

Examining Women's Lived Experiences of Gender Stereotyping on Social Media Platforms

Hakim Ali	MPhil Scholar, School of sociology Quaid I Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan, Lecturer in Sociology, HED, Punjab. hakimali@soc.qau.edu.pk
Dr. Sadia Saeed	Associate Professor, School of Sociology, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. ssaeed@qau.edu.pk
Samar Iqbal	MPhil Scholar, NIPS, Quaid I Azam University (QAU), Islamabad, Pakistan Lecturer in Political Science, HED, Punjab. Samarbhatti38@gmail.com
Mujeeb Ur Rahman	M.Phil scholar Quaid I Azam University Islamabad miangul8090@gmail.com

Abstract: *This study explores the women's experiences of gender stereotyping on social media platforms in Pakistan. This exploratory research focuses on how women experience gender stereotyping on social media platforms (SMP), especially Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and X (Twitter), and their strategies to challenge these online gender stereotypes. The data has been gathered through conducting In-depth interviews with ten respondents (female students from Quaid I Azam University, Islamabad). Thematic analysis of the data revealed that gender stereotyping prevails across respective platforms, significantly shaping women's self-perceptions, online interactions, and reinforcement of gender stereotypes that result in low self-esteem, frustration, and anger among women. The strategies employed by women to counter gender stereotyping range from passive responses, such as ignoring harmful content or conforming to norms, to more proactive measures, such as using humor to critique stereotypes, blocking toxic users, befitting responses, and engaging in online activism. Few respondents transformed this frustration into a source of empowerment. This research contributes to the in-depth understanding of women's experience of gender stereotyping on social media platforms in the Pakistani context. It also paves the way for future studies to consider women's sentiments.*

Keywords: Gender, Gender stereotypes, Social media platforms (SMP)

1. Introduction

Gender is a socially defined category of roles, behaviors, attitudes, preferences, or activities that society assumes to be suitable for persons of a specific sex (Rose et al., 2012). Gender stereotyping is a highly idealized view of the expectations and roles that males and females should display in a given society (APA, 2022). It often encompasses several aspects of people's features, including physical characteristics, temperamental features, behaviors, social statuses, and positions. In general, stereotypical beliefs about gender can be descriptive, which is how one perceives a person of a specific gender to be (Gill, 2004); prescriptive, which is how one perceives a person of a particular gender should be and behave (Prentice & Carranza, 2002); or proscriptive, these are how one perceives a person of a certain should not be and behave (Rudman et al., 2012). The existence of gender stereotypes is multifaceted; it consists of the behaviours of female and male roles, the characteristics of female and male personalities, physical traits, and gender identification (Deaux, 1984).

Gender stereotypes are a product of culture and are acquired through socialization. They reflect attitudes shaped during socialization and acquired through teachers, families, or the media (Ghaffari 2022). The young generation has more chances of socializing in less time and with minimal charges (Rehman et al., 2014). The relationship between the media and women is crucial for understanding this fact: whatever image women have in our country, the media shapes it. It is thus necessary to employ the media in enhancing the position of women in Pakistan and informing about their contribution to the country's development (Zia, 2007).

The majority of the youth of Pakistan are frequent social networking sites (SNS) users (Rehman et al., 2014). Content shared by women on social media may gradually alter the existing myths about women (Sant, 2008). It could also be employed as a weapon in the creation of consciousness about the position of women (Abusalama, 2016) and to challenge stereotypes on Facebook (Fouzia et al., 2020). On the other side, these online interaction places have been postulated as places where a person, a group of people or categories of people are usually marginalized, discriminated against or rejected in a society, not accessible to give their view (Kumar, 2020).

