

Negotiating Masculinity through Language: The Case of Pakistani Facebook Confession Pages

Abstract

This study aims to explicate the construction of male identity through language, and the corresponding embedded notions about gender roles and female gender stereotypes in Pakistani society, in relation to the romantic male-female relations as reflected in the posts on Pakistani Facebook Confession Pages. Social networking sites are being extensively used by youth for a myriad of purposes and analysis of posts on the Confession Pages included in the present study highlights significant aspects of language usage pertaining to 'gender contestation' and the underlying relations of power and male dominance. Adopting a critical discourse analysis framework, the analysis sheds light on three threads of discourse apparent in the selected posts: the discourse of romance, discourse of contention and discourse of discrimination. The implications of linguistic choices of the male students and their association with various socio-cultural stereotypes about women are also discussed. The analysis shows that the discourse used by males to indicate female desirability is associated with complacency and in turn acts as a foil on which they establish their own masculinity – and dominance.

Key Words: Facebook Confession Pages, masculinity, discourse of romance, gender roles, and stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

The post-structuralist approaches to the study of gender espouse that gender identities are fluid and must not be viewed in relation to strictly heterosexual dichotomies. However, when it comes to romantic male-female relations, the conventional societies still reflect the traditional stereotypes associated with male and female gender roles. The recent social media boom has changed the

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dynamics of gender contestation in traditional societies like Pakistan by making interaction easier and convenient. Various apps on mobile phones have further facilitated interpersonal communication and Social Networking Sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn present dynamic social environments and as opposed to online chat rooms, users on SNSs have to conform to their real identities and certain expectations of appropriate online behaviour. In this context, over the last few years new kinds of platform – namely confession pages – have emerged on Facebook which are usually associated with some college or university. While the users post anonymously on these pages, they can still identify the person they are writing a confession to, because the audience of these pages is mostly limited to students of the same college or university. These pages and communities are, however, not officially sanctioned by the institutes they associate with and allow the students to post about topics/issues in a way that they can be discovered by person for whom the post is intended thus there is always a chance for cyber bullying and misuse because the posts are anonymous.

Consequently, on one side these pages and communities offer a platform for Facebook users to talk about issues they cannot broach openly and on the other hand present interesting instances of how the users construct their identities through language in a way that they can only be recognized by certain people. There are only a few studies that highlight different user patterns and the purview of topics that these posts pertain to. Conrad (2014), for instance, analyses the language of High School confession pages on Facebook and asserts that where these pages are anticipated to be used to communicate negative emotions, the analysis pointed that most of the posts were related to positive emotions and emotionally charged posts didn't receive more likes as compared to neutral posts. Barari (2015) analyses the latent topics found on the Facebook Confession page of Tuft University. This study showed that students often use these sites to discuss issues they wouldn't usually approach with their friends and peers. Loneliness and social issues were the two prominent topics that surfaced in this study.

In this backdrop the present study aims to highlight how the male students assert and negotiate their masculinity as reflected in the language they use in the confessions. Most of the posts selected for this study are regarding the profession of love, or indirect (in a few cases direct) marriage proposals. Despite the fact that these posts are anonymous and the visitors do not know the identity of the users posting the confessions, these posts shed light on how certain stereotypes are still embedded in the social fabric of Pakistani society. In view of the efforts of feminist movement in Pakistan, this study elucidates the perception of males

regarding what constitutes as the ideal female and the conflicting issues that arise in terms of male dominance over females in the society. Secondly, these posts are mostly by university students and this study gains further significance from the fact that the male users posting on the confession pages are studying in modern, apparently enlightened educational environments, and given the opportunity to speak their minds without fear of any consequence (so their posts can reflect the underlying perceptions regarding gender roles). Correspondingly, this study highlights the current social perspectives regarding romantic love and its relation to conventional or changing gender role perceptions. In this context and the increasing use of Facebook by the youth, the main research question this study aims to answer is:

How males assert and negotiate their masculinity through language in apparently anonymous posts on the selected Pakistani Facebook confession pages?

The related subsidiary questions are:

- How the linguistic choices of male users positing on confession pages represent the prevalent stereotypes regarding ideal female partners and in turn propagate male dominance over females?
- How the males posting on the selected confession pages construct their own identities in relation to other males and what are the underlying linguistics implications of these choices?

