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The 'Mascara Boys': Performance, Subversion, and the New Pakistani Masculinity

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Abstract

This study offers an exploration into the performative expressions of gender and masculinity by the "Mascara Boys" in Pakistan. Situating the research within the frameworks of performativity theory and hybrid masculinities, the study investigates how these individuals subvert and challenge established masculinity norms through the strategic use of Instagram as a transgressive digital space. The findings reveal a multifaceted landscape where digital platforms act as both a stage and a catalyst for conversations on gender diversity, both within Pakistan and transnationally. The Mascara Boys emerge as agents of change who navigate complex intersections of socio-cultural expectations to embody a form of hybrid masculinity that is both locally informed and globally resonant. Through their intentional acts, they not only disturb entrenched heteropatriarchal structures but also contribute to a richer, more complex understanding of masculinity. The study concludes that their emergence as practitioners of hybrid masculinity within the Pakistani context signals a significant paradigm shift, urging a re-evaluation of normative gender roles and paving the way for a more inclusive discourse on gender diversity in Pakistan.

Keywords Performativity · Hybrid masculinity · Gender expressions · Instagram · Pakistan

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Introduction

Within the dynamic landscape of social media, a significant reimagining of masculinity is currently taking place, leading to a reshaping of both its conceptualization and embodiment (Foster & Baker, 2022). Platforms like Instagram have transformed into conduits for challenging established norms, propelling a critical reassessment of traditional models of masculinity (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001). This transformation, fuelled by an aspiration for uninhibited self-expression, not confined by conventional boundaries, thrusts societal expectations into the spotlight and ignites discussions about the ramifications of this defiance. Within this global context of social media, the emergence of male content creators who defy established masculinity norms is particularly noteworthy (Foster & Baker, 2022; Harrison, 2008; Komulainen & Hjort, 2017). These creators venture into behaviours that blur the demarcations between conventional notions of femininity and masculinity. Their resistance against the established norms transcends mere rebellion; it constitutes a conscious navigation of identity within a digital domain that fosters alternative manifestations of gender (Komulainen & Hjort, 2017). Consequently, the global stage of social media morphs into a platform that transcends geographical confines, empowering individuals to explore and contest their identities, often in ways that would be formidable in their offline spheres (Jones, 2019).

In the Pakistani context, a setting often deemed a haven for traditional gender norms with deeply interwoven religious and cultural teachings, these transformative currents find their presence felt (Salam-Salmaoui, 2022). The inflexible benchmarks of masculinity, orchestrated by societal conventions fortified by religion and culture, face scrutiny in the wake of these digital trailblazers. This interplay between the evolving digital panorama and Pakistan's deeply embedded cultural bedrock manifests in intricate tapestries, encapsulating the broader discourse surrounding the fluidity of masculinity. Amidst this intricate backdrop, a notable subset emerges—the “mascara/beauty boys” (a term used in “The Guardian”). These Pakistani digital content creators boldly challenge long-standing masculine paradigms in Pakistan, appropriating attributes categorized as “feminine” not merely as aesthetic embellishments, but as socio-cultural critiques (Said, 2018). The defiance exhibited by Pakistani “mascara/beauty boys” instigates fundamental inquiries into the boundaries of self-expression, cultural authenticity, and religious sanctity. In a society deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, Pakistani men's resistance toward any form of femininity—be it in attire or bodily postures—derives from the ingrained aversion to masculinity and the derogation of femininity. Men who deviate from these norms often confront ostracism, stigma, harassment, and violence (Salam, 2021; Salam-Salmaoui, 2022). This aversion also interconnects with the cultural taboo encircling homosexuality, criminalized under Pakistan's penal code and underpinning the apprehension of being perceived as effeminate or gay (Yahya, 2020). The fear of social alienation intertwines with the dread of being branded as “unmanly” or “deviant” in a society that reveres conventional gender roles and unyielding conceptions of masculinity

(Salam, 2021). These deep-seated dynamics enveloping Pakistani masculinity form the backdrop against which this study's inquiry unfolds, drawing on Butler's performativity theory (Butler, 1990, 2004) and the notion of hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) to explore the following research question:

RQ: How and in what ways do Pakistani "mascara/beauty boys" use Instagram to challenge hegemonic masculinities and express their non-binary fluid gender identities in the Pakistani context?

From an academic standpoint, the emergence of the "Mascara Boys" serves as a live case study in the fluidity and contestation of gender roles in a society deeply anchored in tradition. Their digital dissent goes beyond mere performance; it illuminates the fault lines in Pakistan's masculine construct, highlighting the pressing need for a more nuanced understanding of gender expressions. Furthermore, the resistance they often encounter is a testament to the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity. This resilience underscores the importance of studying such subversive groups, for they offer invaluable insights into the dynamic interplay of culture, religion, and gender in a rapidly digitizing society. However, in analyzing the "mascara boys", it's crucial to maintain a perceptive lens, differentiating them from identities such as transvestites, transgenders, and those within the spectrum of homosexuality in Pakistan. Each of these identities operates within its unique socio-cultural context, facing distinct challenges and embodying specific resistances. The "mascara boys" are emblematic of the multifaceted nature of masculinity in Pakistan and underscore the necessity of a comprehensive academic inquiry into the variances and nuances of male identity within the region.

Mirror, Mirror: Reframing Beauty in Masculinity Studies

The intersection of beauty ideals and their role in shaping self-perception and societal dynamics has long been a focus of media scholars and sociologists (Anderson et al., 2010; Connell & Mears, 2018; Foster & Pettinicchio, 2021). These ideals, encompassing aspects such as skin tone, fitness, and facial symmetry, serve as a form of aesthetic capital, determining who receives attention and recognition (Mears, 2015). The material and social rewards linked to beauty are disproportionately bestowed upon those perceived to embody it, resulting in economic gains, and increased social esteem (Jæger, 2011; Pfeifer, 2012). This heightened visibility of beauty's rewards is particularly conspicuous in the digital age, reflected in the proliferation of beauty representation online and the commodification of appearance among social media users and "influencers" (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020; Pham, 2015). The online realm accentuates the significance of beauty through metrics like "likes" and "comments", particularly among young women (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). However, the distribution of these rewards is unequal, with whiteness wielding substantial social privilege closely intertwined with beauty ideals both online and offline (Baumann, 2008; Glenn, 2008; Pham, 2015; Strings, 2019).

