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Constructing gender identities multimodally: young, middle-class Pakistanis on Facebook

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In Pakistan, the term "*gender"* can often act as a trigger word in public discourse/sphere, evoking a multitude of emotions and heated debates. Depending on one's position, it can be used to signify one's self as a crusader, as a person valiantly representing and fighting for the notions of enlightenment, modernization, liberalism and/or emancipation in, what is projected as, an otherwise backwards, patriarchal society. Or, in the right-winged conservative circles, it can become a term of indictment reserved for individuals who are seen as traitors, cultural sell-outs, set out to destroy the social, religious, and moral fabric of the Pakistani society by ascribing to a set of anti-religious ideologies inspired by the West.

One of the main reasons for this kind of polarisation and, what I would call a simplistic response is the politics surrounding the term gender. While gender, theoretically speaking, is inclusive of men, women, and all other genders, however in Pakistan, this term has predominantly and inaccurately been used as a synonym for "feminism" again a term that has seen more abuse than use due to its origin and historical ties with western culture and academia. This association of the term gender with feminism thus also makes gender a contentious term as gender is also then interpreted and seen as a western agenda that is out there to spread *beyhayaie* (shamelessness) immorality, and vulgarity in Pakistan.

In this context, my research project offers an important corrective to the understanding of the term gender by exploring the constructions of both masculinities and femininities in the world of Pakistani social media. Having said this, I would like to highlight that by this statement I do not mean to convey the impression that no research has ever been conducted on the construction of gender identities in Pakistan. On the contrary, most of the research in the field of gender in Pakistan has predominantly focused on women. More specifically, there have been debates that significantly highlight the fact that historically gender has been a contested topic in Pakistan and the persistence of women's resistance, views on gender, appropriate gender roles and identities communicated on Facebook and other omnipresent social media in present day Pakistani society continue the long struggle that previously found expression, among other modes, in literature, activism, and street theatre.

Therefore, the focus on masculinity in this study is of particular relevance, as men, like women, are also policed through the lens of culturally established stereotypical models of masculinity. Moreover, while social media, especially Facebook, since it became popular, has generally been a subject of some intense scrutiny from various perspectives among the western academia, however, in Pakistan social media—its practices, modalities, discourses, especially in terms of their potential societal impact—has increased only recently. This research project can thus be seen as a significant and timely endeavour which is located at the nexus of two important, at times explosive and yet in certain ways emerging critical fields of study within Pakistan – that is gender and social media.

Before moving forward, I would like to briefly outline the points I will be talking about today. I will begin by briefly introducing my research, highlighting the key question which motivated this project. I will then move on to a discussion of the key findings of my research. This discussion will be supplemented with information which situates and contextualises these findings, in particular their significance and relevance.

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In the last decade in Pakistan, Facebook, along with other social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, has emerged as a dynamic online platform that provides its users, both men and women with unparalleled opportunities to express themselves using a variety of multimodal resources. As exemplified through the success of recent global campaigns like #blacklives matter or the #metoo movement, I am sure we have all been made aware of the subversive potential of social media to act as a medium which questions and challenges dominant discourses, be it national, religious, racial or gender-based by giving voice to the disenfranchised and the marginalised whose stories and narratives have either been ignored, silenced or considered too unimportant to be become part of the mainstream, official mainstream media or public discourse. In other words, social media platforms have been observed to work parallel to the mainstream media in user access and information dissemination. In Pakistan, as well, the spike which has been seen in the widespread use of social media, such as Facebook among young people in particular can be attributed to the fact that it allows its users to increasingly disrupt and challenge the strict modes of behavioural monitoring and control at the personal, familial, institutional, and state levels. These platforms have

provided their users, both men and women, with greater control over the material/information (regarding their own identities or the world around them) they share with their audience. Here I will quote a small example from my personal life which also served as an entry point for my critical and academic interest in this project.

In the early 2000s, the use of social media had become a norm and I saw my classmates, both men and women, flocking to social media sites like Orkut, MySpace and Facebook to construct their profiles and connect with each other. Naturally, this curiosity and the need to be a part of the 'in thing' led me to create my own profile on Facebook. As a novice, I had no idea how things worked on these platforms, but the freedom to construct your own identity by using a variety of fun things like emojis, audios, videos, pictures, and writing "what's on your mind" and choosing who you want to connect with really caught my imagination. However, as I spent more time on social media, I observed how my female classmates, especially, who were usually covered from head to toe and who in their offline lives sometimes even trembled when talking to our male counterparts, chatted confidently with them on these platforms. I watched them express their opinions on issues like politics and religion, and even become involved in raising social awareness through their posts. Similarly, a gay friend at the university told me how social media not only allowed him to find likeminded people in Pakistan, but also how he felt secure on Facebook and Instagram in showing his 'true' identity to the world.

