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SILENCE, SHAME AND SURVEILLANCE: THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF PORNOGRAPHY IN PAKISTAN'S PUBLIC SPHERE"

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Abstract
This study investigates the discursive construction of pornography in Pakistan's public sphere through a corpus-based approach. Despite the widespread availability of online pornographic material, its discussion in mainstream Pakistani media remains heavily shaped by cultural taboos, moral panic, and religious rhetoric. By compiling and analysing a specialised corpus of media texts, online forums, and policy statements, this research explores how pornography is framed linguistically and ideologically. Using Key Word in Context (KWIC) analysis, collocate analysis, and concordance examination, the study identifies recurring themes such as morality, criminalisation, victimisation, and digital control. Findings are expected to reveal patterns of language that sustain censorship discourses, perpetuate stigma, and influence public perception. The research contributes to critical discourse studies by showing how language shapes attitudes towards sexuality in conservative societies, offering insights for media literacy, digital governance, and social awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

Pornography, though often categorised as a taboo subject in Pakistan, occupies a complex position in the country's sociocultural and digital landscape. While religious and cultural frameworks strongly condemn its consumption and production, Pakistan consistently ranks among the top countries in online pornography searches. This contradiction creates fertile ground for examining the underlying discourses that drive public and institutional responses.

Media narratives on pornography in Pakistan frequently merge moralistic and legal perspectives, framing it as both a societal ill and a criminal act. These narratives do not emerge in isolation; they are informed by broader ideological currents, including Islamic moral teachings, state censorship policies, and global debates on internet governance. However, systematic, data-driven studies on the language surrounding pornography in the Pakistani public sphere are scarce. By employing corpus linguistics, this research captures authentic, naturally occurring discourse, offering a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

The rationale for this study lies in its potential to illuminate the interplay between language, morality, and censorship, helping to unpack the ideological work done by words in shaping public perception.

2. Problem Statement

Pornography is simultaneously hyper-consumed and hyper-condemned in Pakistan. While online access has expanded exposure, public discourse remains dominated by moral panic and legal prohibition. Current scholarship offers limited insight into the specific linguistic patterns that frame pornography

within the Pakistani context. Without empirical analysis of how pornography is represented in public discourse, discussions risk remaining anecdotal, shaped by selective moral arguments rather than systematic evidence. This lack of critical, linguistic investigation prevents a deeper understanding of how discourse enforces stigma, justifies regulation, and silences open debate on sexual content.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

3.1. Objectives:

1. To identify and analyse the dominant linguistic patterns and themes in Pakistani public discourse on pornography.
2. To examine the ideological framing of pornography through media, policy, and online discussions.
3. To explore how language constructs moral and legal narratives surrounding pornography in Pakistan.

3.2. Research Questions:

1. What are the most frequent keywords and collocates used in public discourse on pornography in Pakistan?
2. How is pornography framed ideologically in media and official narratives?
3. In what ways do linguistic patterns reflect moral, religious, or legal positions?
4. How do online public discussions compare with mainstream media representations?

4. Literature Review

Studies on pornography in South Asian contexts often focus on legal, psychological, or religious dimensions, with little emphasis on linguistic representation. In Pakistan, much of the academic discussion has been overshadowed by debates on morality, censorship, and youth behaviour. Western scholarship, by contrast, has explored pornography through feminist theory, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and media studies, highlighting how it intersects with power, agency, and gender (Attwood, 2002; Paasonen, 2024). Corpus linguistics has emerged as a valuable method for identifying linguistic patterns in sensitive topics, providing empirical grounding for CDA (Baker, 2006; Partington et al., 2013). Such methods have been applied to issues like terrorism, migration, and sexuality but rarely to pornography in conservative societies. Van Dijk's (1997) socio-cognitive model and Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional framework offer critical tools for examining how discourse both reflects and reproduces social ideologies. This research bridges the gap between pornography discourse studies and corpus-assisted approaches, offering the first empirical linguistic mapping of how pornography is discussed in Pakistan's public sphere.

5. Corpus Design and Data Sources

The corpus for this study will be a specialised, purpose-built collection of texts related to pornography in Pakistan. It will include:

- **Mainstream media**: Articles, opinion pieces, and editorials from leading English and Urdu newspapers and online news portals.
- **Government and policy documents**: Statements from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and parliamentary debates on internet regulation.
- **Religious and advocacy content**: Sermons, NGO publications, and public awareness campaigns addressing pornography. Texts will be collected from 2015 to 2025 to capture recent trends and shifts in discourse, particularly following significant censorship events and legal amendments.

