

From Hashtags to Protests: Social Media, Emotion, and Misinformation in the Punjab College Harassment Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The present research explore how social media has contributed to how society perceives and feels about the so-called harassment episode in the Punjab College in Lahore that has become prominent in mid-October 2024. The paper look at the ways the online platforms can manipulate discourses to create narratives, community organization and what implications are depicted regarding these accidents.

Methodology: The study employed both qualitative and quantitative designs to collect data with four primary data sources, including Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and electronic newspapers. Certain keywords and links were used to scrape posts, videos, thumbnails, comments, and hashtags to collect the information. The content analysis was done thoroughly to assess the tone, sentiment and the theme of the digital content. They also applied social network analysis to visualize communications between the key words, identify influential users and discover the pattern of information diffusion.

Findings: The results clarify that social media platforms had been the most dominant in increasing support and mistrust of the incident. Emotional appeals included victim-blaming, institutional responsibility and appeals to justice. It was also found out that there were organized campaigns and the rapid spread of unverified news, which influenced the masses and led to the real life protests.

Conclusion: The study reveals the dual nature of the social media in shaping the mass discourse of sensitive issues. Even though these platforms can raise awareness and attract a following, it is also connected to challenges related to misinformation and the polarization of emotions. The paper highlights the necessity of being digitally literate, responsible journalism and sound legal frameworks that would enable negotiating the depth that comes with information flow in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Public Sentiment Analysis, Harassment Narratives, Social Media Discourse, Misinformation Spread, Punjab College Case, Content and Network Analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital age has brought about the social media as an influential and vibrant communication ecosystem, by way of micro-interactions, algorithmic power, and affective mobilization of the populace discourse in its production and circulation. In a case involving the Punjab Girls College (PGC) harassment, the social media was not just a means of communication but also a place of activism, emotional support and narrative discourse (Vasylchyshyn and Kovalchuk, 2024; Safdar and Fatima, 2024; Safdar, 2023) in Pakistan. This is an indicator of a new paradigm in online publics to pursue justice by being viral and not necessarily by the judicial system. The PGC case was the subject of much social media coverage, and it became an example of how digital platforms have become a pillar of the narrative structure of high-profile events as a multiplicity of voices, including everyday users, digital influencers, advocacy groups, institutional actors and (PSC) Progressive Students Collective (Gabol and Bilal, 2024; Desk, 2024) come together to produce, distribute, and criticize competing versions of the event. The paper analyzes this intersection of the user-generated material with media framing to draw attention to the socio-digital relationships that condition the response of the population to the alleged harassment incident in the Punjab College Gulberg campus 10, Lahore.

The incident illustrates how social media platforms go beyond just sharing information (Yang et al., 2023; Shabir et al., 2015; Shabir et al., 2015a; Shabir et al., 2014) they serve as venues for contested meanings and negotiated narratives, emotional solidarities (Fowler & Moist, 2025), and influence the dynamics of sociopolitical discourse. The viral spread of emotionally charged content, public testimonies, and counter-narratives not only mirrors societal anxieties but also reshapes the conditions (Inwood & Alderman, 2024) under which justice, credibility, and institutional accountability are understood and discussed (Mäkelä, 2023). Public perception of the PGC was significantly impacted by viral posts, hashtags, public figures, and influencer involvement. The act of rape sends a powerful message about the subjugation and powerlessness of women victims, which is often socially reinforced through the stigmatization of those who have been raped (Da Silva, 2015; Jewkes et al., 2015; Anwer, 2024).

1.1 Problem Statement

The proliferation of social media has transformed how socio-political events, particularly those involving allegations of harassment and institutional accountability, are represented, debated, and emotionally processed by the public. Despite the increasing relevance of digital platforms in shaping collective discourse, a critical gap in understanding the nuanced mechanisms through which social media forums frame contentious incidents, orchestrate emotional narratives, and foster solidarity and polarization. The October 2024 Punjab College harassment case in Lahore, which triggered widespread online engagement and real-world mobilization, offers a salient context to interrogate these dynamics. This study addresses the dire need to examine how digital architectures, algorithmic visibility, and networked publics intersect to construct, circulate, and contest meaning around sensitive events in contemporary Pakistan.

1.2 Research Objectives

Social media users' reaction to the PGC case is significant for several reasons. Firstly, to understand the formation of digital media in the contemporary form of communication that framed public perception about the case. Secondly, analyze how the media manipulates the misinformation of cases and potentially erodes the principles of justice. Finally, a discussion about the discourse of digital activism and misinformation and verification scenario governing the social media use, especially in the sensitive and hype-created issue of the PGC case.

1.3 Research Questions

- 1: How is the Punjab Girls College case framed across social media platforms?
- 2: What emotional and thematic patterns emerge in digital discussions about the PGC case?
- 3: Which users, hashtags, and keywords shaped the visibility and direction of conversations?
- 4: What forms of circulated misinformation and unverified claims evolve in online discourse?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Punjab College case refers to social, administrative, and legal issues concerning the educational institution in Punjab, Pakistan, as a lot of social media spotlight, like students, activists, and alumni, remain connected through platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube, due to the governance implications and education policy. Many student protests may stem from unfair practices, fee hikes, lack of resources, and campus misinformation (Vivian, 2023, p. 54). Courts have addressed such issues through judicial involvement and taken action against those who spread the misinformation. It's a real danger to society when we don't know the truth. Discussion on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube amplifies opinions, sentiments, and narratives about the case. Activists, legal experts, and influencers actively participated in these forums and created a diverse perception of their approach.

