

Cultural constraints and gender empowerment: Self-representation among young Balochi women on social media

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Abstract: This research investigates how young Balochi women, aged 18 to 24, utilize social media platforms to express their gender identities, challenge traditional gender expectations, and experience empowerment within their cultural context. Employing a mixed-methods approach, involving a quantitative survey on 110 university students and in-depth interviews with 15 participants, and utilizing Goffman's dramaturgical framework, the findings reveal Facebook as the favored social media platform. The results suggest that participants conscientiously project femininity online to align with cultural norms, yet they strategically manage their online personas, particularly in the presence of family members to avoid judgement and social backlash. However, utilizing the technical affordances of social media, participants gain control over their online presence and create a desired persona by striking a balance between their backstage and frontstage performance. While social media serves as a source of empowerment for these women, it does not completely liberate them from the offline patriarchy and traditional gender expectations.

Keywords: self-presentation, impression management, gender identity, traditional gender expectations, empowerment

Introduction

Social networking platforms provide young adults with a multitude of tools and opportunities to express various aspects of their identities and assign importance to their encounters related to identity (Bhandari and Bimo 2022). Through purposeful public displays, these individuals engage in the construction of their gendered identities, specifically focusing on how they can present themselves in their stories and profiles on these platforms (Yau and Reich 2019). Social media

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platforms provide a space for individuals to experiment with gendered identity construction. With the freedom to choose how they present themselves, they can explore and even challenge traditional gender norms (Leong et al. 2019).

In traditionally conservative societies, the appropriation of social media emerges as an avenue for individuals to construct empowered gender identities through the medium of discourse (Kurze 2020). Central to the concept of empowerment is the fundamental idea of power, and social media platforms, with their far-reaching influence, offer a dynamic arena for individuals to challenge and reshape prevailing gender norms (Ye and Yang 2020). Through online performative practices, such as sharing personal narratives, engaging in dialogues, individuals can actively exercise agency in shaping their gender identities. These digital spaces not only provide a platform for self-expression but also enable the marginalized individuals in raising their voice and opinion, that is unlikely or more challenging to do in the offline world (Jamatia 2022). Thus, social media has emerged as a transformative force, not only in facilitating personal empowerment but also in catalyzing broader societal shifts towards the recognition and acceptance of diverse gender identities.

This paper employs Goffman's dramaturgical theory (Kivisto 2012) to explore how young adults in Balochistan, Pakistan use online platforms to construct their gender identities. The primary objective of this analysis is to examine how young women in particular utilize social media to assert agency and empowerment within the backdrop of a traditionally conservative society.

Balochistan, a region in Pakistan, is known for its traditional values and societal norms that often place restrictions on women's freedom and opportunities (Nawaz et al. 2022). In this context, the study investigates how young Balochi women, aged between 18 to 24 studying at a public sector university in Balochistan manage these societal expectations and constraints through their online actions. The research will investigate the ways in which these young women, perform and present their gender identities on the internet. By doing so, it aims to shed light on the role of social media in enabling them to express themselves, challenge traditional gender expectations, and utilize the online platform for personal empowerment and agency.

Empowerment, as central to the research objective, refers to the process by which young women in Balochistan, Pakistan, develop the capacity and confidence to actively shape their gendered identities

through their online presence, especially on social media platforms (Mosedale 2005). In a traditionally conservative society where gender norms and expectations can be quite restrictive, empowerment in this context refers to several key aspects. Firstly, it involves these young women gaining the ability to authentically express their true selves online, including their gender identities, without fear of societal judgment or backlash. This means they have the freedom to represent themselves in ways that resonate with their personal understanding of gender.

