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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Rapping Gender: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Gender Representation in Contemporary Pakistani Hip Hop

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Abstract: This study explores how gender roles are constructed and represented in contemporary Pakistani hip hop and rap music. In a society where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched, music serves both as a reflection of dominant ideologies and as a potential space for contestation. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of discourse and, the research employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how popular Pakistani hip hop songs released between January and May 2025 produce and circulate gendered meanings. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes a purposive sample of 10 highly viewed songs on YouTube to identify recurring discursive patterns surrounding masculinity, femininity, dominance, emotionality, and resistance. The findings reveal how these lyrical constructions shape cultural "truths" about gender and contribute to the normalization of patriarchal values. Overall, this research deepens sociological understanding of how popular media reinforces gender ideologies in Pakistan and offers critical insights for artists, producers, and policymakers seeking to promote more inclusive and equitable representations within the music industry.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Pakistani Hip Hop, Rap Music, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Foucauldian Discourse, Cultural Narratives

Introduction

Music is often regarded as an expression of feelings and emotions, yet it also serves as a reflection of societal culture and values (Chapin & Kramer 2009). In Pakistan music plays a crucial role in shaping narratives, reinforcing established norms and even challenging said norms. It is no secret that Pakistan is a highly patriarchal society. The gender roles are so embedded in its culture that they exist in every structure; including music. Over the years, Pakistani music has changed from traditional folk and classical works to new, modern genres of music like hip hop, rap, and pop (Zafar et al., 2024). With this transition and evolution, the representation of gender in music has also changed. This study aims to explore how contemporary Pakistani music, particularly hip hop/ rap music, represents gender and how this representation is understood by the Pakistani youth.

For this study, the terms "hip-hop" and "rap" are used together. 'Hip-hop' refers to the broader cultural and musical movement, and 'rap' denotes its lyrical and vocal expression. While rap is technically one of the core elements of hip-hop culture, it is often used interchangeably with hip-hop in contemporary discourse, particularly when referring to music (Perkins, 1996). This study centers on Pakistani hip-hop/rap music,

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particularly analyzing songs where rap lyrics and hip-hop aesthetics are central to the depiction of gender roles.

Research Problem

Music and music videos play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes and individual behaviors, particularly among youth. (Chen et al., 2006). In Pakistan, gender stereotypes are blatantly obvious in various forms of media where patriarchal structures prevail with male dominance being portrayed as natural and masculine and women being portrayed as submissive and the object of desire affirming to their femininity (Adnan et al., 2019).

In recent years, Pakistani hip hop and rap have risen as powerful platforms for artistic expression which are often used to reflect broader social dynamics, including gender roles (Murthy, 2013). Within this genre, some artists tend to challenge traditional gender norms through their lyrics and visuals, while others continue to follow the same pattern and reinforce stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity (Taj & Ameen, 2024). Despite the growing popularity of this music genre among Pakistani youth, there is limited scholarly attention given to how gender is constructed and represented within this cultural space. Moreover, the influence of these portrayals on young audiences' understanding of gender roles remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by critically analyzing contemporary Pakistani hip hop/rap music and examining the ways it contributes to shaping perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Research Objectives

- To critically examine how masculinity and femininity are constructed in contemporary Pakistani hip hop/rap lyrics.
- To analyze the ways in which gender roles are reinforced, negotiated, or challenged through discursive strategies in song lyrics.

Research Questions

- How are masculinity and femininity discursively constructed in contemporary Pakistani hip hop/rap lyrics?
- What dominant discourses and themes related to gender roles show in these lyrics?
- To what extent do these songs reinforce or challenge prevailing gender norms and stereotypes in Pakistani society?

