

Online Misogyny: A Study of Silencing Strategies Against Pakistani Women on “X”



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Abstract: *This study examines how misogynistic expressions function as silencing strategies in the digital public sphere. It focuses on replies to the posts of female public figures on Pakistani X. Using a qualitative discourse analysis approach, the study analyzes 355 replies collected from the profiles of four female public figures: Mahira Khan (film industry), Maria B. (business and fashion), Gharidah Farooqi (journalism and media), and Malala Yousafzai (activism), posted between January 1, 2025, and December 31, 2025. Drawing on Berškýtė and Popa-Wyatt’s extended silencing framework and Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, the study identifies three forms of silencing: locutionary, illocutionary, and sincerity silencing. The findings reveal that online misogyny is not merely abusive; rather, it functions as a silencing strategy that delegitimizes women’s voices and reinforces restrictive gender norms.*

Keywords: Digital Platforms, Critical Discourse Analysis, Silencing Framework, Online Misogyny

Introduction

In the 21st century, the digital public sphere, particularly X, is considered a critical site for political and social discourse. It provides a lot of opportunities for public engagement. However, this digital space is not neutral; it is a space where gendered hostility appears. It is visible when women face excessive harassment, abuse and targeted silencing (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Irshad and Yasmin (2023) argue that, in Pakistan, the convergence of digital technologies and patriarchal social structures contributes to the marginalization, criticism, and silencing of women’s voices in digital spaces. Female public figures in Pakistan who are actively participating in public discourse or commenting on social and cultural issues are most likely the target (Munir, 2025).

The study of online misogyny is significant because abuse is not merely insults; rather, it serves as a silencing strategy. Research on online trolling targeting Pakistani women journalists reveals that harassers used a targeted approach and used conservative cultural norms to put social pressure on journalists. The goal was to discourage these journalists from exercising their democratic rights. In addition, qualitative research highlights misogynistic discourses, body shaming, doxxing, and campaigns of professional lack of credibility. All these tactics are designed to exclude women from journalism and public discussion (Hussain et al., 2022). The effects are visible at both personal and professional levels. Pakistani women journalists report mental fatigue, self-doubt, and increased safety measures in their personal lives. Other research reveals that women experience anxiety, panic attacks, self-censorship, and ultimately choose silence. Some women reduce their social media use, stop covering certain topics or avoid public exposure. These are not personal ways of dealing with it; rather, they reflect a public space where women pay the greatest cost for speaking than men do. These findings suggest that online misogyny functions as a tool for social control, not just individual abuse.

Online harassment is well-documented, but there is still a need to understand how certain misogynistic expressions served not only as abusive words but rather as a strategy to silence women (Berškýtė & Popa-Wyatt 2026). Berškýtė & Popa-Wyatt extended Austin’s speech act theory into a silencing framework, differentiating between locutionary, illocutionary and sincerity silencing. This study examines how, by using language, women are discouraged from speaking, that is, locutionary silencing. This study also examines how women’s speech is considered invalid or incorrect, that is, illocutionary silencing and how their concerns or

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intentions are questioned, which is referred to as sincerity silencing. These strategies result in self-censorship among women in public spheres and the restriction of their participation in digital public discourse. It is a phenomenon that is connected to epistemic injustice discussed by (Fricker, 2007). There is a lack of empirical evidence on how these silencing strategies appeared, particularly in the Pakistani context involving high-profile public figures.

The current study utilizes a silencing framework proposed by Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt (2026), which is often employed in western contexts. This study fills this gap by applying this framework to south Asian digital environment, particularly in Pakistan. There are fewer studies that combine Critical Discourse Analysis with a silencing framework to examine certain replies on X in Pakistan.

To bridge this gap, this study combines Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt's framework (2026) with Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough's model is used to analyze discourse at textual, discursive and sociocultural dimensions, by facilitating a multilayered critique of how silencing operates in Pakistan's digital spheres. This combination of approaches addresses a key limitation in standalone approaches: Critical Discourse Analysis is effective in examining ideologies, but the nuances of certain speech acts are often neglected (Wodak & Meyer 2001). While Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt's (2026) silencing framework lacks contextual embedding. Existing studies apply CDA for analysis of misogynistic expressions, but very few has merge it with speech act theory. Also, there is a lack of recent research that focuses on female public figures and their engagement with social and cultural issues. Previous studies also did not account for the role of cultural and religious narratives on online misogyny in the Pakistani context, which are important to gain an understanding of specific silencing strategies used in this region. This study fills these gaps by applying Critical Discourse analysis combined with silencing theory to examine how misogynistic replies on the posts of female public figures lead towards their silencing.

