



## EMPOWERMENT IN EXPRESSION: ANALYSING THE LANGUAGE OF AURAT MARCH SLOGANS

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### Abstract

*The present study elucidates the complex relationship between the explicit content of specific discourse and the factors that influence its meaning, encompassing both pivotal linguistic and non-linguistic elements. These elements include vocabulary selection, visual representations, tone, style, gestures, and body language, collectively referred to as multimodality. This interplay can result in a message that diverges from its original intent. The research underscores the significant role of these linguistic and semiotic factors in the process of meaning-making, as evidenced by a critical analysis of three slogans from the Aurat March. The study analyses three slogans displayed in the Aurat March procession carried out in 2018, interprets the responses of public gathered through questionnaire and dialogues. By employing a mixed methods approach, the research applied multimodality framework by (). The multimodal discourse analysis and survey research have been used as the method of the study. Survey data reveals that 65% of respondents believe Aurat March slogans fail to align with feminist goals, citing ambiguous or “tactless” depictions on placards. Many felt the slogans used vulgar language that disregards Pakistani cultural norms and Islamic values, generating backlash. Some participants suggested that slogans should be carefully crafted to align with feminist principles and avoid causing offense. Further, the slogans have stirred significant public reaction due to their perceived controversial and provocative nature. The introspective nature of this analysis serves as a catalyst for raising awareness about the importance of mindful communication. Such awareness is essential for fostering personal and professional growth, enhancing comprehension, and minimizing misinterpretations that often lead to misunderstandings and conflict, as observed in the context of the Aurat March.*

**Keywords:** Non-linguistic elements, visual representations, multimodality, critical analysis

### Introduction

Pakistan grapples with a disheartening reality where incidents of abuse and injustice against women unfold regularly, capturing headlines and drawing global attention. Despite the spotlight on these appalling violations, the pursuit of justice remains elusive, creating a disturbing pattern where the fundamental rights are routinely compromised. Such inequity gave rise to feminist movements persistently fighting to raise voice against targeting women and shedding light upon acute psychological and physical torments victims are inflicted with much of which goes undocumented. One of the most prominent out of these was “Aurat March” that acquired the most limelight regrettably for all the wrong reasons. The feminist movement initially originated parallel to #METOO trend when violence against women was the pressing concern of the hour and officially commenced in Karachi on 8th March, 2018 spreading across all well-known cities of the state. Unlike the motif of the rally which was applaud worthy to the core it was actually the problematic slogans chanted and displayed on placards throughout that broke out an uproar questioning the extensive negligence and absurdity embedded within its school of thought. The chief motive appeared to fail at reaching the audience as the movement ironically received backlash rather than support and became a heated controversy eliciting social media wars and redefining the term “feminism” as an activism to unleash angst directed straight towards masculinity. Regardless of the movement’s sincere efforts and unwavering commitment to foster awareness on every Women’s Day it persists to be associated with bitterness and faulty accusations that threaten Pakistan’s social and cultural framework continuing an ongoing battle between reality and perceptions. Researches recommended utilizing the power of language by

imparting logical and sensible vocalization calling for a constructive and considerate discourse to acclaim a promising and progressive movement.

#### **Statement of the Problem:**

The feminist movement, characterized by its advocacy for women's rights and the condemnation of violence against women, emerges from the collective experiences of marginalized voices seeking justice and equality. In Pakistan, the feminist movement is exemplified by the Aurat March, which seeks to address and challenge the systemic issues of gender-based violence and discrimination. However, the slogans and messages propagated during the Aurat March often embody varying interpretations that can diverge significantly from their intended feminist goals. This dissonance raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the slogans in conveying a unified feminist message and their ability to resonate with the broader public.

Despite the visibility of the Aurat March and its slogans, a gap exists in understanding the nuanced meanings behind these expressions and their alignment with the overarching objectives of the feminist movement. This research seeks to fill that gap by exploring the connection between Aurat March slogans and feminist ideals, analyzing the interpretations of three specific slogans from the 2018 march, and ultimately providing recommendations for enhancing the impact and clarity of future protests. By addressing these issues, the study aims to contribute to a more coherent understanding of the feminist movement in Pakistan and its implications for societal change.

#### **Research Questions:**

1. How do people perceive the alignment of Aurat March slogans with feminist objectives?
2. What interpretations can be drawn from the three slogans featured on placards during the Aurat March 2018?
3. What is the public's perspective on the legitimacy of the criticism aimed at the Aurat March?
4. What suggestions or enhancements would the public recommend for future Aurat March protests?

