

Visual Art Representation and Social Attitudes Towards Transgender Individuals in Pakistan: Exploring Queer Theory, Personal Narratives, and Societal Change

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Abstract

This paper examines how visual art representations influence social perceptions and the lives of transgender people in Pakistan. Using queer theory, personal storytelling, and content analysis of recent transgender legislation, the study is qualitative in nature. The author aims to promote recognition and acceptance for transgender individuals in Pakistan, exploring key concepts like gender identity and social struggles through queer theory. A case study with a transgender woman provides insight into her personal journey and the challenges she faced, underscoring the need for empathy and acceptance. The research also highlights the role of art in shaping perceptions, especially through the work of trans artists in Pakistan, who challenge social norms and foster greater tolerance. By analyzing how art can inspire understanding, the study demonstrates art's power to promote social change. The paper further addresses societal views and the implications of the transgender bill in Pakistan, calling for equal treatment and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. Limitations include the qualitative nature of the study and non-probabilistic sampling, which restricts generalization. Despite these limitations, the research sheds light on transgender rights and social inclusion, advocating for respect and dignity for transgender people in Pakistan through personal stories, queer theory, and the transformative impact of art.

Keywords: Gender transformation, visual art representation.

1 Introduction

The term "Transgender" serves as an umbrella encompassing individuals whose gender identity (Anderson, [2023](#)), expression, or behavior deviates from societal norms associated with their assigned sex at birth (American Psychological Association, [2015](#)). Gender identity pertains to an individual's internal perception of being male, female, or falling outside this binary spectrum (Wickham et al., [2023](#)); meanwhile, gender expression involves the communication of one's gender identity through various means, including behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or bodily

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characteristics World Professional Association for Transgender Health, [2011](#)). The abbreviation "trans" is often employed as a shorthand reference for "transgender."

It is crucial to note that not all individuals whose appearance or behavior challenges gender norms necessarily identify as transgender (Jackson & Bussey, [2023](#)). The term "transgender" is evolving and, while generally appropriate, does not universally capture the diversity of gender experiences (Anderson, [2023](#)). The discourse surrounding transgender individuals in popular culture, academia, and science is dynamic, reflecting the ongoing growth in awareness, knowledge, and openness to understanding the complexities of transgender identities and experiences (Dhiman, [2023](#); Grant, [2011](#)).

The state of personally identifying as, or being identified by society as, a man, a woman, or other, is usually also defined by the individual's gender identity and gender role in the particular culture in which they live (Levitt, [2019](#)). Most cultures use a gender binary, having two genders (boys/men and girls/women) (Diamond, [2020](#)). In cultures with a third or fourth gender, these genders may represent very different things (Herd, [2020](#)).

The concept of third and fourth genders refers to gender identities and expressions that exist beyond the traditional binary understanding of gender as strictly male or female (Nanda, [1999](#); Roscoe, [1998](#); Thorne et al., [2020](#)). These terms are used to acknowledge and affirm the diversity of gender identities that individuals may experience.

Third Gender: In many cultures, including some Indigenous cultures and societies in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, the concept of a third gender has been recognized for centuries (Nanda, [1999](#)). Third gender identities may include individuals who identify as neither exclusively male nor female, or as a combination of both male and female (Herd, [2020](#); Thorne et al., [2020](#)), as well as other gender identities that are distinct from the binary categories of male and female. Third gender identities may be understood within specific cultural or spiritual contexts and often have their own unique roles, social roles, and rituals within their communities.

Fourth Gender: The concept of a fourth gender expands upon the idea of a third gender to include additional gender identities or expressions that transcend or challenge the binary understanding of gender (Roscoe, [1998](#); Thorne et al., [2020](#)). Fourth gender identities may encompass a wide range of experiences, including non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, and other gender identities that exist outside the traditional male-female binary (Fiani & Han, [2020](#)). These identities may involve fluidity, complexity, or ambiguity in terms of gender expression, identity, or experience.

