

# 'Infidels' on the Internet: Pakistan's Social Media 'Cancel Culture' During the Pandemic

## Les « infidèles » sur Internet : la « culture de l'annulation » des médias sociaux au Pakistan pendant la pandémie

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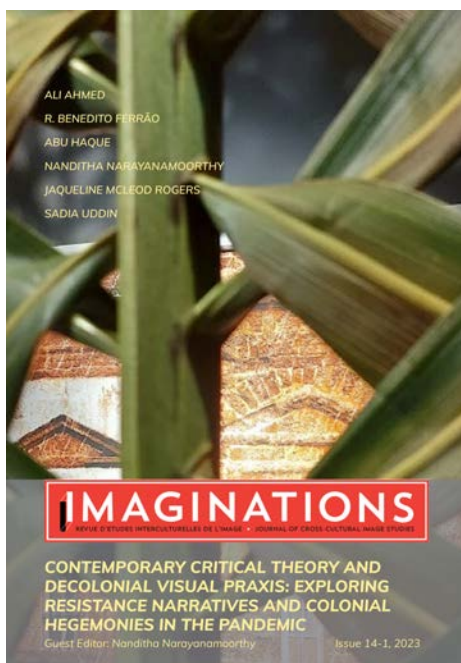
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## 'INFIDELS' ON THE INTERNET: PAKISTAN'S SOCIAL MEDIA 'CANCEL CULTURE' DURING THE PANDEMIC

SADIA UDDIN

This paper explores how the pandemic intersects with religious nationalism in Pakistan and isolates vulnerable groups through the use of its colonial-era Blasphemy Laws. Using the August 2020 case of a music video shoot inside a mosque, the paper emphasizes the role of social media 'cancel culture' in mobilizing these laws to persecute 'wrongdoers' in the name of 'Islam'. The paper confronts power relations and creates new knowledge to challenge prevailing hegemonic structures by exploring the selective applicability of cancel culture and the Blasphemy Laws.

Cet article explore la façon dont la pandémie s'entrecroise avec le nationalisme religieux au Pakistan et isole les groupes vulnérables en utilisant les lois sur le blasphème de l'époque coloniale. En s'appuyant sur le cas du tournage d'un clip vidéo à l'intérieur d'une mosquée en août 2020, l'article souligne le rôle de la « cancel culture » des réseaux sociaux dans la mobilisation de ces lois pour persécuter les « malfaiteurs » au nom de « l'Islam ». L'article confronte les relations de pouvoir et crée de nouvelles connaissances pour remettre en question les structures hégémoniques dominantes en explorant l'applicabilité sélective de la cancel culture et des lois sur le blasphème.

### INTRODUCTION

**S**ocial media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok have served as an outlet for users to express and entertain themselves and to gather and disseminate information and knowledge. With an increased usage of social media platforms,

it can be observed that some governments of postcolonial states in the Global South are actively policing these online spaces using laws that are rooted in their colonial past. Pakistan is one such example where the state actively seeks to enforce ideological conformity in its online spaces to align users with its religious nationalist identity and to maintain a hegemonic order. Online moral regulation has become more apparent during the recent COVID-19 global pandemic, and the impact of colonial laws in shaping social, political, and cultural production can be clearly observed.

This paper will explore the August 2020 case of social media “cancel culture” involving Pakistan’s media artists Bilal Saeed and Saba Qamar who faced backlash for shooting a music video inside a mosque. Their artistic expression, which allegedly included the playing of music inside a mosque, was perceived as a desecration of an Islamic place of worship and was therefore deemed religiously and culturally unacceptable. The case problematizes the use of Pakistan’s colonial-era Blasphemy Laws of 1860 in regulating artistic expressions that allegedly challenge Pakistan’s religious identity. In March 2020 when the pandemic resulted in lockdowns that forced people to stay home, the usage of social media increased in Pakistan. As more people shifted to online spaces to express themselves, the state of Pakistan became more active in monitoring social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. The Blasphemy Laws were thus used to regulate and punish any individual who shared content on social media that was considered to be digressing from Pakistan’s religious nationalist identity.

The case of Bilal Saeed and Saba Qamar’s music video shoot in Wazir Khan Mosque will be used as a focal point to analyze the usage of social media in inciting religious fanaticism and mobilizing the law to persecute individuals with allegedly questionable religiosity. Using discourse analysis, quantitative research methods, and qualitative examination, this paper will draw upon promotional visuals including photo images and videos shared mainly on the Instagram accounts of both celebrities. This will offer insight into how Pakistani social media users, as “cultural consumers,” engaged with and responded to the visual content and documented their reactions through on-

line comments. Using qualitative examination, particular attention will be drawn to the hateful, misogynistic, and abusive comments alleging that the video shot inside a mosque defiled a religious space and was therefore anti-Islamic. This ultimately prompted an apology from both Saeed and Qamar. Furthermore, a critical feminist approach will be used to underscore how “cancel culture” disproportionately impacts women in Pakistan. Those opposing the video continuously called upon the State of Pakistan to persecute the duo for blaspheming against Islam under the contentious colonial era Blasphemy Laws of Pakistan. However, this paper will also examine another case from August 2020 that involved a seminary teacher molesting a student inside a mosque to illustrate the vastly differing legal outcomes of the two cases. The paper will also highlight the disproportionate social media attention the molestation case received in comparison. This will highlight the selective applicability of the Blasphemy Laws, which have increasingly been used to curtail the freedom of expression of anyone who appears to be digressing from Islam and Islamic values.

