

Research Article

Mobile Identity Construction by Male and Female Students in Pakistan: On, In, and Through the Phone

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Abstract

This article reports on focus group research in Pakistan about the symbolic value and use of mobile phones by students in constructing their identities on the phone, in the phone, and through the phone. A striking conclusion is the difference between how men and women use their phones, and we provide accounts of the harassment and bullying of women through their mobiles.

Mobile Phones and the Construction of Identity

There is much literature on the use of mobile devices to mediate social relationships, primarily drawing on evidence from the richer countries of the world (Campbell, 2006; Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Linchuan Qiu, & Sey, 2006; Foley, Holzman, & Wearing, 2007; Green & Singleton, 2007; Katz & Sugiyama, 2006). In poorer countries, the potential of mobile phones to contribute to the economic growth that is widely seen as being essential for poverty reduction has tended to dominate research (Deloitte, 2013; Ilahiane, 2011; Ilavarasan & Levy, 2010; Private Sector, 2009; Unwin, 2006, 2017). Nevertheless, a growing body of work has begun to address the use of mobiles for social reasons, particularly in Africa and Asia (Aoki & Downes, 2003; Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Linchuan Qiu, & Sey, 2009; Donner, 2009; Haidar, Gujjar, Juni, & Kareen, 2014; Livingstone, 2007; Malik, Chaudhury, & Abbas, 2009; Raheem, Akber, & Hashmi, 2013).

Less research has examined the impact of culture on mobile use, specifically for identity construction, and especially in poorer countries (although see Livingstone, 2007; Shuter, 2012; Stald, 2008; Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016). It is striking, for example, that Donner's (2008) major review of the research on mobile use makes no mention of the word *identity* and only pays scant attention to symbolism. In this context, Buskens and Webb's (2014) edited collection provides important insights into the ways through which culture plays a significant role in influencing ICT (information and communications technology) use in Africa and the Middle East, especially in terms of gender differences in access, use, and socialization (see also Sinha & Hyma, 2013). This is particularly evident in Abraham's (2014) chapter, which highlights how online social networks help challenge the dominant misogyny that exists in Zambia. Elsewhere, it has also been suggested that "mobile phone use can impart a sense of self-confidence, sexuality and autonomy, which defies male gaze in public spaces, and may allow adolescent women to reject traditional images of femininity" (Foley, Holzman & Wearing, 2007, p. 179). People's cultures and mobile phone use are intertwined; culture influences mobile phone use, but phone use also shapes culture, particularly people's identity formation (Hassan, 2016). Moreover, the rapid expansion of mobile phone use, and particularly the recent introduction of Internet-connected smartphones,

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MOBILE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION BY MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

has transformed the ways through which young people shape their identities and often challenge traditional cultural norms of their societies.

Drawing on research conducted mainly in richer countries of the world, Yonkers (2015) comments that there are few studies that address social identity and mobile technologies. In her useful review, she suggests that mobile phones create new levels of social identity in three main ways: as extensions of the individual; by maintaining social networks; and by crossing temporal, physical, cultural, and power boundaries to create status. Our research addresses these symbolic and identity construction aspects of mobile phones by university students in Pakistan.

We have chosen to work specifically in Pakistan for three related reasons. First, normative conceptions of identity are frequently seen in a positive light in Pakistan's collectivist society, which is fundamentally different from the negative views of normative conceptions in models derived from Western individualistic societies (Hassan, 2016). Pakistan has some of the strongest norms and lowest tolerance for deviant behavior of any country in the world (Gelfand et al., 2013), and it is therefore an especially interesting country to examine in terms of mobile use in identity construction. Second, Pakistan is both a patriarchal and an Islamic society, in which traditional cultural values play a strong role in shaping identity. It is thus a fascinating place to explore how modern technologies such as mobile phones, developed in more individualistic societies, may influence social and cultural change. Third, Pakistan is currently experiencing rapid expansion of mobile use, especially among young people, and it is therefore interesting to explore mobile use at this transient and fluid moment.

Research on mobile use and identity in South Asia is in its infancy (see, for example, Gurumurthy, 2004; Mahmood, Ullah, & Akbar, 2013; Raheem et al., 2013). Early research by Abbasi (2013) indicates there are fundamental differences in ICT use based on gender and social status in Pakistan, with women being particularly excluded from using mobiles because of fears they may contact people outside the close-knit family context. Similar arguments have also been noted by authors such as Shuter (2012), who highlights that men and women in India have different textiquettes based on existing gender divides and expectations. Such views, however, are not universal. Ali (2013), for example, argues that although differences exist in mobile use among young Pakistani men and women, they are not very significant.

