






# Visualizing Masculinity: A Photovoice Analysis of Pakistani Men's Self-Presentation on Facebook

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**Abstract:** Over the past decade, social media, particularly Facebook, has significantly transformed communication in Pakistan, influencing how people interact. This change is particularly significant given Pakistan's socio-cultural and religious contexts. Facebook serves as both a platform for challenging established gender roles and a location in which such standards may be perpetuated. As a result, it has evolved as a space for the continual creation of gender identities. Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis, this study looks at how Pakistani males portray and shape their masculine identities on Facebook. The findings indicate that, while conventional norms are mostly retained, there are some subtle deviations from established ideals of masculinity.

**Key Words:** Masculinity, Pakistani Men, Facebook, Photovoice Lense, Communication

## Introduction

Gender roles are often regarded via a binary lens under Pakistan's patriarchal framework men are connected with the public arena, whilst women are often relegated to domestic chores at home. Men are typically seen as guardians or protectors of women, who are considered dependent and require male supervision (Jafar, 2005). This ideological system elevates males to positions of leadership and privilege that women do not often hold. While Pakistani women's experiences cannot be reduced to a singular narrative of disempowerment, their behavior and mobility are closely monitored by socio-cultural norms. Men, in contrast, are pressured to conform to stereotypical masculinity, expected to be rational, brave, aggressive, and emotionless, thus highlighting the double standards of a patriarchal culture.

Drawing on Boyd's (2007) Researchers studying the function of digital technologies in creating and expressing gender identities contend that online platforms provide a space for established gender norms to be examined in light of larger cultural and social realities (Danet, 1998). Gender identity is viewed in this context as inextricably linked to religion, social class, education, cultural background, and Pakistan's historical-political environment. Several empirical research (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018; Mullany, 2004) call into question the premise that social media promotes the expression of more varied and non-traditional gender roles. These findings show that online platforms frequently duplicate dominant gender beliefs, such as conventional beauty ideals and sexist narratives, calling into doubt their ability to promote transformational gender portrayal.

In modern society, gender is not only just a biological categorization; it is also a purposefully enacted identity in both physical and digital arenas. Masculinity is socially practiced by men—the study's primary focus—through culturally unique narratives and representations that separate it from femininity (Kiesling, 2007). Although this performance frequently

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corresponds to traditional gender binaries, it does not limit masculinity to a specific set of characteristics, allowing for the presence of diverse masculine expressions. While a large corpus of foreign research investigates gender, discourse, and culture in online contexts, there is still a glaring vacuum in understanding how young Pakistani males use social media platforms. This is particularly noteworthy in Pakistan, where males make up 77% of Facebook users (Alphapro, 2018), although little is known about their cultural and discursive practices online. This study aims to bridge that gap by researching how Pakistani males develop their masculine identities on Facebook. Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis, the research investigates two major topics (a) How do Pakistani males develop their identities via Facebook posts? This involves looking at how they employ visual and verbal features, as well as how these forms interact to produce meaning. (b) Do these acts represent conventional heteropatriarchal masculinity, or do they show deviations from or opposition to established gender norms?

## Literature Review

The performance of masculinity on social media, particularly Facebook, has become a critical area of study in gender and media research. Traditional notions of masculinity—often tied to dominance, emotional restraint, and heteronormativity—are both reinforced and challenged in digital spaces. This paper examines how men construct and negotiate masculinities through Facebook practices, analyzing behaviors such as self-presentation, interaction patterns, and engagement with gendered discourses. Understanding Masculinities Connell's (2005) theory of \*hegemonic masculinity\* remains foundational in gender studies, describing how certain masculine ideals (e.g., toughness, heterosexuality, economic success) dominate cultural narratives. However, digital platforms like Facebook allow for multiple masculinities (Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018), where men may perform different versions of masculinity depending on audience and context.

