with their friends and fans, as well as the rest of the globe. They have the ability to reach even the most remote areas with their voices. Facebook is a

platform, similar to fashion shows, where individuals exchange information, thoughts, personal feelings, current events, post photographs, group chat with their peers, freely share everyday life experiences, community messages, and society updates, and many other things.

Gul (1999) studied Pakistani minorities and elections in Pakistan. Ali (2004) investigated news coverage of Pakistani minority groups in two leading Urdu newspapers, the Daily Jang and the Daily Nawa-i-Waqat. Overall, the media presence and depiction of minority groups in two major Urdu newspapers in Pakistan was positive.

Another research, entitled "Minorities in Pakistan," by Ansari (2006), provided a critical appraisal of the Ahmadi group. The researcher also used the example of a new section in Pakistani passport and national identity card application forms that requires all individuals to indicate whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims (Ansari, 2006). Similarly, Yousaf (2006) concluded that Ahmadis and Christians face prejudice and persecution on a daily basis, both at the governmental and societal levels. Hindus, on the other hand, have been stigmatised and discriminated against (Yousaf, 2006). There is apposite coverage of minorities, according to Ali (2010), with the exception of the Ahmadi group. In Pakistan's leading English publications, the Christian community was highlighted on a large number of occasions.

According to research conducted by the Jinnah Institute of Islamic Studies (2010), minorities consider themselves as Pakistani citizens. Even yet, they are persecuted because of their religious beliefs (Faruqi, 2011). Syed (2006) discovered that there is an excessive emphasis on Pakistan's Islamic identity, which weakens other kinds of identity, including religious aspects of minorities. According to Munir (2002), religious extremism arose as a result of a 'unholy' partnership between fundamentalism and the military in the past, allowing religious extremist organisations to use the media to promote their own goals. According to Fatah (2014), unfavourable preconceptions about minorities are perpetuated in Pakistani films

and this is one of the biggest sources of humiliation among Pakistani minorities.

The examination of international media reveals how minorities are portrayed by international media, as well as how much and what sort of attention is provided to minorities' concerns, whether good or bad. Cortes (2006) found that minorities have long been aware of the importance of the mass media on their lives and have struggled to enhance their own impact on the media.

He discovered that minorities are adamant about increasing their media clout. Journalistic ethics, non-partisanship, and impartial reporting have been harmed by the tendency of breaking stories first and gaining the top rating among news channels. This has a harmful influence on minorities' life. According to the author, if the current media trend continues, it would generate an atmosphere of religious intolerance.

Social media broadly Facebook specifically useful and have made it a part of their daily routine to a considerable extent. Users indicate that they receive positive and useful information from Facebook (Mahmood, 2019). Information receiving and Social media adoption are significantly related, Individuals use internet and internet-based applications to find problem-specific and general information (Mahmood, 2019). Information seeking is one of the important significant relationships between users' perceptions of social media as an appropriate source of information and information seeking behaviour (Mahmood, 2019).

Georgia (2000) stated in her study "Mapping Minorities and their Media: The National Context UK Report" that the British mainstream media is particularly sensitive to issues of racism and minority exclusion, which is likely why British people are more tolerant of minority groups than people in other Eurocentric countries.

Singh (2006) found in his study paper that a successful media needs a continual supply of or monetary resources to successfully showcase stories from the ground up. In his study "Martial Status in Television," Singroriellie (1982)

created an annotated bibliography of television studies, which comprised 307 abstracts of studies on social and ethnic minorities from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s.

### **Freedom of Expression in Pakistan**

Every citizen in Pakistan has the constitutional right to freedom of expression, but due to bureaucracy, this right is rarely used. Liaquat, Qaisrani, and Khokhar (2016) elaborate that while freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed to all Pakistani citizens, it is subject to limitations related to "the glory of Islam, law and order, and national security." In order to prevent people from misinterpreting freedom of expression as a right to disregard other people's beliefs, perceptions, and opinions, a comprehensive definition of freedom of expression needs to be redrawn and communicated to the general public (Liaquat et al., 2016). It is also evident that even when some officials discuss changes to the blasphemy law, they are killed. This illustrates the extent of the violation of free speech (Suleri 2011). Textbooks should not contain hate speech, and students should be taught to appreciate the contributions of people of all faiths while also discussing historical figures who were Hindu, Sikh, Christian, and Ahmadi (Alam et al., 2021). Tarin and Uddin (2013) argue that religious leaders and other authorities frequently abuse the exceptions provided by the right to free speech in order to spread hate speech, accuse minorities and other Muslims of participating in blasphemy, and restrict information access on the grounds that it poses a "threat to national security" (Rehmat, 2019).