Secondly, empowerment implies challenging and potentially reshaping the established gender norms and expectations within their society (Wilf et al. 2022). By using online platforms, these women may advocate for gender equality, challenge stereotypes, or redefine traditional roles and behaviors associated with their gender. Additionally, empowerment involves having a sense of control over their online narratives and representations. This control allows them to influence how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves, enabling a more assertive and self-directed role in shaping their gendered identities (Sobande, Fearfull, and Brownlie 2020). Lastly, empowerment may facilitate the building of supportive networks online, which can further influence their self-perception and challenge societal norms (Li et al. 2023). These networks can provide emotional support, help them raise their voices, and offer a platform for collective action or dialogue about gender-related issues.

The research on online identity construction in the Pakistani context has become quite common in the recent years. Studies have examined various aspects of how individuals, including young adults, present themselves on social media platforms (Mahmood, Jafree, and Sohail 2022), and how this intersects with their cultural and societal backgrounds. Researchers have explored how cultural and religious values influence online self-presentation among Pakistani users (Asif et al. 2020). They have found that many individuals struggle between maintaining a balance between expressing their personal identities and adhering to cultural and religious norms, particularly in conservative regions (Aksar, Firdaus, and Pasha 2023). Studies have also investigated the role of social media platforms in shaping political identities and facilitating political activism (Ida, Saud, and Mashud 2020).

Moreover, researchers have examined how gender identity is constructed and performed online, as well as the challenges and

opportunities this presents, especially for women in Pakistan who may face gender-specific online harassment and societal expectations (Salam 2021). There has been research into online privacy and security issues, with a focus on how users in Pakistan deal with concerns related to data privacy, cybersecurity, and online harassment, particularly in the context of increasing digital connectivity (Naseem, Younas, and Mustafa 2020). Moreover, researchers have explored how Pakistani youth utilize social media to construct their identities, form connections, and negotiate their social roles (Alam 2021).

However, there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific experiences of young women in Balochistan, Pakistan, and their online self-representation within the framework of gender identity. Most of the existing research tends to focus on broader national or urban contexts, often overlooking the unique dynamics at play in regions like Balochistan, which have distinct cultural and societal norms. Balochistan is known for its conservative values and traditional gender roles, which can significantly impact how young women navigate and express their gender identities online (Kamran 2023).

This research paper aims to bridge this gap by examining the online identity construction practices of young women in Balochistan, by specifically focusing on how they negotiate their gender identities within the context of a traditionally conservative society. Recent studies have largely overlooked the crucial element of empowerment through online identity construction in this context. By using Goffman's dramaturgical theory as a lens, the study seeks to shed light on the performative aspects of young Balochi women's online self-representation by examining how these practices may empower them despite the societal constraints they experience in the offline world.

This study specifically involves participants within the age range of 18 to 24 also known as emerging adulthood, concentrating on young adult women residing in Balochistan. Emerging adulthood represents a crucial phase of life where individuals are in the process of transitioning from teenage to early adulthood (Hochberg and Konner 2020). It's a period characterized by significant life decisions, including educational pursuits, career choices, and marriage. By focusing on this age group, the study can offer valuable insights into how online identity construction and empowerment intersect during this pivotal stage of personal development. Secondly, young adults between 18 to 24 age range are often considered "digital natives" (Smith 2019). They have grown up in an era where the internet and

social media have become integral parts of daily life. Their familiarity with digital platforms may influence how they construct and express their online identities.

This demographics' unique relationship with technology makes them particularly interesting subjects for study in the context of empowerment through online self-presentation. Balochistan, with its distinct cultural and societal norms, presents a unique backdrop for this research. Young women in this region often face traditional expectations and gender roles that can significantly impact their lives (Mohammadi et al. 2022).

Online self-representation is a complex interplay between technological affordances, social interactions, and the socio-cultural environment (Ghaffari 2022). Recent research indicates that social media platforms offer different affordances, meaning they provide various functionalities that enable or restrict user actions (Sæbø, Federici, and Braccini 2020). Notably, these social media affordances can be influenced by gender (Comunello, Parisi, and Ieracitano 2021). Gendered affordances refer to the ways in which technology and the cultural context offer different possibilities for action based on gender (Sullivan and Bendell 2020). In essence, these platform features influence how individuals present themselves online and shape the dynamics of online interactions within the context of their society and culture.