Given these contrasting views, we sought to glean information from our sample of male and female students about their differential symbolic and identity uses of mobile devices. By focusing on the symbolic meaning of mobile phones, we draw in part on traditional work in anthropology concerned with cultural symbols (Douglas, 1970; Geertz, 1974; Sahlins, 1976). We explore how people use mobile phones to make meaning of their lives, examining whether they seek to use the latest mobile devices primarily for economic or social reasons, and the extent to which they purchase them for their symbolic value to give the user a sense of having the latest technology and of being at the cutting edge of modernity (Misa, Brey, & Feenberg, 2004; Stald, 2008).

Methodology

This research builds on our work in Pakistan and elsewhere over the last decade and forms part of a wider project on mobile use in Pakistan. Focus groups provide an important starting point by ensuring that our research is built around the opinions and aspirations of participants rather than our preexisting prejudices (Krueger, King, & Morgan, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Our intention is that the results of this qualitative research feed into broader quantitative surveys across a wider spectrum of Pakistani society based on questions deriving from the themes, categories, and constructs identified in this focus group research. The results of our initial study nevertheless raise significant questions about previous generalizations on mobile use in poorer countries and warrant further discussion in their own right.

Focus Group Design and Implementation

We followed existing good practices as we implemented the focus groups (Greenbaum, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), paying particular attention to maintaining homogeneity in the structure of each group, actively encouraging all participants to share their views, and ensuring that the moderator plays as small a role as possible in leading or prompting respondents.

Table 1. Focus Group Characteristics.

Gender (Group Name)	Number of Participants	Percentage Willing to Be Named	Age	
			Range	Average
Female (F1)	8	100%	19–24	21.0
Female (F2)	6	0%	20–21	20.8
Male (M1)	16*	100%	18–24	20.6
Male (M2)	9	100%	20–25	22.0
Male (M3)	2	100%	17–18	17.5

*Includes two additional participants who arrived late and did not provide personal information; data for M1 based only on the 14 who provided information.

In total, 41 young people (14 women; 27 men) participated in two female and three male focus groups (Table 1). These were held at the COMSATS Institute of Information Technology campus in Wah (Punjab) because the students there came from more diverse and poorer backgrounds than those attending the elite universities in Islamabad. A further informal discussion was held in Islamabad with recent graduates and interns (two men; two women; ranging in age from their early 20s to early 30s; referred to subsequently as CS1 for Civil Society 1) who worked for a civil society organization. An additional, highly informative group discussion was held with nine recent postgraduates who had studied in the UK (four women; five men; A1 for Alumni 1). They provided an opportunity to discuss the emergent findings from the focus groups and to explore some of the wider issues the findings provoked. All the focus groups were conducted in English. Care was taken to keep the language as intelligible as possible and to explain the meaning of words unfamiliar to the participants.

This study focuses on university students, in part because of the difficulties of convening focus groups in rural Pakistan among marginalized communities. This follows much other social science research that has been based on responses from university students (Haidar et al., 2014; Mahmood, Ullah, & Akbar, 2013). All our students signed an informed consent form that stated they could withdraw at any time. All agreed to be recorded. To distinguish clearly when we cite respondents, all direct quotations from the focus groups appear in italics. Our sample was drawn exclusively from the 17–26 age group (Table 1).

The focus groups were initially designed to last 90–120 minutes and were divided into four broad sections:

1. Reasons for use of mobile phones;
2. Specific devices used and their implications for identity;
3. Use of apps in identity construction; and
4. Symbolism of mobile phones.

Care was taken to design the focus group template to minimize moderator bias and to show when prompting had been necessary.

Definitional issues were addressed in an introductory explanatory session attended by all participants. *Mobile device* was defined as any device that did not need to be constantly plugged into a power supply, including laptops, tablets, and mobile phones. We emphasized that the core interest of our research was mobile phones, and in practice these were the devices that most respondents possessed. Following multiple readings of the transcripts, both authors independently grouped the responses in the focus group discussions into what each thought were the most significant themes, and these provided the framework for the subsequent analysis. Our independent structural thematic suggestions were very similar, despite our different backgrounds, which we consider adds to the robustness of our conclusions.

Practical Challenges and Limitations

Seven challenges in undertaking this research influenced our findings; they also highlight important issues for us and others to address in future research. First, the number of participants in each group varied, and three of

the groups lay outside our preferred size range of 6–8 people (Table 1). Arrangements for the focus groups were made by colleagues at COMSATS, and because we did not want to be discourteous to our hosts, we worked with the groups that came. Even with the group of 14 people, we were able to involve all students in the discussions. Second, we had little influence over how the groups had been selected by our hosts, other than explaining to them the purposes and aspirations of our research and our desire to have separate male and female groups, as well as students from both the physical and the social sciences. Third, we had designed the focus groups to last around 90 minutes each, but the availability of students meant that this had to be restricted to only about an hour. This led to a fourth challenge, which was whether to prompt participants, since a key aspect of our intended interpretation was the order in which they brought up particular issues without being prompted. The short time in which to cover the range of material meant that prompts were used earlier than we would ideally have liked.

