

MEDIA, MISINFORMATION, AND BLASPHEMY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE MASHAL KHAN CASE

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Abstract

Blasphemy accusations has been used as a tool of fear and social control in Pakistan for a long time. This paper aims to analyze the mainstream media and digital media portrayals of counterdiscourses of justice, condemnation, and reform, as a response to the 2017 lynching of Mashal Khan, a university student who was beaten to death by a mob on his own campus, after being falsely accused of blasphemy. Using Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis framework alongside Entman's (1993) framing theory, the study purposively analyzes social media posts, editorials, and op-eds from April 2017 to early 2018. Since the initial blasphemy accusations circulated through private WhatsApp groups and word of mouth rather than public platforms, this study focuses on the publicly visible counter-discourses that emerged in response. The findings reveal that mainstream and social media both condemned the violence but in distinctly different ways. Mainstream media offered structured institutional condemnation while social media served as an immediate grassroots space for outrage and demands for accountability. A key finding is the emergence of a resilient digital counter-narrative that challenged Pakistan's long-standing culture of fear surrounding blasphemy laws. The study contributes to scholarship on religion, media, and power by demonstrating how public discourse can resist religious extremism even in politically constrained environments.

INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, the weaponization of blasphemy allegations to settle personal and political point scoring is a continuous social issue. The proliferation of social media has dangerously increased this threat, enabling misinformation to trigger mob violence with unprecedented speed and scale. In a media environment with developing digital literacy, online falsehoods can prove fatal, contributing to a landscape where mob-driven lynchings are a recurring reality (Singay, 2020). The social media platforms, those intended for connection, are thus often co-opted into instruments of violence.

In April 2017, the entire Pakistani nation was shocked after the brutal killing of twenty-three-year-old Mashal Khan. He was a student of Mass Communication at Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, who was falsely accused of blasphemy and then beaten to death by a mob from his own university campus. According to DW News (2019), Mashal Khan's legal team in June 2017, a 13-member joint investigation team (JIT) concluded in its report that the allegations of blasphemy were unfounded and were used as a pretext to incite a mob against the student (DW News, 2019). This tragic incident

brought a strong public reaction and led many people to speak against the misuse of blasphemy laws, something that was rarely talked about before because of fear. The case started a serious debate in the media about the misinformation, the legal system, and how these laws are misused in Pakistan. Crimes related to blasphemy are a serious offence in Muslim-majority Pakistan, and penalties range from small fines to the death sentence (Reuters, 2017).

A significant factor in such crimes is the spread of viral misinformation via social media. In the digital age, viral misinformation-based news spreads faster than facts, and social networking platforms act as amplifiers and echo chambers. According to Digital 2025: Pakistan report, in Pakistan, 66.9 million people, which makes up to 26% of the population, maintain at least one social media identity, while Facebook alone reaches 49 million users. These platforms, especially Facebook, X, and WhatsApp groups, have become the primary sources for everyday religion and politics discourse.

This research aims to explore how Mashal Khan's death helped to break the silence around blasphemy laws and made people ask questions and talk about them. It focuses on how newspapers, online media, and public voices from different schools of life talked about this case. It also includes how the legal system and government responded to it, to understand the country's reaction to such a violent and emotional incident.

This research, therefore, examines the aftermath of Mashal Khan's murder as a critical juncture in Pakistan's public discourse on blasphemy. It analyzes how mainstream and digital media narratives, coupled with public and state responses, challenged a long-standing culture of fear surrounding the blasphemy laws. The study also investigates how this case created a space for public inquiry and debate, offering insight into the nation's complex reaction to extremist violence fueled by misinformation.