The current paper establishes the relevance of Erving Goffman's theoretical framework, which centers on the concept of self-presentation, as a foundation for understanding how young Balochi women craft their online identities to gain empowerment. It also explores the concepts of the "real" self and the virtual self within the framework of Goffman's theory (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013).

Literature review

An early exploration of self-representation can be found in Erving Goffman's influential work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In this work from 1959, Goffman employed the metaphor of a theater to elucidate how individuals strategically "act" to project a favorable image. Goffman defines this as "impression management," which essentially means skillfully portraying a particular persona (Riggins 1990).

Much like actors on a stage, people engage in both public-facing ("front-stage") and more private ("back-stage") behaviors to influence

the perceptions others have of them. As soon as an individual finds themselves in the presence of others, they become aware of being watched and consequently adhere to certain social rules and conventions (Price 2018). This front-stage conduct can be either habitual and instinctual or quite deliberate and purposeful. In these situations, individuals tend to follow a well-established and learned social script. This script is composed of internalized norms and societal expectations regarding how one should behave. These expectations are influenced by the specific context, the role one occupies within it, and one's physical appearance.

Failing to manage this impression effectively can result in an inability to convey the desired image or persona one wishes to project, potentially leading to a loss of one's social standing (DeGroot and Vik 2021). The “backstage” represents a private realm where there is no audience; it's a place where individuals can step out of their performative roles and make preparations for their public appearance on the “front stage” (Roderick and Collinson 2020).

Drawing a parallel to the theater, individuals, including women in the context of Balochistan's culture, often engage in both public-facing (“front-stage”) and more private (“back-stage”) behaviors to shape how they are perceived by others. In Balochistan's cultural milieu, particularly for women, social norms and expectations often play a significant role in influencing their behavior in public and private settings. When women in Balochistan find themselves in the company of others, they are acutely aware of being under observation, and this awareness leads them to adhere closely to specific social rules and conventions dictated by their cultural environment. These rules may encompass modesty in attire, respectful communication, and adherence to traditional customs. In the front-stage scenario, whether it's in family gatherings, community events, or public spaces, Balochi women are mindful of projecting an image that aligns with these cultural norms.

Conversely, the “back-stage” in Balochistan's cultural context represents the more private sphere, such as the family home. Here, away from the scrutiny of outsiders, women may have more flexibility to express their true selves, engage in personal conversations, and relax from the constraints imposed by the front stage. Online platforms may offer Balochi women a valuable space to represent their authentic selves in a manner similar to how they might behave in the backstage of their offline lives. These digital spaces provide a range of

opportunities that empower women to express themselves freely and without the constraints of societal norms and expectations.

In the online world, anonymity and pseudonymity can be powerful tools (Mondal, Correa, and Benevenuto 2020). Baloch women often face social pressures and expectations in their offline lives, which can limit their self-expression. However, online platforms allow them to adopt pseudonyms or remain anonymous, offering a shield behind which they can speak their minds and share their authentic thoughts and feelings. This freedom encourages open and honest self-representation. Moreover, online communities and social media groups may provide a supportive environment for Balochi women to connect with like-minded individuals who share their interests, beliefs, and experiences. These virtual spaces serve as a backstage of sorts, where they can engage in discussions, debates, and dialogues without the fear of judgment or societal repercussions. Here, they can embrace their true selves and explore their identities more openly.

A central idea in Goffman's theory is the distinction between expressions that individuals consciously present ("give") and those expressions they unintentionally emit or "give off" (Aspling 2011). Goffman emphasizes that the role of expression is to convey impressions of oneself. Impressions consciously given are purposefully intended and communicated, while those given off are the unintended impressions perceived by the audience (Leary 2019). Another important concept is the notion of a "mask" that individuals use to manage face-to-face interactions. This mask allows individuals to emphasize certain aspects of themselves while concealing others. Importantly, the mask doesn't transform a person into someone they are not; it merely highlights different facets of their personality (Goffman 1959).

