

## New Facebook crowd in Pakistan courts controversy – Emrys Schoemaker comments



**Pakistan’s fast-growing Facebook crowd has become embroiled in a gay rights storm after some users adopted the rainbow profile picture without fully understanding the implications behind it.**

With millions of people around the world opting to customise their Facebook profile picture following the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the US, users in Pakistan have found themselves enticed by the colourful fad.

However, some of those who have adopted the flag have been subjected to a tirade of abuse as the implications of the rainbow-clad pictures became apparent.

Amid online debates where adopters of the rainbow flag have been accused of abandoning their faith, some Facebook users are claiming they have been duped by the unfamiliar visual code.

Emrys Schoemaker, a **PhD student in International Development** researching internet usage in Pakistan, says that the relatively new status of social media in the country could have led people to imitate the trend without fully understanding its meaning.

Fewer than one in six are believed to have access to the internet in Pakistan, though telecoms companies are boosting availability by offering free access to Facebook.

“A lot of people don’t know what the flag stands for,” Emrys said. “One day-labourer said he felt tricked after liking a friend’s rainbow profile picture and later discovering it was for gay marriage.”

Emrys’ research, which looks at how religious minorities construct identity through social media, has found that while people don’t always understand the meaning of global memes, they are adept at using new technologies to maintain traditional practices.



The intended design of technologies, as well as specific social media trends and messages, are often lost in translation as users bring their own meaning to messages and their systems.

Consequently, rainbow-themed pictures might be understood as colourful images, as a celebration of sexual equality, or as an attempt to trick people who already feel their country and religion are under attack.

**See more at 'Pakistan gets flustered over Facebook's gay rights meme', The Guardian.**

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