The following section recapitulates various studies conducted on self-representation on SNSs and the relevant literature available on gender related differences in SNSs usage. Section 3 elaborates on gender theory and the main theoretical works pertinent for the present study. Section 4 presents the methodology including data selection and theoretical framework used for the analysis. Section 5 is the main analysis and discussion section. The conclusion section provides a synthesis of the analysis section in light of the research questions.

Social Networking Sites (SNSs), Self-Representation and Gender Differences

Over the past two decades use of internet for interpersonal communication has increased tremendously. Social Networking Sites (SNSs heron) such as Facebook – which is one of the largest social networking sites with more than 1 billion monthly active users (as of September, 2015¹) – are extensively used by people to

¹ <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>

interact with friends, family and peers as well as to establish new connections (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). SNSs allow their users to create and re-create their personal identities in the cyberspace according to their social needs (Kuo et al, 2013). A number of studies highlighting the dynamics of identity construction on SNSs have emerged in the last few years. Most of the users have been found to present themselves positively on the social networking sites (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2007; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Grasmuck, Martin & Zhao, 2009); others use a different language while interacting with different audience (Walther, 2007); and some create desirable personal identities and behave in ways that are inhibited in the real (off-line) world (Manago, Graham, Greenfield & Salimkhan, 2008).

Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) assert that in contrast to online anonymous environments where users tend to engage in role-playing games and anti-normative behaviour, users on SNSs, especially Facebook, adopt group identities rather than personally constructed ones. Boon and Sinclair (2009) stress the performative aspects of personal identity projection on Facebook which are more often than not opposed to the users' real life identities. Mehdizadeh's (2010) study on the correlation between narcissism and Facebook activities of the participants shows that users with high level of narcissism and low self-esteem tend to spend more time online and post more self-promotional content on their timelines. Cheung, Chiu and Lee (2011) demonstrate the significance of social factors, including social enhancement, in determining online behaviour on Facebook. Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) espouse that a need to belong to the society figures as a prominent motivating factor in the development of users' identities on Facebook.

Michikyan, Dennis and Subrahmanyam (2014) illustrate that young adult users with less coherent beliefs about themselves used false identities on Facebook, as opposed to those with more coherent perception about their identity who retained their real identity to a large extent. Like most of the other domains of life, social media hasn't been devoid of gender contestation and studies targeting gender difference in the use of social media have underlined varied patterns of SNSs usage by male as opposed to female users. These differences provide valuable insights into the relation between gender role expectations and gender based patterns of relationship orientation mediated through SNSs and computer mediated communication (CMC) in general. In Barker's study (2009), for instance, females were found to use SNSs more for relational purposes in contrast to males. Lin and Lu (2011) show that women are more driven by the number of

peers they connect with on SNSs as compared to men, for whom enjoyment is the major factor. Muscanell & Guadagno (2012) found that the male participants of their study used SNSs to establish new relationships whereas females used the same sites to maintain previous relationships. In the same vein, Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis and Kruck (2012) conclude that women use SNSs in order to compare themselves to others, whereas men view profiles of other users in order to find new friends.

Males have also been found to use Facebook more for searching information, looking at the profiles of other users and online games, where females use Facebook for connecting with friends and family for the most part (Kuo, Tseng, Tseng & Lin, 2013). Wang, Burke and Kraut (2013) illustrate that in their Facebook status updates, adult women write more about personal issues, whereas men post about philosophical topics. Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, and Regan (2013) show that the participants of their research (all females) perceive of SNSs as commoditized space where they need to project stereotypical images in order to be regarded as social success by adopting privacy options and not making their profiles public as most of the male users do.

Gender Theory: Gender as Discourse, Performativity Theory and Multiple Masculinities

The present study hinges on the theoretical underpinning of three prominent threads in the field of gender studies: emergence of the notion of 'Gender as Discourse' and corresponding work on language, gender and power (cited in Weatherall, 2002), Butler's Performativity Theory posited in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (2006) and Connell's concept of Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 1996; Connell, 2005, Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Language issues, as Weatherall (2002) argues, subsume political issues, as language reflects the social position of females (as well as males).