It's important to note that the recognition of third and fourth genders varies across different cultures, societies, and historical contexts ((Herd, [2020](#); Nanda, [1999](#); Roscoe, [1998](#)). Additionally, individuals may use a variety of terms and labels to describe their gender identities, and these terms may hold different meanings and significance for different people (Lindqvist et al., [2021](#)). Overall, the acknowledgment of third and fourth genders reflects a growing awareness and acceptance of gender diversity and the need to create inclusive spaces that honor and respect people of all gender identities (Allen et al., [2022](#)).

The most challenging aspect among transgender is a category of men who feel trapped inside their bodies as they feel they should have been women instead of being men (Moschella, [2021](#)). Transgender is a matter of sexual identity rather than sexual orientation (Hereth et al., [2020](#)). Thus, a transgender man would identify with women rather than other men. He considers his own biological gender as a blunder of God and feels he is a woman trapped inside the body of a man (Branch, [2019](#)). The gender identity of a transgender man is not consistent with his behavior that is totally effeminate. It is not just men who are transgender as there are women who feel they are men trapped inside the bodies of women. Transgender people are assigned a sex at their time of

birth, but they grow up dissatisfied with their sex believing themselves to be a person of the opposite sex (Moschella, [2021](#)).

Understanding the complexities of sexual orientation and gender identity is crucial for fostering inclusivity and dispelling stereotypes (Lim et al., [2019](#)). It is important to rely on accurate information to differentiate between these aspects. Sexual orientation involves a spectrum of identities, including lesbian, gay, and transgender individuals. Lesbians are attracted to other females, while gay individuals are attracted to the same sex (Gartrell et al., [2019](#)). It's essential to clarify that being gay or lesbian pertains to sexual orientation, whereas being transgender is about gender identity—a person's internal sense of their gender.

Sexual orientation and sexual identity are fundamental aspects of human sexuality (Fausto-Sterling, [2019](#)), each capturing distinct dimensions of an individual's experiences and self-understanding. Sexual orientation refers to the pattern of emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction that a person experiences toward others (Kaestle, [2019](#)), encompassing attractions based on gender identity or biological sex. It includes categories such as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual. Sexual orientation is often considered an intrinsic aspect of a person's identity and may fluctuate or remain stable over time (Ryan & Ryan, [2019](#)). In contrast, sexual identity pertains to how an individual personally identifies or labels their own sexuality, reflecting their self-perception and understanding of their attractions. While sexual orientation describes who a person is attracted to, sexual identity represents how they conceptualize and articulate their sexual experiences and desires (Hereth et al., [2020](#)). Both concepts are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and personal factors, and while they are closely related, they may not always align perfectly for each individual due to the diversity and variability of human sexuality. A transgender person may experience a disconnect between their assigned sex at birth and their gender identity (Clarke, [2022](#)), leading them to identify with a gender different from the one assigned by society. This may involve adopting dress and behavior that align with their affirmed gender. Importantly, transgender individuals can have any sexual orientation, just like cisgender individuals (Reiman et al., [2023](#)).

Distinguishing between gender identity and sexual orientation is critical. In contrast, a gay person is defined by their sexual attraction to the same sex, a transgender person's experience centers around their gender identity (White et al., [2021](#)). Gender expression, such as clothing and behavior, does not determine one's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Queer theory plays a significant role in understanding these nuances, emphasizing cultural and social constructs related to sexuality and gender (McGuire, [2022](#)). It provides a post-structural theoretical framework that challenges traditional norms. The term "queer" has evolved from its derogatory origins to encompass a broad range of non-heteronormative identities (Hagai & Zurbruggen, [2022](#)). While the term was historically associated with negative connotations, it has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community (Halberstam, [2005](#)).

