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# In a World Where You can be Anyone: An Investigation into the Gendered Social Practices of Pakistani Facebook Users

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## Abstract

This article investigates the construction of gender identities of Pakistani men and women Facebook users given that Facebook has emerged as the prime social media platform through which Pakistani users interact. By employing thematic analysis and taking insights from theory of performativity and intersectionality, the findings of the interview data suggest that the formation, negotiation, and expression of gender identities on Facebook occurs through complex interplay between the discourses of religion, class, culture, and tradition. In some cases, Facebook highlighted the reproduction of the prevalent cultural models of masculinity and femininity while in other cases; there was resistance to the existing socio-religious cultural norms of the society.

**Keywords** Gender identities · Facebook · Pakistan

## Introduction

In Pakistan, where gender (especially femininities) has historically been a contested issue [1], the use of social media platforms such as Facebook can be a complex experience for both men and women [3] as it reflects the intricate interplay between individual autonomy and socio-cultural and religious pressures to conform. Pakistani men's and women's Facebook experiences are also deeply connected to and influenced by the daily practices and social interactions of their everyday lives, rendering the role of social media in bringing about social change even more complicated and powerful (ibid). Unsurprisingly, by providing unfiltered access to information on issues like politics, gender and religion and enabling users to express their points of view, post potentially transgressive or contentious material and/or use

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these platforms to stir up discussion on various subjects, the role of social media in advancing societal transformation and empowering users in Pakistan has been much debated [61]. Thus, examining Facebook users' practices in relation to the dominant gender ideology can illuminate the current social transformative potential of social media in Pakistan. So far, the social and cultural discourse practices of young Pakistani social media users has been little researched (see, however, [3] & 2021) on.

This article is based on thematic interviews with Pakistani men and women on their views and stances on gender, focusing on their Facebook practices. By combining Butler's [11] theory of performativity, intersectional approach to gender and using thematic analysis [10], I investigate how Pakistani men and women experience Facebook and how it enables and constrains the construction of their gendered identities. I interpret Facebook users' stances on and subjective experiences of a patriarchal gender ideology in relation to the socio-cultural, political, religious and historical context of Pakistan. More importantly, with the rise of global hashtag movements like #MeToo on issues such as sexual harassment, the role of social media in shaping subcultures is even more relevant in a country like Pakistan, which is still struggling to guarantee equal status to all genders. Thus, the present study investigates how social media is shaping the various subcultures in Pakistani society.

## Research Context: Gender Ideology in Pakistan

Scholars (e.g., [2] often single out the 1980s, the era under the rule of General Zia-ul-Haque (1977–89), as a turning point in the political, legal, and socio-cultural history of Pakistan. Most of the problems plaguing Pakistan, such as the rise of the religious right, ethnic and sectarian violence, the politicisation of religion, and, in particular, the (re)instatement of misogynist and conservative attitudes towards women are rooted in Zia-ul-Haque's policies. To legitimise his dictatorship, Zia instigated far-reaching legislative and cultural changes. In particular, to curry popular support, especially from the conservative middle class and religious factions, he politicised and instrumentalised religion. Jafar ([34], p. 47) argues that during this period, the political discourse on women was driven by the notions that women's sexuality was a destructive and pervasive force that must be curtailed and controlled and that women were men's property and responsible for the honour of their family. This meant confining women within the "chardeewari" (the four walls of home). These discourses promoted a strict gender division: women belonged to the private domain of the home and men to the public domain. Jafar [34] further points out that these discourses are not mutually exclusive, but often overlap, resulting in the harassment and abuse of women in both their public and private lives. By promoting this gender ideology, Zia-ul-Haque aimed to demonstrate that Pakistan was not only implementing a major "Islamic" reform but had also distanced itself from Western influences and discarded modernity. However, Zia-ul-Haque's gender policies were actively resisted by women's movements in Pakistan and by NGOs concerned with women rights [63].

The consequences of this ‘forced’ gender ideology continue to influence Pakistani society, and misogynistic practices have spilled over into digital social interaction. For example, the notion of feminism as a western-derived liberation discourse and its supporters as “English-educated, westernized, upper middle-class women with imported ideas, having no link to grassroots realities” [32]: p.22), is an example of Zia-ul-Haque’s legacy that continues to dominate Pakistan’s collective consciousness. Moreover, Zia-ul-Haque urged people to reform not only themselves but also their neighbours, a policy which led to morally judging others and unprecedented communal vigilantism [49]. This vigilantism, perceptions of women activists as western agents, and the public/private gender divide are evident in social media interactions. Based on their posts, women activists are heavily scrutinized and even abused. Male feminists are also targeted for deviating from established cultural and religious norms. It is these tensions in Pakistan between the socio-religious and political context and the popularity of Facebook, whose number of users rose by 24% (n=46 million) between January 2020 and January 2021 (Digital 2021: Pakistan), especially among educated youth, that make it interesting to investigate how this affects.

Pakistanis’ perception of the impact of Facebook on their ability to express their gender identity on its platforms.