In the context of online interactions, which can be thought of as a virtual social environment, these concepts of impression management, masks, and expressions given and given off remain relevant. Online interactions involve the communication of these concepts through visual elements and text. They are still crucial for understanding how people present themselves online. Suler (2004) argues that online communication has a unique effect on people, encouraging them to disclose personal information and express themselves more openly and intensely than they typically would in face-to-face interactions. He terms this phenomenon the "disinhibition effect," where individuals feel less restrained when communicating online. This effect can have

both positive and negative outcomes. In some cases, it enables individuals to express deep emotions and thoughts candidly, while in other instances, it can lead to the toxic expression of anger or rage.

Several factors contribute to the disinhibition effect. Anonymity plays a significant role in online interactions (J. Yang et al. 2021). When individuals can remain anonymous, they often feel like they are operating in a backstage setting, allowing them to take risks and engage in intimate self-disclosures even with people they don't know personally. In such instances, the front stage, where individuals typically project a specific persona and aim to avoid embarrassment, becomes less important. However, when social media users choose to reveal their real names and identities, their online performances more closely resemble face-to-face interactions, with the need to maintain a preferred image and avoid unnecessary embarrassment coming to the forefront.

Asynchronous communication, characterized by a lack of real-time interaction, has fundamentally altered the concept of being in the presence of others. In the context of social media, this change has also transformed our understanding of who these "others" are. According to Goffman, the audience plays a central role in any social situation, and an individual's ability to perform effectively hinges on their capacity to gather information about this audience (Ross 2014). However, on social media platforms, there's a notable difference. Social media users don't receive immediate feedback as they would in face-to-face interactions, including non-verbal cues and signals. Conversely, social media users enjoy the advantage of having more time to craft their online personas, and these platforms offer advanced tools for refining how they present themselves (Zani, Norman, and Ghani 2022). They can meticulously choose from a range of features like filters, emojis, stickers, photos, videos, and even edit or completely remove posts and comments if they don't achieve the desired impression.

B. Bharathi (2023) examines the concept of "presentation of self" in online social media environments. He argues that individuals engage in strategic self-presentation to manage their online personas, which involves sharing specific aspects of their lives while omitting others. This curated self-presentation allows users to maintain control over their digital identities and manage the impressions they make on their online audiences. This control over one's self-representation can contribute to a sense of empowerment, as individuals actively shape how they are perceived.

Roulin and Levashina (2016) highlight how individuals in these digital spaces can create multi-faceted personas that transcend traditional identity boundaries. The ability to adopt different roles and explore various aspects of one's personality can lead to a more empowered sense of self. Their work suggests that online environments enable individuals to move beyond fixed offline identities, fostering a greater sense of agency in constructing their online personas. Moreno and Uhls (2019) focus on the role of social networking sites in identity development among adolescents. They argue that online platforms offer adolescents a space to explore and experiment with different aspects of their identity, contributing to the development of a more empowered and multifaceted sense of self.

In light of the existing literature, the present study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse by focusing on the intersection of online identity construction and empowerment, particularly within. While prior research has explored various aspects of online self-presentation, gender identity negotiation, and digital empowerment, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold within the specific socio-cultural environment of Balochistan.

Methodology

In this study, we aim to address two primary research problems:

1. How do young women (aged between 18 to 24) use social media platforms to express their gender identities?
2. In what ways do these women utilize social media as a means to challenge and confront traditional gender expectations and practices?

To achieve these objectives, we have adopted an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method Design (ESMMD) as our research framework, as outlined by Creswell ("Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research" 2023). Our study unfolds in two distinct phases. Initially, we conducted a quantitative survey involving 110 university students. This quantitative phase provided us with a general understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Subsequently, we proceeded to the qualitative phase, involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with a subgroup of 15 students. Through this qualitative phase, we aimed to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives (Fetters, Curry, and Creswell 2013).

