

Virtual Manifestations of Patriarchy: Digital Experience of Pakistani Women

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Abstract

The official launch of Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006 in Pakistan ushered in an era of new socio-virtual experiences for Pakistani citizens. A number of studies have examined the use of different social networking sites and explored their effects on the public at large. However, to date, little attention has been paid to Pakistani women's experiences in social media. The current article aims to draw attention to women's digital experience in the male-dominated society of Pakistan. Through the use of in-depth interviews, this qualitative study documents the lived experience of seven female social media users. Findings suggest that online harassment and male family members' control over their social media activities are norms in these women's social media experiences. Even among the highly educated, patriarchal notions of *purdah* (veil) and *izzat* (honor) continue to define Pakistani women's lives in the virtual world.

Key words

social media, digital patriarchy, women and new media, online harassment, online veil

Introduction

The massive impact of social media on its users has drawn researchers' attention to the phenomenon, especially in developing regions of the world (Dini & Sæbo, 2016). Developing countries with rampant poverty, gender disparities, and traditional cultures have low literacy rates and limited/slow access to the Internet (Chuang & Schechter, 2015). Nevertheless, the globalization of social media has

also palpably transformed relationships and culture in these low-income countries (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017). The bulk of academic research into social media in developing countries is primarily focused on its social and political use. However, social media's impact on gender, education, health, and its economic effects in developing countries, particularly in regions with conservative cultures, requires more attention from researchers (Sultana, 2012). Research on social media use as an emerging experience is still in its infancy, although it offers significant scope for research, particularly centering on female users in their social and cultural contexts (Boulianne, 2015). This paper is an early attempt at addressing this gap by exploring women's social media use within the cultural context of Pakistan's patriarchal social structure.

Although social media was and still is expected to empower women, recurring incidents of online violence against women and cyber harassment in Pakistan have proven otherwise. A survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) (2017) found that almost 70% of Pakistani women have experienced online harassment and are reluctant to post their photographs on social media (DRF, 2017). This figure highlights the unfortunate fact that online harassment often goes unnoticed, a problem further aggravated by patriarchal cultural norms, leaving Pakistani women highly vulnerable to cyber harassment (Hassan & Unwin, 2018). Common forms of cyber harassment in Pakistan include, but are not limited to, blackmailing, non-consensual access and distribution of personal information, impersonation, defamation, threats, and gender-based bullying (DRF, 2018b). While children and minorities are also victimized online, the most conspicuous targets are women. Although, there is no available official record, according to a report published in Pakistan's leading newspaper *Dawn* (2017), 45% of reported cases to police evolve around women's complaints about electronic violence against them. The report further revealed that social media exacerbates the victimization of women in the name of honor, i.e., to preserve a family or a tribe's honor; a woman believed to be behaving "dishonorably" must receive severe punishment, which can include death. Cases in point are the murder of YouTube star Qandeel Baloch¹ and a Kohistan leaked video² showing women

¹ Qandeel Bloch, a women's rights activist and Internet celebrity in Pakistan, was killed by her own brother for bringing the family's honour into disrepute. Qandeel regularly used YouTube to share videos of her daily life routines as well as to speak out for women's equality. Her outspoken attitude and perceived salaciousness earned her the nick name the "Kim Kardashian of Pakistan."

dancing in the presence of men—these women were later killed in the name of honor. The “domestication of technology” and “digital *purdab*” are both keenly observed in Pakistan (Schoemaker, 2016), where social media use follows “established gender lines,” further contributing to gender segregation in an already highly segregated society.

Pakistani women face issues online due to embedded patriarchal attitudes and norms, namely *purdab* (veiling) and *izzat* (honor). Given that in many conservative cultures, new social media penetration occurs alongside continued observance of old patriarchal traditions, it is important that social media research explores the cultural nuances of women’s digital experiences, particularly within patriarchal societies. Hence, this paper aims to explore women’s digital experience vis-à-vis patriarchal cultural influences. To the extent that *purdab* and *izzat* are highly valued within Pakistani patriarchal culture, this paper will focus on these two notions that simultaneously define family and gender relations as well as restrict women’s conduct. Thus, the current study was conducted an in-depth analysis of Pakistani women’s digital experience in the context of the country’s patriarchal society. The objective was to examine how these dominant aspects of patriarchy, *purdab*, and *izzat*, affect women’s virtual social experiences. The study contributes to the on-going debate on “online patriarchy” and social media research which revolves around women, particularly in the South Asian region.