Reclaiming "queer" began in the 1990s, where it started to be used academically and socially to encompass a spectrum of identities beyond traditional categories like gay or lesbian. Today, "queer" is embraced as a positive and affirming term within the LGBTQ+ community. This reappropriation aimed to broaden and fluidize understandings of sexual orientations and gender identities, fostering a more inclusive and empowering perspective. (Warner, [1993](#))

2 Research Methods

This research utilizes qualitative research design to examine manner in which visual art representation can affect societal perception of transgenders in Pakistan (Hagai & Zurbruggen, [2022](#)). Data triangulation was achieved through face-to-face interviews and semi-structured and structured observation with the participants (Ipek & Mutlu, [2022](#)), as well as self-generated

photographs, art and illustrations, documentaries and films, and social media updates. These methods were favored as they generate large amounts of qualitative data that gives a more nuanced understanding of the critical personal utility of the art and vital social consequence for transgenders.

One of the major activities in the assignment was an extensive interview with a college friend who had transitioned to a woman and had been officially diagnosed as biologically male. The researcher then interacted with her in order to get her best insights into the qualitative study of the composite of her self-erected life experiences, struggles, and evolution. These insights were rich, context-specific, and added to the detailed data from the other three samples of the research participants who are transgender artists.

Since the purpose of the study was to interview key informants about the social implications of the art work, participants were chosen purposively because of their key roles in the circles of Pakistani art and Trans-gender community. Due to this, purposive sampling was used in the study in order to capture a holistic view of the matter under study through the perception of key informants who were directly involved in the portrayal of transgender issues. The research interviews focused on obtaining the firsthand accounts and possible experiences of the subjects regarding their art's effectiveness in shifting public perceptions of the transgender community. Furthermore, following the collection of the artwork, the following procedure was used to analyze the content to deduce recurring messages and themes:

On ethics, its principles were not compromised during the research process as various ethical considerations were followed. Subjects were interviewed by the researchers after signing an informed consent to participate in the study so that they became very much aware of the purpose of the research as well as their involvement. Participants also remained anonymous during the study to ensure that a client's identity was not revealed and the gathered data was treated with discretion. Such steps were helpful in ensuring that the participants had confidence and felt safe when participating in the study the research subject matter being of a sensitive nature.

As with the majority of the research, the current study is not without limitations. This is so because results that may be obtained depending on the methods used are likely to be inclined to the experiences of the researcher. However, the use of convenient sampling reduces the sample size to a certain group of the participants in the transgender community of Pakistan and thus it may not represent all the participants in the entire community. For these reasons, the following potential biases and constraints of the study are made known: It is through the disclosure of these kinds of limitations and drawbacks that the study aims to have a sound epistemological awareness of its size and ramifications. From this standpoint, the present study benefits from the relatively high level of methodological transparency, thus potentially providing a sound basis for the further development of this line of research.

3 Results and Discussion

Due to the tough experience around the topic and cultural peculiarity of the Pakistani, the paper employs cultural relativism in analysis and presentation of the experience of the transgender without sensation and stereotyping the situation. Thus, the forthcoming sections draw attention to present the results of the study stressing cultural differences focusing on the experiences of Transgenders in Pakistan and the artworks they created.

The exhibition of the artists' pieces demonstrates a range of the selves and the performativity that the artists elucidate in the Pakistani milieu. Decent representation is upheld by relating the presentation of the artists to personal stories as well as their roles in society. This approach also helps in increasing the awareness and tolerance towards the culture of the transgender individuals since it helps in acknowledging the differences found amongst the said group.

The study includes artworks of several artists who are Transgenders, and each of them is captured with their experiences and the society's hardships. For example, the selected work of Anwar Saeed has a collection of the male figure paintings that signify postures for the Pakistani society's inner-self, beliefs and religion as shown in Figure 1. His art is provocative and, at times, shocking in view of the present-day gender roles and ideals, rubbing into the audience's eyes the problematic aspect of male lust and identity crisis. Thus, comparing Saeed's concern with homosexuality and masculinity, the study emphasizes the ability of the visual art to provoke and reconstruct norms.



Figure 1: The left presence of the artist himself, and the Right are two of his paintings.