In mixed-methods research, it is imperative to establish clarity regarding the prioritization and integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Draucker et al. 2020). In our study, while the quantitative research was conducted in the initial phase, we assign priority to the findings derived from the qualitative research. This choice aligns with the central purpose of our study, which is to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender self-representation on social media, a dimension that is best examined through personal narratives and qualitative insights.

The mixed-method approach is adopted for this study as it combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively investigate how young Balochi women utilize social media for self-representation and empowerment. Quantitative data offers a broad understanding of the phenomenon, while qualitative insights provide a deeper exploration of participants' experiences (Merriam and Grenier 2019).

Firstly, we formulated qualitative data collection protocols based on the insights gathered from the quantitative phase. This included the development of interview questions and the selection of interviewees, all of which were finalized based on the results of the quantitative phase. Subsequently, in the interpretation phase, we synthesized the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study's outcomes.

The study utilizes a non-probability sampling approach (Wolf et al. 2016). The primary objective was not to draw broad generalizations but rather to dig deep into online self-representation among young women at a public sector university. Our research revealed that all participants engage in some form of self-representation through social media. To reflect the characteristics of the actual university population, we employed quota sampling (K. Yang and Banamah 2014), taking into account age, gender and department. Our data collection efforts were centered on a single public sector university in Balochistan, from which we gathered responses from 110 students.

The survey focused on demographic, which gathered information related to the participants' age and department. The second element focused upon was social media usage, where the researcher mainly investigated the time the participants spent on social media, their preferred social media platforms, and their reason for using that specific social media platform. The third section investigated how respondents utilized the affordances of social media to manage their

impressions. It examined their tendencies to curate an online persona, manage their self-presentation, and project unique facets of their identity through social media. The final section of the survey focused on the theme of gender empowerment. It explored how social media served as a space for young women to challenge conventional gender roles within a traditionally conservative society through online performative practices.

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted from young female students enrolled in a public sector university in Balochistan. These interviews dig deep into participants' online self-representations. The interview themes were drawn from the quantitative data analysis and mainly focused upon impression management, the adoption of online personas through self-editing, and the exploration of gender empowerment. The selection of participants was purposive, where the researcher specifically selected the social media users who utilize their real names in their online profiles.

Discussion

The key findings from the survey questions focusing on social media use among young Balochi women reveal some intriguing insights into the participants' platform preferences and how these choices might be connected to the expression of their gender identities and the challenge of traditional gender expectations.

The results suggest Facebook as the most preferred social media platform among young Balochi women, with a substantial 65.2% of our participants choosing Facebook as their primary platform. This finding aligns with the global trend of Facebook being a widely utilized platform, especially among younger demographics. Instagram emerged as the second most favored platform, with 23.6% of respondents opting for it. Instagram's visual nature and focus on imagery and storytelling could be seen as an appealing factor for young women looking to express their gender identities. Its emphasis on visual content allows users to curate and share images that reflect their desired self-representation. Twitter emerged as the least preferred platform among the surveyed participants. This preference was primarily due to Twitter's distinct communication style, characterized by brevity and rapid information dissemination. Young Balochi women may find other platforms more conducive to expressing their gender identities in a more visual and narrative manner.

These platform preferences also influence the ways in which these women challenge traditional gender expectations and practices. Facebook's broad reach offer opportunities for these young women to share perspectives and engage in conversations with a more diverse audience, Instagram's focus on visual representation also empower them to challenge stereotypes through posting their images. This act of self-expression can be considered a departure from the traditional Balochi culture, where women typically adhere to modesty and are not expected to publicly display their appearances.