## Conceptualising Gender

Debate on gender construction usually, directly or indirectly, concerns such issues as biological sex, gender roles, conformity to gender stereotypes, gender socialisation and gender ideology (see e.g. [12, 39, 40]). However, within these various interconnected gender discourses, the shift away from essentialist discourse (e.g., deficit, difference and dominant models) towards social constructivism has opened up the possibilities of doing gender in different ways, unlearning the internalised socio-cultural notions of gender and resisting established gender norms at both the societal and individual level [66]. This presents gender as fluid and variable which is continuously (re)negotiated through social interaction thereby supporting the idea that gender is not only construed by repetitively enacting the prescribed gender norms but also it is created discursively with language (both written and oral) [11, 16]. This also suggests that the prevailing gender ideology in a society is constructed via culturally available discourses about gender and manifested through individuals’ performances. Similarly, West and Zimmerman ([71], cited in [22], p. 1) claim that gender is not something we are born with and not something that we have; rather, it is something we do. In this study, I draw on the post-modernist concept of performativity [11] in conceptualising gender identities. Since social media offers a space where in their profiles people can construct their gender identities, consciously or unconsciously, by choosing what they want to share, gender identities are thus located in particular ‘repeated acts’ [11, 39], such as the kind of content people repeatedly share on their Facebook profile pages. In other words, these performative acts constitute individuals’ gender identities in their cyber social sphere [18]. Using performativity theory to explain the construction of gender identities helps me to

locate and understand my participants' gender identities in their broader socio-cultural and religious online and offline contexts. It also highlights the difficulty of sustaining the traditional dichotomy of "offline identity" vs. "online identity" in today's digital context [18]. This means that users' digital gender identities may be considered as an extension of their physical or real-world identities (this is particularly significant in cases where my participants' offline or physical lives were affected by how they portrayed themselves in their social media accounts, see, e.g., excerpt 4).

Moreover, given the pivotal role played by religious, economic, and socio-cultural factors in the construction and expression of gender identities on Facebook by Pakistani men and women, my analysis of the interviews is also informed by the anticategorical approach to intersectionality, where "categories are understood as artificial and exclusionary. Therefore, performances and understandings of statuses change based on context" [44, p.1773]. Further, this approach emphasizes that gender identities, like other social identities, are a product of multiple social categories and are socially mediated [44, 69], enabling me to holistically understand the lived experiences of my participants and show how social categories influence one another. More specifically, I analyze my interviewees' talk about gender and possible other aspects of their gender identities.

## Gender and Social Media Studies

Globally, the relationship between gender and social media has been widely explored. For instance, in their study on the self-representation strategies of young women on Instagram, Caldeira et al. [13] foreground their importance for these women as a self-empowering tool. Within the gambit of these strategies, they argue, work remains to be done on (re)negotiating the discourse surrounding selfie-taking to dispel its negative stereotypical gendered reading. Similarly, Baulch and Pramianti [7] qualitatively investigated an Indonesian-based hijaber's community on Instagram and showed that by posting veiled 'Muslimah' images, the community constructed their middle-class Islamic identities. They also found that these identities are a product of two distinct factors, i.e., a dynamic global digital culture and a changing field of Islamic communication. Jackson [33], who applied a feminist poststructuralist approach to study online feminist activism by teenage girls, argues that digital platforms not only provide 'safe' spaces for girls to do online feminism

**Table 1** Themes with their respective subcategories

Gender identities and Facebook as an extension of social/ physical reality	Gender identities and Facebook as a platform for change and agency
Instrumentalisation of religious discourse for gender policing	Voicing dissent: Using Facebook to raise social awareness
Online sexual harassment: A mechanism to silence subversive voices	Facebook as a source for economic independence
Gender policing via public opinion: Loag kiya kahien gay syndrome ('what will people say syndrome?')	

but also play an instrumental role in enabling girls to connect with other feminists locally and globally. Other areas of interest include the role of social media in the socio-economic empowerment of women [42, 64]. It is argued in these studies that due to the ease of accessibility to larger audiences, social media platforms have become a significant contributor in supporting and economically empowering women, particularly in more conservative patriarchal societies. In turn, studies on men and social media have for instance investigated the relationship between social media campaigns and hypermasculine work cultures [41] and yielded insights into how social media platforms are shaping contemporary workplaces. Social media campaigns such as #MeToo have also played a critical role in naturalising gender differences in such organizations. Putranto et al. [53], applying critical discourse analysis to Instagram posts, explored the construction of metrosexual masculinity through the promotion of facial skin care products. They concluded that metrosexual representations in these images feature clean, bright skin and masculine representations are manifested by beard growth. Schmitz & Kazyak [60] content analysed the strategies used in seeking to achieve social legitimacy and power by Men's Right Activism forums on social media and identified two main strategies: cyber lads in search of masculinity and virtual victims in search of equality. The cyber lads used more aggressive forms of engagement to address men's issues while the virtual victims resorted to political and social movement rhetoric. Other studies have investigated masculinity on social media from perspectives such as commodification as hypersexualized and heteronormative ideals [6], violence and digital media [51] and portrayals on Instagram of the male body [30].