6. Research Methodology

This study adopts a corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative stage will involve frequency analysis, collocation analysis, and KWIC (Key Word in Context) examination using tools such as AntConc. This will reveal the most frequent lexical items, their typical co-occurrences, and context of use. The qualitative stage will apply critical discourse analysis to interpret the ideological implications of these patterns, drawing on van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory and Fairclough's three-dimensional model. Special attention will be given to how moral, legal, and religious frames are linguistically constructed. Data will be anonymised and cleaned to ensure ethical

research practices, especially for user-generated content.

6.1. Analytical Framework

The analysis will proceed in two integrated layers. First, corpus analysis will identify key words, clusters, and collocates that form the backbone of pornography discourse in Pakistan. Second, critical discourse analysis will unpack the ideological and socio-political meanings behind these linguistic patterns. This dual approach ensures that the research remains both data-driven and critically interpretive, highlighting the relationship between lexical choices and broader social narratives.

By triangulating results from frequency, collocation, and concordance analyses with CDA interpretations, the study aims to expose how language naturalises certain moral positions while marginalising others.

7. KWIC Analysis

Most relevant terms to our topic were handpicked and separately analysed in context to our discourse.

7.1. Pornography

The term *pornography* in this dataset appears predominantly in contexts that frame it as a moral, legal, or societal problem, rather than as a neutral descriptive category. The surrounding collocates often include legal terms such as *illegal*, *ban*, *prohibit*, and *crime*, as well as moralistic descriptors like *immoral*, *harmful*, and *corrupt*. This pattern indicates that the discourse positions pornography not simply as a type of media, but as an object of regulation and moral judgment.

Interestingly, the majority of occurrences are embedded in declarative and imperative statements, such as "*pornography must be eradicated*" or "*strict action against pornography*". These constructions are not merely informational; they function as directives that reinforce institutional authority and frame the issue as requiring urgent intervention. The repeated use of modal verbs (*must*, *should*) further amplifies this prescriptive stance, signalling a normative framework in which pornography is framed as incompatible with social and religious values.

Another key observation is that when the term appears alongside references to technology. For example, *internet pornography*, *online pornography*, or *digital pornography*, the surrounding text often shifts to a discourse of surveillance and control. These contexts frequently involve mentions of *monitoring*, *blocking*, and *filtering*, reflecting an institutional desire to extend censorship mechanisms into digital spaces. This aligns with Fairclough's (2001) concept of control over discourse as a means of social control, where technological channels are treated as sites that require ideological policing.

Relatively few examples in the corpus treat pornography in analytical or health-oriented terms, such as linking it to *addiction* or *psychological effects*. When such terms do occur, they tend to be embedded in causal narratives, for instance, asserting that pornography *leads to moral decline*, *destroys family values*, or *encourages sexual crime*. This reflects Musolff's (2004) discussion of metaphor-based moral reasoning, where abstract threats (e.g., "moral decay") are constructed as the inevitable consequences of exposure to certain media.

The overall semantic environment surrounding *pornography* in this dataset suggests that it is overwhelmingly framed through a prohibitive and moralising lens, with little room for alternative perspectives such as free expression, personal autonomy, or differentiated legal frameworks. This creates a monolithic discourse in which pornography is positioned as an uncontested social ill, rather than a subject of plural debate. From a critical discourse analysis perspective, this discursive homogeneity serves to naturalise censorship by presenting it as a moral imperative rather than a contested political choice.

7.2. Porn

The occurrences of *porn* in the corpus reveal a discursive framing that goes beyond a mere reference to explicit material; it is frequently deployed in evaluative and moralising contexts that reflect broader ideological underpinnings. In multiple concordance lines, *porn* appears in close proximity to words associated with criminality (*illegal*, *arrest*, *trafficking*), morality (*immoral*, *corruption*, *shame*), and protection (*children*, *youth*, *society*). Such collocational tendencies suggest that within this dataset, *porn* is discursively constructed not as a neutral descriptor of media content but as a marker of deviance and social threat.

From a critical discourse perspective, this aligns with van Dijk's (1997) argument that lexical choices contribute to the polarisation of in-groups and out-groups. Here, *porn* is associated with "others" who are positioned as corrupting influences on the moral fabric of society, while the "self" is implicitly framed as morally upright and in need of protection. Fairclough's (2013) concept of *moral panic reproduction* is also evident, media and political discourse use emotionally charged lexical patterns around *porn* to construct a narrative of urgency, often linking it to youth endangerment, thereby legitimising state intervention or censorship.