Despite the ongoing debate about the inclusivity of social media platforms compared to legacy media, the preeminent stars of social media largely uphold Western beauty standards (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020; Pham, 2015). This replication of existing norms and privileges regarding appearance prevails across platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, where creators sometimes comment on or critique the dominance of appearance online. Nevertheless, the literature regarding beauty, particularly in the context of social media, has devoted less attention to men (Barber, 2016). The relative silence surrounding men's engagement with body image and appearance alteration is not surprising, given the historical scrutiny and implication of vanity (Ahmed, 2006; Gimlin, 2007). Existing research in this area often centers on "metrosexual" men or those who embrace appearances while resisting feminization (Salzman et al., 2005) or focuses on men's interest in physical fitness that they claim is unrelated to beauty norms (Gill et al., 2005; Grogan & Richards, 2002). However, men's aesthetic visibility is on the rise (Widdows, 2018), aligning with the increasing trend of positioning men in idealized and eroticized portrayals (Gill et al., 2005; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). Although these depictions have diversified to some extent, they often still reflect elements of hegemonic masculinity—particularly the portrayal of heterosexual, muscular, and white men (Attwood, 2005; Barry & Martin, 2016; Waling et al., 2018).

The study of masculinity in Pakistan is multifaceted, spanning domains of religion, culture, media, and digital platforms. However, this diverse landscape is not without its gaps and challenges. Media-focused studies such as Mahmood's (2022) exploration of Pakistani TV serials and Malik's (2021) analysis of masculinity in television dramas provide valuable insights yet may inadvertently offer limited perspectives by focusing on specific serials or platforms. Transitioning to digital contexts, Salam (2021) delves into online masculinities through Facebook, but this singular platform focus might overlook broader digital landscapes. Urban snapshots like Khan and Malik's (2023) work capture masculinity dynamics in Lahore, but questions arise about the applicability of their findings to masculinities beyond the metropolis. Exploring the intersection of religion and masculinity, De Soudy (2009) and Aslam (2014) critically examine religious narratives' impact on masculine identities, although potential overlaps between religious and cultural narratives warrant consideration. Khan (2018) introduces "pious masculinity", acknowledging religious underpinnings of Pakistani male identities. Chaudhry and Amis (2022) explore masculinity in crisis, illuminating the dynamics among male civil servants during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a comparative analysis of crisis-induced masculinity with everyday manifestations remains unexplored. Within this landscape, Fatima's (2020) investigation of hegemonic masculinity provides a critical lens, yet the study's focus might not encompass a comprehensive range of experiences, particularly those of non-binary and subversive identities.

Considering these gaps, the study on "Mascara Boys" contributes significantly to the field of masculinity research in Pakistan. Existing literature often confines itself to specific geographical areas or mainstream media, hindering a holistic understanding of masculinity's complexities in the broader national and digital context. This study fills this void by delving into the narratives of self-identified non-binary gender fluid individuals and showcasing diverse expressions of masculinity

beyond conventional norms. By exploring alternative sources like social media, the study broadens the research landscape and offers nuanced insights into masculinity dynamics. With such a focus and exploration of narratives beyond mainstream media, the study enriches our understanding of masculinity in Pakistan, addressing gaps in the existing literature and portraying a more comprehensive view of how masculine identities are undergoing a change considering the country's dynamic religious and socio-cultural milieu. In other words, this endeavour provides essential insights into the shifting dynamics of masculinity representation in the digital sphere of Pakistan.

Conceptualizing Hybrid Masculinities

Historical research has shown the dynamic nature of masculinities (Kimmel, 1996; Segal, 1990). However, the scope, effects, and interpretations of contemporary transformations are subjects of ongoing debate (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). The term "hybrid masculinities," offers a useful framework for understanding this evolving field. It critically addresses the emergence and implications of recent changes in masculinities. Originally used in the natural sciences to describe species resulting from interbreeding, "hybrid" later referred to cultural interpenetration (Burke, 2009). "Hybrid masculinities" involve the selective integration of marginalized and subordinated masculinities and, at times, femininities into privileged men's identities (Arxer, 2011; Demetriou, 2001; Messerschmidt, 2010; Messner, 2007). This concept has been predominantly explored among young, White, heterosexual-identified men. The notion of "hybrid masculinities" provides a lens for comprehending complex contemporary gender dynamics (Arxer, 2011). In the context of masculinity portrayal, mainstream advertising predominantly reinforces the muscular male body ideal. However, Scheibling and Lafrance (2019) introduce an alternative narrative, highlighting the emergence of "hybrid masculinities" that blend femininity and gay aesthetics (Bridges, 2014; Demetriou, 2001). This fusion enables nuanced gender identities and public presentations, even encompassing beauty-focused body work framed as progressive (Barber, 2008; Bridges, 2014). These hybrid masculinities also involve strategic manipulation of cultural scripts to conceal power dynamics (Pfaffendorf, 2017; Sobal, 2005). Yet, accessibility to this hybridity is not universal; it favours those with high masculine capital, aligning with conventional masculine traits and privileges rooted in race, class, sexuality, and appearance (Anderson, 2005; McCormack & Anderson, 2010). Current research, despite complexities, demonstrates these individuals adeptly integrating femininity and subordinate masculinities while maintaining dominance (Pfaffendorf, 2017). In the realm of hybrid masculinity dynamics, race plays a significant role, shaping the experiences of individuals within this framework (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Particularly, men of color, working-class individuals, and immigrants often find themselves positioned as carriers of regressive forms of masculinity within hybrid expressions (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). In contrast, white men adeptly navigate these hybrid forms, leveraging their masculine capital to mitigate shame when challenging gender norms (Burke & Haltom, 2020). As hybrid masculinities gain traction in the analysis of

online gender identities, platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTok encourage diverse representations. However, research indicates that these narratives tend to be more prevalent among men with high masculine capital, resulting in visible metrics and potential economic gains (Nguyen, 2022). Despite this progress, a comprehensive comprehension of gender transgressions remains a vital research pursuit (Owen & Riley, 2020; Maloney et al., 2019; Pascoe & Diefendorf, 2019).