In Pakistan, however, research on gender has overwhelmingly focused on the construction and representation of womanhood and on women's issues in the context of religion, law, politics, development, economics, education, health (including reproductive rights), sexuality, and the media [52, 56]. Recent studies on women and social media in the Pakistani context have also looked at online feminist resistance [57], the socio-economic empowerment of women via social media [73], the impact of social media on family dynamics [1], women's buying behaviour on social media [50] and the linguistic and semiotic construction of gender identities on Facebook [3]. Interestingly, this recent research emphasis on women has effectively rendered men invisible. Most research on men in Pakistan has considered them in relation to religion [2, 20, 36] and Punjabi films [62]. Moreover, many such studies have been conducted within the broader research on Muslim masculinities in the post-9/11 context (see e.g., A notable exception is a study on the linguistic and visual construction of masculinity on Facebook [3, 4]. The present study is important because unlike the dominant readings of Pakistani femininities and masculinities from a religious or political perspective, it offers an exploration of Pakistani femininities and masculinities as situated and performed at the intersection of various socio-cultural forces in a social media context, in this instance Facebook. It is also important as it engages with both masculinities and femininities. It endeavours to fill a major research gap by bringing a South Asian-Pakistani perspective into the global and local debate on how men and women in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan negotiate multiple socio-cultural and religious pressures in constructing their gender identities on Facebook.

## Research Design

### Interviews

In previous studies [3, 4], I investigated the role of visual and linguistic choices in Pakistani men's and women's construction of their gender identities on Facebook. The results showed that Facebook was used not only to perpetuate the existing patriarchal ideology but also to (re)define and (re)negotiate the dominant cultural models of femininity and masculinity. The results of the present interview study on Pakistani men's and women's thoughts and evaluations regarding their own Facebook activities complement these earlier discourse analytic findings. I conducted the semi-structured interviews during April–May 2019 in the interviewees' homes as familiarity with the interview site is considered to make for a more relaxed environment that may encourage interviewees to talk more openly and easily about the subject at hand [38]. The average interview lasted around 90 min. The aim was to establish how and for what purposes the participants used Facebook and how, in their view, the prevailing socio-cultural and religious norms of Pakistani society influenced their Facebook posts. This would allow me to further probe gender-related issues. I interviewed the participants individually in the expectation that they would talk more freely even about extremely sensitive or private issues (e.g., sexual harassment encountered in their online and offline lives). Moreover, the interviews were conducted in the participant's language of choice (English/Urdu or both). I transcribed and translated Urdu talk into English, retaining the cultural metaphors used by the participants. As I was focusing on a sensitive issue that may have caused individuals (especially women) distress, my participants signed a consent form that not only detailed the research objectives but also emphasized that their participation in the project was voluntary and that their names would be anonymised in quotations from the data.

### Interviewees: Background and Sampling

The interviewees were selected from the group whose Facebook profiles I had previously investigated [3, 4]. These interviewees had been selected by using snowball sampling. This technique, which is extensively used in qualitative research [19], proved beneficial for this project as it enabled me to recruit from a difficult to reach population. Thus, my friends and family members acted as “insider assistants” [26]. In total, 12 participants, six men and six women, were interviewed. This sample size is justified as the researcher may reach data saturation within the first twelve interviews, [14, 28]. Moreover, according to Creswell [19], there is no hard and fast rule for sample size in qualitative research. My aim was to find participants with whom I could establish good rapport and who would be available not only for interview but also for possible clarification during the data analysis. All lived in South Punjab, i.e., Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan, and all were middle- and upper middle-class Muslims aged 18 to 30. Having middle and upper middle-class informants for this study was crucial, as these social groups are often seen as guardians of

the moral and socio-cultural values and norms of Pakistani society [35, 55]. Moreover, while their views of Islam are often conservative and they are ‘ritualistically religious’ [43], p. 205), they are currently undergoing an ideological transformation (see, e.g., [74]. While battling to uphold their conservative outlook on Islam and the traditional patriarchal setup of Pakistani society they are also early adopters of new technologies and enjoy their benefits [61], p. 17). I chose South Punjab for two main reasons. First, this region exemplifies a traditional, agrarian and feudal culture that is transforming with the arrival of information technology and shifting towards a business-based economy and greater political awareness. Second, despite these changes, the region is known for its adherence to a rigid patriarchal ideology based on gender segregation [47]. It should be mentioned here that the feudal culture found in South Punjab is also present in varying degrees in other regions of Pakistan such as Khyber Pakhtoon Khawah, Baluchistan and Sindh (see, e.g., [8, 23, 72]) and hence the results of this study may also have relevance outside of the study location.

### **Method of Analysis**

I analysed the data thematically, applying the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke [10]. This method allowed me to investigate both semantic and latent meanings, that is, “the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and the ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” [10], p.13). In other words, thematic analysis allowed me not only to find recurrent themes in the interview data but also to identify core ideological or discursive similarities and differences in the data. This distinguishes thematic analysis from content analysis, which does not enable such in-depth investigation [68]. Moreover, thematic analysis provided me with tools to organise the data systematically and inductively and to make sense of seemingly unrelated material, thereby increasing the accuracy, understanding and interpretation [9] of my participants’ descriptions of their everyday Facebook practices and experiences. The analysis focuses in particular on the content of the interviews, that is, on gender and the construction of gender identities, as discussed by the participants.

### **Analysis of the Interview Data**

For the interviewees, Facebook was perceived as a complex phenomenon. In some cases, it meant carefully considering how they expressed their views about being subjected to the same policing and constraints they experience in their offline world. Others saw it as providing them with opportunities to express themselves more freely. I discuss these two main orientations (see Table 1) that emerged from the data under the headings (1) Gender identities and Facebook as an extension of social/physical reality and (2) Gender identities and Facebook as a platform for change and agency. It should, however, be noted that the above-mentioned orientations are not mutually exclusive but often overlap. They are linked by the shame and honour based strategies that are used to silence subversive voices in Pakistan [29].