Status of Women in Pakistan

Pakistan, with 208 million people (Nawaz-ul-Huda & Burke, 2017) and a fast-growing population, is a developing and largely conservative country. Despite constituting half the population, an inequality in resource distribution and a disadvantaged position is the lot of women in Pakistan (Usman, 2011). With wide

² Kohistan is a tribal and culturally conservative part of Pakistan. In 2012, a video was shared, showing five young women and four young men dancing at a wedding ceremony. The video was leaked and shared on social media. A local jirga (tribal court) ordered the killings of these girls as well as the young man who recorded the video. Initially, the five young women were murdered and a year later three young men seen dancing in the video were also killed. A survivor from the video raised the alarm, prompting police and civil society to investigate it as a murder case. The Supreme Court of Pakistan took *suo moto* notice of the killings. However, the families of the young people in the video denied the killings had taken place, even going to the extent of presenting five other living girls in place of the murdered young women. Extensive probes and investigations led the court to sentence three men to life imprisonment for their part in the honor killing scandal.

disparities, gender relations are inequitable (Afzal, Butt, Akbar, & Roshi, 2013) in health, employment, and education (Quayes & David, 2015). The literacy rate among women in Pakistan is 47%, which is low and not satisfactory as compare to men, i.e., 70% (A. Rehman, Jingdong, & Hussain, 2015). In Pakistan, 21.5 million children out-of-school, and most were girls (M. Khan, 2016). Cultural attitudes toward women's education, as well as economic pressures, are major factors keeping women's literacy rates low in Pakistan. Women are also economically dependent, and, in deprived areas, girls are considered a burden on the family finances, leading to them being married off at a young age.

Only 24% of women participate in the workforce. Pakistan is an agricultural country and it is mainly women who work in the farms and fields; however, their contribution to the agricultural economy is not acknowledged (Shaheen, Sial, & Awan, 2011). The undermined and marginalized position of women in society also correlates with their poor health outcomes, both physical and mental. The traditional rural concept of home delivery leads to serious health threats for mothers and babies. This attitude of indifference toward women's health is deeply culturally embedded, where pregnancy and birth are not considered as health or medical issues, and in tribal areas, women are not allowed to visit a doctor or a hospital. These social and cultural dogmas restrict women's access to reproductive health facilities. In such cultural circumstances, women are vulnerable to high-risk pregnancies and maternal deaths as well as sexually transmitted diseases. The gender disparities and undermine status of women indicate the plight of women in Pakistan's patriarchal culture, which challenges gender equality (Husain & Husain, 2018) and allocates power and preferential treatment to males (Habiba, Ali, & Ashfaq, 2016), resulting in women's status becoming marginalized in all domains of life (Hadi, 2017).

Pakistan's March towards gender equality has been invariably slow and Pakistan ranked 148 out of 149 countries in this regards (Moin, Fatima, & Qadir, 2018). Male dominance in Pakistan remains consistent despite the persistent focus on SDG-5³ and the 2030 Agenda (Hadi, 2017). Although efforts are being made at the state and private level, women still face discrimination in all fields of life (Qaisrani, Liaquat, & Khokhar, 2016).

³ Sustainable Development Goals aim to eradicate poverty and hunger, improve health and well-being, provide equal educational and health facilities, and eliminate gender disparities in all forms by 2030. A detailed note is available at <http://www.un.org.pk/pakistans-challenges-sustainable-development-goals-2015-2030/>

In comparison to tangible legislative progress in Pakistan, cultural norms and traditions guarantee more powers for males than for females. Women are viewed as inferior, to be “reined in” by men (W. Ahmad, Naz, & Ibrahim, 2012). This gave rise to many severe forms of discrimination, such as gender violence, honor killing, forced marriages, child marriages, bride burning, and acid attacks (Critelli, 2010).

Legislative Protection for Women

The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) guarantees gender equality; Articles 25 and 32 specifically address women’s rights and direct the government to take special measures to ensure equal participation of women in the political and legal spheres (Tabassum, 2016).

To promote gender equality and safeguard women’s rights, Pakistan has been an active signatory member of international commitments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Vienna Declaration (1993), the Beijing Declaration (1995), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1996). In addition, two national-level initiatives, the “National Plan of Action for Women in 1998” and “National Policy on the Development and Empowerment of Women 2002” were introduced to improve the status of women in the country. In 2000, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) was established to observe and examine government policies and programs to ensure gender equality in all fields of life.

The *Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act 2006* was approved by the National Assembly and the Senate of Pakistan. The law provided protection to women against misuse, abuse, and exploitation. The law also covered the issues of kidnapping, abduction, and forced marriage. Religious parties, however, protested against this bill, labeling it a “Western agenda” and claiming it contradicted the injunctions of Islamic jurisprudence (Lakhvi & Suhaib, 2010). Despite so much criticism and deprecation, another milestone was achieved by the passing of the *Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010 (IV of 2010)*, which guaranteed women constitutional protection against workplace harassment. However, while it was indeed a large step toward the protection of women, the degree to which it is actually implemented is still questionable (Sadruddin, 2013). Even after the formulation of this law, 378 harassment cases were reported in 2018, including complaints from universities and government institutions. Additionally, to tackle the issue of increasing domestic violence in Pakistan, the

Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2012 was passed to control this social evil. Even though religious and political groups tried to curb these efforts, the government of Pakistan remains committed to providing legal protection and emancipation to women to ensure gender equality.

Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016

Advanced technology has provided many facilities for human beings, but it has also exposed humanity to many risk factors. In addition, increasing digital technologies have resulted in various threats to individual privacy (E. A. Khan, 2018). To address these issues and to monitor and control communication in open access networks, policies and laws have been drafted worldwide.