Despite these new developments, I also witnessed men engaging in more 'macho' activities, talking endlessly for instance about sports, cars, guns, bodybuilding, bullying minorities such as the transgender community, and sometimes even objectifying women who were on the pages that they joined/liked. At the same time, I also noted that some of my female class fellows deleted their social media accounts. Upon inquiry, some of them showed me screenshots of their inboxes which were flooded with adult content and porn requests from men, while others said their male family members simply do not want them to be on social media sites, as it will give the family a bad name. Thus, these encounters and observations made me realise that social media has become an avenue where gender norms are simultaneously reinforced and transgressed.

Given this context, I became interested to conduct an in-depth analysis of how Pakistani men and women construct their gender identities, both visually and linguistically on Facebook. In particular, I set out to explore the following research question:

1. How do young middle-class Pakistani men and women mobilise visual and linguistic resources in constructing their gender identities in their Facebook posts?

2. In what ways do young middle-class Pakistani men and women adhere to or contest the prevailing linguistic and socio-cultural norms and stereotypical gender notions in Pakistan in their Facebook posts?

3. What specific roles does Facebook play in enabling and constraining their construction of gender identities?

The starting point for this research were thus, the multimodal representations of gender identities that Pakistani Facebook users (men and women) created, and the final aim was to understand in what ways Pakistani men and women adhered to or contested the prevailing linguistic and socio-cultural norms and stereotypical gender notions in Pakistan in their Facebook posts and what specific role, if any, Facebook played in enabling or constraining the construction of their gender identities. I explored these research questions in three interrelated articles which have all been published in internationally recognised journals. To answer these questions, I gathered the data from middle class young Pakistani men and women who belonged to the region of Southern Punjab. The first article where I had collected data from the female participants showed marked ambivalence in the use of visual and linguistic resources in the sense that women were found to conform to existing socio-cultural standards of a patriarchal society while, they also employed social media platforms not only to distinguish themselves from traditional gendered linguistic patterns by using for instance, profanities – something which is not expected from women.

Similarly, the second article that dealt with the data collected from male participants indicated that men predominantly conformed to the existing socio-cultural norms of Pakistani society. They shared images that reflect the mainstream heteropatriarchal notion of masculinity. However, at the same time, the findings also highlighted the existence on Facebook of emergent forms of hybrid models of masculinity where men choose to share their emotional side with their audience: a practice that is not common in Pakistani culture. Such models indicated a shift away from the traditional norms of a patriarchal society.

The findings of the analysis of the two articles were then complimented by detailed interviews of the participants. These interviews allowed me to investigate how the participants themselves evaluated their own Facebook practices. I was interested in exploring how the broader discursive context (online and offline) affects the ways in which the participants construct and perceive their understanding of gender. By permitting the interviewees to freely express their views, these interviews were helpful in exploring their beliefs about and attitudes towards gender. The results of the study indicated that in Pakistan, Facebook constitutes a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, Facebook has become another venue where gender norms are reinforced and perpetuated. On the other hand, Facebook was found to be particularly empowering for previously marginalised groups – such as, women assault victims, the LGBT community – as it offered them a space to resist the dominant hegemonic discourses.

In terms of its transgressive potential, like the observations I shared from my personal life earlier on, the results of my analysis revealed that Facebook allowed for a questioning of traditional construction of gender identities. For women, it provided a space that enabled them to verbalise and voice their opinion about issues concerning women. By posting on subjects like marital rape, sexual violence and acid attacks which are often considered taboo topics for public discussion by traditionalists or the right-wing conservative groups, female participants could contest such unmentionable issues. In a similar manner, social media in general and Facebook in particular also offered a relatively safe space for men to enact their masculinity in ways that do not necessarily conform to the established gender models.