The notions of shame and honour form the basis for what is considered appropriate conduct, especially the sexual conduct of women, which is seen to reflect upon the status of male relatives, thereby sanctioning a society in which power is unequally distributed [58, 70]. In such a social set-up, “male honour and shame becomes intrinsically bound with men’s ability to control the sexuality and body of women associated with them” ([27], p.35–36).

### **Gender Identities and Facebook as an Extension of Social/ Physical Reality**

In this section, I discuss how some of the interviewees highlighted the ways in which Facebook plays a crucial role in perpetuating the existing gender ideology. Their views were more or less conservative in nature. These interviewees indicated that life in cyberspace differs little from their day-to-day lives. For example, they stated that even on Facebook, their freedom to express themselves is limited, and they are forced to conform to the dominant patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, they reported that in their online and offline lives, religious discourse is one of the most common strategies used to pressurize men and women to adhere to the established gender order. Similarly, they referred to online sexual harassment and public opinion as other significant tactics used to regulate men and women’s behaviour in Pakistani society.

### **Gender Policing through Instrumentalisation of Religious Discourse**

According to the interviewees, the most common strategy employed in Pakistani society to ensure compliance with the dominant gender norms is to rely on the prevalent socio-religious ideologies of Pakistan. Extract 1 typifies such a position:

#### **Excerpt 1 (Male Interviewee 1, Original Interview in Urdu)**

Social Media and Facebook is bringing a negative change. It is spreading ‘bey-hayaie’ (shamelessness/vulgarity) in our society. Before its popularity, ‘bey-hayaie’ (shamelessness) was not so common. You remember what happened in Aurat March (Women March) where women were holding such shameful and objectionable banners? I feel those are completely against our religious and cultural norms... especially banners like ‘Mera jism meri marzi’ (My body, my choice) were shameful as it was women who were displaying it. Sorry to say it but this slogan only meant one thing that is women want the freedom to have sex like men. Social media is feeding this insanity in our Islamic culture.

This interviewee voices a conservative stance, condemning social media for triggering an unwelcome change into Pakistani society. He sees this as done through the provision of a platform for potentially unpoliced heterogeneous voices and non-conformist views that potentially endanger the existing gender hierarchy. He argues that before the popularity of social media, shamelessness was not visible in Pakistani culture. Now, however, social media are destroying the natural fabric of Pakistani culture by estranging Pakistani men and women

from their Islamic morality and cultural values. In doing so, he twice uses of the word “beyhayaie” (shamelessness/vulgarity) to refer to social media (*it is spreading “beyhayaie”*), thus emphasizing his view. To further reinforce the dominant gender hierarchy, he then strategically connects the concept of shamelessness with the women who stepped out of their homes (...*shameful as it was women who were displaying it*) to protest against gender inequality in Pakistan. The use of the term beyhayaie (shamelessness) is significant here, as the concept of shame in patriarchal societies is often used, as by this interviewee, as a disciplinary strategy to regulate behaviour, especially that of women [24]. For him, shame is a surveillance tool that can help maintain the ideal concept of ‘respectable’ femininity. In cultures like Pakistan, it is common male practice to use notions like shame and honour to pressure women to adhere to the culturally accepted model of femininity [65]. Moreover, the term beyhayaie has strong religious connotations [59].

He further validates this stance by referring to “Aurat March” (Women March), quoting one of its most widely cited and controversial slogans [*Mera jism, meri marzi (My body, my choice)*]. This slogan was the topic of many heated critical debates on social media as well as on mainstream private Pakistani television channels. The interviewee’s statement “especially banners like “Mera jism meri marzi” (*My body, my choice*) were really shameful as it was women who were displaying it” is particularly noteworthy here, since it seems to explicitly perpetuate men’s expectations of appropriate female behaviour. Moreover, his use of the pronoun *our* is interesting: he uses it for three main purposes. First, in talking about our society, our religious and cultural values, and our Islamic culture, he strives to emphasize a sense of belonging, pride, and appreciation of traditional Pakistani culture. Second, he is not only voicing a sense of solidarity and togetherness but also trying to represent the collective consciousness of the Pakistanis who reject “Aurat March” and any subsequent public discussion of women rights on- or offline. Finally, he also seems to be seeking the sympathy and support of the interviewer (since she belongs to the same culture). Of particular interest in this excerpt are the two claims against “Aurat March”, i.e., that it is an assault on cultural and religious values (*I feel those are completely against our religious and cultural norms*). However, towards the end of the excerpt he equates culture with Islam (*social media is feeding this insanity in our Islamic culture*). Thus, he cojoins culture and religion and implies that Aurat March is fundamentally an attack on Islamic values. Thus, this excerpt highlights the close association between culture, religion and, in particular, women’s bodies.

Some of the female interviewees also instrumentalised religious and cultural discourses to show their conformity with the Pakistani patriarchal ideology. Excerpt 2 is a typical example. Here a female interviewee points out that Facebook (and other social media platforms) are the root cause of the spread of ‘evil’ in contemporary Pakistani society.