This study provides both scholarly and practical contributions. At the scholarly level, it advances research in Pakistan that combines media studies, discourse analysis, and the politics of religion. By combining Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional CDA framework with Entman's (1993) framing theory, it gives an empirically based analysis of how blasphemy-related narratives from misinformation

and incitement to counter-discourses of justice and reform were constructed and contested through language and ideology across digital and mainstream media. It fills a notable gap in existing literature by examining online and print media narratives surrounding blasphemy and mob justice, an area underexplored in both South Asian and global scholarship on religion, communication, and power. At the practical level, the study contributes to public and policy debates on media ethics, information regulation, and civic responsibility. The findings underscore how narratives of blasphemy can be weaponized for political or personal gains, strong violence, and silencing dissent. By revealing how misinformation and emotional language shaped public perception of the Mashal Khan case, this research highlights the urgent need for media literacy initiatives, ethical editorial practices, and counter-misinformation strategies in Pakistan's media landscape. These insights can inform journalists, educators, and policymakers seeking to foster a more informed and responsible public discourse on sensitive religious issues.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is organized in a thematic structure to explore the relevant key areas to this study, such as the phenomenon of mob justice, the role of mainstream media, the influence of social media and misinformation, the historical context, and the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the evolution of public discourse following the Mashal Khan case.

Muhammad (2024) explores how social media shapes political discourse and public opinion, showing that these platforms not only encourage civic engagement but also mobilize users toward activism. His work points to the double-edged nature of social media: while it enables the rapid spread of information and encourages participation, it also fuels problems like misinformation and polarization. These insights resonate with the present study, particularly in highlighting how activism-related content circulates widely among Generation Z, often shaping their perspectives and engagement. However, unlike Muhammad's broader focus on political contexts, this study concentrates specifically on Generation Z. By doing so, it uncovers more nuanced patterns—such as

the rise of slacktivism or performative activism—that remain underexplored in Muhammad’s analysis.

Similarly, Gulzar (2023) examines how both traditional and digital media shape public opinion and social discourse, focusing on mechanisms such as agenda-setting and framing. The study also highlights the risks posed by echo chambers and the circulation of misinformation, while stressing the ethical responsibility of media organizations to foster balanced and informed debate. The present research supports Gulzar’s observations on the role of echo chambers and algorithm-driven content curation, especially in how they intensify polarization. However, unlike Gulzar’s broad approach that spans multiple forms of media, this study narrows its focus to social media and its specific impact on Generation Z. In doing so, it extends Gulzar’s insights by showing how algorithmic biases and polarization influence not only discourse patterns but also the civic behaviors of this digitally native generation.

This paper says that the media plays a central role in shaping public opinion, as it not only determines which issues gain visibility but also frames how those issues are perceived. Scholars widely agree that agenda setting directs public attention, while framing influences interpretation. The editorial gatekeeping in traditional media provided structured narratives, while digital platforms have disrupted this by enabling the rapid circulation of diverse perspectives. This democratization of information has also raised concerns about misinformation, echo chambers, and polarization. Across formats, media uses emotional appeals, repetition, and visuals to influence opinion and relies on framing, agenda setting, and persuasive strategies. Traditional media frames narratives with journalistic norms, while digital media blur these boundaries, mixing factual reporting with opinions, marketing, and disinformation. Tailoring content according to users’ preferences, algorithms, and targeted advertising further complicates the environment, potentially narrowing their exposure to diverse viewpoints. Taken together, this study underscores the media’s enduring power of persuasion but also reveals a gap in understanding how these mechanisms operate in politically sensitive and non-Western contexts, especially where misinformation is circulated unchecked.

The paper *Unpacking the Blasphemy Laws of Pakistan*

provides a comprehensive critical analysis of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, seeing their historical, political, legal, and theological dimensions. It starts with highlighting the severity of punishments related to blasphemy in Pakistan and how allegations have deeply impacted minorities and civil society. With the example of Governor Salman Taseer’s assassination, the paper highlights the dangerous consequences of speaking against these laws. The section titled *Flagrant Abuses and an Archaic Justice System* presents statistical evidence of how blasphemy laws are often manipulated for personal or political gain, especially in the case of minorities. It highlights serious gaps in the justice system, including judicial bias and lack of fair trial system for accused. A theological perspective is offered in *The ‘Islamic State’ Quandary*, where the paper critiques the lack of scholarly consensus within Islamic jurisprudence regarding the application of capital punishment for blasphemy. It contrasts the dynamic evolution of blasphemy discourse in the West with the stagnancy observed in many Muslim-majority countries, arguing that societal culture plays a pivotal role in shaping legal norms. Perhaps most significantly, *The Dissent Within* presents a counter-narrative to mainstream Islamic jurisprudence by highlighting dissenting voices such as Javaid Ahmad Ghamidi and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. These scholars challenge prevailing interpretations and argue for a return to more contextual, forgiving understandings of Islamic law. In conclusion, the paper recommends legal reform and cultural shift in the country. While suggesting instant steps to take like procedural safeguards and amendments to Section 295-C, it calls for a broader national dialogue with different stakeholders on the role of religion in the state and a shift toward greater religious tolerance.