The Pakistan government passed the *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016* to protect the digital privacy and rights of citizens, although it faced much resistance and criticism on the count of curtailing citizens' rights of free expression and privacy (Farieha, 2018). This law primarily addresses unauthorized data sharing, hate speech, rumormongering, false information, and stereotyping people or groups online. The law also covers issues related to the sharing of sensitive pictures and sexual content. On implementation of the law in 2018, the first offender was convicted by the cybercrime court for disseminating pictures and videos of a woman (DRF, 2018b).

The law ensures the online protection of people, especially women; yet 72% of female citizens are unaware of this law. Women activists who try to create awareness about this law and raise their voice against online harassment of women are threatened and trolled by men to dissuade them from such efforts (Z. Rehman, 2017). The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) reported an increase in cybercrimes, especially the harassment and blackmailing of women. Such online stalking is mostly committed through the Facebook and WhatsApp platforms, with 90% of cybercrime victims being women or minor girls, and 70% of cases involving pornographic content (Syed, Awais Khaver, & Yasin, 2019).

Social Media Landscape

The growth rate of Internet users in Pakistan is the second-highest in terms of percentage of population among the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries (Lenka & Barik, 2018). Some 38 million people were active Internet users in 2017, and this figure rose to 44.6 million in 2018. The

number of Internet users is continuously growing (Saleem, Malik, Ali, & Hanan, 2014) as social media is supposedly improving living standards by providing open access to online businesses and employment opportunities (M. Rehman, Irem, & Ilyas, 2014). Young Pakistanis aged 18 to 24 years in particular use social media excessively (Zaheer, 2018) and in urban settings, the Internet and social media are mainly used for entertainment and socialization purposes. Females spend more time on social media for entertainment purposes than men (Jamil, 2018).

Although the introduction of 3G and 4G technologies resulted in an increase in social media access, digital insecurities and threats create a wide gap between male and female users in terms of their social media use (Michota, 2013). As a result, only 27% of women have access to use the Internet and social media (Rowntree, 2019) and they are vulnerable to unethical practices such as privacy breaches, indecent content, and hate speech (Zaheer, 2018). Despite the numerous challenges of cyber harassment and unethical practices, however, social media has made women vocal and provided them with open access to share their concerns and seek advice (Karolak & Guta, 2015). Social media in Pakistan has emerged as a ray of hope, a platform where women can raise their voices for justice and equality, strengthen their social, economic, and political identities (Zubair, 2016), and mobilize them to oppose stereotypical and discriminatory behaviors (Nowacka & Estelle, 2015).

Women in developing countries are digitally quite active, but the cultural barriers remain constant factors in widening the digital divide (Hilbert, 2011). The idea of a digital divide, which suggests a gap in access to information communication technologies, has mainly focused on physical access to computers or the Internet (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). However, women's access to new media technologies is culturally determined in traditional societies, resulting in inequalities in media adoption, use, effects, and online practices (Oberst, Renau, Chamarro, & Carbonell, 2016). Women are generally not welcomed or encouraged on social media (A. Khan & Du, 2017). Therefore, perceptions and measurements of physical access cannot reveal the actualities and real experience.

The inequalities in access have been extensively explored by scholars in different population segments in terms of frequency and intensity of use (Taylor, Johnston, Tanner, Lalla, & Kawalski, 2013), inequality and disparity in digital knowledge (van Osch & Coursaris, 2014) and digital skills (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). The imbalance further surfaced with the pervasive use of social media, which refers to the web-based technologies and services used for networking and interaction purposes (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, the quantitative assess-

ment of a digital divide lacks the relational properties of new media and the cultural environment. The concept of “affordance,” proposed by James Gibson (1979), refer to the perceived and actual properties of objects and surrounding environments by animals and humans” (Gibson, 1979). While associating the concept of affordance with human-computer interaction, Donald Norman (1999) defined affordances as “the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used”. Affordances are not just limited to the visible senses but can also be felt or heard. The affordances are primarily facts about action and interaction, not perception. Keeping in view the original concept of affordances, social scientists elaborated the notion of social affordances among technologies (objects), interaction (actions), and social environments (social structure or culture) where the communication process occurs (Huysman & Wulf, 2004; Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Brooks, Hogan, Ellison, Lampe, & Vitak, 2014). The present research focused on women’s interaction with social media in a cultural environment (patriarchy) and discussed their real-life experiences.

Online Patriarchy

The term “patriarchy” originated from the Greek word “patriarkhē,” which means “chief or father of race.” The patriarchal system, therefore, means “the rule of the father.” Some scholars have also mentioned that the term “patriarchy” is a combination of two Latin words: “pater (father) and arch (rule)” (Ademiluka, 2018). Patriarchy as a system gives a supreme and advantageous position to the father or male and a subordinated role to females. Although women are working on a par with men in all fields of life, the patriarchal system creates obstacles in their way to progress (Sultana, 2012).

Pakistan is a patriarchal society with men dominant and women subordinated (Chauhan, 2016). Similar social patriarchal norms exist in online communities with men pre-eminent and women in a vulnerable situation. In Pakistan, various barriers hamper the use of social media among women, with patriarchal forces being the strongest of all the factors which restrict women’s socialization and communication.

