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# Gender Barriers for Women in Construction of Cyber-Self: A Study in Pakistani Socio-Cultural Context

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## Abstract

The spread of internet enhancing connectivity through various social media platforms has transformed the previous patterns of self-construction. The advent of the virtual world and digital culture has enabled individuals to be the creators and authors of their self or identity construction, especially in the digital world in contemporary society. In today's world, individuals' personalities are divided into dualistic categories, the actual self-constructed through face-to-face interaction in the real world and the cyber-self which one has constructed through online interaction with people in the virtual world. In this study, the researchers tried to discover how men and women are inversely forming their digital or cyber selves in a male-dominated society and whether are they facing any specific coercion, threats, pros, and advantages because of their particular gender. Under the interpretive approach the researcher opted for qualitative research methodology and interviewed 20 individuals, with age ranged between 25 to 30 years, having virtual existence for the last ten years. The research findings indicated that women have to face similar barriers to the actual culture in the digital culture too. While constructing their cyber-self, women have to face discrimination just because of their gender by their male family members particularly.

**Keywords:** cyber-self, digital culture, virtual world, virtual identity

## Introduction

In contemporary society, the usage of cyberspace and social media has become a reality and increased speedily across the globe, forming a universal digital culture (Thumim, [2012](#)). In the digital world, people share their self-created content to build their profiles including pictures, videos, and personal thoughts. Social media provides a platform for its users to share their views and content with a large number of people

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across the world (Lister, [2013](#)). The growth of cyberspace in the form of the digital world has mixed the actual and digital culture altering some of the actual cultural norms and developing the new ones at the same time (Abbasi & Chen, [2008](#)). The earlier media theories focused on direct or limited effects on the audiences by consuming the given content but today's social media users are not just passive consumers, they are the creators of the content at the same time (Wartella, [1991](#)).

Contemporary research hasn't completely denied the effects of the content produced or consumed through social media on both men and women of any age (Kleemans et al., [2018](#)). As the gender is concerned both men and women build their profiles on various social media platforms in different ways under the prevailing cultural influences. In the longer run, individuals attempt to develop their virtual identity or cyber-self through social media interactions continuously enriching their profiles (Thumim, [2012](#)). As the actual self or personality development is concerned, scholars have highlighted various aspects including "Looking Glass Self" by Charles Cooley (Yeung & Martin, [2003](#)). Self-presentation on social media and self-presentation in the actual or real world can be totally different phenomenon. Self-presentation is mostly thought to be driven by a want to make a satisfactory impression on others (Thumim, [2012](#)). Going into a digital world, where the actual appearances of the users are not openly known to others, directs diverse opportunities for self-expression and exposure to new identities (Mayfield, [2006](#)).

In today's cyber world, the personality of any person is divided into dual categories. One is the real or actual self in which a person takes on a role in the actual world, connects and interacts with people, forming an identity (Wan et al., [2007](#)). On the other hand, there is a virtual identity or cyber self that one forms in the digital world to portray the desired personality. Here, through the present study, we want to discover how men and women are inversely forming their digital or cyber selves in a male-dominant society. Are they facing any specific coercion, threats, pros, and advantages because of their particular gender?

This debate is widely recognized that gender is socially and culturally constructed. When discussing gender and sex, it is important to understand that there is a difference between gender and sex. Sex refers to biological changes between men and women, while gender entails socially and culturally specific forms of behavior that may be linked to sexual roles

(Alvesson & Billing, [2002](#)). A common representation of this practice across diverse societies associates women with home and family, while men with community and economy.

When discussing gender inequality in the digital world, women experience different types of inequalities in the real world due to cultural norms and traditions which eventually penetrate the digital culture (Lister, [2013](#)). This increases the chances of discrimination and restrictions against women in the digital culture or virtual world, while constructing their cyber self or virtual identity because scholars have argued a strong link between the existing culture and digital culture (Gündüz, [2017](#)). This can be visible as women are not permitted to reveal their real identity (picture, name, age, home address, etc.) on social media when developing their profiles (Best & Puzio, [2019](#)). The digital world is an open platform that accessible to the people of different identities, including men, women, and transgender, to interact beyond local, regional, or even global boundaries. However, facts state that men are generally dominant in all cultures in the economic, communal, and political domains, while women are more passive (Vannini, [2009](#)).

The existing literature suggests that forming an identity among youths is a critical phase. In this phase, youngsters face misperception while performing the role in the real world. Moreover, adolescents may suffer from identity crises constructed based on their gender identity. The process of developing a masculine identity has evolved for men; however, girls still encounter barriers in breaking through the traditional feminine identity. Research suggests that young girls may form a stronger identity by adopting liberal trends as compared to boys (Sandhu & Tung [2006](#)).

