

Visual Narratives of Sound: A Qualitative Analysis of Music Album Cover Design in Pakistan (1980-2025)

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Received: 09-10-2025

Revised: 16-11-2025

Accepted: 24-12-2025

Published: 12-01-2026

ABSTRACT

This study presents a qualitative analysis of music album cover design in Pakistan from 1980 to 2025. Drawing upon semiotic analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, and visual rhetorical frameworks, this research examines how album cover design has functioned as a site of cultural negotiation, identity construction, and visual communication within the Pakistani music industry. The study traces the evolution of visual aesthetics across musical genres including pop, rock, Sufi rock, heavy metal, folk fusion, and hip hop, revealing how cover design has both reflected and shaped perceptions of Pakistani musical identity. Through purposive sampling of album covers from major labels and independent releases, this research identifies recurring visual vocabularies, typographic conventions, and iconographic patterns that distinguish Pakistani album design. Findings suggest that album cover design in Pakistan has served as a form of visual communication that negotiates Western and indigenous aesthetic traditions while constructing national and subcultural identities. The study contributes to the underexplored field of South Asian visual design culture and provides foundational documentation for future archival efforts.

Keywords: Album cover art, Graphic design, Visual communication, Pakistani music, Multimodal analysis, Typography, Cultural identity, Design history

INTRODUCTION

The album cover, since its emergence as a commercial and artistic artifact in the mid-twentieth century, has occupied a unique position at the intersection of visual art, commercial design, and musical expression. As a form of graphic communication, album covers must simultaneously attract consumer attention, convey information about musical content, and establish visual identity for artists operating within competitive commercial markets. In the Western context, scholars have extensively documented how album covers function as cultural texts, reflecting and shaping social movements, aesthetic trends, and identity formations across decades of popular music history (Jones & Sorger, 1999; Inglis, 2001). However, the visual culture of music packaging in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, remains a significantly underexplored domain within academic discourse on design history and visual communication. This absence is particularly striking given Pakistan's rich and vibrant musical history, which has produced internationally acclaimed artists and distinctive genres while navigating complex political, religious, and cultural pressures.

Pakistan's music industry emerged from the partition of British India in 1947, inheriting a cultural legacy that combined indigenous musical traditions with colonial influences. The subsequent decades witnessed the development of a distinct Pakistani musical identity, punctuated by periods of authoritarian suppression, particularly during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977 to 1988), whose Islamization policies severely restricted musical expression and visual representation. It was within this constrained environment that Pakistani pop and rock music experienced its most significant emergence, with bands like Vital Signs

and the sibling duo Nazia and Zoheb Hassan creating visual identities that negotiated between Western pop aesthetics and local cultural sensibilities.

The significance of studying Pakistani album cover design extends beyond aesthetic documentation. Album covers in Pakistan have functioned as sites of cultural negotiation, identity construction, and visual communication in ways that differ from their Western counterparts. The constraints imposed by religious conservatism, the negotiation between English and Urdu typography, and the material limitations of local printing technologies have shaped a distinctive visual culture that merits scholarly attention.

Problem Statement

Despite the cultural significance of Pakistani music, the visual dimensions of this production have received virtually no systematic scholarly attention. While the music itself has been the subject of journalistic coverage and some academic analysis, the album covers that packaged and visually represented this music have been treated as ephemeral commercial artifacts rather than cultural texts worthy of study. This oversight represents a significant gap in understanding Pakistani visual culture, design history, and the relationship between sound and image in South Asian popular culture. The problem is compounded by the absence of accessible archives. Unlike Western music industries, which have benefited from institutional preservation efforts, Pakistani album covers exist primarily in private collections or in deteriorating physical storage.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

1. How has music album cover design in Pakistan functioned as a site of visual communication, cultural negotiation, and identity construction from 1980 to 2025?

Research Objectives

This study addresses identified gaps through the following objectives:

1. To document and critically analyze the evolution of album cover design aesthetics in Pakistan from 1980 through 2025.
2. To identify, categorize, and interpret recurring visual vocabularies, iconographic patterns, and typographic conventions characterizing Pakistani album art across different genres.
3. To evaluate how album cover design has functioned as a medium for cultural negotiation and identity construction within Pakistan's socio-political context.
4. To synthesize foundational documentation supporting future archival and preservation efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Album Cover Design as Cultural Text

The scholarly study of album cover design emerged primarily within Western academic contexts, building upon broader traditions of visual culture studies, design history, and popular music research. This body of scholarship recognizes album covers as significant artifacts of graphic design that mediate between musical

content and audience reception through visual communication strategies. Inglis (2001) established foundational frameworks for understanding album covers as visual manifestations of musical content, arguing that covers function not merely as protective packaging but as integral components of the musical experience that actively shape listener expectations and interpretations before any sound is heard.