#### INTERNET ACCESSIBILITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN PAKISTAN

**I**nternet accessibility in Pakistan and the overall usage of social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter has increased over the course of the COVID-19 global pandemic. While these statistics seem to indicate social and technological advancement, a closer exploration is useful in discerning how social media users, and by extension, the “consumers” of social media visual culture changed during the pandemic. It is worth noting that in January 2020, the population of Pakistan was estimated to be approximately 218.7 million people (Kemp). The population had increased by an estimated 4.3 million people or roughly 2 percent, since January 2019. In 2020, 76.38 million Pakistanis were classified as Internet users while 37 million individuals were also classified as active social media users. Additionally, 164.9 million Pakistanis were known to have access to mobile devices, which is roughly 75 percent of the total population. The number of Internet users in 2020 had increased by 11 million, or

17 percent, when compared to the previous year. Since 2019, the number of social media users also increased by 2.4 million people, which demonstrates a surge of approximately seven per cent by 2020. Furthermore, platform-specific data reveals that the monthly traffic of Instagram users was approximately 3,543,000 in January 2020 (Kemp). By March 2020, when lockdowns were implemented, the number of Instagram users nearly doubled to 6,786,000 users (“Instagram Users”, March 2020). These statistics reflect the upward trend in internet accessibility and social media usage over the course of a year, but also indicate that social media presence increased during the pandemic. Yet, having access to the internet and social media platforms has not necessarily translated into progressive social change given that Pakistani society is still dictated by some archaic policies that severely limit the space for creative expression. Furthermore, the strong national tendency to religiously and morally police celebrities, and particularly women, has increased through social media platforms and has created a hostile online environment for some users.

#### ONLINE ACTIVITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

When examining the impact of social media usage in Pakistan, it is imperative to distinguish between cultural consumption and the “cultural consumer” in order to explore their interrelated relationship. Anneke Meyer describes cultural consumers as “those who consume cultural texts or engage in cultural practices involving consumption.” Over time, the mediums for engaging with culture have evolved, and technological advancements have contributed to the development and dissemination of new media as well as information and communication technologies (ICTs) (68). Thus, cultural consumption by cultural consumers has also increased with the prominence of social media applications like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok, et cetera.

Steve Katz observes that prior to 2020, the world was not accustomed to worrying about contemporary global pandemics. However, once lockdowns forced everyone indoors beginning in March 2020, there

was a significant increase in social media usage. These two factors can simultaneously be used to explain the rise of “cancel culture,” and the subsequent takedown of popular personalities and iconic brands, et cetera. (34). Penny Andrews similarly notes that global lockdowns forced people into spending time in their “bubbles” at home, which resulted in anger or a general sense of frustration (905). However, the lockdowns merely contributed to intensifying already polarized conditions in online spaces of politics and activism (902). This anger and resentment demanded an outlet so that people could vent their frustrations somewhere. Subsequently, online social media applications provided the ideal platform for some Pakistanis to channel their anger and frustration during the pandemic.

### LOCATING PAKISTAN'S BLASPHEMY LAWS IN ITS COLONIAL PAST

The present-day state of Pakistan was formerly a part of the Indian subcontinent, which was colonized by the British Empire until 1947. In 1947, the event known as the Partition created the two independent states of India and Pakistan, with Pakistan identifying itself as an Islamic homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. Although Pakistan emerged as an independent postcolonial state, it retained the British Indian Penal Code as a part of its own legal system. Under the newly renamed Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), many of the contentious colonial laws, including the Blasphemy Laws, were subsumed into Pakistan’s mode of governance. Over the course of time, several political shifts closely aligned Pakistan with the religious right, and Pakistan’s state institutions began to project a more prominent “Islamic” identity. As a result, the colonial-era Blasphemy Laws, which were previously nondenominational, were now used to govern and regulate society in order to uphold the respect and sanctity of Islam—the official religion of the state.

“Faith, Unity, Discipline” is the national motto of Pakistan and provides a litmus test for determining a sense of patriotism that is deeply linked to religious nationalism. For one to remain loyal to Pakistan and maintain a sense of nationhood, they must adhere to this motto

as a guiding principle. Identifying markers such as “Pakistani” and “Muslim” are often used interchangeably, despite Pakistan’s population not being religiously homogenous. Any transgression that offends nationalist or religious (i.e., Muslim) sentiments is considered morally unacceptable and is often accompanied by consequences. In the age of social media where communication is expeditious, these consequences may be felt instantly and impactfully through what has popularly come to be described as “cancel culture.”

### WHAT DRIVES “CANCEL CULTURE”?

Rob Henderson describes “cancel culture” as an attempt to end the career or negatively impact the prominence of any individual who is deemed as having engaged in immoral behaviour (37). Thomas S. Mueller further describes it as the “withdrawal of support” from any individuals whose actions “related to social media, viewership, or the purchase of products or services” are considered unacceptable. The prevalence of cancel culture on social media has “opened up a portal where individuals become the collective and can act as judge, jury, and executioner of others” (1). Thus, the act of “cancelling” serves as an accountability measure through which people demand an apology from those who have transgressed or taken part in unacceptable behaviour. At times, appropriate action is also sought from those who might be placed in higher positions of power over the individual who has committed the unacceptable act (e.g., an employer, manager, religious leader, etc.).

