



UNDERSTANDING TRANSGENDER ACCEPTANCE IN PAKISTAN: CULTURAL ATTITUDES AND RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract

The present study intends to find out the relationship between cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and acceptance of transgender individuals in Pakistan. This study utilized a cross-sectional research design, and participants were recruited through a convenience sampling technique. A sample of 300 individuals was taken from different areas of Faisalabad. Results showed that there is a strong positive relationship between cultural attitudes and religious interpretations, and that positive cultural attitudes predict positive religious interpretations. There was also a significant positive correlation between cultural attitudes and transgender acceptance. Also, greater acceptance of transgender individuals was strongly positively related to religious interpretations reflecting that positive views of religious interpretations are associated with higher rates of acceptance of transgender individuals. This indicates that religious interpretations are more influential in understanding acceptance of transgender individuals within the Pakistani context as compared to cultural attitude. Results showed that there was no significant difference between males and females in terms of cultural attitudes. Females have higher religious interpretations and acceptance of transgender individuals than males. Results also revealed that there was no significant difference on socioeconomic status. The findings highlight the paramount importance of engaging with religious scholars and community leaders to foster gender acceptance and promote inclusive policies in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Cultural Attitude, Gender Acceptance, Pakistan, Religious Interpretation, Societal Stigma, Transgender Individuals.*

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1. Introduction

Gender acceptance, specifically of transgender people, is a complex and multidimensional problem which is entrenched in the cultural and religious fabric of society. The acceptance and recognition of gender-diverse identities is a deep challenge in Pakistan where conservative social norms and Islamic values are entrenched. While there have been significant strides in legal progress over the years (particularly the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018), there continues to be a negative attitude towards transgender people in society. This resistance is frequently legitimized by misinterpretations of religion, and by a combination of patriarchal cultural traditions.

Transgender people in Pakistan are known as Khawaja Sira and have a historically paradoxical situation. Under Mughals, they were accorded socially accepted and appreciated positions, as servants and protectors of the royal households. But this situation worsened under British colonial rule especially after the introduction of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 which branded the community as criminals and a stain on the British government. It was a colonial intervention, that altered the social systems of the indigenous people, and made an historically known group into a marginal group. Transgender people still experience violence, economic marginalization and systemic discrimination in today's Pakistan. They are often denied access to education and to formal employment, and are forced to engage in precarious modes of survival, such as begging, ceremonial dancing and sex work.

In Pakistan, the attitudes about gender are mainly based on a binary gender classification system which allows only two genders – male and female. Deep seated patriarchy dictates that men and women engage in certain roles and if they stray from them, then it is often viewed as a threat to social order and family honor (izzat). Such cultural beliefs are not just hypothetical constructs, but are also real lived experiences that facilitate the marginalisation of transgender people in their family, community and public spaces. The cultural attitudes regarding non-conforming gender identities become a big challenge for social acceptance when they are linked with shame and immorality.

Along cultural influences, religious interpretations are also a major factor which influences the attitude towards the society in Pakistan. Religions are a key feature of public morality and of legislation in an Islamic Republic. But, there are not one-size-fits-all interpretations of what it means when it comes to Islamic teachings and gender diversity. There are a number of historical examples mentioned by progressive scholars, including the mukhannaths of early Islam, and an underlying principle of dignity, justice, and compassion within Islam. The ones that come from these perspectives call for the acknowledgment and safeguarding of genderdiverse people as God's creation.

However, there are other interpretations of transgender that are dominant, namely that transgender is synonymous with homosexuality, which is generally considered as

forbidden in Islamic law. Moreover, often these interpretations describe gender variance as a threat to God's will and give endorsement to moral grounds of social exclusion and discrimination. Empirical studies indicate that an increase in religious fundamentalism (i.e., literal and rigid beliefs regarding religious texts) is strongly linked to negative attitudes towards gender minorities (Vincent et al., 2011). Stigma is deeply entrenched and difficult to change when it is reinforced by religious discussion.

Thus, the relationship between cultural attitudes and religious interpretations is important in comprehending transgender acceptance in Pakistan. Analytically different, they may reinforce each other. Cultural normativities are often legitimated in selective religious logics and religious teachings are read in the context of prevailing culture. Some past studies suggest that societies with strict gender norms have less tolerance for gender diversity (Norton & Herek, 2013). Another factor is that processes like urbanisation and education can lead to more liberal cultural attitudes, but deeply-rooted religious interpretations can remain a major obstacle to acceptance (Yip, 2005).