### Excerpt 2 (Female Interviewee 1; Interview in Urdu and English)

Discussing gender issues on Facebook is not the right forum because for me these issues are a private matter and discussing such things so publicly on social media will only create a rift between men and women in our society. You see everything in that obnoxious Aurat March was broadcast to the nation thanks to Facebook; it (social media) has become such an evil thing. We live in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and holding up those placards in public is like you are bringing dishonour to your family, cultural and religious values.

While talking about the negative influence of social media in general and Facebook in particular, the interviewee calls social media an “evil thing”. Like the male interviewee cited above, she justifies her stance by referring to the Facebook discussion on Aurat March. She condemns debates on gender issues by calling them a “private matter” that should not be discussed in public. As shown by her use of the word “broadcast,” she considers the Facebook discussion on “Aurat March” to be part of an external agenda designed to destroy the existing socio-religious norms of Pakistani society and hence “an evil thing”. Her use of first-person pronouns, as in “for me”, “our society” and “we live in” creates a division between those against and those for Aurat March. On the one hand, the use of “we” indicates her pride in Islamic cultural values. On the other hand, she also cites religion to justify her stance that public debate on gender issues in is unacceptable in Pakistan. This is because raising private issues in the public domain is generally condemned in Pakistani society [31]. Also interesting is her use of the terms “private” and “public” to show her alignment with the ways in which Pakistani culture assigns the public domain—power, status, control of information and decision making—to men, and the private domain—helplessness, domestic chores, dependence on male kin—to women [48].

### Online Sexual Harassment: A Mechanism for Silencing Subversive Voices

According to the interviewees, another common strategy used to regulate men’s and women’s behaviour on Pakistani Facebook is online sexual harassment. The interviewees, women, in particular, repeatedly point out that, whenever they voice their opinion about women or gender issues, they are subjected to sexual harassment and even receive threats against their lives. These were posted either in the comment sections of their homepage or inboxed directly to them. For instance, one female interviewee, who actively makes and shares sarcastic videos about gender stereotyping and women issues in Pakistan on Facebook, described her experience:

### Excerpt 3 (Female Interviewee 2; Interview in English)

I have particularly received abuse and even rape threats from men. There is a group of incels who run pages with sexually explicit and demeaning content about women in general under the pretext of \*dark humour\*. It is also a group which happens to be very active and organized against most of the feminists’

content and movements on Facebook, and they tried their best to attack me as well. By posting sexist abusive memes, calling me a rundi (whore), photoshopping my face to someone's naked body, all the usual tricks. They also tried to spam my page with similar abusive content in a planned and organized manner, which they call raids.

Excerpt 3 represents a progressive position in terms of gender issues in Pakistan. The interviewee achieves this linguistically by emphasizing herself as an individual agent targeted by her opponents (e.g., using pronouns “I” (*I have particularly...*), “me” (*they tried their best to attack me as well*) and “they”, (*they also tried to...*). These strategies allow her to position herself as a reformist who not only advocates gender equality but also challenges conventional gender roles. Thus, she is distancing herself from the traditional gender ideology of Pakistani society. In particular, she exposes self-motivated, traditionalist groups of men (incels: according to the Urban Dictionary, incels are members of an online community who are self-delusional, egoistic pretend to be a nice guy, blame others for their deprivation of sex or a romantic relationship, and often stereotype others, particularly women) who employ threats of violence to police, modulate and/or silence voices that question or (in their opinion) deconstruct established gender hierarchies. In doing so, the interviewee sketches the most typical strategies (*all the usual tricks*) that are employed by such men to curb progressive women's voices. She points out that, on Facebook, these men resort to misogynist verbal and visual abuse, often disguised as “dark humour”. In her view, these men regard creating abusive memes and sexually explicit and demeaning content and making rape threats as a harmless joke. She also describes how this kind of sexual harassment takes place in a systematic manner (*They also tried to spam my page with similar abusive content in a planned and organized manner*) to shape and control women voices on Facebook. She further states that this group of men methodically raid the profiles of women (...*which happens to be very active and organized against most of the feminists' content and movements on Facebook*) who in their view, are guilty of violating the acceptable (and thereby respectable) model of passive femininity in Pakistan.

Online harassment is not, however, always limited to women alone but is also visible when men do not fit into the prescribed dominant gender mould. Excerpt (4) illustrates the views of such men. The interviewee identifies himself as a cisgender man who engages in activities that are regarded as gender transgressive. For example, he actively shares his makeup tutorial videos on Facebook and Instagram. As a result of he was picked on and beaten up by a group of men. In his interview, he describes a typical way in which threat and harassment operate when men do not subscribe to the traditional, heteronormative standards of masculinity. In his case, the threats and harassment did not remain verbal but manifested in physical action.

#### **Excerpt 4 (Male Interviewee 2; Interview in English)**

I am a cisgender and happy being a male yet I am proud of my femininity. I have had death threats over phone calls and in my dms (direct messages in Instagram). I get loads of phone calls and sometimes even prank messages

that literally say that we are going to kill you. I know Pakistan is not flexible enough to digest people like me and this kind of transgression. I was studying at the university; some people came and beat me up just because they were not comfortable with my makeup tutorial videos on Facebook and Instagram. They had problems with my identity and what I represent. Therefore, it is not just an online thing. It is a very real physical trauma too.