Badry (2019) states in her article, scholars widely agree that Pakistan’s blasphemy laws are among the most restrictive globally and have evolved less from religious necessity than from political expediency. She demonstrates how General Zia ul-Haq’s Islamization entrenched discriminatory provisions, particularly against Ahmadis, while creating vague statutes open to misuse. These laws, as Julius (2016) and Siddique & Hayat (2008) also note, have become tools for settling personal scores and disproportionately target marginalized minorities. Beyond legal design flaws, Badry situates the persistence of the laws within a

broader pattern of state-sponsored sectarianism, where political elites have consistently used religion to maintain power rather than to promote justice. Yet while such scholarship traces historical and structural roots, less attention has been paid to how digital media has intensified the circulation of blasphemy accusations, as seen in the Mashal Khan lynching. This gap underscores the need to study how contemporary media discourse interacts with longstanding legal and political frameworks.

Hamdani (2015) in his research paper examines the human rights implications of Pakistan's blasphemy laws and argues that these laws are biased despite the claims of equal application. The study highlights that minorities, especially Christians and Ahmedis, experience discrimination in terms of legal and social marginalization. The author uses a qualitative, document based methodology drawing on constitutional texts, court rulings, legal interpretations and international human rights treaties. He frames blasphemy laws as incompatible with Pakistan's constitutional rights and international human rights standards and raises doubts about their implementation. Though the study does not focus on digital media, it provides the important background to understand how online accusations and discourse around blasphemy impact marginalized communities. The paper titled "Religious Intolerance Impact of Blasphemy Allegations in Pakistan: Role of Social Media and Mainstream Media" presents an in-depth examination of the influence of blasphemy allegations on religious intolerance in Pakistan. Scholars Kamran Saddique, Liu Xiumei, and Wu Baoqin, explore the role of social and traditional media in addressing religious intolerance which is related to blasphemy cases.

The study discussed the detailed history of blasphemy laws in Pakistan from British era to post 1947. The paper also examines that how social media because of its easy access and cheap rates gives opportunity to individuals to play with religious sentiments of the public. Lastly, the paper discusses the impact of misuse of blasphemy laws in our society, particularly in spreading hatred. It also talks about promoting fear, and identity crises for religious minorities. The study is a mix method approach with case studies, content analysis, and a comparative analysis of both social and traditional media.

Muhammad Imran writes in his research paper titled "Exploring the Role of Hate Speech in Anti-Religious Discourse in Pakistan" gives a critical analysis of hate speech that contributes to religious intolerance in Pakistan with a focus on social media platforms like Facebook. Author uses the Uses and Gratification Theory to investigate consumer's demographics and their relationship to the dissemination of hate speech. He also examine the correlation between religiousness, education levels, socioeconomic status, and hate speech during the period of Muharram, which is a high time for sectarian tensions in Pakistan. The study reveals a strong positive correlation between higher religious levels and consumer's inclination to post hate speech content on social media. The results suggest that individuals with higher levels of education and financial stability are less likely to engage in hate speech. The paper used a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and interviews. The thesis titled "DIGITAL FAITH: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ENACTMENT OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN PAKISTAN" authored by Emrys Schoemaker in 2016 explores the significant role of social media, specially Facebook, in shaping religious identities among young people in three cities in Punjab, Pakistan. This study contributes to understanding how digital technologies intersect with cultural and religious discourses in a rapidly changing society like Pakistan. The research employs a mixed method approach with surveys, in depth interviews and document analysis through pictures, data for this research was collected over 12 months (2014-2015). The study by Ezung and Koza (2024) analyzes the wider impact of social media on contemporary public debate; they emphasized how digital platforms shape public attitudes and behaviors. Authors defined social media not only as a communication tool but also as a space for activism and public participation. They worked on both positive and challenging dimensions, such as increased global participation and citizens engagement as positive dimensions and the misinformation and disinformation as challenges that undermine healthy discourse. In its secondary sources the study finds that frequent exposure to social media can correlate with strong inclination to engage in useful public discourse. This supports the idea that social media platforms are now important spaces for opinion building and mobilization. Despite

worries about content credibility. The writers argue that social media networks play a crucial role in shaping society's values and decision making. The authors used a qualitative, secondary research methodology relying on already available material such as government reports, scholarly articles, journal publications, and books.