In the digital era, the rape issue is a deeply troubling challenge that impacts countless individuals and communities. The rape battle and implication requires a collective effort to dissociate cultural norms that ensure justice is swift and perpetuate violence in their path to healing. Sexual violence is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting (Torazzi et al., 2021). It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part, or object, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, and other non-contact forms (Peterson et al., 2024; WHO, 2024).

The PGC case highlights how information or misinformation rapidly shapes public perception, opinion, and the responses of societal influencers, especially in the presence of social media and other sharing platforms. In October 2024, this controversy began when an unverified account shared photos alleging that a first-year student had been sexually assaulted at a private college. These issues, fueled by the emotional perception of a lack of official clarification, spread across various digital forums, leading to widespread protests in Lahore and other locations. The situation escalated quickly, resulting in clashes between law enforcement and demonstrators. In response, authorities temporarily closed all educational institutions across Punjab to contain the unrest, which led to several reported injuries. The investigation by the Punjab police, Progressive Students Collective (PSC), and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) (@OfficialDPRPP, 2024; Gabol & Chaudhry, 2024) indicates that the allegations were baseless. The victim's family publicly claimed that the consequences of the back injury prevented her from attending college at the time of the incident. Initially, misinformation caused substantial damage to institutional stability and public trust. Recognizing the situation, the FIA took action against individuals, including social influencers and journalists, for spreading misinformation, false narratives, and unverified claims, as the emotional reactions were so intense before the discovery of the full truth.

2.1 *Theoretical Framework*

This study is grounded in a multi-theoretical framework that draws on the framing theory (Entman, 1993), networked publics (Dutton, 2018; Boyd, 2014), and digital misinformation studies (Ecker et al., 2022; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Zhou & Zhang, 2007) to understand how the Punjab College harassment case was articulated, interpreted, and disseminated across various digital platforms. At the core of this research lies 'Framing', which asks how media content shapes (Moernaut et al., 2019) audience understanding and emotional engagement with a real-life issue (Bell, 2024). According to Entman (1993), framing involves certain aspects of perceived reality to make them more salient in a communication context, thereby promoting particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. In the Punjab College case, social media users and digital influencers framed the narrative around victimhood, institutional failure, and calls for justice. This paper examines the emotional appeal and effect of symbolic language usage on shaping the discourse of the masses and the development of a shared sentiment through aesthetic means, determined by analyzing visual communications, tone, language and narrative structures (Doroshenko and Tu, 2023; De Vreese, 2005). To supplement framing,

the paper combines the findings of emotion discourse analysis (EDA) and affect theory (Tomkins, 1962; Ahmed, 2013; Massumi, 2021; Sedgwick, 2020) to assess in what ways feelings of outrage and empathy versus denial and apathy are encoded in online discussions (Koschut, 2018). Papacharissi (2015) states that communities mobilized through shared emotional expressions on social media play a pivotal role in shaping political and civic discourse (p. 111), especially in comments and video thumbnails in the emotional construction of social meanings that helped to mobilize public action or backlash in the PGC case.

The emergence of “networked publics” (Boyd, 2010), further developed by Papacharissi (2013), offers an understanding of digital spaces’ functionality and participatory discourse. Hashtags such as #JusticeForPunjabCollege or #HarassmentInColleges acted as digital gathering points for collective action, critique, and meaning-making. These publics are not passive receivers but active co-creators of discourse (Papacharissi, 2022), influencing what gains visibility and traction (p. 61). This study uses social network analysis to map how key hashtags, influencers, and users shaped and steered the online discourse around the case.

Moreover, to evaluate the role of unverified claims and the spread of misleading content, the study draws on (DMS) Digital Misinformation Studies (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), which defines misinformation ecosystems as environments where false or manipulated content circulates rapidly due to the digital platforms’ architecture. The framework, mentioned in Table 1, has been used to trace how misinformation related to the PGC case: false accusations, doctored videos, or politicized narratives, emerged, spread, and influenced public engagement. This study assesses the diffusion patterns of digital media in either clarifying or complicating the public understanding of case sensitivity.

A growing body of scholarship highlights the commercial drive to monetize emotional engagement for the strategic incorporation of psychological science, particularly its measurable and behaviorally predictive aspects, into the design of digital platforms. This integration has fundamentally shaped how users experience, express, and respond to emotionally charged content online. (Stark, 2020, p. 298; Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2023). The dissemination of profound information to public opinion poses a significant challenge to demographic and cohesion processes. Rape victims mostly receive negative reactions from their social circles, health care professionals, and the justice system (Maiorano et al., 2023); a secondary victimization that can compromise their recovery and well-being (Malayeri et al., 2025). The rape perception of patriarchal society tends to blame victims, skipping the other narratives (Kazmi & Rauf, 2024), as the defensive theory describes that women may blame the victim to feel less vulnerable (Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2021).