This male interviewee detaches himself from the conventional masculine norms of Pakistani society. He describes how his transgressive masculinity, especially because it is linked with femininity, is considered threatening and intimidating. By making use of the active voice and personal pronouns (*I am a cisgender...I know Pakistan is not flexible enough to digest people like me; they had problem with my identity*) he, like the female interviewee above, is not only distancing himself from traditional gender beliefs but also manifests a more immediate and personal stance [67]. His use of the word proud also shows his sense of achievement in consciously attempting to break free from the stereotypical masculine models in Pakistani society. Further, he narrates how he receives death threats (*I have had death threats over phone calls and in my dms*) and how he was beaten up (*some people came and beat me up just because they were not comfortable with my makeup tutorial videos on Facebook and Instagram*). Moreover, by stating “I know Pakistan is not flexible enough to digest people like me and this kind of transgression” and “it is not just an online thing. It is a very real physical trauma too” he draws attention not only to the rigid gender segregation but also to the non-acceptance of other forms of masculine and feminine expression in Pakistan. He seems fully aware of the dangers of deviating from the established gender norms and engaging in transgressive practices.

### **Gender Policing via Public Opinion: Loag Kiya Kahien Gay Syndrome ('What will People say Syndrome?')**

According to the interviewees, another very common patriarchal custom is inculcating fear of public opinion. In their view, for a collectivist patriarchal system to function in Pakistan, it is paramount that men and women strictly follow the established gender models. This kind of ‘vigilantism show’ has also crept its way into online social media platforms, as exemplified by one of the female participants:

#### **Excerpt 5 (Female Interviewee 3; Interview in English)**

People keep a constant tab even on Facebook. I remember when I shared my pictures in which I was sitting with a biker man in the US; those pictures created such havoc and people even went to the extent of saying that I am no longer eligible to be married because of those pictures. They even called me a gashti (slut). Nevertheless, people are always going to judge you no matter what you do or don't do.

Excerpt 5 highlights how this female interviewee is not only morally policed on Facebook for transgressing expected feminine behaviour but also how other people's opinions are premeditated to induce feelings of shame and guilt in deviant individuals. She validates her view by narrating how she posted pictures of herself with a biker on Facebook during a trip to the United States that resulted in her being judged as a "gashti" (slut) (*They even called me a gashti*) and not suitable for marriage. She starts with the word "people" (*People keep a constant tab even on Facebook*), that directly translates into the Urdu word "loag" to refer to people collectively in and outside of her circle of family and friends who are involved in publicly policing women. Of interest here is *her use of the phrase even on Facebook*, demonstrating that such moral policing and monitoring is not limited to the real physical world but has also infiltrated the digital social world, as also observed in social media research [5]. Moreover, she uses the phrase "created havoc" to emphasize her mental state when people tried to morally reproach her for her transgressive behaviour.

She further describes the two most typical strategies people use to pressure women to adhere to the stereotypical feminine models. The first is to label them as unworthy of marriage. In Pakistan, marriage is foregrounded as the ultimate female goal [54]. Single women living alone are unheard of. Remaining unmarried is considered a huge social stigma for both the woman and her family (*ibid*). The young unmarried woman quoted above who chose to express herself freely on Facebook was criticized for deviating from the prescribed gender norms, and therefore declared unworthy of marriage. The second strategy is slut-shaming. The female interviewee is slut-shamed (*They even called me a "gashti"*) for not following the female norm. She reports this kind of online vigilantism as a regular occurrence in Pakistan (*people are always going to judge you no matter what you do or don't do*). The style of her statement also conveys the sense that there is no escape from "loag kiya kahien gay" (*what will people say*) syndrome.

Online gender vigilantism is not limited to monitoring and regulating women's behaviour; men also suffer from "loag kiya kahien gay". Excerpt (6) illustrates a typical response from the public when a man transgresses the normative moulds of masculinity in Pakistan. The male interviewee in excerpt 6 was strongly criticized for openly sharing videos on gender issues in Pakistan on Facebook and Instagram.

### **Excerpt 6 (Male Interviewee 3; Interview in English)**

People, particularly men, try to discipline me by saying things like how can you talk about gender issues on Facebook. You are not one of us (men). Your wife and daughters are going to sleep around with other men. However, my "ghairat" is not situated in what these men say about women in my family.

Whereas the female interviewee in excerpt 5 received comments attacking her lack of 'morals', the male interviewee in excerpt 6 is targeted by dragging the women in his family into the discussion to attack his "ghairat" (honour). He lists the most typical strategies that people use to induce him to adhere to the traditional masculine models. In the same way as the female interviewee in excerpt 5, he initially refers to his critics as people, but immediately specifies that men in particular

attack him for talking about gender issues on social media. He further elaborates that one tactic used by men is exclusion (*You are not one of us (men)*), since this traditionalist group of men wholly reject gender equality (*how can you talk about gender issues on Facebook*). The tone of his words also reflects the notion that even talking about gender is considered a threat to Pakistani men. Thus, in situations like this, discussing gender is deemed a hostile and alien act.

Another common strategy to keep men in check, mentioned by the interviewee, is to attack the women in his family (*Your wife and daughters are going to sleep around with other men*). As mentioned earlier, in Pakistani society a man's honour ("ghairat") is directly associated with the women in his family [34]. Therefore, by his disgracing the women in his family, conservative men not only seek to instil feelings of guilt and shame but also to nudge the interviewee to conform to the strict norms of masculinity. Interestingly, in his response to his critics, this "tempered radical" [46]: p.308) blatantly rejects the traditionalist idea that male honour depends on female sexuality (*However, my "ghairat" is not situated in what these men say about women in my family*).