Most of the studies conducted to date have described Internet and social media use among females as a “futile” activity (Nowacka & Estelle, 2015; Hicks et al., 2012). According to them, women mostly indulge in online shopping, sharing of photos and cross-commenting rather than doing something productive. The pos-

itive elements and the positive outcomes, however, have been overlooked in these studies. It is important to recognize that in a culturally restricted society, women find respite in the Internet and social media platforms (Dayal & Chaudhry, 2017), a way to develop their online identities, and a means to challenge sexist cultural orientations (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). The “online patriarchy,” however, is a perpetual hurdle for women in the digital world (Murtiningsih, Advenita, & Ikom, 2017), and this predominant aspect of social media also promotes hegemonic and traditional power relations (Demirhan & Çakir-Demirhan, 2015).

A recent example of online patriarchy can be clearly observed when a women’s march turned online spaces into virtual war zones. The *Aurat March* was organized by women activists to celebrate International Women’s Day in Pakistan in 2018 and 2019. The marches were held in the metropolises of Pakistan where thousands of women from all walks of life joined in and raised voices for their fundamental rights. They held posters with different slogans calling for an end to gender discrimination, the provision of equality at the national level, and an acceptance of shared responsibilities at the domestic level. The activity provoked a negative reaction in the country and male members of society opposed it with sexist comments on social media and termed it as *Mard* (men) *March*. A Facebook page, “FHM Pakistan” was created, which posted pictures of men carrying placards with messages like “Ladies First, gents first kab ayega?” (Ladies First, when will we have Men First?), and “Moza choro, dupatta dhundo” (Quit the sock, find your scarf). A clear tide of hatred started pouring in against women on social media and their slogans were mocked by men. Various statements made by women were strongly criticized by men and a few female participants in the activity also received death threats (Daily Dawn, 2019), a development that cannot be ignored in a country like Pakistan which the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security Index (2017) has identified as the fourth most unsafe country for women. The march conducted on Women’s Day was a peaceful demonstration for equality, but it was followed by great turmoil. Men filed court cases against this march. It was also criticized by celebrities and intellectuals, who described it as being against Pakistan’s culture and traditions.

In Pakistan’s traditional patriarchal society, as mentioned earlier, women are controlled by two notions: *purdah* (veiling) and *izzat* (honor) (Roomi & Parrott, 2008). *Purdah* is meant to segregate and exclude women from social activities (Papanek, 1973), while *izzat* is supposedly gained and maintained through women’s chastity and good reputation (Gull Tarar & Pulla, 2014).

In line with the debate focusing on social affordances, researchers have ex-

tended their work to culture and gender (Vatrapu, 2009), revealing that online social interaction is determined by culture and that communication practices are suggested by gender (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). In traditionally patriarchal societies in particular, women's social interactions and communication practices (offline and online) are defined by cultural forces. The offline culture is exhibited in online spaces and similar social practices and behaviors are followed in the virtual world. Consequently, the patriarchal culture and gender inequalities create more challenges for women in accessing technologies and result in a strongly negative online experience. The fact that women represent only a small minority (27%) of Internet users in Pakistan reflects the cultural attitude toward women's use of new media technologies. The conceptual model below represents women's online experience of patriarchy, with various factors resulting in women's online victimization. The literature has revealed numerous reasons for this victimization; however, the current study, grounded in a social media affordance approach, explores the real-life interactions of women with social media in the patriarchal culture of Pakistan.

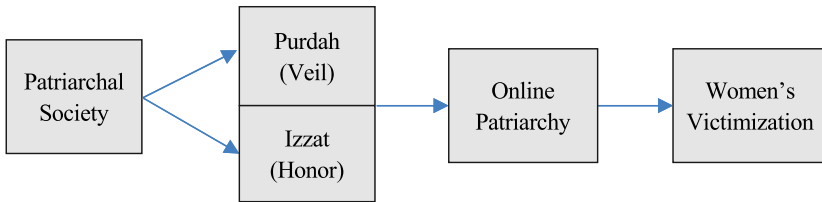


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Online Patriarchy

***Purdah* (Veiling)**

Purdah (veiling), the covering of a woman's head, face, and body, is associated with Islam; however, these practices can also be traced back to pre-Islamic eras and therefore do not hold exclusively religious connotations. The veil was considered as a symbol of status and was treated as way of distinguishing respectable women from the rest (Slininger, 2014). Islam emphasized the covering of the head and body and advised both men and women to keep their eyes down, which is the real *purdah*. However, culturally, the veil is associated with a physical covering of the face and is only associated with women in order to exclude them from social dynamics (Papanek, 1973). In South Asian countries, *purdah* is an important feature of the social system to limit the interaction between men and women and to restrict women's socio-economic mobility outside the sphere of the home. This

physical segregation of women excludes them from social, economic, and political activities and tries to confirm their second-class status (Yusuf, 2014).

The *purdab* system functions as an institution in Pakistan to govern the lives of women. The regime of Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) imposed “Islamization” in Pakistan, which added more severity to women’s lives. He banned the participation of women in public gatherings on the basis of *purdab*. The ideology of *purdab* resulted in restrictions on women’s mobility, socialization, education, and workforce participation.