The trust in the justice system is crucial for victims to engage with the legal process, directly proportional to their recovery and other outcomes (Raver et al., 2025), including personal beliefs, demographic traits, and gender-based differences (Hancock et al., 2021; Kunst et al., 2019). According to Sun & Xie (2024), the motivation to alleviate boredom has a positive association with misinformation sharing, as information literacy demonstrated a moderate negative effect, and new media literacy did not have a statistically significant impact. Moreover, on social media, health misinformation, as well as other types of misinformation, can negatively impact knowledge, behavior, attitude, and public health efforts (Heley et al., 2025). Due to fake allegations, severe social and psychological repercussions occur to exert pressure in legal matters (House, 2023) through various mass media technologies (Gjika, 2020).

Digital discourse highlights aspects that the mainstream news media may overlook, as it is often influenced by the political and economic agendas of large media corporations, high technology industries, and government (Gilardi et al., 2022). Many recognize the need to incorporate elements of media literacy into education, such as analyzing, evaluating, accessing, and producing communication, especially for students (Frechette, 2019), because of their engagement in the political environment. Even post-broadcast media have begun to influence political events worldwide, affecting public perception or shaping opinions (Al-Zaman & Noman, 2023).

Citizen journalists contribute to public discussion by voicing and addressing issues that society and the upper class often ignore. However, in the modern world, this is seen as a negative phenomenon, widespread on social networks, and infringes on human rights (Gevorgyan, 2022). Sexual assault can be defined as any unwanted sexual contact, such as rape or attempted rape, sodomy, child sexual abuse, incest, or unwanted fondling (Ross, 2024). In many cases, the perpetrator is known to the victim or their family. But sometimes, the perpetrator can be a stranger, using tactics such as violence, threats, coercion, manipulation, pressure, or deceit. Sexual assault is a severely traumatic experience for any person, and it brings about damage to the person's physical, psychological (both short and long-term), and social health, while also affecting the well-being of many others in a very strong way.

3. METHODOLOGY

In view of the qualitative design of the study supplemented by computational tools, the analysis was conducted on the discursive construction of the Punjab Girls College (PGC) harassment case on digital and mainstream platforms. The temporal bounds of the analysis were limited to one week (October 13-19, 2024) so as to place special emphasis on covering the intensity and discursive shifts. The final dataset comprised 286 media items, including Instagram posts ($n = 47$), reels ($n = 50$), YouTube videos ($n = 91$), and TikTok reels ($n = 98$), alongside 11,000 top-level user comments proportionally sampled from these items.

The sampling strategy used a purposive approach (Palinkas et al., 2015), focusing only on content directly related to the PGC harassment case. Posts, reels, and videos were collected using keywords and hashtags such as #PunjabCollege, PGC harassment, and their Urdu equivalents. On Instagram, the sample included accounts like the newspaper.pk, thecurrentpk, Mounima Sheikh, Pakistanicinema, and The News Pak. TikTok data was gathered from high-engagement accounts, including Momin Sadiq, Viral Pool, Bhimloer News, Lifestyle Vlogs, Meer Media Production, Hamza Pahwar, and Fit on Our Heroes Punjab (Primary Observation Date, 2024). YouTube sampling involved both mainstream news outlets (Capital TV, Geo News, Dunya News, Hum News, Aaj News, Urdu Point, and Lahore HD) and independent creators (Mansoor Ali Khan Digital Podcast Channel, Rabi Pirzada Channel, and Ad. Mian Abdul Mateen, Raza Samo, Fun with Zartasha, Vlog Central). Including both digital-native accounts and the digital extensions of mainstream broadcasters ensured coverage of bottom-up, participatory narratives as well as top-down, institutionally curated discourses.

Data collection encompassed both textual and visual elements, including captions, transcripts, thumbnails, hashtags, and user comments. All material was publicly accessible, and user identifiers were anonymized during reporting. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, qualitative content analysis (QCA) was applied to code both manifest content (explicit references, descriptive accounts) and latent content (implied sentiment, bias, and framing), following the interpretive model of Graneheim and Lundman (2004) and Graneheim et al. (2017). Codes were iteratively refined and grouped into thematic categories capturing dominant frames, tones, and moral evaluations.

Second, sentiment and comparative opinion analysis were conducted on captions and user comments. Sentiment polarity (positive, negative, neutral) and intensity were initially identified using natural language processing tools, then manually validated to account for Urdu-English code-switching and contextual meaning. Comparative opinion mining (Jindal & Liu, 2006) further identified explicit and implicit comparisons (e.g., holding the college administration “more responsible” than law enforcement, or portraying media coverage as “less credible” than eyewitness accounts). Comparisons were coded as either gradable (measurable along a scale) or non-gradable (binary oppositions).

