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# Compliance and resistance: An investigation into the construction of gender identities by Pakistani women on Facebook

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## ABSTRACT

Facebook has recently gained popularity among young, digitally literate and predominantly urban Pakistanis. Such social networking sites allow users the freedom to express themselves using usernames, visuals and topics of their own choice. In this article, I examine how Pakistani Facebook users mobilize such resources in their identity work. Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis, I investigate how Pakistani women construct their gender identities on Facebook using visual and linguistic resources. The results revealed the significant impact of Facebook on the socio-cultural and linguistic norms of discourse in Pakistan that enables women to challenge established communication models while they simultaneously reinforce traditional gender models.

**KEYWORDS** Facebook; gender identities; multimodal discourse analysis; Pakistan; women

## Introduction

Social media provide people with platforms for building and maintaining social relations with other individuals, regardless of age, language, ethnicity, color, region, sex or religion (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The popularity of social media resides in the diverse range of resources such as audios, videos, visuals, text and gifs that are on offer for online communication. However, these also offer a means of communication that facilitates transgression of traditional gendered social interactions. This is especially important contexts like Pakistan, where women who choose to express their individuality, assert rights, exercise freedom of choice, voice opinions openly, and move in the public sphere among or with men, all of which may often be looked down

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upon, while their defiance of traditional gender roles is interpreted as a sign of loose morals and bad character (Salam, 2011). International and national social media campaigns, for instance, #BringBackOurGirls, #MeToo; #JusticeforZainab, have highlighted this instrumental use of social media. Such campaigns, which are meant to raise awareness – often on taboo subjects such as child pornography and rape – give voice to previously marginalized and disenfranchised groups (e.g. female assault victims) and offer possibilities for resisting mainstream hegemonic discourses. They have also shown that social media is a powerful tool for propagating and/or questioning ideology. Scholars like Halpern and Gibbs (2013) have argued that online social networks have contributed to societal transformation by actively enabling social and political debate. Researchers, such as Al-Saggaf (2011), have also reported that social media platforms offer women a space not only to raise awareness on issues important to them, but also to exercise their freedom of expression, call for gender equality, bring about cultural change and empower themselves.

While social media can be used as a subversive tool, many of the limitations that structure wider reality permeate the former as well. For instance, gender differences, generally observable in a culture, also imbue and persist in digital networks (Lee, 2002). This suggests that social media communication therefore reflects and reaffirms existing gender identities and practices. For example, women have exhibited a tendency to express themselves via their profile pictures in ways that conform to the dominant socio-cultural and religious discourses on gender, such as restricting audiences in posting, placing profile pictures and rejecting “friend requests” from unknown people or specific relatives (Mishra & Basu, 2014). Hence, in the rather conservative mind-set of Pakistani culture, the social media environment, initially declared to be an “anonymous” and “gender-free” space (see e.g. Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013), actually serves to maintain and reinforce the integrity and reputations of users and their families. Taking inspiration from these insights, and using Multimodal Discourse Analysis as an analytical framework, explained in due course, this study investigated the following research questions:

- a. How do Pakistani women mobilize visual and linguistic resources to construct their gender identities via Facebook posts? Moreover, how do these semiotic resources combine to communicate specific meanings?
- b. Do these virtual gender identities adhere to existing stereotypical gender notions in Pakistan or do they seek to contest prevailing sociocultural and linguistic norms.

From a feminist perspective, resistance is identified in various types of discourse such as public assemblies, circulating discourses (e.g. #MeToo

movement), state feminism or resistance to disciplinary power (Lilja, 2017). Similarly, compliance refers to adherence to conventional gender expectations that, for example, highlight men as breadwinners or heads of families and women as homemakers (Leamaster & Bautista, 2018). In this study, I use the concepts of resistance and compliance to refer to the everyday practices of Pakistani women on Facebook. These practices may include those of individual women who consciously raise social awareness about gender issues, question the status quo, make subtle changes in their language use or, conversely, choose to communicate about domestic concerns, religious content or related matters via their posts that conform to stereotypical gender ideologies that strengthen and reinforce gender inequality.

In Pakistan, changes in communication patterns enabled by social media take on additional significance when seen against the backdrop of the cultural and socio-religious norms that govern interaction between men and women. This is predominantly a patriarchal society, in which political, economic, cultural and religious structures and forces have traditionally offered more freedom, control and power to men than to women (Jafar, 2005). To preserve and maintain male dominance, socio-cultural norms target the mobility, voice and freedom of women (Jafar, 2005). Hence, it is not surprising that men and women are assigned stereotypical and essentialist roles: men partake in public affairs and are viewed as breadwinners while women are primarily defined in terms of their reproductive ability, as mothers, daughters and wives. In short, patriarchal values are entrenched in the cultural traditions of the society and regulate the social values of gender. However, the increasing use of social media among young men and women here is potentially perceived as disruptive and challenges the strict monitoring and control of behavior, both at the familial and state levels.