The final three linked challenges are typical of much focus group work. The first concerns the balance between emphasizing diversity in reporting our findings, while also seeking to identify issues over which there was consensus within a group. The comments and insights from our respondents were rich in detail, and we have sought to share much of this diversity by incorporating direct quotations in this article, while at the same time drawing out themes that emerged within each group. Closely linked to this is the challenge of representativeness, as we seek to draw conclusions across the different groups that we can explore more widely in future research. Finally, it is never easy to represent the nonverbal richness of focus group discussions in written form, but we have tried to do this by including mention of such things as laughter and quietness.

The Construction of Student Identity

A phenomenologically focused thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approach was used to explore the transcripts. We concentrate here specifically on our inductive findings relating to identity construction, four of which were particularly prominent: the dominance of social usage; the importance of symbolic value; the portrayal of identity on, in, and through the phone; and the significance of social media. The complex gender and cultural dimensions that cut across these themes are discussed separately in the final section.

The Dominance of Social Usage

Our first main observation is that all our participants agreed without hesitation that their primary use of mobile phones was for social purposes. Indeed, most participants had real difficulty in thinking of any other type of use, even when prompted. The emphasis on economic benefits to users in much previous literature on mobile phone use in poor countries has therefore tended to underestimate the important role of social interaction through mobile devices. Moreover, most operators are likely to gain more revenue from social rather than economic use, as is clearly recognized in much of their advertising.

Few respondents, even when prompted, suggested economic uses for mobile phones. Even the older participants from the civil society organization (CS1), who might have been expected to use mobiles for economic purposes, concurred that economic use was minimal. The students, not unexpectedly, generally responded similarly, noting that they are studying and socializing, but did recognize that phones could also be used for business calls. When asked to expand on why they did not use mobiles for economic purposes, F1 agreed with this observation from one of their numbers:

Because we don't need it now, like, we are students. So we mainly focus on studies and for leisure time we just connect with others on social media a lot. (F1)

However, they did identify others who were more likely to use mobiles for economic purposes:

*Like people who have to, err, connect to others, like for business calls and all.
My cousin is doing online business and he is always on call for business purposes. (F1)*

The F1 group also noted that people use the Internet via smartphone for online shopping, which they suggested could be a form of economic use.

In line with much previous research on mobile phone use, the three main areas of social use, in order of importance, were: to contact family and friends; for social media; and for relaxation and entertainment,

including games. We conjecture that the powerful family ties in Pakistani society continue to play a strong role in maintaining the use of mobile devices to talk with family and friends, while they are also used to share other media on social networking platforms. The different groups, though, highlighted nuances in use, particularly related to its location and purpose. For example,

Like, if you are at the university, you are, you need to be stay in touch like with family and if you are home you need to stay in touch with your friends and colleagues so you may know the update on what are the need for tomorrow's class. (F1)

An interesting question arose while focusing on the social use of mobiles:

You should ask, why do people use more than one mobile?

Moderator: OK, why do people use more than one mobile? What's the answer?

It's, err, the main average is many youngest generation in our country, they are using one, more than one mobile because one mobile is for their friends . . .

[Much laughter as someone's mobile phone goes off]

. . . and one is for family and your friends. One is properly for girlfriend; they do call at the night so that they can be in the touch with their girlfriend. (M1)

Another important distinction between family and friends was brought out in one of the men's groups:

To communicate with friends we send them messages, but because when we are away from home our family calls us. (M2)

The use of mobiles for entertainment was also important. One man thus highlighted what he saw as a distinction:

I think most men use mobile to contact important people for business purpose, but woman use it for social reasons to reduce boredom. (M2)

Women in F1 and F2 agreed with this. The women in F2 emphasized that everyone uses phones for entertainment and to "waste" time, although one woman commented that she thought men wasted less time on their phones than did women. In part this can be understood because of a feeling among some of the women that they had more time on their hands that needed to be filled, whereas men were busier undertaking business activities. The extent to which young men admitted spending time playing games for entertainment on their phones was nevertheless remarkable, with their generally agreed average across the groups being about five hours daily. One individual claimed he spent more than 12 hours a day playing games. These figures are high compared with The NPD Group's (2015) estimate that the global average for mobile gaming is about two hours a day.

