



Freedom of expression in films: A qualitative study exploring challenges and opportunities in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The study delves into the complicated prospect of freedom of expression in the film industry, specifically focused on Pakistan. It starts by recognising the historical and worldwide importance of free speech in cinema and its vital role in formulating cultural stories. The study adopted a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews and the participants of the study comprised filmmakers and actors. The study aimed to identify challenges and opportunities essential for steering innovative boundaries, censorship, and societal expectations in Pakistan's film industry. Results reveal a composite connection of factors including government limitations, social and political pressure, as well as historical lack of diversity and representation. The study also sheds light on noteworthy opportunities in Pakistani films for real expressions by exploring different stories, engaging social and political issues, and boosting marginalised voices. Further, the study provides recommendations for policymakers and industry stakeholders to boost a culture that protects artistic freedom, supports diversity, and appreciates responsible filmmaking. Moreover, implications of the identified challenges and opportunities for the film industry are discussed, emphasising the importance of embracing diversity, addressing historical biases, and leveraging the power of cinema for positive societal change.

Keywords: ***Freedom of expression, cinematic landscape, multifaced challenges***

INTRODUCTION

The complex undertaking of face handling remains perhaps one of the most complicated accomplishments of people. Faces, frequently seen as a gold mine of social data, comprises imperative insights regarding personality, emotional states, persuasive signs, lip discourse, and, surprisingly, the direction of concentration as reflected in the eye stare. This complex extravagance of facial signals is key for successful communication (Khan et al., 2024). Subsequently, face pictures have afforded widespread utility as boost materials across a variety of research areas, including the investigation of face handling improvement, data handling inside conditions like fears and mental imbalance, social referring to, relational fascination, convincing correspondence, individual memory, impression arrangement, human-computer face recognition, and even the domain of robotics (Humar & Singh, 2023; Rule et al., 2008).

The historical backdrop of freedom of expression in films is set apart by a complicated transaction of legal, social, and cultural factors. In the early long stretches of the film industry, there were moderately minimal conventional guidelines, permitting producers more prominent scope in communicating their artistic vision. Nonetheless, worries about the ethical effect of movies prompted the foundation of the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, in 1930, forcing severe rules on happiness (Leff & Simmons, 1990). The 1960s saw a shift as cultural standards developed, testing the Hays Code's limitations. Landmark legal cases, for example, the finish of the prohibition on unequivocal language in films like "Who's Apprehensive about Virginia Woolf?" (1966), denoted a defining moment (Doherty, 1999). The cessation of the Hays Code eventually gave way to the modern film rating system in 1968, allowing for a more nuanced categorisation of content and offering filmmakers greater freedom within certain boundaries (Thompson, 1997). Today, while legal protections for freedom of expression in films exist, ongoing debates persist over issues like censorship, representation, and the balance between artistic freedom and societal concerns.

In a democratic society, the concept of "Freedom of Speech and Expression" stands as a cornerstone, essential for the healthy functioning of the democratic machinery. This fundamental right encapsulates the liberty to articulate one's thoughts, opinions, and ideas (Riveira & Navarro, 2023; Voorhoof & Cannie, 2010). However, within the realm of cinema, the discourse surrounding freedom of speech and expression has remained contentious. With over a century of existence, cinema has significantly contributed to disseminating a nation's rich cultural, social, economic, and political heritage (AL-hakeem & Alshadoodee, 2021). The film industry possesses a unique capacity to reach millions, making it an indispensable medium for communication and expression (Dastidar & Elliott, 2020).

Films, as an incredibly persuasive medium of communication, have gone through significant development recently. Moving in tandem with society and innovation, films have adjusted to keep up with the evolving times, presently having a remarkable capacity to associate with the majority (Dastidar & Elliott, 2020). India's film industry, the biggest universally, produces more than 1,000 films every year and exhibits them in a stunning 13,000 venues the country over. Notably, the film industry has a rich history of testing cultural standards and restrictions, frequently by thinking for even a moment to portray questionable subjects (Sharma & Mishra, 2023). Moreover, films have made huge commitments to the sociocultural development of countries, uniting individuals, and bringing basic issues to light.

