

Communicating Social Perceptions of Art as a Profession in Pakistan



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Abstract: *In our socio-cultural setting art is an essential medium for expressing human emotions. Art plays a pivotal role in creating and fostering a healthy nation. This research studies the relationship between socio-cultural ethics and art as a profession in Pakistan. Despite Pakistan's rich cultural heritage, the role of an artist is relatively new and often misunderstood. According to our findings, art in Pakistan has a rich cultural and social background, and people are attached to it. Based on their mindsets, knowledge, and physical environment, different people favour different kinds of art in their surroundings. Art is regarded as an appreciation by most people but is not regarded as a serious choice of profession for men. In contrast, art is a highly regarded profession among women in Pakistan. This study expands the scope of evaluation and development of art as a profession in Pakistan based on gender and cultural norms.*

Key Words: Visual Arts, Gender, Profession, Cultural inclusion, Cultural Norms, Pakistan

Introduction

Visual art has the power to express community values, improve our environment, enhance a landscape, raise awareness, or challenge our preconceived notions. As an expression of how we see the world, visual art is an artist's response to our time and place combined with our own perception of who we are ([unboundvisualarts, 2019](#)). In our socio-cultural setting, visual arts are an important means of expressing universal emotions. In our society, art plays a pivotal role in constructing a culture that cultivates a strong society that

benefits the nation throughout its history. The purpose of this research is to study the relationship between socio-cultural ethics and art as a profession in Pakistan. Despite Pakistan's rich cultural heritage, the role of an artist is relatively new and often misunderstood. According to our findings, art in Pakistan has a rich cultural and social background and its people are deeply connected to it. Different groups of people prefer different kinds of art in their surroundings based on their individual

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mindsets, their educational backgrounds, and the physical environment in which they live ([Introduction- Pakistan's Cultural Heritage](#)). Art is regarded as an appreciation by most people but is not regarded as a legitimate and serious choice of profession for men in Pakistani society. In contrast, art is a highly regarded profession among women in Pakistan. The objective of this study is to expand the scope of evaluation and development of art as a profession in Pakistan based on gender and cultural norms.

Our perception of different social phenomena is shaped by predetermined cultural knowledge. Using these perceptions, we can establish generalizations and identify the different cultures based on these perceptions. Nevertheless, every culture has its distinctive characteristics, and therefore it is impossible to compare them side by side. Visual culture describes the prevailing culture of a society. Sally Price believes that the art produced by non-western cultures is not different from the art produced by western cultures. It is also produced by talented individuals and imaginative artists who deserve to be recognized for their hard work. Therefore, primitive art should be evaluated by western artists with the same critical standards ([Gell, 2017](#)).

When we generally talk about Visual Art, it seems that it is an interesting subject. The majority of the time, when it comes to art and the activities associated with it, people attach positive connotations to them. The fact is that in today's society learning art forms has become a symbol of status as one of my respondents quoted that her mother wants her to learn to sketch as it looks exquisite to express to guests that my daughter is proficient at

sketching at parties and get-togethers. Art forms are also considered a means of stress relief, as they provide a sense of calm. For instance, in Islamabad, there is a place called the mind-body-soul wellness centre that believes that healing can be achieved through creativity. It's a tea and coffee shop. People go there; they offer canvas and paints. While drinking tea or coffee people paint and enjoy and take out the stress on canvas. In the end, they can bring that painting with them. Another similar activity is happening in the famous TJ (tea junction) in F-7 Islamabad. They put a big canvas, place paints beside it and everyone is free to paint or write anything on it. They repeat this activity every weekend. In this study, respondents were inquired about how their journey began, what was their experience in the field of art? Who supports them? Who inspires them?

Review of Literature Global Context

Economists and sociologists highlighted the connection between gender and professional development. Throughout history, gender stereotypes played a vital role in career outcomes. Men are more likely to choose professions that secure a future as compared to women. Culturally it is perceived that men and women hold different jobs. ([Reskin & Bielby, 2005](#)) Globally, men are considered the financial provider of the family although the contribution of women has increased widely. Traditionally men are expected to become a breadwinner of a family. Therefore, career-building is considered more important for men than women. Studies showed that men are more under economic pressure because it is expected for them to contribute to the family financially. And if they are unable to support

for whatever reason, it can cause depression and mental illness in them. ([Zuo & Tang, 2000](#))