The objectives of this study are to identify types of silencing strategies (locutionary, Illocutionary and Sincerity silencing) present in the replies under the posts of Pakistani female public figures, to analyze the discursive and linguistic features through which gendered hostility is constructed in online replies, and to investigate how these silencing strategies undermine women's participation in online public discourse. The study seeks to address the following research questions, based on the above objectives

1. What types of silencing strategies are used in the selected sample?
2. What type of linguistic and discursive patterns are described in online misogynistic replies?
3. How are these discursive strategies used to limit, discredit and delegitimize women's voices?

Literature Review

The discourse examining online violence against women has evolved from considering digital abuse as an incident of harassment towards considering these as silencing strategies. In early research on cyber violence such as (Nixon, 2022) highlights that online hate speech leads to intensive psychological consequences. The research on online misogyny no longer views it as isolated incivility, but rather it is framed as a structured form of gendered power. A recent study argues that online misogynistic expressions served as a strategy to silence women, particularly when aggressive responses, group attacks and platform features make women's participation unstable and costly (Berškyte & Popa-Wyatt 2026). According to Nixon (2022), social exclusion is a popular cyberbullying tactic that functions as a silencing strategy in digital spaces. However, recent literature marked a shift from analyzing the function of this abuse. Studies argue that online misogyny is not only an expression of prejudice, but it serves as a strategy to exclude women from digital spheres (Wajcman, 2024). As scholars like Tufekci noted silencing in the digital era serves through the creation of noise, the cost of participation for marginalized voices is made high by using harassment and group attacks. On the platform of X, the silencing of women can be understood through (Tufekci, 2019) framework of digital censorship. Instead of removing content, abusers utilize the platform's features to marginalize target voices through competing narratives and distractions. This strategy is used through trolling and abusive language by creating

an environment that makes it difficult for others to engage with actual information, and it functions as a link to disconnect women's voices from influencing the public.

Empirical studies at the global level have established a strong relation between offline patriarchal norms and online gendered violence. According to the UN (2024), a hostile digital environment, which is characterized by cyberbullying and harassment, is used by anti-rights actors to marginalize women's participation in public discourse. Several studies in the Western context have established these broader patterns. For instance, a qualitative study of Nigerian women on Facebook shows that online misogyny consciously functions to limit their online voices and visibility and reveals that feminist expressions can themselves trigger abuse (Alichie & Oriola, 2022). Similarly, a study of women police officers in England and Wales reveals that online abuse often limits women's contributions and criticizes their appearance, and this study proposed a framework for recognizing misogynistic abuse as a structured phenomenon rather than a random one (Watson, 2022). Research on women in public life also supports this view: a monograph on women in public life found that online abuse targeting women is misogynistic, and includes threats and dismisses women's participation in online discourse (Watson, 2025).

In the South Asian context, scholars such as Ceia, Nothwehr and Wagner (2021), highlight how online gender-based violence acts as a silencing strategy that prevents women from “fully occupying public spaces” through an intersectional framework. Their study demonstrates how cultural, religious and political factors in South Asian contexts like Pakistan often make women self-limit their participation to avoid harassment. Bhat and Chadha's (2022) research in the Indian context highlights silencing strategies such as doxing and deep fakes targeting women and mob censorship. It provides valuable insights for understanding gendered harassment on Pakistani X.