Research on the manifestation of power relations between men and women through language entails that these relations surface in language in a number of ways. Lakoff's pioneering work (1975) espouses that language reflects the subservient position of women in the society, Spender (1994) argues that since men had control over language in the past so they encoded sexism in language and further language research by feminists elucidate that men's power is not only manifested through language but it plays a crucial role in actively establishing and maintaining negative attitudes regarding the status of women in the society (Weatherall, 2002). In this context, as Weatherall (2002) contends, language not

only reflects gender but constitutes it as well; both the language about men and women as well as their ways of talking are to be taken as the facets of the same process namely the 'social construction of gender'. Correspondingly, in this largely poststructuralist vein, notions about gender are understood as being not fixed but culturally, historically and locally determined. However, the dominance approach (a term used to refer to Spender's (1994), and West & Zimmerman's work (1983) cited in Sunderland, 2006) is also pertinent for the present study as it expounds the hierarchical nature of gender-related power relations. Hence, in the present context, language and gender relation are viewed from the perspective of discourse – where discourse refers to the broader systems of meaning and gender as a concept is itself manifested as a social meaning system, determining and influencing how we understand the world (Weatherall, 2002).

In *Gender Trouble* (2006) Butler expounds that gender must be viewed as 'performative' where perceptions of and about gender arise from a repeated set of acts: 'the gendered stylization' of our bodies. The most significant notion under this theoretical approach is to regard the performative nature of gendered identities which require power for propagation and legitimization. For Butler, gender has no ontological status aside from the set of acts that constitute it. Identity construction also occurs at par with the practices that constitutes gender as Butler writes "identity is performativity constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (2006, p. 35). Hence gender is essentially a performance and the corresponding practices account for various gender identities. Once a gender reality is constructed through a set of practices that Butler calls 'styles of flesh', notions about gender are propagated and sustained through continuous social performances. These performances, however, come with punitive consequences and actors in a society have to conform to these 'styles of the flesh' in order to survive in the social milieu.

For Butler, gender is consciously created through the performance of various social acts which are assumed to be pre-existing. Thus it is bound to undergo change and is reshaped as a result of social and historical changes. From a poststructuralist perspective this view of gender is particularly important as it entails a fluid notion of gender, open to the possibility of transformation in association to gender roles, gendered identities and the very performative acts that constitute gender itself. The concept of Hegemonic Masculinity was introduced by R.W Connell in 1980s in relation to the study of social inequality in high schools in Australia. As opposed to the generally accepted concept of masculinity, these studies illustrated the presence of multiple masculinities both in terms of

gender and class relations. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that the term refers to the most honoured ways of being a ‘man’ and how all men are required to identify themselves in relation to it, and how, in turn, this idealized notion of being a man leads to subordination of women around the world. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the concept of hegemonic masculinity encompasses ways in which gender roles were actualized and how these in turn sustained the male dominance over women. Hegemony is not equated with violence in Connell’s account, however, it does refer to the ascendancy gained and perpetuated through institutions, culture and persuasion in a patriarchal gender system where new forms of masculinity can replace the old forms. In patriarchal societies, men have received certain privileges throughout history. Connell (1996) terms these privileges “patriarchal dividend”. Due to their dominant position in the society men are able to earn more than women (until a few years ago, even in the developed countries men’s average incomes were almost double of the average incomes of women), men have considerably greater political access and men control the means of violence including weapons and armed forces.

Theoretical Framework

The selected post for this study will be analysed using the framework of critical discourse analysis posited in Fairclough (1989), and Wodak and Meyer (2001). Textual analysis is a significant part of discourse analysis; in fact, it is starting point of discourse analysis. Fairclough (1989) has espoused three stages of critical discourse analysis: “description of text, interpretation of the relationship between text and interaction, and explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context” (p. 109). In Fairclough’s contention, for analysing the textual features it is necessary to take account of ‘other choices’ that could have been made. Discourse analysis, then, also focuses on text choices “the system of options in the discourse types which actual features come from”. The analysis in this paper is largely informed by gender theory; however, the following features of the text have been analyzed to highlight the interrelatedness of language choices and the embedded socio-cultural concepts about gender and gender roles:

I. Reference and Nomination: by which one constructs and represents social actors. The identity of the participants is created mainly through nomination and in part by predication (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Reference also involves:

ii. Predication: Labelling social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively. It includes the attributes given to the social actors

in the text, by predicates, predicative nouns/adjectives, collocations, comparisons, allusions and presuppositions/implications. (Wodak & Meyer, 2001)

iii. Perspectivation: includes expressing involvement and positioning speaker's point of view. In involves the use of pronouns and how the readers/audience are addressed. (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Selection

This study is carried out on the basis of 50 posts selected from 15 confession pages of Pakistani Universities using purposive sampling to identify posts that relate to the research questions. Purposive sampling has been used essentially to weed out posts that are not related to gender relations (as many users also share unrelated items, ask questions about semester schedules amongst others things on the same confession pages). Confessions posted between the time-period of one year: December 1, 2014 to December 1, 2015 are considered for analysis. Only posts from male users are included because the main aim of this study is to explicate how males construct and negotiate their identities while professing their sentiments for female students in their universities. Although, a number of female students also posted on the selected confession pages, their number is considerably low and in correspondence to the aims and objectives of the presents study these posts are not explicitly used for analysis and discussion.