Each artist contributes to the overall health, development, and well-being of our society in a different and necessary way ([Mripa, 5th October 2017](#)). Thinkers and makers are not only a source of joy, interaction, and inspiration for their communities, but they also act as thoughtful critics of our political, economic, and social systems, pushing communities to engage thoughtfully and take steps toward social progress. Anthropology helps us to understand existing cultural knowledge. Visual arts describe the popular prevailing culture of society through art forms. Everything created with imagination and skill is art. Art is a powerful means of examining and offering food for thought to society through its medium. (<https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog>, 2021)

Pablo Picasso believed that every child is a born artist, but he remains an artist depending on his surroundings. ([Pablo Picasso Paintings, Quotes, & Biography, 20th century](#)). Surrounded by various art forms, we are unable to exclude them from our lives. Whether doing paintings or watching films, listening to music, visiting monuments, in fact, from our coffee mugs to mobile covers, everything can be a piece of art. When we scrutinize visual art, we realize different positive and negative connotations are attached to it. We like to watch films and dramas but, on the other hand, becoming a part of this field is stigmatized as inappropriate. ([Coote, 2009](#))

Local Context

Pakistan came into being in the name of Islam.

Being an Islamic state, modern art has some limitations, art as a profession is not considered desirable, especially for men. Moreover, it differs from city to city corresponding to the culture of those cities. Islamabad is a relatively newly developed city with a liberal perspective and considerably urban or modern culture therefore, it has less chance of receiving criticism from people for opting for art as a profession as compared to other cities ([Shah, Shah, & Xianfeng, 2018](#)). Career building is influenced by various factors, including education, family type, physical environment, and personal interests.

The word visual culture is an umbrella term that is used for different art forms with reference to culture. Commonly it refers to the art forms which signify cultural history and origin, public engagement, and social objectives. However, the understanding of visual culture is changing across the world due to technological progression, economic development, cultural shift, and rapid urbanism. Generally, visual art includes 2-3-dimensional objects such as sculpture, paintings, film, drama, music, monument, reliefs, murals, and performing art. It is not just a piece of art; preferably it has an extensive relationship between the artist and its content that has a profound impact on an audience. ([Ali, 2017](#)) ([Integrating Gender into Social and Behaviour Change Communication, 2021](#))

The impact of Globalization on contemporary art is very significant. It connects people from different parts of the world and the artists who settled outside their home country, visual art helps them to reconnect with their homeland. There are many Pakistani artists who settled abroad who still connected with Pakistan with their work.

For example, Shazia Sikandar, an American-based Pakistani artist. She discovers the endless depths of miniature paintings in her work. Moreover, the advancement of technology has changed the spread and effect of visual art, globally and locally. ([Kamran, 2017](#))

Research Methodology

This research used a qualitative methodology that enables the researcher to gain access to the experiences of the respondents and their interpretations of them. The purpose of this study is to comprehend the knowledge and experiences of the respondents extensively. In-depth interviews were conducted so that the respondents feel free to share their life experiences. And they also elaborate on their experiences under their perceptions. The researcher applied an inductive approach that allows data to flow and speak without forming preconceived notions. ([Vanderstoep & Johnston, January 2009](#)) ([Creswell, 2007](#)). The artists' names have been mentioned with their consent.

Data collection is one of the most significant steps in the research process as it enables the researcher to discover facts and enhance the quality of the research. Data is collected from 12 top-notch artists in Pakistan. And purposive sampling technique is used to get the needed data. All the respondents are profound professionals in visual arts and have more than 10 years of experience in this field.

Discussion

All respondents were asked about their families' reactions when they found out they wanted to pursue art as a profession. It is organized in a sequence that begins with a brief profile of the respondents, followed by their

responses, and then the analysis. The profile of the respondents is mentioned after their consent. As the respondents are top-notch artists of Pakistan, therefore it is required to mention their experiences with their names.

Mansoor Rahi is a legend in the art world. He was born in West Bengal in 1939. He is the world's leading abstract artist. Celebrated neo-cubist Mansoor Rahi and his artist wife, Hajra Mansoor, live in their beautiful, private art gallery cum studio home within sight of the magnificently green Margalla mountains. Mansoor Rahi and Hajra Mansoor both teach art as well as give art therapy. They have been drawing, painting, and teaching breathtaking art forms for over half a century. ([Mansoor Rahi, 2021](#)) Mansoor Rahi has a large following of students known as Generation Rahi. Many of his students become well-known artists. His extensive research in art is based on his knowledge and experience of his life in Japan, Germany, and France. He has received many awards including President's Pride of Performance in 2008. His significant contribution to art education was a series of talks that he conducted weekly for six years on Pakistan Television to enlighten common viewers about the world of art. He shares his family's reaction as

He said, His family always supported him, and his teachers also appreciated him a lot. He considers himself very blessed and privileged to have Mohammad Kibiri, a distinguished artist, and Abdul Razzaq, a famous artist, as his teachers. Moreover, Zainul Abedin remained an enduring inspiration to him. The appreciation he received from his son (Danish Rahi) in a form of a book, 'RAHI-THE CUBIST LEGEND OF ASIA' was overwhelming for him. According to him, his

son not only wrote it as a writer, but it is also a whole survey of me and my work. He said I believe a man is mortal, kings, warriors all vanished. But, "I realized this book has made me immortal".