In the context of Pakistan, where cyber harassment is mainly a gendered issue, the research on this issue is emerging. Recent studies, for instance, Qureshi et al. (2020) show that this victimization frequently targets young, educated women using media for blackmail and revenge. The silencing of these victims is self-imposed just because of societal values, fear of damaging dignity. Similarly, recent research on Pakistani social media influencers found that they experience body shaming, sexual harassment, vulgar comments, mockery of personal life, character assassination, and religious criticism. Females experience commentary focused on their attire frequently equating to objectification and harassment (Yasmin et al., 2025). Research examines how online misogyny is used to dominate and silence women through gendered abuse, also highlighting how digital platforms reinforce patriarchal norms to undermine authority that led towards psychological distress and forced self-censorship among female journalists (Iqbal et al., 2024). A recent study by Muhammad Ahsan and Farhat Ali (2026) analyses cyber harassment of female activists in Pakistan through qualitative interviews. The study highlights different forms of abuse, such as gendered and sexualized, trolling, moral policing and threats, which are used to shame, delegitimize and silence female voices. A common pattern emerges across these studies that women are not attacked only for what they say but also for violating expectations for femininity, modesty and public authority. Research in the Pakistani context shows that these patterns are not confined to one profession or platform. Studies of female journalists, political activists, feminists, and public figures consistently find that online abuse is influenced by patriarchal norms, religious discourse and platform's environments that amplify hostility and suppress women's voices (Iqbal et al., 2024). A recent study on online misogyny reinforces the same point, indicating that misogyny is sustained through appeals to free speech and by platform's environment that amplify hostility and weaken women's voices (Berškyte & Popa-Wyatt 2026). Together, these studies suggest that misogyny should be analyzed not just as individual harassment but as a discourse that can silence, delegitimize, and regulate women in public spaces.

Despite a number of studies on misogyny, there are still significant gaps that this study aims to address. Firstly, general studies on harassment in Pakistan exist, but only a few focus on the platform of X. X is quite different from Facebook and Instagram because of its character limit, real-time nature and trending topics. There is limited empirical research on how X is utilized as a weapon against women in Pakistan. Secondly,

many studies have documented the occurrences of abuse (how many times threats were received). There is limited research that examines silencing strategies that are used to delegitimize women. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how language is used as a silencing strategy against women. Most of the recent studies in Pakistan rely on self-reported surveys and interviews, which can be biased or underreported. So, there is a need for empirical and data-driven analysis of actual public discourse on X to highlight the nature of these silencing strategies objectively. The existing literature confirms that online misogyny acts as a barrier to women's participation in digital spaces, but there is a lack of empirical research on specific silencing strategies employed on X. By addressing all the gaps above, this study aims for the contribution of more nuanced understanding of how digital platforms enforce traditional patriarchal norms.

Recent research by Berškyte and Popa- Wyatt (2026) has divided silencing into three types: restricting someone from silencing (locutionary), making their words ineffective (illocutionary) and questioning their concerns or intentions (sincerity). This framework shows how women are silenced through different ways of online misogyny. While this framework has been applied in Western contexts, its use is underdeveloped in non- western context, such as in Pakistan, where sociocultural factors make these tactics more relevant. Existing studies in the Pakistani context note the abuse in online spaces but don't break down specific silencing mechanisms. This study fills this gap by examining these silencing strategies against Pakistani women on X.

Theoretical Framework

Silencing Framework: Berškyte and Popa Wyatt (2026)

This study utilizes Berškyte and Popa- Wyatt's (2026), which develops insights from Austin's (1962) speech act theory to explain how speakers can be discouraged and rendered as incredible or incompetent in public interaction. This framework is significant for studying hostile exchanges in digital spaces because it treats silencing not as a single event but rather as a social and pragmatic mechanism through which participants are restricted. This framework is based on Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial injustice, where speakers are undermined due to stereotypes, particularly prominent in gendered online contexts. In online public spheres, people not only disagreed with women rather they are regarded as less rational, less credible or less entitled to speak. Berškyte and Popa Wyatt distinguishes three dimensions of silencing, which are locutionary silencing that is visible when speakers are prevented from speaking or discouraged from participation. It occurs through harassment, intimidation or hostile replies that pressure women to restrict themselves from participation in discussions on digital spaces. Illocutionary silencing this type of silencing occurs when a speaker's utterance is not recognized as the same as it was intended. For instance, a statement which is intended as criticism or argument is considered emotional, irrational or irrelevant. Sincerity silencing occurs when the speaker's motives, sincerity or authenticity are questioned, which undermines the credibility of their statements. For instance, you are just an attention seeker. This dimension extends Austin's felicity conditions, emphasizing performative disbelief (Popa-Wyatt & Brennan, 2017). The question is not whether woman spoke or not, but whether she is believed. For instance, replies such as "you are just an attention seeker" or "you only want publicity", these strategies undermine the speaker's credibility by attacking the intentions of speaker instead of engaging the claim itself.