ANALYSIS

A discursive approach to the analysis of identity construction entails that we look at the systematicity of how ideas and opinions are constructed in particular contexts. In the selected posts three streams of discourses are apparent and significant from the perspective of power relation in association with gender roles and gendered identities:

- Discourse of Romance: referring to ways in which the male users posting on the confession pages construct the identity of the person they are confessing to and their own identities correspondingly.
- Discourse of Contention – Asserting Masculinity through Comparison: discourse pertaining to conflict and comparison where the male users construct their identities in relation to other males, particularly in relation to the concept of multiple masculinities shedding light on the varied ways of asserting maleness.
- Discourse of Discrimination – Female Gender Stereotypes and Sexism: referring to language usage that reflects discrimination against women,

stereotypes that reflect culturally expected ways of behaving from females, and how these language choices in turn perpetuate sexism.

However, these three streams are identified only for the purpose of stratifying the various aspects of gender relations and largely conflate with one another.

Discourse of Romance

Research on romance and masculinity in the western society shows that romantic masculinity is associated with femininity and may clash with the culturally accepted ways of being male (Allen, 2007). However, in the selected posts one of the characterizing features of the language used for females by the male users reflect the traditional associations of subordination with female gender roles. Here it must be noticed that these posts are anonymous so their lexical choices reflect on the actual social conceptualization of gender roles in the Pakistani youth. These lexical choices and their implication are discussed in the following section.

Lexical Choices: Ways of Referring and Predication

Reference/nomination and predication are two of the most important tools used to construct identities. How the social actors are labelled reflect the underlying assumptions about their identities. Furthermore, in the present case, where the male users are using language to describe the females they are confessing to for the most part, they are also simultaneously constructing their own (male) identity in correlation.

Significantly, the words cute, innocent and the phrase ‘I like your smile’ surface again and again in these posts. Since the language of romance has been traditionally expected to be imbued with metaphors and expressions exalting the beauty of the beloved – contrary to the expectations these posts are surprisingly general. This can indicate a shift in the traditional ideas about romantic love in the modern Pakistani society as the students posting on these confession pages and communities are heavily under the influence of western notions about male-female romantic relationships which are not necessarily formed on the basis of ‘love’ and doesn’t necessarily entail commitment. Table 1 shows the frequency of the prominent lexical cues – the lexical choices – that characterize the discourse of romance or in other words lexical choices used to express the sentiments of likeness, approbation, and in certain cases invitations for establishing a romantic relationship. These lexical cues, however, do not belong to one grammatical category: some are adjectives, others complements and even nouns.

Table 1. Lexical Cues for the Discourse of Romance and their frequency in the selected 50 Posts

Lexical Cues	Frequency	Denotations	Cultural/Social Connotations
Smile	24	Facial expression indicating that the person is happy or relaxed.	Indicator of subservience, acceptance and in most cases understood as a feminine as opposed to a masculine feature. It also signifies approachability and indicates that the person is willing to engage in a particular interaction. In male to female interaction it is taken to be an indication of 'consent' and 'willingness'.
Cute	17	Quality of being attractive, owing to small size	Cute generally conveys meaning of smallness, femininity and when it comes to the females it is related to the elements of innocence, complacency and delicateness. When used in a romantic context it also indicates that the person deemed 'cute' is not taken as clever or cunning.
Beautiful/Beauty	15 (9+6)	Visually appealing	One of the most common adjectives used for women over the ages. Its use, however, has been replaced either by more explicit terms that encode 'sexuality' or by less explicit terms like 'cute'. As a complement 'beautiful' carries meanings of respect. However, as an adjective it is seldom used for men and a man labelled as 'beautiful' is likely to be considered feminine.
Innocent/innocence	7 (6+1)	Someone who doesn't intend harm to anyone or is not considered as capable of doing evil	Innocent, when used for females generally carries meaning of powerlessness, immaturity and a lack of intelligence. However, this powerlessness is implied as an inherent quality – entailing that they are not capable of doing any harm by virtue of their very nature. It is important to note that 'innocent' also indicates immaturity and a lack of worldliness.
Pretty	3	Beautiful but not imposing	Another explicitly feminine complement that is often used for girls and carries meaning of moderate beauty. In socio-cultural context
Attractive	3	Appealing and capable of arousing interest	Attractive is not an explicitly feminine and is used for both males and females. Whether used for a male or a female it mostly signifies sexual appeal and desirability.