#### **Delimitations of the Study:**

The analysis will focus exclusively on the meanings of three slogans from the 2018 march. The study will utilize a survey to assess public perceptions of the criticism directed at the march, which may not encompass all viewpoints. This survey was conducted on a limited scale, involving only 25 participants from all genders, without targeting specific age groups.

#### **Literature Review**

The current literature study seeks to investigate the relevance of multimodality theory in comprehending and analyzing the Aurat March by drawing on research findings in visual communication, frame-processing theory, and feminist media activism. Geise and Baden (2015) underline the role of visual communication in framing processes, underlining the relationship between visual imagery and frame-processing theory (Javaid et al., 2024). They suggest that visual features have a significant impact on perceptions and interpretations, emphasizing the importance of including visual analysis in communication theory. This viewpoint is shared by Forceville (2014), who advocates for the use of Relevance Theory to analyze visual and multimodal communication, highlighting the importance of visual aspects in transmitting meaning.

Technology has revolutionized the way people interact and share ideas in the digital era (Akram et al., 2021; 2022; Ma et al., 2024). Particularly social media has become a powerful method in society to spread visual content (Ramzan et al., 2023). This technological advancement has significantly impacted how visual communication can be strengthened (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Akram & Abdelrady, 2023; Al-Adwan et al., 2022), fostering a more interconnected and

engaged environment (Akram & Li, 2024). Furthermore, Pearce et al. (2018) examine the use of digital technologies to evaluate social media photos, emphasizing the value of cross-platform analysis in comprehending visual communication. Their findings highlight the importance of a complete approach to examining visual content, which is especially pertinent in the context of the Aurat March, where social media has played a critical role in propagating visual narratives. In the framework of feminist media activism, Tan (2017) investigates "digital masquerading" as a type of feminist advocacy in China. This study focuses on the use of visual images to challenge established conventions and advocate for gender equality. The findings are especially pertinent to the Aurat March because they emphasize the power of visual media in advancing feminist objectives and opposing patriarchal hierarchies. Brim and Ghaziani (2016) also emphasize the importance of queer methodologies in feminist research, highlighting the need for diverse and inclusive approaches to media analysis. Their work emphasizes the need to use a critical lens to examine visual representations, especially in the context of feminist movements like the Aurat March. Here are the reviews of 10 articles which were written by Pakistani Researchers from year 2020- 2023:

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Sr. no	Year	Topic	Results	In-text citations
1	2023	Analytical Review of the Slogans of Aurat March expressing the Right of Freedom	The Aurat March 2020 slogans have caused controversy in the media and on social media. The corpus analysis of the slogans reveals that they were directed more at a specific person than the entire female race.	(Hasan, 2023)
2	2023	Discourse Analysis of Pakistani Media a Coverage During	The issue of women's rights in Pakistan has not been a major focus in election campaigns, with Islamic	(Tabassum et al., 2023)

		“Aurat March” 2022: A Feminist Approach	and secular parties not emphasizing this topic.	
3	2022	The Aurat March (2018-2022) in the Context of Gendered-Islamophobia: A Case of Muslim Women’s Identity in Pakistan	The analysis of key ideas to combat gendered Islamophobia in Muslim women's lives while restricting oneself to gender, culture, and religion finishes the study. It is recommended that the government and legal authorities impose some restrictions and constraints on these types of marches.	(Syeda Mehmoona Khushbakt, 2022)
4	2021	The Poetics of Pakistani Patriarchy: A Critical Analysis of the Protest Signs in Women’s March Pakistan 2019	The protest signs from the Women's March in Pakistan 2019 depict the Pakistani patriarchy as a confining institution that restricts women to gender roles of homemakers, marking women who show agency as a threat and justifying violence against them	(Akhtar et al., 2021)
5	2022	Blacklashes to Aurat March in Pakistan: Opinion	The Aurat March organizers view the movement as a symbolic resistance against discrimination	(Batool & Malik, 2022)

		of Organizers and Opinion Leaders	and suppression of women, continuing the legacy of the feminist movement in Pakistan. On the other hand, religious leaders criticize the demands of Aurat March as immoral and challenging to religion, believing it aims to disrupt the family system and go against Islamic values	
6	2021	A Multimodal Analysis of Selected Placards from the 'Aurat March' 2018 of Pakistan	The study aimed to explore the meanings built through the placards used in the 'Aurat March' 2018 in Pakistan. Placards in the Aurat March portrayed issues such as women's empowerment, gender equity, gender-based violence, and violence against women's bodies. The placards were used as a visual form of protest against the patriarchal mindset towards women in Pakistan, conveying visual messages of confrontation.	(Memon, 2021)
7	2020	The Women Activism in	Feminism has been a significant movement throughout history,	(Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020)