This framework is relevant to digital spaces because social media platforms such as X allow interaction between public figures and audiences, but this also creates a space where misogynistic discourse flourishes. Women are discouraged from expressing opinions because of these misogynistic replies, which question their sincerity. By using this framework, this study categorizes these replies as specific types of silencing strategies.

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis

In addition to silencing framework this study is complemented by Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical discourse Analysis. According to Norman Fairclough, discourse is a form of social practice, and it should be examined at three interconnected levels: text, discursive practice and social practice (Fairclough,

1995). Textual level focuses on the text itself, including linguistic features. It includes analyzing vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, rhetorical devices, evaluative adjectives derogatory labels and sentence structure in discourse. These features are significant because misogyny is usually realized through specific lexical choices that categorize women into sexualized, and moralized categories. Textual analysis uncovers how meanings and identities are constructed through linguistic choices. This level makes it possible to identify language through which women are demeaned or framed as socially deviant. For instance, in online interactions, lexical choices such as insults, stereotypes or derogatory labels are used to construct gender-based hostility towards women. Discursive level analyzes how discourse is produced, distributed and interpreted in a particular context. Fairclough argues that texts are not isolated rather they are part of broader communicative processes involving authors, listeners and the platform through which they are distributed. Discursive practices in the context of social media involve examining how users respond to posts, how replies circulate and how specific narratives about women are reproduced across spaces. Social Practice level, discourse is connected to wider social structures and power relations. According to Fairclough, discourse reflects and reproduces social ideologies, which include gender hierarchies, cultural norms and institutional power. This level explores how discourse is used to maintain and challenge dominant social structures. In the context of misogyny, this dimension facilitates explaining how misogynistic discourse directed at women may reflect patriarchal ideologies and gender inequalities within society.

In the current study, this model facilitates examining the linguistic features of replies directed at female public figures (textual level), the interactional dynamics of replies on X (discursive level) and ideologies and gender power relations that shape these interactions (social practice).

The current study combines this model with the silencing framework developed by Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt to analyze how misogynistic expressions function as a strategy that undermines women's voices in digital public spaces. The combination of both silencing and Fairclough's three-dimensional model is significant for this study. The silencing framework identifies what kind of silencing is the reply and CDA explains how silencing is linguistically constructed and socially sustained. The combination of both provides a multilayered account of misogynistic discourse on X. It shows how replies do not merely insult women, but can also undermine credibility, restrict women from participation and normalize exclusion from digital public spheres.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study is a qualitative research design, grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis, as theorized by Norman Fairclough (1995). The qualitative design is appropriate because the study is concerned with interpreting how misogynistic replies are linguistically constructed and how they serve as a silencing strategy in the digital public sphere. CDA is good at examining how language constructs power relations, which makes it perfect for analyzing misogynistic replies and to study how hostile replies on X reproduce gendered hierarchies and restrict women's participation.

The study integrates Fairclough's 3D model with Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt's silencing framework. This combination of approach allows the study to examine misogynistic replies as a specific silencing type, rather than just identifying the abuse as a general category. This is relevant to the Pakistani context because existing studies reveal that women who speak publicly are mostly targeted through body shaming, moral policing, sexualized abuse and professional discrediting. Pakistani female influencers, journalists and activists have been shown to encounter abuse that is not only insulting rather it directly aimed at discouraging participation and reduce visibility (Yasmin et al., 2025). Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt's framework categorizes silencing into three different types. Locutionary silencing is referred to as directly stopping someone from speaking through harassment. Illocutionary silencing occurs when the speaker's words are made ineffective by dismissing their expertise or context. Sincerity silencing occurs when a speaker's sincerity or credibility is attacked by using moral or character attacks. These categories are significant because they show how misogyny can work not

only through direct insults, but rather through strategic attempts to undermine women's authority and reduce the legitimacy of their speech.

Data Collection

The profiles of four prominent public figures were selected on X for data collection based on their visibility and history of gendered abuse: Mahira Khan (@TheMahiraKhan), Maria. B (@RealMariaButt), Gharidah Farooqi (@GFrooqi) and Malala Yousafzai (@Malala). These accounts were selected because they represent women with high visibility and engagement that make them targets of gendered hostility.