The study aims to investigate the qualitative perspectives of filmmakers and actors regarding the complicated landscape of freedom of expression in Pakistan's film industry. Through in-depth interviews, the research attempts to recognise the difficulties faced by filmmakers and actors in exploring imaginative limits, censorship, and cultural assumptions. Furthermore, the paper aims to reveal the opportunities that emerge from stretching the boundaries of expression in film, looking at how artistic freedom adds to the development, varied narrating, and the moulding of social stories. By digging into the lived insights and experiences of experts inside the film industry, this study hopes to give a nuanced comprehension of the unpredictable connection between freedom of expression, innovative strategies, and the more extensive social and cultural settings that impact filmmaking.

Problem statement and justification

In the digital era, the Pakistan film industry grapples with evolving challenges and opportunities surrounding free speech. Technology and social media offer new avenues for filmmakers to express ideas, but they also introduce obstacles, notably in the form of censorship and the spread of misinformation. Previous incidents in Pakistan have highlighted the difficulties encompassing freedom of expression in the film industry, especially with the ascent of online campaigns dispersing misleading data focusing on films. These campaigns have triggered violence as well as actuated savagery, highlighting the unstable idea of public talk in the nation (Aragon, 2023; Biltereyst & Meers, 2018).

For example, the movie "Maalik" (2016) directed by Ashir Azeem faced an impermanent boycott by the government because of its depiction of political subjects, igniting debates about freedom of expression in Pakistani cinema (Dawn, 2016). Another notable incident involves the film "Padmaavat" (2018), an Indian creation that backfired and triggered public backlash and online campaigns in Pakistan due to its portrayal of historical figures (BBC News, 2018). Furthermore, Pakistan's regulatory structure for the film industry which exercises explicit limitations on content, also limits the artistic freedom of filmmakers (Hashim, 2020). Balancing the majority's right to free discourse with emphasis on open significant quality and security is vital in Pakistan's unique situation. The different social and religious landscapes require a careful exploration of fragile subjects depicted in films. More importantly, the potential for misdirection that can fuel social strains requires careful oversight (Elliot & Holt, 2020).

In this remarkable circumstance, facilitated dialogue between the film industry and government experts becomes essential. Such cooperation can work with the advancement of systems that explore the fragile harmony between artistic freedom and cultural awareness. Enabling movie producers to challenge standards, advance different stories, and invigorate public talk is pivotal for cultivating an energetic and comprehensive cultural landscape. The overall objective is to cultivate a cooperative climate where imaginative arrangements are spearheaded to address the difficulties confronting the film industry in Pakistan. These arrangements should not only shield the substance of free speech, but also maintain the standards of mindful filmmaking that contribute towards public sentiments and drive cultural changes.

Significance of the study

Cinema's global impact on public opinion is significant, forming points of view across friendly, social, and political aspects (Do Nascimento, 2019). Films have highlighted basic issues, catalysing shifts in broad daylight that impact policy changes. Messages of trust and equity highlight the basis of maintaining majority rule's values (Muniroh, 2019; Samet,

2023). Free speech challenges the filmmaking structure in a nuanced manner, introducing problems as well as opportunities. This study, the only one of its kind in Pakistan, expects to gather insightful perspectives from a different populace, film producers and actors. Using qualitative techniques, the study endeavours to grasp the scope of challenges and opportunities in the domain of free expression in film, contributing to a neglected area of artistic discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historical backdrop of freedom of expression in films highlights the impact of cultural, social, and legal factors on cinematic portrayal and narration. The cultural studies theory gives a framework for examining how cultural norms, values, and power elements shape the creation, dissemination, and gathering of movies. By looking at the transaction between cultural settings and artistic expression, this theory offers insights into the complexities of artistic freedom and censorship in the film industry (Kellner, 2011). Within the scope of this freedom, people manage the cost of freedom to hold sentiments without external obstructions, and they are engaged to effectively look for, obtain and communicate data and thoughts through any medium, independent of geographical limits (Masferrer, 2023). In this specific context, researchers usually allude to this freedom of expression as the right to freedom of data. Thus, the right to freedom of information can affect huge changes in the unique relationship between the state and its general population (Saravanamuttu & Mohamad, 2020).