## **Gender and social media**

Previous empirical studies, worldwide, on gender and social media, amongst other things, have focused on the construction of Muslim identities, representation of body image, objectification of women, self-esteem and self-presentation strategies used by women, women's socio-economic empowerment and feminist cyber activism (Davis, 2018; Jackson, 2018; Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020; Point, 2019; Rassi, 2016; Schenato, 2017). In South Asia, religion and socio-cultural practices have also been subjects of research with respect to gender and social media. Mishra and Basu (2014), in their study of visual self-presentation strategies adopted by Indian Muslim women on Facebook, argue that these represent conscious efforts not to disrupt family values and existing patriarchal expectations. Similarly, Mishra, Monippally, and Jayakar (2013)

explored the self-presentation strategies of Indian Muslim men and women in online matrimonial advertisements and concluded that, while upholding traditional societal norms, they are also making radical changes to adhere to the social media affordances.

Earlier studies on gender in Pakistan have primarily examined gender roles and stereotypes in contexts such as education and the representation of gender in the print and electronic media (Ullah, Khan, Khan, & Ibrahim, 2016). Most of these have concluded that gender typecasting persists in this culture, as depictions of men and women in print and electronic media continue to be heavily imbued by patriarchal ideology (see for example Raza & Liaqat, 2016). A few studies have examined the notion of gender and social media. Rehman (2017), for example, investigates how social media has provided Pakistani feminists with a platform that has enabled them to organize different women-related events and raise the visibility of the Pakistani feminist movement. However, the same online platforms also disseminate online hate talk against these feminists who are also sometimes seen as part of the Pakistani elite. Zafar, Toor, and Hussain (2019), in turn, argue that social media have been invaluable for women entrepreneurs who were prohibited from entering public spaces. It has given them access to potentially "large markets, direct messaging and inexpensive and swift information sharing and flexibility" (Zafar et al., 2019, p. 886). *Although Facebook is hugely popular, its impact on Pakistani society has not been studied much.* As of January 2020, there were 37 million Facebook users in Pakistan, of which 79 percent were men and 21 percent women, while persons between the ages of 18 and 24 constitute the largest user group (NapoleonCat Statistics, 2020). It would, therefore, be significant to investigate how women in Pakistan construct their gender identities on social media, both linguistically and through other semiotic resources.

## Research methods

I had unfiltered access to the Facebook profiles of my participants for this study. The dataset comprised 570 Facebook posts shared by ten Pakistani Muslim women, systematically collected over a period of three months (from May to July 2017). The posts were multimodal in nature and consisted of English, Urdu and Arabic text, inscribed either on images or as captions, and still visuals, for example, cartoon characters, photographs of family members and film stars. The participants were recruited via a snowballing technique, whereby I informed my Facebook friends about the study and requested them to share the information with their friends and family members and ask those who were willing to participate. Interested individuals contacted me via Facebook Messenger. This strategy was successful,

and I was able to recruit participants who were unknown to me. I also briefed them on my goal and the objectives of my study and informed them of their right to withdraw from it at any point. Confidentiality was ensured by not disclosing any names or personal information; hence, when quoting from the data, all names have been erased and only those details that were strictly relevant to my research questions were retained.

More specifically, I selected participants according to age, socioeconomic class and geographical locale. I recruited women between 18 and 30 years as my focus was on young women specifically, because in this age span people were likely to be in the midst of one or more of the following life stages: as students, choosing careers, or entering domestic roles. While establishing their patterns of communication and behavior as individuals (boyd & Ellison, 2007), people of this age group are also early adopters of new technologies (Schoemaker, 2016). In addition, I wanted to target women of the middle and upper-middle classes, who have most commonly been cited as the bearers, custodians and representative voices of a society's moral, cultural and societal values, norms and traditions (Jamal, 2013, p. 297). However, as Maqsood (2017, p. 205) argues, while such groups maintain a conservative outlook about Islam and continue to assert the traditional patriarchal structure, they also desire to enjoy the fruits of modernity and so were likely to experience some sort of ideological change.

Finally, I decided to focus on women from South Punjab specifically from Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan and Bahawalpur cities for two reasons. First, this was a motivated choice, because South Punjab has a pronounced feudal culture and has not traditionally been known as an emancipatory environment. Moreover, from a gender perspective, unlike women in other metropolitan areas of Pakistan who have greater mobility and decision-making power, women in South Punjab are generally discouraged from taking part in any decision-making processes and are thus rendered almost politically invisible (Sathar & Kazi, 2000, p. 89). Second, in this region, given its rigid gender segregation, strict behavioral code, familial and kinship patterns and a strong ideology that links family honor with female virtue (Moghadam, 2003), honor killings and forced or early marriages are common practices and are not considered crimes. Therefore, I considered it important to assess whether Facebook offered young women in this area the freedom to express themselves and how this type of interaction would then influence their construction of gender identities. It is arguable, therefore, that the milieu, social class and age of my participants offered fertile ground for investigating gender identities located at the nexus of modernity and traditionalism. This also provided a space to understand whether changes in participants' Facebook communication patterns conform to and/or subvert dominant and cultural patterns of gendered identity construction in Pakistan. It is

necessary to mention here that these observations may well be true for other parts of Pakistan that may have even more pronounced patriarchal cultures such as interior Sindh and tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

## Analytical framework

Drawing on the work of Jones (2015) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), I used Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) as my framework. This enables a multifaceted analysis of the range of semiotic resources, such as language, images, gestures, videos and gifs that are utilized to produce meanings. Moreover, MMDA also facilitates examination of the meanings constructed via the integrated deployment of these resources in a given situation (Jones, 2015; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). More significantly, it assumes that, like language, all other modes of communication have been shaped by their cultural, historical and social uses to fulfill specific social functions and that people produce meaning by using and reconfiguring the various resources available to them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