Cancel culture has gained a lot of traction in the recent past, which makes it worth interrogating why participating in it becomes so appealing. Cancel culture provides an almost immediate boost to one’s own social ranking at the expense of others. If one is seeking validation through social media platforms with a significant online presence, it may be more impactful to broadcast and amplify the actions of others (Henderson 36). Pulling someone else down may also boost one’s own online image and following. As this paper will further highlight, Bilal Saeed and Saba Qamar, the celebrities involved in the alleged blasphemy case, were easy targets because they already had a



social rank due to their established social media presence with a sizeable following. Thus, their social rank had the potential to be easily impacted.

Pakistani society largely adheres to a collective sense of religious nationalism, and online cancel culture has provided a venue for forming community along similar lines. When social media users unite to single out and target anyone who has allegedly committed a “moral infraction,” they are mobilizing around shared or common values, which also strengthens their loyalty to one another (Henderson 38). In the case study that follows, loyalty was shown towards Pakistan’s “Islamic” identity through the blatant use of death threats, profanity, cyberbullying, misogyny, and abuse, despite this being an obvious transgression against Islamic values, which promote kindness, forgiveness, and most importantly, respect towards women. However, Henderson suggests that “pointing out the flaws of an individual or of society demonstrates one’s moral credentials” (37). An individual may also desire to highlight themselves as a better person; therefore, they may exhibit a strong urge to isolate and condemn the “wrongdoer” (36). These features of cancel culture can be better illuminated through the online case of alleged blasphemy in Pakistan.

### THE MUSIC VIDEO AND THE MOSQUE

In late July of 2020, a duo of Pakistani artists including a singer named Bilal Saeed and an actor named Saba Qamar, were working on a video shoot for Saeed’s upcoming music video titled *Qubool*, which was scheduled to release on 11 August. The venue chosen for this shoot was the historical and widely popular Wazir Khan Mosque located in the Walled City of Lahore in Pakistan’s Punjab province. *Qubool*, which literally means “to accept” in Urdu, was intended to portray a couple’s Islamic marriage ceremony, or the *nikkah*. Saeed and Qamar were depicted as a newlywed couple, and the pair dramatized a scene in which Saeed clasped his bride’s hand while she twirled around him.

The pair took to social media and shared photo stills from their video shoot to promote the upcoming project. Bilal Saeed was the first to

share a black and white image on his Instagram on 31 July with the caption “*Qubool Hai*” (I accept). This post, which shows an image of Saeed and Saba Qamar in the backdrop of the Wazir Khan Mosque, generated 111,000 views and 1171 comments on Instagram (Saeed, “*Qubool Hai*”). As Eve Ng indicates, comment threads serve as a “location for qualitative examination through which user engagement can be analyzed” (624). Initially, there was confusion surrounding the image, and the post received mixed comments ranging from speculations about Saeed’s second marriage, as he was already known to be married. The majority of users, however, had caught on that the image was promotional and criticized Saeed for defiling a religious space. As the varying reactions to this post indicate, cultural consumers are not homogenous, and thus a unified message or response is never apparent (Meyer 68). It is also expected that factors such as political orientation or who the target audience is will determine how online media is interpreted, and what type of attention it will receive (72). In this case, the positive comments were shared by Saeed and Qamar’s fans, who genuinely appreciated the artists and were looking forward to their forthcoming project, while the negative comments were shared by those with religious nationalist leanings.

On 1 August, Saeed shared a colour image of the pair on Instagram with the caption “Eid Mubarak from us to you all” and tagged Saba Qamar as well as the photographer and designer of his outfit (Saeed, “Eid Mubarak”). The post was viewed 121,000 times, and while the 1029 comments mostly speculated Saeed and Qamar’s relationship, they also contained abusive language towards the pair. One comment in particular was optimistic about both of them receiving a just punishment in the near future for violating religious boundaries. A loose translation of that user’s comment in Urdu states, “God willing, you will be rightfully punished for your actions very soon” (“Eid Mubarak”).

A day later, Saeed shared another colour image with a banner detailing the name of the forthcoming music track (Saeed, “One Two Records Presents”). By this time, the online sentiment towards Saeed and Qamar had taken a turn for the worse, and an angry cyber-mob



Figure 1: Instagram image posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music). Photo credit: @clickbysawaiz

was now readily abusing the duo and shunning them for disrespecting Islam through the defilement of a mosque. Although the Instagram post generated 86 700 views and around 751 comments, most of them were charged with abusive and profane language (“One Two Records Presents”). One Instagram user openly questioned whether

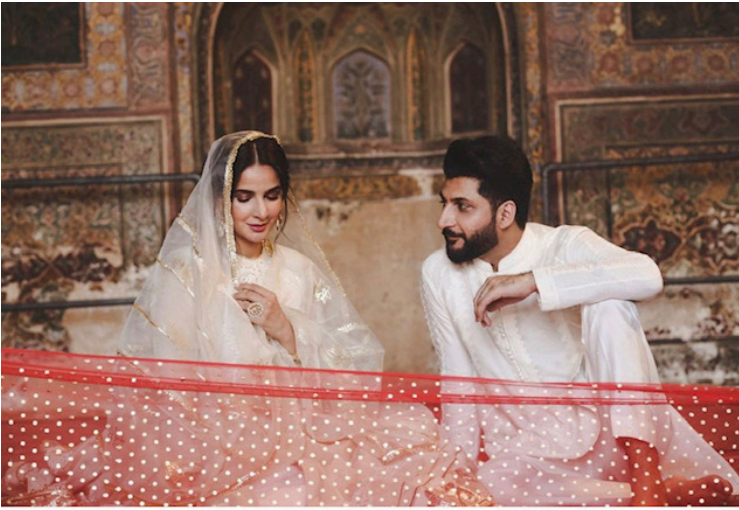


Figure 2: Instagram image posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music). Photo credit: @clickbysawaiz