Coston and Kimmel (2012) argue that masculinity is often a \*homosocial performance\*—men behave in ways that gain approval from other men. On Facebook, this can manifest through Bragging or competitive posts\* (e.g., gym check-ins, professional achievements). Jokes and memes reinforcing male stereotypes\* (e.g., "men don't cry" humor). Exclusion or harassment of women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Performance of Masculinity\*: dramaturgical theory applies to Facebook, where men \*curate profiles\* to align with idealized masculine traits (strength, success, emotional stoicism) (Marwick, 2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press.). Hybrid Masculinities\*: Some men blend traditional and progressive traits. Hom sociality and Male Bonding Online Kimmel, Michael S. (2012). *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (3rd edition) argues that masculinity is often a \*homosocial performance\*—men seek validation primarily from other men. On Facebook, this manifests through: Banter" culture\*: Jokes, memes, and teasing that reinforce in-group belonging Exclusionary practices\*: Private male-only groups (e.g., sports, gaming) that maintain gendered boundaries.

## Key Themes in Facebook Masculinity Studies

Self-Presentation and Profile Curation: Research shows that men strategically construct their Facebook identities to align with dominant masculine ideals: Visual Cues: Profile pictures often emphasize physicality (muscles, sports), professional success, or stoicism\* (). Status Signaling: Posts about career achievements, travel, or material wealth serve as performances of hegemonic masculinity\* v). Avoiding "Feminine" Traits\*: Men are less likely to share emotional vulnerability compared to women (Light & Cassidy, 2014). Toxic Masculinity and Online Harassment: Facebook's structure can amplify toxic masculinity behaviors that enforce patriarchal dominance through aggression, misogyny, or homophobia Gender trolling: Organized harassment of women, feminists, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Anti-Feminist Discourse Men's rights groups use Facebook to spread backlash against gender equality movements (Ging & Siapera, 2018). Algorithmic Amplification: Facebook's engagement-driven algorithm promotes \*polarizing, hyper-masculine content\* (e.g., "alpha male" influencers). Alternative Masculinities and Resistance: Not all men conform to traditional norms; some use Facebook to challenge or redefine masculinity. Mental Health Advocacy: Men sharing struggles with depression or anxiety Feminist Allyship Men engaging in pro-feminist discussions or calling out sexism (Mendes et al., 2019). Queer Masculinities LGBTQ+ men subverting heteronormative ideals through inclusive posts.



## Masculinity in Social Media

The notion of masculinity in connection to social media has received substantial attention in worldwide psychological, sociological, and cultural study. Scholars such as Genter (2014), Patterson (2013), and Schmitz and Kazayak (2016) have investigated a variety of topics, including violence, male self-representation tactics, sexual expression, dangerous sexual practices, and changing ideals of manhood. In the South Asian setting, research has generally focused on political involvement, cultural identity creation, and young resistance. For example, Balaji (2014) discussed how social media material leads to the formation of a homogenized and hyper-sexualized image of Indian masculinity that frequently overlooks ethnic and regional variety. In contrast, academic research in Pakistan has mostly focused on women, examining their behaviors, language usage, and media depictions in educational institutions, print media, and television (e.g., Pillay, 2008; Ullah et al., 2016).

In Pakistan, minimal research has been conducted on masculinity, mainly in the contexts of religion, terrorism, migration, healthcare, and cross-border marriages (Aslam, 2014; De Soudy, 2009; Khan, 2018). In terms of social media, two important studies stand out: Karamat and Farooq (2016) and Bano et al. (2021). Karamat and Farooq (2016) investigated how platforms such as Facebook and Twitter influence political involvement, concluding that these media make a substantial contribution to political mobilization and transformation in Pakistan. Similarly, Bano et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of digital technologies, including as social media, mobile phones, and blogs, in fostering student engagement and propagating alternative narratives during the 2007 emergency rule. Despite these findings, the dynamic and expanding relevance of social media in the lives of Pakistani youth requires greater examination, particularly how masculinity is increasingly transmitted through a combination of visual, linguistic, and symbolic manifestations.