As it is apparent from Table 1 the word ‘smile’ appears most frequently in the selected posts. A smiling face indicates that the person is more open, however the high frequency of this word in the confessions indicates that the less-smiling females of the student population have been implicitly deemed unattractive. The most frequent collocation in the posts is cute and innocent; these words have been mostly used in conjunction. Labelling the females as ‘cute’ and ‘innocent’ in turn signifies that the male users occupy the powerful end in the heterosexual dichotomy and these females, although their voices are absent from this ‘discourse’, are identified in relation to the stereotypical subordinate female gender roles. Furthermore, these terms are never used to describe traditional male identities – where they are either described as smart, or tall or handsome. This also sheds light on the hierarchical nature of the gender relations and it can be argued that by labelling these females as ‘cute’ and ‘innocent’, the male users have quite successfully avoided the frowned upon notions of femininity associated with romantic discourse. Consider this example for instance:

1) To the g!rl Wearing Green today In N I T

You look cute and beautiful. I have been noticing you from the commencement of classes. I like Your Smile and unfortunately I don't know How to convey this. But i don't like your f*cking arrogance. *devil emoticon...*

Here the male student has simultaneously professed his likeness for the intended girl while asserting his maleness by expressing his dislike for ‘arrogance’ of the same girl. The underlying assumptions about the legitimacy of this claim – indicated through the use of profanity shows that somehow this girl does not have the right to be arrogant and her attitude defies the conventional complacent behaviour associated with young girls.

Forms of Addressing and Approbation

Another significant feature in the confessions posts is the way forms of addressing are used in these posts. This also includes perspectivation – referring to how the speakers position themselves in relation to the audience. Consider, for instances the following posts:

- 2) To, the girl in white and red dress 35th MBBS You were looking so beautiful, like an angel
P.s: That feather head band was cute *tongue emoticon*
- 3) New Crush.....

that pretty girl on grey cultus hm ny furc sy ly kr askari 14 sec B tk us ka pecha kiya but kya faida naam tk to pta chl nhi saka us ka *cry emoticon* hey princess agar tm yaha nho to plz apna naam btao

Your admirer

[That pretty girl on grey cultus, we/I followed you from FURC to Askari 14, section B, but to no avail because I couldn't even find your name.... hey princess! If you are here, please tell me your name]²

- 4) Final yr doll. tm ne mujhe bhi dhoka de dya. Pta ni kitne larko ko dhoka do gi. Aur unki zindagy kharab karogy but i still luv u cum back to me.
-anonymous

[Final year doll! You even betrayed me. Don't know how many boys will you deceive and ruin their lives but I still love you, come back to me]

The terms “final year doll”, “hey princess”, “angel” carry connotations of subservience as dolls, princesses or angels never rebel and the very semantics of these terms have ‘complacency’ encoded in them. It is interesting to notice that none of the posts mention any expressions or terms that confer power to the females. From the cultural perspective, it should be noticed that unlike the male gender roles that are considered acceptable in eastern societies even when males transgress boundaries of social, religious and moral codes, the male users indicate their likeness mostly for females who conform to traditional female gender roles. In (4) particularly, where the male student is accusing a girl of betraying him and many others, the accusation is paradoxically juxtaposed with the use of nominative ‘doll’ which conveys meaning of ‘artificiality’, ‘beauty’, and ‘inanimateness’. This is perhaps one of the more common terms that signify objectification of women in the main stream discourse where they have come to be regarded more as commodities as opposed to social actors.

Additionally in (3) it is not clear whether the person followed the girl alone or with friends as ‘hum’ in Urdu translates to ‘we’ as a collective first person pronoun, and it is also used as a singular first person pronoun when used formally (if used in this manner ‘hum’ also carries the connotations of ‘pompousness’ and is often mocked). The use of ‘hum’ in present day Urdu speaking communities as a singular first person pronoun has become almost redundant, in the present

² Most of the posts quoted in the analysis are either written in slang English or in mix English-Urdu code, however some posts use only Urdu in Roman script. Where necessary, I have given a rough translation of such posts and in some places translation of only the Urdu words in square brackets.

context it can signify two things: firstly either the male user who posted this post is trying to assert his own personal identity as superior or contrarily he is trying to corroborate the use of nominative ‘princess’ by using ‘hum’ – in traditional Urdu literature kings, queens, princess, and other elites are represented as using ‘hum’ (we) as opposed to ‘mae’ (me). Thus, the user not only asserts his dominance by the use of ‘hum’ but also reciprocates it by addressing the intended girl as ‘princess’.