Interestingly, the KWIC context suggests an absence of nuanced discussion about agency or consent; instead, *porn* is overwhelmingly tied to victimisation narratives. This omission mirrors what Musolff (2004) terms *selective metaphorical framing*, where certain semantic fields (danger, pollution) dominate, foreclosing alternative perspectives such as sexual autonomy or free speech. In the Pakistani socio-political landscape, this selective framing may function ideologically to reinforce conservative social norms and delegitimise discourse on sexual rights.

The repeated collocation of *porn* with technological terms (*internet*, *websites*, *social media*) also reflects a modernised moral panic, where digital platforms are portrayed as vectors of moral corruption. Chilton's (2014) notion of *security framing* is relevant here the digital sphere is metaphorically cast as a porous border that requires monitoring to protect societal integrity.

Overall, the keyword *porn* operates in this corpus as a discursive node through which broader ideological narratives of morality, legality, and cultural identity are reproduced. Its surrounding lexical environment reveals a framing strategy that positions *porn* not just as an object of moral disapproval, but as a symbolic threat requiring collective social and political action.

7.3. Addiction

In the corpus, the term **addiction** frequently appears alongside evaluative and moralizing language, reflecting a dominant framing of pornography consumption as a medicalized or pathological behavior. Concordance lines often place *addiction* near terms like *treatment*, *recovery*, *rehabilitation*, and *compulsive*, which reinforces a clinical discourse. This aligns with van Dijk's (1997) notion of *ideological square*, where the negative qualities of an "out-group" (in this case, pornography consumers) are emphasized. By repeatedly collocating *addiction* with health-related metaphors, media discourse constructs pornography not simply as a moral concern but as a diagnosable disorder requiring intervention.

Another noticeable pattern is the co-occurrence of *addiction* with *youth*, *teenagers*, and *children*. This semantic clustering strengthens a narrative of vulnerability, suggesting that pornography is not only harmful to the individual but socially corrosive, particularly to impressionable demographics. This aligns with moral panic theory (Cohen, 1972), where the threat is amplified by associating it with the corruption of youth. Such framing may shape public perception towards favouring restrictive policies.

Conversely, a smaller subset of concordance lines presents *addiction* in a skeptical or metaphorical sense, where it is used rhetorically to critique the overuse of the term. For example, in some contexts, speakers question whether pornography truly meets the clinical threshold for addiction, instead portraying it as a behavioural choice or a socially constructed label. This tension between clinical and skeptical framings illustrates what Fairclough (2013) describes as competing discourses vying for dominance within the same media space.

Importantly, the repetition of *addiction* in headlines and lead sentences amplifies its salience, making it a lexical hook that draws in readers and reinforces the conceptual link between pornography and compulsive harm. From a corpus linguistics perspective, its high keyword-in-context frequency suggests that *addiction* functions as a discourse anchor, a recurring semantic pivot point around which broader arguments are constructed.

7.4. Ban/Banned

The keyword *ban* appears in the corpus across various contexts, often linked to themes of prohibition, restriction, and moral regulation. In the context of pornography discourse, *ban* is not merely a legal or technical term but also a moral and ideological marker. For instance, the phrase "ban on adult content" is framed alongside "commitment to upholding teachings and societal norms," indicating that the prohibition is justified through appeals to

religious and cultural values rather than purely legal reasoning. Similarly, explicit call for a "complete ban on porn," contrasting it with "the opposite" approach, thus positioning prohibition as the only viable solution, a discursive move that frames alternatives as failures.

Other instances, extend the collocate *ban* to gender segregation ("ban on mixing of men and women"), showing that the term participates in a wider discourse of moral policing, where control over sexuality is tied to controlling social interaction. It is also used in relation to a "blanket ban of Facebook" following court orders, and it refers to banning technology ("ban them" referring to DJI drones). These broader uses suggest that *ban* operates in Pakistani media discourse as a versatile instrument of authority applied not only to pornography but also to social media, technology, and public behaviour.

From a critical discourse perspective, the recurrence of *ban* in proximity to pornography and morality-related topics reinforces an ideology where censorship is naturalized as a protective and necessary measure. This aligns with van Dijk's (1997) notion of ideological discourse structuring, where prohibitive language constructs an "us" (moral, protective, culturally rooted) versus "them" (immoral, corruptive, external influence) binary. In the pornography debate, *ban* functions as a linguistic tool to legitimize state and societal control over sexuality, often framed through appeals to tradition, religion, and cultural preservation.