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Here, I would like to provide a little context in order to highlight the significance of the transgressive and subversive potential of Facebook. Pakistan is largely a patriarchal society which fundamentally operates on the segregation of gendered spheres demarcating men's sphere as public, and women's sphere as private. This renders men responsible for financial earning and management within the family, and subsequently hold an economically and socially superior position to women who are relegated to be nurturers and homemakers within the family. Such segregation of spheres and roles creates a power differential in which women hold a place of subordination and economic dependence on male family members (e.g., father, husband, or brother). Such discourses on one hand, construct a stereotypical identity for women where they are seen as passive, inferior, obedient daughters and wives, and sexually submissive. They are also expected to act as the guardians of morality and preservers of national and socio-cultural norms. In this way their identities and social roles became a matter of public concern, particularly for state actors. On the other hand, these discourses also construe and typecast men as rational, brave, aggressive, and emotionless beings thereby compelling men to act according to stereotypical gender models of masculinity. Consequently, power and authority within the family, the society and the state remain in the hands of men.

Such a gender ideology is also equally detrimental for men. Men, too, are constrained and directed by established gender expectations. Expectations of what it is to be a 'real man,' within contemporary Pakistani society, causes the stigmatisation of others who do not conform to these socially constructed standards. Terms such as '*chaka*', '*stappny*', '*gaandu*' (slang words used for men who display feminine characteristics) are assigned to those who do not 'measure up' to expectations of the desired masculine identity. This means that the established norms of masculinity are not only oppressive to women but also to men who do not conform to the dominant notions of masculinity. In this situation, men remain oblivious of the inequality breeding based on gender, and the problem of gender disparity becomes invisible.

In terms of conformity to traditional gender ideology, the discourses of moral and gender policing that are usually experienced by Pakistani men and women in their everyday life are also carried into and are visible in the digital social interactions. The results highlighted that multiple societal factors or discourses play a crucial role in the participants' construction of their gender identities. Some of the most common discourses that were used online to police men and women included religion, *loag kiya kahien gay* i.e., inculcation of fear of public opinion in their personal lives and online sexual harassment. This is of particular relevance as the identities have never been constructed solely on the basis of gender. Religion, socioeconomic class, sexuality, and nationality have been other important categories that play a critical part in the construction of identities. By this I mean that the experiences of women, for instance, cannot be completely understood by exploring gender and religious aspects separately, as it is the intersection of the two, or of more than these two dimensions of identity that not only reinforce one another but also create their unique experience, which may not be the same the experiences of other Muslim women.

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In short, I have argued that social media in Pakistan has opened up spaces for debates and is providing a platform for the (re)negotiation of gender identities even within the conservative patriarchal structures of Pakistani society. Moreover, this study empirically furthers understanding of the multiple ways in which Pakistani men and women construct their gender identities both visually and linguistically through their Facebook posts. The qualitative findings reported in this dissertation highlight how the changes in communication patterns that have occurred with the emergence of social media take on additional significance when considered against the backdrop of the cultural and socio-religious norms governing the way men and women are expected to interact with each other in Pakistani society.

Additionally, this study provides a starting point for further research on social media and gender studies in Pakistan and elsewhere as well as extending the literature on the communication patterns and online performances of Pakistani Facebook users. More specifically, unlike many of the previous studies on social media the present findings offer a perspective on how non-western Muslim participants belonging to global South use social media and Facebook, thereby increasing knowledge on gender and social media in different local contexts and of the cross-cultural connections between them. Moreover, by investigating how young, adult, middle-class Pakistani men and women perform their gender identities on Facebook, this study contributes to the growing debates on the current social transformative potential of social media in Pakistan.

In the end, this dissertation research process has opened up multiple choices and possibilities for future study and can be taken in different directions for instance, by broadening the scope in terms of examining a larger pool of participants from other provinces/regions of Pakistan. Moreover, access to the comment sections of the participants' Facebook posts to find out, for example, whether and, if so, how readers' views are influenced (reinforced or undermined) by a particular Facebook post, which topics receive more comments/likes, and how participants' conversational styles and strategies vary when addressing same-gender and opposite-gender individuals in a given situation. Such an analysis would be interesting, as users' Facebook posts act as the "interaction agenda and shape the trajectory for the comments". This study points to the roles and possibilities that social media offers its users and to the fact that despite the hegemony of a binary heteropatriarchy in Pakistan, venues exist for the expression of multiple genders and sexualities as well as practices that sanction and oppress them.

Dr. Rauha Salam-Salmaoui currently holds the position of Postdoctoral Researcher within the Department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She has been the recipient of a research grant from the Kone Foundation, which supports her ongoing project entitled "Flawed, Real and Marginalized: Exploring Emergent Genders in Pakistani Online Streaming Media."