Respondents made no unsolicited comments about the use of mobile phones for cultural, political, or religious reasons. However, when prompted, they had some interesting reflections. Politics was something that a few participants (F1, M1) discussed with their friends on social media, and one man (M1) who was active in a political party noted how the party used social media to contact its members. M2 respondents noted the use of games such as "Run Sheeda Run," "Angry Imran," and "Go Nawaz Go" as reflecting local culture. Others commented that informing friends of local events was also an aspect of culture for which they used their phones. When prompted about religious uses, some respondents, especially women, noted that they had a copy of the Holy Qur'an in translation as well as the Hadith and other religious texts on their mobiles, and several had apps that provided prayer times and a compass for the direction in which to pray. Those without smartphones, however, could not access such functionality.

Symbolism Matters

A small majority of participants immediately acknowledged that the symbolic value of mobile phones was indeed significant, but often this only emerged through prompted discussions. Many admitted that they had not previously explicitly thought about the symbolism of their phones. Moreover, a minority of respondents, especially those with feature phones rather than smartphones, felt strongly that mobiles were merely a communication device.

MOBILE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION BY MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

The M2 men's group had a particularly revealing discussion about the general symbolic value of phones, which was initiated unsolicited by a participant:

Some people use it for their status symbol. A good mobile, an expensive mobile in university for status symbol. They even don't know how to use all the features of cellphone and how to use all the features. The smartphone and the simple phone, they have no difference between them. They use for just call and marriages. (M2)

One of his peers responded:

Because I have used only for call and SMS. I have no social use and music. I have used my laptop for that. But when I have a bigger smartphone I will always be comfortable to show off. And put it on the table. (M2)

Many participants agreed that one of the most important aspects of mobile phones was what they indicated symbolically about someone's status. Thus, a new model smartphone was generally seen as reflecting a person's better financial status. This was typified by discussions around their use on social occasions, particularly concerning marriage:

Mostly people in Pakistan use it as a status symbol. They don't actually need it, but they use it as a status symbol. (M2)

When asked for examples of the symbolic value, they reflected as follows:

*Purchasing power
Price tag . . .
Status
Financial status
Being brand conscious
...
If we have the power to buy a costly cellphone, then it means we can get a good life partner.
[Much laughter]
A tool for spouse selection
Making a good impression for others
She thought that if he has an expensive phone then will have a large house, credit card . . .
Lots of pocket money. (M2)*

Most participants agreed that their mobile devices did indeed have significant symbolic value. Typically, the type and brand of a phone were seen as symbolic of social status and affluence. One comment made during discussions was that some men even purchased fake Chinese copies of iPhones so that they could display them at weddings and other social events, thereby trying to impress people who might be seeking to arrange a marriage for their daughters. The downside of this, though, was that respondents also felt that most mothers would not know the difference between phone types so such efforts would be largely wasted.

The symbolic value of mobile phones is complex and interwoven with diverse aspects of Pakistani society. We suggest that the emphasis on mobiles and spouse selection is a more prominent feature of South Asian society than, for example, African and European societies. While most respondents argued that phones are indeed an important symbol, there were exceptions. Many people who own smartphones still only use them for making calls, and the illiterate do not even use them for sending text messages. As one man commented,

Actually in Pakistan you can't judge a person with the mobile phone he is using this. Because the man who is milking the cow in Pakistan, he has iPhone. [Much laughter] The man with PhD doctorate in country in Pakistan, he has iPhone. So, you can't judge about the personality or the nature of the person or his financial reputation in the society by detailing or saying his iPhone or mobile phone. (M1)

Identity On, In, and Through Mobile Phones

To explore these symbolic dimensions of mobile phone use further, we focused especially on the ways by which people portrayed their identities through mobile phone use. Many participants initially commented that they

had not previously considered this notion. However, with probing, they nearly all agreed that phone use was indeed an important way through which they projected their identities, providing many accounts of such use. Three distinct dimensions emerged from the discussions: identity on the phone, (with)in the phone, and through the phone. These distinctions are important and have been insufficiently emphasized in previous research.

Identity on the phone. Identity on the phone is the most immediately visible aspect of identity construction. The brand and make of phone have already been noted as having symbolic significance, and respondents judged them on a range of factors, including reliability, software type, functionality, and durability. Approximately one quarter of respondents only had feature phones; several had both a smartphone and a feature phone, with the latter being used in circumstances where the owners were security-conscious and did not want to appear rich (see also Grappetite, 2014). iPhones and high-end Samsung devices were viewed as indicating affluence and higher status, whereas the Q-Mobile device was treated with derision, although it claimed to be the best-selling brand in Pakistan.¹

Mobile phones can nevertheless be personalized in diverse ways, notably in terms of color, type of case, use of stickers, and attachments such as key chains. Most groups referred to these in passing, and there was a broad consensus that men preferred darker phones, with women liking bright, especially pink, phones. Women, in contrast to men, also used stickers on their phones to express their identities. Significantly, this specific embellishment applies not only to smartphones but also to traditional feature phones, and this is therefore an important way in which poorer people can express their identities “on the phone.”