Today, it is relatively simple to come across such stereotypes not only in the content disseminated by traditional media like TV, print media, and radio but also in social media content (Pramaskara, 2022). Likewise, most women do not reveal their identity and personal information owing to pressure of tradition, social pressures, security, and privacy. Further, women's decisions and desires towards the use of social media are more social than personally influenced (Aksar & Firdaus, 2021). Even though both genders in Pakistan are expressive on social media, females have a higher probability of gender stereotyping due to their submissive position in society. The changes in the level of tolerance and the overall rate of sexist and abusive attitudes provoked by exposure to problematic media representations also affect the culture that exists in these circumstances. Consequently, women victims of discrimination and abuse in a cultural environment that is likely to accept sexism and abusive behaviour, may receive lower social support, have a lesser likelihood to seek help, and may also have a narrower definition of what may be considered discrimination and abuse thus, endorsing gender disparities (Santonniccolo et al., 2023).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Social media platforms often reinforce traditional patriarchal norms in contemporary world and women are subjected to societal norms and ideologies that reflect gendered expectation (Rizwan, 2017). Pakistani women encounter patriarchal rules and attitudes on these SNS, i.e., Facebook features memes that either directly or indirectly promote gender biasness that encompasses various forms, including women as dependent, illogical, opportunistic, weak, and artificial (Guo, 2022). Numerous instances of stereotyping like sexism (Demirhan & Çakır-Demirhan, 2015), body shamming (Vandenbosch et al., 2022; Hussain et al., 2023), online assault (Citron, 2014); online celebrity bashing (Ouvrein et al., 2021); and body imaging (Ullah & Naseer, 2014) can be observed on social media platforms like Instagram (Hamid et al., 2018) and Twitter (Felmlee et al., 2018, 2020). Many of the researches were conducted under positivists paradigm in Pakistan that mainly focused on the perpetuation of stereotypes in mainstream media in the form of memes and gender-based representations of men and women (Guo, 2022). Besides limited studies on social media platforms, little attention has been paid to the Pakistani women's experiences (Aksar et al., 2020) who encounter these stereotypes on SNS. This research is novice as it takes into account the feelings and experiences of women on Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Snapchat, and Instagram. It also focuses on how women cope with this stereotyping on social media platforms.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to explore how women experience gender stereotyping on social media platforms. In addition to this, their responses to gender stereotyping on social media remain the pivotal

concern of the study. This enriches the existing breadth of literature in the realm of gender stereotyping on technological fronts and sets forth a new debate in the Pakistani context.

1.3 Significance of the study

The rationale for carrying out the phenomenological research on Women's lived experiences of gender stereotypes on social media platforms is immense and complex. It will be valuable for policymakers, social media sites, and educators to understand the various forms of gendered stereotypes that women experience on the internet spaces so that appropriate approaches and measures can be formulated. Practically, the findings of this research will have considerable value for intervention and policy intended to create more tolerant and gender-sensitized cyber worlds. In addition, this research could help end users and advocacy groups of women to become more informed to combat harmful gender discourses. This study will also help to shed light on the benefits of media literacies, and also for processing the gendered content posted on social media. By exploring strategies adopted by women to combat gender stereotypes, this study will guide how online platforms can be made more inclusive and secure from stereotyping.

2. Literature Review

In contemporary times, Gender stereotypes have been widespread in both conventional and digital media platforms (Eriyanto, 2001). The media perpetuates gender stereotypes and portrays men and women unequally (Ariani, 2013). Gender stereotypes are observed on social media platforms, encompassing three distinct categories: ad stereotypes, comment stereotypes, and stereotypes depicted in photographs and videos (Guo, 2022). Gender has a vital role in media selection (Idemudia et al., 2017), and gender, as well as age and background, can influence access to, activity on, and time spent on social networking platforms.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the male gender is commonly associated with traits such as authority, rationality, logic, and activity, while the feminine gender is often associated with passivity, emotions, and subjectivity (Ghaffari, 2022). These Socially and culturally determined communication behaviors, i.e., women as emotional (Shifman & Lemish, 2011) and men as individualistic (Zuckerman et al., 2016), are strongly reflected in the online communication environment (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Additionally, Men spend more time on social media than women (Boneva et al., 2003), implying that the former are expected to participate in the public realm and the latter in the private sphere.