Third, the information disorder framework (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) was applied to classify posts and videos into misinformation (false but non-malicious), disinformation (false with harmful intent), or malinformation (true but shared with harmful framing). This classification was complemented by mapping hashtag co-occurrence and content circulation patterns to assess whether narratives were confined within echo chambers or diffused across heterogeneous networks. Methodological rigor has

been ensured through multiple safeguards. Triangulation across platforms reduced single-source bias, and an inter-coder reliability check yielded a Krippendorff’s alpha above .80 (Halpin, 2024). The bounded timeframe prevented dataset drift, while an audit trail of coding decisions enhanced transparency and confirmability. Ethical safeguards included reliance on publicly available data, anonymization of user handles, and contextual sensitivity in interpreting culturally specific expressions about the PGC harassment case.

3.1 Data Analysis

The process of analysis combined thematic interpretation with systematic coding. Thematic categories were first generated from qualitative content analysis, capturing discursive patterns in both digital-native and mainstream media sources. Sentiment analysis scores and comparative opinion structures were then triangulated with these categories to trace evaluative tendencies in user discourse. Finally, the information disorder framework provided a typology of content distortion, enabling systematic classification of posts into misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation. To illustrate these classifications, a summary table is developed to highlight key definitions and coding criteria (see Table 1). This multi-layered strategy allowed the study not only to describe surface-level content but also to interpret deeper ideological positions, emotional intensities, and discursive distortions in the digital conversation about the PGC harassment case.

Table 1: Information Disorder Framework in PGC Incident

	Subcategory	Aptness in the Case
Agent	Type of Actor	Unofficial actors: social media users, local pages, influencers
	Organization Level	Loosely organized: viral reactions spread via TikTok, Instagram, & YouTube without central coordination
	Motivation	1. Psychological: gaining views/followers, 2. Social: group identity (moral policing), 3. Political: possible institutional deflection
	Intended Audience	Public users in Punjab, youth, institutional stakeholders, and gender-sensitive audiences.
	Automation	No evidence of bots; viral content was mostly organic, with potential algorithmic amplification
	Intent to Mislead	Some actors spread edited/thumbnails out of context → disinformation. Others shared without fact-checking → misinformation
	Intent to Harm	In cases of shaming or misidentification → mal-information (real content used for harm)
Message	Durability	Some videos/posts lasted long on platforms; some were removed. Thumbnail-based clickbait persisted
	Accuracy	Mixed: edited, sensationalized, and emotionally framed (anger/shame). Some accurate content paired with misleading captions
	Legality	Borderline illegal: defamation, cyber harassment, privacy breaches (especially when the girl’s identity was revealed)
	Imposter Content	Some posts mimicked “official news” design without real attribution (fake logos/watermarks)

	Intended Target	The girl, Punjab College, women's freedom in public, & educational decorum
Interpreter	Reception & Identity Factors	Audiences reacted based on gender, class, and cultural norms (some supported the girl's right to self-expression; others criticized harshly)
	Role in Perpetuating Cycle	Interpreters became new agents by re-sharing, commenting, and stitching videos. Performed outrage or solidarity → added layers to the narrative and frame
	Resistance or Endorsement	1. Fact-checking was rare 2. Emotional reactions prevailed. 3. A few critical voices challenged the dominant narratives, especially in viral threads


4. RESULTS

Table 2 shows a clear image of the role content creators played in the general discussion on the Punjab Girls College case. The stories were reactive indeed, but significantly constructed to advance certain opinions, starting with emotional pleas of injustice up to official efforts to disregard the event as a political agenda. The theme of G&OCN is the official reaction of the governmental structures and police. These stories tried to re-package the event as a hoax and put the riots on political opponents. The police point of view that alleged to have checked CCTV records and had disregarded the incident is also classified as such. The fact that these counter narratives appear very often together indicates that there was a major and organized attempt to manipulate the narrative and suppress the anger of citizens.

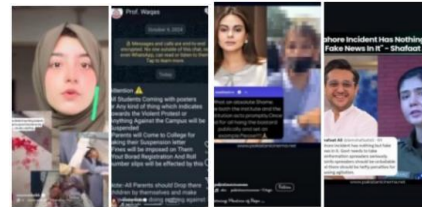
V&SS was the most prevalent one, content creators concentrated on the supposed sexual attack and made the actions of the students in the case of a just cause. Emotional epithets and call to actions were frequent posts under this, asking people to join in solidarity with the students. The frequency of this theme is high, which means that it is an intensive, emotionally charged attempt to create popularity and support of the protests in society. A significant part of the content left by the content creators focused on the perceived cover up by the college administration over C&CUAs. These accounts invested in the lost or erased CCTV footage as a major factual element arousing suspicion of the official college accounts with very high frequency, indicating a mass conspiracy to withhold the truth among the populace.

CAALD's narrative captures the confusing and contradictory information that circulated online. Posts under this theme juxtaposed official statements and parent testimonies with student accounts and demands for legal action. This created a chaotic and murky picture, leaving the audience to navigate multiple competing versions of events. Moreover, an important and distinct theme was the retraction of initial reports. Some content creators and media pages initially shared unverified claims and later had to correct their information. Through the networked publics theory (NPT) perspective, creators acted as central nodes that bridged online and offline spaces: their posts circulated evidence, mobilized protests, or defended institutions, thereby shaping how publics connected and deliberated. From the vantage of Digital Misinformation Studies, the same creator ecosystem also produced and circulated contradictory claims, deleted footage narratives, and politically motivated explanations, which heightened public confusion and demonstrated how digital environments accelerate the entanglement of truth, rumor, and propaganda.