- 5) Two girls were standing in c2 watching match. One in grey and the other in black *abaya*. [‘abaya’ is a robe like apparel worn by Muslim women to cover their heads and clothing] The girl in black was too cute. I have a crush on her. She was wearing green scarf. Please if someone knows her mention her in comments. And I guess they both were from Post graduate classes. tongue emoticon
- 6)ma us time apko like krta hon jb apna bilkul white colour k kapre phne thy..name ka to pta nai but hamisha sar pa dopata or chera pa moskorahat aj b green+pink colour ka dopata sar pi ta..
[I like you when you wear white dress... I don’t know your name but you always have a dopata (a long scarf used to cover head by women in the subcontinent) on your head... today again you were wearing a green and pink dopata...]
- 7) I'm from Johar block morning student. I don't want to mention my name. I have a Crush on a beautiful girl of johar block. Her name starts with S.... she is from bs English 4th semester. I want to tell her that I really like you she always wears a *black gaon* [gown]. I'd like to tell you through this platform if you are interested plz contact me. If someone knows her kindly inform her thanks.

As gender is performative in nature, we can see these aspects as examples of what Butler calls the ‘styles of flesh’ (2006). The male students posting about the females are apparently trying to convey their likeness for the concerned females but interestingly the features they use to identify and commend at the same time are the typical ways of behaving in a conventional Muslim society where girls are supposed to cover their heads with a head cover, in the present case with a dopata in (6), and their clothing with a gown as in (5) and (7). By commending and highlighting these features the male students not only reflect what the Pakistani society deems to be approbatory for a young girl but also perpetuate these notions. Even more interesting in the case of these examples is how these male students implicitly assert their own maleness by indicating approbation for these expected ways of dressing by females.

Discourse of Contention: Asserting Masculinity through Comparison

Confession pages on Facebook serve as an outlet for students to give vent to the issues they cannot otherwise address directly. Apart from the posts in which the male students indicate their feelings, there a number of posts (on most of the selected pages) where the male students construct their identities in relation to other males and their behaviour – however with a purpose to either disapprove of a relationship they don't find suitable or else to highlight their own suitability as opposed to some other male who has successfully established a relationship with the girl they either like or consider unworthy of him. For instance, see the following posts:

- 8) Muja ek baat samj ni ati k NUST ki sari pyri larkiya hamesha chawal and kojey larko k sth he ku nazar ati hain frown emoticon Hum kya pyre larkey mar gye hain A silent observer of C1
[I can't understand one thing. Why are all the pretty girls of NUST always seen with stupid and ugly boys? All of us good looking boys aren't dead, are we?]
- 9) To that couple who were involved in some suspicious activities near HQ at 9.15. I saw you, I know you. BUT you will never find me.
P.S. next time pls use back side of NBS or SEECS.
q k hum bhayon ko kch kch hota hai. [because we (brothers) are also human]
Regards,
Elegant Boys of NUST
- 10) There is a boy in class BSCS 5b who has changed 5 girlfriends up till now,,,,,as he is freshman so we should get tution from him,,,,,,hmara b dilkta ha [we also have desires....]

In the first post quoted above (8) the male student is evidently highlighting his superiority by associating himself to the group of good looking (smart) boys of NUST. Implicit in this post are many stereotypes about male-female relationships. For instance, it is often assumed that a beautiful girl is more likely to find eligible suitors and smart boys are more likely to establish relationships with beautiful girls. The student is voicing his confusion and disapproval at the same time. To him this is apparently an aberrant phenomenon where beautiful girls have chosen to be with 'ugly' and 'stupid' guys. Also as is clear from the post, the male student is trying to assert his own suitability for the pretty girls as he deems himself to be good looking. One of the central propositions that Connell (2005) highlights in relation to the construction of gender for men is the complexity of conforming to pre-established gender role expectations. Males are often induced to conform to these gender role expectations in order to establish, assert and

sustain their masculinity. Furthermore, conforming to these expectations is a choice that has to be made every day – sustaining masculinity becomes a feat of performing the male acts. Post (9) apparently looks like a warning: the students who posted this are identifying suspicious activities of the couple but simultaneously they are also encouraging the couple to continue to activities but elsewhere where there would be less chance of being seen. On one side the students who posted this appears to be establishing his identity as part of the group of ‘elegant boys of NUST’ mainly because they are not involved in the same suspicious activities like the couple or else have been able to be discrete about it, and on the other they are relating to them as well by using the word ‘bhayon’ which is Urdu for brothers – indicating a strong social bond and understanding.