The existing body of literature provides evidence for the existence of different gender roles assigned to both men and women (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008). It also suggests that these roles are promoted through various forms of media (Hancock & Toma, 2009). Findings show that sports news predominantly emphasizes male athletes (Sainz-De-Baranda et al., 2020) and rarely includes women. Likewise, females are demonstrated in television programmes while focusing on their physical beauty (Hentges & Case, 2013), subject to scrutiny based on their appearance (Rousseau & Eggermont 2018), and gender-based representation of female athletes (Sainz-De-Baranda et al. 2020). In their study on gender, Masse & Rosenblum (1998) suggest that television ads perpetuate gender stereotypes. Facebook features memes that either directly or indirectly promote gender bias (Guo, 2022). In politics, voters perceive masculinity as an indicator of competence and may impose negative consequences on female politicians who do not possess conventional masculine traits (Koenig et al., 2011). Instagram and TikTok networks may be more closely linked with negative body image than platforms like Facebook, which have similar features but also offer text-based content (Vandenbosch et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Online abuse is a phenomenon that is not exclusive to women of South Asian descent. Individuals on the Internet face a wide range of dangers, such as harassment, bullying, revenge pornography, and doxing (Sambasivan et al., 2018). Women are more prone to being targeted for online assault compared to men (Citron, 2014). Haider (2020) reports that out of 37 million active social media users in Pakistan, 40% of the women population who access the internet have come across instances of

digital assault. Online celebrity bashing is a prevalent practice on social media (Ouvrein et al., 2021). Twitter and TikTok, in particular, are renowned for significant celebrity examples of appearance shaming that have been trending for months (Felmlee et al., 2018).

Additionally, there have been such instances of appearance-shaming on Instagram (Hamid et al., 2018), Twitter (Felmlee et al., 2018, 2020) and TikTok that leads to derogatory comments on the physical and sexual appearance of celebrities (Felmlee et al., 2018; Felmlee et al., 2020). On the other hand, it is observed that women run beauty items as sexist symbols to entertain the males in society or to get their attention as sub-ordinate persons. Women's success seems to be based not only on their talents but also on physical appearance and looks, and it is very much vital for them to invest themselves in being lovely; otherwise, society would not accept them or give them respect (Ullah & Naseer, 2014).

Previous research has shown that people of both genders use traditional masculine and feminine stereotypes in their online presence. Individuals frequently comply with gender norms in interpersonal order to avoid social marginalization (Oberst et al., 2016). In addition, female activists may use social media platforms to affect the decisions they support at a low cost and promptly (Dasgupta, 2018). According to Keller (2015), celebrities, particularly female superstars such as Emma Watson, Beyonce, and Lena Dunham, have made a concerted effort to demonstrate that their social media platforms can be used for political engagement rather than for purely superficial purposes (Harris, 2008).

Historically, the media has used its material to reinforce gender stereotypes (Dasgupta, 2018). Social media frequently reinforces gender stereotypes by perpetuating the rhetoric of respectability politics, which imposes restrictions on women's bodies, looks, and sexuality (Younas, 2020). Furthermore, Tweets perpetuate the patriarchal narrative surrounding women (Demirhan & Çakır-Demirhan, 2015). Although there is a general acceptance of gender equality, the presence of stereotyping, objectifying depiction, and sexualizing portrayals suggests the ongoing presence of a profoundly ingrained gender-biased society that can lead to prejudice, unfair treatment, and injury (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

Social media platforms are perpetuating the notion of gender stereotyping using their content (Imbuwa, 2021). In contrast, digital formats also present an opportunity to reproduce cultural norms (Rose et al., 2012). SNS offer platforms for addressing concerns that are typically suppressed or disregarded in society (Dasgupta, 2018). Women engage in several kinds of resistance to contest unjust power structures (Sant, 2008). According to Abusalama (2016), the media can serve as a means of resistance and promoting awareness regarding women's issues. Likewise, social media has enabled the usage of hashtags and viral campaigns to mobilize collective action and raise public awareness about topics such as sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and the uneven treatment of women (Sue, 2018).

3 Theoretical Framework

Two theories are adopted in the study to understand the phenomenon of gender stereotyping on social media platforms. Cultivation theory by George Gerbner and his colleagues is a socio-cultural theory that tries to explain the influence that television may have in constructing the perception, beliefs, attitudes, values, and other aspects of the viewer (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The other is the Social Identity theory by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, which provides a comprehensive view of the theoretical framework in explaining where the self-concept and identity of an individual come from in their respective memberships to social groups and further how this identity may mold their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in diverse social surroundings. These theories are explained and applied to the research gap in the study. These theories provide insights into the gender stereotyping that women encounter on social media platforms, how women experience stereotyping on social media, and how social networking sites play a role in reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes.