Impression management

The survey findings indicate that female respondents prioritize projecting a sense of femininity to adhere to the Balochi cultural norms in order to avoid judgement and backlash from their families, especially when sharing something with a larger audience, for example, while sharing a Facebook post. Whether their intention is to come across as fun, intelligent, or imaginative, women tend to center their social media presence on the portrayal of femininity. This portrayal revolves around conventional gender markers like clothing choices, behavior and overall impression.

Some of the female participants in our study mentioned that when they express their femininity on social media, they feel like they are conforming to what society expects from them in terms of traditional gender roles. For example, one of the participants aged 20 explained that despite social media giving them a platform to showcase themselves, it hasn't really changed the deep-rooted cultural norms in their conservative society. In her view, women are still expected to behave in ways that align with these traditional expectations as per the Balochi culture, and social media hasn't altered that aspect of their lives.

One participant, aged 22, shared her experience of managing the privacy settings on her Facebook account due to a past incident. She explained that she had encountered a negative reaction from a family member, her uncle, when she posted about women's issues openly on her profile. In her post, she discussed the challenges faced by women burdened with household responsibilities, particularly those married at an early age, and shared her opinion on delaying marriage until after achieving a certain age or completing education. This situation took an unexpected turn when her uncle read her post and subsequently visited her home to express his discontent. He conveyed to her father his

concerns about her increasingly vocal and modern stance, which included questioning traditional norms. During this encounter, her uncle even labeled her as a “rebel” for openly addressing such issues on Facebook. As a result of this incident, she now takes precautions to restrict the visibility of her posts by removing family members and extended family when she intends to share her opinions on similar topics. This adjustment in her privacy settings serves as a protective measure to maintain a balance between her desire to express her views and the potential repercussions within her familial and cultural context.

The survey findings reveal that an overwhelming majority, 96.4% of respondents, maintain private accounts on social media, accessible only to people they consider as “friends.” This “friends” category encompasses a wide range of individuals, including close friends, acquaintances, colleagues, influencers, family members, and even parents.

One participant aged 25 shared that the way she presents herself online is influenced by who she allows into her social media circle. She explained, “When I have my close friends on a specific profile, I feel comfortable being my true self. However, when my parents or other family members are part of that group, I find myself needing to adjust how I communicate.” In simpler terms, her online behavior varies based on who is in her social media circle, with her being more authentic when it's just her close friends and making certain adjustments when her family members are part of her online audience.

Another participant, aged, 19, shared that she restricts access to her Instagram profile, allowing only her close friends to view it. She finds a sense of freedom in expressing herself on this platform, in ways that might not be possible in the offline world. She explained, “I can be totally myself online, just like boys are in the offline world. I can talk about things that matter to me and the way I want to and it's considered acceptable. I can't do these things offline because I can't control who might see me.”

Many interviewees shared a similar sentiment about the power to block or unfriend people who they find disagreeable. A participant aged 21 expressed, “I have the ability to block people who bother me, and that's truly liberating. It's something you can't easily do in the real world.” In simpler terms, these individuals feel empowered online because they can be themselves without worrying about judgment or harassment, and they have the control to remove negative connections from their online spaces. Just like the technical affordance on social

networking sites (SNSs) empower individuals, the cultural context from which an individual belongs to also play a crucial role in doing so.

When it comes to expressing gender identity on SNSs, people benefit from various technical features, like choosing who gets to see their content, improving how they present themselves online, and connecting with like-minded communities. However, it's crucial to recognize that these gender-based self-representations still take place within societies where male-dominated structures exist. In simpler terms, even though SNSs provide tools for self-expression and connection, they don't change the underlying influence of traditional gender roles and power dynamics. As highlighted by (Trepte 2021), the influence and authority granted by social media are neither entirely controlled by traditional gender expectations or patriarchal mindset nor completely independent of it. This phenomenon, known as the disinhibition effect, has liberated the way gender is represented and expressed online by allowing individuals to be more open and expressive about their gender identities. However, it has also liberated social judgment as people are subject to increased scrutiny and criticism in the online sphere. However, the judgement and criticism that individuals face online are not of the same intensity or doesn't have the same impact as the criticism and backlash that they experience in the offline world.