This dynamic interplay resonates with the phenomenon of “mascara boys” in Pakistan, who embody hybrid masculinities through the fusion of traditional masculine attributes with non-normative practices like makeup. This integration serves as a defiance of conventional gender boundaries, offering a unique space for the expression of non-binary and fluid gender identities. The coexistence of these hybrid expressions and the deeply rooted patriarchal context of Pakistan unveils a complex narrative of gender evolution. In the context of Pakistan, this investigation’s significance extends beyond its immediate scope. By delving into the dynamics of “mascara/beauty boys” as agents of hybrid masculinity, the study illuminates a complex interplay between prevailing gender norms and the (re)negotiation of masculine identities. This aligns with the conceptual framework of hybrid masculinities, which emphasizes three salient dimensions. Firstly, the symbolic distancing from hegemonic masculinity, as highlighted in the investigation, challenges normative notions, and empowers alternative expressions. Secondly, the disparities in meaning attributed to different forms of masculinity echo the study’s emphasis on how “mascara/beauty boys” navigate hybridity, reshaping conventional understandings. Lastly, the investigation’s revelation of the ways these dynamics reinforce social boundaries and obscure power differentials resonates with the broader framework of hybrid masculinities. In its expansion beyond the predominantly white male-centric literature, this study potentially contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of diverse groups’ interactions with established norms. Particularly, by spotlighting men of color from the Global South, the research underscores the multifaceted ways in which hybrid masculinity intersects with race, culture, and power dynamics. This understanding further enriches the discourse on masculinity, offering valuable insights into the complexities of gender representations and identity negotiations in evolving socio-cultural contexts.

Methodology

Data Collection

The present study employs a case study design to investigate the Instagram profiles of two young self-identified non-binary beauty influencers, referred to as “Indigo” and “Yellow” from hereon. The data primarily comprises the images and stories shared by these individuals on their profiles. This data collection spans twelve months (from April 2022 to March 2023), facilitating a comprehensive analysis of their evolving online self-presentation over time. Moreover, the selection of “Indigo” and “Yellow” is grounded in multiple criteria. Firstly, their active participation in content creation is crucial, not only for engaging followers but also for shaping their

influencer image and reputation (Silva et al., 2020). Secondly, their substantial following, exceeding 50 k, signifies popularity and broad reach, demonstrating resonance with a significant portion of the platform's users (Dewey, 2014). Additionally, their provision of online and face-to-face makeup classes showcases advanced skill sets and expertise in the beauty industry. This expertise extends their influence beyond local spheres, underscoring their impact. Thirdly, their endorsement of cosmetic brands emphasizes their credibility and potential financial incentives (Hund, 2019; Silva et al., 2020). Finally, their identity as non-binary Muslims from Pakistan offers a specific context for the study. This context enables insights into the challenges and opportunities non-binary gender fluid individuals encounter in Pakistan's socio-religious environment, allowing for an examination of how they navigate and express their gender identities (Salam-Salmaoui, 2022; Jafar, 2005).

Furthermore, the use of case studies bears significance in gaining an in-depth understanding of how these self-identified non-binary beauty influencers navigate and express their gender identities on Instagram. This approach delves into the unique experiences of "Indigo" and "Yellow", facilitating a nuanced exploration of the intersections between masculinities, religion, and culture in Pakistan. This analytical approach is particularly valuable for investigating under-researched topics and for revealing insights into marginalized communities (Krusenvik, 2016; Langley & Royer, 2006). In conclusion, the selection criteria and the utilization of case studies work synergistically to ensure a focused and comprehensive exploration of non-binary identities within the Pakistani context. This approach contributes to a more profound understanding of how gender identities are constructed and expressed, particularly in the context of non-binary beauty influencers on Instagram.

Analytical Framework

This study employs Butler's performativity theory (2004, 2011) as the analytical framework for examining the intricate processes involved in constructing and expressing gender identity. By recognizing that gender is not an inherent, unchanging trait but a product of ongoing performative acts, this theory sheds light on the flexible and context-dependent essence of gender. Moreover, this approach directly challenges conventional essentialist viewpoints and confronts prevailing hegemonic gender norms, rendering it a fitting tool for addressing the research question at hand. There are several reasons to use this analytical approach.

Firstly, Butler's theory underscores that gender is a socially constructed performance rather than an innate, fixed quality. Embracing this perspective enables a comprehensive exploration of how "mascara/beauty boys" in Pakistan harness Instagram as a platform for enacting their gender in ways that disrupt conventional masculinity paradigms. This lens delves into the process of "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990: 33), enabling these individuals to redefine their gender identity through their digital presence. Secondly, the theory's emphasis on the context-bound nature of gender performances resonates profoundly within the Pakistani context, facilitating an examination of fluid gender identities. This adaptability permits an inclusive assessment of the cultural, social, and political

elements that influence how "mascara boys" challenge dominant masculinities and express their fluid gender identities on Instagram. Thirdly, the non-fixed and non-universal stance of Butler's theory aligns seamlessly with the exploration of fluid gender expressions. This framework empowers the study to dissect how "mascara boys" in Pakistan disrupt and reshape traditional gender norms through their online acts, revealing the dynamic and contingent aspects of their gender identities. Finally, Butler's theory fundamentally opposes essentialism and static identities, offering a vital foundation for exploring the multifaceted ways in which "mascara/beauty boys" engage with and counter hegemonic masculinities on Instagram. By recognizing the performative and constructed character of gender, this study comprehensively investigates the diverse strategies these individuals employ to negotiate, resist, and subvert conventional gender norms within the specific context of Pakistan. In conclusion, Butler's performativity theory furnishes an invaluable lens through which to examine the research question. Its emphasis on performative qualities, context sensitivity, and non-fixed nature of gender enables an insightful analysis of how Pakistani "mascara/beauty boys" utilize Instagram to challenge prevailing masculinities and express fluid gender identities within their distinctive cultural milieu.