### **Gender Identities and Facebook as a Platform for Change and Agency**

For some interviewees, social media also allows people to express themselves more freely. This group also highlighted the factors that support them in constructing and expressing their gender identities differently, such as the key role Facebook plays in raising social awareness, especially about gender issues, and in bringing financial independence, especially for women.

### **Voicing Dissent: Using Facebook to Raise Social Awareness**

One of the most recurrent themes in the interviews revolved around how social media in general, and Facebook in particular, offered individuals opportunities to learn, offer and gain support as well as express their ideas and views. Excerpt (7) illustrates this view.

#### **Excerpt 7 (Female Interviewee 4; Interview in English & Urdu)**

Openly ("khule-aam") discussing things [gender inequality] on Facebook is bringing about positive change. Yes. In my case, both my father and my brother have learnt so much from social media, especially when the whole Aurat March discussions took place on Facebook. I can see a positive change in their attitude towards gender issues. It is not just one voice, the more we speak collectively, the more we can bring change, but right now change is slow.

Excerpt 7 shows how the female interviewee views Facebook (and social media in general) as a learning space and platform that can potentially raise awareness of gender inequality. For example, she observes that Facebook can give people the opportunity of "openly discussing things", using the expression "khule-aam". The

Urdu word “kuhla”, meaning open, can refer to public debate on issues (such as those related to women) which, traditionally and historically, have been considered private [15]. In this context, the choice of the phrase openly discussing things on Facebook thus suggests that Facebook has breached the traditional public/private divide. The interviewee then immediately adds “yes” to reaffirm and emphasize her first statement about Facebook that openly discussing things [gender inequality] on Facebook is bringing about positive change. She validates her view by referring to her own experiences and the Facebook debate on Aurat March and how this induced the male members of her family to change their attitude towards gender equality. The debate on Aurat March on social media platforms improved men’s understanding of women’s everyday struggles.

Interestingly, towards the end of this excerpt, the interviewee switches from the singular pronouns I and my (e.g., *In my case..., I can see...*) to the plural we (*the more we speak collectively, the more we can bring change*). In this way, she is not only showing solidarity with the women activists on Facebook but also emphasizing how societal change can be collectively promoted via social media. Further, her comment (*it is not just one voice, the more we speak collectively, the more we can bring change*) suggests that besides providing women with a platform for resistance and free speech in the public sphere, Facebook can offer information and education on societal issues. However, she admits that such change is slow.

Similarly, in Excerpt 8, a male interviewee reports how he is using social media to raise social awareness about gender issues and gender inequality in Pakistani society.

#### **Excerpt 8 (Male Interviewee 4; Interview in English)**

My most rewarding experience doing these videos on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube (on gender issues) has been the number of men who agree privately with what I share. Some have thanked me for inspiring them to be better husbands and fathers. I think there are far more men who acknowledge the injustices of a patriarchal system than are immediately visible.

Here, the interviewee talks about his experience of sharing his videos on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube on gender injustice and discrimination in Pakistan. He believes his videos are helpful in changing gendered attitudes and in raising social awareness, as they have positively influenced the attitudes of some of his male followers. More generally, he thinks they exemplify what makes it difficult for men in Pakistan to openly support women’s rights. He further points out that many men agree with him (*My most rewarding experience doing these videos on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube (on gender issues) has been the number of men who agree privately with what I share*), claiming that his videos have made a difference and that men acknowledge the plight of women in Pakistani society. However, such acknowledgement is not expressed publicly, indicating that these men fear ridicule for not being real men. In short, he views the positive responses to his videos as an achievement. In the last sentence (*I think there are far more men who acknowledge the injustices of a patriarchal system than is immediately visible*), he states his

opinion (*I think*) that the pervasive force of patriarchy in Pakistani society demands that men (and women) adopt a particular persona to avoid any potentially serious consequences of deviating from the traditionalist gender ideology.

### Facebook as a Source of Economic Independence

None of the male interviewees mentioned that their use of social media platforms had been financially profitable. One of the women, however, argued that social media had played a pivotal role in helping her achieve financial security.

#### Excerpt 9 (Female Interviewee 5; Interview in English & Urdu)

For me the most redeeming aspect of using Facebook and Instagram is that I have been able to start my own clothing business. I was not allowed to go out to work so I thought of trying social media to reach out to the people. Alhamdulillah, with time my business grew. I have become independent and my family supports what I do. I make my own decisions; I feel powerful and this is so liberating.

Excerpt 9 is the clearest example in my data of how social media can have a positive and emancipatory impact on the lives of its users. The interviewee shared her experience of becoming a women entrepreneur with the help of social media platforms. According to her, social media had a redeeming role in her life. She then explains that, due to the conservative outlook of her family, she was prohibited from working outside the home (*I was not allowed to go out to work*), which led her to using Facebook and Instagram to connect with others (*so I thought of trying social media to reach out to the people*). Further, she describes how her decision to start her business not only empowered her economically, but also drew her family's support. To emphasize and celebrate her economic empowerment and achievements, she uses words and phrases like "independent", "I make my own decisions", "I feel powerful" and "liberating". These words, which generally belong to the male vocabulary, are especially significant when used by a woman. It is even arguable that the way she describes her work on Facebook projects a feminist stance, an attempt to challenge and change the power balance between men and women. Thus, the digital world can offer women new freedom, independence (*I have become independent*) and more control over their lives, helping them to do things previously impossible for them in their physical lives.