Mughal and Martínez (2023) examine how local media shapes public opinion and democratic participation. However, the study does not use formal empirical methods, but it adopts a conceptual and analytical approach, grounded in media anthropology and discourse theory, to explore the shift between traditional local media and emerging digital platforms. The researchers argue that local media act as a primary source when talk about constructing collective identities and building community narratives, especially in geographical and cultural contexts. Simultaneously, they identify that the rise of social media challenges traditional gatekeeping roles, and creates hybrid spaces easily where voices from the grassroots, different viewpoints and rumors circulate easily and freely. Mughal and Martínez's analysis reinforces the need to learn the interaction between traditional and social media landscape, especially in a country like Pakistan which is ethnically diverse and sensitive.

This study is based on two theoretical frameworks: Framing theory (Entman, 1993) and Critical discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995).

Framing in digital spaces influences how audiences perceive credibility and importance of issues (Leong, 2024), while hybrid media systems illustrate the interplay between social media discourse and partisan news framing (Zhang, 2023). Framing theory provides a lens for exploring how specific aspects of the Mashal Khan case, including the blasphemy allegations and later the violence were selected, highlighted and made salient in media narratives. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." In context of this study, this theory helps in explaining that journalists, activists, politicians and social media users how they shaped public perception of blasphemy and its interpretation

in Mashal Khan's case.

Critical Discourse Analysis complements this viewpoint by providing a systematic framework for investigating how language reflects and shapes social identities. This study adopts Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, which is particularly appropriate for investigating discourses around sensitive and politicised issues such as blasphemy and mob violence in Pakistan.

The model consists of three interrelated levels of analysis:

- **Textual Analysis:** This level scrutinizes the linguistic features in which vocabulary, metaphors, tone, and sentence structure is included. In this study, textual analysis identifies how the language used in tweets, news reports, editorials, and other texts frames the Mashal Khan incident,

- **Discursive Practice:** This dimension examines the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption. It involves exploring how social media users engage with discourse, how news organizations shape narratives and opinions, and how misinformation circulates across social media platforms and among diverse audiences. This is crucial for understanding the dynamics of narrative formation and ideological reinforcement (Fairclough, 1995).

- **Social Practice:** This level situates the discourse within the broader socio-political and cultural context of Pakistan, where blasphemy is a deeply sensitive and politicized issue. In this study, social practice analysis explores how discourses around blasphemy, religious sentiment, and mob violence shape and are shaped by the socio-political climate in Pakistan.

Together, these theoretical frameworks provided a nuance exploration of how different actors such as media, politicians, state representatives, religious leaders and civil society strategically frame problems that are interconnected like blasphemy, religious extremism, justice, and national identity. They help to reveal how misinformation can be weaponized in an emotionally charged context.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on the critical discourse analysis of public narrative related to the lynching of Mashal Khan in Pakistan. This study aims to examine how blasphemy

allegations and acts of mob justice, fueled by misinformation, were framed and communicated across both social media and traditional media in the aftermath of Mashal Khan's killing. A qualitative research design was selected as it facilitates a comprehensive and in-depth examination of individuals' behaviors, perceptions, and experiences within their broader social contexts. This approach is particularly appropriate for analyzing media discourses surrounding blasphemy allegations, as it allows exploration of how meanings are constructed, framed, and contested across both social and traditional media platforms.

Data collection for this study involves the purposive selection of social media content and newspaper opinion articles. For the social media component, tweets and Facebook posts shared between April 2017 and February 2018 were collected, with a focus on those discussing the Mashal Khan incident. Posts authored by journalists, activists, lawyers, politicians, and ordinary users were included, with selection criteria based on engagement (likes, shares, retweets, comments) and the diversity of perspectives represented. This approach ensured the inclusion of both influential voices and grassroots responses, allowing for a comprehensive examination of how blasphemy allegations and mob justice were framed and communicated online.