Jones and Sorger (1999) extended this analysis by examining how album covers participate in constructing musical genres and subcultures, arguing that visual codes help audiences identify with particular musical communities. Their work on punk and heavy metal album art demonstrated how genre-specific visual conventions, including typography, color palettes, and imagery, function as markers of subcultural identity recognized by both producers and consumers.

Recent empirical research has established quantifiable relationships between album cover design elements and musical genres. Dorochowicz and Kostek (2019) conducted statistical analysis of 564 album covers representing 34 music genres from nine countries, examining typographic, compositional, and coloristic parameters. Their findings demonstrate that album covers serve as genre-specific visual signatures creating coherent relationships between visual and auditory content.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) developed multimodal discourse theory providing analytical tools for examining album covers as complex texts combining visual, typographic, and material elements. Their concept of visual grammar offers systematic approaches to analyzing compositional structures, including element positioning, framing, and text-image relationships. The multimodal approach has been applied to Pakistani music contexts by Iftikhar et al. (2021), who applied Machin's framework (Machin & Ledin, 2020) for visual semiotic analysis to Pakistani pop music CD covers, examining how participants, objects, settings, gaze, and color function as meaning-making resources.

Pakistani Music Industry: Historical Context

The history of Pakistan's music industry provides essential context for understanding album cover design development. Journalists including Paracha (2014) have traced Pakistani popular music's trajectory from post-partition emergence through phases of growth, suppression, and resurgence. The industry's visual culture must be understood within this narrative, particularly the impact of the Zia-ul-Haq era, during which music videos were banned, female performers faced restrictions, and popular music was forced underground.

EMI Pakistan, established as a subsidiary of the global EMI Group, dominated the Pakistani recorded music industry for decades, releasing commercially significant albums in pop and rock history. The label's production standards and design conventions established templates influencing the broader industry. The cassette era, spanning the early 1980s through late 1990s, represented peak commercial reach and a distinctive period in visual culture. The cassette format's constraints shaped aesthetic choices differently from LP-centric Western design traditions. Vernacular design aesthetics in Pakistan have been characterized by bold typography, saturated colors, and distinctive conventions reflecting both material constraints and local visual preferences (Zaidi, 2009).

Visual Identity and Cultural Negotiation

Postcolonial visual culture theory provides frameworks for understanding how Pakistani album covers negotiate between Western and indigenous aesthetic traditions. Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity illuminates how Pakistani musicians and designers engage with global visual conventions while

maintaining local identity markers. Hall's (1997) work on representation and identity construction helps understand how album covers participate in forming Pakistani national and subcultural identities.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining three complementary approaches. Following Barthes (1977) and Chandler (2022), semiotic analysis examines album covers as sign systems producing meaning through denotation and connotation. This approach analyzes iconographic elements, including recurring images, symbols, and visual motifs carrying culturally specific meanings. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse framework provides tools for examining how different semiotic modes interact to create meaning, allowing analysis of compositional structures, information value, and relative salience. Visual rhetoric, as theorized by Foss (2004), examines how visual texts function persuasively, constructing arguments through visual means and positioning artists and audiences within cultural frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which holds that meaning is socially constructed and must be understood within its specific cultural and historical context (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The research combines archival analysis and visual analysis methods to construct a comprehensive understanding of Pakistani album cover design as both designed artifacts and cultural documents. Purposive sampling was employed to select album covers representing different decades (1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, 2020s), genres (pop, rock, Sufi rock, folk fusion, hip hop, metal), and production contexts (major label releases, independent productions, international releases) from 1980 to 2025. Visual analysis followed the multimodal framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), examining compositional structures, typography, color, and iconographic elements. Thematic analysis following (Braun, 2006) was used to identify patterns across the corpus.

FINDINGS

The visual design of Pakistani music album covers has evolved through distinct phases over the past four decades. The following sections chronologically outline major developments in each decade, addressing RO1 (documenting and analyzing evolution) and RO2 (identifying visual vocabularies and patterns).

The 1980s: Foundations of Pakistani Pop Visual Identity

The sibling duo Nazia and Zoheb Hassan, whose debut album *Disco Deewane* (1980) became the best-selling Asian pop record of its era, established visual conventions that influenced Pakistani pop aesthetics for the following decade. Semiotically, the album's cover presents Nazia Hassan in a confident, Western-style pose with a microphone, her hair in youthful braids, against a backdrop of concert photography. No overt South Asian visual markers appear; instead, the multimodal composition layers elements like HMV shop signage, producer Biddu's credit, and performance stills in a layout indistinguishable from international disco releases (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Glamorous studio photography, fashionable clothing, and sophisticated lighting techniques all convey a cosmopolitan image that deliberately eschews regional aesthetics in favor of global disco styling. Rhetorically, this complete embrace of Western visual conventions positioned Pakistani pop music as a globally competitive product.