Table 2: PGC Incident Narrative Exchange by Social Media Content Creators

Themes	Description	Illustrative Examples (Screenshots)
Victimhood & Student Support	<p>Posts framed the incident as a violation of students' dignity, emphasizing solidarity with the victim and portraying students' protests as a righteous demand for justice. Narratives highlighted parental testimonies, condemnation of administration, and appeals for child protection.</p>	 <p>This block contains several screenshots of social media content. At the top, there are three posters with Urdu text: 'جنگی کیمپ کا میڈیکل پرنسپل پر پورے آگے' (Medical principal of the military camp forward), 'جنگی کیمپ کا میڈیکل پرنسپل جنگی کیمپ میں کر' (Military camp medical principal in military camp), and 'جنگی کیمپ کے ڈاکٹر کے ساتھ' (With the doctor of the military camp). Below these are several video thumbnails showing people speaking, some with Urdu subtitles, and one showing a man in a yellow shirt speaking into a microphone.</p>
Government & Official Counter-Narratives	<p>Official voices (politicians, police, & administrators) framed the incident as fabricated, politically motivated, or exaggerated. These posts often cited CCTV footage, inquiry committees, or statements from law enforcement denying wrongdoing.</p>	 <p>This block contains screenshots of official counter-narratives. It includes several posters with Urdu text such as 'جنگی کیمپ کا میڈیکل پرنسپل' (Military camp medical principal) and 'جنگی کیمپ کا میڈیکل پرنسپل' (Military camp medical principal). There are also several video thumbnails showing officials in uniform and suits, some with Urdu subtitles, and one showing a man in a white shirt speaking into a microphone.</p>
Conspiracy & Cover-Up Allegations	<p>Content creators accused authorities and college administration of deliberately hiding evidence, especially deleted CCTV footage. The narrative portrayed silence and contradictions as proof of institutional cover-</p>	 <p>This block contains screenshots of content creators' allegations. It includes several video thumbnails showing people speaking, some with Urdu subtitles, and one showing a woman in a black headscarf speaking into a microphone.</p>

up.



Conflicting Accounts & Legal Demands

Posts juxtaposed contradictory claims from officials, parents, and students. These created confusion while amplifying calls for legal action under the Cybercrime Act or Sharia-based justice.

Media Retraction & Misinformation

Some accounts initially circulated unverified claims of rape or abduction, later retracting with apologies. This theme reflects both the fragility of trust in online reporting and the speed of misinformation correction.