		Pakistan: An Analysis of 'AuratMarch'	challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for women's rights. While there may be criticisms of feminism, it cannot be dismissed as a mere fantasy created by the elite class for their purposes. Feminism has played a crucial role in addressing issues of gender equality and empowering women.	
8	2023	The Precarity of #MeToo in Pakistan	This chapter examines how the #MeToo/Aurat March in Pakistan has highlighted some lingering, unsolved issues and contradictions in female politics. To avoid disintegration and the potential defeat of a newly emerging resistance movement in Pakistan, these demands must be addressed immediately.	(Zia, 2023)
9	2020	Role of Media in Representation of Sociocultural Ideologies in Aurat March	The role of media in representing ideologies has been extensively analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in various studies. CDA has been used to uncover	(Baig et al., 2020)

		(2019-2020): A Multimodal Discourse Analysis	hidden ideologies and power dynamics in media discourse, revealing how certain groups are discriminated against while others are positively portrayed.	
10	2022	Men’s Engagement with Feminist Movement: Aurat March and Gender Justice in Pakistan	The Aurat March in Pakistan, which began in 2018, faced significant backlash from men but also sparked a new wave (Haya March) of right-wing activism in the country. This reactionary outfit has been criticized for inciting violence and abuse, morphing into a violent force against gender justice	(Khan, 2022)

**Research Methodology**

This section includes research paradigm, population and sample for the study, sampling technique and sample followed by the theoretical framework and method of the research.

**Research Paradigm:**

The study employs an eclectic approach of study combining both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. This approach has been used for the reason that the slogans mentioned on the images of placards have been analyzed qualitatively presenting their interpretation while to elicit the opinions of viewers surveys and dialogues have been performed and the results have been presented quantitatively in the form of percentages and graphs.

**Population of the Study:**

The population of the first part of the study includes the banners and placards displayed in the Aurat March processions.

For the second part of the study, the university students were chosen as the population of the research to conduct surveys and dialogues.

**Sampling Technique and Sample:**

For the first part of study, three slogans were selected from the population of the placards that appeared on Aurat March 2018 and for choosing the sample, the purposive sampling technique was used.

For the second part of the study, total 21 students were selected employing purposive sampling

technique. These students were sent online surveys, to which they replied and from these 21 students, total 10 students were interviewed discussing the survey filled by them.

**Theoretical Framework:**

The study uses the multimodality framework presented by Kress and van Leeuwen known as visual grammar (2006) to analyze the images and the content written on these images. Further, the responses of the participants were analyzed.

**Method of the Study:**

The study uses multimodal discourse analysis as a method to analyze images and survey research method to analyze the responses gathered from the questionnaire and dialogues. In real-life communication, messages are sent not just through written text but also through non-linguistic elements, such as images, video, audio, and so on. Blogs, commonly presented through written texts, pictures, or videos, serve as the prime illustration of multimodal text. MDA examines the utilisation of language and visual elements in real-life situations to reveal the concealed concepts, principles, identities, and power dynamics inside texts that are deployed to convey meaning (Ledin & Machin, 2019; Amjad et al., 2021). Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is a developing approach in the field of discourse studies that expands the investigation of language to include the examination of language in conjunction with other elements, such as images, colours, scientific symbolism, gestures, actions, music, and sound (Halloran, 2011; Ahmad et al., 2022). Multimodal discourse analysis examines how different modes of communication interact and depend on each other in a certain setting (Snyder, 2009; Javaid et al., 2024; Ramzan et al., 2023, 2020). Researchers in this field aim to determine the impact of mode on meaning in a certain situation, with a particular focus on the interplay between several semiotic systems (Baldry and Thibault, 2006; Li & Akram, 2023, 2024; Ramzan et al., 2023; Javaid & Mahmood, 2023). Multimodal discourse analysis focuses on the study and examination of many forms of communication and the ways in which meaning is created through the combination of different signs and symbols in diverse cultural contexts. Intersemiosis, which refers to the inter-semiotic interactions resulting from the interaction of semiotic choices, is a key focus of multimodal study (Jewitt, 2009). For this reason, the researcher has chosen to utilise MDA as it aids in comprehending the information conveyed.