Mansoor Rahi is one of the pioneers who worked hard to change the face of art and appreciation of art in Pakistan. As he belongs to an educated family, he got all the support he needed, further his teachers played a vital role in the initial years of his career. Therefore, support from the family is critical, but educational institutes and teachers can play a very influential role in a person's life to choose and grow in this field. Mansoor Rahi's wife, Hajra Mansoor, who studied at Govt. College of Art and Craft Lakhnow in 1964. She established the Karachi School of Arts in Karachi with her sister Rabia Zuberi. She researched the creative synthesis of painting, and her evolutionary phases are Academic Realism, Classism, Oriental Formalism, and Neo-Romanticism. She exhibited her solo shows every year from 1963 to 2008 nationally and internationally. She is the winner of top prizes and awards, specifically the "Chughtai Award" sponsored by the Pakistan National Council of Arts in 1996. She was awarded "Pride of Performance" by the President of Pakistan in 2009 in recognition of her services towards the development of art in Pakistan. She has also declared "Safeer-e-Mashriq" of Pakistan. Hajra Mansoor unfolds the experiences of her life. Her parents were in Pakistan while she was in India with her sister completing her studies at the Government College of Art and Crafts. Her whole family was supportive. she said, "When we were coming to Pakistan after completing the course, we were asked to stay in India because there is no art in

Pakistan. It was 1964 then. My family supports me in everything. And I decided to come to Pakistan and start art activities with my sister Rabia Zuberi" The period Hajra Mansoor is referring to is considered to be the golden period of art in the history of Pakistan. Her family supports her strongly as she not only studied art but is from another country. It shows people have always empowered their women, depending on their educational level and social circle.

However, the response of Jamal Shah is quite different. He is a famous artist, educationist, actor, singer, and writer in Pakistan. He was born into a Pashtun family in 1956 in Quetta, Baluchistan, Pakistan. In 1984, he founded the Fine Arts Department at the University of Baluchistan and directed the department for three years. He also established the Artists Association of Baluchistan in 1985 and was elected the first Chairman of this association. He had done Masters in English Literature from Baluchistan University. He graduated from the National College of Arts NCA, Lahore. He was the first artist who opts for sculpture as a major subject in NCA. Further, he went to Slade School of Fine Arts in London done his master's degree in Fine arts. He established HunerKada, The College of Visual and Performing Arts in Islamabad in 1992. He became a Telenor Pakistan Brand Ambassador and also did television productions (HunerKada Productions).

He explains his family's reaction, "Surprisingly, to my disappointment, the response of my family is not positive when I discussed, my family especially my father stopped me. He said don't become an artist but study medicine, take care of the poor people and served humanity. Art is not a profession, you can do art at any time, but you should have a proper career to secure your

future. My elders convinced me with examples therefore, I select pre-medical subjects in Intermediate. But I never liked it. As a reaction, I start taking music lessons secretly. I used to contemplate whether I should become a doctor or not and my gut feeling was always not to be a doctor. My heart was not in medicine. I don't have the spirit of Mother Teresa. This is not right."

Jama Shah shared his journey of becoming an artist. He explains that he started drawing when he was only two years old. He was exceptionally talented, and his family always appreciated his drawing skills. But he did not get permission from his family. But the experience of his wife and an artist Amna Jamal is quite different. Amna Shah, the wife of Jamal Shah and the director of HunerKada, is a visionary artist, educationist, and philanthropist, based in Islamabad. *"Stainless glass painting was in trend and my mother pushed me to do it. that is how I started. After all, art is not considered a subject to study. so, it was just for fun that instead of doing nothing let's start this. My family has no objection because I was a girl therefore, they were not much worried about my future career. They said just do what you want to do."*