Likewise, in the vein of abstraction and isolation, Ali Kazim's paintings present the historical roots of Pakistan and draw from the artist's biography and exposure as shown in Figure 2. The play of light, texture and luminous washes of watercolor and pencil make up a multifaceted story that addresses gender difference as a completely normal concept. Kazim's overseas experience has let him express himself fluently about the pieces he makes, giving a voice to the most oppressed individuals in the transgender population.



Figure 2: Water color paintings by Ali Kazim

Sialkot based visual artist and curator Abdullah Qureshi's work focuses on pornography, sexuality, and desire as shown in figure 3. His chosen format of documenting the world through mirrors and structured photography of the subjects, to describe individual identity and memories of youth, represents a powerful and very much needed representation of the queer / Muslim / migrant experience. Qureshi's work is semi-abstract and, often, his paintings reflect the problems of gender ambiguity and its queer essence. In his recent endeavors, Qureshi adopts the visual diary format, using portraiture as a medium to probe into concepts like masculinity, sexuality, and intimacy, among other aspects. His artistic journey extends beyond national borders, with exhibitions showcasing his work both nationally and internationally. Notably, Qureshi is the founder of Gallery 39K. From 2013 to 2016, he held the position of Senior Consultant Arts at the British

Council and served as visiting faculty at the National College of Arts and the Pakistan Institute of Fashion Design.



Figure 3: Mix Media Paintings.

Bhutto Jr.'s performances represent the experience and oppression of queer and trans bodies effected by the Western and more specifically the American imperialism in regions like Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Iran as shown in figure 4. However, entirely transforming these bodies into the victors over Western imperialism, Bhutto's work becomes a critique of liberation and opposition. He provokes the status quo and offers transformative gestures in favor of pluralistic emancipatory queerness and transness.



Figure 4: Body Performance.

Sohail Aziz's performance about embracing new experiences through social media dating applications such as Tinder and Grindr, presented in the split between the Pakistani and Indian border vividly reflects the conflict between the interpersonal experiences and politics of the foreign policy. Sohail maps out new categories of liberty and interaction, thereby offering a critique of the typical and political paradigms that pervade the existence of queer characters in the area. His work is focused on how people play out their presence and selves in a world that is separated.

Drawing on the examples of conscious creation and conscious consumption, the study also reveals the long-term impact of art on overcoming prejudice and changing people's attitudes for the better. The artists' diverse and powerful expressions are here as various experiences that I am so delighted to immerse myself with because of the well-articulated fight for equality and acceptance of Transgenders. This study gives insight about the emotional challenges and inner turmoil that people go through when they are in relation with transgenders, thus pointing out the need to establish relationship that are compassionate.

By explaining the focus of these artists and the themes depicted in their creations, the research proves that art can become a strong agent of social transformation. While the narratives inherent in their work are personal, they can contribute towards the understanding of the achievements and struggles of the Transgender community in Pakistan through contemplation of the spectator's stereotypical/ prejudice mindset towards this class of people.

The use of terms such as "queer" and "gay" carries various connotations, and it is essential to consider the historical and cultural context surrounding these words. While the dictionary defines

"queer" as strange and unusual, and "gay" as happy and bright, the meanings and interpretations have evolved, especially within the LGBTQ+ community (Merriam-Webster, [n.d.](#)). In the context of the LGBTQ+ community, "queer" has been reclaimed by some as an umbrella term encompassing gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals (Merriam-Webster, [n.d.](#)). However, it's crucial to note that not all individuals within the LGBTQ+ community may identify with or prefer the term "queer." Some may find it insulting, as it historically held negative connotations associated with nonconformity.

In Pakistan, recent, steps for the legislation have been taken to ensure rights for the communities and individuals of the third gender. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 covers employment and education, and healthcare sectors among them, in terms of prohibition of discrimination and harassment in these sectors. The legislation upholds the constitutional rights of the transgender persons in Pakistan and demands placement of the gender minorities in shelter homes, hospitals besides requiring services from the prisons.