Ali et al. ([2010](#)) have discussed that in a patriarchal society like Pakistan, mostly men have control and dominating power over women regarding important decision-making such as higher education, career development, marriages and future planning including family planning. This indicates that women in such patriarchal societies may have to face restrictions in using different social media platforms to interact with the world or to develop their cyber-self because patriarchal forces keep trying to control women in almost all spheres of life. The patriarchal culture and upbringing of men give them power and justify exercising power over women in controlling their life and aspirations (Bamman et al., [2014](#)). The woman has no autonomy of independent decision-making even about the

most essential aspects of her life in rigged patriarchal cultures like Pakistan because they must follow the decision which is taken by the men (husband, father, or brother etc.) of the family (Ali et al., 2010). By understanding Pakistani society in such a scenario, it becomes more important to highlight the barriers that girls may have to face due to patriarchal cultural gender discriminatory norms and discriminatory social behaviors in the construction of their virtual identity or cyber-self.

### **Research Question**

What are the different kinds of barriers women have to face in Pakistani society while constructing their digital or cyber-self based on their gender differences?

### **Method**

After reviewing the existing literature, the researchers have conceptualized that identity formation is a socially constructed phenomenon and relies on the ideologies of gender, perceived under the prevailing cultural boundaries either in the material world or at any virtual platform. It differs from individual to individual, urban to rural, and educated to uneducated men and women. People may have to face diverse forms of inequality in the material world and the virtual world is also constructed on the similar gender identities of actual culture. Constructing identity at virtual platforms is a complex phenomenon for women, so this phenomenon can be well studied by using a qualitative research method. The researchers used the interpretive approach in studying the formation of virtual identity or cyber-self and how girls face gender discriminatory barriers while constructing their virtual identity. The researchers collected data by interviewing 10 men and 10 women participants who were recruited purposively. Only those having virtual existence on any social media platform for at least the last 10 years were included in the study. The age group of participants interviewed ranges from twenty to thirty years and the interview guide included open-ended questions developed with a thorough review of the literature allowing the participants to share their lived experiences freely. The data was analyzed by thematic analysis technique through extracting different categories or codes to generate sub-themes which then helped to develop the following themes of the research findings.

## Results

### Fears of Being Judged

Culture is always regulating individuals' opinions and actions. Liberty of identity formation is limited in Pakistani society's culture and practices even though it defines the boundary lines for both men and women.

Participant Sana explained that the users of the digital world change their thoughts about you based on the material or content you share. *In the digital world, a large population is noticing and evaluating you by observing you and constructing a thought about you grounded on the data you shared and liked.* People start judging you based on the posts you create, like or share online on different social media platforms as users of the digital world. Furthermore, she adds, *These types of thoughts always play a vital role in my identity formation in the digital world, that in what way people will judge me.* This reflects that women and girls fear being judged even in the virtual world while constructing their identity.

### Family and Societal Pressures

The virtual world is so connected that your family members, neighbors and friends also notice your activities online and this further creates a preconscious behavior among women. As participant Hiba describes, *If we talk about my liberty, the autonomy of decision-making depends on male members of my family. They choose the outline on which I have to build my identity on social media.* This is a typical patriarchal reflection of Pakistani society where men of the family have absolute power and dominance over women in such a way as not allowing them to participate in the life outside home and even controlling their online interaction through social media checks.

Pakistan is such a rigid patriarchal society which doesn't even allow men to violate cultural norms and boundaries. A male participant Wajid shared his views, *I believe we all are experiencing the strain of culture. So, I feel no confusion to say I can't enjoy any liberty. I am building my identity on those limitations which are designed by my culture.* This statement indicates that men also have to follow the cultural strains while constructing their identities in the digital world. While constructing their cyber-self, men also have to follow the cultural guidelines and cannot violate the norms.

## Freedom Standards for Men and Women

As the existing literature proves change in any society is inevitable. Pakistani society is also going through various changes and opting for modern trends to some extent. Participant Rabia said that *Yes, I faced a lot of disapproval and criticism from some individuals but I have liberty and I am enjoying it on different social media platforms.* This expression is proof that there are women enjoying liberty while interacting with people online through different social media platforms constructing their cyber-self. The participant admitted that she has to face severe criticism and disapproval as well but she ignored all that. A similar expression was made by another women participant of the present the study. *In some way, I think I am able and enjoying liberty in constructing my identity in the digital world,* expressed participant Sheran.

As identity is concerned, women in Pakistani society are known by the names of their husbands or fathers. They have to face many cultural restrictions in developing their independent identities. Such cultural influence is visible in the digital culture too as participant Maria explains, *In my society, women are not allowed to portray their actual desires on social media platforms.* Still, the idea of liberty is very inadequate for some women she discoursed, *Even though I am not able to use my actual name on social media platforms. So, the idea of liberty is groundless or worthless for some girls as well as for me.* This expression is a clear reflection of women's helplessness in constructing their own identities either in the actual world or in the digital world. Participant Meesha says, *In my family, females are not allowed to construct or build their original profile on social media while my brothers are regularly using different social media platforms.* Many girls are still suffering from inequalities in this era as their men do not allow them to use the internet for online interaction with people.