Data Analysis

Through a methodical examination of the data, recurrent patterns and trends were identified. These patterns were then organized into the thematic constructs that constituted the three categories for analysis (see below). This categorization was grounded in the data itself, ensuring that the identified themes were representative of the content and nuances present in the dataset. The themes surfaced as a natural outcome of the in-depth exploration of the data, highlighting the salient aspects that contributed to the overarching narrative of masculine representation. Each theme was carefully defined and delineated to encapsulate complexity of the subject matter. The process of theme identification was guided by the interpretive framework, ensuring that the themes were relevant, coherent, and aligned with the research objectives. These categories are as follows:

- a. Traditional South Asian bride
- b. Transnational influences
- c. Unpacking Hierarchies: Layers of Hybrid Masculinities in Indigo's Expression

It is significant to mention here that while acknowledging the potential impact of capitalist trends on commercial endorsements by "mascara boys," this study predominantly concentrates on examining their online masculine representation. The exploration of hybrid masculinities and gender expression within the Pakistani context takes precedence in our investigation.

Traditional South Asian Bride

One prominent observation derived from the images (see Figs. 1 and 2 below), is that both the participants adopt the representation of *traditional South Asian brides*, as evidenced by their selection of attire and adornments. They depict themselves in the captivating allure of bridal aesthetics, employing elaborate jewelry, vibrant and celebratory colors in their garments, heavy makeup, and bridal photography. This conscious choice to embody the emblematic figure of the bride is deeply rooted in South Asian traditions and carries significant historical connotations, intricately intertwined with socio-cultural frameworks that have historically confined women

Fig. 1 Traditional South Asian bride (Yellow)



Fig. 2 Traditional South Asian bride (Indigo)



within marriage paradigms (Dewandaru & Triastuti, 2021). The idealized image of the bride, synonymous with weddings, serves as a performative medium that reflects a myriad of cultural values, societal norms, and the broader tapestry of identity (Rosenberg-Friedman, 2012). The various elements encapsulated within South Asian weddings, ranging from attire to makeup, function as potent symbolic tools through which nuanced messages about cultural values are conveyed. While brides within this cultural landscape encapsulate notions of femininity and tradition, their portrayal simultaneously reinforces binary conceptions of gender (Dewandaru & Triastuti, 2021). However, it is imperative to highlight that this very construct of the bride archetype tends to rigidly situate women within heterosexual and cisgender paradigms (Hashmi, 2022). The implications extend further within patriarchal societies, exemplified by Pakistan, where gender roles are inextricably bound to preconceived notions and heteronormative expectations (Jafar, 2005; Zia, 2022). These norms impose stigmatization upon single, divorced, and widowed women, serving to perpetuate and magnify gender disparities while concurrently championing domesticity (Qamar & Hafiza, 2021). Crucially, the glorification of the bride archetype, celebrated as the epitome of femininity and traditional roles, wields a decisive influence over societal expectations concerning women's positions and significance within the realm of marriage (Dewandaru & Triastuti, 2021). The participants' strategic embodiment of bridal aesthetics thereby encapsulates a dual symbolism, intersecting notions of beauty and femininity. This alignment resonates with the pervasive South Asian cultural understanding of brides as emblematic representations of quintessential womanhood, symbolizing not only aesthetic transformation but also the commencement of an integral life phase (Cooper, 1999; Dewandaru & Triastuti, 2021).

The deliberate integration of the bridal archetype by the mascara boys underscores their active role in deconstructing deeply ingrained hegemonic masculine paradigms that persist within the framework of Pakistan's patriarchal society. Despite their awareness of potential repercussions, including social ostracism, ridicule, and the potential erosion of their sexual identity (Khan, 2016a, 2016b), these participants consciously adopt the bridal archetype as a means of confronting and unsettling prevailing societal gender norms. Their engagement in such disruptive practices can be critically understood through several interconnected lenses. *Firstly*, the strategic incorporation of the South Asian bridal archetype by the mascara boys within the context of Pakistani society forms a multi-dimensional exploration of their gender fluidity through cross-dressing. Embedded in a socio-religious landscape shaped by Islamic principles and entrenched heteropatriarchal gender norms (Salam-Salmaoui, 2022; Zia, 2009), their conscious embrace of this archetype signifies a calculated resistance against conventional gender binaries. This purposeful choice embodies their intent to challenge established gender boundaries within a framework that aligns with scholarly discourse on clothing's performative role in identity construction, thereby contesting normative gender expressions (Firth & Gleeson, 2004; Entwistle, 2023). Through strategic cross-dressing, they introduce a layer of hybridity that intricately complicates traditional perceptions of masculinity and femininity, thereby effectively disrupting deeply ingrained gender norms (Farooq, 2020). This occurs within a society governed by Islamic values and rigid gender norms.

Consequently, their defiance through the adoption of the bridal archetype potentially exposes them to the label of "hijra"—a term historically tied to transgender identity and societal marginalization (Khan, 2016a, 2016b).