Saeed and Qamar were even Muslim. Ironically, while some comments were hurling abuse at the artists, they were simultaneously trying to exude their own sense of piety and respect towards Islam and Pakistan. To share an example, a user named Hamza suggests that the duo's unacceptable act is a way to increase their followership amongst Indians, "Increasing Indian followers RIP [Rest in Peace]" . Another user named Suhail taunts the artists by commenting, "Now Govt [government] and People of Pakistan doing prank on u.." ("One Two Records Presents"). This user was referring to the online cancel culture that had begun mobilizing against the pair in addition to the government's efforts to punish the duo and their team for committing blasphemy.

Despite the growing outrage concerning the images shared on Instagram, Saeed and Qamar posted video stills from their behind-the-scenes (BTS) shoot through Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to build anticipation prior to the official launch of the *Qubool* video.

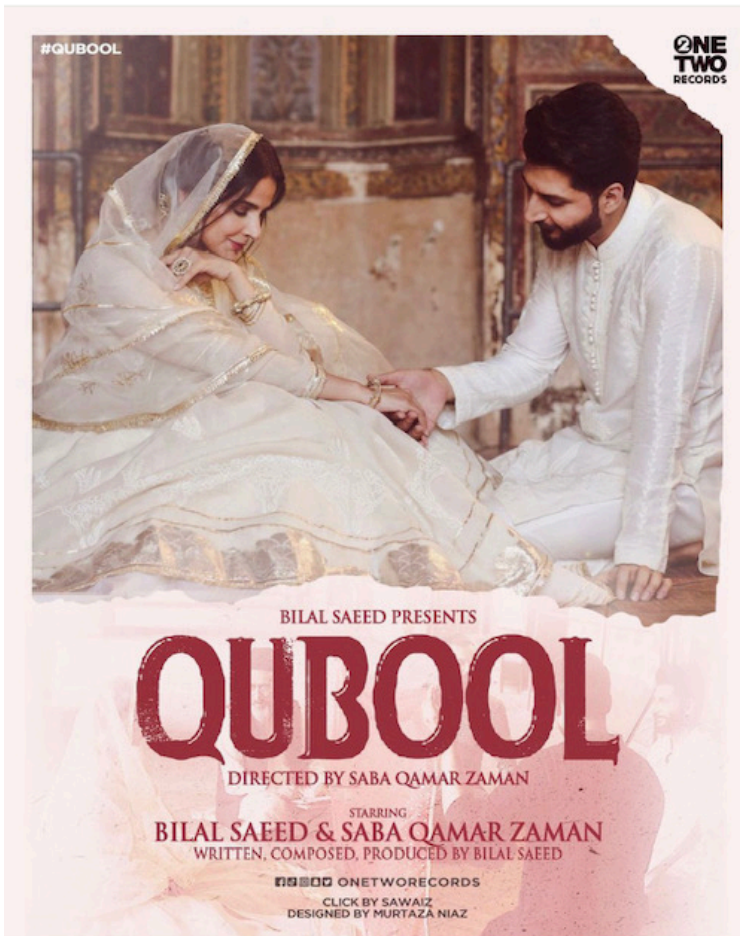


Figure 3: Instagram image posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music). Photo credit: @clickbysawaiz

However, the video segments went viral and generated severe backlash. Now even more Pakistani social media users identified the setting as Wazir Khan Mosque. Subsequently, Saeed, Qamar, and the entire production team were aggressively targeted for desecrating an Islamic religious space by playing music inside the boundaries of the

mosque. With nearly 9,315,000 users on Instagram in August 2020, Pakistani consumers of online visual culture quickly exhibited their anger through “cancel culture” and predominantly used Instagram and Twitter to demand blasphemy charges against the pair. Interestingly, the majority of these Instagram users were men and made up 65.7 percent of the total number of Instagram users (“Instagram Users,” August 2020). At the same time, it was noted that Saba Qamar’s name had become a top trend on Twitter, and demands for her to be charged for blasphemy continued to grow (“Historic Mosque’s Manager”). What remains interesting about this Twitter trend is that between Saeed and Qamar, it was Saba Qamar who was being pinpointed as an alleged blasphemer. These actions demonstrate targeted cyberbullying and abuse against a woman, which was noticeably driven by misogyny.