In my analysis of the participants' posts, I used the compositional criteria of salience, social distance, attitude and information value (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Detailed analysis of these elements revealed not only how participants mobilized resources both to capture their viewers' attention and to negotiate their relationship with them, but also how a posted message was presented. In order to show how "identity is constantly interactively (re)constructed and contested on a microlevel via language" (Norris, 2007, p. 657), I paid close attention to the participants' visual and linguistic choices (in captions for images and text inscribed on images) as "identity is constantly interactively (re)constructed and contested on a microlevel via language" (Norris, 2007, p. 657). Furthermore, unlike many earlier linguistic and visual studies (see for example Yazdani & Manovich, 2015) that have examined social media content via quantitative methods, my aim was to empirically document in a qualitative way what images and textual content may potentially "do" (function) and how they "look" (Pinney, 2008).

The first compositional feature analyzed in the data was "salience." Its analysis concerned the elements (e.g. color, backgrounding, foregrounding, emphasis and contrast in the visuals) that attracted viewer attention. Color can be used, for example, to generate a "sense of substantiality and accentuate features of visuals and stimulate effects of distance or proximity" (Hook & Glaveanu, 2013, p. 16). Similarly, in images, foregrounding and backgrounding distinguish more salient from less salient characteristics. In all-text posts, the salience of lexemes is indicated via fonts and lettering (e.g. bold, italics,



upper vs. lower case). "Social distance" refers to the juxtaposition of things, places and people in visual materials. Typically, this is generated through frame size (close, medium and long shots), indicating the level of intimacy and anonymity. Close shots are used to create a feeling of intimacy between the audience and the subject, while medium shots indicate familiarity and long shots generate a sense of anonymity between the viewers and the represented participants. In text, social distance is indicated via the choice of style (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For instance, a "personal style" (intimate use of language) indicates alliance with an individual or group, whereas a "social style" refers to routine communication with friends and acquaintances, and a "public style" represents formal communication. "Attitude" indicates the power dynamics between a subject and a viewer. In visual materials, attitude is indicated through the choice of the viewing angle (e.g. frontal, oblique, high and low). For example, a frontal angle invites audience involvement with the subject, an oblique angle generates a feeling of detachment, a high angle places the viewer in a more powerful position vis-à-vis the subject and a low camera angle reverses this relationship. In text, attitude is indicated via three features: affect, appreciation and judgement (Macken-Horarik, 2004b). Affect refers to whether the text generates an emotive response in the reader, appreciation points to aesthetic fulfillment, and judgement to ethical evaluation of both the visual and textual choice made. Finally, the "information value in visuals" refers to how information is presented to the audience. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify three ways of presenting information: from left to right, the left showing the "familiar, expected and known" and the right "new information" meriting special attention (pp. 179–185); from top to bottom, the information at the top representing the "ideal," while content at the bottom the "real" (pp. 186–194); and center-margin, the center indicating the "nucleus of information" and the margins "subservient" information (pp. 194–200). However, in Urdu, in which most of the messages in my data were written and proceeds from right to left, textual information was presented from right to left, the right showing the "old and known" and the left being the "new" information.

Finally, it was also important to examine how different semiotic modes interact with each other to convey specific meanings. More specifically, this meant that I needed to study "intersemiotic parallelism" (Liu & O'Halloran, 2009, p. 10) in order to understand how different verbal and visual modes, when combined together, contribute to create specific meanings, for example, images may include reference to texts, and the latter may include reference to the former. This is because meanings produced through the combined use of semiotic resources has more impact as compared to the meaning created via an individual semiotic resource. In other words, intersemiotic parallelism allows analyzing how similar organizations of information

are offered across different semiotic modes (Liu & O'Halloran, 2009). Thus, "Intersemiotic Parallelism refers to a cohesive relation that interconnects both language and images when the two semiotic components share a similar form" (Liu & O'Halloran, 2009, p. 372).

## Findings and discussion

The findings of my analysis are discussed below in two sections. The first section, "Compliance: Traditional Construction of Gender Identities," documents how the South Punjabi women's posts conformed to the dominant socio-cultural norms of Pakistani society and the second section, "Resistance: Emergent Model(s) of Gender Identities," how women also mobilized posts to empower themselves by voicing opinions and discussing issues generally considered "sensitive" and therefore not openly discussed in this culture. Table 1 groups the posts according to some main types.

### *Compliance: Traditional construction of gender identities*

Posts that included religious and motivational text and images formed the largest group (38 percent) in my data. These contained religious extracts from the Quran, Hadiths, a collection of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, which along with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunnah), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims, apart from the Quran or motivational quotations that encourage them to cope with everyday hardships, as extracted from other Facebook pages. More specifically, the themes in this category were forgiveness, patience, virtue, protection from evil, seeking help from Allah and how people should conduct themselves in their everyday lives. The quotations from the Quran and Hadiths were in Arabic. In contrast, the posts indicating the women's relationship with Allah, along with a motivational quotation, were in either Urdu (70 percent) or English (30 percent). In line with Islamic norms, the religious posts contained no human figures. Hence, most of these used natural motifs, such as floral patterns and calligraphy (see Example 1). Example 1 shows a typical post of this category. It consists of three *surahs* (chapters) from the Quran, which are "Surah Ikhas," "Surah Falaq" and "Surah Naas," written in Arabic.