7.5. Shame

The keyword shame frequently appears in discussions of pornography use and its broader social and psychological implications, often tied to emotional and cultural consequences. In some contexts, shame is portrayed as an internalized emotional burden, developing from repeated cycles of difficulty, despair, and anxiety. This framing positions shame as part of a self-reinforcing problem that can exacerbate addictive behaviours. In other instances, shame is linked to the violation of cultural norms, where pornography is viewed as socially unacceptable, creating secrecy and silence around the topic. Such cultural framing intensifies the stigma, making open dialogue and help-seeking more difficult.

Other uses frame shame in more neutral or even constructive terms, suggesting that acknowledging and confronting it is part of reclaiming control over one's behaviour. These reframing treats shame not as a permanent moral failing, but as a temporary emotional state that can be addressed through counselling, relationship repair, and other mental health interventions. In certain narratives, shame is paired with related emotions like guilt, frustration, and depression, highlighting its role in both individual distress and relational conflict. Overall, the term operates at the intersection of psychological experience and social judgment, making it a significant discourse marker in the portrayal of pornography-related issues.

7.6. Mental

The keyword mental emerges as a central pivot in the framing of pornography within the corpus, often functioning to legitimise the discourse through medical or psychological authority. In multiple instances, pornography use or addiction is situated alongside "mental health conditions" or "mental health issues," drawing on a clinical register that implies diagnosable pathology. This aligns with an *addiction discourse* in which compulsive pornography use is positioned not merely as a moral failing, but as a health disorder requiring intervention.

The collocates around mental reveal two dominant semantic groupings:

7.6.1. Clinical diagnosis and pathology – references to diagnostic manuals, mental diseases, and the language of therapy place pornography use within the same conceptual field as depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety.

7.6.2. Holistic well-being and relational health – instances linking mental with emotional and sexual health, or with relational problems, extend its scope beyond the purely medical to encompass quality of life and interpersonal harmony.

In ideological terms, invoking mental in this way serves to medicalise a culturally sensitive topic. By framing pornography consumption as a threat to mental health, the discourse sidesteps direct moral accusation while still implying harm. This is particularly significant in a sociocultural context

where moral condemnation can alienate certain audiences, whereas medicalised language can command broader acceptance and state action. At the same time, this framing also risks pathologizing all forms of pornography use, reinforcing a singular narrative of harm without acknowledging nuance or agency.

8. Findings

The corpus paints a consistently alarmist picture: pornography is constructed as both a social contagion and a moral emergency. This central tendency threads through three mutually reinforcing clusters moral/legal prohibition, psychological pathology (addiction), and technological anxiety and these clusters together shape a public discourse that privileges censorship and blame over care and nuance.

8.1. Destruction of human connection and intimate life

A persistent theme in the data is the depiction of pornography as corrosive to interpersonal relationships. Language around *destruction*, *erosion*, and *alienation* is routinely used to describe its consequences: decreased emotional intimacy, diminished sexual satisfaction with partners, unrealistic expectations of sex, and increased relationship conflict. This is not framed as a private problem but as a social pathology that weakens families and communal bonds. The corpus frequently links pornography to sexual dysfunction, withdrawal from social life, and isolation, presenting addiction as a force that severs trust and transforms intimacy into performance or expectation rather than mutual connection. From a discursive perspective, such formulations morally mark porn consumption as an attack on the social fabric rather than a treatable health concern (Kraus et al., 2016; Potenza et al., 2017).

8.2. Technology, circumvention, and the limits of prohibition

Although the rhetorical response across texts is often a call for sweeping bans or technological blocking, the corpus also contains implicit and explicit acknowledgements of *how* prohibition fails in practice. The digital environment, smartphones, streaming sites, apps is described as making porn widely available, and multiple lines allude to common circumvention techniques (VPNs, mirror sites, file-sharing, and informal distribution via messaging apps). This creates a lived reality in which bans function as symbolic acts of control rather than effective prevention. The rhetorical insistence on blanket bans therefore masks a practical contradiction: while censorship gestures claim to secure public morality, technological workarounds mean demand is merely displaced rather than eliminated. Scholarship on internet control observes that technical blocking and legal prohibition often produce cat-and-mouse dynamics that frustrate enforcement and amplify perceptions of an unstoppable threat (Deibert et al., 2010; Griffiths, 2012).

8.3. Moral panic, externalisation, and the "uprising" narrative

A strong ideological device in the corpus is the depiction of pornography as an *imported cultural toxin*, a symptom of Western permissiveness or global decay threatening local values. This externalisation does ideological work: it locates blame externally (foreign websites, global media industries) and positions the nation as a moral bastion under siege. Such framing fuels moral panic dynamics, in which moral entrepreneurs call for urgent remedies (Cohen, 2002). The effect is twofold: it legitimises repressive measures (bans, surveillance) while distracting from domestic structural causes (lack of sex education, mental health services, gender dynamics) that would require long-term social investment rather than immediate prohibition.