This relationship is complicated by demographic factors. Research conducted internationally has shown that women have more accepting attitudes toward transgender individuals, likely because they relate to the marginalisation of women in patriarchy (Norton & Herek, 2013). Likewise, being in a higher socioeconomic status (SES), which is related to more educational exposure is correlated with more advanced social perspectives. In Pakistan, however, the applicability of these patterns is under-explored and requires an empirical study of it, but within the socio-religious context of Pakistan.

Even though this issue is paramount, empirical studies focusing specifically on the implications of cultural attitudes and religious interpretations on transgender acceptance in Pakistan are still scarce. The literature that is available is a qualitative kind or it's generally addressing human rights issues without a systematic discussion of the sociopsychological mechanisms. This disconnect underscores the necessity of quantitative research that will be able to untangle the relative contribution of cultural and religious influences.

The present study aims at filling this void by critically reviewing the cultural attitudes, religious readings and trans-acceptance in context of Pakistan with special reference to the city of Faisalabad. In a quantitative study, the objective will be to evaluate the predictive ability of these variables and to examine the differences among demographics in terms of attitudes. The results will help build on the current knowledge base and inform the policy, teaching, and faith-based work of the pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable society

1.1. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and the acceptance of transgender individuals.

2. To determine the predictive role of cultural attitudes and religious interpretations on the acceptance of transgender individuals.
3. To investigate gender differences (male vs. female) regarding cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and acceptance.
4. To explore the impact of socioeconomic status on cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and acceptance of transgender individuals.

1.2. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a significant positive relationship between cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and the acceptance of transgender individuals.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Cultural attitudes and religious interpretations significantly predict the acceptance of transgender individuals.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): There will be significant gender differences in cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and acceptance, with females demonstrating more positive attitudes than males.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Socioeconomic status will significantly influence cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and the acceptance of transgender individuals.

Rationale

This study is focused on the difference between recognition and acceptance of the legal aspects. The rights of transgender are also recognized in the national laws of Pakistan but they are yet to be accepted, humiliated and discriminated in the society. Advocacy and policy may not have the right attitude or value system that will determine acceptance. Cultural attitudes and religious interpretations were important as they influenced family attitudes and norms and the actions of institutions and public support for rights. The study was therefore aimed at investigating the factors that hindered or helped in the acceptance of depression, cultural and religious (Islam, 2020).

A second was the need for culturally sensitive psychological research. Numerous dimension of transgender attitudes were created in Western settings. While they offered very fruitful frameworks, the religious, familial, linguistic and cultural context of Pakistani society were unique. A local study may be employed to aid in answering the question of "Was the situation of constructs such as interpersonal comfort, gender role beliefs, human value, and inclusive religious interpretation relevant to the Pakistani Adult sample? It may also be part of the culturally informed counseling, educational, and community discussions (Jones et al., 2024).

A third rationale was that acceptance impacted mental health indirectly via social environments. But rejections and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards a transgender person were linked to increased psychological stress, decreased level of support and fewer access to protective institutions. In the present study, public attitudes were measured but it was a social determinant of mental health. The results were

anticipated to guide intervention strategies to reduce transgender stigma experienced by transgender individuals such as working to improve the context in which they reside (Marquez-Velarde et al., 2023).

The fourth one was for demographical variation. Pakistan was quite diversified in terms of education, gender, income and place of living (urban and rural). If the acceptance did differ by these demographics, interventions would be aimed at these areas. For example, in the rural populations, campus, religious organizations and professional environments, the approaches to educational measures might differ. If demographic differences were to be tested then this would provide practical insight for designing policies and advocating it, and psychological support outreach to these groups (Rehman et al., 2024).

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to examine the proposed relationships. A cross-sectional design was deemed appropriate to assess the attitudes and beliefs of the population at a single point in time, allowing for the rapid collection of data across a diverse community sample.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

A sample of 300 individuals was recruited from various residential and commercial areas of Faisalabad, Pakistan. A convenience sampling technique was utilized due to resource constraints and the necessity of recruiting a general community sample willing to discuss sensitive socioreligious topics. The sample comprised both males and females, representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (low, middle, and high SES). Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and capable of understanding Urdu or basic English to comprehend the survey instruments.