### Conclusion

In this article, applying thematic analysis to interviews and drawing on Butler's [11] theory of performativity and intersectionality, I investigated the views of twelve young, well-educated Pakistani men and women on Facebook as a platform for the discussion of gender issues. Specifically, I investigated the ways in which the interviewees positioned and performed their gender identities in relation to the culturally

available discourses on gender roles and gender ideology in Pakistan. My analysis confirms earlier findings that the formation, negotiation, and expression of gender identities on Facebook occurs through complex interplay between the discourses of religion, class, culture, and tradition. Facebook (like other social media) played a dual role in the interviewees' lives: for some it was a way of reinforcing existing gender ideologies while for others it was a subversive medium allowing the construction of alternative gender identities. The first group enacted their gender identities in order to gain validation and acceptance from society. This involved mobilizing religion and culture (Excerpts 1 & 2) in ways that favour men and disadvantage women. Importantly, my analysis also revealed the strongly gendered nature of socio-cultural discourse (see, e.g., Excerpts 1, 2 & 5) in which demands for women's rights and autonomy were reductively framed as a demand for sexual freedom. Further, the interviews foregrounded that the traditional gendering of space (see Excerpt 2), that is, the relegation of women to the private domain, means the privatisation, and thereby silencing, of the woman question (Habiba et al. [31]). The private–public spatial divide also contributes to maintaining Pakistan's traditional gender models, thereby supporting the argument that public and private spaces can be used to either challenge or uphold the dominant gender ideology (ibid). The gendered nature of spaces often goes unnoticed, owing to the unconscious internalization of the patriarchal system. Today, many social media platforms such as Facebook have also become sites that fortify the biases and hostilities of the offline world [25]. For example, the sexualised nature of the threats highlighted in Excerpt 3 indicates that the perceived violation of patriarchal norms can have serious corporeal consequences. For women, the punishment for transgressing the prescribed model of submissive femininity can range from mild verbal derision, such as being called “unfeminine”, to serious forms of sexual assault and even murder.

Men who transgress the established modes of masculinity in Pakistan (see Excerpt 4) can face online harassment and sometimes offline violence. The traditional model of masculinity in Pakistan is closely linked with hegemonic masculinity [17], which not only constructs men as the benchmark against which all other genders are measured but also requires men to shun all types of feminine behaviour [21]. By positioning all other forms of masculinities as subordinate, hegemonic masculinity becomes the norm or the ideal that helps maintain the existing gender hierarchy. Research on gender role transgressions has generally found that although both men and women are likely to be evaluated less positively when they do not conform to gender role stereotypes, male transgressors tend to be viewed more negatively than female transgressors [45]. The interviews also revealed that fear of censorship by society often serves to reinforce existing gender hierarchies. For a collectivist patriarchal system to function in Pakistan, it is paramount that men and women adhere strictly to the established gender models. In such cases, societal obligations and customs take precedence over personal needs. For instance, after a certain age, unmarried women become an object of public censure (see Excerpt 5), while others are slut-shamed for voicing gender discrimination (see Excerpts 3 & 5). Therefore, young, independent single women are viewed as a threat to the patriarchal order. Furthermore, since women are symbols of familial, communal, and national honour, their behaviour

is closely monitored, and infringements are punished. This means that men's honour and masculinity can be questioned because of what their wives and daughters do or say (see excerpt 6).

The interviewees in this study also reported that Facebook offers them an emancipatory space. For many, social media, particularly Facebook, has become a crucial source of information as well as an important forum for raising social and humanitarian awareness, mobilising protests and engaging in political discussion [37]. Previously marginalised women (and men) have benefitted from Facebook and for men it has become a space for learning about gender inequality in Pakistan. Finally, Facebook and other social media platforms have provided women with opportunities to become online entrepreneurs, thereby allowing them to reap the benefits of being financially independent and empowered (see, e.g., excerpt 9). More importantly, individual empowerment has only sharpened their desire to actively re-shape societal gender norms. In other words, by countering gender-related challenges in the creation of their own ventures, these women have begun to perceive themselves more broadly as agents of change.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. Furthermore, there is no financial interest to report. I certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

**Ethical approval** Written informed consent was obtained from the participants of the study (and the relevant document(s) may be provided when requested by the journal). Moreover, the legal basis for the processing of personal data is based on EU's General Data Protection Regulation, Article 6, Paragraph 1. It states that processing shall be lawful only if and to the extent that at least one of the following applies: a. the data subject has given consent to the processing of his or her personal data for one or more specific purposes; b. processing is necessary for the performance of a contract to which the data subject is party or in order to take steps at the request of the data subject prior to entering into a contract; c. processing is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation to which the controller is subject; d. processing is necessary in order to protect the vital interests of the data subject or of another natural person; e. processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller; f. processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party, except where such interests are overridden by the interests or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject, which require protection of personal data, in particular where the data subject is a child.

**Availability of data and material** Can be provided on demand by the journal.

**Code availability** Not Applicable.

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