Identity (with)in the mobile phone. The way through which identity is reflected in the content stored in a phone’s memory has been insufficiently emphasized in previous research. For many of our respondents, the content stored in the phone, particularly images and music, has considerable importance and needs to be distinguished from what they share through social media. In a highly normative society such as Pakistan, many people prefer to keep certain private aspects of their identities hidden in their phones and not revealed through social media. Such content is of two main types: that which is self-generated and that which is commercial or downloaded from the Internet.

Taking selfie photographs is a pervasive aspect of mobile phone use in contemporary Pakistan (Figure 1), more widespread than in many other countries. We conjecture that this might be due to the relatively recent introduction of phones with good cameras in Pakistan, but it may also be because it is one of the quickest means of self-portrayal on social media. Given the gender-segregated nature of Pakistani society, men generally take selfies with men (Figure 1), and women with, and of, women. Most selfies are taken primarily for storing on the phone and are definitely not for sharing. This was especially the case for women, who are much more security-conscious and who commented that men were more likely to post photos online than women:

Although men are fond of taking selfies, however woman take more. We take selfies but don’t post them. Self-satisfaction comes with taking selfies only. So phone is symbolic of you. (F1)

This was reinforced by the men, with one commenting,

When girls are in their Colleges there they don’t have the coeducation, then, then they use the mobile more than us for selfies. (M2)

Although widespread, this practice of holding potentially socially revealing photographs in a mobile phone is risky, especially if the device is unlocked or stolen. It should also be noted that even the most basic feature phones can store images, and so this dimension of identity within the phone can be of particular importance to poorer people who cannot afford smartphones.

Interestingly, music was rarely mentioned directly in the discussions about identity, although when prompted one person did raise it as an important use of mobile phones, noting

I thought everyone used the cellphone for music. (M2)

1. <http://www.qmobile.com.pk/>

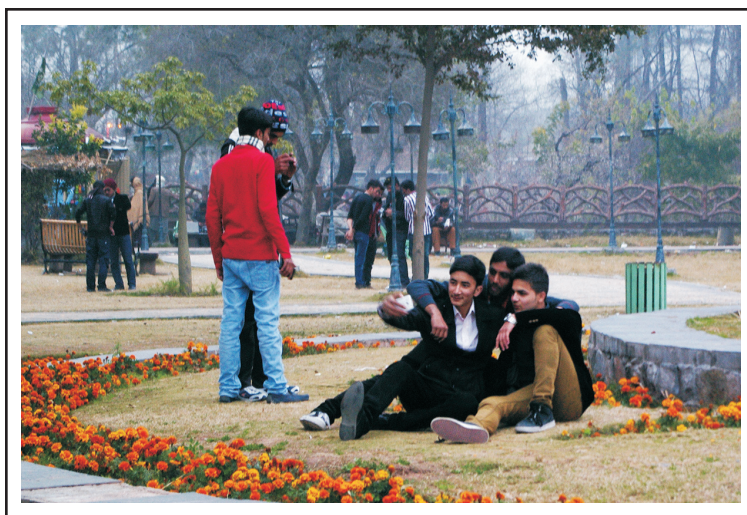


Figure 1. Taking a selfie.

Source: Tim Unwin, January 2016, Islamabad

There was general agreement about this important feature of music for entertainment, which reemphasizes that many aspects of mobile phone use that are taken for granted may not always be at the forefront of respondents' minds in such discussions.

A third aspect of identity that blends both identity within the phone with identity on the phone is the number and type of downloaded apps. Little rigorous research has been done on the symbolism of app use in poorer countries, but research by Nielsen (2015) in the U.S. suggests there is an upper limit of about 27 for the number of apps that people regularly use. One interesting feature of our findings in Pakistan is that

some participants saw the number and type of apps that they had within their phone as being an important part of their identity, especially when this was visible on the phone to others who might see it:

So, basically when you see someone's phone and their apps you can check what they are using, what he is interested in, like someone interested in games, they got more apps of games. If you have education apps or using some other apps, you can understand what type of person he is. (M1).

This is clearly likely to be true elsewhere, but it suggests that further cross-cultural comparisons could be a revealing focus for future research.

Identity through the mobile phone. The main way through which those who had smartphones portrayed their identities was social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp. There were clear differences between the ways that men and women posted material, and most respondents were aware of the dangers that could arise from the sorts of material they posted and how others might perceive it.