**Table 1.** Types and numbers of posts

Types of posts	Number
Religious and motivational posts	203 (38%)
Posts about friends and family	171 (32%)
Posts about social awareness and taking a stance	156 (30%)
Total	530 (100%)



Example 1

The background of the post was white, a color often associated with purity, goodness, calmness and faith in Islam. In the Muslim tradition, black symbolizes holiness, as the Kaaba or the Muslim spiritual center, is covered by a black cloth with verses inscribed in gold. The use of black on white also assists readability and possibly also promotes feelings of spiritual closeness (Nazri, 2015). The *surahs* are separated with the help of a patterning design and decorative motifs, hallmarks of Islamic calligraphy and architecture (Flood, 2007). Further, the *surahs* were in the center, directing the viewer to the core information in the image. These three *surahs* are referred to as the “shielding chapters” of the Quran, as they guard believers from committing *shirk* (identifying or equating someone else with Allah) and protect them from evil (Ali, 2013). The first, Surah Ikhlas, explains the concept of *tawheed* (oneness) and God in Islam whereas the second and third, Surah Falaq and Surah Naas, protect believers from the devil (Ali, 2013). The text-image relationship here exemplifies “montage,” wherein the verbal content is the most significant part of the visual.

The inclusion of the *surahs* on Facebook suggests that young Pakistani women have imported the practice of reciting these in everyday life into the virtual world. This is significant as resolving everyday difficulties and trying to reduce grief through religion is a common practice and seen as part of strong faith in Pakistan (Banning, Hafeez, Faisal, Hassan, & Zafar, 2009). Such visible performance of religious practices not only raises the person’s status but also signifies piety and chastity. Another reason for

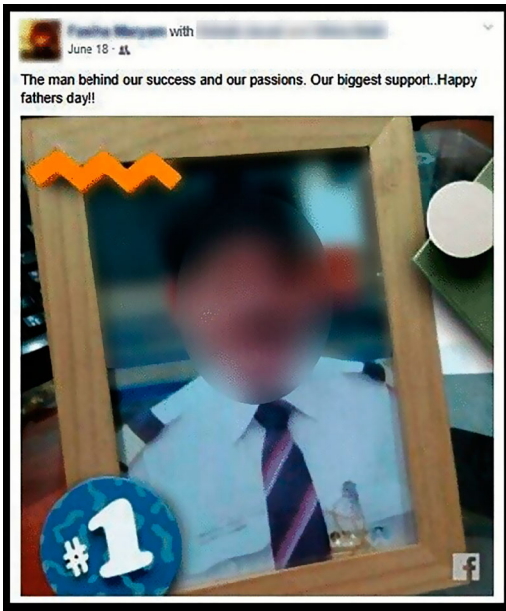
their widespread circulation and recitation is the belief that they protect believers from worldly vices such as the evil eye, jealousy and black magic. Women in Muslim communities often recite these *surahs* for their male family members and children to shield them from harm when they leave home. Thus, they are not only recited to strengthen faith, but also to guard the family from physical harm. Such practices also reflect how in traditional patriarchal cultures women are generally represented as physically and emotionally weak and unable to defend their families and thus need men to guard them and their honor (Jafar, 2005).

The circulation of religious texts on Facebook supports recent empirical findings in Pakistan that the number of women (especially of the middle- and upper-middle-classes) who adhere to “Islamic piety markers over the past decade” (Zaman, 2016, p. 212) has increased. Two primary explanations for this phenomenon are: the contemporary revivalist movement and public discussions on Islam and the role of women on mainstream TV talk shows. Revivalists see themselves as the “bearers of an explicit Pakistani culture as well as a pure Islam” (Zaman, 2016, p. 206). Such movements draw heavily on Pakistan’s colonial history. To emphasise national identity during the independence movement in the 1940s, women, especially, were constructed as the custodians of Islamic piety, morals and the indigenous culture (Zaman, 2016).

Mainstream religious TV talkshows on private channels, especially between 1999 and 2008, enabled religious scholars to reach and mobilize a wider audience. As a result, women in particular, started learning the religious texts. Thus, the widespread quoting of *surahs* on Facebook by women can be interpreted to signify the rejection of cultural activities deemed as “western” and valorize the cultivation of piety. Scholars like Banning et al. (2009) also suggest that in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan, religion is used as a “coping mechanism” in times of distress. They further argue that women use religion not only to seek help from higher powers for confronting the injustices of the oppressor but also as an escape from physical reality and to find refuge in adverse situations. Women have also transferred their religious expressions to online contexts, which in turn positions them at the nexus of religion gender and national politics. By circulating religious images, they may find solace in the way of having the protection of a higher power for their families. However, it also subtly displays the outcome of decades of internalized “gendered piety.”<sup>1</sup> It is thus evident that religion plays a significant part in the construction of women’s gender identity, including on Facebook.