## Methodology Data Collection

This study used a dataset of 500 screenshots of Facebook postings published by ten Pakistani Muslim men from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These postings, which comprise both verbal and graphic information, were meticulously gathered during three months, from May to July 2024. The visual components were generally pictures, animated figures, and comic strips, with written material appearing either embedded inside the images or as captions. The participants freely gave us access to their Facebook timelines, with the understanding that the analysis would omit any comments made by others on their postings.

## Sampling and Ethical Considerations

The data for this study were gathered using a snowball sampling method. The approach began by reaching out to people on my Facebook friend list and explaining the study's goal and objectives. I welcomed them to participate and encouraged them to spread the word within their own networks, including friends and family. This strategy was successful in reaching people who would otherwise have been difficult to contact (Groenewald, 2004). Within a few days, numerous people showed an interest in joining. The choice to limit the sample size to 10 individuals was based on the observation that, early in the data gathering process, repeating themes emerged regularly. This theme recurrence implied that more data gathering would not produce substantial new insights, hence supporting a strong and consistent analytical framework. To protect participants' privacy and safety, they were told about the nature, purpose, and scope of the study from the start. Participants were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the research at any stage. They were also informed that their contributed information would be treated discreetly, with no personal identifiers or actual names used in the research or publishing. Only posts directly related to the research topics were chosen for inclusion in the study.

## Why Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Facebook users?

Cultural Context of Masculinity Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) is often perceived as a region with traditional and conservative gender norms, where masculinity is socially linked to honor (ghairat), authority, and tribal codes such as Pashtunwali. Studying Facebook practices of men in this region allows us to explore how these traditional masculine ideals are either reinforced, contested, or redefined in online spaces. Digital Expression vs. Offline Norms In KPK, public spaces are often gender-segregated, and men's identities are tightly regulated by cultural expectations. Facebook provides a semi-public/semi-private arena where men can experiment with self-presentation, interact across gender



lines, and perform alternative masculinities that may not be possible offline. Under-Researched Region in Digital Masculinity Studies Most existing studies on masculinity and social media in Pakistan focus on urban centers like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. By choosing KPK, the study contributes to decolonizing and diversifying masculinity research by bringing in voices from a region that is academically underrepresented, especially in the digital sphere. Youth Demographics and Social Media Use KPK has a large youth population who are active users of Facebook, making it an important site for analyzing how younger generations negotiate masculinity in relation to both global digital cultures and local traditional values. Masculinity in Transition

The region is witnessing social and economic changes due to urbanization, education, migration, and exposure to digital technologies. Facebook use in KPK provides a unique opportunity to study how men navigate between hegemonic masculinities (authority, honor, toughness) and emergent masculinities (emotional openness, care, globalized digital expressions).

### **Analytic Framework**

This study employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) as its theoretical framework, drawing on the works of Jones (2015) and Iress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London/ New York: Routledge., for three main reasons. First, MMDA enables the exploration of communication through a range of semiotic modes, including visuals, color, gestures, typography, and layout, revealing how these elements contribute to the construction of meaning and discourse. Second, it emphasizes that such modes are culturally situated and perform distinct social functions. Third, MMDA asserts that semiotic choices are not neutral; rather, they are deliberately employed to serve specific communicative purposes and support underlying ideologies.

The study examined both the language and visual features of Facebook postings, focusing on terms like social distance, attitude, salience, and information value. These analytical tools assist in determining how the postings attract attention, build relationships with visitors, and arrange content. This technique also gives information on the sorts of content posted by Pakistani men, as well as how these posts shape their masculine identity. Language choices, image captions, and embedded text were studied in depth, with a focus on how meaning is created through the interaction of words and visuals.