Figure 1

Album Cover of Disco Deewane (1980) by Nazia and Zoheb Hassan

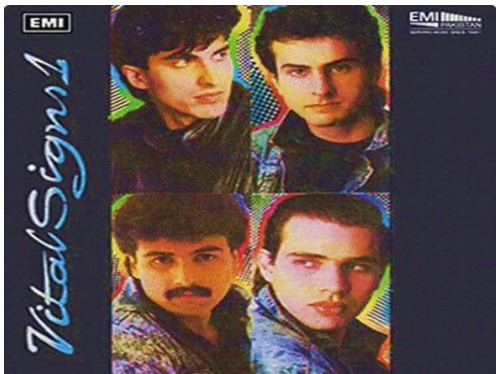


Note. This cover established the cosmopolitan visual template for Pakistani pop music throughout the 1980s. The Western-style pose, concert photography backdrop, and absence of South Asian visual markers positioned Pakistani pop as globally competitive.

In contrast, the rock band Vital Signs (formed 1986) developed a visual identity emphasizing band photography and patriotic motifs. Their debut *Vital Signs 1* (1989) established conventions for Pakistani rock cover art, featuring a tightly cropped group portrait that emphasizes camaraderie and authenticity. A halftone texture overlay unifies the image, paralleling the technological mediation seen on Talking Heads' *Remain in Light* (1980). The intimate framing highlights collective identity over individual stardom; each member's direct gaze creates connection with the viewer, a convention similarly employed in post-punk cover portraiture such as The Sound's *Jeopardy* (1980). The desaturated color grading aligns with contemporaneous Western rock photography conventions (Dorochowicz & Kostek, 2019), effectively situating Vital Signs within the visual lexicon of international rock.

Figure 2

Album Cover of Vital Signs 1 (1989) by Vital Signs



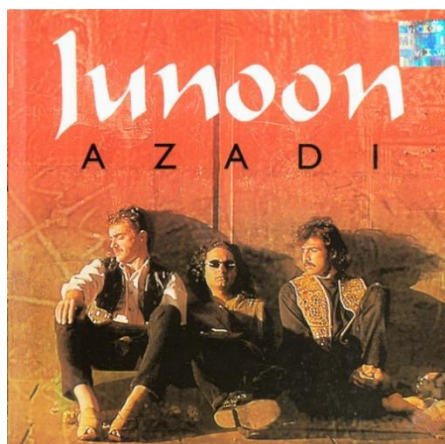
Note. The tightly cropped group portrait with halftone texture established conventions for Pakistani rock cover art, emphasizing band camaraderie and rock authenticity through visual strategies paralleling international post-punk aesthetics.

The 1990s: Golden Age of Rock and International Crossover

The 1990s represented the peak of Pakistani rock music production and a highly creative period of album cover design. Unprecedented artistic freedom following the end of martial law in 1988 enabled musicians and designers to experiment with visual languages that had previously been suppressed (Paracha, 2014). Two major threads of album art emerged: the hybrid Sufi rock aesthetic pioneered by Junoon, and the cosmopolitan world music presentation of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's albums for international markets.

Figure 3

Album Cover of Azadi (1997) by Junoon



Note. The terracotta and ochre color palette evokes Sufi spirituality while the blend of Western rock attire with traditional embroidered elements exemplifies the hybrid visual identity of Pakistani Sufi rock.

The rock band Junoon, formed in 1990, pioneered Sufi rock and developed a visual identity merging Western rock aesthetics with South Asian mystical imagery. The cover of Junoon's breakthrough album *Azadi* (1997) exemplifies this blend: the three band members are posed against rich terracotta and ochre tones that evoke earthiness and spirituality. Semiotically, the warm red-orange textured background connotes the passion of Sufi philosophy, while one member's traditional embroidered vest serves as a localized cultural marker amid otherwise Western rock attire (Barthes, 1977). This visual strategy parallels broader world music album covers of the era, where artists like Youssou N'Dour and Salif Keita balanced indigenous elements with international pop-rock conventions to appeal to global audiences.

Figure 4

Album Cover of Duur (2000) by Strings

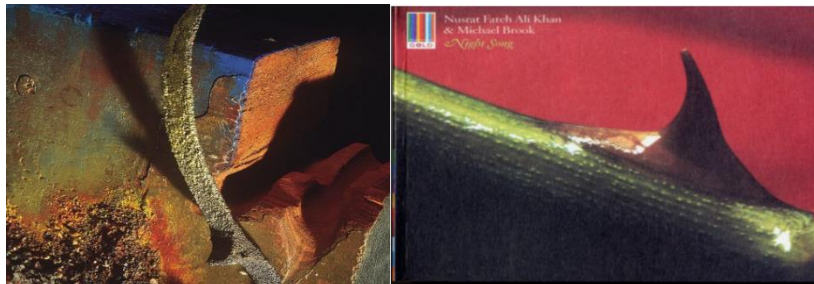


Note. This cover exemplifies softer visual aesthetics developed by Strings. Naturalistic lighting and intimate composition emphasize acoustic authenticity and emotional accessibility. The minimalist design reflects the band's mature sound.