In (10) there is an underlying approval for the boy who has changed 5 girlfriends but is still a freshman. In the western society being able to go out with many girls/women is often considered a sign of brazen masculinity and this notion appear to have seeped into the Pakistani society as well. Having relationships with more than one girl, thus, becomes a symbol of machoism – although it is still frowned upon but what should be noticed here is that this kind of behaviour is still accepted in many factions; hence the famous aphorism ‘boys will be boys’. More importantly, the student who posted (10) appears to be commending the freshman. Both these posts are written in the backdrop of male-female relationships and yet the females appear not as ‘agents’ or ‘social actors’ who can behave and interact independently. Post (9) and (10) particularly signify this aspect where the male is holding the upper hand in either deciding the ‘suspicious’ rendezvous point or ‘changing girlfriends’. While the male students are contesting about their own maleness by either approving (as in 10) or by disapproving the behaviour of other male, these posts entail ‘exclusion’ of females from the narrative.

- 11) I want to confess that I hate all the girls of my class... :v app ko koi aur department nahi milla? [Sisters! couldn't you find any other department?]
From a boy of mech 14 sec C

Post (11) is a particularly interesting one as over here just because the boy doesn't like the girls of his class, their nomination changes to ‘behno’ – Urdu for ‘sisters’. In the cultural context, when used for women/girls who are not related by blood, ‘behno’ signifies association of respect. However, in this particular context what ‘behno’ means is that ‘girls’ are deemed as unappealing from a romantic perspective. Furthermore, this post was posted as a snapshot where the admin of

the group had replied to the student that ‘he himself had a face like sisters’. In terms of male to male contestation, this is a vivid example of how males insult other males by associating effeminate qualities with them. As Aslam (2012) contends men’s greatest embarrassment is to be described as women. Thus, in many institutions, males are deliberately insulted by calling them female names to beat out the behaviour associated with women. This not only leads to the calcification of rigid male/female gender roles but also leads to the subjugation of women, as men who have been exposed to this type of social conditioning expect the females to be complacent.

Discourse of Discrimination

As it has been mentioned before, Pakistan is still a conventional society and where enlightenment has found its way into many factions of the society, and when it comes to women and women empowerment, these changes have been limited to only a few sections. Thus, even in the present case where we are presented with the thoughts of seemingly educated youth of Pakistan, a myriad of stereotypes relating to women and their roles surface. These posts not only reflect the expectations of young Pakistani males from the women of the society but also entail the propagation of the same stereotypes; where the female students are part of the same educational institutes that as these male students. In these posts the females are discriminated on the basis of their gender and implicitly expected to conform to these stereotypes because surviving in a society is more often than not a matter of conforming to the established socio-cultural norms including ways of behaving, dressing and even interacting. By reasserting these stereotypes not only are the male students indicating that they conform to the socio-cultural stereotypes but also formulate their own masculine identity in relation to these expected male gender roles – or what Connell (2005) terms as the most honoured ways of being male.

12) I don't know about boys but real men don't see beauty but what they see is modesty in a girl. So for all the girls out there be modest and you will find the real man tah [*sic*] the end of the day.

13) To I*** S***** R*** heart emoticon

I really like you yaar nd I honestly respect the way you dress and the way you keep your distance from men. Sab ko free nai krati [you don’t talk freely to everyone] and you are not ond [one] of those sluts who do all these things to seek attention. You are a genuine person, unlike all those fake girls with duck face selfies. I like your golden locks of wavy hair the most- lambey baal zaada

achey lgtey hen [long hair look good on you]. You intimidate me but I know you are a very sweet person at heart.