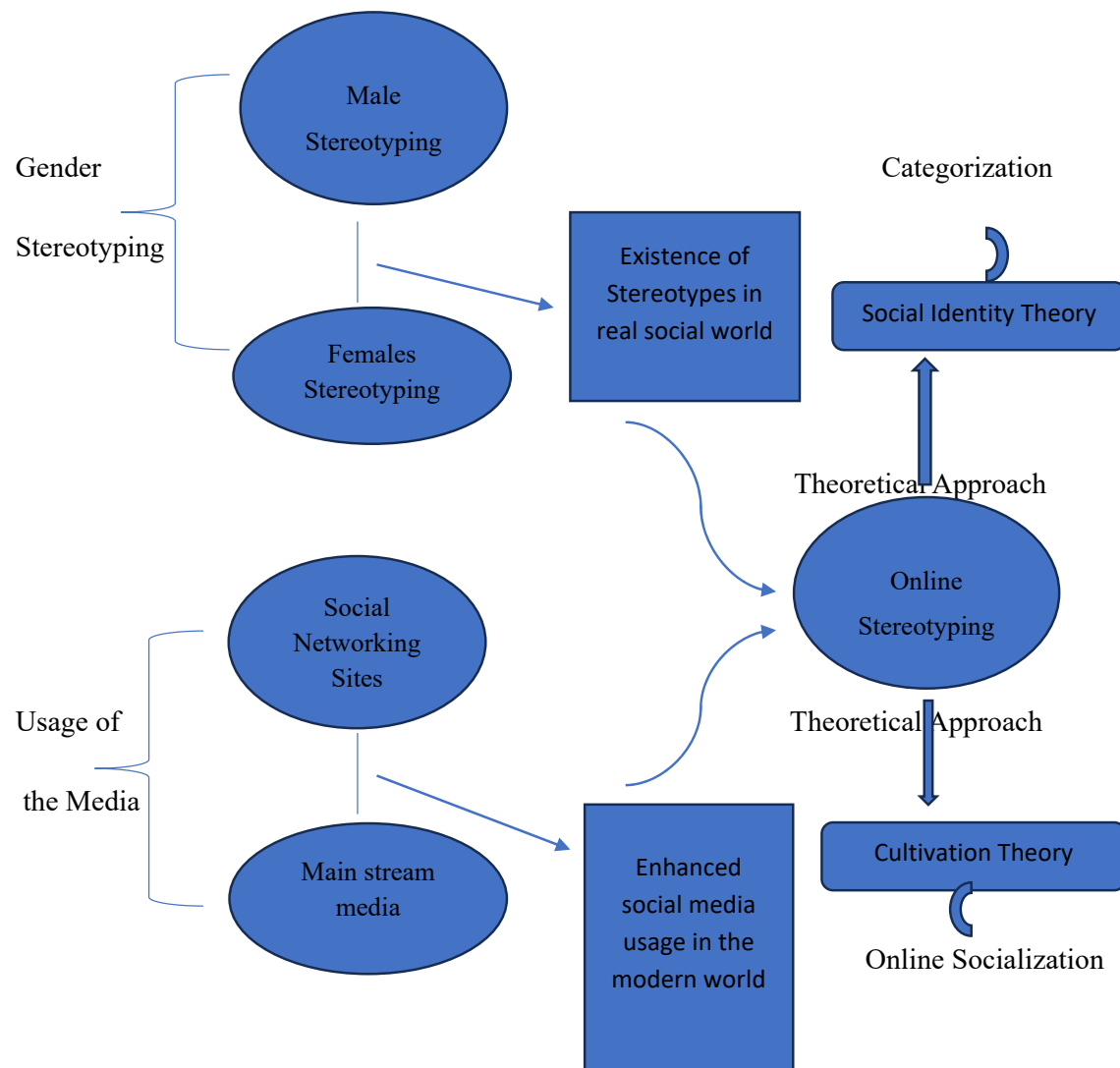


Figure # 3.1 Diagram of the Theoretical Framework

Figure 3.1 illustrates the application of the theories on research gaps in the diagrammatical form of the concept of Gender stereotyping. The figure underscores the gap of the study, which is relevant to the prevalence of stereotypes on online platforms, acknowledging their manifestation in the daily social world as is evident by the previous literature. It also presents the theoretical approaches that are engaged to address the study's gap in light of these theoretical approaches.