Amna Shah has explained that from her childhood, her mother used to engage her in art activities. She followed and chose art as a career. Her family was very supportive. Her passion for art made her pursue a career in the same field. Art is not considered a formal subject to study for her brothers but apt for her. My next respondent is Imran Abbas. Imran Abbas was born in Islamabad in 1984. He is an exceptionally talented artist and belongs to a well-educated family. His father and sister were poets. Therefore, he considered himself blessed to have a company of

intellectuals and scholars. At a very young age, he joined a kid's program in radio, where he got a chance to polish his abilities and learn new things. He has successfully worked in the national and international arena. He is a brilliant actor, beautiful singer, talented architect, producer, and philanthropist. He is a man of many dimensions. He said, *"It is very important for me to get permission from my family. I belong to an architectural background and when you spend time in any field, your family expects you to do practice in that field. Similarly, my family also wants me to practice architecture. but when I started a new, career in acting they never stop me. I was the youngest in the family and the youngest child usually took advantage of being the youngest."*

In addition, Syed Noor, a Director, Writer, Producer, and Professor at Government College Lahore were one of my respondents. He is a profound Pakistani artist who works and promotes different social issues through visual art. He has done remarkably well since he belonged to a prestigious religious family. They were the "Peers" in their area. However, he never liked it. Because of his sensitive nature, he used to think a lot. Writing stories allowed him to express himself and question traditional ways. In grade seven, he wrote a story about why children pluck flowers? He wrote that when one flower is plucked by a human the other flowers cry because their brother or sister dies. The teacher was very impressed by his story. That story was selected and published in the magazine called "Kohistan". After this Syed Noor realized that he could write. During his college life, he joined the newspaper 'Jung'. A very famous historical writer Naseem Hijazi was the editor. Syed Noor developed a knack for watching

movies and used to think about the craft of movies. Later, when he joined film and movies. His family got very angry. It was totally against their traditions and values to go into this field. He said, "my family was more concerned about their reputation among their "Mureeds." But Syed Noor's persistence and determination did not succumb to the family pressure. In his mind he was clear that his ancestors' work of "Peeri Mureedi" is not real. It is fake and absolutely not for him. In the 1970's he joined the film industry.

Bashir Ahmad is an indispensable bond between traditional miniature practice and its pedagogy methodology. He realized the new demands of modern Visual arts styles. Therefore, he initiates the transformation from traditional to contemporary. One example includes, 'Women Smoking a Hookah'. He is a visiting faculty at HunerKada Islamabad. He explains that his father was an educationist. His father realized art potential in him and put him in this field. He received extensive training, knowledge of miniature painting from Ustand Seikh Shuja Ullah and Haji Sharif. He gives credit to his teachers, who teach him each aspect of miniature painting.

Saadat is a superb painter, Jamal Shah's assistant on many of his projects. He teaches drawing and painting at HunerKada. He belongs to Peshawar and lives in Islamabad. Purely, his experiences are based on the time he spends in Peshawar. He explains that "My childhood inspired me. The family and society I belong to have a great impact on me. I belong to Peshawar, KPK. My school time makes me feel that I cannot do anything My family never supported me at all, they are still against my field. I am alone, doing all the struggle. thanks to Sir Jamal Shah, he acknowledges my talent

and provides me with the opportunity to excel."

Imran Khan is an emerging artist in Pakistan. He has had many national and international exhibitions. He has a degree in fine arts from NCA. His nature is sensitive, so he feels things that others don't notice. He shared his experience as follows. "I used to draw from class three, after eighth grade I started painting. As a result of my drawing and painting, I was mostly beaten by my family, barely passed my classes, and my family forbade me from painting. I locked myself up in the drawing-room. After that, they have never stopped me." He enjoys doing art. Despite his family's objections, he continues to paint. People are under social pressure to choose art as a profession. The family is concerned about the future of a person. Sometimes they take an intense steps to stop their son from opting for art such as beating.

My next respondent is "Nadia Hussain" a famous model, actress, and qualified dentist. She said, her family supports her, and her mother has confidence in her if she decides to opt for modelling and acting as a profession. She will do it well and excel at it. Nadia Hussain belongs to an educated family who believes in supporting their kids equally. Her family practices liberal norms and does not have to conform to gender roles, in fact, they reject them. By allowing her daughter to do modelling. Similarly, "Shazia Solat" is a very talented painter. Born in Islamabad, studied fine arts at Margalla College Islamabad. She joined painting courses conducted by Mansoor Rahi. Her family supported her. She has participated in several solo and group exhibitions of her work. She explains that her family supported her. As she is a woman, her

family is not worried about her securing her future. Currently, she lives in Lahore but will exhibit at the Islamabad PNCA in March 2021.