Importance of right to freedom of expression

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR) reveres the right to freedom of expression in Article 19(2), specifying that this right encompasses the opportunity to obtain data, dependent upon legal limitations or restrictions considered significant for defending the freedoms and notorieties of people, public safety, public request, general wellbeing, or ethics. At the same time, Article 25 of the ICCPR perceives that residents have more right than wrong to participate in open issues (Weiss, 2013). The importance of the right to freedom of information extends beyond its standalone significance; it serves as a fundamental underpinning for other human rights, including the right to development, democracy, and a clean environment (Istace, 2024). By providing comprehensive information, governments empower citizens to seek redress in the event of governmental interference or violations of their civil, political, economic, and social rights, particularly among marginalised and vulnerable groups. This right encompasses proactive dissemination (seeking), reactive dissemination (receiving), and the right to reuse and redistribute received information (imparting) (Wan Khairuldin et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, freedom of speech, while seen by some as the cornerstone of democracy's vitality, also carries its set of risks and controversies (Fisher et al., 2001). In today's landscape, readers encounter a plethora of blogs and social media platforms, including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and more, all driven by three philosophical motives: the pursuit of truth, self-governance, and self-fulfilment (Kartika & Ashaf, 2023; Feldman, 2016). The exchange of ideas to discern truth from falsehood is a central objective, particularly in journalism. However, the definition of "journalism" is undergoing a profound transformation as the profession contracts, allowing virtually anyone to express their views on social media platforms, essentially as a form of self-expression (Neuwirth et al., 2007; Taylor, 1982). Moreover, citizen journalists can

easily share images and videos with mainstream media outlets, enabling the dissemination of extremist ideologies and propaganda, as exemplified by groups like ISIS that use apps like The Dawn of Glad Tidings (Burke, 2016). This changing media landscape has spurred debates about the media's role in providing a platform for certain groups that exploit technology for unprecedented purposes (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

Freedom of expression in context of Pakistan

Pakistan's legal, cultural, and social landscape regarding freedom of expression in the film industry is multifaceted and influenced by various factors (Islam, 2022). Legally, Pakistan has regulations governing freedom of expression in films, which are enforced by government agencies such as the Central Board of Film Censors (CBFC). These regulations often aim to align with societal and religious values, leading to censorship of content deemed offensive or contrary to cultural norms. Additionally, Pakistan's Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, but this right is subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law (Aftab, 2024; Jue Jun & Firdaus, 2023). Culturally, Pakistan has a rich history of film that mirrors the country's different social legacies (Iqbal & Malik, 2023). Nonetheless, cultural mentalities towards imaginative expression can be moderate, especially when they concern delicate points like religion, governmental issues, and emotional quality. However, this conservatism can influence the content created and isolate Pakistani movies (Rehman, 2016).

Issues of freedom of expression in the Pakistan film industry

The Pakistani film industry has undergone many basic changes in the long run, grappling with various issues associated with freedom of expression (Iqbal, 2023). As the industry tries to convey unique and fascinating substance, most of the time it ends up investigating a complex landscape moulded by social, political, and cultural components (Müller et al., 2024). One of the fundamental challenges inhibiting the Pakistani film industry is the limitations and authoritative prerequisites set by government authorities. The Central Board of Film Censors (CBFC) assumes a basic role of looking at film content to ensure consistency with cultural and religious standards. Regardless, this regulatory oversight occasionally includes explicit considerations or points considered as problematic or threatening. For instance, films exploring contentious issues like religion, legislative issues, or social issues could encounter checks from control sheets, confining the artistic freedom of makers (Biltreyst & Meers, 2018).

Furthermore, self-censorship among filmmakers is prevalent as a result of worries over anticipated backlash or legal repercussions. In a moderate society like Pakistan, where social norms and cultural practices have a strong influence, producers habitually tread carefully to avoid disputes or guilty sensibilities (Elliot & Holt, 2020). This self-censorship can forestall the examination of solid and creative considerations, and in the long run, limit the range of stories depicted in Pakistani films. A couple of events have shown the negative implications of online campaigns that spread misleading information on certain films. These campaigns fuel public backlash as well as pose a threat to the prosperity and security of filmmakers and industry professionals.

The scattering of deception can demolish cultural strains and subvert the honesty of the filmmaking framework (Biltreyst & Meers, 2018). Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for the Pakistani film industry to resolve issues of freedom of expression and encourage a more comprehensive and dynamic imaginative climate. The coordinated effort between producers, industry partners, and government specialists is fundamental in fostering systems that offset artistic freedom with culturally responsive qualities (Elliot &

Holt, 2020). By advancing exchange and understanding, stakeholders can make progress toward establishing a favourable climate where various differing points of view are invited and celebrated.