The study uses a purposive sample by focusing on high engagement posts from January 1, 2025, to December 31, 2025. Only those posts were selected that addressed the public issues because such posts were more likely to attract public debate and misogynistic responses. A total of 355 replies were collected, which contained misogynistic content through manual screening. The data were collected directly from the profiles and are publicly available; usernames were anonymized because of ethical considerations.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis was done in two stages: Fairclough's CDA was applied to each reply at the textual, discursive and social levels. The textual analysis was concerned with lexical aspects of the replies with focus on insults, imperatives, religious references, evaluative language and other linguistic features of aggressiveness. The discursive analysis was concerned with how replies positioned the target speaker, how the meaning was constructed and the circulation of misogynistic ideologies around the original post. At social level, the responses were framed in relation to Pakistani public patriarchal values, religious authority, and gendered power relations in Pakistani digital spaces.

Second, the study coded the same replies by Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt's (2022) typology of silencing. Replies that explicitly discouraged women from speaking up, or told women not to speak, were coded as locutionary silencing. Each reply was categorized as illocutionary silencing (saying women's contributions are irrelevant, ignorant, or otherwise inappropriate for discussion) or sincerity silencing (calling women's motives, truthfulness, or authenticity into question).

Each category was defined by a set of decision rules in order to improve consistency: a command like "shut up" or "delete your tweet" was classified as locutionary silencing, claims that a woman was "stupid" or "did not understand politics" were characterized as illocutionary silencing. Similarly, claims that a woman's post was for attention, money, or publicity were classified as sincerity silencing. Where a reply was marked as belonging to more than one category, the dominant silencing move was assigned by close reading.

Results

The dataset consists of users' replies to posts by four well-known Pakistani women: Mahira Khan, Gharidah Farooqi, Malala Yousafzai and Maria. B. posted on X. These women represent different domains such as entertainment, journalism, activism and business but actively participate in social, cultural or political issues. There is a wide range of gendered hostility, moral policing and delegitimization strategies directed at these women.

The analysis utilizes the three-dimensional model by Norman Fairclough, focusing on textual features of misogynistic language, discursive strategies to silence women's voices, and the broader sociocultural context of patriarchal discourse in Pakistani digital spheres. In addition,

the silencing framework proposed by Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt is used to examine how replies function to silence, dismiss and delegitimize women's voices. This combined framework allows this study to reveal both misogynistic language present in the dataset and also how it serves as social discursive exclusion.

Gendered Abuse and Sexualized Insults

At textual level, the dataset reveals a dominant pattern of sexualized and gender-specific slurs. Women were labeled with terms such as “Randi”, “tawaif”, “ghashti”, and “prostitute” repeatedly, also with the term “Bitch”, which is equivalent in English to these. These insults objectify the women and somehow consider their participation as morally wrong and corrupted. The female visibility in public discourse is constructed as deviant through this approach. For instance, women such as journalists and actresses are labeled with terms that were historically associated with prostitution, implying that they have violated social norms.

For instance, *Shut up bitch!! Go to India if you love them so much (reply to Mahira Khan), Gashti aurat! Chup kr randi (reply to Maria.B), Oh, Ghatya tu anchor hay ya siasi tawaif. You're a prostitute of the Pakistani army (Replies to garidah Farooqi) and You are a BITCHH and you don't even know that. (reply to Malala Yousafzai)*. These labels at the discursive level operate as techniques of exclusion. Instead of the women presenting their arguments, users build their own discourse, making the women's participation the topic of the discussion. The point of the interactional focus changes from the subject of the conversation to the speaker's gender and morality. These discursive shifts make substantive discussion less appealing and sanitize personal attacks as a response to women's public engagement.

These expressions, at a larger sociocultural level, reinforce patriarchal values and norms that link respectable femininity to modesty, silence and domesticity. The symbolic punishment of women who enter the gaze of public opinion is the use of sexual language. The discourse is therefore not only anti-female, but also a tool for maintaining the traditional gender order, and managing women's presence in public spaces.