Two forms of *purdab* are practiced in Pakistan: one that is operational in the segregation of sexes and a second that is intrinsically ingrained in social attitudes to control the lives of women (Haque, 2010). The social and cultural disparities faced by Pakistani women are quite evident in their everyday lives. The rule of *purdab* has, in fact, deprived women of their basic rights to education, health, and employment (W. Ahmad et al., 2012). This *purdab* is not really practiced as a religious belief but is tied to concepts of honor, chastity, and family respect. The extreme extent to which the norms of *purdab* are followed for the honor of the family restricts the mobility and freedom of women and adversely influences their education and employment opportunities.

The system of *purdab* in Pakistan varies with regional and cultural values. Norms, values, and attitudes toward women are culture-specific in each province of Pakistan. Pakhtoon in KPK Province and Baloch from Baluchistan area are more conservative and observe a strict form of *purdab* in which women are supposed to cover the whole body and face with a *burqa*. Another division in the implementation of *purdab* in Pakistan can be seen between rural and urban settings. In rural areas, the *mohvi* (religious scholar) enjoys the supreme power. He confines women to domestic chores, curbing their freedom and denying them their basic rights, teachings that are blindly followed by the men of the communities (Zubair, 2016). This culturally imposed and socially defined system hampers the inclusion of women in national growth and development.

***Izzat* (Honor)**

The notion of *izzat* (honor) is also gendered in the sub-continent’s male-oriented culture (Vishwanath & Palakonda, 2011) and women are a repository of *izzat* for the family. In regions with traditional patriarchal cultural traditions, honor is always associated with men and shame belongs to women. To safeguard the prestigious status of men in society, women are controlled by men to ensure the protection of their sexual purity, their modesty, and their obedience to men. Since

the concept of patriarchy is based on an imbalance of power in society, man uses his power to rein in woman. The culture subtly dictates that daughters behave like “good” girls. They are trained in household chores and expected to be “good” wives in the future. This expected behavior psychologically prepares a girl to maintain the *izzat* of the family, specifically the *izzat* of her father and brothers, and afterward that of her husband and sons.

The concept of *izzat* specifically allied with modesty and the sexual purity of women indicates the subordinated role of women. The patriarchal rules expect women to preserve their virginity, marry according to family wishes, only give birth to sons, and remain obedient to their men. All these commandments are meant to maintain the *izzat* of the family. Disobeying such cultural codes can result in “honor killing”. Honor killing justifies the murder of a woman due to her disobeying family norms and is a crime that usually goes unpunished.

Although Pakistan is a Muslim country, it follows the South Asian patriarchal culture. The ideology of *izzat* in Pakistan means that a woman as a daughter, sister, wife, or mother is controlled by her father, brother, husband, and son as the custodians of her honor. Socializing by women outside the home, particularly with men, is not tolerated, and attempts by women to seek such freedom are considered disrespectful of family honor.

Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative in-depth interview methodology to explore formulated research questions. The interview method was appropriate to the aim of the study, which was to examine women’s actual use, experience, and perception of social media, which cannot be otherwise documented with observations and instruments. The study sample comprised seven Pakistani females selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria were based on their daily use of social media (at least three hours per day). All research participants were Ph.D. scholars at the University of Malaya (Malaysia) and aged between 27 and 35. They had completed 18 years of education and were pursuing careers as university lecturers. All the participants were from the province of Punjab in Pakistan and belonged to the upper-middle class. Only one of these participants was unmarried.

Before a semi-structured interview, basic background information about the participants was collected, which included age, the field of study, duration of social media use, and number of SNSs, for its significance in identifying themes. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasted for 45 to 60 minutes with each

participant. Since the participants were highly educated and spoke good English, the interviews were mostly in English. However, a few variations occurred in the language used when the participants felt more comfortable explaining their feelings and experiences in their native language—Urdu. To avoid prejudice in translation, the participants were encouraged to express themselves in English. Each interview was recorded on an audio device and these recordings were then transcribed by the researcher. Each transcribed interview was mailed to the respondent for checking to ensure accuracy.

The participants were generally asked the following questions:

1. *How do you present yourself on social media?*
2. *What are the advantages of social media for females in Pakistan?*
3. *What are the factors that influence your social media use?*
4. *Do you feel free or restricted in posting items on social media?*

Each notable issue, event, and incident that occurred during the interview was recorded in a notebook. Participants' reactions, expressions, and emotions were also recorded in note book. The first author, who is an Urdu-speaking woman from Pakistan and pursuing her Ph.D. in the same university, conducted the interviews. This in-group attribute of the first author positively contributed to rapport-building and understanding of cultural references.

The researcher thoroughly explained the purpose of the study and assured the participants of the confidentiality of their identities. All seven interviews were conducted individually as per the availability of the participants. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Each interview was analyzed line by line, and at the first stage, significant information was coded. At the second stage, both the first and second researchers identified the themes by grouping the codes together.

At the first step, the primary researcher used bracketing to highlight and identify interview extracts related to social media use and harassment within the participants' patriarchal culture without mentioning her personal perspective or applying her judgment. Extracts with the same meanings and codes were grouped and then data were reviewed for recurring themes and categories. Finally, two main themes, each with sub-themes, were analyzed.