The international releases of legendary qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in the 1990s through Peter Gabriel's Real World Records represent a distinct visual phenomenon in Pakistani music history. The groundbreaking *Mustt Mustt* (1990), Khan's fusion project with Canadian producer Michael Brook, features cover art drawn from a contemporary abstract painting (*Chant*) by British artist Russell Mills. Mills, known for designing album covers for Brian Eno and David Sylvian, contributed layered textures of curved metallic forms against weathered stone surfaces. Semiotically, this absence of representational imagery resists exotic stereotypes, instead positioning Nusrat's music within the visual vocabulary of avant-garde art and ambient music (Chandler, 2022).

Figure 5

Album Covers of Mustt Mustt (1990) and Night Song (1996) by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan



Note. Russell Mills' abstract artwork for Real World Records deliberately avoided Orientalist imagery, positioning Pakistani qawwali within the visual vocabulary of contemporary art and ambient music.

The 2000s: Battle of the Bands and Concept Albums

The 2000s brought significant transformation to Pakistan's music industry, including the advent of televised music competitions and the rise of independent rock and folk acts. Entity Paradigm (EP) emerged from the inaugural Pepsi Battle of the Bands competition and released *Irtiqa* (2003), widely regarded as Pakistan's first mainstream concept album. The album's cover art introduces a darker, conceptual aesthetic to Pakistani rock, drawing heavily on alternative and nu-metal visual conventions prevalent in early-2000s Western rock (Jones & Sorger, 1999). The design features organic forms rendered in bold red against distressed black textures, with stylized stencil-like typography, directly paralleling contemporaneous nu-metal album designs like Linkin Park's *Hybrid Theory* (2000).

Figure 6

Album Cover of Irtiqa (2003) by Entity Paradigm

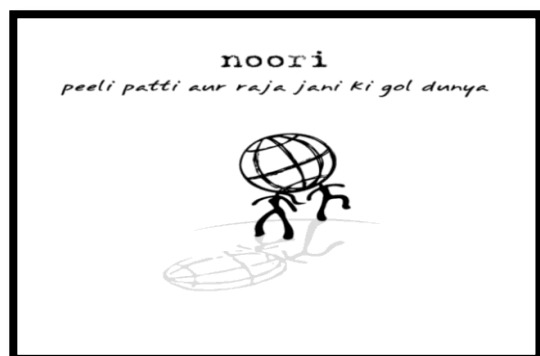


Note. Pakistan's first mainstream concept album employed darker, conceptual aesthetics drawing on nu-metal visual conventions, with organic red forms against distressed black textures paralleling Western alternative rock design.

Noori's second studio album *Peeli Patti Aur Raja Jani Ki Gol Dunya* (2005) features cover art that is a striking departure from conventional rock imagery, instead employing intertextuality with a famous Pakistani travelogue.

Figure 7

Album Cover of Peeli Patti Aur Raja Jani Ki Gol Dunya (2005) by Noori



Note. The intertextual reference to Ibne Insha's travelogue *Dunya Gol Hai* represents a distinctive strategy of grounding rock album design in Pakistani literary heritage.

The cover's central graphic is a hand-drawn globe with legs, directly referencing the cover of Ibne Insha's *Dunya Gol Hai* (1982), a beloved Urdu travelogue. This whimsical globe-with-feet illustration establishes a literary and local cultural link highly unusual for rock album design, demonstrating how Pakistani designers negotiated between global rock conventions and indigenous cultural references.

The band Overload's self-titled debut album *Overload* (2006) introduced yet another innovative approach to Pakistani rock visuals. The cover design abandons the typical band photo or singular illustration in favor of a grid-style collage: an array of fragmented photographs and textures arranged in mosaic form. Small images of musical instruments, band members, urban architectural details, and abstract forms are tiled without a clear hierarchy, creating a dense patchwork. This collage aesthetic aligns with international psychedelic and experimental rock conventions, paralleling strategies employed by bands like Radiohead, many of whose album covers designed by Stanley Donwood feature similar collage and cartographic fragmentation techniques (Foss, 2004). Semiotically, *Overload*'s grid of disjointed images signifies a multiplicity of sensory experiences, reflecting the band's percussion-heavy, experimental sound which melds traditional drumming with rock.