14) from a boy to a girl civ 2012..

it is humbely requested k ksi py line na mara Karin aur aisi harkat kr k bad my efficiency na mara karin.... next be careful

[It is humbly requested that don't hit on people and once you do that, don't show off efficiency.... next (time) be careful]

The post (12) Shows one of the most common stereotypes extant in the Pakistani society where an ideal girl/women is the one who is 'modest'. 'Modest' here should not be understood as only carrying the meaning of 'humble' but it also carries the connotations of being subservient, dressing properly and in the present socio-cultural context the quality of not overbearing, dominating and imposing. The student who posted this is reasserting the deeply embedded stereotype in the Pakistani society that 'real men' are supposed to like girls who are not overbearing and complacent. He also suggests that females should conform to this expectation of being modest if they are to find 'real men'. Hence on one side where there is discrimination, there is also an imposition being made for other males to become 'real men'. Perhaps this is the most quintessential example of how gender stereotypes disadvantage women and put them at the less powerful point of the social hierarchy.

In post (14) the male student is commending some girl for not being like other girls and for keeping her distance from other men. The underlying stereotype in this post is that girls who interact openly with boys have loose morals. Additionally, the girl's behaviour is deemed appropriate because she is not seeking attention like all the other girls – here again we see the same implications as in (12) where 'modesty' was highlighted as the most desirable quality in women. In terms of power contestation in gender relations, these posts appear to be reasserting the gender hierarchies embedded in the eastern societies, where the ideal female gender roles are often devoid of power and authority. Another way to look at these posts is that where these male students are reasserting the common stereotypes regarding female gender roles, these posts also appear as an effort to counteract the changing social milieu of the Pakistani society. These males are studying, for the most part, in coeducation institutes where they have to compete with girls and even when they get out of college they face significant competition from females. By asserting that the society expects modesty and subservience from them, these males appear to be trying to invalidate the changing attitudes of

women in the society where they occupy the more powerful positions and interact more openly as compared to in the past.

In the previous section post (9) and (10) appeared to be signifying approval for the still-frowned upon male-female relationships, post (14) presents a stark difference. This is a particular example of how males and females are judged on the basis of different standards. Over here we see how discrimination against women is perpetuated by weighing their behaviour through different standards. Where the students who posted (9) and (10) didn't disapprove of a male who was either changing girlfriends rapidly despite being a junior in university or was involved in suspicious activities, in the case of (14) we see a stringent rebuttal of a girl who tried to 'hit' (indicate likeness) for some boy. The student who posted this is not only implicating that the girl's behaviour is unacceptable but also adopts an imperative tone to assert his maleness and by taking a position where he has the power to rebuke someone to not 'show efficiency'. Furthermore, this posts is reasserting the point made in (13) that girls are not supposed to openly interact with boys/males and echoes the imperative tone of the student in (12), through which he assumes a position of power to give the verdict that real men are not intimidated by beauty but look for modesty.

However, more importantly, in comparison to the posts in the previous section where male students were constructing their identity in relation to other males by signalling approval of their behaviour, in these posts they base their claims on certain stereotypes that ultimately disadvantage women and put men in more dominant positions. Especially as was apparent in (12) where the male student asserted his own maleness by claiming that the real worthy quality in a girl is modesty and also by urging other males to conform to this ideal – which in the end leads to perpetuation of these stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to elucidate how male students negotiate and assert their masculinity in the anonymous posts on Facebook confession pages. The analysis highlighted that three significant types of discourses are apparent in the posts: Firstly the discourse of romance where the male students are expressing their likeness for females. Most of the students use words like 'cute', 'innocent' and 'pretty' to commend the females – these words encode meaning of subservience and entail that desirability in females is related to their complacency. This, in turn, leads to the implication that by describing these desirable females through terms

that deem them powerless, they are putting themselves at the more powerful end of the gender hierarchy. The second type of discourse that surfaced in the selected posts is the 'discourse of contention' where the male students construct their own masculinity by relating to the behaviour of other males – the accepted and expected ways of behaving like males which in turn disadvantage women because where these notion condone a lot of illicit male activities, the same prerogative is never give to women. This leads to the third type of discourse in the selected posts: the 'discourse of discrimination' where females are discriminated and judged on the basis of different standards as compared to males. By reasserting many stereotypes associated with female gender roles, the male students assert their own masculinity via conforming to the ideal ways of being male who do not approve of women's freedom to interact openly and freely. These aspect highlight the embedded relations of gender hierarchy in the Pakistani society, however, it is important to remember that the voice of females is missing from this narrative and on these platforms males are more actively participating to construct not only their own male identities but also reasserting the socio-cultural stereotypes against women that ultimately put them in a disadvantaged position. As Weatherall (2002) asserts power should not be understood as an entity that can be possessed by individuals, it is an effect of discourse and thus, as is the present case, it is gained and sustained through an active and deliberate shaping of discourse.

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