2.3. Measures

Data were collected using a structured demographic sheet alongside three specific self-report instruments assessing the key variables:

Cultural Attitudes Scale: A culturally adapted scale was utilized to measure participants' general cultural beliefs regarding gender roles, family honor, and societal norms. Higher scores indicate more rigid, traditional, and conservative cultural attitudes.

Religious Interpretations Scale: This scale measured the rigidity and conservatism of the participants' religious interpretations specifically concerning gender and morality. Higher scores denote a more strict, literal, and conservative interpretation of religious doctrine.

Transgender Acceptance Scale: A validated scale was used to assess the participants' level of tolerance, social distance, and general acceptance of transgender individuals in various social spheres (e.g., employment, neighborhood, basic human rights). Higher scores reflect greater acceptance and lower prejudice.

2.4. Procedure

Prior to data collection, the purpose of the study was explained to all potential participants. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of the complete anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the researchers emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers and that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The questionnaires were administered in person, and the researchers remained available to clarify any ambiguous terms.

2.5. Data Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Preliminary analyses included checking for missing values and assessing internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. To test H1, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analyses were conducted. To test H2, Multiple Linear Regression analysis was employed to determine the variance explained by the predictors. To test H3 and H4, Independent Samples t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were utilized to assess demographic differences across the variables.

3. Results

The collected data were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis. The internal consistency of all scales was found to be acceptable. Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation matrix for the primary study variables.

3.1. Testing Hypothesis 1: Correlational Analysis

Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant relationships among the variables. There was a strong positive relationship between cultural attitudes and religious interpretations ($r = .58, p < .01$). Furthermore, cultural attitudes were significantly correlated with transgender acceptance ($r = .42, p < .01$). Notably, religious interpretations demonstrated a very strong positive correlation with transgender acceptance ($r = .65, p < .01$). These results indicate that deeply held cultural and religious views are inextricably linked to how the public perceives and accepts transgender individuals, thereby supporting H1.

Table 1: *Pearson Correlation Matrix for Study Variables (N=300)*

Variables	1	2	3
1. Cultural Attitudes	-		
2. Religious Interpretations	.58**	-	
3. Transgender Acceptance	.42**	.65**	-

Note. ** $p < .01$.

3.2. Testing Hypothesis 2: Multiple Regression Analysis

To evaluate the predictive power of cultural attitudes and religious interpretations on transgender acceptance, a multiple linear regression was conducted (see Table 2). The overall model was highly significant, $F(2, 297) = 54.32, p < .001$, explaining 45% of the

variance in transgender acceptance ($R^2 = .45$). While both predictors were significant, religious interpretations emerged as the strongest independent predictor ($\beta = .52, p < .001$) compared to cultural attitudes ($\beta = .21, p < .01$). This suggests that in the Pakistani context, religious framing is a more potent determinant of transgender acceptance than general cultural tradition.

Table 2: Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Transgender Acceptance ($N=300$)

Predictor	B	T	p	R^2
Cultural Attitudes	.21	3.45	< .01	
Religious Interpretations	.52	6.89	< .001	
Overall Model				.45***

Note. β = Standardized beta coefficients. *** $p < .001$.

3.3. Testing Hypotheses 3 and 4: Demographic Differences

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences (H3). The results showed no significant difference between males and females regarding general cultural attitudes ($p > .05$). However, significant differences emerged in religious interpretations and transgender acceptance. Females demonstrated higher, more flexible religious interpretations and significantly greater acceptance of transgender individuals compared to males ($p < .05$). Thus, H3 is partially supported.

To test H4, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of socioeconomic status (SES). Surprisingly, the results revealed no statistically significant differences across low, middle, and high SES groups concerning cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, or transgender acceptance ($p > .05$). This indicates that the stigma and socioreligious views surrounding transgender individuals are pervasive across all economic strata in this sample, refuting H4.