Historical perspectives on censorship in the film industry

During the early years of the film industry, there was limited formal censorship. Notwithstanding, as movies acquired ubiquity, worries about the expected impact on virtues and public ways of behaving developed. Local censorship boards emerged, frequently driven by local community or religious groups, controlling content or information they considered unseemly (Dixon, 2003). Considering public and political strain, the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, was laid out in 1930. This self-regulatory framework forced severe rules on film content, precluding portrayals of violence, and certain social issues.

The Hays Code essentially moulded the substance of Hollywood movies for a long time (Leff & Simmons, 1990). The 1950s and 1960s witnessed growing defiance to the Hays Code, as movie producers and studios pushed back against its impediments. Milestone legal cases, for example, the finish of the prohibition on express language in “Who’s Anxious about Virginia Woolf?” (1966), denoted the breakdown of the Hays Code (Doherty, 1999). The downfall of the Hays Code prompted the foundation of the Motion Picture Association (MPA) rating framework in 1968. This framework guides films considering content, furnishing watchers with data about a film’s reasonableness. Notwithstanding the shift towards additional liberal principles, debates over censorship persist, especially involving issues like viciousness, expression satisfaction, and social awareness (Thompson, 1997).

Case studies of films that faced censorship of controversy

Stanley Kubrick’s “A Clockwork Orange” faced significant censorship challenges due to its explicit depictions of violence and controversial themes. The film was banned in several countries, including the United Kingdom, where Kubrick himself withdrew the film from distribution. The controversy surrounding the movie prompted discussions about the fine line between artistic expression and societal impact (Deb, 2023; Hughes, 2009). Martin Scorsese’s “The Last Temptation of Christ” sparked controversy for its unconventional portrayal of Jesus Christ. Religious groups protested the film’s release, and several countries banned it for its perceived blasphemy. The film’s controversy reignited debates about the boundaries of artistic freedom and the potential to offend religious sensitivities (Rege, 2023; Wood, 1988).

Ang Lee’s “Brokeback Mountain” faced censorship challenges in various conservative regions for its portrayal of a homosexual relationship. The film’s depiction of love led to restrictions and bans in certain countries (Gustafson, 2007). Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg’s “The Interview” stirred international controversy for its satirical portrayal of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The film’s depiction of political figures led to cyber-attacks on Sony Pictures and threats against theatres, illustrating the power of film to incite geopolitical tensions (Johnson & Sicker, 2015).

The impact of freedom of expression on artistic creativity

Freedom of expression plays a pivotal role in fostering artistic creativity by providing artists the liberty to explore unconventional ideas, challenge societal norms, and engage in thought-provoking narratives (Almahfali et al., 2024). The ability to express oneself without fear of censorship or reprisal encourages artists to push boundaries, contributing

to the diversity of artistic endeavours across various mediums (Kanojia, 2023). In the realm of literature, film, visual arts, and music, unrestricted expression enables creators to address complex social issues, question authority, and offer unique perspectives on the human experience.

Scholars like Pekka Himanen (2013) argue that a free and open environment for expression is crucial for the cultivation of a vibrant and dynamic cultural landscape. Similarly, UNESCO (2013) emphasized the importance of freedom of expression as a fundamental human right that underpins artistic freedom, allowing for the flourishing of creativity and the enrichment of global cultural discourse. In essence, the symbiotic relationship between freedom of expression and artistic creativity ensures the continual evolution and enrichment of the cultural tapestry (Han, 2024).

The impact of freedom of expression in democratic societies

In democratic societies where people wield ultimate decision-making authority, freedom of expression is the lifeblood of democracy and an essential component for individual development (Voorhoof & Cannie, 2010). Films, as a potent medium of communication, have rapidly evolved to adapt to societal and technological shifts, reaching unprecedented audiences (Dastidar & Elliott, 2020). India's film industry, the world's largest, produces over a thousand movies annually and screens them in more than 13,000 theatres nationwide. Undoubtedly, cinema has a rich history of challenging societal norms and taboos through the portrayal of contentious subjects (Sharma & Mishra, 2023).