Literature Review

Music is an effective and powerful medium of social and cultural expression and influence. Researchers have long recognized its capacity to shape individual and collective identities by strengthening or challenging societal standards and societal norms (Hess, 2019; Rabinowitch, 2020; Danaher, 2010). In the context of gender studies, music serves as both a reflection of prevailing gender ideologies and a specialist in their propagation or change (Dibben, 2002). Research shows that pop culture remains a powerful agent of socialization. In music, the combined system of lyrical content, visual media, and artist branding provides a sort "script" for young audiences' understanding of gender (Anderson & Kavanagh, 2020). Studies on gender representation in music highlight a tireless trend of reinforcing traditional gender norms and stereotypes (Altayeb, 2022). Studies have shown that media, especially music, frequently depicts men as prevailing, dominant, aggressive, and autonomous, while women are frequently portrayed in submissive and objectified roles (Avery et al., 2017). These portrayals contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchal structures by normalizing masculine authority and female subservience (Dibben, 1999; Herd, 2015; Kapsaskis, 2021). However, emerging music genres and artists are progressively challenging these generalizations, giving different representations of masculinity and femininity (Bailey, 2021; Hawkins, 2015; Stos, 2012).

Hip hop/rap music, as a prevailing and broadly consumed genre, is especially critical in understanding gender representation in Pakistani music. Unlike traditional genres that essentially cater to particular social or regional audiences, hip hop music features a broader appeal and reaches far beyond (Alim, 2023; Hirsch, 1971). It is characterized by its accessibility, mass production, and integration with digital platforms, making it a crucial medium for shaping cultural discourse (Alim, 2023; Shuker, 2013).

In the context of Pakistan, music has undergone significant changes, shifting from traditional classical and folk music to modern genres such as pop, hip-hop, and electronic music (Zafar et al., 2024). Whereas early forms of Pakistani music frequently followed and adhered to routine and traditional gender norms, modern music reflects a more diverse range of viewpoints on gender roles. Contemporary rap in particular draws on South Asian poetic traditions, especially the Urdu ghazal, which valorizes themes of longing, heartbreak, and unfulfilled love, but reworks them within a hip-hop idiom (Qureshi & Rabbani, 2021). This localization allows rap to resonate with audiences familiar with poetic conventions while also carrying forward gendered discourses (Zafar et al., 2024). Within this shift, some artists continue to reinforce traditional patriarchal beliefs, whereas others challenge them by presenting non-conforming depictions of masculinity and femininity (Anwar et al., 2024; Zaidi, 2016).

Research Gap

The existing literature underscores the critical role of music in forming and reinforcing gender perceptions. Whereas much research has centered on worldwide media, there remains a gap within the study of gender representation in contemporary Pakistani Hip-Hop/Rap music. By centering on hip-hop/rap music, this study aims to fill this gap and give a sociological viewpoint on how music impacts gender norms and personalities in Pakistan. The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on media and gender studies, while offering insights for artists, policymakers, and media producers seeking to advance more comprehensive and inclusive representations.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study draws on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power to analyze gender representation in Pakistani hip hop/rap music. Foucault (1969) argues that discourse shapes what is socially accepted as truth, meaning that language, such as song lyrics, plays a central role in constructing gender norms. Music becomes a site where dominant ideologies around gender are reinforced or challenged. Foucault provides a framework to examine how gendered identities are discursively constructed, normalized, or resisted in music, helping reveal how power operates through cultural expression in contemporary Pakistan.

Methodology

This study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, grounded in Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power (Foucault, 1969), to investigate how gender is constructed and represented in contemporary Pakistani hip hop/rap music. This approach allows the exploration of how language in lyrics does not simply reflect social reality, but actively shapes and regulates ideologies, particularly those related to gender, power, and cultural norms. Given that music is often regarded as a site for identity representation, construction, and resistance, this method is particularly suitable in analyzing how gender roles are maintained, negotiated, or challenged within lyrical discourse.

Research Design

The research involves a Critical Discourse Analysis of a purposive sample of 10 Pakistani hip hop/rap songs released between January and May 2025. This genre was selected due to its cultural relevance, mass appeal, strong influence among youth, and its capacity to represent identity and social commentary, including gender norms. The selected songs were drawn from tracks released in 2025 to ensure the research captures current discursive trends in gender representation. By focusing on songs with high cultural visibility and relevance, the study aims to examine texts that actively shape public understandings of gender among youth audiences.