Findings

The participants shared their perceptions, uses, and real-life experiences of social media. Social media is widely used for socialization and communication pur-

poses, and the experience varies from participant to participant. A few participants shared as to how their social media use is dictated by family, mainly by the husband. As members of a male-dominated society, all of them follow “social norms” while using social media. Overall, all the participants observed the patriarchal cultural values, trying to avoid exposure and self-presentation by not posting anything which might become an issue for themselves and their families. The social structure, family norms, and marital relations directly influence Internet usage patterns. The rules, not directly communicated but defined in society, are a must for women to follow. For example, a participant stated: “*being women, we have to follow some rules in Pakistan how society or family expects us to behave, we have to follow... if we don't follow, we are not considered good women.*” While sharing personal experience, another participant said that that “*being expressive in Pakistan is not tolerated and it becomes more dangerous if a woman raises [her] voice for her right[s]*”. In-depth analysis of data revealed the two themes and eight sub-themes.

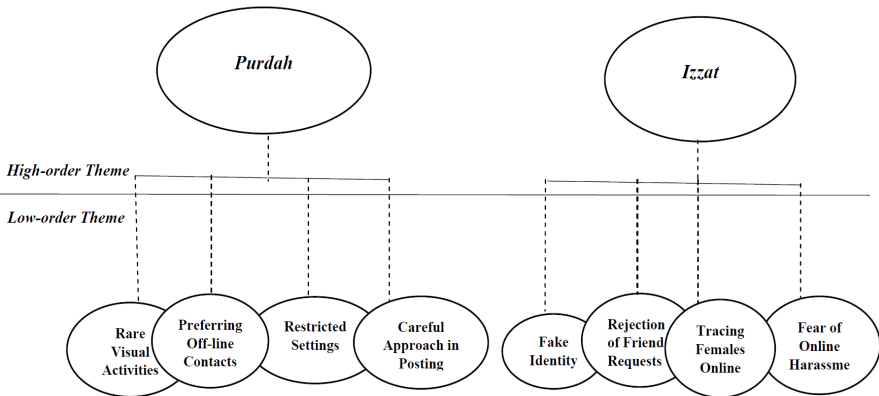


Figure 2. Theme Map

Purdah

The Pakistani patriarchal notion of *purdah*, which is derived from religion, informs and influences the ways in which Pakistani women use and perceive social media. The ways in which offline *purdah* limits women’s presence and activities also impact their online world, in particular with regard to the rarity of their visual activities, restricted settings, a careful approach in posting statuses, and preferring offline contacts. *Purdah* implies covering and not exposing oneself to others, so the participants indicated how they maintain *purdah* on social media.

Rarity of Visual Activities

Visual activities are about a participant's visual presence on social media. Participants produced multiple statements related to their thoughts about the rarity of their engaging in visual activities on social media like posting photos and sharing their visual identity. All participants agreed as to how the use of social media by women is a reflection of actual society and the reality of the situation on the ground.

Most families do not allow female family members to come in contact with strangers, and females are kept within the four walls so that no one can recognize them. The same rule is followed on social media by restricting visual presence. Visual activities involve posting pictures on social media. Most of the participants stated that they rarely post photos and even when they do, they keep access limited to close contacts.

A participant shared *"I am not allowed to post my pictures. In the past, I used to post my daughters' pictures, but now my husband has restricted me from posting even my daughters' pictures as well because my daughters are growing up. And above all, they are also girls."* Another participant stated: *"I rarely share pictures, but I have to keep it to my close contacts. Again it depends on the picture and the selection of its viewer."*

Restricted Settings

Restricted settings involve the application of security features that specify who can send a friend request, or see profile information, posts, and pictures. A few incidents have been reported by the media where females' photos were downloaded and edited for blackmailing purposes. The participants shared it as a grave concern and a reason for applying maximum security barriers. Most participants reported that only friends of friends could send a friend request and that only a close friend could have access to personal posts. One of the participants stated that *"personal life is not public and people (male) silently observe what we are up to on social media; therefore, these filters help in maintaining privacy. Above all, they can't get access to me."*

Another participant stated *"I don't want to spoil my social media life. Therefore, I don't allow anonymous people to check my social media life. People don't digest; males particularly cannot tolerate expressive women in Pakistan."*

Careful Approach in Posting Status

All the participants shared that they are quite careful while updating their status or posting any content. Especially in terms of check-ins and traveling, the status is not marked as public. A participant stated, “*I know a few people monitor every post of mine and keep an eye on all my activities. Definitely, their purposes are not good.*”

Further, it depends on the type of posts and content being shared. Visual posts and check-ins notably expose the person’s identity. Therefore, participants avoid sharing such visual content. Second, written content is also shared carefully, keeping in view the mind-set of the people in question. In addition, females usually avoid posts related to political content or opinions.

Preferring Offline Contact

Participants talked about their beliefs regarding the ways in which social media usage results in overexposure. They shared their experiences of how people search their profile, seek out personal information, and then send indecent messages. Such dubious conduct by men necessitates limiting women’s online circles. All the participants were quite familiar with the various online privacy breach tactics and a few also described recent incidents that had occurred in Pakistan.