Variables	Lower Class ($n = 95$)		Middle Class ($n = 142$)		Higher Class ($n = 63$)		F	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Cultural Attitudes	57.14	6.99	57.88	5.99	57.57	5.36	0.40	.003
Religious Interpretations	23.53	4.16	24.42	4.20	23.68	3.92	1.52	.010
Acceptance of Transgender	53.83	7.14	55.19	8.33	54.82	6.93	0.91	.006

4. Discussion

The present study sought to unravel the complex dynamics of cultural attitudes and religious interpretations in shaping the acceptance of transgender individuals in Faisalabad, Pakistan. The empirical findings provide critical insights into the sociocultural barriers preventing transgender inclusion.

The correlational analysis strongly supported H1, demonstrating that cultural attitudes, religious interpretations, and transgender acceptance are highly interconnected. The strong correlation between cultural and religious views confirms the theoretical premise that in Pakistan, culture and religion are deeply enmeshed, frequently borrowing language and justification from one another. The positive correlations imply that as cultural and religious views become more rigid or conservative, acceptance drastically decreases. Conversely, more flexible or progressive cultural and religious attitudes are associated with significantly higher acceptance.

The regression analysis testing H2 yielded perhaps the most crucial finding of the study: religious interpretations are a significantly stronger predictor of transgender acceptance than general cultural attitudes. This finding highlights a vital nuance in Pakistani society. While cultural patriarchy plays a role, it is the specific religious framing of gender and morality that holds the ultimate authority in the public consciousness. When transgender identities are perceived to conflict with religious doctrine, the resulting stigma is profound and resistant to secular or purely human-rights-based arguments. Therefore, advocacy efforts that ignore religious discourse are likely to be ineffective. Engaging with progressive Islamic scholarship that emphasizes human dignity and the protection of vulnerable minorities is essential for fostering genuine societal acceptance.

Regarding demographic differences, the finding that females exhibit significantly higher transgender acceptance than males aligns with international literature (Norton & Herek, 2013). This may be attributed to a shared experience of marginalization under a patriarchal system, fostering greater empathy among women for transgender individuals who similarly defy or suffer under rigid patriarchal norms. Interestingly, the lack of significant differences across socioeconomic statuses refutes the common assumption that higher education or wealth naturally leads to greater social liberalism. In this context, conservative socioreligious views regarding gender appear to transcend economic class, permeating the entire societal structure.

This study is not without limitations. The use of convenience sampling from a single city (Faisalabad) limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Pakistani population. Future research should employ nationally representative, stratified random sampling. Additionally, relying exclusively on self-report measures introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. Future studies could incorporate implicit association tests to gauge unconscious prejudice.

In conclusion, the acceptance of transgender individuals in Pakistan is heavily dictated by a complex matrix of cultural tradition and, most predominantly, religious interpretation. The pervasive nature of this stigma across socioeconomic classes highlights the depth of the challenge. The findings underscore the urgent need for

culturally and religiously sensitive advocacy. Promoting transgender rights in Pakistan requires a paradigm shift that actively engages with religious community leaders and scholars to promote an inclusive narrative rooted in the fundamental Islamic principles of justice, compassion, and human dignity.

The implications of this study extend beyond academic discourse; they directly impact the daily survival of the transgender community. The profound lack of acceptance documented here translates into the structural violence that transgender individuals face daily, denial of housing, expulsion from schools, and rampant workplace discrimination. If religious interpretations are the primary gatekeepers of acceptance, then state-sponsored initiatives, such as the implementation of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, must be accompanied by widespread socio-religious awareness campaigns. Laws alone cannot mandate empathy in a society where moral frameworks are heavily governed by religious conservatism.

Furthermore, the intersectionality of gender and class requires deeper investigation. While this study did not find significant SES differences, the lived experience of a transgender individual from an affluent background is vastly different from one belonging to the working class. The latter faces the compounded burdens of poverty and gender stigma, severely restricting their access to legal recourse or safe spaces. Future qualitative studies should explore these intersectional realities to provide a more holistic understanding of transgender marginalization in Pakistan.

Ultimately, transforming societal attitudes requires sustained, multi-sectoral efforts. Educational curricula must be reformed to include narratives of gender diversity and human rights. Media representations, which often caricature or villainize transgender individuals, must shift towards dignified and authentic portrayals. Most importantly, a continuous, respectful dialogue with religious institutions is imperative to dismantle the theological justifications for prejudice. Only through such comprehensive, culturally congruent strategies can Pakistan move towards a society that genuinely accepts and protects all its citizens, irrespective of their gender identity.

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