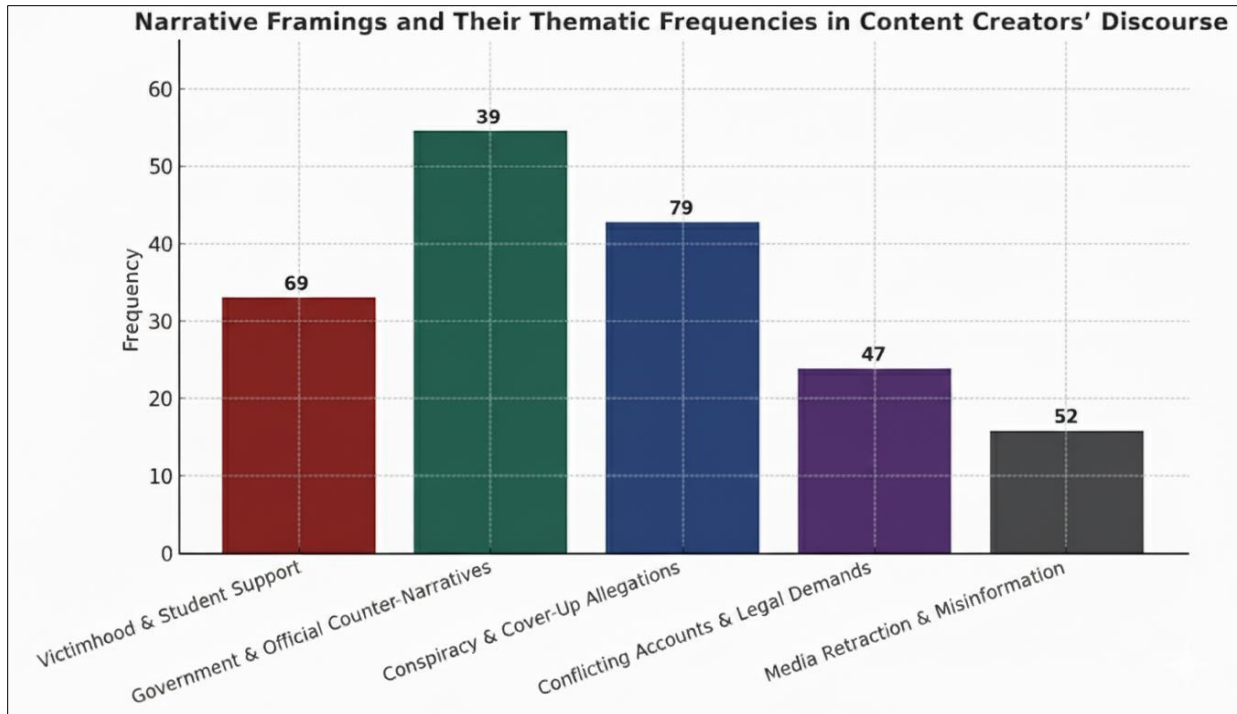


Figure 1: *Framing and Thematic Frequencies*

4.1 Interpretation of comment-theme distribution (11,000 comments)

The bar chart in Fig. 2 above visualizes how the 11,000 public comments collected across Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms were distributed across five analytical themes. The counts shown are approximate aggregated frequencies derived from the coded comment corpus. Victimhood & Student Support has been the largest cluster with 3,900 comments. Across platforms, users expressed strong emotional solidarity with the students (calls such as “we want justice”, prayers, emojis), framed the students as victims of institutional wrongdoing, and urged collective action. The predominance of this theme indicates that public sentiment was primarily oriented toward empathy and mobilization rather than detached analysis. From a framing perspective (Entman, 1993), these comments prioritize problem definition (harm to students) and moral evaluation (outrage), and they frequently push a treatment recommendation (calls for protest, legal action). The second largest set, under the theme Government and Official Counter-Narratives, contains efforts at 2,400 comments, some of them by the government itself and others by users sharing them, to refute or downplay the incident (e.g., the claim that the material is fabricated, the claim that the police guarantees that it is CCTV). These messages have a discursive effect to reposition the issue (deny harm), give it alternative causal meanings (political manipulation), and suggest a lack of action or administrative solutions. The popularity of this group displays vibrant rivalry involving the institutional voice as well as the general mobilization.

Conspiracy & Cover-Up Allegations 2,100 comments much of them devoted to the alleged evidence tampering (lost CCTV footage), administrative suppression, and conspiracy. These posts were used to undermine the official discourse and increase investigative frames (need to release footage, demand disclosure). They do legitimacy work in critical-discourse terms, undermining institutional narratives of dominance, and holding institutional leaders and their rhetoric to evidentiary responsibility. Opposing Reports and Lawsuits (1,800 comments). There are calls to legal redress, demands to be registered FIRs, and confusions caused by conflicting assertions in this theme. The requests frequently include both procedural (open the CCTV, file a cybercrime complaint) and activist (boycotts, protests) here. They

demonstrate the way moral outrage is turned into action by the masses in the form of policy/legal demands (Entman version, treatment recommendation).

In addition, Media Retraction and Misinformation received 800 comments. Though numerically much smaller, this cluster has an analytical significance: it includes retractions, corrections, and claims of misinformation and political propaganda. These posts are indicators of a lack of trust in some actors in the media and are reciprocated by both the counter-narrative and the conspiracy cluster, demonstrating that corrections can actually make things more polarized and distrusted. Framing functions applied in conjunction with a critical discourse lens (Fairclough) reveal (a) that problem definition varies across actors: publics focus on victimhood whereas official voices are focused on order and denial; (b) that causal attribution is polarized, institutional failure or political manipulation (c) that moral judgments and treatment suggestions vary across platforms. Critical discourse analysis adds to it, the power imbalances which we are able to observe in posts (high-status protection, political names) indicate how language is replicated and structural distrust of institutions is created.

Such a crowd-sourced contest of truth and legitimacy is visible in the 11, 000 likes on Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Comments under framing outnumbered comments under official denial frames and there were many more comments under framing that students were victims and administration complicit than under official denial frames where there were two-sided struggles between justice world and deflection world. The comments captured using NPT suggests how the meaning-making of both the everyday users and not the high-profile content producers formed solidarity around emotions and challenged institutional silence. Other statements such as we want justice, leave the college was a set of activities as a structural waste of the high institutions of education. Simultaneously, conspiracy-motivated claims (PTI propaganda, false narrative) also emphasize the fact that misinformation is not only weaponized, but is also contested in such networked spaces. This kind of interaction in respect to the study of digital misinformation reveals that misinformation and counter-misinformation are not external to discourse but it is a predetermined practice that establishes discourse legitimacy. Such empathy about justice-seeking and politically-inspired denial as polarities created a fragmented and at the same time immersive digital space that kept the issue in the societal awareness much longer than the traditional media cycles would allow.