### **Social Media and Freedom of Expression in Pakistan**

Social media is the most effective platform for hope and change because it draws attention to the problems faced by Pakistan's religious minorities. Indeed, despite its drawbacks, social media is also helping to expose heinous crimes committed against the religious minorities in our nation. In an effort to promote peace and harmony, Pakistan opened the Kartarpur Corridor to allow Sikh pilgrims from all over the

world to visit Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, one of Sikhism's holiest shrines. Beginning in 2019, the Supreme Court made a ruling allowing Christians to legally register their marriages with a marriage certificate (Rai, 2021). According to research, using Facebook groups encourages the Christian community to find solutions to their problems. There is also a correlation between using Facebook groups and the Christian community's awareness of social issues (Batool et al., 2021). Despite being protected by the constitution, not everyone has access to free speech, especially marginalised groups. The freedom of speech and the right to information are practically nonexistent for religious minorities in Pakistan. Laws that currently discriminate against religious minorities and disproportionately harm minorities need to be changed. Criminal defamation (section 20) and content moderation (section 37) provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act of 2016 must be reviewed for online spaces to ensure compliance with international human rights frameworks (Shahid, 2020).

## METHOD

This research is carried out utilising a qualitative approach and the existing literature on Pakistani minorities. This qualitative study consisted on four indepth interviews of Christian activists in Pakistan. Each interview was 30 to 40 minutes long. All interviews were conducted from Executive Directors from effective and well renowned NGO's. These NGO's are working on law issues, education problems, economic issues, and helping the victims of bomb blast and blasphemy cases. The interviews were designed to extract response in terms of freedom of expression on social media and to explore the problems of coverage in traditional media.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The phenomenon of Christians utilising Facebook for freedom of expression was examined in this study. Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative comments of participants. The researcher first read all of the re-

marks aloud and transcribed them. During interviews, the researcher discovered a broad and wide variety of reasons why Christians in Pakistan are dissatisfied with traditional media coverage. What are the reasons they're shifting their attention to social media sites like Facebook? The researcher organised a list of reasons or problems they made them utilise Facebook for freedom of speech after transcribing and reading the comments. Following discussions with participants about their remarks and a sorted list of explanations, the researcher came to three reasons. The reasons behind this are explained in the paragraphs that follow.

### Constitutional Discrimination

Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim Majority country where 96.4% people affiliated themselves with Islam as their religion (The Guardian, 2011). Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadis, and Hindus make up the religious minorities, who account for fewer than 5% of Pakistan's total population, according to the state-run population census agency ([www.census.gov.pk](http://www.census.gov.pk)). Non-Muslims are classified as minorities by the state (The constitution of Islamic republic of Pakistan).

Pakistan made gestures such as putting a white band in the national flag to symbolise religious minorities in the country, and the Constituent Assembly approved the Objectives Resolution in 1949, which provided for religious and cultural freedom for religious minorities.

Participants' views about Pakistan's constitution, which they believe is the root of prejudice in Pakistan. "The Pakistani Constitution has provisions that discriminate not only against religious minorities in Pakistan in general, but also contain provisions that have resulted in greater discrimination against Jamat Ahmaddiya in Pakistan in contrast to other religious minorities."

It is necessary to examine how the term "legitimate" is used. This phrase is very subjective since it allows the government to restrict minorities from engaging in particular religious activities. Sections 298B and 298C of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860 (the "PPC"), fo

example, might be considered to be a result of this ambiguous wording, since they "...make the sheer act of openly discussing or practising the Ahmadi faith a criminal action." Only in 2010, with the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment, was the phrase "freely" reintroduced into Article 2A.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, on the other hand, has rules protecting minorities, such as article 36, which states, "The State must preserve the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their fair representation in the Federal and Provincial services."

The 1949 objective resolution served as the foundation for the constitution of 1951. The aim of the resolution is to preserve religious minority' rights. Minorities should be free to profess and practise their faith, and the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance, and social justice should be properly followed, according to it.

Minorities were protected under the 1973 constitution. Fundamental rights were given a lot of attention. The following are the fundamental rights: All citizens are equal before the law. No one should be denied their right to life and liberty. There should be no prejudice based on religion, caste, creed, gender, or birthplace. Slavery and forced labour in any form are prohibited. The right to free speech, expression, association, and cultural expression is protected.