Figure 8

Album Cover of Overload (2006) by Overload



Note. The grid-style collage of fragmented photographs and textures aligns with international psychedelic rock conventions. The mosaic composition featuring instruments, band members, and urban details creates visual complexity paralleling the band's experimental percussion-driven sound.

Zeb and Haniya's debut album *Chup* (2008) presented a distinctive visual approach that blended photographic realism with hand-drawn illustration. The cover features the two musicians seated on outdoor steps within a scene that is part photograph and part pencil sketch, creating a liminal space between reality and illustration. This hybrid aesthetic reflects the album's musical sensibility: an intimate fusion of Pashto and Urdu folk traditions with contemporary acoustic music.

Figure 9

Album Cover of Chup (2008) by Zeb and Haniya



Note. The hybrid photograph-illustration aesthetic creates visual liminality reflecting the album's fusion of Pashto and Urdu folk traditions with contemporary acoustic sensibilities.

Pop, folk and ethnic band Khumariyaan, formed in 2009 in conflict-affected Peshawar amid Taliban insurgency and regional instability, cultivated a stark visual identity that frames music-making as cultural resistance. At a time when extremist actors reportedly restricted or banned music in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, targeted music markets, and intimidated performers, the public performance of Pashtun musical traditions operated as a visible refusal of cultural erasure. The band's slogan, "Existence Is Resistance," functions as an explicit ideological anchor, positioning cultural production not as leisure but as a form of oppositional practice against forces seeking to suppress indigenous expression.

Visually, the branding adopts a minimalist, high-contrast aesthetic: black silhouettes of Pashtun instruments, including the rubab, zerbaghali, and the acoustic guitars on the extremes of the image. These instruments are rendered as bold, easily legible icons. In semiotic terms, these silhouettes operate as indexical cues to an endangered musical heritage, asserting continuity and presence under conditions of threat. Their abstraction (silhouette rather than detailed depiction) elevates the instruments from specific artifacts to portable symbols, enhancing recognizability, reproducibility, and circulation across platforms.

Figure 10

Visual Identity of Khumariyaan with "Existence Is Resistance" Tagline (c. 2009)



Note. The stark black-and-white design featuring traditional instrument silhouettes positions musical practice as cultural resistance in conflict-affected regions.

The 2010s: Digital Transformation and Professional Design

The shift from physical to digital music distribution fundamentally transformed album cover design practices in Pakistan during the 2010s. As the industry embraced CDs and then streaming platforms, cover art had to function at multiple scales, from full-size prints to tiny digital thumbnails, mirroring global changes in music consumption. This era also saw the rise of professional graphic designers specializing in album art and independent artists producing high-quality visuals without major label support.

Kaavish's debut album *Gunkali* (2009), designed by Sophia Khan and Maheen Meenai, represents sophisticated integration of traditional and contemporary visual languages. The album title *Gunkali* refers to a morning raga in Hindustani classical music, and the designers created a logo that integrates Urdu calligraphy of "Gunkali" into a stylized sitar silhouette. Semiotically, this hybrid logo immediately signals connection to classical music tradition within a modern graphic framework.

Figure 11

Album Cover and Packaging of Gunkali (2010) by Kaavish

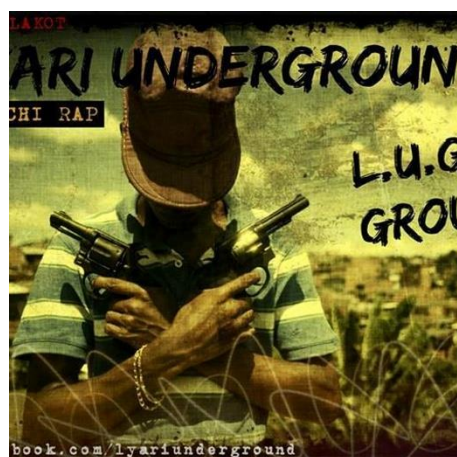


Note. Designed by Sophia Khan and Maheen Meenai. The logo integrating Urdu calligraphy with sitar silhouette exemplifies sophisticated fusion of traditional and contemporary visual languages.

Karachi's Lyari Underground (LUG) burst onto the scene in 2014, introducing visual conventions drawn from global hip hop culture while infusing them with distinctly local elements. LUG's imagery combines familiar hip hop design codes (graffiti-style typography, gritty urban backdrops, street fashion) with references specific to Karachi's working-class Lyari neighborhood. This visual language explicitly draws on the legacy of Houston's Pen and Pixel Graphics, whose maximalist Southern U.S. rap album covers celebrated aspirational and dangerous imagery.

Figure 12

Visual Identity Artwork for Lyari Underground (LUG), circa 2014



Note. The fusion of global hip hop visual codes with Karachi working-class aesthetics demonstrates how Pakistani artists adapted international genre conventions to local contexts.