The primary unit of analysis is song lyrics, which have been examined to identify the discursive strategies used in the construction of gendered identities and ideologies.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this research, rap songs are defined as musical tracks that have a vocal performance of rhythmic speech and rhyme (Bradley & DuBois, 2010) delivered over a 'beat' (Schloss, 2014), created by artists who operate within and self-identify with the rap tradition. Given the limited number of high-performing rap songs released between January and May 2025, this study analysed the ten most highly rated tracks on YouTube during this period. The sample aimed for diversity in artists and stylistic expressions within the genre. The songs were selected as per the following criteria:

- High visibility: based on YouTube views (minimum 1 million)
- Cultural or political resonance: particularly regarding gender or identity-related themes.

Each song was examined using a consistent set of guiding questions, such as:

- How is masculinity or femininity constructed through language?
- What roles or behaviors are assigned to different gender identities?
- Are dominant gender norms reinforced, challenged, or reimagined?

Data Analysis

The analysis follows the three-tier Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, grounded in Foucault’s frameworks:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Lyrics were closely read to identify key linguistic and rhetorical features that construct gendered subject positions. Attention was given to:
 - Gendered metaphors and descriptors;
 - Binary oppositions (e.g., strong/weak, active/passive);
 - Use of repetition, slang, or culturally loaded terms.
2. **Discursive Practice Analysis:** This level considered how lyrics function within the conventions of Pakistani hip hop and rap. It explored:
 - Recurring themes such as hypermasculinity, emotional repression, or resistance;
 - Genre-specific strategies like braggadocio, storytelling, and resistance narratives.
3. **Social Practice Analysis:** At this level, the study linked lyrical discourse to broader sociocultural dynamics, including:
 - Patriarchal ideologies and gender hierarchies in Pakistani society;
 - The normalization or marginalization of non-conforming gender performances;
 - The potential for lyrical resistance to shape public discourse on gender.

Findings

The examined data using Foucault’s theory and its three stages reveals the recurring themes.

Table 1
List of the Songs Analyzed

S#	Song name	Singer	Link to the song	Link to the lyrics
1	Pal	Afusic	[Link]	[Link]
2	Departure Lane	Talha Anjum	[Link]	[Link]
3	Shayar	Faris Shafi & Zain Zohaib	[Link]	[Link]
4	BDTD (Been There Done That)	Bilal Saeed & Talha Anjum	[Link]	[Link]

S#	Song name	Singer	Link to the song	Link to the lyrics
5	Sultan-Shikari	Faris Shafi, Sultan	[Link]	[Link]
6	Memories	Hassan Raheem & Justin Bibis	[Link]	[Link]
7	Akh	Bohemia & Noveen Morris	[Link]	Transcribed by the researcher
8	Up	Talha Anjum & JJ47	[Link]	[Link]
9	Now & Then	Talha Anjum & Jokhay	[Link]	[Link]
10	Wasted	Talha Yunus, Hassan Raheem & Shareh	[Link]	[Link]

Theme 1: Femininity as Dangerous yet Intoxicating

Textual Analysis

In rap songs, women are often portrayed as delicate. They are described as angel-like.

Han, ay Nazneen

Yes, O delicate

Teri nazron ke siwa mujh ko khumar nahi

Other than your gaze, nothing intoxicates me.

(Wasted, Talhah Younus & Hassan Raheem).

Femininity is depicted as both dangerous and alluring, with women's gaze and beauty described as jadoo (magic) and nasha (intoxication). This reflects Dibben (1999) and Avery et al. (2017) on music objectifying women by portraying them as passive yet intoxicating forces.

Discursive Practice

Rakh saambh ke zulfan de jaal

Take care of your intoxicating beauty

Saanu rehnde vich saaday haal

Let us be as we are

(BTDT, Bilal Saeed & Talha Anjum)

These lyrics use common ideas and tropes from Urdu poetry and folk stories. Qureshi & Rabbani (2021) argue that Pakistani rap is heavily inspired by ghazal traditions of longing and enchantment. In this hybrid style, words like butterflies (titliyan), jadoo, and nasha are used.