All the participants unanimously agreed that they preferred their personal sharing to be conducted with offline rather than online contacts. Sharing information about personal life, and posting pictures and check-in messages result in online harassment, as making the whole world aware of you and your activities is a way of inducing them to notice you.

Izzat

The concept of *Izzat* or honor is deep-rooted in Pakistani society and culture. It is principally associated with girls and women, and no one compromises on *izzat*. All the participants shared details of the care they take with their digital experiences and their use of social media in order to maintain the honor of their families. They highlighted the fact that while staying abreast of the latest technology and information is necessary, family reputation is also of the utmost importance. Because online harassment, which is in itself a form of disrespect to families, is on the rise, such incidents impact their social media use. Participants revealed that they prefer to have fake online identities, reject friend requests, and are watchful of the male tactics of tracing females online to be on guard against the danger of online

harassment.

Fake Identity

A fake identity involves the use of incorrect information and a fake profile picture. The participants reiterated the fact that they gave incorrect information in the profile to keep their identities hidden as it helped them in two ways: first, it gave them freedom of expression; and second, it guaranteed that this expression would not harm them or dilute their family reputation.

For example, one participant stated *“it is very common in Pakistan that women don’t post their actual information and pictures. It is due to several reasons, the major being the concealment of your actual personality. Being female, I cannot say and post whatever I like under my real identity; therefore, under a fake identity, I can express what I want. Under this identity, I cannot be recognized even by my family.”*

Other participants also emphasized having a fake identity. According to them, *“... in Pakistan, females in particular are not allowed to express themselves, but definitely, I am desirous to voice my opinion, so having a fake identity on social media is like a guard because even my family can’t tolerate the exposure of my real identity on social media.”*

Another participant expressed the same opinion: *“... actually, they represent what they feel deep inside.”* A participant further shared that she wanted to wear jeans but her family would not allow it. So she secretly wore jeans, took photos of herself, and posted them online. In this way, she fulfilled her desire but, of course, without the consent of her family and without letting them know. *“I love to wear jeans, but you know in our society girls wearing jeans are tagged with bad names; my parents also don’t like it, but I want to wear jeans.”*

Rejection of Friend Request

All participants, without exception, talked about their restricted settings and that they are not allowed to accept friend requests, especially those from males. One participant said *“my husband doesn’t like keeping male friends in my social media contact list. So I unfriended my male colleague and if any colleague sends me a friend request, I have to reject it. If he sends me [requests] again and again, I have to block him.”*

Another participant stated *“... no family tolerates [it] if they find their daughter chatting with any male. If anyone from your family knows about your male friend list, it*

can simply ruin your well-reputed life.”

Fear of Online Harassment

The participants were deeply concerned about the increasing number of harassment cases generally in society and specifically online. They said that they strictly apply all possible security settings and would not show their visual presence on social media as pictures can easily be downloaded and tampered with.

One participant stated, “*I don’t share picture[s] at all. I have heard about stories of downloaded pictures. They are misused, and [a] few girls committed suicide because of their Photoshopped pictures.*”

Tracing Females Online

Participants identified the practice by males of tracing females on social media by looking at their profiles as common. A participant revealed that she was contacted by an individual through social media. He sent her a friend request and praised and flattered her for no good reason. The participant stated, “*The information on my profile is not that impressive but he appreciated me so much. All these are tactics to gain favor for friendship.*”

Another participant shared a similar experience: “*... a lot of people have nothing to do, they just search profile of girls [sic] and send me lovely messages. Unfortunately, [a] few girls accept them as real and it causes a problem for them and their family. So we need to understand [this] and [that] we are ambassadors of our family and their honor.*”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study recorded the digital experiences of females and the influence of cultural notions of *purdab* and *izzat* on their online practices. Grounded in the concept of social affordances, the findings suggest that online interactions are highly reflective of dominant traditional values and culture. The interviews revealed that offline culture (patriarchy) influences online culture and practices, and this constitutes an online patriarchal environment. The study concluded that the use of social media and the socio-cultural context are mutually shaped and interrelated. The researchers keenly observed during the interview how participants make everyday choices in posting and sharing online and how the women’s narrative manifested

the strict observation of digital *purdah* and the maintenance of *izzat* on social media. The study also exposes a growing digital inequality in relation to culture and gender in a conservative developing country. The accounts of participants from within a patriarchal social structure reaffirm that despite a technology revolution and globalization, which created the “information society and knowledge economy,” there is a need to address the culture of conservative societies and gender relations while assessing the benefits offered by technologies (Selwyn & Facer, 2009).

Because most research concerning social media is conducted in Western countries, studies related to its use in collectivist cultures are limited (Peters, Winschiers-Theophilus, & Mennecke, 2015). Although new media technologies have removed geographical barriers, gender “barriers” still exist in the form of attitudes and practices, specifically in developing countries (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). Paradoxically, the “digital society” borrows offline cultural values and rules for women’s online interactions and experiences. In collectivist patriarchal cultures, women are considered as the custodians of their families’ honor (A. Ahmad & Nawaz Anwar, 2018); so their social media use is not only limited but also quite restrictive. The current study was conducted in a non-Western culture (Pakistan) where the two concepts of *purdah* and *izzat* are deep-rooted in a male-oriented society in which a woman’s worth is centered around her role as the family’s “repository of honor” (Vishwanath & Palakonda, 2011). The use of social media is more “sensitive” where women not only have to compete in the digital world but at the same time have to follow the cultural obligation of safeguarding family honor through *purdah*.