Building upon this intricate context, both Male to Female (MTF) crossdressers and mascara boys share a common goal in their endeavours—to challenge traditional masculinity by adopting feminine attire and participating in performances that encompass dance, theatre, and digital platforms. This shared endeavour highlights their intent to navigate and transgress established gender boundaries. However, a critical distinction becomes evident when delving into the nature of their respective engagements. The experiences of MTF crossdressers unfold within a distinct context where activities like soliciting at intersections and participating in performances characterized by objectification come to the forefront (Chakraborty, 2022; Farooq, 2020). These circumstances highlight the intricate interplay between economic necessity, objectification, and societal marginalization that underpin their journeys. Their engagement with cross-dressing and performance frequently arises as a means of survival, driven by economic need and encounters with various forms of exploitation. This context shapes their experiences and interactions with society, contributing to the nuanced dynamics of their gender expression and performance (Farooq, 2020).

In contrast, the mascara boys' appropriation of the bridal archetype resonates more with an artistic expression that transcends mere cross-dressing. Their performances encompass more than just adopting feminine attire; they encapsulate an intellectual engagement with the complexities of gender norms and their transformation. These endeavours manifest a sense of agency, creativity, and purposeful defiance. Through their performances, they intentionally shatter normative constructs of gender, unravelling and challenging deeply rooted perceptions of masculinity and femininity within the heteropatriarchal society like Pakistan (Salam-Salmaoui, 2022). Furthermore, their performances function as powerful forms of symbolic resistance, placing them at the forefront of an active struggle against the status quo. While both groups engage in cross-dressing, the mascara boys' expressions are infused with an intention to stimulate discourse, question societal norms, and introduce an alternative narrative of masculinity. The context of their performances spans live shows, theatre, films, and the virtual landscape of social media. This varying context gives rise to diverse receptions, ranging from elements of acceptance within certain circles to instances of exploitation or mockery, often influenced by the societal gaze. As the mascara boys navigate the pursuit of gender fluidity, they traverse a landscape woven with religious principles and socio-cultural norms. Their defiance is far from being a binary act; it emerges as a sophisticated negotiation within Pakistan's socio-religious fabric. Their gender expression through clothing unfolds within a complex web where their challenge to established gender norms coexists with the need for self-expression. Thus, their journey encapsulates the intricate interplay between gender fluidity and socio-religious expectations.

Secondly, the engagement of the "Mascara Boys" with makeup extends beyond mere visual alteration (Aguinaldo & Peissig, 2021; Batres, 2022), embodying profound implications that symbolize a calculated disruption of the normative hegemonic boundaries that underpin the patriarchal order in Pakistan. This performative

endeavour functions as a strategic subversion of established gender norms, challenging preconceived notions of masculinity (Connell, 1995). Operating within a patriarchal society, the act of men embracing makeup serves as an embodiment of gender transgression, where individuals consciously challenge socio-cultural norms linked with their prescribed gender roles (Connell, 1995). Their participation in makeup consumption and the documentation of their experiences on Instagram intentionally transgress the confines of prevailing masculine consumption practices (Wiid et al., 2023) within Pakistan. Consequently, their performative engagement disrupts the clear-cut demarcation between feminine and masculine consumption realms, thereby critically examining deeply ingrained assumptions regarding the exclusivity of makeup to women (McCabe et al., 2020).

Conspicuous self-presentation through the medium of makeup signifies the intentional and overt expression of one's identity and individuality (Hjort & Komulainen, 2017; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). This practice exerts a transformative influence by dismantling established norms and challenging societal expectations pertaining to gender and appearance. The "Mascara Boys" performance on Instagram vividly exemplifies this phenomenon, constituting a significant departure from conventional ideals of masculinity. By openly embracing makeup, these individuals effectively shatter the established boundaries that uphold patriarchal norms in the context of Pakistan. This conspicuous self-presentation resonates with Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation, wherein individuals strategically manage their public image to communicate desired impressions. Within the framework of the "Mascara Boys," their engagement with makeup stands as a resolute assertion of their distinctive identities within the prevailing heteronormative gender constructs. Their calculated actions become emblematic of resistance against the pervasive ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which dictate the appropriate presentation of men (Connell, 1995). This act of resistance assumes a pivotal role in reshaping perceptions while simultaneously dismantling the power dynamics that perpetuate conventional gender roles. The intricate connection between conspicuous self-presentation and the overarching theme of challenging established gender norms becomes manifest as the performance of the "Mascara Boys" encapsulates a purposeful endeavour to redefine masculinity. This endeavour transcends the realm of personal aesthetics, extending towards an interrogation of deeply rooted assumptions concerning gendered appearances and behaviors. The act of makeup application becomes emblematic of a transformative gesture that accentuates the fluid nature of gender expressions, thereby challenging binary divisions between femininity and masculinity (Connell, 1995). This disruption aligns with Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) conceptualization of hybrid masculinities, where individuals navigate diverse expressions of gender identity. Additionally, the "Mascara Boys" performance aligns with the dynamics of online influencers, leveraging their impact on Instagram as early adopters within Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation model. Their influence emanates from their capacity to reshape societal narratives by redefining expressions of masculinity. The performative nature of makeup application reinforces their role as online influencers, aligning with Lee and Watkins' (2016) depiction of influencers as agents instigating shifts in societal perceptions.

Within the intricate fabric of the Pakistani socio-cultural context, where traditional masculinity is intrinsically linked with notions of power and control, the conspicuous self-presentation of the “Mascara Boys” through makeup emerges as a crucial instrument for reshaping the contours of masculinity’s boundaries. This phenomenon serves as an exemplification of how individual acts of resistance, when collectively amalgamated, possess the potential to effectively challenge deeply entrenched norms. Therefore, these acts precipitate a broader discourse that encompasses gender and societal expectations. The engagement with makeup by the “Mascara Boys” transcends the superficial aesthetics, embodying a deliberate endeavour to recalibrate the conventional script of masculinity and disrupt the prevailing ideologies within Pakistan’s distinctive socio-cultural landscape.