In addition, editorials and opinion pieces were collected from two of Pakistan's major English-language newspapers, *Dawn* and *The News International*. These articles were chosen for their focus on key issues such as the Mashal Khan case, misinformation, mob lynching, blasphemy laws, religious extremism, justice, and politics. The combination of social media content and print media texts enables a comparative discourse analysis of how narratives were constructed and circulated across traditional and digital platforms during the period under study.

It should be noted, however, that the study is limited by the scope of its data. Social media material was not collected on a large scale but rather purposefully sampled, and the newspaper analysis was restricted to English-language publications. As a result, the findings reflect dominant discourses in English-language media and among more digitally engaged publics, rather than the full breadth of perspectives

available across Pakistan's multilingual and diverse media landscape.

This study did not employ an evenly distributed timeline for data selection. Instead, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted, focusing on four key discourse "spikes" that reflect moments of heightened public engagement, media coverage, and social media activity in the Mashal Khan case. The identified periods are as follows:

1. **April 13–30, 2017** – The immediate aftermath of the lynching, characterized by widespread public shock and intense emotional reactions.
2. **May–September 2017** – A phase in which narratives began to consolidate, marked by backlash, polarization, and shifts in public sentiment. This period also includes the release of the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) final report on June 3, 2017.
3. **February 2018** – The announcement of the Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) verdict triggered extensive responses in both media and public discourse.
4. **April–December 2018** – A later stage of remembrance and memorialization of Mashal Khan, in which commemorative practices and reflective narratives became prominent.

From each of these periods, 8–12 social media posts were purposively sampled from two platforms: X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. The selection included a variety of post types and authors, ranging from news organizations and journalists to activists, lawyers, politicians, and ordinary users. This diversity of sources ensured that the dataset captured multiple perspectives and discursive positions. By structuring sampling around these temporal peaks of engagement, the study was able to trace the evolving contours of public conversation, media framing, and societal perceptions over time.

The collected data were analyzed by using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995). The analysis proceeds in the following stages as per the model:

- Textual Analysis
- Discursive Practice Analysis
- Social Practice Analysis

Notably, no software or automated tools were employed in this process. Instead, the analysis was conducted manually by the researcher to ensure closer

interpretive engagement with the texts. The data was read and re-read to develop familiarity and to identify recurring patterns. Texts were then manually coded to extract key themes, metaphors, and frequently used terms. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories aligned with Fairclough's framework.

This manual approach facilitated a more nuanced interpretation of the language within its socio-cultural context. Through this systematic process of coding, theme-building, and critical interpretation, the study examines how narratives relating to blasphemy, violence, justice, and misinformation were constructed, and what implications these narratives hold for public discourse and social cohesion in Pakistan.

5. Findings & Results

This section presents the critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the texts examined in this study, which investigates how Mashal Khan's lynching was framed and communicated across social media and mainstream print media. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the analysis demonstrates how language was employed to report the event, shape public understanding, and contest ideological positions while calling for justice and reform. The discussion is organized into two parts: the first focuses on social media posts, including tweets and Facebook entries, which provide insight into immediate public reactions and grassroots discursive practices; the second examines editorials and opinion pieces from English-language newspapers, offering perspectives from more formal and institutional narratives. Taken together, these two layers of discourse highlight the complex interplay between media, society, and state power in shaping how such incidents are understood and framed in Pakistan.

5.1 - Critical Discourse Analysis of Social Media Posts on Mashal Khan's Lynching

The social media discourse following Mashal Khan's lynching reveals a contested and emotionally charged arena where grief, outrage, and ideological struggle intersected. Posts on Twitter and Facebook were necessarily concise but nonetheless conveyed powerful meanings, ranging from expressions of anger and solidarity to challenges against systemic injustice.

Through Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this analysis shows how discourse not only documented the event but also became a site where power and ideology were negotiated in real time.