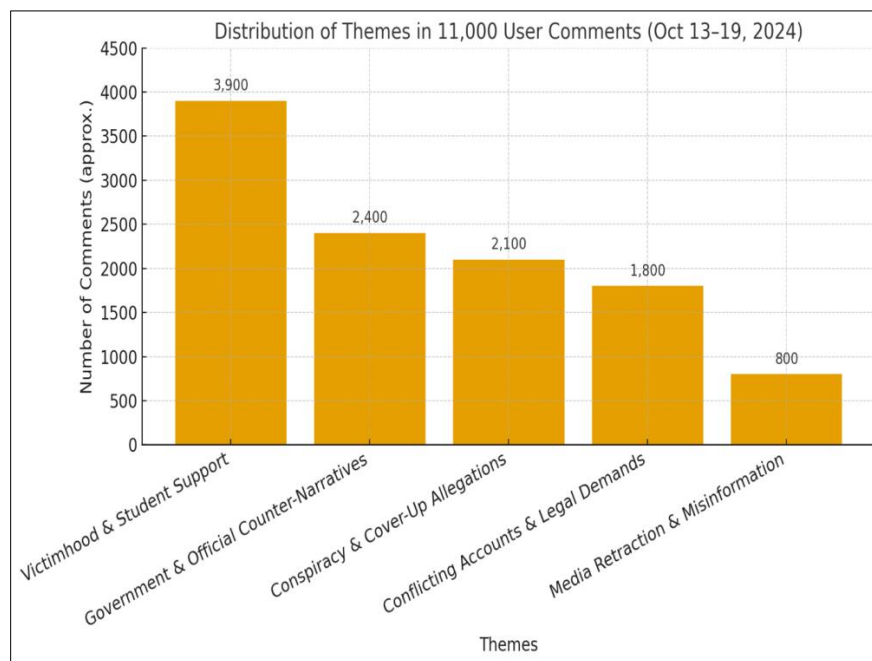


Figure 2: *Distribution of Themes*

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 News Coverage and Institutional Responses

The coverage of the Punjab College protests illustrates a severe divergence in the descriptions of the events by the institution and the protestor, using qualitative content analysis. The stories by protesters focused on sexual assault, deleted CCTV footage, and censorship of dissent, and the official stories called the event a fake news piece and propaganda, with a tendency to tie it to partisan politics. According to Framing Theory, this difference in the manner in which rival stakeholders tried to shape the reality of the situation can be explained through a justice and accountability prism, on the one hand, and denial and delegitimization, on the other hand. Sentiment analysis demonstrates that the language of protesters is full of anger and moral urgency, compared to defensive and reputationally protective language that is used by the authorities. The hybridization of the online circulation and offline protest can be seen through the Networked Publics Theory. WhatsApp and Instagram rumors had students hitting the streets, baton charges and arrests were soon to follow as digital content that escalated actions. DMS goes further to describe how the suspicion started to enter into the mainstream discourse when allegations of deleted videos and conflicting police statements were steered through suspicion.

5.2 Visual Narratives and Image-Based Frames

News images and captions extended these frames visually. Institutional actors used images to stabilize denial and portray order, while protesters and opposition actors circulated protest imagery and CCTV screenshots to imply a cover-up. The choice of imagery amplified selective truths (Entman, 1993), either the “fake news” defense or the “justice denied” claim. Networked Publics Theory explains how these visuals migrated between mainstream and digital spaces, with influencers and activists recontextualizing official imagery to question credibility. Analysis shows that emotionally charged captions (“fabricated,” “severe punishment”) were associated with higher reshare rates, indicating that emotionality in visual-textual framing boosted agenda salience.

5.3 Emotional Reception and Public Sentiment

The emotion analysis of online reviews emphasizes the emotional focus of the case. The most active reactions resulted in videos and posts regarding the Punjab College incident, which is why it is possible to assume that the level of affective engagement was high. Compassion toward victims prevailed, being expressed in lamenting emojis, prayers, and demands to unite. The distrust of institutions was seen through anger expressed in charges leveled against the administrators, political parties and police. Simultaneously, denialist histories created frustration and confusion and consolidated polarization. In the view of FT, the emotional register was enhanced frame resonance, justice frames did better due to congruence with popular sentiment whereas denial frames failed to gain legitimacy despite amplification. NPT emphasizes the role of emotional cues in supporting connective action, which turned disjointed voices into a somewhat uncoordinated counterpublic. DMS views the amplified emotion as a catalyst of misinformation virality: anger and grief amplified unproven assertions as people needed some assurance in the absence of facts. Thus, the emotional aspect tells us that this event went far beyond the rhetorical plane and became an emotive battlefield on which legitimacy was being brokered as much by emotions as by facts.