Moral Policing and Religious Norms

Religious and moral policing is another pattern present in the dataset. There are a number of replies which accuse women of hypocrisy or religious inconsistency, for instance, criticizing their clothing, lifestyle or their failure to follow Islamic rules before speaking on public issues. This type of discourse portrays women's participation as conditional, depending upon their conformity to moral expectations such as modest dress, hijab or silence on religious matters. The replies consist of phrases such as “stay in your limits”, “first cover yourself then talk”, “stop talking about religion”, or “you have nothing to do with the religion”. In these replies women's legitimacy to speak is made conditioned based on their conformity to patriarchal understanding of Islam, dress and female behavior. For example, *Just asking madam. Please don't mind if you still have it. Is it sharia certified 🤖 For women to call millions as her Jaan. I'm just curious to know. Thank you 😊 (Reply to Mahira Khan)*. Similarly, in another reply, *Pls button up your shirt, Islam urges to cover up your body! You're literally a hypocrite trying to hide under the name of Islam, using religion for your own personal motives. Aedi tu Islam di thekedaar. Biggest wrong number ever!! (Reply to Maria.B), and Dupta sar per ha nahi or bat islami Karti ho sharm karoo gholam media (Reply to Garidah Farooqi), and in The Muslim world doesn't rely on women (Reply to Malala Yousafzai)*, such language shows how gender norms and religious values are combined, where religion is used to control women's voices. This pattern is significant because it reveals how misogyny is embedded in systems of moral authority.

The dataset also reveals that misogynistic replies are linked to silencing practices. The study uses Berškyste and Popa-Wyatt's (2026) silencing framework and reveals three types through which women are being silenced.

Locutionary Silencing

There are many replies in the dataset that explicitly instruct women to stop speaking. For instance: *Shut up, Delete your tweet, and Just stop posting*. These statements try to suppress women from the act of speaking. Such repeated directives, in the digital public spaces, create a hostile atmosphere that discourages women from expressing their opinions publicly. Even short statements or comments have a strong discouraging effect because they convey women's voices are unwanted, unwelcomed or punishable. For Example: *Shut up (Reply to Mahira Khan)*

Shut up you elite bitch. (Reply to Maria. B).

*Zip and shut ur dirty mout*h (reply to Garidah Farooqi).*

*What A Fucking Joke... Just Sit Down and Keep Quite You B***H 🙄 (Reply to Malala Yousafzai).*

In this way, locutionary silencing served as a direct effort to push out women from digital interactions. In this sense, silence is not accidental rather enforced through hostile interaction.

Illocutionary Silencing

This type of silencing is visible in the dataset, the replies that label women's statements as irrelevant, ignorant, or stupid. The claims like women have "low IQ", "they are stupid, or don't understand politics or religion" are examples in the dataset. These types of remarks delegitimize women's voices and prevent their speech from being interpreted as meaningful or legitimate. Women's attempts to participate in public are portrayed as incompetent or unworthy, and in this way, it undermines the validity of their words. For Instance, in a reply to Maria B. *You are a stupid shallow woman!, Stupid woman stupid post (Reply to Garidah Farooqi), U fckin idiot with low iq who has sold her soul to Zionist n acting as if u care, clown stop spreading Zionist propaganda. U have been exposed (Reply to Malala Yousafzai).*

This type of silencing is significant because it undermines the illocutionary force of the women speech itself. Women may speak for criticism, debate or to join public discussion, but such replies reframe their words as illogical and incompetent. It results in delegitimization, instead of treating statements as arguments, these are considered as nonsense. In this way, this type of silencing reduces the credibility of women's voices and restricts their participation in public discourse.

Sincerity Silencing

It is the most frequent strategy in the dataset. There are numerous accusations in the dataset that women speak only for publicity, money or political influence. For instance, some replies claim that the posts by females are only made to gain "public attention", "to sell clothes", or "attract international recognition". These replies portray women as opportunistic or manipulative, which delegitimizes the authenticity of their speech, resulting in the marginalization of women's voices in public discourse. Even when women raise social or political concerns, their contributions are framed as performative rather than genuine. For instance;

Lol... trying to gain favours from Bollywood 😏😏😏😏 (Reply to Mahira Khan).

B.B at its best for Using religion for her kurta pajama business (Reply to Maria.B).