This was well captured by comments in the civil society group discussion. As one woman said,

They can see us; we want others to see us, to know about us, and to know what we are doing . . . by "seen" I don't mean actually seen for everyone—but actually knowing about what I do. We make groups—family, friends, and we use privacy setting—but they are not that reliable. (CS1, woman)

As this discussion continued, other interesting comments were made about the differential use of social media by men and women:

Women post in closed circles because we take more pictures relative to men. (CS1, woman)

Men post more publicly because they want to be expressed and to be cool. (CS1, man)

Men are not much concerned that someone will trap them. (CS1, man)

These general views were widely replicated in all the focus groups and highlight the much stricter social divisions that exist in Pakistan between men and women than in many other countries. A discussion in one of the female groups was particularly revealing and emphasizes not only the diversity of images posted, but also concerns about hacking. For example, when asked about the sorts of things they post on Facebook, part of the discussion in one of the women's groups was as follows:

It depends on conditions. [quiet]
. . .
It depends on the conditions.
Mood.
[. . .]
We don't want to expose ourself . . .
[Pause]
. . .
It's unsafe.
[Pause]
Moderator: *In what ways is it unsafe?*
You never really discern to.
We do not want to expose ourselves.
. . .
Moderator: *But why is it unsafe?*
Umm.
Hacking.
[Pause] (F2)

The use of the word *expose* in the above discussion is particularly significant because of the deep concerns among many Pakistani women about exposing any part of their body to public gaze.

In contrast, the following is a typical male account of the purposes for which they use Facebook:

Social activity, nothing else.
Show your information.
Or your plans.
Where are you going.
Usually people in Pakistan have 500 friends on Facebook and in reality they have two to three friends.
. . .
Pictures of our food, pictures of our class, pictures of our family . . .
Mostly they are on Facebook.
Maximum people in our university in our culture use the Facebook for their activities, daily routine, nobody have an interest on them, but in our . . .
[Much cross-talking]
They use Facebook less for . . .
Showing active in the bathroom, in front of bathroom mirrors.
I'm going for if a shower, I'm going for food, I'm going for . . . Those are unnecessary things.
Issues, time spending. (M2)

Almost all the men posted pictures of themselves on Facebook. However fewer than half the women in the focus groups admitted to doing so, in part due to concerns about how this would be perceived by their families, but also because some of them genuinely did not feel it was right for them to post images of themselves. Instead, they preferred posting images of places, religious texts, dresses, weddings, food, and fashion (F2). Somewhat paradoxically, most of the women had no qualms about posting group photos, particularly of weddings and other ceremonial occasions, even though such pictures included women and could be downloaded and manipulated by others. In part, this may be because such events are traditionally seen as public rather than private, which makes it more acceptable for women to show them on social media.

As well as posting images and comments about the ordinary aspects of their lives, participants also projected their identities on social media through other ways. Status messages were particularly used to convey moods, with one woman (F1) commenting that if she wanted to appear busy, even if she was not, she would show her WhatsApp status as *Busy*. Another woman (F1) mentioned using the Pakistani flag on WhatsApp to show her identity, and the relatively recent addition of their flag to the emoji flag list on WhatsApp on most major platforms was widely welcomed. Another dimension of identity was the use of social media by some

people to express their religious identity. One man (M2) commented that he uploaded videos of the religious leader Maulana Tariq Jameel, also using his timeline to show various Islamic posts.

Patriarchy and the Hijab: The Pervasiveness of Gender Identities

The above account has highlighted the important, and often subtle, differences in the ways through which Pakistani men and women use their mobile phones. One of our most striking findings is how women feel constrained in their use of mobile phones and the Internet, and at the same time how they are frequently harassed and bullied through them. Several groups noted that many girls and young women were still prevented from owning or having access to mobile phones. Pakistan is a patriarchal and Islamic society (Badran, 2009; Moghadam, 2007), and although it is difficult to disentangle the precise influence of each of these social dimensions, many participants noted that such behavior was how their society operated. Although they may say it is wrong, few people sought explicitly to change such behaviors. Indeed, the attitudes of some, but by no means all, men, and indeed several women, seemed to reinforce rather than undermine such cultural traditions. This section of our article explores aspects of abuse through mobile phones by many people in Pakistan and how women respond.

The discussion with the small civil society group provides a good starting point for this analysis. They emphasized that they were careful in what they posted on social media, but that it was more important for women to be careful than men because of the nature of Pakistani society. As one of them put it,

This depends on our society—our norms, our culture, and our traditions. (CS1)

Moreover, they also mentioned the key point that Pakistan does not yet have effective laws or legal system that enables Internet crimes against women to be investigated.

At the lowest level of threat, most of the participating women said they had been teased through their mobile phone:

Many people in our country, like young boys, they call “hello, hello, hello” messages.

Moderator: But how do they know your number?

Hi, hi, hi—This is the effect of the desperation which is spreading in our generation. That is a fact. It is a fact. We have to accept it. They try to maintain their relationships of boyfriend and girlfriend. For this they are trying to disturb or tease others, forcing them to make them friendships.