Finally, and importantly, their performative embrace of the bridal archetype intersects with cultural symbols inherently linked to femininity and marriage. Historically, marriage has reinforced binary gender roles, where women epitomize femininity and men enact masculinity (Mohee, 2012). By subverting these roles as brides, participants question the foundation of marriage and its assumptions (Dasgupta & Basu, 2011). Their acts critique embedded gender norms, revealing roles as constructed and performed, not inherent (Butler, 1990). This challenges the idea of fixed gender roles within marriage, paving the way for more flexible roles based on identities and desires. This disruption doesn’t negate traditional experiences, but offers an alternative, prompting a re-evaluation of gender norms in marital relationships. It highlights a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender dynamics, reshaping societal perceptions (Thobejane & Khoza, 2014).

Transnational Influences

The strategic inclusion of cultural symbols such as the bindi (a forehead adornment) and sindur (a red hair parting powder, hold intrinsic cultural connotations in Indian contexts) by the mascara boys (see Figs. 3 and 4) within their transnational digital self-presentation holds profound significance. These symbols, rooted in the South Asian cultural context, extend beyond a singular Pakistani representation, indicating a deliberate attempt to establish a connection that transcends geographical boundaries. Moreover, this choice functions as a bridge that spans the gaps of the physical and digital realms, enabling a nuanced form of cross-cultural expression. In other words, the bindi and sindur act as visual markers that tap into the collective memory and shared meanings of South Asian communities dispersed across borders. By incorporating these symbols, the mascara boys articulate their defiance of traditional gender norms and assert their identity within a broader South Asian context.

Within the discourse of digital transnational self-presentation, these practices become even more significant. The mascara boys navigate a complex terrain where their digital engagement defies not only Pakistani gender norms but also challenges regional expectations tied to marriage, masculinity, and femininity. This aligns with the arguments presented by Robards et al., (2022) and Çakırlar, (2017), who explore how localized LGBTQ+ identities intersect with transnational digital spaces. They delve into the complexity of how localized LGBTQ+ identities are negotiated and

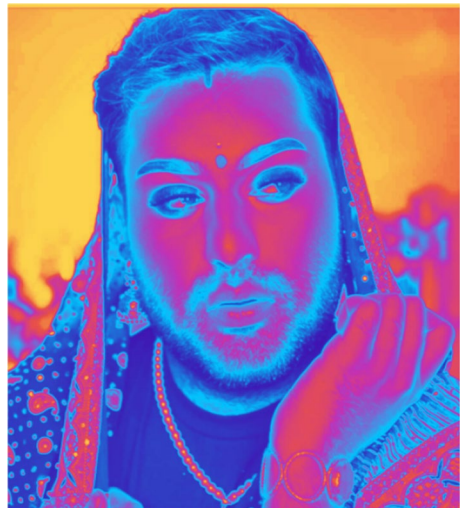
expressed within the fluid realm of transnational digital spaces. The mascara boys' use of the bindi and sindur can be seen as an extension of this negotiation, acting as conduits that bridge the local and the transnational. The bindi and sindur serve as cultural conduits, transforming local identities into transnational spaces for the mascara boys' unique gender expression.

Furthermore, digital spaces function as arenas that eclipse geographical constraints, affording individuals the latitude to calibrate their identities within diverse cultural milieus (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2010; Robards et al., 2022). Applying this lens to the mascara boys' use of the bindi and sindur, we recognize how these symbols

Fig. 3 Transnational influences
(Bindi & Sindur)



Fig. 4 Transnational influences
(Bindi & Sindur)



transcend the confines of their Pakistani locale and become part of a broader transnational discourse. By strategically incorporating these culturally significant symbols into their digital self-presentation, the mascara boys engage in an act of cultural translation, where local symbols acquire new meanings and resonances within the global digital landscape. The transnational digital culture framework underscores the transformative potential of digital spaces as sites of resistance and subversion against traditional norms (David & Baden, 2020; Jenzen, 2014). In the case of the mascara boys, their adoption of the bindi and sindur is a strategic manoeuvre that challenges established gender norms not only within their Pakistani context but also within the broader South Asian diaspora. This transgressive use of symbols acts as a form of digital disidentifications, where the mascara boys navigate the tension between conforming to traditional cultural norms and asserting their agency as queer individuals within a global digital arena. Moreover, the bindi and sindur serve as visual markers that simultaneously evoke recognition within their local Pakistani context and remind a sense of shared identity with the broader South Asian diaspora. This dual significance underscores the mascara boys' ability to navigate the complexities of belonging to multiple communities while challenging rigid gender roles and normative expectations.

More significantly, the mascara boys' deliberate and strategic engagement with these cultural symbols reflects an embodiment of Szulc's concept of "digital gender disidentifications," underscoring their active agency in challenging and destabilizing the conventional hegemonic gender binaries that have traditionally constrained expressions of identity (Szulc, 2020). Within the paradigm of digital gender disidentifications, the mascara boys' adoption of the bindi and sindur transcends mere visual aesthetics and assumes a more profound significance. These cultural symbols metamorphose into instruments of their disidentifying strategies, functioning as tools to navigate, negotiate, and subvert the prevailing gender norms within both local Pakistani and broader transnational contexts. Their strategic use of these symbols stands as a resounding affirmation of Szulc's assertion that gender disidentifications are not merely an act of resistance but a strategic transformation of the very contours of gender narratives (Szulc, 2020). In this intricate choreography of symbolism and identity, the bindi and sindur play a dual role as visual and semiotic signifiers. Notably, their adoption not only challenges established gender norms within their Pakistani surroundings but also catalyzes a ripple effect that reverberates across transnational digital spaces. By embracing these symbols, the mascara boys foster a transnational discourse of gender diversity that reverberates both within and beyond the parameters of dominant ideologies, thus echoing Szulc's emphasis on the transformative potential of disidentification (Szulc, 2020). Consequently, the mascara boys, through this deliberate act of cultural incorporation, they not only reclaim these symbols from their traditional contexts but also synthesize them into a novel narrative of self-expression and defiance.