Legal frameworks and regulations governing freedom of expression in films

Legal frameworks and regulations governing freedom of expression in films vary across countries, reflecting diverse cultural, political, and social contexts. In the United States, the First Amendment of the Constitution protects freedom of speech, extending to the realm of filmmaking. However, this freedom is not absolute, and legal battles, such as obscenity trials and classification systems, have shaped the boundaries of expression in American cinema (Doherty, 1999). In contrast, countries like China maintain strict censorship through government agencies that review and approve film content, often aiming to align with state ideologies and moral standards (Yue, 2016). European nations, with a commitment to artistic freedom, balance it with measures to protect against hate speech and discrimination (Picard, 2007). International bodies like UNESCO emphasise the importance of freedom of expression in cinema as a fundamental human right, urging nations to develop policies that encourage diverse cinematic voices while respecting cultural sensitivities (2005). These legal frameworks underscore the ongoing global discourse on finding a balance between artistic expression and the need to address societal concerns.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the type of research methodology used depends on the research, according to the type of research. In this study, the researchers used an inductive research approach to obtain in-depth information about the subject through interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In the same way, the right research design enables researchers to achieve the objectives of their research work. In this study, the researchers adopted an exploratory research design. It should be noted that it was quite challenging for the researchers to have access to Pakistani filmmakers and actors.

Sampling and data collection

The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide to collect data from filmmakers and film actors. The interview guide was developed and pre-tested to check that all the questions were related to the topic and could provide accurate findings. Semi-structured interview helps the researcher to get detailed answers, which are less filtered, compared to other methods of data collection (Graue, 2015). As the participants have to be well-versed with the study topic, the researchers used purposive sampling to select the sample. According to Dane (1990), one of the advantages of purposive sampling is that it allows the researcher to make direct contact with those individuals who have a good understanding of the studied event or phenomenon, and this is a critical element of qualitative research.

The researcher interviewed 30 professionals including filmmakers and actors available in Pakistan who shared their own opinions based on their experiences. According to Fugard and Potts' (2015) qualitative sample size tool, a sample of more than 25 participants is robust and has a 95% probability of capturing at least one instance of themes common to 6% of the population. On average, in the qualitative part of the study, one interview lasted for up to 30 minutes, and a questionnaire was developed to ask the participants relevant questions. During the interviews, different co-related and connecting questions were also asked to get the correct thoughts of participants about freedom of expression in terms of movies and films. As the mother language of the participants is Urdu, the interview data was transcribed using Excel.

Demographics

A total of 30 interviews were conducted with Pakistani's film professionals. Most of the participants declined a voice recording of the interviews, and following ethical considerations, no compulsion was placed on participants for voice recording. However, they willingly allowed the researcher to document their responses to the questions or key points discussed during the interviews. The gender distribution among the participants was 17 males and 13 females. Out of the 30, six participants were filmmakers, while the other 24 were film actors.

Reliability and validity

To check the validity of the questionnaire developed by the researcher, it is very important to conduct a pre-test (Bryman & Bell, 2011). One of the reasons for doing a pre-test for a qualitative study is to check any issues in the work developed by the researcher (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). There are several ways to analyse data collected by the researcher from participants through interviews, surveys, and feedback. In this study, the thematic analysis method was used as this technique is suitable for the identification of patterns, analyses, and reporting of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Cooper and Schindler (2014), coding is the most useful method when researchers do not have hypotheses to answer and when researchers try to understand participants' personal opinions and natural expressions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study align with existing literature, offering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted landscape surrounding freedom of expression in the film industry. In the context of Pakistan, the findings of the study on freedom of expression in the film industry reflect the unique sociopolitical and cultural landscape of the country.

The study outlines various obstacles such as governmental constraints, self-censorship, and pressure from political or ideological groups, which align with the historical perspectives on film regulation (Leff & Simmons, 1990). Aligning with contemporary literature that emphasise the importance of free speech and expression in societies, the research findings affirm that films, as influential tools, play a crucial role in democratic conversations (Riveira & Navarro, 2023).

The qualitative examination of the interviews demonstrates that there are many challenges and opportunities when we discuss freedom of expression in films. The themes in the study resonate profoundly inside Pakistan's specific circumstances and are evidenced by the participants as government restrictions, societal pressure, cultural sensitivities, representation and diversities, technological challenges, opportunities for social engagement, empowerment of marginalised voices, preservation of cultural heritage, global reach and impact, educational value of films, and support for filmmakers and creativity. The study's investigation of the challenges and opportunities in the film industry contributes important insights to the continuous discourse encompassing artistic freedom, portrayal, and the sensitive harmony between expression and societal concerns.