Nevertheless, discrimination against trans-gender people in Pakistan society has not entirely eradicated. Lack of knowledge, rumor, and prejudice from the society hinder the social, economic and political integration of the transgender people. In this regard, despite the existence of progressive legal reforms to transform the lives of queer people for the better, the social acceptance of criminal law continues to be a challenging obstacle, while the private existence of queer persons remains concealed owing to the currently existing penal code and social relations.

Among them are ignorance on how to treat them, continuation of discrimination due to stereotype thoughts, disrespect to some of their civil advantages as economic and medical. The recent developments are positive in moving forward in dealing with the issues such as the recent approval of transgender bill; yet there are current problems which include the social aspect of persons with gender identity different from the physical appearance (Khan, [2019](#)).

Major attention should be paid to the elevation of knowledge, improvement and tolerance towards the members of the transgender community in Pakistan. While society is gradually developing greater supervision over marginalized, discriminated, and aliens, the task is to establish the transsexual's free and infinite portrayal and recognition of their adequate rights.

3.1 Policy Implications

The conclusions of this research underline essentialism of systemic changes to address the concerns of the transgender people of Pakistan. In order to satisfy these needs effectively, here there is the logic of policy propositions, the call for and, finally, the guidelines for further research.

3.2 Policy Recommendations

First, an emphasis should be left on the direction to work actively in the searching for and identification of the legislative changes that would provide equal rights and protection of transsexuals as far as the workplace and education, as well as medical services are concerned. Policies that should be adopted should contain non-discrimination clauses to guarantee that transparency of any form of prejudice against gender identity and provide equal chances for obtaining education, employment, and medical care for the members of the transgender population. These policies should also offer customers accommodation and treatment services addressing the issues of the transgender population to allow them to compete fully for the available opportunities in society. Secondly, appropriate officer and service providers training, which also should include thorough courses on non-discrimination, is essential. These programs should aim at promoting cultural competence and mainstream knowledge regarding the transsexual population. Through informing participants with these specific facts concerning transgender people, such consolidation-based training programs can enable professionals working for the government or the healthcare system to become more sensitive and better prepared to help such members of society. Regarding

this initiative, the goals include the establishment of equality, justice, and dignity for trans-gender people and the creation of institutions that are welcoming for them.

3.3 Advocacy Strategies

Active engagement and collaboration with the organizations and advocacy groups on transgender's issues and rights are crucial. Such organizations can be operational as the interface level organizations that meet the needs and fight for change in the existing systems. Supporting them with sufficient funding, equipment and rallying grounds can go a long way in boosting their endeavors. It can assist in strengthening their ability to prevent prejudice and systematically empower Transgenders; can also directly help the Transgenders. It is also necessary to establish social campaigns aimed at raising people's awareness of the presence of transgenders and their potential benefits to the society's development. Such campaigns should be designed to change the general population's perception, increase the understanding and awareness of mental health, and decrease the discrimination against mentally ill persons. Due to the portrayal of positive images and narratives of transgenders, such campaigns can open the society's eyes to accept and embrace transgenders.

3.4 Future Research

To increase the effectiveness of the foregoing initiatives, it is suggested that where possible, longitudinal surveys be undertaken. Such studies can determine the sustainability of the inclusive policies to the transgender group, offering useful information and recommendations for future modifications on the policies. Longitudinal research can capture change throughout periods, therefore showing the sustainability of different intercessions and the validity of the procedures done. Moreover, incorporating the theme of intersectionality for the analysis of the discrimination that trans people experience is also vital. Theoretical research should consider ways in which other social categories – class, ethnicity, and religion – moderate experience of gender identity, and manifest as separate difficulties. Thus, future research can bring more targeted and complex solutions for the needs of trans people as they reveal these compounded issues.

In this way, the present study would like to make its contribution to reducing the existing policy gaps and building an environment of equality in Pakistan for transgenders. Hence, these recommendations point at the need for inclusion when making policies, lobbying and research done to address the needs of the Trans-African community that is the transgender population.

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