In conclusion, the mascara boys' incorporation of the bindi and sindur within their transnational digital self-presentation is emblematic of their strategic engagement with cross-cultural symbolism. By transcending geographical boundaries and drawing upon shared cultural connotations, they challenge normative gender roles, reflecting the evolving landscape of transnational digital practices. Through

their transnational self-presentation, the mascara boys forge a transgressive digital path, fostering a space where defiance, identity, and solidarity converge. More importantly, by strategically adopting the bindi and sindur, the mascara boys not only transcend traditional gender boundaries but also engage in the construction of hybrid masculinity. These symbols, laden with traditionally feminine connotations, are recontextualized within the mascara boys' transnational digital self-presentation. This deliberate adoption represents a negotiation between normative masculine ideals and their own unique expressions of identity. Through these symbols, the mascara boys create a space where conventional notions of masculinity intertwine with contemporary transnational influences. This construction of hybrid masculinity is not only a challenge to established gender norms but also an assertion of their agency in shaping a fluid and inclusive conception of masculine identity.

Unpacking Hierarchies: Layers of Hybrid Masculinities in Indigo's Expression

Another noteworthy observation stemming from the analysis of the images is the construction of gender identity by one of the participants, Indigo, who simultaneously embraces a nonbinary and fluid self-presentation as a bride, while notably maintaining their beard (see Figs. 5 and 6). The analysis of the images offers a striking insight into the construction of gender identity by Indigo, who blends a nonbinary self-presentation as a bride while purposefully retaining their beard. This strategic decision to juxtapose facial hair with a feminine role offers an intricate lens through which to examine the intricate interplay between gender constructs and physical attributes. In a context like Pakistan where established paradigms associate facial hair exclusively with masculinity and a clean-shaven appearance with being gay or effeminate (Amer, 2015; Khalil, 2013), Indigo's portrayal emerges as a formidable departure from normative gender categorizations, effectively challenging societal preconceptions that rigidly tether specific physical traits to predefined genders (Neave & Shields, 2008).

Fig. 5 Layers of hybrid masculinities in Indigo's gender expressions



Fig. 6 Layers of hybrid masculinities in Indigo's gender expressions



More importantly, Indigo's decision to preserve their beard while simultaneously embodying a bridal persona demonstrates a subtle yet assertive reclamation of masculinity within the contours of hybrid masculinity (Demetriou, 2001). By fusing both masculine and feminine attributes, Indigo navigates the intricate structure of gender dynamics in a society where entrenched masculine ideals and power structures predominate (Amer, 2015). This strategic manoeuvre allows them to articulate their identity without wholly relinquishing their masculine agency, all the while interrogating the conventional gender norms that often tether beards solely to the realm of masculinity (Salam, 2021). The significance of Indigo's decision to retain their beard amid their bridal appearance encapsulates the intricate negotiation of power, identity, and agency within a patriarchal environment like Pakistan. By charting this intricate gender terrain, Indigo potentially seeks to assert a degree of control and agency within a society where entrenched gender roles persist. Their choice serves as a proclamation of the legitimacy of varied gender expressions, concurrently asserting their prerogative to engage with and challenge societal norms without fully relinquishing their intrinsic power and identity. At its core, one pivotal tenet of hegemonic masculinity in patriarchal societies, such as Pakistan, lies in the connection between physical attributes like facial hair and dominance, authority, and power (Neave & Shields, 2008). Facial hair is frequently perceived as a symbol of maturity, sagacity, and a certain degree of societal esteem (Antonio, 2014). By choosing to retain their beard while donning a bridal presentation, Indigo strategically harnesses this element of conventional masculinity to their advantage. This manoeuvre serves to assert an impression of authority and agency in a cultural context where these attributes are often inextricably linked to power and control (Amer, 2015). Furthermore, the act of maintaining the beard alongside a gender-fluid portrayal allows Indigo to adeptly navigate the intricate socio-cultural landscape, effectively challenging and accommodating specific societal expectations. By engaging with hegemonic masculinity's focal point on physical attributes, Indigo situates themselves in a manner that amplifies their likelihood of acceptance and respect

within established societal norms. This strategic choice serves to anchor Indigo within the realms of conventional power structures even as they expand the boundaries of gender expression. Moreover, Indigo's selected mode of gender expression embodies a deliberate resistance against the binary constructs of gender and power that permeate Pakistani society (Salam-Salmaoui, 2022). Their refusal to conform to the anticipated norm of keeping their beard challenges the binary delineation of masculinity and femininity, effectively signalling that gender identity is not exclusively connected to physical attributes or performative gestures. This bold rejection of normative expectations mirrors the tenets proposed by Bridges (2014) concerning the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity, as Indigo subverts the conventional notion of an indivisible and monolithic masculinity.

It is significant to mention here that Indigo's decision also presents a complex interplay between masculinity and femininity, yielding both positive and potentially harmful implications. On one hand, Indigo's choice challenges established gender norms and underscores the fluid and intersecting nature of gender and physical attributes. It empowers individuals to challenge binary conceptions of gender and affirms their right to self-expression and identity. On the other hand, there is a potential risk of reinforcing hegemonic norms by implying that certain masculine traits are prerequisites for power and authority, potentially reinforcing traditional beauty standards and placing pressure on nonbinary individuals to conform to elements of masculinity. Indigo's expression serves as a reflection of the broader struggle to redefine gender roles and identities, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of its multi-faceted implications. It underscores the complexity of the relationship between physical attributes and gender roles in a society grappling with evolving gender dynamics. Nevertheless, this process of expressing masculinity allows Indigo to navigate the intricate interplay of gender, power, and identity, forging a transformative and resonant path that resonates with the prevailing cultural paradigms.