Minorities' religious teaching freedoms are guaranteed inside their institutions. There are safeguards in place to prevent prejudice in government services. Protection is given for the upkeep and growth of religious institutions in all communities (Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973).

*"I guess if you follow the Nationalism in Pakistan, you are discriminating the minorities in Pakistan. That is why the discrimination in Pakistan cannot be eliminate".*

The comment from participant is showing that the concept of nationalism in Pakistan is supporting discrimination. In this context, it is

very clearly stated in constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan and there are evidence available in history and literature that there is no difference and inequality on any base cast, economic, color, or place by passing objective resolution and current constitution of Pakistan (Constitution, 1973).

### Higher Management of Pakistani Media

Participants are of the view that there are reasons for not believing on tradition media. The higher management or owners of media houses are influenced by majority portrayal of religious minorities and right of freedom of speech.

*"problem is mindset of people all the higher management is having typical Islamic mindset and there is no policy for the coverage of minorities' issues. Secondly, they don't want to broadcast or print such news (minorities news), which brings pressure to their media from Muslims extremists".*

There are some episodes witnessed that was influenced by the owners or management.

*"Incidents like Gojra, Sagrilla Hill, and Joseph Colony never had sufficient coverage in media. Media shared the issues just like a new headline; example Christian settlement was burnt, but they did not share the background of the incident and the impact of it".*

*"Incident like twin blast on Churches in Youhanabad, after lynching by a mob the focus shifted from the victims and survivors to a more sinister narrative. Media highlighted the issues of burnt Muslims boys and presented them as innocent. In result of that The Chief Minister of Government of Punjab has issued order to arrest the Christians from all over Lahore who were allegedly involved in murder and public nuisance during protest. More than hundred Christians were in jail and their bails were rejected".*

On the other hand, the literature, national news media, online media and somewhat international media is of the view that the print media and electronic media is providing sufficient coverage to the minorities in Pakistan and

they have freedom of speech to large extend. The maximum numbers of issues were highlighted about Christian community in the elite English newspapers of Pakistan (Ali, 2010). Furthermore, Qandeela Ambreen corroborates that the coverage of minorities in newspapers of Pakistan that are Daily Dawn, The News and nation is mostly positive (Ambreen, 2014).

But it has been observed that discrimination against religious minorities is being practiced and freedom of speech effected by the war against terror in Pakistan. American led wars in the world are playing important role in spreading discrimination attitudes.

### Education and Lack of Tolerance

The comments by the participants after a question regarding the understanding the meaning of right of freedom of speech was,

*"I guess there is thin line between freedom of speech and religious sentiments. We should avail the right of freedom of speech but religious emotions should not hurt. But some fundamentalists could not find the difference and they think that others right of freedom of speech are hurting their religious sentiments. Religion is personal matter not state's matter I guess we should focus on human nature instead of criticizing others religion. This is the only way to promote peace in our society".*

*"I guess new media should talk about people practices but not the studies of anyone's religion"*

The comments of participants show that there are many problems created by the uneducated fundamentalists. They do not have understanding about freedom laws and basic concepts freedom of expression. They are just born to create trouble and to deliver hate speeches weather they are from majority or from minority. Participants are of the view that government should manage to educate people about religion and tolerance by using social media like Facebook. Education must start from the humanity and human nature that will help to maintain peace and avoid the discrimination in country. Everyone is equal according to the law of nature and according to constitution of

Islamic Republic of Pakistan as well. It is well said by researcher that every time religion cannot be blamed or criticized after someone's act or words used for other religion.

### CONCLUSION

This research article has presented a qualitative study on freedom of speech of religious minorities on social media by using in-depth interviews methodology. The study found that there are some basic problems that religious minorities are facing in traditional media specially in Urdu media. The findings show that religious minorities are facing discriminations due to the mindset of higher management or owner's choice, advertisers and lack of information regarding religious minorities and their events. Moreover, they are of the view that lack of tolerance from both minorities and majority is playing the role in destroying peace. The researcher found that English media whether print or electronic are providing sufficient coverage to the religious minorities in Pakistan. Minorities are preferring online social media like Facebook for freedom of speech because of easy and quick access and wide range of audience by avoiding all the filters. Moreover, they are targeting their aimed audience as fast as the incident happens around the world.

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