Sub-theme 1: Outrage and Dehumanization of the Mob (Textual Analysis)

Many posts employed emotionally charged language to frame the perpetrators of violence. Terms such as "monsters," "inhuman," and "murderers" were widely circulated, including in tweets by journalists such as Zarrar Khuhro and Mubasher Lucman. This dehumanization of the mob is not merely descriptive—it delegitimizes the moral and religious justifications often associated with blasphemy accusations. The discourse here functions as a counter-narrative, framing the lynching as a brutal crime rather than a defense of religious sanctity. By redefining the perpetrators as "inhuman," users resisted dominant ideologies that often normalize or excuse violence in the name of religion.

Sub-theme 2: Irony and Sarcasm as Tools of Critique (Textual Analysis)

Another striking discursive strategy was the use of irony and sarcasm. Journalists like Mubashir Zaidi mocked institutional priorities by highlighting the absurdity of investigating blasphemy accusations rather than addressing mob violence itself. Such rhetorical choices expose contradictions within state practices, showing how language can ridicule and destabilize institutional authority. This shows that sarcasm on social media becomes a subtle but potent resource for resisting dominant narratives and questioning the legitimacy of state power.

Sub-theme 3: Information Sharing and Discursive Participation (Discursive Practice)

Beyond emotional and rhetorical framings, some accounts (e.g., @GroundZero_pk, @JavedAzizKhan) posted factual updates on investigations and court proceedings. While adopting a neutral tone, these posts shifted the framing from religious outrage to legal accountability, reframing the lynching as premeditated murder. Importantly, activists such as Jibran Nasir and citizens like @Arifbarichum used their platforms to initiate broader debates about whether direct and immediate justice alone could

dismantle the ideology that glorifies religious violence. Dialogues between elites (e.g., lawyer Reema Omer) and ordinary users further illustrate, how social media disrupts traditional hierarchies of knowledge production. In this sense, the platform enabled grassroots participation in shaping discourse, amplifying alternative narratives that challenge entrenched religious and political authority.

Sub-theme 4: Political Instrumentalization of Justice (Social Practice)

At the level of social practice, the discourse also revealed how justice narratives were mobilized for political legitimacy. For instance, Imran Khan's framing of the Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) verdict as a sign of institutional strength positioned the outcome as evidence of state capacity, even while systemic issues of fear, silence, and glorification of violence remained unaddressed. This reflects how political actors selectively use justice discourses to reinforce their authority, thereby reproducing existing power structures rather than dismantling them.

Synthesis

Across these dimensions, the analysis demonstrates that social media did more than register grief or document the events surrounding Mashal Khan's killing. It became a discursive battleground where competing ideologies – religious extremism versus human rights, silence versus accountability, state legitimacy versus public dissent—were contested. The use of emotionally charged language, irony, factual updates, and participatory debate highlights how digital spaces provide opportunities to challenge dominant narratives. At the same time, the appropriation of justice discourses by political actors illustrates the enduring resilience of power structures. Taken together, these dynamics show how social media in Pakistan functions simultaneously as a space of resistance and as an extension of existing ideological struggles over blasphemy, violence, and state authority. Notably, the recurring use of the hashtag #MashalKhan shows digital solidarity and activism, amplifying counter-discourses that resisted dominant justifications of violence in the name of religion.

5.2 - Critical Discourse Analysis of Newspapers

Zahid Hussain's Op-Ed "Silencing Mashal" (Dawn, April 19, 2017)

The analysis of Zahid Hussain's opinion piece *Silencing Mashal* discloses how journalistic discourse constructed Mashal Khan's murder not only as an isolated incident but as part of ingrained social, political, and ideological dynamics in Pakistan. Across the text, Hussain employs strong, emotive language (e.g., "beastly act," "medieval barbarity," "mindless mob") to highlight the brutality of the lynching and to stress the abnormality of such violence based incidents within an academic setting.

At the textual level (Fairclough's Level 1), the author's writing is crafted by the use of persuasive techniques such as metaphors ("shake them out of their apathy"), hyperbolic expressions ("medieval barbarity"), and rhetorical questions about challenging the political leadership's courage. The tone remains critical, urgent, and often despairing, reflecting deep concern over the societal consequences of religious extremism.