**Analysis and Discussion**

The study presents the following results:

**Analysis of Image 1:**





### “Khud Khana Garam Karo”- (Heat the Food Yourself)

The following slogan intrinsically implies to help one's self instead of having women run around for something as petty as heating up food. The message aligns with their demand to possess liberty rather than being subjected to slavery which tragically appears to be a typical demand from a wife or daughter owing to the outlandish expectation of surrendering her identity and personal desires. Woefully, the message fails to convey its essence due to the accompaniment of a horrific visual of a man's decapitated head being cooked in the oven not only diverting the attention but altogether promoting violence and wrath towards men that entirely beats the purpose and contradicts their own urgency for safeguarding from the violation of basic human rights. It collectively triggers the audience for coming across as vicious and venomous which spontaneously churns up bad blood between the two already unsettled parties.

### Analysis of Image 2:



**“Lo Beth Gai Sai Se”- (Look! Now I’m Sitting Properly)**

Indisputably, fanciful societal standards of an ideally perfect women haunt them to this day; adhering a strict criteria guiding women how to accurately sit, walk, talk, and as far stretched as it goes would be safe to say breathe as well. Unreasonable sounding though religiously preached throughout the universe under the guise of “femininity” to secure control over womanhood. The slogan above highlights the same dilemma but regrettably yet again the rebellious nature of the poster illustrating an unruly, rogue woman disturbingly seated with legs spread wide open portraying a mischievous and bitchy attitude that ranges nowhere near the gist of protest. It channels as a mockery of women themselves and serves to prick public sentiment kindling instigation and disgruntlement rather cherishing the authenticity and uniqueness of her individuality which was to be the primary aim.

Analysis

of

Image

3:



**“Mein Awara, Main Bad Chalan”- (I’m Unprincipled, I’m Wicked)**

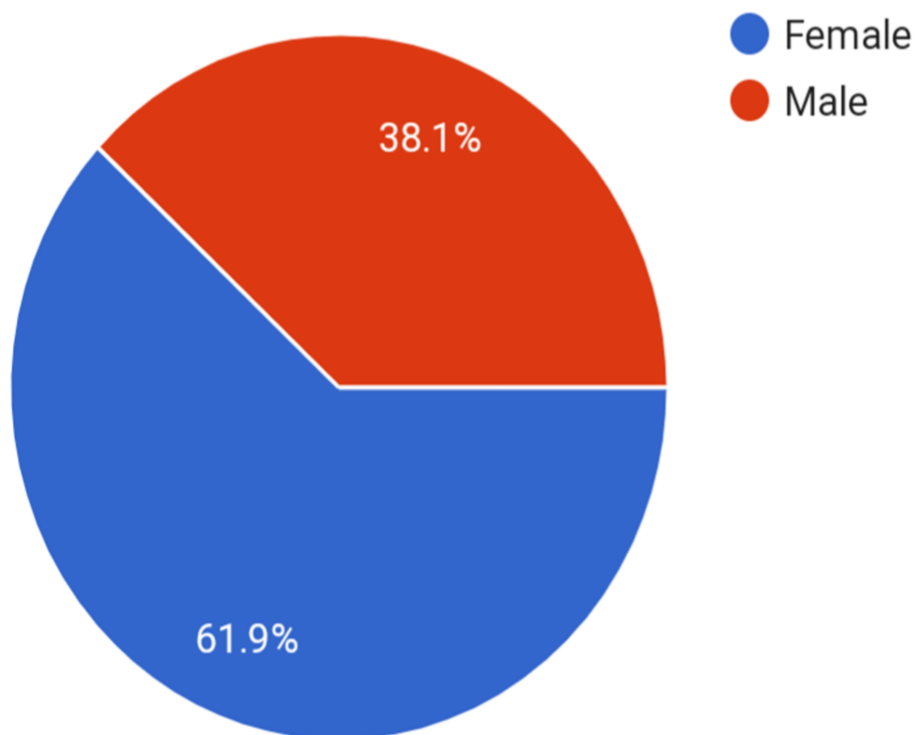
The proclamation and gut-wrenching ownership of such infelicitous, obscene, odious phrases utterly shudders the spirit of morality and ethics stirring a radical revolution at its worst. The unidentifiable pursuit baffles the nation apart from giving way to speculations of conspiracy theories. Such vile and vague mottos result in the flourishing of amoral and corrupt maverick mindsets later establishing dogmatic, anarchic groups that instill chaos in the community. Besides building up communal angst and riot among population it very much caused accusations of blasphemy which threatens the chastity of humanity as a whole. In no way it opposes transgression or strives for change in contrary reinforces obscenity ultimately being merely engrossed in loath and humility.