4 Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of women regarding gender stereotypes associated with women. The data collection method is in-depth interviews with 10 respondents. The researcher interviewed four BS students, four MPhil students, and two PhD students to ascertain their lived experiences of gender stereotyping. The universe of this research is Quaid i Azam University, Islamabad and the target population is active social media user women who use social media more than 4 hours a day. The participants for this study are female students aged 20-30 years at Quaid I Azam University (QAU) Islamabad who actively engage with social media platforms at least four hours a day. The rationale behind choosing women at this public sector university is that youth, from all geographic areas of Pakistan, study here. The researcher will not need to visit all areas of Pakistan to target women from all regions. Selecting respondents from the university will be more effortless, time-saving, resource-saving, and representative of Pakistan's educated young women.

A purposive sampling technique is used for the selection of respondents. The rationale behind using this technique is that only those educated females are selected who are active social media users. Data is collected primarily through an interview guide, allowing participants to express their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations in their own words. The interviews were conducted in person, and each interview lasted approximately 40 to 45 minutes. The researcher also used recording devices, a field diary, and field notes while conducting interviews with participants. The thematic analysis technique is employed to analyze data by systematically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data related to gender stereotypes on social media platforms.

5 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is used to make themes according to the research questions, objectives, topic, and theoretical framework. The themes are derived from the reviewed literature, collected data, and experiences of the research respondents. The primary focus was on key indicators and topic implications. The women's in-depth feelings, experiences, and insights were analyzed by making themes.

5.1 Manifestation of Gender Stereotypes on Social Media

Gender stereotypes manifest in various forms on social media platforms. Its manifestations are in the form of memes, comments, posts, images, and videos. Respondents' family background and area of residence were strongly linked with the type of stereotype they encountered. Social media users recorded varied responses when asked the question of what kind of stereotypes are being manifested on social media platforms. While responding to a question related to the type of stereotypes experienced, Respondent 3 from Sindh mentions:

"Most of the time, my followers comment that women should not oppose male arguments and should not engage in debates. This shows the attitude and demand of male users to force us to behave and respond in a specific way. Sometimes these comments are vulgar and suppressive to influence women. Social media platforms are more stereotyped than mainstream media. Here, everyone can share his views and expressions regardless of revealing my identity. So these comments are gendered in nature toward women, and this is not fair with an already marginalized community of the society."

This implies that women should be non-confrontational and submissive while engaging in social media platform activities. As respondent 1 from KPK mentions:

"Women are seen engaging in domestic activities and roles related to beauty, and men are depicted as professionals and leaders. Women are forced to be limited in their roles in the kitchen and household chores. At the same time, men are seen as more independent and expressive than females."

At the same time, while making conversation with Respondents, it was observed that gender stereotypes are being reinforced through social media platforms. Although it is good that women are caring and performing better roles in bringing up their children, they should not be denied participation in other fields of society. In this regard, Respondent 9 from Gilgit commented:

"Even positive comments on Instagram and Facebook posts can be gendered. For example, praising women for being caring and nurturing; and praising men for being strong, decisive, and caretaker. These comments reinforce the gendered roles and characteristics of men and women on social media platforms."

Similarly, respondent 5 from Punjab comments:

"The female's body is objectified in comments, memes, and photos on social media platforms. Instagram is ripping platforms in this regard. Fat females receive very negative and inhuman comments if they try to do the modelling or make reels. They are laughed at and get negative responses from the audience. While at the same time, fat males are not criticized for their body shape. Even on the marriage apps,

the weight of females matters but not that of men. So, social media platforms contain comments and memes that objectify the body of females instead of considering their talent and personal capabilities. Besides it, body shaming on social media platforms is seen on Instagram."