Unlike earlier studies, which predominantly used quantitative approaches to assess social media material (e.g., Yazdani & Manovich, 2015), this study used a qualitative visual analysis. In this concept, social distance in photos is represented by framing methods such as close-ups (suggesting closeness), medium shots (showing familiarity), and long shots (implying distance between strangers). Similarly, in textual content, linguistic formality conveys social distance. We define 'personal style' as closeness, 'social style' as informal engagement, and 'public style' as formality. Attitude in visual communication is conveyed through camera angles, which signal power relations. A frontal angle suggests engagement, while an oblique angle implies detachment. A high-angle shot places the viewer in a dominant position; an eye-level angle suggests equality; and a low-angle shot elevates the subject, indicating their dominance over the viewer. In the verbal realm, attitude is expressed through affect (emotional tone), judgment (moral evaluation), and appreciation (aesthetic valuation), as described by Macken-Horarik (2004). Salience was assessed by examining how visual and textual elements, such as positioning, contrast, foregrounding, backgrounding, and use of color, guide the viewer's attention. In text-based posts, features like font style, color, bolding, italics, and capitalization are strategically used to highlight important information and draw the audience's focus to specific aspects of the message.

### **Data Analysis**

The obtained data was divided into four thematic categories based on the frequent themes in the posts. It is crucial to note that these groups are not rigidly separated and frequently overlap. To ensure analytical clarity, the postings are divided into two categories based on the type of masculinity they represent. The first portion contains articles that adhere to classic heteropatriarchal concepts of masculinity, while the second, smaller segment focuses on posts that represent developing or alternate forms of masculinity. The examples chosen for detailed analysis were chosen for three primary reasons: (a) they appeared repeatedly across multiple participants' timelines, (b) they represented dominant trends and patterns in the dataset, and (c) they shared significant similarities in both verbal and visual elements with the broader content in their respective categories.



### Posts Highlighting Traditional Heteropatriarchal Masculinity

Travel-related posts constituted the greatest section of the sample, accounting for 38% of the total. These entries mostly included photographic documentation of the participants' road journeys, which were frequently staged in the picturesque and culturally rich regions of Northern Pakistan. The images often included natural vistas, unusual fauna, and peeks into local cultural traditions. The accompanying subtitles often gave easy information such as trip partners, dates, and places. For example, Example 1 depicts a photograph obtained by the participant's companion during their travel to the northern territories.

**Figure 1**



Example 1 depicts a visually appealing image of a man visiting a local jirga. his image can be used to reflect patriarchal dynamics in rural KPK, where:

#### I. Male Dominance in Social Structure

The image shows only men, which already implies the absence of women in decision-making or public affairs. In many parts of KPK, especially rural areas, patriarchy is deeply entrenched, and men hold all positions of power, both within families and communities. Generational Hierarchy: The older man possibly represents a Jirga elder or family patriarch—his body language and placement suggest authority. The younger man beside him might be in a learning position—indicating how male authority is passed down generationally, maintaining the patriarchal cycle. The image is colorful, which adds to the visual appeal of the natural scene. Table 1 shows the distribution of post types by topic. Travel-related content accounted for 38% of the 300 posts, followed by political articles (23%), writings about women (22%), and personal connections (17%).

Political posts were the second most popular type, accounting for 23% of the total data. These tweets frequently contained comments on national and global politics, as well as support for certain political parties in Pakistan. They often contained images of political people followed with captions or comments expressing the posters' viewpoints, which ranged from serious analysis to amusing or hostile remarks. Example 2 is a sample instance from this category.

**Figure 2**



## Example 2

**Image Description (Contextualized Politically & Culturally):** A group of male political leaders and clerics, possibly from different ideological backgrounds (religious and secular/nationalist). The figures appear to be engaging in a public protest, political demonstration, or alliance. All individuals are men, many in traditional Pashtun or religious attire, with one prominent figure in Western-style dress (likely a political leader). No women are present in the image, either as leaders or participants. **Masculinity & Patriarchy in the Image**

**Hyper-Visibility of Men in Public & Political Space:** The image is dominated by male bodies, male voices, and male leadership. In KPK (and much of Pakistan), politics is considered a “male domain”—women are often discouraged, excluded, or tokenized in political participation. This normalizes the idea that men are the rightful decision-makers, both at home and in governance.

**Traditional Masculine Authority:** Several men wear turbans and religious caps, symbols of traditional male authority—not just spiritual but political as well. These visual markers signal respect, wisdom, and dominance in local culture. The beards, body language, and dress codes reinforce hegemonic masculinity—a model of manhood that is dominant, authoritative, and revered.