**Discussion of Responses from Questionnaire and Dialogues:**

## Gender:



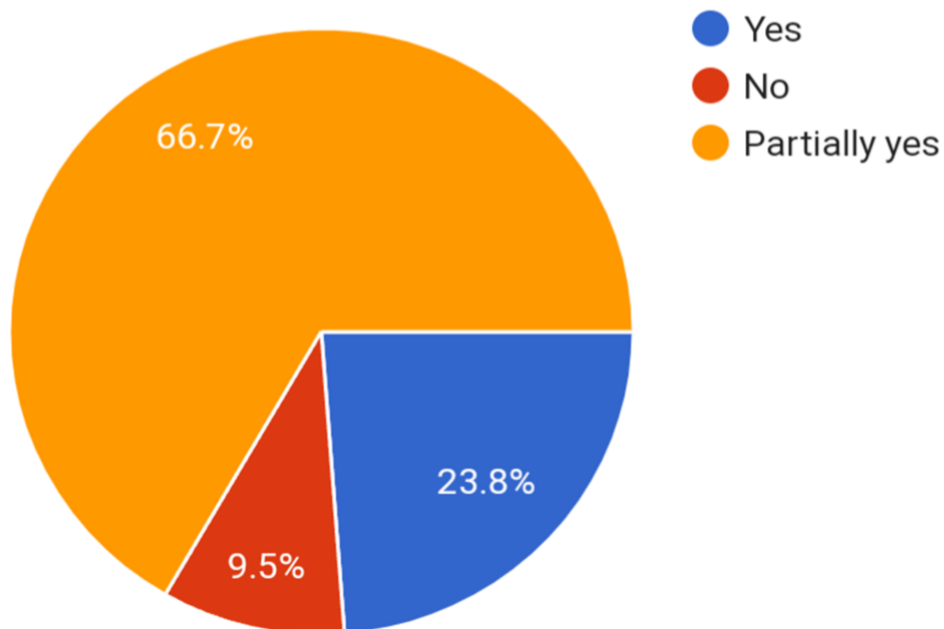
21 responses



Do you think the criticism directed at Aurat March is justified?



21 responses



According to the data gathered through surveys and dialogue surprisingly up to 65% of the responses denied that Aurat March slogans align with feminist objectives having about 40% plainblunt No and rest ambiguous all relying solely on the tactless depictions on the placards. Even the number of Yes themselves were acknowledging the savage and sarcastic tone of wanting to have everything their way that takes away from the essence and reinforces the faulty and reckless use of language that appears “vulgar” as mentioned by many and defies Pakistani norms as well as Islamic teachings compelling severe backlash its way. It was mutually advised to “carefully analyze the slogans and their meanings to assess their



compatibility with feminist principles.” A wise man also added on to the necessity of “understanding the goals and impact of their slogans.”

The very first poster prompted Impulsive gasps and candid reactions followed by replies such as “dumb”, “crap”, and “disturbing” in view of the unsettling imagery displayed but once they were asked of their views on men taking part in household chores for instance heating up food they were very much convinced with the idea and spoke in its favour. Upon learning that this apparently “bullshit” seeming poster glorified the same people were spewed with mixed emotions further declaring how the visual is “exaggerated” and not represented in a “correct way” coming down to the lack of clarity in phrases and misconduct.

On the other hand, the second placard sparked a massive debate reflecting the cruciality to act “civilized” irrespective of gender, encouraging mannerism and etiquettes. Some women appeared offended by the sight considering it as a personal attack and disrespect to their “modesty” and “dignity”. Disagreement shook many heads evoking dispute that stated “why try to act like men when we are different” and preached “in order to stand equal we don’t need to lose our grace instead teach them”. Somewhat also applauded declaring how this nonsense served as a good laugh mocking the consequences of “freedom of speech” which truly shatters the seriousness of the subject the movement strives to bring forth. Conclusively, the whole realization was summed up into one adequate word: “stupid”.