Other popular posts (32 percent) were directed at friends and immediate family members. The themes in these included parents’ birthdays, relationships with siblings, friends, husbands and in-laws. Besides text, these also contained film and cartoon characters, pictures of parents, (male) family members, and emoticons. The choice of language in the visuals varied

according to the addressee. Posts targeted at friends were often in English, while those depicting personal relationships with their family members were either in English or Urdu. Those concerning husband-wife relationships or with in-laws, however, were largely in Urdu. Most posts also tagged friends. This category represented a large number (85 percent) of images of family members. Typically, these included photographs of male family members, especially fathers and brothers. Example 2 is a typical case.



#### Example 2

This shows a photograph of the poster's father uploaded on Facebook, for the purpose of celebrating Father's Day with an image of a framed photograph probably kept at the person's workplace or home. The subject is evidently at his workplace, as indicated by his uniform and the background context. In the foreground, the person has added some additional features to the image, such as the #1 in the lower left-hand corner, with the English caption: "The man behind our success and our passions. Our biggest support. Happy Father's Day!" This also tags two of her siblings and the picture, a close-up, allows viewers to observe how she feels. Moreover, the frontal camera angle, enabling direct eye contact, renders the photograph more appealing (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Despite the visual absence of other people (e.g. the poster's mother), instead of using the singular first person, "I," she chooses the more inclusive "our." This may refer not only to herself and her immediate family members, but also more inclusively to other family members, her wider

Facebook audience, or all children who feel similarly about their fathers. The text-image relationship is signaled by the words, "Happy Father's Day," in the caption as well as in the photograph itself. Thus, the verbal elements in the caption extend the meaning of the photograph.

Example 2 represents a typical gendered stereotype: a sole male figure referred to as a source of material and emotional success and strength. It is a headshot, with the subject in his professional context, highlighting that he is primarily associated with or seen in his breadwinner role. This is consistent with traditional patriarchal cultures, where the authority of a father, and hence all men, is perceived as absolute (Moghadam, 2003). These features also implicitly highlight the public (outside home) – private (domestic space) divide that exists in most societies. This divide is particularly significant here as it not only defines the roles men and women are expected to play but also relates to their status in society (Jafar, 2005). This is reinforced by the fact that, while displaying her affection and love for her father by using his picture and strengthening it with the caption, the poster herself is absent from the picture. This is because in a male-dominated society such as Pakistan women generally do not want their pictures uploaded due to concerns about privacy and the fear that these may be misused (Rehman, 2017). In Pakistan, such gender stereotyping not only supports empirical studies that have suggested that men and women learn these roles from a very early age, but it also manifests a typical patriarchal ideology inculcated via institutions such as the educational system and media (Moghadam, 2003).

Similarly, in posts referring to friends and family, those where women tag their husbands, included images praising their behavior, which reinforce socio-cultural norms. Example 3 illustrates posts of this type.



### Example 3

The Urdu text and caption is translated as follows:

The best husband is one who doesn't fight over trivial things; provides for the needs of his wife; is kind hearted; appreciates his wife for doing good deeds; treats her like a friend and life partner rather than a maid and, if there is a fight between the two, is the first one to forgive and forget.

Caption: "You qualify as a Good Husband"

In example 3, the text is framed by a pattern of flowers and hearts in pink and blue against a plain white background. These decorative elements symbolize the loving relationship the woman enjoys with her husband. The message of the title, *behtareen shohar* (excellent husband), is foregrounded in black bold font right at the top and draws the attention of viewers. Below it follows the list of six qualities describing an excellent husband. The text is laid out in the top-to-bottom configuration where the position of the title "*behtareen shohar*" is at the top and then expanded upon in the list below, to generate a sense of positivity. The caption, "You qualify as a *acha shohar*" (good husband), further strengthens this theme of the post. The post is a verbal "montage" as text constitutes the most significant aspect of the visual.

This is a typical instance of praise for a husband for taking care of his wife, amplified here via the caption in English and Urdu "You qualify as a *acha shohar*." Moreover, the text in the image itself lists the qualities that justify this gratitude. This type of post is particularly significant in the Pakistani context because directly after marriage, a woman moves into her husband's home with her in-laws, and thus experiences new family dynamics (Habiba, Ali, & Ashfaq, 2016). Typically, the women in her husband's home see the newly married woman as a threat to their control and power and may try to subjugate her. This effort on the part of the other women to protect their status and authority in the family not only leads to a power struggle that helps to maintain patriarchy, but also exercise control through the male family members (Habiba et al., 2016). This in turn hampers communication between husband and wife. Thus, given these limitations, married women in Pakistan may circulate posts, as seen in example 3, to cope with their new challenges. Such coping strategies accord with earlier findings, especially in psychology, showing that displaying appreciation of one's partner (known as "relationship visibility") on online social media platforms often stems out of feelings of insecurity about the relationship and is directly linked with attachment style (Emery, Muise, Dix, & Le, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Thus, circulating such posts is not only indicative of the discourse used by women in male-dominated Pakistani culture but also show how a typical family is hierarchically structured, with newly married women occupying secondary positions and husbands viewed as authority figures.

Interestingly, the women also posted messages describing their relationships with husbands and in-laws in a humorous manner. These did not include real-life photographs of either and other than the language used to convey messages, they only contained emoticons and cartoons, as seen in example 4 below.



Example 4

The Urdu translates as follows:

What is the difference between wedding and a wedding? In welding, you see the sparks first and then two metals are joined whereas in a wedding you first join two people and then see the sparks.