The cultural influence is so strong in patriarchal societies like Pakistan that it is not just women but men also have to obey the rules and regulations set by the society. As participant Meesha shared her opinions saying that,

We are living in a male-dominant family where male members are in leading positions; liberty and these kinds of notions are only for

men. For me, the idea of liberty doesn't exist because I must have to upload such content that is approved by my cultural norms.

This expression is a clear reflection of a strong cultural influence on women not having the agency to violate the cultural norms, not in the digital or virtual world. Women need approval from their male family members before uploading any personal content or information on social media, particularly their pictures.

There are some unhealthy behaviors which are discouraged in almost every culture like smoking or drinking and such behaviors are discouraged in digital culture as well. Participant Ahad said that,

I am not enjoying any freedom or independence in that scenario which is not accepted by my social norms. Similarly, smoking is not allowed in my family. So, I am unable to construct my identity as a smoker on social media platforms.

This indicates that smoking is considered an unhealthy behavior in Pakistani society even for men and discouraged from being reflected through virtual identities or cyber-selves. Social barriers are present in the digital world as well to discourage unhealthy behaviors. Furthermore, He said, *As concerned about my perceptions, I have the liberty to express my views to describe my real self in the material world as well as in the virtual world.* This expression reflects that men have the liberty to describe their actual selves in the digital and real world having no particular restriction.

On the other hand, women are objectified through various brand advertisements and TV commercials. There is a different class or segment in this society which enjoys all kinds of liberties in the actual culture or in the digital world. Participant Aliya said, *I have done every action in the virtual world without restrictions. I can say I am enjoying favor from society because of my gender. Indeed, I have to keep in mind my social and cultural norms.* This statement shows that women are also enjoying a privileged status in this society just because of their gender. Another example we can see in Pakistani society is women being given special treatment at banks, ATM lines, in public transport or in public places just because of their gender.

Pakistani society has been divided into two extremes, one not allowing women to participate in public life at all and the other giving them



privilege at public places. Participant Waliha explained liberty as a very multipart phenomenon. *According to my viewpoint, people are unaware of what freedom is, sometimes we are treated as privileged and sometimes not allowed to go out.* Social and cultural extremes are weakening the notion of liberty. Furthermore, she added, *I remember the time when I was forced by my uncle to delete my Facebook account and the time when people offered us seats in public transport.* These are two extreme kinds of public attitudes that women have to face in Pakistani society but are not allowed to have freedom and autonomy.

Due to such extreme social behaviors, frustration is reflected at a large scale in Pakistani people, especially among men. In social media, men always try to contact women by all means like hitting likes on all their posts, commenting unnecessarily, sending them friend requests, and praising them online. Participant Talat explained,

Absolutely, I have liberty while building my identity at social media, but when I started my YouTube channel, I was already aware that I would face disapproval and this is the main reason why I don't let anyone know about my channel.

Different issues are faced by women at the digital platforms. She further explained that *Surprisingly, I got a very positive response from people, especially the male population who subscribe to my channel more than women.* She was giving beauty tips to women through her channel which had nothing to do with men but the majority of likes and comments were by men.

### **Gender-Based Cultural Norms**

Culture already describes the roles of people based on their gender. These cultural norms are constructed based on gender practice in the digital world too. Gender-based discriminatory cultural practices are mostly prevalent in patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Participant Marina discussed cultural norms that are constructed based on gender training for people through socialization with their families as we all know family is the main agent of socialization. She stated, *gender-based roles are like a cage and not any single individual in a society is free from this cage. Also, these cultural norms related to gender exist on social media platforms.* This reflects that being a woman she perceived the cultural norms as a cage for her. Furthermore, she shared her personal experience,

In my case, all three sisters of mine are using a single account in the digital world. The main logic behind using the same account by three different people is gender as we are girls, so, the formation of identity in a virtual world is not permissible for us.

This shows that women are not allowed culturally to participate in social life even through social media or in the digital world and if they do, they have to maintain secrecy from the family and the relatives.

Men also have to face discrimination in the digital world particularly when it comes to forming identity through public appreciation and acceptance. Participant Talal shared his experience, *As per my experience and observation if you're uploading content like any video with the girl you surely will get a higher number of views, likes, and comments.* Users of social media create inequality based on gender of the content creators by liking and viewing the content created by or featuring women.