Not boyfriend–girlfriend, but just only time pass. (F2)

When probed further about how boys get to know their numbers, they listed many ways:

Let’s say, if we have applied with our cellphone numbers in the admission forms, they take the number from there.

. . .

And then a lot of reason . . .

They take the numbers from our friends who are the mutual friends of them.

From the mobile phones.

No ethical values. (F2)

They acknowledged that sometimes girls also send “tease calls,” although this was not often. Strikingly, all the young women reported having experienced such tease calls and that, generally, they experienced them about once a week.

There was widespread agreement that men are generally the perpetrators of such actions, although women were occasionally involved in making unwanted approaches to men. However, it was also recognized that such behavior by men was more tolerated than it was by women in Pakistani society. One of the male groups (M2) discussed this at length, noting that when a man calls a woman at home, it disrupts family life, and the woman can thus become the subject of suspicion. The men agreed that women are more vulnerable, and it is easy for their husbands, fathers, and brothers to target them; women are then blamed for bringing a bad name to the family.

However, the abuse of women through mobile phones goes far beyond mere teasing, and the women raised this as a serious issue. In particular, social media is used extensively for harassment and bullying, as highlighted by the honor killing of Qandeel Baloch six months after we undertook our focus groups. This, though, is just the visible tip of an iceberg of abuse. The following extract is worth quoting at length, not least because of the openness of the respondents and the sensitivity of the issues discussed:

I personally do not suffer from this, but I have heard of many stories like a female searched for all personal data from their some kinds of relatives have, let's spot boyfriends and then they started to blackmail them.

Moderator: OK, so posting pictures with boyfriends and blackmail. Is that very common here?

Yes.

Yes.

[Long pause]

Moderator: How does the blackmailing work?

[Pause]

In what way?

Moderator: So, so, I'm a woman.

Yes.

Yes.

Moderator: And, and I have a secret boyfriend.

Yes.

Moderator: And somebody sees us and posts a picture. Err, how does the blackmail then work? What happens?

Female is actually scared of their families, that's why.

It's not a part of our religion.

Moderator: I know.

Our families.

Moderator: But it happens.

Everybody does this in being hidden, so they were scared of exposing it in front of their families.

People call themselves, and threaten them to inform their parents, and threaten them . . .

Moderator: But what is the blackmail that they do? Do they say, so you must pay us money.

They exchange money, or they exchange their [slight laugh] phone numbers, then they call them to come to meet at a certain hotel.

Or for spending night or time with them, or for dating. Also ask for the money. (F2)

The consequences can be severe. As this conversation developed, it became clear that in such circumstances some liberal parents might punish their daughter only by restricting her movement; she would not be permitted to leave the house if a photo of her in the company of a man had been posted on social media. Others commented that many parents would force their daughter to marry another man of their choosing if they became aware through imagery or text on social media that she had had any kind of relationship with someone. Although it is impossible to judge the number, our respondents also noted that many people had committed suicide because of such harassment, and there are also claims that in some instances women have been killed by their families because of postings on social media. Human Rights Commission Pakistan (2016) notes that 1,096 women in Pakistan were killed by relatives who felt the women had dishonored their families, but it is also widely recognized that many "honor killings" go unreported. Inappropriate images on social media are one form of dishonor; we suggest this is far more common in Pakistan than in many other countries.

A particularly interesting dimension of the emotional and physical tensions facing young people in Pakistan that emerged during the focus groups was the discussion about the use of Facebook pages titled "Confessions and Crushes." Students in many Pakistani universities have created such pages, but interestingly the academics with whom we were working were unaware of them. Typical of a relatively mild and innocent entry on one such page in February 2016 is shown in Figure 2. This illustrates how explicit and easily identifiable people are from such postings.

MOBILE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION BY MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

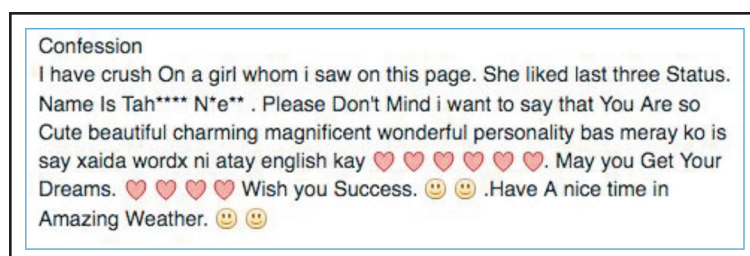


Figure 2: Entry from Facebook "Confessions and Crushes" page.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com>, February 2016

Details of these Facebook groups were noted especially by the first women's group:

Sometimes people use their phone to take pictures of people without letting them know that they are taking pictures, and even videos and maybe audio recordings sometimes.