**Religious Patriarchy:** The inclusion of religious clerics shows how religion and patriarchy intersect. In many rural and urban areas of KPK, religious leaders influence political discourse—often reinforcing gender segregation, male control, and traditional gender roles. This religious-political alliance helps sustain patriarchal norms under the guise of cultural or moral preservation.

**Nationalist & Tribal Masculinity:** In KPK, masculinity is often tied to ideas of honor (ghairat), protection, and leadership. Male political actors often project themselves as protectors of values, faith, and homeland, sidelining women in the process. This image shows a coalition of powerful men defending their version of society—implicitly reinforcing that women’s issues or voices are not central.

## Posts Highlighting Emergent Model(S) of Masculinity

A considerable fraction of the entries (17%) focused on personal connections. The visual components in these blogs frequently comprised photos of prominent film stars or bands, with the associated text set against plain, unadorned backdrops. These literary components frequently included excerpts from Urdu literature, as well as lyrical statements or lyrics from Pakistani and Bollywood music portraying feelings of love or loss. Notably, none of these posts featured visual depictions of real or imaginary female characters. Example 4 exemplifies this style of content.

Figure 3



In this scene, the man kneeling on the floor breaks away from the traditional patriarchal image of masculinity that is often associated with power, control, and emotional restraint. Instead, his posture signifies vulnerability, humility, and devotion—traits aligned with the emergent model of masculinity where men are encouraged to express feelings openly rather than suppress them. The woman seated higher on the bed symbolically holds a position of authority, subtly reversing conventional gender hierarchies. She appears calm, dignified, and somewhat detached, while the man looks upward toward her, seeking connection. This reversal illustrates a relational dynamic where masculinity is no longer about dominance but about emotional openness, dependence, and care. The red dress worn by the woman represents passion, intensity, and emotional tension. It contrasts with the man's darker clothing, which conveys seriousness, grief, or longing. Symbolically, this interplay highlights how masculine vulnerability is often expressed in moments of emotional crisis, where love and loss collide. From a broader cultural perspective, the imagery aligns with shifting ideals of masculinity in contemporary societies: the man here is not “less masculine” for showing emotional weakness; instead, he is presented as more human, more authentic, and more relational. His masculinity is reconstructed through emotional expressiveness, dependence, and surrender to love, challenging older models that equated masculinity with stoicism and dominance. The text is housed in the image's middle and lower regions, reflecting the indicated characters' current emotional state and story. This arrangement implies a power imbalance, with the guy quietly shown as less dominating in the dynamic. The mix of picture and text successfully communicates the concept of emotional vulnerability. The selected color palette also matches the general melancholy tone of the text.

From a cultural standpoint, particularly in light of Pakistan's established gender standards, the man's public emotional outpouring represents a departure from normal masculine values. According to Aslam et al. (2022), males who publicly express devotion, particularly toward their spouses, are frequently teased for being unduly subservient, using terms such as 'Biwi kay neechay laga hua hai' ('under his wife's control'). This critique is generally motivated by cultural expectations to conform to dominant masculine beliefs that favor violence, emotional reserve, and power over women.

However, networks such as Facebook allow males to explore and express a more emotional, empathetic aspect of their identities. As demonstrated in this example, such expressions deviate from traditional gender standards and represent what gender academics refer to as the emergence of 'multiple masculinities' (Lamont, 2015). These viewpoints indicate that a growing number of men are rejecting restrictive notions of manhood in favor of more inclusive and adaptable identities (Eisen, 2019). Nonetheless, as this essay indicates, gentler forms of masculinity may coexist with established gender hierarchies, allowing males to express themselves while maintaining symbolic authority over gender roles. In this case, the poster's use of poetic language provides a culturally acceptable vehicle for communicating vulnerability while without fundamentally undermining prevailing masculine standards.

## Discussion

The study reveals that masculinity among Pakistani men on Facebook is both a reproduction of traditional gender norms and a platform for subtle deviation and negotiation of these norms.