Besides body shaming and imaging, sexualized portrayals of women on the social media platforms are seen on social media platforms. Respondent 7, from Balochistan, has also mentioned in this regard:

"I have witnessed on Snapchat and Instagram that certain sexual characteristics are attached to females. Certain characteristics define males and females on social media platforms. Women's portrayal not only objectifies them but also sets unrealistic standards that how females should look and behave. Sometimes, it frustrates us to reduce us to just a physical object and not consider our intellectual and knowledge capabilities. This makes it harder for me to participate in professional and technological spaces."

These insights emphasize how widespread gender stereotypes are and how they can sway opinions even when they appear to be reinforced positively. Respondent 6 from Kashmir's awareness of gender stereotypes highlights an increased level of understanding about how these stereotypes prevail on social media platforms:

"I frequently observed comments on my political posts that make doubt on females' knowledge or advocate for women to stay out of politics. It may be quite discouraging to receive responses like this, making it impossible for me to have meaningful political conversations. People ask have you read political science? Do you know the political landscape of Pakistan? Do women know what politics is? These gendered comments limit the role of women in politics. I can also recall a Facebook post where females were asked What do women know about politics? they ought to be concentrating on more feminine things. It was annoying because I didn't receive the same backlash from my male peers who were talking about the same thing."

5.2 Impact of Stereotypes on Women

Gender stereotypes have a profound influence on social media users' self-esteem, confidence, and willingness to express themselves. Respondents discussed personal experiences that demonstrated the psychological and behavioural effects of coming across gender stereotypes on social media platforms. Comments on women's appearance further restrict them from being more open and assertive in achieving their goals and compete men and women on equal footing in professional life. This opposing stereotyping forces them to be more cautious while sharing their accomplishments on social media platforms. The researcher interviewed respondent 7 from Baluchistan, who said:

"I feel degraded and devalued when I encounter stereotypes on social media platforms. Most of the time, I feel frustrated when judged based on my appearance instead of my professional achievements in comment sections. Comparatively, I feel freer to share my achievements on LinkedIn and WhatsApp than on Instagram and Facebook."

Similarly, respondent 4 from Punjab said:

"These stereotypes on social media make me feel that I have to work harder than men to prove myself because my achievements are considered undervalued."

Gender stereotyping on social media platforms leads to frustration among females. Their feeling may vary from surrendering to these stereotypes to challenging these stereotypes. While taking insights from Respondent 3 from Sindh, it was observed that she felt self-doubt and lower self-esteem. She mentioned:

"I feel that I have lower self-esteem, which creates self-doubt in myself and my capabilities. I am the gold medalist in Bs and MPhil but feel restrained in sharing my accomplishments and ideas on social media platforms. Consequently, I feel more convenient to observe trends on social media instead of posting and challenging these actively."

Another respondent, 10 from Islamabad, had mixed feelings of anger and sadness. While responding to the questions about the implications of gender stereotyping on her emotions and behaviour, she said:

"I feel sadness and anger when I encounter gender stereotyping on social media platforms. I feel anger due to the unjust and baseless nature of online stereotypes. And I feel sad as these stereotypes still exist in an era of technology, science, and advancement. I use Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter to challenge these gendered stereotypes actively and raise awareness for gender equality."

Similarly, respondent 2 from Gilgit said:

"It is demoralizing to see these stereotypes on social media platforms. I feel that I must challenge these stereotypes online and make positive changes in society. These stereotypes motivate me to challenge them to prove my capability in a role model way."

5.3 Adopted Strategies to Challenge Online Gender Stereotypes

Coping strategies to challenge online gender stereotypes vary from person to person and type of social media platform. While sharing insights on the question of tactics adopted by respondents to challenge gender stereotypes, respondents shared varied strategies ranging from ignoring negative comments to actively challenging those stereotypes and sharing their experiences with others. As one of the respondents mentioned:

"I believe that awareness about gender stereotyping can greatly influence positive change in society. I share research articles regarding the challenge of gender stereotyping on LinkedIn and also sometimes post on Instagram. I also share personal stories on Instagram and WhatsApp to make it more impactful."