...

Yes it happens. It happens very common.

They want to blackmailing.

There followed a detailed discussion about the "Confessions and Crushes" Facebook group:

We have a page about confessions and something like that.

Confessions and crushes actually.

And every day hundreds of mentions of different couples and stuff.

...

And people are confessing like.

Their feelings for other girls and stuff.

Girls and all.

And are posting pictures.

I have seen girls posting pictures of boys. (F1)

The women were confident that their parents would not become aware of the details because people did not post names, but rather described, for example, when and where someone was seen. They also noted that people wanting to post material send it to the page Admins, although they did not know who these Admins were. They agreed this meant that they had to trust the Admins, since they would know exactly who posted every message. Despite knowing this, the participants seemed to disregard the risks this posed. There is clearly a demand for such a service, in part because it may provide a safer mechanism for young people to have romances that were previously mediated through dangerously hidden paper notes or secret phone calls.

Men commented in a different way when asked about what using these pages says about their identity:

Basically it is just because people want to know about what is going on in the university, like who is connecting with whom.

Who wants [emphasis] to connecting with whom.

Yes.

Who have crushes.

...

[Laughter]

We are in society.

Like if he is interested in someone that he is not connecting already in any other person.

I think you know very well!

[Laughter]

...

In Pakistani culture, the females are not very open, so they don't approach you directly and say, "Hey to you. Listen to me. I am interested in you. Would you like to be a friend with me?" So they don't, like, say

you this. They will spend a four years in the university and she will spend this four years liking you, but she will not come to you and say to you that I like you. I want to make a friendship with you. So they use the platform of Confessions and Crushes to be a anonymous and then they post their crush about you on that page, so when the person with whom the confession is . . .

About . . .

Moderator: Do you do this the other way round to girls as well?

No.

No one would tell, but everyone has done this.

[Laughter] (M1)

It was possible briefly to pursue what respondents thought were the implications of mobile devices for the future. Most were positive that their use, particularly with such social media, would eventually lead to positive changes. At present it was widely acknowledged that

In Pakistan, there is a lot of people, on, who did not allow mobile phones to girls especially. (F2)

However, when asked if this was going to change, they all felt confident that it would:

Yes.

. . .

It will take a lot of time, but . . .

I think the next generation will have, will not be facing this problem. (F2)

Interestingly, the women in F1 also felt that mobiles were liberating for women, not constraining.

Conclusions

This article has illustrated the complexity and diversity of ways in which young Pakistanis use mobile phones, both for symbolizing and for constructing their identities. We have shown here that the social and symbolic uses of mobile phones are paramount in the minds of young Pakistanis, not the economic aspects of mobile use that previous research has highlighted. The distinctions between identity construction on, in, and through mobiles are helpful in understanding this social and symbolic use, and we encourage others to consider adopting this structure as a heuristic device. Indeed, we suggest a need exists for more detailed qualitative research in other developing countries to explore further how culture influences, and is influenced by, mobile use.

The views of young Pakistanis are in many ways similar to those reported in other research, but we suggest that the patriarchal, normative, communal, and restrictive features (Gelfand et al., 2011; Hassan, 2016) of Pakistani society also have particular ramifications for mobile identity construction there. In particular, the gendering of mobile use in a patriarchal society resonates with that reported by Shuter (2012) in India and Abraham (2014) in Zambia. We nevertheless suggest that the extent of harassment and bullying of and fear among young women in Pakistan over their use of mobiles, and the identities that they construct through them, are more extreme than in other countries. The use of "Confessions and Crushes" pages and the optimism of the young women with whom we spoke illustrate that ICTs in the form of mobile devices may have the liberating effect suggested by Foley et al. (2007) in increasing their self-confidence and independence. Nevertheless, the women with whom we spoke saw this as a distant hope and were aware of the considerable constraints that applied in the patriarchal Islamic society and culture of Pakistan, constraints that can be life-threatening.

Finally, we have provided in-depth insight into the gendered dynamics of the difficulties women face in their use of mobile phones and social media in Pakistan. Most of our participants were from liberal families living in a small town not far from Islamabad. They recognized that women in many other parts of Pakistan, especially in rural areas, would face much worse conditions with regard to digital harassment and blackmail, if indeed they would have mobile devices at all. Despite their stated understanding of the risks of using social media, many women continue to use it, facing frequent, usually unwanted, pressure from men through their mobile phones and social media. Building on the findings of this article, we recommend that further research be undertaken on these issues, especially in rural areas and in other cultural contexts. To this end, we have

recently conducted an online survey of more than 500 people in Pakistan, specifically on sexual harassment through their mobile devices. These findings will be reported in a forthcoming article. ■

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MOBILE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION BY MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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