A similar expression is given by the participant Wajid discussing that, *I am a YouTuber. I observed audiences or consumers of social media are viewing those content more which have an image of the female on the thumbnail.* This shows the desperation of the Pakistani public about women. He further adds *I realized if you are a female, you will get more subscriptions and views as compared to males. If you are male, it's a challenging task to get fame and subscription because gender matters more than content.* This perspective identifies discrimination against men and objectification of women that prevails in the digital world.

Participant Fareena shared her experience,

My hobby and as well my passion is to make videos for social media and become a social media influencer. I get very much appreciations from the audience, but not from my family because I am a girl and these things are not acceptable in my family.

This statement also reflects that cultural norms related to gender exist and are also implemented through social media platforms.

Explaining the existence of gender roles in Pakistani society participant Wajid explained that *teaching gender roles and norms is a main part of socialization which every society does to its members.* This clearly shows the misogynist approach of the male population and they usually justify gender-based discrimination in the context of gender role

segregation. Women on the other hand have totally opposite viewpoints because they suffer from such gender discriminatory norms every day. A participant Hiba shared her experience saying, *In my family, if you are a girl, you are not allowed to use social media platforms with your real name. So, I am using social media by constructing that identity which doesn't exist in the real world.* This shows the severe existence of gender discriminatory norms in the Pakistani society.

Participant Faheem discussed showing masculinity via your content is a necessary part. Furthermore, he adds, *I upload that content which reflects my masculinity and I must have to like that content on social media platforms that are masculinity related.* This is how it becomes obligatory for men to show-off masculinity even in the digital world. You can not show any weakness even during your online interaction with the outside world. Similarly, participant Aliyan expressed that *I have to keep concerned that my poses and pictures posted on social media platforms are not girlish types.* Being judged by society is the major fear among both men and women which is why they have to follow the already set gender patterns in their virtual existence. A participant Sana shared her experience saying that *I am not allowed to make male friends in the real world and also not allowed to make male friends in the virtual world because it's not acceptable by the family and society.* Cultural boundaries of the actual world are also practiced in the virtual world.

## Discussion

With the analysis of data collected through the interviews and the reviewed existing literature, it can be said that the construction of identity in a digital world is equally challenging, particularly for women in patriarchal social settings. The literature and data have indicated that cultural barriers and norms of the real-world actual culture are present in the digital culture on social media platforms (Aboujaoude et al. [2015](#)). Majority of the sociologists agreed that cultural aspects contribute the most information of any person's identity and society decides the parameters on which one's identity will be designed (Ashley, [2003](#)). Individuals experience different types of pressures and controls implemented by society that influences their social interactions and shape the process of self-construction or identity formation (Hassan et al., [n.d](#)). The study participants have also revealed similar patterns that they have to meet the criteria set by society while developing their social media

profiles and interacting virtually with the world. As virtual identity or cyber self is concerned, society also sets boundaries and criteria for individuals according to their gender, class and ethnicity (Fowler, [2013](#)). Norms are constructed based on gender practices in the physical world and are also observed by a greater number of sturdy participants on social media (Moradi & Parent, [2013](#)).

Pakistani society is a male-dominated society which is known as a patriarchal society where men are enjoying dominance in every aspect of life as compared to women. Furthermore, on social media platforms, men construct their identities through pictures and these pictures depict their power, authority, and dominance. They share content that reflects their masculinity to construct a socially accepted or sometimes admired masculine cyber-self (Reuter & Kaufhold, [2017](#)). Women who use social media upload content that reflects feminine characteristics like dependency and soft looks (Villora et al., [2019](#)) or do not post their pictures on profiles as expressed in the study. The experiences of men and women about social media platforms displayed that patriarchal influences prevail even in the digital culture on different social media platforms. In some segments of Pakistani society, guardians do not permit their women to create their IDs or profiles on any virtual platform by using their real names and pictures. As men are concerned, they are experiencing different forms of identity crises. They have to form their identity in a way which portrays their masculinity and upload content which is culturally approved.

## Conclusion

Virtual existence is a very challenging task for Pakistani women. They are facing various difficulties, limitations, barriers, and various types of boundaries. Social discrimination occurs in the digital world too. The phenomenon of identity construction is designed by society. The boundaries and limitations that an individual must have to follow are decided by the culture. The results of the study showed that the physical world is different from the digital world. However, societal pressure, boundaries, limitations, and cultural norms are the same in the physical world as well as on digital world platforms. Pakistani society is a patriarchal society that provides an advantage to men while creating their identity either in the physical world or on virtual platforms. Men are free from social control to portray their identity in the digital world. They have

freedom of formation of identity. Even if men are under societal pressure to some extent, they are living the choices and forming their identities by deciding their limitations. If we talk about women, they are facing more limitations and restrictions. Even some women are not permitted to use their real names in the digital world. They are not permitted to reveal their actual self or real identity on virtual platforms.

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