**Reinforcement of Traditional Masculinity:** The majority of the Facebook posts analyzed upheld heteropatriarchal masculinity, which aligns with dominant cultural expectations in Pakistan. Key themes observed include:

- Traditional posts (38%): These emphasized adventure, risk-taking, and physical courage—traits associated with traditional masculinity.
- The framing of such photos often placed the male subject in the foreground, commanding the viewer's attention, reinforcing a sense of power, independence, and dominance over the natural world.
- Posts about women (22%): While less detailed in the article, the inclusion of this category and its alignment with traditional masculinity likely means women were often objectified or discussed within frameworks reinforcing male superiority.

**Emergence of Hybrid or Alternative Masculinities:** Although less common, some posts (particularly those about relationships and emotional expression) indicated a departure from rigid masculine norms:

- Emotional expression (17%): Posts with poetry, lyrics, and visual aesthetics like soft colors or romantic themes illustrated an emergent masculinity-sensitive, emotionally expressive, and romantic. These posts show that young men are gradually carving space for vulnerability and emotional complexity in their self-presentation.
- Negotiation with cultural norms: Despite showing emotional depth, even these "softer" posts often maintained male dominance by not featuring actual female figures, thus preserving the traditional symbolic boundary between men and women. They reflect a "hybrid masculinity"-borrowing from feminine traits while subtly maintaining masculine superiority (Eisen, [2019](#)).
- Social critique: These softer posts implicitly challenge rigid masculine ideals that ridicule men for showing love, care, or attachment, indicating an ongoing identity negotiation within the confines of socio-cultural expectations.

**Role of Multimodal Communication:** The use of images, colors, camera angles, and textual overlays played a significant role in shaping how masculinity was constructed. Multimodal elements were not just supplementary but central in reinforcing or subtly challenging dominant gender norms.

- Frontal angles and close-ups promoted emotional connection and power dynamics.
- Use of Urdu for emotional intensity and English for rational or factual content showed how language itself was a tool for gender performance.
- Highlighting and color schemes enhanced the salience of emotional expressions, suggesting an intentional attempt to direct viewers' perceptions.

## Conclusion

This study explores the construction of masculinity in Facebook posts by Pakistani men, revealing its complex and multifaceted nature. The analysis shows that Pakistani men predominantly adhere to traditional socio-cultural norms, often sharing images and posts that reflect heteropatriarchal views of masculinity. Through travel photos, political debates, and expressions of verbal toughness, men reinforce their position within society's power structure. Some posts also target women, subtly endorsing male dominance. However, the data also reveal emerging, hybrid forms of masculinity, where men occasionally share their emotional side, challenging traditional patriarchal norms. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of masculinity in Pakistan, highlighting the coexistence of hegemonic and alternative masculinities, and underscores the significance of studying men in gender research.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study offers several important recommendations for researchers, educators, and policymakers:

1. Expand Gender Research to Include Men Much of the gender discourse in Pakistan has historically focused on women. This study shows the importance of including men in gender research to understand how masculinity is constructed, sustained, or challenged, particularly in online spaces.
2. Address Digital Masculinity in Education Media literacy and digital citizenship programs should include discussions on online gender performance. Helping youth reflect on how they project themselves online can foster more critical engagement with patriarchal norms.
3. Encourage Alternative Masculinities Social and educational campaigns can promote non-hegemonic masculinities—those embracing care, empathy, and equality. This can counteract the social stigma attached to men who show vulnerability.
4. Leverage social media as a Transformative Tool Social media platform should be seen not only as sites of risk (misogyny, bullying) but also as potential spaces for progressive change. Encouraging men to use digital platforms for emotional expression and self-reflection could help normalize diverse forms of masculinity.
5. Further Research Directions - Broader demographic studies should be conducted across different regions and age groups in Pakistan to examine how masculinity varies with class, education, and urban/rural contexts. - Comparative studies with other South Asian countries could provide regional insights into digital gender performance



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