In example 4, the woman has tried to show the comical side of being married. The image in the post is taken from the "Oye Bazz aa jaa" ("Hey, Stop doing that") Facebook page, which circulates amusing memes on household problems, humorous verse and accounts about everyday encounters between men and women in different settings. To make the image more entertaining, it represents men and women as cartoon characters. The background is white and the Facebook source page is watermarked. In the foreground, in the upper left-hand corner, are two characters dressed in typical western wedding attire, holding hands and a heart-shaped balloon depicting the happy start of matrimony. In contrast, the lower middle section has a male cartoon figure holding his head in both hands, with mouth open, as if



astonished by something the female cartoon character says. Additionally, a hare is placed next to them holding a sign saying "Help," suggesting that the man needs help after getting married. In the upper right corner is another cartoon character, wearing gloves and holding a welding torch to illustrate the "difference between wedding and welding." The Urdu text points to the "difference between welding and wedding" and the word "whereas" in the center is in red font that not only symbolizes intensity, war, danger and power but also highlights the main message. The use of red and black fonts also enhances readability. The text-image relationship in this instance may be defined as "duo-specific": the cartoons depict the man and woman in the left-hand corner, the welder in the upper right-hand corner and the hare at the bottom with the "help" sign, all contribute to the meaning of the text.

On the surface, example 4 appears to be in the way of an innocent joke, representative of the huge body of humorous literature on the institution of heterosexual marriage, both offline and online (Woodzicka, 2010). However, I argue that such jokes both reflect and perpetuate sexism, especially in Pakistan. As seen in example 4 jokes that depict "male self-victimisation" are widely prevalent in Pakistani culture and are used as a strategic device to reinforce male dominance. Matrimonial jokes, particularly those targeting women and portraying them as disobedient, unruly, abusive and materialistic, are very common here and reflect the stereotypical gender identity construction that characterizes its culture (Khan & Khalid, 2019). Women are portrayed as chatterboxes, greedy, shopaholic, nagging wives, while men are depicted as their "oppressed" partners who are peace-loving and happy to spend lavishly on their wives, yet constantly under threat of abuse and forced into marriage (Sanchita, 2016). In such instances, humor illustrates the sexist attitudes prevalent in a society and helps to maintain established patriarchal norms. Many scholars (Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997, as cited in Prusaczyk, 2018, p. 11) agree that such discourse not only provides an ideal context that "increases negative stereotypes about disadvantaged social groups" but sexist jokes also underpin sexism and promote tolerance for prevailing negatives attitudes towards women.

Interestingly, the woman who posted this joke, indicates that discourses of patriarchy are not only widely inculcated and internalized but also reinforced through circulation and mediated via everyday practices. It is ironic that women are willing to share ideas that portray them as oppressors in the visuals posted on social media. By fortifying and disseminating a male-dominated ideology and then integrating it into their family and social kinship networks, they are clearly serving as mediators of patriarchy (Habiba et al., 2016). Hence, the woman becomes the "token-torturer," as Kandiyoti (1988, p. 280) puts it, by consciously or unconsciously reconstructing stereotypical gender ideology and thereby strengthening a system of oppression that affects all women.

### **Resistance: Emergent model(s) of gender identities**

Around 30 percent of the posts exemplify social awareness and taking a stance on themes such as education, social and economic justice, sexual harassment, honor killings, women's rights and awareness-raising regarding the LGBT community. The content of the images about these mostly comprise real-life photographs of people (similar to example 5). It is, however, noteworthy that posts focusing on topics like honor killings, the transgender community and sexual harassment were extracted from other Facebook pages, such as "Feminist News," "Women's Rights News," "3WF-Third Wave Feminism," "Exposing Men's Rights Activism," "Feminist Info," "World Wide Women," "Khabees Ourat" ("Mischievous Woman") and "Qandeel ki kahani" ("Qandeel's story"). These pages provide information on and a platform for raising awareness on issues (see Example 5) not openly discussed in a patriarchal society like Pakistan.

The women used Facebook as a platform to share their thoughts and emotions. Their posts alluded to life struggles and experiences, disappointments and expressions of love, although these did not target any particular persons, as such. They often included content that women are unlikely to discuss in their offline lives, because of the societal norms that do not allow them to openly express their emotions and inner turmoil, being forced to sacrifice their own aspirations and conceal their own opinions. For instance, such posts are illustrated in example 5.



### Example 5

This post is divided into two sections. The upper part has two photographs taken at the same petrol pump. The photograph on the right shows a man kissing the picture of a woman on a billboard in headscarf, t-shirt and trousers on the advertising display stand. The photograph on the left shows a cardboard cutout of the same woman with a man wearing a helmet trying to grab her breasts. These are captioned in English: "Do u think it's funny man?" The lower half of the post consists of a tweet in English by a female poster: "Tell me again how the way a woman dresses contributes to the possibilities of her getting assaulted. This is a cardboard cutout." The post thereby conveys that sexual harassment and sexual assault have nothing to do with how a female is dressed, since both pictures are of a woman who is completely covered and wearing a headscarf. Moreover, the public display of such acts is not something that can be ignored, since assaults on women are an almost daily occurrence in Pakistan. The tweet and the caption are also significant as they indicate that men are shirking their duty in protecting women. The inter-semiotic relationship between image and text here could be termed "interdependent" because, together they express meanings that neither the words nor the image alone would convey.