Working our way to the third and last slogan failed to prove our stance any wrong as grimaces and frowns persisted till the very end however this time numerous were left speechless or chose not to pass any comments at all upon finding it atrocious and aggressively inquired “why” amidst titling it as “illiterate humour”. The slogan did not digest well as people constantly nagged about the flaunting of such pathetic slurs instead of their condemnation which was what the whole movement was about to begin with. A lady grieved and communicated her anguish quoting, “A prostitute can’t even use those words for herself...this is merely a propaganda to brainwash young women and nothing else.”

Though 66.7% admitted that the criticism directed towards Aurat March was partially correct alongside a concrete 23.8% yes yet counter points and encouragers exist with a ratio of 9.5%. The participants proposed the obligation to stand for women rights in its true sense by sensible and sincere efforts which included avoidance of influence from western media. It was suggested to keep clear goals that reflect through their slogans in order to unite us and not divide in addition confront the actual issues to enhance the effectiveness through once again crafting logical, empowering, and suitable slogans. Prominently it was insisted to remain in the refrains of Pakistani values and in accordance to Islamic teachings. Moreover, repetitive appeal remained to stay focused on their motive rather than “officially approving themselves as whores” so that actual solutions can finally make way for betterment instead of being entrenched in sheer defamation. Emphasis on adapting impactful, concise, and constructive discourse recurred for accusations of LGBTQ agenda being carried out under the camouflage of these slogans made its way at the top of the list.

### **Conclusion**

All findings and evaluation of the Aurat March slogans through a critical lens cohesively weaves together a tapestry of linguistic layers and semiotic significance

upholding the elaborate and keen relationship between what is originally intended and how the chief role of linguistic and non-linguistic features alters its meaning underlying the prerequisite to consciously and deliberately incorporate semiotic and linguistic elements. The slogans "Khud Khana Garam Karo" ("Heat the Food Yourself"), "Lo Beth Gai Sai Se" ("Look! Now I'm Sitting Properly"), and "Mein Awara, Main Bad Chalan" ("I'm Unprincipled, I'm Wicked") have stirred significant public reaction due to their perceived controversial and provocative nature. The first slogan advocates for self-reliance in simple tasks, critiquing the expectation for women to fulfill all household roles. However, the graphic imagery of a decapitated head cooking detracts from this message, potentially promoting hostility rather than equality. The second slogan challenges restrictive societal standards on women's behavior but is depicted in a way that some interpret as disrespectful, overshadowing the message of individuality. The third slogan's bold ownership of negative labels shocks audiences, seen by some as morally disruptive rather than progressive. These visuals and messages have provoked backlash, fostering misunderstanding and division rather than focusing on positive change for women's rights.

Survey data reveals that 65% of respondents believe Aurat March slogans fail to align with feminist goals, citing ambiguous or "tactless" depictions on placards. Many felt the slogans used vulgar language that disregards Pakistani cultural norms and Islamic values, generating backlash. Some participants suggested that slogans should be carefully crafted to align with feminist principles and avoid causing offense. For instance, one placard that promoted shared household responsibilities initially drew negative reactions, but respondents softened after learning its meaning, reflecting the need for clearer messaging. Another slogan promoting "civilized behavior" provoked debate on gender roles, with some finding it offensive and others viewing it humorously. The final slogan was widely condemned for its aggressive tone, seen by some as "illiterate humor" and propaganda. Overall, 66.7% of participants partially supported criticism of Aurat March, advocating for slogans that respect cultural values, remain focused on women's rights, and avoid divisive language. Having said that, the research provided merely brings about qualitative analysis which by no means takes away from the focal ambition of such movements which is to highlight injustices and violence against women that prolong till this day. Apart from reviewing slogans, people also are requested to recheck their perceptions and be more open, attentive to varied viewpoints and diverse discussions for accurate comprehension rather being quick to form judgments. For once contemplate to sympathize with the victims than to critique and be insightful of how this rebellion of theirs is just built-up angst stacking up from countering decades of resistance and has now flared up ugly. The power of language in challenging existing structures and working up to restoration is doubtless as substantiated at each step of this examination. Now it is in up to the viewers to employ it for the greater good.

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