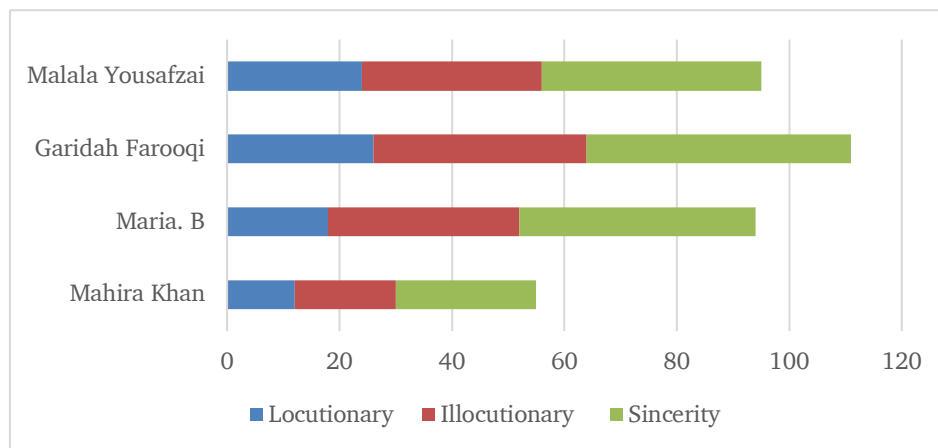
She's posting it to get views (Reply to Garidah Farooqi).

You are such a bloody hypocrite 😏 (Reply to Malala Yousafzai).

This type of silencing is significant because credibility is attacked rather than content. It functions to delegitimize women's agency and make their authenticity of their public voices doubtful.

In the dataset, female public figures are targeted for their gender, appearance and their adherence to societal expectations rather than their opinions. The dataset reveals that misogyny intersects with sexism, politics, and religion. This reflects a pattern in digital public spheres where women who participate in public debates are slammed with sexist abuse, where instead of engaging with their actual points, critics go for personal attacks, slut-shaming and discredit them.

The frequency distribution confirms this pattern. Sincerity silencing appears more frequently followed by illocutionary silencing, while locutionary silencing remains less dominant as illustrated in Fig. 1. These frequencies were consistent across figures, though activists like Malala faced high sincerity attacks. It suggests that women are silenced less by direct commands but more by portraying them as hypocrites, biased and morally corrupted. It aligns with Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt's framework of sincerity silencing (Berškyte & Popa-Wyatt 2026). The study reveals that women are more often silenced through indirect strategies by questioning their motives, credibility and legitimacy, instead of direct command to stop speaking.

Figure 1*Distribution of Silencing Strategies Across Selected Pakistani Women Public Figures*

The results of the study can understand at three connected levels. At the textual level, replies use slurs, commands, moral judgments and dismissive words. At the discursive level, they reframe women’s speech as immoral, irrelevant or fake. At the social level, they reinforce patriarchal norms that view women’s public presence as conditional and their authority as open challenge. Therefore, the language in the dataset is not only offensive rather it is socially structured and ideologically charged. It functions to regulate the boundaries of who is allowed to speak, what can be said, and under what conditions women’s voices are considered as legitimate.

The analysis shows clearly that online misogyny functions as a form of discursive silencing. The abuse is not only personal attacks, rather it has a wider structural effect. Sexualized insults lower women’s status by linking them to shame and immorality. Religious moral policing frames women’s participation as inappropriate until they follow patriarchal norms. Locutionary silencing attempts to entirely silence women from speaking. Illocutionary silencing weakens the force of their words. Sincerity silencing undermines their credibility and portrays their speech as deceptive or false. These patterns reveal that digital public sphere is not a neutral space for participation, rather it is a contested environment where women’s voices are constantly challenged, discredited and controlled.

The study using the combined framework shows that misogynistic replies on X are not random expressions of hostility. They are repeated discursive practices that functions to maintain patriarchal power by controlling women’s visibility, authority and legitimacy in public debates. Therefore, the key findings of the study are not just that women are abused online, but that this abuse functions as a tool for exclusion. Online misogyny functions to keep women visible enough to attack, but vulnerable enough to be silenced.