Mooroo's debut album *Pehli* (2015), designed by prominent Pakistani artist Samya Arif, exemplifies the vibrant illustrated aesthetic emerging in digital era Pakistani music. The artwork features a stylized portrait with psychedelic elements: Mooroo's face is split into two stylistic halves, one side in naturalistic flesh tones, the other composed of geometric turquoise shapes. This approach parallels trends in international indie music design, notably the resurgence of hand-crafted psychedelic illustration by designers like Leif Podhajsky.

Figure 13

Album Cover of Pehli (2015) by Mooroo



Note. Designed by Samya Arif. The bifurcated portrait with psychedelic elements exemplifies the vibrant illustrated aesthetic emerging in digital era Pakistani indie music.

The 2020s: Illustration Renaissance and Geographic Branding

The early 2020s have witnessed a flowering of sophisticated illustration and design in Pakistani album artwork, paralleling a global illustration renaissance in music packaging (Julier, 2017). After a decade dominated by slick photographic covers, many artists returned to hand-crafted visuals, giving album art renewed importance as an artistic statement.

The Lahore-based rock band Karakoram (named after the Karakoram mountain range in northern Pakistan) built a visual identity closely tied to Pakistani geography. Their debut album *Ibtida* (2020), with cover art by Azeem Hamid, features a stark white silhouette of a mountain peak against a textured deep-blue background, with custom angular typography echoing mountain forms. Semiotically, the white peak icon directly indexes the snow-capped summits of the Karakoram range, grounding the band's identity in the national landscape. This geographic branding strategy parallels approaches employed by Icelandic acts like Sigur Ros.

Figure 14

Album Cover of Ibtida (2020) and Single Artwork for Kyun (2022) by Karakoram

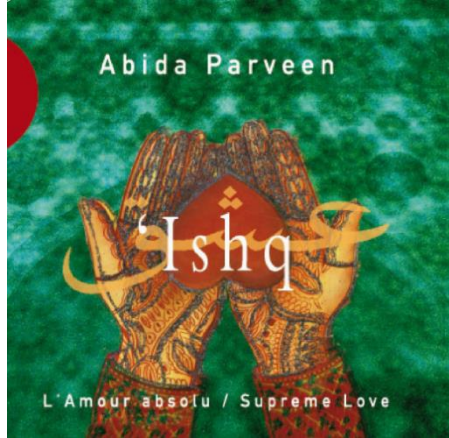


Note. Illustrated and designed by Azeem Hamid. The geographic branding strategy using mountain silhouettes grounds artistic identity in Pakistani national landscape.

Abida Parveen's album *Ishq* (2023), subtitled *L'Amour Absolu/Supreme Love* and released through a Paris-based label, demonstrates how contemporary Sufi releases maintain visual traditions established in earlier decades. The cover features a pair of henna-adorned hands cupped together in a devotional pose against a rich emerald-green textured background, with Urdu calligraphy integrated into the composition. This imagery closely mirrors the iconic upraised hand motif from Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's *Star Rise* (1997) cover, creating deliberate visual continuity across decades.

Figure 15

Album Cover of Ishq (2023) by Abida Parveen



Note. The devotional hand imagery maintains visual continuity with 1990s Sufi music packaging while the bilingual French-English subtitle indicates international market positioning.

Samya Arif's artwork for Mekaal Hasan Band's Rivayat series (2023) demonstrates sophisticated synthesis of traditional and contemporary visual languages. The Rivayat project, meaning "tradition," discovers local talent whose commitment to traditional music spans generations, employing design that honors roots-based music while appealing to contemporary audiences. Arif's illustration style brings visibility to working-class musicians often overlooked by mainstream media, using vibrant colors and detailed portraiture to celebrate their artistry.

Figure 16

Album Cover of Rivayat (2023) by Mekaal Hasan Band

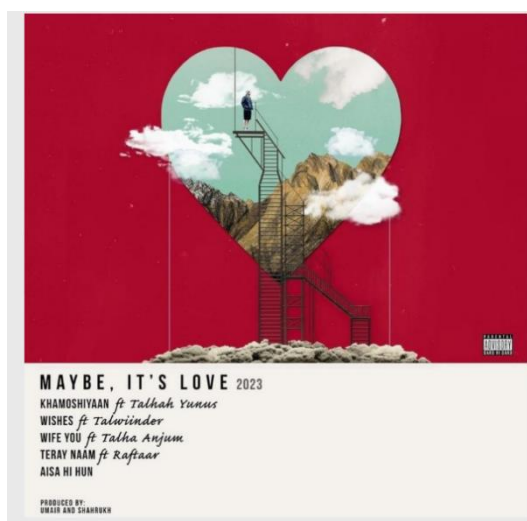


Note. Illustrated by Samya Arif. The design honors traditional musicians through vibrant illustration, synthesizing folk heritage with contemporary visual languages to appeal to modern audiences.