Tu pariyon si kaisi Nazneen

You're as delicate as the fairies.

Ki dil ne zehan ki na suni

That my heart did not listen to my brain

(Departure Lane, Talha Anjum)

Women are seen as pure while at the same time destabilizing or dangerous. By repeating these metaphors, rap normalizes the idea that women's beauty is both enchanting and destabilizing.

Social Practice – (Disempowered Lens)

This imagery reflects patriarchal binaries where women are idealized as pure (nazneen), yet their sexuality is feared or moralized (jadoo, nasha). Femininity is disempowered and seen through its effect on men rather than female subjectivity. Women are objects of male narration, and men's definitions of women's behavior

remain dominant. As Foucault suggests, such metaphors operate as discursive tools shaping power and position.

Theme 2: Male Entitlement and Authority

Textual Analysis

Rappers build a larger-than-life persona, calling themselves the boss, the king, or even the ‘father’ of the game. They often put down other rappers using parental metaphors.

Mera rap game pe ho jese Sinatra effect

My rap game has the Sinatra effect

Urdu rap ka may baap, karlo NADRA mein check

I'm the father of urdu rap, you can check it on Nadra.

(Up, Talha Anjum, JJ47 & Jhokay)

In *Departure Lane*, repeated cries of "don't leave" feel like a demand. A woman's love is treated as something a man is owed.

Meri jaan, meri jaan, tu na jaa

My love, my love, Don't leave.

Abhi karz hai tujhpe woh waada

You're still in debt for that promise.

(Departure Lane, Talha Anjum)

Discursive Practice

This aligns with hip hop's global braggadocio tradition, where rappers construct dominance through wordplay (Perkins, 1996) (Shuker, 2013).

Mera rap game pe ho jese Sinatra effect

My rap game has the Sinatra effect (sinatra's song If I make it here, I can make it anywhere)

Urdu rap ka may baap, karlo NADRA mein check

I'm the father of urdu rap, you can check it on Nadra

(Up, Talha Anjum, JJ47)

In Pakistan, paternal metaphors (baap, abbu) combine global rap ego with local patriarchal language. The repetition of metaphors over time like these reinforces male authority as the natural voice of rap, it makes male dominance feel like a natural part of the music.

Beta, dekho meri body, mein hoon kitna commando

Son, look at my body, I am so commando

Mere pajj gaye gawandi, mein tou karta karate

My neighbors got beaten up, while I was busy doing karate.

(Shayar, Faris Shafi x Sultan)

Social Practice – (Empowered lens)

These rap songs reflect patriarchal norms where male entitlement and authority are treated as natural. The use of paternal metaphors comes from Pakistani cultural practices where the father holds unquestioned authority over the household. In songs like *Departure Lane*, love is something owed to the man, making it an

obligation. This reinforces the idea that men are entitled to loyalty and devotion. It empowers masculinity that is centered on ego, dominance, and indispensability. As Foucault argues, such claims reproduce hierarchies.

Theme 3: Masculinity as Stoic Suffering and Romantic Fatalism

Textual Analysis

A recurring construction of masculinity in rap revolves around a man's pain and stoic endurance. This mirrors cultural archetypes like Ranjha or Majnu, whose suffering is romanticized. In *Now and Then*, the absent woman is blamed for betrayal and the man endures heartbreak:

Tum aati kyun nahin ho jab tumhe bulaata hoon?

Why don't you come when I call you?

Yahin kahin dukhega dil humara phir se

Somewhere here, my heart will be broken again

(Now & Then, Talha Anjum & Jhokay)

In *Wasted*, loneliness and intoxication paint the rapper as a tragic genius, where his suffering proved authenticity.

Shayad hum mashhoor kaafi hain

Maybe, we're too famous

Hai ek ajab si bebasi, koi dooba, koi door kaafi hai

There is a strange kind of helplessness — someone is drowning, yet someone is so far.