Theme 1: Government restrictions

Government-imposed limitations on film content, are often enforced by regulatory bodies like the Central Board of Film Censors (CBFC). These restrictions can infringe upon artistic freedom and may lead to self-censorship among filmmakers. According to filmmakers 25 and 27, political and cultural considerations drive these restrictions, impacting the content and scope of films produced, *"...the struggle of producers in navigating government limitations on film content feels stifling...and I feel it's hindering our artistic freedom and forcing us to self-censor to comply with regulations"* – F25 and F27. Some other filmmakers and actors' informants have also expressed the same sentiment.

Based on actors 3, 4, 8, 9 and filmmakers 18, 22, 28, *".... the restrictions enforced by a regulatory body such as Central Board of Film Censors (CBFC) can limit the artistic freedom of filmmakers and result in discretion to avoid conversations or concur with oversight rules drives rules..."* – A3, A4, A8, A9 and F18, F22, and F28. Some said, *"...we are forced to agree with the social and cultural characteristics specified within these regulations"* – A5 and F25. Additionally, pressure from political or philosophical groups is unavoidable, also highlighted in *Dawn News* (Usamakhilji, 2023), influencing the substance of movies, and perhaps hampering open talks. Filmmakers could seek help for threats against their imaginary expression, marked in *Geo News* (Web Desk, 2022), producing biased briefs and self-censorship among writers.

Theme 2: Societal pressures

In the Pakistani society, film matters and one-sided writing may be affected by pressures from political, religious, and philosophical parties. As highlighted by Al Jazeera, films that counter the established norms or standards such as religious or political issues are commonly resisted in society, as mentioned by actors 1, 5, 10, 13 and filmmaker 17 in their statements, *"...the pressure from political or philosophical groups is palpable and often influences the content of movies. It feels like it's covering up open dialogue and creativity..."* – A1, A5, A10, A13 and F17. Religious beliefs exert a strong influence, and any freedom considered impolite can provoke shock and oversight. The producers of films face ambiguity in their creative expression and may have to adopt self-censorship to protect themselves from public backlash or pressure from investors. The same opinion shared by other filmmakers, *"... the strain from political or philosophical groups is discernible and*

frequently impacts the content of movies.... As filmmakers, we often threaten our creative expression, leading to self-censorship and biased reporting in the industry...” – F16, F18, and F19. Stressed by other actors 9, 11, and 14, “... as industry players, we play a vital role in shaping societal discourse.... It’s a kind of responsibility we take seriously, using our platform to address pressing issues and inspire change....” – A9, A11, and A14. In expressing the same thoughts, actors 5 and 12 admitted, “... it’s a way to provoke meaningful discussions and inspire positive change.” – A5 and A12.

Theme 3: Cultural sensitivities

Filmmakers must struggle with steering around contentious topics involving religion, norms, standards, and historical stories. These topics counter norms of taboo subjects and can trigger strong reactions within the Pakistani society, specifically those revolving religious beliefs and traditions. As mentioned by actors 4, 6, and 9, “.... films that counter norms or address conscious topics face backlash in Pakistani society.... And it’s disappointing to see the effect of religious belief on artistic freedom” – A4, A6, and A9. Achieving a harmonious mix of artistic creativity and recognition of cultural standards creates a fear constraint for filmmakers. As expressed by some of the filmmakers “.... balancing artistic expression with cultural sensitivities presents a significant challenge for filmmakers...” – F19, F26, and F30. This theme was also addressed by actors 2,3,7, and 12 in their feedback, “... steering social norms worldwide is hindering because what’s liked in one culture might be not liked in another one.... hence, it’s a continuous struggle to confirm that our content positively covers different audiences” – A2, A3, A27 and A12. Further, as highlighted by Al Jazeera, films that challenge limitations by repudiating societal rules and addressing sensitive topics like religion or social issues can lead to negative reactions and violence in the Pakistani society. As mentioned by filmmakers 15 and 17, “...it is essential for promoting empathy and understanding in our society by comprising films, as a bridge between cultures, exposing audiences to new perspectives and experiences....” – F15 and F17.