Hassan Raheem's *Maybe, It's Love* (2023), produced by Umair and Shahrukh under the Dard Hi Dard label, represents the visual aesthetic of Pakistan's burgeoning lo-fi and bedroom pop movement. The cover presents a surrealist composition: a lone figure stands atop a staircase leading into a heart-shaped portal, beyond which mountains and clouds are visible. The scene is rendered in warm, hazy red tones with a collage-like digital technique that gives it a deliberately DIY, retro feel. This visual style aligns closely with the global bedroom pop aesthetic established by artists like Clairo, whose cover art and promotional visuals often feature grainy film photography, pastel colors, and intentionally imperfect design elements to signal intimacy and authenticity. Semiotically, Raheem's surreal staircase-to-heart imagery suggests a journey into emotional interiority, inviting listeners into the artist's personal, romantic reveries. The visual-to-sound alignment creates authenticity signaling where intimate production values correspond to personal, candid imagery.

Figure 17

Album Cover of Maybe, It's Love (2023) by Hassan Raheem



Note. The surrealist lo-fi aesthetic featuring a figure ascending stairs into a heart-shaped portal aligns with global bedroom pop visual conventions, signaling intimacy and DIY authenticity through deliberately imperfect, collage-like digital manipulation.

Bayaan's album *Safar* (2024), with cover illustration by Hafsa Ashfaq, represents the most elaborate illustrated album cover in contemporary Pakistani music. The densely detailed artwork incorporates numerous elements (mountains, birds, compass, cassette tape, human hands) arranged in a rich, storybook-like composition. This maximalist approach counters the minimalist trend dominant in streaming era design, paralleling the hyperpop movement's "horror vacui" aesthetic.

of cosmopolitan modernity that contested the prevailing atmosphere of cultural conservatism. Similarly, Vital Signs' patriotic album visuals operated within what might be termed a "visual diplomacy," simultaneously appeasing regime preferences while legitimizing space for Western-inflected pop music.

This pattern of strategic visual negotiation persisted across subsequent decades, evolving in sophistication as political conditions shifted. The underground metal and hip hop scenes of the 2000s and 2010s deployed album art as instruments of subcultural differentiation, employing aggressive aesthetics that simultaneously rejected mainstream Pakistani norms while forging transnational connections with global genre communities. Lyari Underground's fusion of Houston-derived hip hop visual codes with Karachi working-class imagery exemplifies what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe as multimodal meaning-making the strategic combination of genre conventions with localized signifiers to construct distinctive cultural positions.

Negotiating Design Traditions

Central to understanding Pakistani album cover design is the persistent negotiation between Western popular music conventions and indigenous aesthetic traditions a dynamic that exemplifies Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space" where cultural meanings are neither purely local nor global but productively hybrid. This negotiation manifests most visibly in typographic practice. The creative combination of English and Urdu scripts observed throughout the corpus required designers to balance divergent writing systems carrying distinct cultural connotations: romanized Urdu signaling youth culture and transnational aspiration; Nastaliq calligraphy invoking traditional authority and spiritual authenticity. The evolution from predominantly English-text covers in early pop to the deliberate incorporation of Urdu calligraphy in 1990s Sufi rock reflects shifting negotiations of national identity within increasingly globalized cultural markets. Contemporary releases continue this negotiation through evolved strategies: digital design tools enable more universal imagery and minimal text aimed at cross-linguistic communication, while subtle localized elements color palettes derived from truck art traditions, compositional structures referencing Mughal miniature conventions allow designers to embed indigenous aesthetic DNA within ostensibly global-looking designs.

Genre-Specific Visual Languages and Subcultural Formation

Consistent with Dorochowicz and Kostek's (2019) empirical findings on genre-visual correlations, Pakistani musical genres developed distinct visual vocabularies functioning as markers of subcultural identity. These conventions operate what Jones and Sorger (1999) term "visual passports" immediately recognizable aesthetic codes that signal community membership to initiated audiences while simultaneously excluding outsiders. The significance of these genre-specific visual languages extends beyond mere marketing taxonomy; they constitute what Hall (1997) describes as representational practices through which cultural identities are constructed and contested. The emergence of Khumariyaan's stark instrument silhouettes as symbols of cultural resistance, or Hassan Raheem's lo-fi aesthetic signaling intimate authenticity, demonstrates how Pakistani artists have deployed genre conventions not merely to categorize their music but to articulate specific cultural positions within contested social terrain (Dorochowicz & Kostek, 2019).