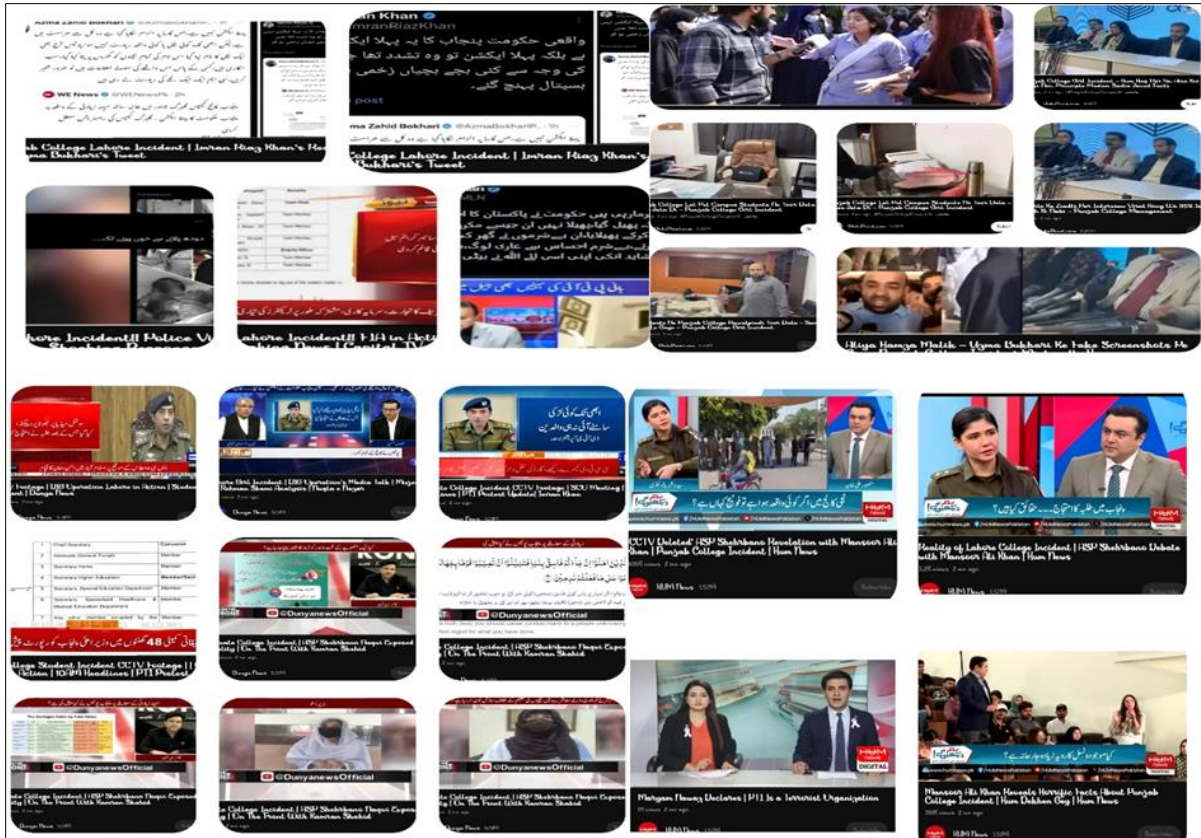


Figure 3: New coverage and institutional response

6. CONCLUSION

The Punjab Girls College case was mostly positioned in social media forums through the lens of victimization, injustice, and governmental laxity discourse, with a denial and political evasion discourse being advanced by institutional and partisan forces. Protesters and students raised frames of justice, and officials and compliant media focused on misinformation and propaganda (Q1). There existed a two-fold register related to emotions and themes: on one side, empathy and solidarity with the victim, and on the other, anger and distrust and conspiracy discourse. Emotions of high intensity (grief, outrage, frustration) not only enhanced justice requirements but also contributed to suspicion of official silence, demonstrating the way emotion impacted narrative traction (Q2).

The student activists, influencers, and news commentators directed visibility, as did hashtags like #JusticeForVictim, FakeNews and PGCProtests. The analysis with the help of the keywords showed that the discursive anchors fixed the online discussion, as the clusters around the words justice, CCTV, protest, police and propaganda were identified (Q3). There were also rumors about fabricated videos, lost CCTV footage and partisan conspiracies. Unverified claims turned into a channel of mass spread of counter-narratives, where the virus of disinformation, along with its concealing, became as discursive as the discourses of justice, and the role of disinformation as a disturbance and a frame making tool was highlighted (Q4).

6.1 Limitations

Only publicly accessible digital data was considered in the study, and it did not include any private networks (e.g., WhatsApp groups) in which parallel discourses could possibly have spread.

6.2 Research Implications

The study has significant implications to both scholarship and practice due to the sensitivity of the Punjab Girls College case in the Pakistani media. The analysis reveals to researchers how social media can be a problematic space in which the discourses of justice, denial, and conspiracy exist simultaneously in many layers, and which requires subtle approaches to analyzing digital publics when in such sensitive sociopolitical circumstances. To practitioners and policymakers, especially, the findings underscore high reputation of urgency in assuring the opening of clear lines of communication when a crisis occurs as silence, and incoherent messages create doubt and misinformation. In this paper, the author emphasizes the impact that digital platforms and journalists can have on the ethical discourse, where the emotionally charged stories can result in the promotion of positive civic behavior or the polarization process. Contextualizing the PGC case within the context of significant debates on institutional responsibility, gender justice, and the topic of online misinformation, this paper identifies the way the media can persuade society that it is sensitive and vulnerable to heightened sensitivity and vulnerability.

Besides this, the present research paper is applicable in the achievement of the intersection of framing, affect and misinformation in digitally networked publics of institutional legitimacy crisis. It demonstrates that in the Pakistani context, social media does not simply strengthen justice-oriented counterpublics, but actually makes the mainstream spaces full of conspiratorial and denialist counter-frames. The question that should be pursued in the future concerns how hybrid information ecosystems between the personal message, the protest mobilization and the mainstream coverage co-produce the negotiated realities during moments of outrage in society.

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