#### A SERIES OF APOLOGIES

**W**ithin days, Qamar used Twitter and Instagram to issue an apology, while Saeed recorded a video apology on behalf of himself, Qamar, and the entire video production crew, which was then shared on all social media platforms associated with the celebrity. It is worth noting that both Saba Qamar and Bilal Saeed shared relatively similar posts on 8 August 2020 just three days prior to the official release of the music video. The statement posted by Saba Qamar read:

“Presenting the first teaser of ‘Qubool’. This is the only sequence that was shot at the historical Wazir Khan Mosque. It’s a prologue to the music video featuring a Nikah scene. It was neither shot with any sort of playback music nor has it been edited to the music track. I won’t explain any further as the full video comes out on 11<sup>th</sup> of August. The BTS video that’s making rounds on social media was just a circular movement to click stills for the poster of ‘Qubool’ depicting a happily married couple right after their Nikah. Hurting or offending anyone or being disrespectful to a holy place is as unimaginable and unacceptable for me as for any decent human being. Despite this

if we have unknowingly hurt anyone's sentiments we apologise to you all with all our heart. Love & Peace! #Qubool releasing on 11<sup>th</sup> of August" (Qamar, "Presenting the first teaser" 2020).

In the fifty-five-second teaser video that Saeed and Qamar both shared on 8 August, the pair are shown sitting across from one another inside the mosque (Akbar). The video does not include any background music; the listener can, however, hear the audible chirping of birds as they both utter "*qubool hai*" to solemnize their marriage in front of a *nikahkhwaan* (clergyman) (Akbar). Although both artists shared similarly worded posts to clarify their involvement in the alleged defilement of the Wazir Khan Mosque, Bilal Saeed received 242,000 views and approximately 1687 comments on his Instagram post (Saeed "Qubool Teaser"). Many of these comments contained profane and abusive language towards Saba Qamar and specifically targeted her with misogynistic abuse. Qamar's post on the other hand, received 1825 comments shortly after she shared it on Instagram. Since the BTS video went viral, Qamar faced the most backlash. Due to the nature and magnitude of the online abuse Qamar experienced, she has now removed the aforementioned post from 8 August as well as all earlier posts related to the *Qubool* project. Thus, it is not clear how many views the same video received. However, the video posted on Saeed's account was viewed 242 824 times ("Qubool Teaser"). Despite Qamar's involvement in the project, the artist decided to make her art and labour invisible to protect herself and to avoid further online abuse. Qamar's actions thus indicate a defence mechanism through which she opted for self-regulation as a way to remain safe from misogynistic abuse in a virtual setting. It is also important to indicate that the video for *Qubool* was Qamar's directorial debut, which was caught in a literal web of controversy from the outset. Even though the video was eventually released on the scheduled date, the scenes shot within the mosque were edited out.

Saba Qamar previously suffered backlash for acting in a Bollywood film titled *Hindi Medium* (2017). There is an apparent tendency



amongst Pakistan's hyper-nationalist social media users to question one's loyalty to Pakistan or Islam, especially if the individual is affiliated with the field of entertainment. At times, both Pakistan and Islam are considered interchangeable, and subsequently, Qamar's loyalties to Pakistan were called into question when she opted for acting in an Indian film. Much of the anger and resentment towards her as a celebrity, and therefore, as "public property," was already driven by her perceived lack of patriotism. However, it is worth noting that the Indian film found an extensive audience in Pakistan irrespective of the initial disapproval Qamar received. This is not uncommon amongst Pakistani viewers who share a complicated relationship with Pakistan's political archenemy, India. Bollywood films are eagerly viewed despite ongoing political tensions between the neighbouring countries. A point worth considering is that while social media users are quick to attack and cyberbully Pakistani celebrities like Saba Qamar, they oscillate between politically demonizing India while simultaneously being receptive to its film and culture. The only catch is that liberties such as viewing or appreciating Indian content without calling *their* loyalties to Pakistan into question do not extend to Pakistani celebrities. Thus, Pakistani artists are and continue to be open to cyberbullying and abusive attacks for partaking in Indian projects, which raises questions about their patriotism. Qamar was already vulnerable to attack due to her previous film project and was made the focal point of another targeted campaign that doubted her respect towards Islam.

Andrews' usage of "digital dissensus" is an appropriate way to understand this growing wave of online cancel culture in Pakistan. Andrews advances the idea that digital dissensus describes an era of politics where the liberal consensus of the 1980s and beyond collapsed, only to be replaced by one where the Internet and social media emerged as the preferred venues for "noisy debate and extremist voices" (902). To develop this idea further, the scope of cancel culture can be considered through the "two-step flow theory," in which information distributed through social media results in a transformation of messages into actions (Mueller 2). Opinion leaders such as religious or political personalities, who would otherwise not be as ef-



fective when isolated, maintain their power by appealing to structured social groups (Mueller 2).

This is particularly true of Pakistan, where there is an already pronounced religious right that openly confronts those segments of society that adhere to ideals considered too “secular” or “liberal.” The tweet of a religious scholar named Syed Adnan Kakakhail provides a relevant example. Kakakhail immediately took to Twitter after the *Qubool* controversy gained attention and called upon law enforcement and relevant actors to immediately arrest everyone involved in creating the video. He further appealed to all Muslims to unite and demand the arrest of the perpetrators involved in this “forbidden” act (Kakakhail). Kakakhail’s Tweet aptly describes criticism against cancel culture, which argues that it is deeply polarizing, divisive, and thrives on limiting spaces of social discourse, which then imposes ideological conformity (Mueller 2). Furthermore, it has been argued that cancel culture encourages mob rule, and established legal processes are often bypassed in favour of shaming individuals through “unmoderated character assassination” on social media platforms (Mueller 2). Kakakhail’s tweet serves as a good example for highlighting a deliberate attempt to humiliate Saba Qamar and Bilal Saeed. In his Tweet, he refers to Qamar as a *raqaasa* (dancer) and Saeed as a *bhaand*, which loosely refers to a performer or a fool in Urdu (Kakakhail). Both of these terms may be considered harmless through a Western lens, but in the context of South Asian culture, and particularly Pakistani society, these terms have negative connotations and are therefore considered offensive.