Discussion

This study focused on 355 responses fielded to four prominent Pakistani women on X – Mahira Khan, Maria B, Gharidah Farooqi and Malala Yousafzai representing the entertainment, business, journalism, and activism sections, respectively. They work in different professions, but they are very visible in the public sphere, and are often the subject of gendered hostility online. The study was based on Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt’s conceptualisation of silence and Fairclough’s 3D model of Critical Discourse Analysis, aiming to explore the working of misogynistic discourse in digital settings. The results show that women face a lot of sexist backlash where religious, moral and political narratives are used to discredit women in the public discourse. Users often refocus on gender, sexuality, morals, and credibility, rather than directly addressing what users are saying. As texts, this hostility is expressed in gendered slurs, sexualised insults, imperatives and accusations of hypocrisy. At the level of the discursive-practice, these linguistic shifts present women’s contributions as immoral, irrelevant, and self-serving while at the social-practice level they perpetuate generalised expectations for women to be modest, subservient, and less visible in public discussion. The silencing framework proposed by Berškyte and Popa-Wyatt is another example of how these reactions serve as means

of silencing women, rather than being simply expressions of abuse, by depleting their communicative agency, eroding the power of their voice, and doubtfully doubting their authenticity or legitimacy as public voices.

Two dominant language patterns emerge in the dataset. The first is sexualized, gender-based abuse such as the use of words *randi*, *twaif*, *ghashti*, *prostitute*, and *bitch* appear repeatedly. These are not random insults rather these are attempts to reduce women to sexuality, shame, and moral impurity. These slurs redirect attention to women's bodies, morality, and sexual availability instead of engaging with content of post. This pattern aligns with the earlier research which shows that women are double victimized through media portrayal (Akram, Yasmin & Sohail 2025) and online misogyny frequently takes the form of sexual objectification and sexist abuse (Dehingia et al., 2023 ; Yasmin et al., 2025). Similarly, scholars argue that hostile, sexist tweets are strategic in nature (Felmlee et al., 2019). This interpretation is consistent with this analysis that abuse is systematic, and it reinforce traditional gender norms by shaming women for occupying public spaces. The second is moral policing through religious norms. Expressions such as *stay in your limits*, *first cover yourself*, and *you have nothing to do with the religion*, turn religion into resource for regulating women's speech. This finding is significant because it reveals that misogyny is not only sexualized but also moralized. Siddiqua et al. identify religious and moral policing as common forms of harassment experienced by Pakistani female journalists, while Javed et al. claims that sexualized comments, rape threats, body shaming, doxing and political trolling as common forms of abuse (Siddiqua et al., 2023; Javed et al., 2026 n.d.). The present study expands those findings across several public domains. It suggests that this logic of policing extends beyond journalism into celebrity, activism, and business discourse (Jamil et al., 2025).

The silencing analysis is the main contribution of the study. Locutionary silencing appeared in direct commands like “shut up”, “delete your post”, and “just stop posting”. These are direct attempts to restrict women from speaking. Illocutionary silencing shows up when women are labeled as “stupid, low IQ” or ignorant about politics or religion. In this way, women's utterances are made meaningless for contribution. Sincerity silencing is the most frequent form in the dataset. It portrays women as attention seeker, manipulative, hypocritical, or motivated by publicity and political gain. Berškyte and Popa Wyatt describe these as three systematic forms of silencing (Berškyte & Popa-Wyatt 2026). McGowan account of sincerity silencing is relevant to this study because she describes it as a fairly widespread phenomenon (McGowan, 2014). In the present study, sincerity silencing also appears with high frequency of 43.2%. It is significant because they change the direction of debate from what women say and towards why they said it.

The study's main contributions include that it reveals indirect forms of exclusions are more frequent than direct commands. The dominant pattern is not simply “stop speaking” but instead “your speech cannot be trusted”, which places sincerity silencing as the center of the analysis. It also expands the evidence beyond women journalists to include women in entertainment, activism, journalism, and business. It reveals that same hostile strategies operate across different forms of public roles. This study demonstrates that religious and moral vocabulary gives online misogyny a normative cover which allows abuse to look like correction. It is particularly visible in Pakistan where honor, decency and reputation are closely linked to how visible women are allowed to be.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that misogynistic replies on platform X in Pakistan are not isolated expressions of hostility rather they are organized discursive practices that silence women by attacking their credibility, morality, and right to speak. By combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model with Berškyte and Popa Wyatt's silencing framework, the study reveals that locutionary, illocutionary, and particularly sincerity silencing delegitimizes women in entertainment, journalism, activism and business. The findings also reveals that sexualized abuse and moral policing function together to reinforce patriarchal norms and restricts women's participation in digital public spaces. This study contributes to frame online misogyny as structural exclusion in Pakistan that limits women's participation, undermines their authority, and reinforce broader gender inequality in public discourse.

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