Theme 4: Representation and diversity

The film industry in Pakistan continues to face criticism due to its lack of diversity and underrepresentation of marginalised voices and communities. As highlighted by filmmakers 19, 21,22, and 28, “... the lack of representation and diversity in the film industry is a significant issue” ... and it’s important to address this shortfall and provide voices to underrepresented communities” – F19, F21, F22, and F28. On the other hand, films have the potential to showcase diverse stories and perspectives, including those of marginalised groups, but there is a perceived shortfall in adequately addressing the needs and experiences of these communities. The theme was also validated by other filmmakers, “...filmmaking provides a novel chance for Pakistani narrators to find out different stories and underrepresented communities. It’s an opportunity to recognize overlooked voices...” – F26, F27 and F30. And, “...films facilitate social exchange by exposing audiences to different cultures and perspectives.... it’s essential for fostering understanding and appreciation within our society...” F23 and F29. Further, the realm of filmmaking in Pakistan gives a chance for underrepresented voices to be heard, as reported by *Express News* (2024).

Theme 5: Technological challenges

Emerging and innovative technologies present new challenges for the film industry in terms of more avenues for manipulation and misguidance. As highlighted by the interviewed filmmakers, “...advancement in technology such as deepfakes, needs careful consideration to stable the integrity and credibility of films while concerning issues regarding manipulation”

– F22 and F25. In addition, “...emerging technologies pose new challenges, undermining the integrity of films and spreading misinformation” – F24, F28, and F30. Issues caused by technological advancements were also validated by *The News International* (Rizvi, 2021). Hence, it is vital to pay more attention to technological progress to maintain the authenticity and trustworthiness of movies by resolving any manipulation or fraud issues.

Theme 6: Opportunities for social engagement

Apart from challenges, films provide opportunities to address pressing political and social issues like gender equality or environmental sustainability. They serve as a platform for sharing awareness, promoting dialogue, and boosting social change within the Pakistani society. As indicated by actors 13 and 15, “... engaging youth through films concerning political and social issues are important for boosting civic engagement.... also, film is a significant platform for a dialogue and initiating positive change....” – A13 and A15. In addition, filmmaker 15 highlighted that films provide a medium for narrators to discover different stories involving social diversity and pertinent issues in Pakistan, “... the social engagement delivered through film is a healthy idea to showcase overlooked experiences...” – F15. Meanwhile, other filmmakers mentioned, “... we have the liberty to explore unique and innovative projects, breaking traditional narratives and expanding artistic limits ...” – F19 and F23.

Theme 7: Empowerment of marginalised voices

Films provide a medium for raising the voices of underrepresented communities and recognising their novel exposures and challenges. According to some of the interviewed filmmakers, “.... filmmaking provides a medium for marginalized voices to be listened to and recognized... and it’s important to amplify these voices and ensure their stories are told authentically” – F16, F19 and F23. The actors shared the same sentiment on this theme, emphasising that “...film is a powerful tool for uncovering untold stories and shedding light on overlooked experiences...” – A8, A9, A11, and A13. Despite the aforementioned challenges, there are incredible opportunities for genuine expression in Pakistani films. “.... and it’s inspiring to see filmmakers tackling pressing social issues and sparking important conversations...” – A4.

Theme 8: Preservation of cultural heritage

Films play a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of Pakistan via documentation of norms, traditions, and historical events. As per filmmakers interviewed, “...films can be utilized as invaluable records of the cultural heritage of Pakistan and save the moments for upcoming generations.... it’s our duty to ensure that these stories are documented authentically...” – F17 and F23. They also added, “...the capability for films to reach a worldwide audience is significant. It’s an opportunity to share cultural perspectives of Pakistan around the globe to foster cross-cultural understanding....” – F18, F24, and F29. And “... the global reach of films allows Pakistani stories to transcend geographical boundaries. It’s an opportunity to showcase our culture and values on a global stage...” – F22. Documentaries can contribute as archival records to catch important moments and preserve cultural heritage for upcoming generations. Similarly, some actors added, “... documentaries play a crucial role in preserving Pakistan’s cultural heritage and documenting untold stories....it’s important to ensure these narratives are recorded for future generations...” – A11 and A13.

Theme 9: Global reach and impact

Films can reach worldwide audiences, crossing geographical and linguistic constraints. This worldwide reach allows the sharing of ideas and stories on a broader scale, investing

in cross-cultural awareness and appreciation. As agreed by the actors, “.... *the capability for films to reach a worldwide audience is noteworthy. It’s an opportunity to share Pakistani narratives around the world and boost cross-cultural understanding...*” – A7 and A9. The filmmakers also highlighted, “....*the cultural exchange not only enriches individual viewers but also contributes to a more connected and harmonious global community...*” – F16 and F22. They also added, “....*as audiences engage with these stories, they become more open-minded and appreciative of the diversity that exists in the world, ultimately fostering a sense of unity and global solidarity...*” – F17 and F19. Thus, films serve as a powerful medium for storytelling, allowing people from various backgrounds to share their narratives and experiences.