#### PLAY TO THE AUDIENCE OR PERISH

**I**t has been observed that “lockdown social media has been riddled with pained apologies and ‘repentance’ messages from high status individuals who have been cancelled or feel wronged” (Andrews 905). Similarly, a day after the video teaser of *Qubool* went viral on social media, Bilal Saeed issued a clarification and apology through a video that was shared on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram on 9 August. The two-minute and fifty-second video appears on In-

stagram with a caption on behalf of Saeed and his team stating, “We as Muslims, as decent human beings and as artists will never ever trivialize or condone disrespect to Islam or any other religion, race, caste, colour or creed,” followed by “Please find the video below as a sincere apology from myself, Saba Qamar and the rest of the team” (Saeed, “Apology”). Interestingly, Saeed stepped in to represent Saba Qamar and also issued a direct apology on her behalf, since she had limited her online presence. As a woman who faced severe misogynistic backlash for her previous role in an Indian film and now the *Qubool* project, Qamar was the least likely candidate for issuing a video apology that could purposefully defuse the controversy.

Saeed appears in this video dressed in a cream-coloured *shalwar kameez*, which is the national dress of Pakistan and includes a long, loose-fitted shirt and trousers. In the video, Saeed converses in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, and begins with the Islamic greeting *Assalam o Alaikum* (“peace be upon you”), which immediately positions Saeed as both a patriotic Pakistani and a Muslim (Saeed, “Apology”). Saeed then proceeds to share how grateful he is to be a Muslim and proudly acknowledges that he was raised in a Muslim household. It is imperative to emphasize how serious a blasphemy charge is in Pakistan, so it can be reasonably presumed that Saeed felt compelled to underscore his own Muslim identity and that of his family to protect them against any physical harm or abuse from a cyber-mob. Some of the comments on Saeed’s previous posts had also questioned his religious beliefs by referring to him as a “Hindu” or an “Indian,” which serve less as markers of identity and more as pejoratives in the psyche of Pakistan’s often hyper-nationalist social media.

Saeed uses the video as a platform to further assure the audience that the management of Wazir Khan Mosque can also be contacted to corroborate that no music was played inside the mosque. He then mentions that the stills shared on social media were merely part of a promotional photoshoot, which has historically not been uncommon for the mosque in question. Despite the clarification that they did not shoot a dance sequence or play music inside the mosque, Saeed still admits to an “unintentional fault” on his part and that of his



Figure 4: Image still from Instagram video posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music).

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team members. However, he emphasizes that just like everyone else, they, too, are human, and to err is human. Saeed further reassures his

viewers that he and his team repent to Allah and quotes the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, which states that Allah is pleased with those who repent (Saeed, "Apology"). He specifically references verse 222 from the second chapter, *Al Baqarah* (The Cow) which states, "innallaha yu'hib'bul tawaa'been" (Surah Al-Baqarah 222) or "Allah loves those who are most repenting" (Taqi Usmani).

Saeed then takes responsibility for his actions by acknowledging that he and his team have hurt the sentiments of Muslims and Pakistanis, and being a Muslim himself, he would have felt the same if he were in their position. This is a clear attempt to appeal to the religiously charged social media cyber-mob and encourage them to show compassion. There is a calculated effort to highlight a common thread between his team and online social media users, which is their Muslim identity. In that moment, Saeed is emphasizing an unintentional mistake and advocating that if his sentiments were hurt in a similar way, he would have opted for forgiving the individuals involved, because that is what Allah, their mutual creator, would also encourage and be pleased with. Saeed assures his audience that after learning from his mistake, he has decided that the entire sequence shot inside the Wazir Khan Mosque will be edited and removed from the video before it is released on 11 August. Finally, Saeed concludes by stating that although he never imagined himself to be caught in a controversy of this nature, he can guarantee that he will never be involved in anything like this for the remainder of his life. This is worth noting because Saeed uses it as a strategy to remain relevant amongst an audience that clearly has the ability to either make or break his music career. Thus, he has to remain on their good side and undo the effect of "cancel culture" while also dodging the possibility of physical harm and legal persecution. Saeed's desperation is also understandable given the likelihood that his work would potentially not resonate with the audience two days later had he not conducted himself in this manner.

Saeed's apology video received 399 093 views and 4152 comments on Instagram (Saeed, "Apology"). The comments once again ranged from being unforgiving to those attacking Saba Qamar. In the entire video apology, which lasted nearly three minutes, Saeed reiterated

that he was a Muslim approximately five times. Despite the profuse apologies and an overt display of Islamic and patriotic symbolism through language, dress, and Quranic references, Pakistani social media users from all strata of society demanded more accountability by insisting that the celebrity duo be punished under Section 295 of the Blasphemy Laws.