At the discursive practice level (Level 2), the article is an opinion piece aimed at influencing public discourse. Hussain frames the lynching within broader narratives of Pakistan's history of religious militancy, state complicity, and the political exploitation of blasphemy. Intertextually, his article connects the Mashal case to other incidents such as the glorification of Mumtaz Qadri, pointing to a consistent ideological set of beliefs.

At the social practice level (Level 3), the discourse shows the power struggle between radical religious actors and a state which is either unable or unwilling to confront them effectively. The text exposes the culture of impunity for blasphemy accusations, framing Mashal's murder as the result of political weakness, societal extremism, and the neglect of the state. His repeated calls for legal reform and courageous political leadership stress an ideological stance that advocates rationality and human rights over religious fanaticism.

The key discourse themes and codes emerge from the article are:

- Silencing Dissent
- Political Apathy and Expediency
- Culture of Impunity

- Extremist Intimidation
- State Complicity or Weakness
- Weaponization of Blasphemy
- Calls for Legal and Social Reform
- Education vs Extremism

Hussain's op-ed piece therefore contributes considerably to the public discourse around blasphemy laws and mob violence in Pakistan. His critical stance in this op-ed aligns with the broader narrative in Pakistani English-language media that views blasphemy-related violence as a system's flaw and asks for urgent political and legal intervention. This analysis shows how journalistic discourse not only reports news and events but also shapes ideological perspectives, potentially influencing public opinion and policy debates.

Critical Discourse Analysis of The News Editorial "The Murder of Mashal Khan" (April 15, 2017)

The analysis of *The News* editorial "The Murder of Mashal Khan" reveals how newspaper editorial constructs the discourse that the lynching of Mashal Khan is both a personal tragedy and a manifestation of deeper social and ideological crises in Pakistan. From the starting paragraph, the editorial takes condemnatory tone, using graphic and emotional language (e.g. "gruesome murder," "thrown from the second floor," "brutally beaten and then shot") to stress the brutality of the act and a horror that this kind of violence erupted within a university, a place that is a symbol of enlightenment and rationality.

At the textual level (Fairclough's Level 1), the editorial adopts rhetorical devices such as describing society as "brutalised" and referring Mashal as "an example of the best Pakistan has to offer." In text the writer uses collective condemnation ("how have we stooped so low?") and gives a stark contrast between progressive ideals and violent intolerance. Its tone is serious and mournful, yet urgent and anxious about the country's moral and social trajectory.

At the discursive practice level (Level 2), the editorial works as a collective voice which aims to guide public consciousness and political accountability. It frames the murder of Mashal Khan in the broader narrative of misuse of blasphemy allegations, religious extremism and failures of political leadership. The piece also connects Mashal's killing to the system's issues like the impunity of mobs, silence or complicity

of politicians, and recent rhetoric for inflaming blasphemy paranoia used by the institutions.

Intertextually, this editorial also references other past cases of blasphemy killings, which reinforces the notion of deep rooted ideological patterns.

At the social practice level (Level 3), the discourse represents and critiques the power dynamics that supports religious violence and political cowardice in Pakistan. The writer highlights an atmosphere of fear in which accusations can serve as a death sentence, while political actors and law enforcement consistently fail to intervene effectively. It also shows how blasphemy accusations are weaponized to silence progressive voices and keep social control. It repeatedly gave warnings stating that Mashal "may not be the last to pay with his life", this highlights an urgent ideological call for structural change and legal reforms to protect the fundamental rights of citizens and stop religious vigilantism. The key discourse themes and codes from this editorial are:

- Culture of Violence and Brutalization in Society
- Blasphemy Accusations as Power Instruments
- Silencing of Progressive Voices
- Mob Mentality and Collective Irrationality
- Political Silence and Institutional Complicity
- Urgent Need for Social and Legal Reforms

Therefore, *The News* editorial contributes significantly to the discourse around blasphemy laws and mob violence in Pakistan. Its critical stance aligns with the broader English-language media narrative that frames blasphemy-related violence as a systemic issue requiring urgent reform. The editorial shows how journalistic discourse not only reports events but actively shapes public perceptions and policy debates, positioning Mashal's murder as a tragic sign of a society teetering on the brink of moral collapse unless definitive action is taken.