Material Conditions and Vernacular Innovation

A significant theoretical contribution of this study concerns the relationship between material constraints and aesthetic innovation. Following Julier's (2017) conception of design culture as shaped by economic and technological conditions, the evolution of Pakistani album art reveals how material limitations fostered

distinctive vernacular aesthetics rather than merely producing inferior versions of Western designs. The cassette format's dimensional constraints (Zaidi, 2009). necessitated bold, legible designs that, combined with local printing limitations, produced what Zaidi (2009) characterizes as a resourceful vernacular aesthetic. Rather than viewing these constraints as deficiencies, they should be understood as productive limitations that generated creative solutions, loud colors, collage techniques, and improvised typography representing not failed imitation of Western standards but innovative responses to specific material conditions. The contemporary transition to digital distribution introduces new constraints around scalability and platform-specific optimization, yet designers continue demonstrating adaptive creativity, as evidenced by the maximalist illustration of Bayaan's Safar countering prevailing minimalist trends (Julier, 2017).

Emerging Design Culture and Professional Recognition

A notable trajectory evident in the corpus concerns the professionalization and increasing visibility of design labor within Pakistan's music industry. Whereas Western music industries have long celebrated album cover designers as creative figures, Storm Thorgerson, Peter Saville, and Stanley Donwood achieving recognition approaching that of the musicians themselves, Pakistani designers historically remained anonymous or uncredited. The emergence of named designers in contemporary releases, particularly figures such as Samya Arif, Hafsa Ashfaq, and Azeem Hamid, signals a significant cultural shift in how visual creative labor is valued and attributed. Following Julier's (2017) conception of design culture, this shift suggests album covers increasingly function as starting points for broader visual identity development, with designers recognized as collaborators rather than anonymous service providers.

Implications for Design Practice and Scholarship

This study extends the history of graphic design by documenting a previously under-examined corpus of work and revealing sophisticated visual problem-solving within a challenging cultural context. The strategies developed by Pakistani designers for negotiating between Western and indigenous traditions, for creating compelling visual identities under material and political constraints, and for communicating effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries offer transferable insights for contemporary design practice in postcolonial and globalized contexts. The vernacular aesthetics of the cassette era particularly merit serious reconsideration: rather than viewing the bold colors, collage techniques, and improvised typography of 1980s and 1990s Pakistani album covers as deficient imitations of Western designs, design scholars and practitioners should recognize these works as exemplifying creative constraint-driven innovation a lesson increasingly relevant to contemporary sustainable and frugal design discourse (Julier, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first comprehensive scholarly analysis of music album cover design in Pakistan, charting the evolution of visual conventions across four decades and multiple musical genres. The findings address the central research question by demonstrating that album cover design in Pakistan has operated as a significant site of visual communication, cultural negotiation, and identity construction functioning not merely as commercial packaging but as contested cultural text participating in broader negotiations of Pakistani identity, modernity, and authenticity.

The analysis fulfills the stated research objectives through four principal contributions. First, the documentation of aesthetic evolution (RO1) reveals how Pakistani album art developed distinctive visual vocabularies successfully negotiating between Western popular music conventions and indigenous aesthetic traditions, exemplifying what Bhabha (1994) theorizes as productive cultural hybridity. Second,

the identification of genre-specific visual conventions (RO2) demonstrates how these function as markers of identity and community belonging, comparable to patterns documented in Western music industries (Bhabha, 1994). RO2 was addressed through the identification of genre-specific visual conventions functioning as markers of identity and community belonging, comparable to the genre-specific visual languages documented in Western music industries (Jones & Sorger, 1999). Material and technological constraints, particularly during the cassette era, shaped aesthetic choices in unique ways, producing vernacular styles that should be recognized as creative achievements in their own right (Zaidi, 2009). Third, the evaluation of cultural negotiation processes (RO3) shows how album cover design has functioned as a form of visual cultural assertion, providing expressive means for articulating visions of modernity, cosmopolitanism, regional identity, and subcultural affiliation within Pakistan's contested socio-political terrain (Hall, 1997). From the glamorous pop imagery of the 1980s challenging Zia-era conservatism, through the mystical iconography of 1990s Sufi rock, to the gritty street photography of contemporary hip hop, album covers have served as contested sites where competing visions of Pakistani culture are articulated through graphic design.

Fourth, the documentation compiled herein (RO4) provides foundational material for future archival initiatives addressing an urgent preservation need. Much of Pakistan's music design history exists only in deteriorating physical formats or in the memories of industry veterans; without systematic documentation and preservation, significant portions of this cultural record face potential loss. Future research might productively extend this analysis to earlier periods, investigate individual designer practices through oral history methodologies, or conduct comparative analysis with neighboring South Asian countries. The theoretical frameworks and empirical findings presented here provide foundation for such investigations while contributing to broader scholarly understanding of South Asian visual culture.

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