Theme 10: Educational value of films

Films also function as an educational tool by providing inputs into scientific discoveries, traditions, and other educational subjects. They are used by educational institutes for teaching purposes and contribute to the development of viewers’ critical thinking abilities. According to the filmmakers, “.... *films serve as educational tools, enlightening viewers about historical events, cultural traditions, and more.... it’s also crucial for promoting learning and critical thinking among audiences.*” – F18 and F22.

Moreover, all the participants shared the same opinion that it is important to utilise this platform for boosting learning and critical thinking. And, according to the participants, “.... *films have immense potential as educational tools, enlightening viewers about diverse subjects. Hence, it’s important to leverage this medium for promoting learning and critical thinking.*” – A3, F23 and F25. Some implied, “.... *government support for film education and training programs is essential for nurturing the next generation of filmmakers. It’s crucial for ensuring the industry’s continued growth and innovation.*” – F24 and A3.

Theme 11: Support for filmmakers and creativity

Support for filmmakers, particularly independent filmmakers, is essential for fostering creativity and innovation within the industry. As highlighted by the participants, “... *support for filmmakers and creative freedom is important for the growing film industry. It’s encouraging to see initiatives that nurture talent and innovation...*” – F18 and A8. Providing opportunities for creative freedom and exploration encourages filmmakers to push boundaries and challenge conventional narratives, leading to a more vibrant and diverse cultural landscape. The participants highlighted that films contribute as a medium for countering norms and creating social change. “...*it’s empowering to incorporate creative talent to recognize pressing issues and inspire actions...*” – A6, A7, and F15. This not only increases the diversity of content available in access to the audience but also promotes the cultural landscape forward. Some contended, “....”*Support for filmmakers and creative freedom is essential for a vibrant film industry. It’s encouraging to see initiatives that nurture talent and innovation.*” – A8.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In investigating the freedom of expression in films, the study unravelled a diverse nexus of challenges and opportunities as well. Using qualitative analysis to decipher the interview data, the researchers added new insights into existing literature, and revealed the intricate elements that confine the portrait of real expressions in films. Remarkably, the primary challenge in presenting real expression in films comes from the rules and regulations imposed

by the government. These regulations bind the genuine freedom of filmmakers and hinder the explorations of themes. Further, pressure from political parties and philosophical groups forces filmmakers to evade complex territories. Lastly, the norms of society exert an important effect, leading to constraints in the investigation of subjects deemed relevant to religion, society, and culture.

Future researchers are recommended to study the concept of freedom of expression in films from a summarised view. This includes a deep investigation of different approaches of countries towards regulation, perceptions of society, and the development of diversity and portrait within the film industry. By studying these different approaches, experts can have input into efficient practices and find areas for boosting the freedom of the artist in filmmaking. Further, future studies can explore how people perceive and react to films that address conscious topics. Studying how audiences react provides inputs into films that prompt difficult conversations and counter norms and traditions. A method involving interviews or surveys could be utilised for data collection. Moreover, investigating the effect of the latest technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) on the artistic freedom of the film industry can provide an important conception of upcoming filmmaking trends and freedom of expression.

Implications of challenges and opportunities for the film industry

The constraints or regulations issued by the external environment or governments can lead to a compromise on the freedom for filmmakers. In this context, self-censorship becomes unavoidable as a reaction to counter the argument, which may limit the industry's capability to explore and investigate original narratives. Further, minority perspectives could be neglected as a result of historical constraints in the film industry and political pressures. This limitation leads to more problems for the industry in portraying the diversity of experiences and narratives.

Moreover, story writers are saddled by international precautions to avoid violence. This can limit the distribution and assembly of films. On the other hand, storytellers could explore different stories, norms of society, and marginalised voices because these can contribute to the latest landscape of the film industry. This can also boost awareness amongst audiences and enhance the capability of the industry to involve a broader range of viewers.

Finally, films can capture the attention of the audience by addressing political and social issues and acting as a medium for dialogue. Films have the potency to alter public opinion and cultural innovation. Additionally, by combining social exchanges, films offer a chance for viewers to experience many cultures and views. In short, the central language of film could be an effective platform for worldwide communication.

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