### “CANCEL CULTURE” AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Since the actions of the mosque’s management were also called into question, the Punjab Auqaf and Religious Affairs Department (i.e., the board of trustees for mosques and religious spaces) announced that Ishtiaq Ahmed, the manager of Wazir Khan Mosque, was suspended as of 9 August 2020 when the video teaser for *Qubool* went viral on social media (“Lahore Police”). Ahmed was interviewed by a local news channel, and he confirmed that music was not played inside the mosque and the artists did not perform a dance, either. However, he stated that the now viral video had undergone editing after the shoot was completed. While Ahmed appeared to be more aware of the technicalities of post-production editing, Sahibzada Saedul Hassan, the Punjab Auqaf Minister, assured the media that strict action would be taken against those who had allowed the use of the mosque for the purpose of filming a music video (“Lahore Police”). Understandably, Hassan was responding to the mounting political pressure on relevant authorities to punish those involved in defiling a mosque and hurting the sentiments of Muslims. One of the most prominent figures calling for action was Usman Buzdar, the Chief Minister of Punjab, who took notice of the matter and escalated the issue. In the chain of accountability, Buzdar was also responding to pressure from the Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q), the ruling party’s political ally, as well as religious clerics who had begun protesting on the streets of Lahore (“Historic Mosque’s Manager”).

Inevitably, “cancel culture” succeeded and a First Instance Report (FIR) was filed against the duo on 13 August. The complaint was filed by Advocate Farhat Manzoor Chandio at the Akbari Gate Police Sta-

tion in Lahore (“Lahore Police”). The FIR followed after social media and religious scholars united in demanding that a blasphemy case be registered against the pair (Saqib). The Lahore High Court eventually accepted the charge against Saeed and Qamar under Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code for “violating the sanctity of the mosque” (Saib). Section 295 is enshrined under the wider category of “offences relating to religion” and broadly prohibits “injuring or defiling place of worship with Intent to insult the religion of any class” (“Pakistan Penal Code”). The statute further states:

“Whoever destroys, damages or defiles any place of worship, or any object held sacred by any class of persons with the intention of thereby insulting the religion of any class of persons or with the knowledge that any class of persons is likely to consider such destruction damage or defilement as an insult to their religion shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both” (Pakistan Penal Code).

Interestingly, the language of Section 295 of the Penal Code suggests that the sanctity of “any” religion is to be protected and that the defilement of “any class or religion” is considered a punishable offence. However, tracing the trajectory of the Blasphemy Laws as a colonial relic furthers an understanding of how these laws have been used as a tool for personal vendetta against anyone deemed to be outside the parameters of acceptable “Muslim-ness.” It must also be pointed out that the concept of “blasphemy” does not have validity in Islam, and that it has been (mis)used as a tool of political and social appeasement, especially since the problematic statute makes the offence of blaspheming against Islam punishable by death in most cases. Even in the case of the *Qubool* debacle, religious and political circles had a strong reaction to the viral video and joined forces to bring the alleged perpetrators to justice.

## READING BLASPHEMY INTO VISUAL CULTURE

**H**enderson outlines a recent study conducted by David Levari of the Harvard Business School in which participants were asked to view and determine the colour of blue and purple dots that appeared on the screen. Initially, the dots appearing on the screen during the trial were an equal mix of both colours. As the trial progressed, more purple dots were introduced, which resulted in the participants expanding their definition of what they considered “blue” and they began to identify some of the purple dots as blue. In the second part of a similar experiment, participants were asked to view expressions on faces that ranged from “neutral” to “threatening.” The experimenters manipulated the trial and gradually decreased how often a threatening face would appear on the screen. Intriguingly, it was observed that due to the lack of threatening faces, the participants eventually began to describe neutral faces as threatening in the same way they had previously started to identify purple dots as blue. A key finding of the study suggested that when people are looking for signals, they tend to broaden their definition of any given variable so that “more observations fit” (Henderson 38). This particular finding of the experiment is useful for understanding how the scope of “blasphemy,” and specifically blasphemy towards Islam, has expanded to include even the most innocuous acts. As Anneke Meyer notes, the prerequisite to cultural consumption is that consumers have to make sense of products, and thus, they can be described as the producers of meaning (68). In this case, it can be argued that blasphemy was “read into” a situation where the artists merely posed for a photoshoot inside the mosque. However, it was considered a transgression against Islam, which was then amplified through social media and came to represent blasphemy against an entire religion and its followers.

During a global pandemic like COVID-19, it can certainly be argued that access to religious spaces should not have been granted to a video production crew in the first place. However, those demanding harsh punishment for Saeed and Qamar overlooked the fact that many such photoshoots had previously taken place in the Wazir

Khan Mosque as well as the historic Badshahi Mosque, which are both popular religious sites in close proximity of each other. This indicates that religious spaces have previously been rented out for monetary gain by the Punjab Auqaf and Religious Affairs Department. Yet this common practice had not garnered as much attention as *Qubool* because it was not widely publicized on social media. Therefore, the news pertaining to the prior use of the mosque space was perceived as being less offensive than a brief scene portraying a newlywed couple inside the vicinity of the mosque. There was also a recent case of a *Qari* (religious instructor) who was caught on video while molesting a young child in the precincts of a mosque in Pakistan's Sindh province in August 2020. But that particular incident resulted in considerably minimal social media criticism, which points to obvious fault lines in Pakistan's social media consumption, thus making it difficult to gauge which indecent acts cause more offence to "Muslim" sensibilities in Pakistan.