From the standpoint of raising social awareness and stance-taking, example 5 indicates that social media have become indispensable to women in Pakistan as a means of questioning the status quo, societal attitudes and the manner in which men respond to women's issues. Female social media users in my data shared images that can be interpreted to foreground "uncomfortable issues" in a patriarchal society. This, in turn, demonstrates that social media, such as Facebook have not only empowered Pakistani women to talk about hitherto unspoken and taboo issues, but also provided them with an alternative platform for making their voices heard. Women in my data have posted images that questioned the marginalization of women's issues, as seen here.

Texts and images shared by my participants illustrated the sexual harassment of women in daily life on the streets, in offices or outside home that is often dismissed as either a crime perpetuated by a few individuals or, as in example 5, using humor. These posts question the social mentality of choosing to blame a few selected individuals for perpetrating crimes against women and ending up by reducing these problems to one-time, individual, and random acts. This absolves society from blame and renders these as occasional happenings, thereby reducing possibilities for any mainstream discussions on these or legislation to combat them.

Such attempts to minimize and dismiss gender concerns are common. Therefore, the sharing by women in Pakistan of "forbidden" and "personal" issues on social media is highly significant, as such conversations have

historically been silenced by state institutions (Rehman, 2017). Unlike the majority of state-controlled discussions on women's issues in Pakistan, Facebook has provided women with an alternative platform whereby they can become the authors of their own narratives.

In contrast with such explicit messages, as seen in example 5, example 6 is aimed at the poster's friends and family members and is more ambivalent. While such posts can be interpreted as reflecting conformity because their function is to strengthen the posters' relationships with their friends and families, they also display subtle signs of digression from traditional female discourse. Example 6 illustrates this, as a shift away from the male-dominated model of Pakistani culture and a move towards an alternative model of gender identity.



#### Example 6

Example 6 includes a meme with names of friends tagged in the caption, a clear indication on the part of the poster's wish to demonstrate the strong bond she has with them. This includes a picture of the Hollywood actor Jack Nicholson, notorious for playing mischievous "bad boy" roles, holding a cigar in one hand and blowing smoke rings. The complete absence of background de-contextualizes the image and draws attention to the most prominent aspect of the post, the photograph rendered in close-up, allowing viewers to observe minute details. Despite the frontal camera angle, there is no direct eye contact between the person represented and the audience,

a feature that generates a sense of detachment and distance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The verbal message of the post, in English, is in bold upper-case white letters and positioned at the center of the image. The words “dick-head” and “smart ass” resonate with the actor’s bad boy rebellious image. Thus, the text and image form an additive relationship via Nicholson’s reputation for playing anti-heroes and using expressions like “dickhead” and “smartass” that mostly carry negative connotations. Not only are these expressions generally considered to be impolite, but they are also not deemed appropriate for Pakistani women to use in their offline lives (Salam, 2011).

In the case of example 6, the poster uses swear words to signal informality, group solidarity and to reinforce her relationship with her friends (Gati, 2014). However, in a patriarchal setup like Pakistan, women are not normally expected to use such language publicly as it is not only considered impolite, but is mostly associated with an aggressive form of masculinity (Sanauddin, 2015). Instead, they are expected to behave modestly and practice *purdah* or veiling, both literally and figuratively. Such expectations in a patriarchal culture are the result of women being socialized and brought up as individuals who are selfless, obedient and forgiving, while also being responsible for doing household chores and caring for their children, husbands and in-laws (Jafar, 2005). Such a construction of gender identity is disseminated via a “respectability and responsibility politics/discourse” that prescribes strict standards of “piousness, temperance, decorum and self-restraint, sexual restraint, propriety and morality, neat appearance and self-protection” for women, if they are to be respected by their families and society (Barratt, 2018, p. 18). Moreover, women here are expected to make public displays of these virtues, both to demonstrate their worthiness and legitimise patriarchal ideals of femininity. This discourse essentially eliminates the possibility of other feminine experiences, thereby creating a dichotomy of good versus bad woman (Barratt, 2018). Posts such as example 6 confirm what earlier empirical studies (Gati, 2014) have highlighted: women are not only familiar with profane language but also routinely use it in Pakistan.

In sum, given the broader discourse repertoire of Pakistani women, this post (example 6) is of interest as it employs visual and linguistic resources more typical of men than women. Typically, it features women’s use of black humor, for example, in referring to mothers, in ways that include taboo words or phrases (e.g. “and she will escort your ass in hell”). Interestingly, this kind of language use, which is most typically associated with men to assert their power and show aggression (Wood & Eagly, 2002), indicates that a feminine version of the power and aggression discourse is lacking. Hence, the use of “unseemly” language by these women on

public platforms such as Facebook not only indicates the breaking down of negative stereotypical notions of women as overactive, lustful and immoral, but also draws attention to the fact that the semiotic resources they employ to communicate in their everyday lives are heavily imbued with a male-dominated ideology. Therefore, in order to appropriate some measure of power, they need to draw on the only available standard and this is a masculine one.