6. Discussion

The study examines that how the mob lynching of Mahsa Khan was constructed discursively across mainstream media and online platforms in Pakistan, with an emphasis on the framing of false information, blasphemy, mob violence, and justice. The analysis, which is driven by two research objectives, finds both similarities and differences between the ways that traditional and digital media crafted narratives about the case. The findings show that Mashal Khan was

primarily portrayed as a victim of brutality and injustice, which reflects Entman's (1993) concept of framing, that framing is the choosing and highlighting of particular facets of reality. In both mainstream and social media, the case was narrated as a national tragedy, exposing institutional failures and the misuse of blasphemy allegations. However, the tone and purpose of framing varied. Mainstream news reporting remained largely factual and event-based, aligning with Badry's (2019) observation of a cautious approach to blasphemy-related discourse. In contrast, editorials and op-eds deployed moralistic and emotionally charged language, openly condemning political apathy and state complicity. Social media discourse, meanwhile, reflected grassroots involvement as users expressed outrage, grief, and reform demands, consistent with Castells' (2012) notion of digital counter-publics. By demonstrating how common citizens discursively opposed the weaponization of blasphemy laws through hashtag activism (#MashalKhan), the finding expands on Julius's (2016) argument on the subject.

From a CDA perspective, the discourse demonstrates how language operates as an ideological battleground. Emotional terms such as "monsters" and "barbarity" delegitimized religious justifications for violence, while irony and sarcasm destabilized institutional authority, reflecting Fairclough's (1995) claim that discourse can both reproduce and contest social power. At the same time, the cautious avoidance of direct theological critique confirms Siddique and Hayat's (2008) argument that blasphemy discourse is heavily constrained by fear and risk.

Importantly, the shift from misinformation in the immediate aftermath to counter-discourses exposing fabricated allegations illustrates how framing evolves dynamically in digital spaces. This contributes to framing theory by highlighting how counter-frames (justice, reform, victimhood) emerge in direct opposition to dominant frames (blasphemy, outrage, silence). In this sense, the study aligns with Van Hulst's (2024) argument that discourse, framing, and narrative represent interrelated ways of shaping public meaning, as the Mashal Khan case shows how frames of brutality and injustice were woven into broader narratives of state weakness, extremism, and the struggle for reform.

The analysis shows early confusion in the Mashal

Khan case, which highlights the central role of misinformation in shaping narratives, a challenge also observed in Pakistani audiences' engagement with fact-checks (Shahid & Ullah, 2024). Posts circulated without verification, reinforcing rumors and deepening polarization. This aligns with Friggeri et al. (2014), who argue that algorithmic design and echo chambers amplify unverified content, making it harder for users to access diverse perspectives. In Pakistan's context, this suggests an urgent need for digital literacy initiatives that equip users with skills to evaluate credibility, detect biases, and engage constructively in online debates.

Several tweets explicitly linked the incident to systemic failures in education, with one user stating: "*Extremist producing education system of Pakistan is responsible for the lynching of a secular and brilliant student #MashalKhan.*" Such discourse points to the importance of curriculum reform as part of the broader fight against extremism, echoing Badry's (2019) argument that structural failures perpetuate cycles of violence. Embedding digital literacy within educational systems, as suggested by Earl et al. (2022) and Gee (2017), could therefore foster more critical and responsible public discourse, enabling social media to function as a space for accountability and reform rather than misinformation and division.

Conclusion:

When combined the result supports the argument that Pakistani public discourse on blasphemy and justice is significantly shaped by the media, both traditional and digital. While misinformation can rapidly intensify polarization, social media also enables the emergence of counter-discourses that memorialize victims and demand reform. This study shows that language is a place of resistance as well as a tool for ideological reproduction by tying framing theory to CDA. In order to combat the culture of impunity surrounding blasphemy violence, these insights highlight the significance of promoting digital literacy, bolstering responsible media practices, and seeking structural reforms. By linking framing theory with CDA, this study shows that language is a place of resistance as well as a tool for ideological reproduction. In order to combat the culture of impunity surrounding blasphemy violence, these insights highlight the significance of promoting digital

literacy, bolstering responsible media practices, and seeking structural reforms.

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