Despite the less intensity of judgement, the female participant utilize impression management technique as highlighted by Goffman, by keeping their backstage (limited/restricted audience) and frontstage (public or profile shared with the entire friend list). So while the technical affordances were found to be empowering for these young women restricted by traditions and culture, it doesn't completely liberate them from the challenges and limitations they experience in their offline world, primarily due to their gender.

Self-presentation

The survey results show that almost 78% young women tend to alter or edit their self while posting online, especially on Facebook, which has more familial audience as compared to Instagram where they limit their followers. About 40% of the participants confessed being a passive member on Facebook due to its more public nature and having familiar audience. The remaining participants shared that they review their posts before and even after posting and even delete their posts if

they realize that their posts gave an impression they don't want to give off.

A 23-year-old participant shares that it's because of the tools of social media that she started expressing her opinions on injustices done to women in general and specifically the limitations that Balochi women go through in their real lives. She elaborated that since the social media features allow her to change, delete or edit her posts, she finds it liberating and safe that she can always go back and fix things as per the impressions she wants to give off. Another 18-year participant reported utilizing the feature of restricting the audience quite frequently as she started writing about forced marriages of women in her culture, especially after three of her cousins were married off after school and were not allowed to pursue higher education. Moreover, she also shared that she edits the self and utilize self-presentation tactics to portray the self that she wants, so if she receives negative comments, she tends to delete her post later on.

In contrast to in-person interactions where one's public persona is immediately on display upon entering a social setting, online interactions predominantly involve backstage or behind-the-scenes preparations. The physical separation between individuals on the online platforms provide social media users the time to carefully construct and refine their self-presentation. Along with that, social media platforms consist of tools such as filters, emoji's, and stickers that participants can utilize for creating a desired persona, but most importantly, these platforms offer users the luxury of time and distance to curate the image they wish to project. In situations where the initial impression they convey falls short of their desired image, they can easily rectify it. A 21-year old participant shared her perspective about the freedom she enjoys on social media: As aptly "Social media empowers me to express myself freely because, even if the worse happens, I can always edit or delete my post."

Social media platforms, like Facebook, allow users to temporarily pause their accounts, giving them the freedom to take a break and come back when they want. One person who started making videos about a year ago shared her experience when she began sharing her videos on Facebook. She said, "I felt really sad and tired because I got a lot of mean comments on my posts. People called me names like 'behaya (shameless),' 'beizzati (dishonored),' and 'baghi (rebel)' when I shared the links to my videos on Facebook. These hurtful comments really demotivated and disheartened me, so I decided to take a break

from Facebook for two months. During that time, I also stopped making videos for a while. But something important happened. I started getting positive comments on my YouTube videos, especially from women who liked and felt inspired by my content. They asked me to make more videos, especially about lifestyle stuff. This motivated me, so I went back to making YouTube videos. I still stayed away from Facebook and focused all my energy on creating videos that my viewers loved. After some time, I started feeling better about myself. I had taken a break from all the negativity and was really focused on what I wanted to do. When I came back to Facebook, I didn't let mean comments bother me as much. I had become stronger and less affected by them."

In Balochistan, women often face serious challenges when they do things that go against what's expected of them because of their gender. In the example mentioned above, it's not common for Balochi women to vlog or share their life with public through vlogging or making videos for public. Balochistan has strict rules about what women can and cannot do. When women break these rules, they can face a lot of criticism and resistance. This part of the story shows how women in Balochistan deal with these additional challenges when they pursue things that challenge traditional gender expectations. The technical affordance of social media platforms, such as the option to temporarily deactivate one's account on Facebook, plays a significant role in empowering women, particularly in socio-cultural contexts like Balochistan. This feature offers women a valuable sense of control over their online presence and interactions. In many societies with traditional gender norms and restrictions, women experience heightened scrutiny and backlash for their online activities. The ability to pause their accounts grants them the power to step back from potentially harmful interactions and protect their mental and emotional well-being.