Discussion

Using performativity theory (Butler, 1990) and the notion of hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) the study's findings offer an exploration of gender expressions within Pakistan's socio-cultural and religious context, particularly through the lens of the "Mascara Boys" on Instagram. Their strategic integration of cultural symbols like the bindi and sindur sparks a transnational discourse on gender diversity. Their choice to embody the bride archetype navigates complex intersections between gender roles, cultural symbolism, and societal expectations. Indigo's participation adds further complexity as they challenge gender constructs through a nonbinary and fluid presentation while retaining a beard. This approach to hybrid masculinity signifies resistance to conventional norms and a nuanced negotiation of power, identity, and agency. Moreover, their embrace of the bride archetype functions as a performative intervention that destabilizes rigid gender binaries. Their performance showcases a shifting masculinity landscape characterized by resistance against entrenched heteropatriarchal norms. The act of incorporating traditionally feminine symbols and challenging normative gender roles speaks to a broader

societal evolution where nonconformity and fluidity are becoming more visible. This performance unveils the nuanced negotiation between hybrid masculinities and prevailing cultural and religious values. While it challenges gender norms, it also treads a precarious path where resistance may inadvertently reproduce selective reinterpretations of existing gender constructs.

It is also significant to mention here the distinction between the "mascara boys" and other groups like transvestites, transgenders, and homosexuals in Pakistan. In Pakistan, transgender individuals, have historically occupied a unique and marginalized position within society (Khan, 2016a, 2016b). They face significant discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion. In contrast, the "Mascara Boys" distinguish themselves by emphasizing hybrid masculinity through performative expressions that challenge conventional masculinity norms. Their deliberate adoption of feminine symbols within artistic performances sets them apart from the broader transgender community. Similarly, in a conservative Muslim society like Pakistan, where homosexuality remains criminalized (Qureshi, 2018), the "Mascara Boys" introduce a nuanced dimension to gender exploration and defiance of societal norms. This deliberate choice not only challenges established gender norms but also contributes to the ongoing exploration of gender and identity paradigms in the Pakistani context. Furthermore, their actions reflect a strategic engagement with both local and transnational influences, marking a departure from traditional gender norms and contributing to a transformative discourse on gender diversity within a transgressive digital space. By purposefully occupying the digital realm, they not only confront the invisibility and marginalization experienced by nonbinary individuals but also contribute to a broader reshaping of societal perspectives and attitudes towards gender within the unique cultural and social framework of Pakistan.

More significantly, the gender dynamics within the socio-religious fabric of Pakistan are especially complex, shaped by interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence that often lean towards traditionalism (Subhani et al., 2016). Within this context, the existence and gender expressions of the so-called mascara boys, who embody gender fluidity, reveal profound tensions between orthodox religious doctrines and diverse forms of gender self-expression. Islam in Pakistan, defined by a Sunni majority and various minority sects, is not monolithic (Willox, 2014). The religious orthodoxy often underscores strict gender binaries, and these rigid distinctions exert significant influence over societal norms (Salih & Kraidy, 2020). Consequently, the mascara boys' gender expressions, which transgress these traditional categories, can be met with societal resistance, grounded in particular religious interpretations.

However, within this context, Sufism (spiritual Islamic practice focused on the internal quest for God, rejecting materialism) has historically been more accommodating of diverse gender expressions (Farooq, 2020). Sufi philosophy emphasizes personal mystical experience and union with the divine, often symbolized by a desire to transcend worldly distinctions, including gender (Anjum, 2015). Within the context of Pakistani Sufism, practices such as cross-dressing have been part of religious rituals, symbolizing a spiritual quest to overcome earthly binaries (Farooq, 2020). The mascara boys' gender expressions, when viewed within the framework of Sufism, present a compelling argument that challenges conventional gender norms within broader Islamic religious doctrine. Their gender fluidity resonates with the

mystical aspirations of Sufism, potentially allowing them a spiritual and cultural space within the Pakistani socio-religious landscape (Anjum, 2015; Farooq, 2020). But this does not come without its set of complexities. Understanding the mascara boys' navigation through their gender identities requires a careful analysis of how the heterodoxy of Sufism interfaces with mainstream Islamic beliefs. While Sufism might provide a theological refuge, the broader religious environment may still perceive their gender fluidity as incongruent with traditional Islamic norms. This tension can manifest in their daily lives, leading to varying degrees of acceptance, resistance, or negotiation. Furthermore, it's important to recognize that the relationship between mascara boys and Sufism is not necessarily uniform. Some may identify with Sufi traditions for spiritual resonance, while others might merely find in it a cultural or social shelter. This diversity reflects an intricate interplay between individual agency and broader socio-religious structures.

Conclusion

This study holds significant implications within both the Pakistani and international contexts, particularly concerning the concept of hybrid masculinity. The emergence of the 'Mascara Boys' as practitioners of hybrid masculinity in Pakistan challenges the monolithic narrative and underscores the universality of gender fluidity and performative expressions across diverse cultural landscapes. Further enriching this narrative, the examination of Mascara Boys within the religious aspect and Sufi tradition of Pakistan offers a complex and layered understanding of gender fluidity. The intricate relationship between these individuals, the broader religious context, and the specific traditions of Sufism, provides a rich terrain for scholarly exploration. In the Pakistani context, the subversion of normative gender norms within the country's conservative environment challenges the conventional paradigms that often suppress alternative expressions of masculinity. This study prompts a re-evaluation of the Pakistani gender landscape, encouraging conversations that highlight the multiplicity of identities and the need for more inclusive understandings of gender. Moreover, it demonstrates that the negotiation of gender boundaries and expressions is a complex phenomenon that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. In conclusion, this study's implications are twofold: it reshapes the Pakistani understanding of masculinity by challenging heteropatriarchal norms and illuminates the global discourse on hybrid masculinity by demonstrating its applicability in non-Western contexts. The 'Mascara Boys' serve as agents of change, ushering in a more inclusive and dynamic conception of masculinity that transcends cultural boundaries and reinforces the universality of gender fluidity.

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