Aaryan Ismail is a visual artist who works in different mediums like painting, graphic designing. He shares his journey as follows: "My father is a chemistry professor and a self-taught sculptor. My sister and brother also do skilled painting, but they do have other professions. When I decided to choose art as a profession, my family supported me, but they have fears about how I am going to manage my finances. He also said that "From time to time I have been inspired by different artists. When I was a school-going kid, I was inspired by Michelangelo. I used to copy his drawings all the time. Because of that, my skill was upgraded, and I learned a lot of things. My father also supported me in this thing. After studying the arts, I realized that the life of an artist is not easy. It is unclear whether they are in the west, or they are Asian. Artists in ancient times had a very tough life. For example, Picasso has a very tough life. Modigliani has also had a very tough life. He did suicide. American artists who started pop culture also attempted suicide. Artist life is very depressed and full of ups and downs."

Furthermore, Amir Taj is a famous and brilliant artist from Pakistan. His distinctive style of painting, incorporating a minimalist approach with calligraphy makes him unique. He is an artist, a researcher, and an anthropologist, working on various projects nationally. He chose art as a profession and his family supported him because they have an artistic background. They used to meet different artists at a very young age. Their words and work have inspired him.

MS. Anjum Ayub Khan is a renowned printmaker, and painter. She has represented Pakistan nationally and internationally. Born and lives in Islamabad. She went to the National College of Arts NCA Lahore for a master's in fine arts. She has established her studio in D12, where she conducts art classes. She has exhibited in hundreds of solo and group exhibitions. She received various honours, including a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010, three SS Hyder Awards, and many international awards and trophies. She said: "When a person is born, he doesn't plan as such there is no planning at this age. there is no artist in my family. After my matric exams, there is a three-month gap. When I contemplated what I should do at this time, I decided to join an institute where they have started painting classes. When I attended painting classes I really liked it. It was a different experience after that. I started drawing and painting a lot. Even my father arranged for me to have Ehsaan Qureshi as a tutor for NCA. While in intermediate in Pakistan, I won a first-place award in fine arts from FJ College Rawalpindi. I asked my parents if I wanted to go to NCA. My father was OK, but my mother was really against it. She said I never send you there because, in NCA, the environment is very liberal, there are no restrictions and people are very open-minded. After wasting my one year I managed to convince her."

Conclusion

Our society is more supportive of females when they decide to opt for art as a profession. Because being females, they don't have the responsibility of feeding the family. In our society man is the head of the family and he must manage the household financially.

Although male members of society do get support from their families, they also have fears about the future management of the household. Therefore, art is not considered a profession that secures the future of a person. As an artist, Aaryn is well aware of the challenges of this field. In the development of a profession, a person's family education, personal choices and social status all play a crucial role. The place where they live, the geographical setting, and the opportunities they have also affect their career outcomes. People are influenced by the environment in which they live. Consequently, environmental factors influence their decisions. Furthermore, social perceptions also have an effect. Learning usually occurs as a result of external environmental factors. People develop perceptions by understanding the environment in which they live.

Significantly, from the widespread nature of the findings, the social perception of visual art in Pakistan as a profession is not as simple. Social perceptions of visual art are influenced by a variety of factors. A conclusion is strained from the responses of the respondents. It is concluded that gender bias is strongly associated with visual art as a profession. All of my female respondents receive full family support whereas male respondents struggle to obtain permission to pursue visual art as a profession.

Jamal Shah, Syed Noor, Saadat, Aryan and other famous artists unfold the fact that it was not easy for them to enter the visual culture. They have no or less support from their families. Therefore, gender plays a vital role in a selection of a profession. Art as a profession is

considered suitable for girls but not even considered a formal profession for boys. Moreover, family education and the environment in which people live have a significant influence on social learning. So man is the product of his environment. The response of artist Saadat also highlights the impact of environmental factors on the social and cultural backgrounds of people. If you belong to a conservative or traditional society where negative connotations are attached to visual art. It is not easy to opt for it as a profession. Therefore, people receive less or no support from their families. Mona Mehmood is also a product of her surrounding environment, which makes her a person who has the built-in capacity to represent her country, and she chooses visual art as the medium of her expression. To improve our society and gender norms, we should create awareness through visual arts.

In Pakistani society, visual art is not considered a formal profession but more like a leisure pursuit. Women are encouraged to choose art as a career because women are not considered breadwinners for the family. Based on the obtained responses, it can be concluded that art is not regarded as a serious profession in Pakistan. Therefore, even well-known artists like Jamal Shah and Syed Noor have to struggle a lot to pursue art as a career. In the present scenario, young artists still have been going through social pressures to meet their maximum ends. In addition, economic pressure doubles the struggle to achieve the desired results. Change is happening at a very slow pace.

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