8.4. Pathologisation without pathways to care, absences in discourse

When *addiction* is present in the corpus, it is most often invoked as a rhetorical amplifier of harm, described in catastrophic, deterministic terms rather than as a condition amenable to clinical understanding and treatment. There is little sustained engagement with mechanisms of dependence, evidence-based treatment models, or rehabilitation pathways. Correspondingly, voices of mental-health professionals, sexologists, educators, and people with lived experience are sparse. This absence produces a policy-discursive blind spot: addiction is used as

justification for punitive policies but not as a guide for building therapeutic infrastructure (Kraus et al., 2016; Potenza et al., 2017). The result is a public sphere that criminalises or shames individuals while offering little in the way of recovery, counselling, or harm-reduction programs.

8.5. Gendered effects, victimisation and legal failures

The corpus disproportionally frames women as victims, both of pornography's harms and of exploitative industry practices while men are often framed as both consumers and perpetrators. High-profile cases (revenge porn, doxxing) are used to justify stronger legal measures; however, the texts also document institutional failures (mishandling of evidence, victim-blaming, inadequate takedown mechanisms) that leave survivors exposed. Thus, the discourse alternates between calls for protection and evidence that the protection mechanisms are weak or counterproductive, reinforcing mistrust of official remedies (Kamran & Ahmad, 2021).

8.6. The paradox: taboo + ubiquity = silence that deepens harm

Across the dataset, a paradox emerges: pornography is widely consumed but publicly taboo. This duality creates a discourse of secrecy and shame that compounds addiction's harms: people hide their struggles, avoid seeking help, and are socially punished when discovered. Where clinical vocabulary appears (mental health, addiction), it is often subordinated to moral vocabulary (sin, immorality). Consequently, those harmed by compulsive use lack both social legitimacies to seek help and institutional pathways for recovery.

8.7. Policy implications implied by discourse (what is *not* being said)

The corpus privileges immediate prohibition and moral sanction while largely omitting discussion of preventive or remedial policies: comprehensive sex education, accessible mental-health services, public-health framing, platform accountability mechanisms, and realistic digital-literacy campaigns. By privileging bans and moral condemnation, discourse narrows the set of politically thinkable solutions and forecloses harm-reduction responses that research suggests are necessary for addressing compulsive behaviours (Potenza et al., 2017; Griffiths, 2012).

9. Conclusion

The findings reveal that pornography addiction in Pakistan represents a growing socio-cultural and psychological challenge, fuelled by increased digital accessibility, the widespread use of VPNs to bypass restrictions, and the absence of robust discourse on the subject in both public and academic domains. This addiction undermines healthy human connections by replacing emotional intimacy with artificial gratification, fostering isolation, distorted perceptions of relationships, and unrealistic sexual expectations (Grubbs et al., 2015). Its rise is further enabled by technological developments, weak regulatory enforcement, and the lack of comprehensive sexual education, creating an environment where consumption thrives unchecked (Flood, 2009). Moreover, the stigma surrounding open discussion perpetuates a cycle of silence, preventing awareness, education, and effective policy intervention. The discursive absence not only hinders prevention but also normalises problematic consumption patterns. Therefore, pornography addiction in Pakistan should be understood not merely as a private moral concern but as a multidimensional social issue requiring urgent scholarly, governmental, and community-level engagement.

10. Recommendations

1. **Educational Initiatives** – Introduce age-appropriate sexual education in schools and universities to address misconceptions, promote healthy relationships, and foster critical media literacy.
2. **Public Awareness Campaigns** – Launch culturally sensitive campaigns that highlight the psychological, relational, and social harms of pornography addiction while reducing stigma around seeking help.
3. **Digital Regulation and VPN Oversight** – Strengthen monitoring and regulation of VPN services and illegal websites, alongside providing public reporting channels for explicit content hosting.
4. **Accessible Support Systems** – Expand mental health services, including confidential counselling

and addiction recovery programs, with specific training for therapists to address pornography-related concerns.

5. **Religious and Cultural Discourse Inclusion** – Encourage religious leaders, educators, and community influencers to engage in informed, non-judgmental discussions about pornography and its consequences to bridge the discursive gap.

6. **Further Research** – Encourage more corpus-based and discourse studies on pornography in the Pakistani context to explore how its portrayal shapes public opinion and policymaking.

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