Moreover, this deactivation feature provides women with a much-needed break from the negativity they may encounter online. When women challenge established gender expectations, they are sometimes met with hurtful comments and criticism. Taking a break allows them to distance themselves from these hurtful remarks, and offer them the space and time to heal, regroup, and rebuild their confidence.

Empowerment

In the context of Balochistan, where cultural expectations often restrict women's interactions and expressions, social media serves as a powerful tool for empowerment. Most participants shared that social media offers a unique space to highlight aspects of their identity that usually they don't express during face-to-face encounters. For instance, a 24-year old shared her experience of growing up in a conservative environment characterized by strict gender segregation. In her words, "I was raised in a conservative family, where gender segregation was the norm. There were limited opportunities to interact with boys outside of my immediate family circle. Social media opened up the world for me by allowing me to connect with boys and form new friendships, even with people from different countries which changed my perspective and allow me to grow as an individual by learning from about the world and different people that exist outside my own culture."

However, despite the freedom they experience on the social media platform, most participants were of the opinion that patriarchy exist even within the online world, and social judgment is prevalent both online and offline. A 19-year old participant pointed out that "due to 24/7 access and ease of connectivity social media can often exacerbate social judgement. I have noticed that in the offline/real world, sometimes people hesitate in passing negative comments especially when you show your contempt through your body language, they may even stop giving their opinion; however, people do not hesitate to write whatever they want on social media, because of which negative comments and judgement becomes unavoidable at times."

However, a few participants shared their perspective that for them judgement on social media is less damaging and significant as anyone can write whatever they want to, even if they don't know them personally; however, criticism in the real world mostly comes from people they know and that's more demotivating.

Moreover, the participants also highlight the importance of online community support. In situations where they face hostility or cyberbullying, they find solace in the collective support of their online communities. A participant shared: "when someone posts negative comments on her posts, she feels extremely liberated when her friends step in to defend her, which is unlikely in the real world. She also shared that since everything is on record on social media, it empowers her to think that in case of bullying, she can easily report someone's

profile, and would not have to face the repercussions that she usually would in the offline world.”

Conclusion

This study examined how young Balochi women between the ages of 18 to 24 utilize social media platforms to express their gender identities and challenge traditional gender expectations. The findings shed light on several key aspects of this phenomenon. The results indicate impression management constituting a major part in the self-presentation of the participants. Balochi women consciously curate their online personas, primarily focusing on projecting a sense of femininity to conform to cultural norms and avoid judgment from their families and society.

Despite the empowerment that social media offers, participants still find themselves bound by traditional gender roles and power dynamics within their offline world. The strategic division of their online selves, between restricted and public audiences, allow them to deal with these challenges and maintain a balance between self-expression and cultural expectations.

Self-presentation on social media platforms, characterized by the freedom to edit, delete, and refine one's online presence, empowers young Balochi women to express their views on issues like gender inequality and societal limitations. The technical affordances of social media provide them with a sense of control over their online interactions and protect their mental and emotional well-being, especially when faced with negative comments and criticism. However, it is essential to recognize that these online expressions coexist with the influence of offline gender dynamics. Social media empowers these women, but it does not entirely liberate them from the challenges and limitations imposed by their conservative culture.

Considering the widespread adoption and extensive use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) among young Balochi women, future research must focus on investigating the impact of these social media platforms on overall wellbeing and real lives of Balochi women. SNSs play a significant role in facilitating social interactions and shaping gender identities. By examining the activities of youth on SNSs, particularly in spaces that allow for expressions beyond the constraints of their cultural norms, researchers can uncover alternative narratives that challenge the prevailing stereotypes associated with young women in Balochistan.

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