## Conclusion

As an insider of Pakistani culture that does not support women in voicing their opinions, I investigate how they multimodally construct their gender identities online via Facebook posts, and how these may be related to ongoing changes in the socio-cultural norms of contemporary society in the country. The data were studied using Multimodal Discourse Analysis and the results showed a marked ambivalence in the use of visual and linguistic resources. On the one hand, women were found to conform to existing socio-cultural standards of a patriarchal society and on the other, they also employed social media platforms not only to distinguish themselves from traditional gendered linguistic patterns by using profanities, but also to voice their opinions on social issues such as sexual harassment, social and economic justice and female empowerment. In terms of compliance with socio-cultural norms, religion was the most frequently used element for women's self-constructions in their Facebook posts, as seen in example 1. This is in line with the traditional gender ideology practiced in this society whereby discourses construct females not only as the carriers of cultural norms but also as the transmitters and guardians of Muslim and national values (Jafar, 2005). My data also suggest that stereotypical patterns of women's identities are persistently reproduced (as seen in examples 3 & 4), supporting the view that these gendered patterns are socially facilitative. This implies that they are prompted by existing mechanisms of power, such as state institutions, media and educational settings, and thus can be interpreted as evidence of women's socialization in order to accept men as central and in control, while women are encouraged to be cooperative and agreeable to the former (Jafar, 2005). These roles are also continuously reinforced through social media as young people are continuously exposed to them.

Moreover, my data also suggest that for women in Pakistan social media in general, and Facebook in particular, have become crucial sources of information about and means of raising awareness. In a context where the presence of women, particularly on Facebook, is considered to go against the socio-religious norms of society and their access to internet is viewed generally as defiance, their very presence on social media platforms is a subtle sign of resistance against the status quo (Schoemaker, 2016). Women were also

found to engage in discussions on Facebook that challenge (as seen in example 5) traditional gendered ideas of “public” masculine and “private” feminine spheres and question dominant ideologies of womanhood that, for instance, allow acts of sexual harassment to be perpetuated and thereby strengthen the notions of hegemonic masculinities and femininities (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). This also means that women in Pakistan are potentially challenging long-held gender norms, via social media, regarding how they need men to protect their honor. This type of individual or collective social media activism focusing on women’s rights and issues is supported by recent empirical studies on women’s empowerment via social media in various contexts (Jackson, 2018; Rehman, 2017). These studies suggest that women across the globe are using social media to reject stereotypical models of gender and make themselves more visible and audible. Thereby they seek to celebrate a range of identities. The same studies also explicitly point to the dangers of how women receive threats of death and acid attacks, while experiencing online bullying, surveillance, sexual and verbal abuse, and aggression by doing feminism online.<sup>3</sup> Thus, by bringing the rights of marginalized groups into the heart of public debates, online social media platforms such as Facebook have become powerful instruments for mobilizing popular support for minorities, including women, across the globe.

## Notes

1. Gendered Piety here refers to “gendered practices propagated in the Pakistani state’s version of Islam. Women, in Pakistan, generally view these practices as one part of Islamic praxis wherein the focus is largely on moral and ethical behaviors and personal and social conduct” (Hasan, 2015, p. 11).
2. Emery et al. (2014) identify three attachment styles: an “avoidant attachment style,” where the person feels detached from the partner and shows low desire to post a relationship status; an “anxious attachment style,” where persons require more reassurance and therefore share more about their relationships; and a “secure attachment style” for which no instance was identified among my participants.
3. My women interviewees also confirmed this during April–May, 2019 (Salam, forthcoming).

## Notes on the contributor

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**ABSTRACT IN URDU**

دور حاضر میں فیسبک نے پر جوش اور ڈیجٹل خواندگی رکھنے والے نوجوان طبقے، جن میں سے اکثریت کا تعلق شہروں سے ہے، میں بہت زیادہ پذیرائی حاصل کی ہے۔ سماجی روابط کے پلیٹ فارمز اپنے استعمال کرنے والوں کو شخصی اظہار رائے کی آزادی فراہم کرتے ہیں۔ یہ تحقیقی مضمون اسی نکتے پر حقیقت پسندانہ روشنی ڈالنے کی ایک کاوش ہے کہ پاکستانی مرد و زن درج بالا ذرائع مواصلات کو اپنی شناخت کے اظہار کیلئے کس طرح استعمال کرتے ہیں۔ ملٹی ماڈل ڈسکو رز اینیلسڈ سے استفادہ کتے ہوئے میں نے اس بات کی تحقیق کی ہے کہ خاص طور پر پاکستانی خواتین نے ان بصری اور لسانی ذرائع کو بروئے کار لا کر فیسبک پر کس طرح اپنی صنفی شناخت کو اجاگر کیا ہے۔ نتائج سے ظاہر ہوتا ہے کہ فیسبک کے مندرجہ بالا انداز مواصلات نے پاکستان کے سماجی، تمدنی، لسانی اقدار اور معیار ات گفتگو پر نمایاں اثرات مرآتب کیے ہیں۔ بل خصوص فیسبک نے پاکستانی خواتین کو یہ موقع فراہم کیا ہے کہ وہ گفتگو اور معاشرتی روابط کے مروجہ و مسلمہ طریقوں پر سوال اٹھا سکتی ہیں تو دوسری طرف فیسبک پاکستانی معاشرے میں مرد و عورت کے روایتی صنفی کردار کو رائج و راسخ کرنے میں بھی معاون ثابت ہو رہی ہے۔

**KEYWORDS** فیسبک، صنفی شناخت، ملٹی ماڈل ڈسکو رز اینیلسڈ، پاکستان، خواتین