#### MOLESTATION IN THE MOSQUE

**I**n August 2020, a seminary teacher named Maulvi Ghulam Abbas Sehto, also known as Qari Abbas, molested a 12-year-old boy inside a mosque located in the Buddak village near Kandiaro, Naushero Feroze District, Sindh (Bhatti). On 7 August, when the child's mother went to the mosque where her son received Quran reading lessons, she learned that Qari Abbas had molested him ("Seminary Teacher"). A former student at the seminary reported that he heard the sounds of crying from the mosque and was able to record a video of Qari Abbas as he was molesting the child (Bhatti). The former student revealed that he was also molested by Qari Abbas several times over the span of the two years that he had previously spent at the seminary. Although he reported the issue to his parents, no legal action was taken, and he eventually discontinued his Quran lessons at the mosque (Bhatti).

The video in which Qari Abbas can be seen molesting his student was shared on social media and started to circulate on Twitter. When the child's mother registered a FIR against Qari Abbas at the Kandiaro



aro Police Station for raping her son, a local court granted him bail (Bhatti). Rehan Hussain Wassano, the Station House Officer at the police station, admitted that although video footage of the indecent act was reviewed as evidence, it was ultimately determined that the accused was merely “carrying out unethical acts” and had not actually raped the child (Bhatti). Although the hashtag #ArrestQariAbbas briefly trended on Twitter in August 2020, it did not generate nearly as much attention as the incident involving Bilal Saeed and Saba Qamar. As one Twitter user questioned on 16 August, “If on one side someone gets charged for blasphemy for shooting a video in Mosque, really interested to know what charges would this moron would be tried for. If this aint disrespect of a mosque then what is? #arrestqariabbas” (Bhatti). This tweet, like a few other similar ones, was only “liked” by two users and was unable to generate any retweets to amplify its message; a stark difference can be observed between this tweet and Kakakhail’s, which generated 17 700 “likes” and 6735 retweets. What remains obvious, however, is that social media has been used both relentlessly and selectively as a mechanism for targeting certain groups and individuals. While the Qari who molested a child escaped the law and whose indecent act is all but forgotten from collective social memory, Saeed and Qamar both remain the focus of scrutiny as they continue receiving death threats. At the time of writing, Saeed and Qamar are still involved in an ongoing legal battle. Despite having pled not guilty to the charges against them, the courts have still ordered a monetary fine for both and issued theirailable arrest warrants (Bilal).

By specifically outlining quantitative data such as statistics for Internet usage and specifically Instagram usage in Pakistan before the COVID-19 pandemic as well as after March 2020, this paper documents the increase in social media usage in Pakistan during the pandemic. This is effective in exploring the behavioural consumption patterns during the pandemic and the subsequent attitude formation in the Saeed-Qamar debacle. In addition, the qualitative examination of a selection of responses by Pakistani social media users collected from Instagram and Twitter was used to highlight the perceptions of the social media audience to assess why the Saeed-Qamar debacle

instigated religious tensions, and how the outcomes in two separate cases involving the use of mosques disproportionately affect media artists and not a seminary teacher.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper has been to assess the overall capacity of social media to contribute to religious and nationalist ideological conformity. It can be observed that online mobilization has also contributed to positive change in some cases, a significant example being the Black Lives Matter movement that was driven by direct action through active online spaces (Andrews 903). This led to forced accountability and allowed participants involved in online activism to call for the removal of problematic names, symbols, and statues, and even prompted apologies from various organizations, institutions, and companies involved in the marginalization of Black people (903). However, using Pakistan and the Saeed-Qamar incident as a case study shows that increased social media usage is not necessarily accompanied by positive engagement. Instead, the remnants of colonial statutes like the Blasphemy Laws severely undermine how far modes of visual culture can extend in Pakistan before some artists are forced to scale back in expressing their craft. In particular, the selective outrage reserved for celebrities and especially women promotes a “cancel culture” which has intensified during the pandemic when social media has been used more readily as an alternative form of entertainment and communication during the lockdown.

More specifically, this paper used the recent Pakistani case of alleged blasphemy registered against media artists Bilal Saeed and Saba Qamar to highlight the problematics of using social media in Pakistan. Since Pakistan is a state still governed by the colonial-era Blasphemy Laws of 1860, these laws continue to be used selectively to enforce uniform ideas of Islamic acceptability on members of Pakistan's pluralistic yet constrained society. Therefore, anyone considered to be outside the legally established ambit of Islamic religiosity can be punished through incarceration, fines, or even state-sanctioned

death penalty in extreme cases. A case like this points to the limitations of visual culture and pronounces the disproportionate conventional power structures in Pakistani society which have contributed to the isolation of certain individuals. During the pandemic, these groups have become even more vulnerable and are increasingly finding themselves on the margins of society. Thus, interrogating how a rise in social media driven “cancel culture” has contributed to this increased vulnerability and challenging hegemonic power structures in online spaces becomes an important prerequisite to confronting colonial laws and decolonizing knowledge production in a postcolonial Pakistan.

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#### Image Notes

Figure 1: Instagram image posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music). Photo credit: @clickbysawaiz [July 31, 2020].

Figure 2: Instagram image posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music). Photo credit: @clickbysawaiz [August 1, 2020].

Figure 3: Instagram image posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music). Photo credit: @clickbysawaiz [August 2, 2020].

Figure 4: Image still from Instagram video posted by Bilal Saeed (@bilalsaeed\_music). [August 9, 2020].