Four out of every five women reside in developing countries (Hilbert, 2011), and along with other severe discriminatory behaviors and practices, they also lack the digital skills that could otherwise help them explore their potential (Chadwick, Wesson, & Fullwood, 2013). This study also observed that women’s lack of knowledge regarding security settings and technical skills to ensure protection and privacy constitutes a loophole exposing them to online harassment. The online patriarchal attitude forbids women from being expressive on controversial issues and reinforces the suppression of women. A few dare to raise their voices but do not reveal their identities while expressing their views. The traditional forces control the online spaces, which claim to be open for all. The culture clearly defines “feminine and masculine” online behavior (Dueñas-Cid, Pontón-Merino, Belzunegui-Eraso, & Pastor-Gosálbez, 2016), and the current study has tried to expose the digital experience of women in such settings.

The cultural gender segregation is evident in the findings and highlights the digital gender divide in Pakistan. So far, in collectivist and patriarchal societies, social media have not been successful in bridging gender differences and bringing about desired societal changes specifically related to gender. Although women are using social media, their online behavior manifests traditional norms and values. Women in Pakistan are facing challenges from all walks of life. One of these challenges is to establish their online identity, which is emphatically undermined and defined by patriarchal forces. The isolation and exclusion of women (offline and online) in the name of *izzat* and *purdah* deprives them of the opportunity to realize their needs for self-expression. The presence of an “online patriarchy” (Murtiningsih et al., 2017) and “hegemonic and traditional power relations” (Demirhan & Çakir-Demirhan, 2015) in online cultures is clearly evident in Pakistan. Digital *purdah* and *izzat* restrict the online socialization and mobility of women, but more importantly, they increase gender segregation, excluding women from public and private domains and further reinforcing the “online patriarchy.” Social media affordances are not, and in fact cannot be, equal for both males and females, as the culture has defined their roles and powers. Social media may disseminate equal information regardless of geographical barriers, but it is the cultural filters that decide access to and the uses of that information.

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Appendix A

Participants' Demographic Information

Name	Department	Social Media Use	Checking Frequency per Day	Time Spent online per Day
F-1	Economics	7 years	7 times	4 hours
F-2	Chemistry	5 years	3 times	2 hours
F-3	Education	7 years	5 to 6 times	4 hours
F-4	Psychology	9 years	9 times	5 hours
F-5	Accounting	6 years	7 times	4 hours
F-6	Computer Sciences	7 years	4 to 5 times	3 hours
F-7	English Language	11 years	12 to 15 times	6 hours

Appendix B

Interview Questions

- Do you use social media?
- How long you have been using it?
- How much time you spent online daily?
- What are you main online activities?
- How many online friends do you have?
- Do you use social media openly and accept friend requests?
- How many family members and offline friends are part of your online community?
- Does your family monitor your online activities?
- To what extent, you are free to post your opinion online?
- Do you have actual profile information online?
- If no, then why?
- Do you post pictures and do online check-ins?
- How you perceive social media use among women in Pakistan?
- How does culture impacts women's online behavior and practices?

Appendix C

Examples of Answers by Participants

Participant	Purdah	Izzat
F.1	<i>“Very rarely I share pictures with my family and friends, usually I did check in without picture”.</i>	<i>“nothing in my profile information is correct. All is fake... I don't want my family to know what I post online. you know this is very sensitive matter. Girls are murdered”.</i>
F.2	<i>“I didn't like to share my picture, I used to share picture of landscape, something like that profile picture is not mine”.</i>	<i>“having fake online identity does not mean that I am not satisfied with my personality, I love myself, but my family does not allow me to post actual information.”</i>
F.3	<i>“Earlier I use to post pictures and sometime my parents got angry, many times my father scolded me, cautioned me to avoid social media”.</i>	<i>“If we violate any cultural norm, then we (women) are tagged as besbaram (shameful).”</i>
F.4	<i>“Pictures can be misused, and there are incidents in Pakistan when FaceBook pictures were manipulated and misused.</i>	<i>“If, in conservative societies like Pakistan, we (women) violate and create an open profile online, people label them as “slut.”</i>
F.5	<i>“It is better to keep family activities and check in secret. You know many incidents of harassment took place. Pictures are altered and so on”.</i>	<i>“if we (women) are into relationship, we have to keep it secretly private. We can show that we have boy friends and same online, I can't show that men or boy are in my friend list”.</i>
F.6	<i>“But gradually I blocked people and now I have only friend whom I know personally and mostly my family members are in my social media circle”</i>	<i>“Now I selectively use social media, now my use is limited to interaction with friends and family”</i>
F.7	<i>“I rarely check in and as far as pictures are concerned, big no. not allowed by my family and particularly by husband. I used to post my daughters pictures but now as they are growing up, so I avoid posting their pictures as well. You know our society...”</i>	<i>“You know our society...It is better to keep family activities and check in secret. You know many incidents of harassment took place. Pictures are altered and so on.”</i>

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