(Wasted, Talha Younus, Shareh & Hassan Raheem)

Discursive Practice

These tropes come from South Asian romantic traditions like Ranjha and Majnu, who ended tragically. Their pain is celebrated as heroic because of loyalty and love.

Pal-pal jeena muhaal mera tere bina

Every moment of living is unbearable without you.

Yeh saaray nashay bekaar teri aankhon ke siwa

All these intoxications are useless — except for the intoxication in your eyes.

(Pal Pal, Afusic)

These tropes are adapted into rap as authenticity markers. The more glorified the suffering, the more authentic the rapper becomes.

Mein tou betha hoon raat se le ke gham ye saaray sirhaanay

I've been sitting here since the night with all my sorrows behind me

Lagta hai, shayad, ab subha ho gayi ho

Now it looks like it might be morning

(Now and Then, Talha Anjum x Jhokay)

Social Practice – (Empowered/Disempowered Lens)

The glorification and romanticization of male suffering as noble reproduce cultural tropes that both empower and disempower masculinity. This shows how gendered identities are discursively constructed (Hall, 1997), while popular music reinforces such stereotypes through cultural repetition (Altayeb, 2022).

Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis reveals that Pakistani hip hop/ rap reinforces patriarchal norms by combining global rap traditions with deeply rooted South Asian cultural stereotypes. The genre actively performs and reinforces gender relations in the Pakistani society. Femininity is constructed in a sort of what Sigmund Freud (1912) called the 'Madonna-Whore dichotomy' which portrays women as either pure, angelic figures that need to be protected or as dangerous seductresses who are a threat that can destabilize men (Dibben, 1999; Freud, 1912). This provides justification for seeing femininity as a force that must be controlled. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as God-like saviors who claim the authority over the women's agency and, at the same time, are powerless before female beauty and desire. It creates a paradox that allows them to have moral authority while also blaming their vulnerability and powerlessness on women.

This makes masculinity shift constantly between dominance and vulnerability (a trope in south Asian poetry tradition). It is performed through stoic suffering (Ranjha, Majnu), paternal authority (baap), and an ego-centered braggadocio that raises the rapper's street status to that of a cultural patriarch. The repetition of these ideas, as Butler says, makes gender as a performance that becomes normalized and 'authentic' in the society (Butler, 1990). At the same time, Foucault's theory highlights how the discourse decides who is allowed to speak and who remains silent like how in rap genre, women are silent entities and men are granted the authority to narrate, interpret, and dominate. (Foucault, 1969).

It's interesting that while rap presents itself as rebellious, it ends up reinforcing hierarchies that already exist. This genre then essentially becomes a place where listeners construct and negotiate their identities. They often absorb the very power dynamics that the music presents as the real or authentic reflection of the dominant localized culture. The power of this genre lies in its ability to make hierarchies like these feel natural and inspirational to the youth of society. This is why music like this must be listened critically because it doesn't just reflect culture, it also helps in building and reinforcing it.

Examining the gender construction and representation in contemporary Pakistani hip hop/ rap music using Foucauldian discourse analysis and Butler's gender performativity theory reveals how the genre simultaneously reflects and reinforces patriarchal power structures. The findings identified recurring themes such as femininity as dangerous yet intoxicating, male entitlement and authority. Across the songs analyzed, femininity was constantly portrayed through a disempowered lens which included them being idealized yet highly objectified while masculinity was constructed as both dominant and emotionally burdened. Representations such as these help normalize gender hierarchies by portraying men as the sole narrators and women as subjects in their discourse.

This study reveals how popular culture acts as a platform where historical and traditional gender ideologies are reintroduced in new ways within the modern artistic forms. Pakistani hip hop/ rap scene likes to appear rebellious and progressive but often it just reproduces established patriarchal norms under the guise of creative expression. Understanding of these discursive mechanisms is needed to analyze how youth audiences internalize and reproduce gendered power relations in everyday life.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted according to the ethical guidelines provided by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Forman Christian College (A Chartered University). Artists' works were cited and credited. No defamatory or personal judgments were made. The analysis centers on social representation instead of individual intent.

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