Likewise, another respondent 1 from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa said:

"I try to ignore negative comments on Facebook and Instagram and try to focus on positive interactions on these platforms."

Respondent 5 mentioned in this regard:

"I am used to blocking those users who try to belittle me or criticize out of no way. I feel empowered after blocking those individuals who believe in gendered stereotypes and try to influence my activities under the light of those activities."

In contrast, some respondents feel it is compulsory to actively challenge these stereotypes. Women think that gender stereotypes must be directly challenged, and it is crucial to encounter them on social media platforms. Some of them try to engage in debates in the comment section whenever they encounter negative stereotypes. Respondent 6 from Kashmir, while wiping sweat from their forehead, answered:

"I feel that engaging in healthy debates regarding counter of stereotyping is crucial to minimize stereotyping on social media platforms. I hope challenging people will compel them to change their attitudes in the right direction."

In the same manner, respondent 10 from Islamabad mentioned:

"I always try to confront online stereotypes by sharing personal experiences on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram stories and try to be engaged in constructive and meaningful dialogues."

An attractive, challenging technique was observed while interviewing the respondents. Humor is adopted as a powerful technique to influence the audience to bring change. This technique has helped the respondent to challenge stereotypes on social media platforms. While sharing her views on the coping strategies, respondent 4 said:

"I create humorous posts, memes, and videos to critique the gender stereotypes on social media"

platforms. I engage my audience on Instagram through laughter while at the same time making them think critically about outdated societal stereotypes."

Similarly, women may engage with supportive communities to challenge stereotypes. They create content that uplifts women to face online stereotypes and helps them be brave enough to bear all the worst situations. As respondent 2 from Gilgit added:

"These communities introduce new techniques like online campaigns, raising slogans for women's rights and engagement of audience to identify and challenge stereotypes on social media platforms."

5.4 Engagement in Advocacy and Activism

Besides personal techniques to challenge gender stereotyping, active social media female users are noticed to be involved in activism and advocacy efforts to challenge gender stereotyping on social media platforms.

As respondent 9 from Gilgit described:

"I was part of #MeToo hashtag campaigns. I shared other #MeToo foreign women's content on my Instagram stories who shared their stories under these campaigns. Besides that, I have also shared one of my own hashtag stories on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram."

Similarly, Women engage in campaigns promoting women's rights and self-esteem. These campaigns also include the 8th March Day, on which women's rights are highlighted on all platforms. They share all the indiscriminating behaviour against women through posts and sharing the content of NGOs on Facebook and Instagram. One of the respondents, respondent 8 from KPK, added:

"This advocacy technique has helped me a lot to spread seeds of gender equality and better treatment of women. In my opinion, most of the stereotypes exist unknowingly in our minds, and there is always a need for raising these issues and making people setoitive of gender-related issues."

Likewise, respondent 1 from KPK said:

"I have been engaged in online campaigns that promote gender equality and highlight gender issues on Twitter and Instagram."

These campaigns of educational awareness and participation in online campaigns are shared among the users. This technique of advocacy adds to the increased awareness of existing gender stereotypes and promotes gender equality indirectly.

In this regard, respondent 3 from Sindh added:

"Sometimes, I interview gender equality advocates and share their insights with the audience on social media platforms. I engage with my community through live sessions and sharing the culture of activism and awareness."

Similarly, Respondent 6 from Kashmir said:

"I try to focus on promoting health and fitness content on social media platforms. I highlight physiological differences in men and women that lead to different growth patterns in females and different health conditions. In this way, the purpose of women's empowerment is achieved."

6. Discussion

The emergence of social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, X (former Twitter), Snapchat, and WhatsApp, has drastically changed how people communicate, share, and interact with information. However, in many respects, the advent of these very same platforms has served to magnify different societal issues, one of which is gender stereotyping. The researcher's endeavour to probe gender stereotyping on social media among female students at Quaid-i-Azam University is a dynamic interplay of complexities and nuances.

Social media is a reflection of and amplifier of societal norms concerning gender stereotypes in society. The data shows that very predominant gender stereotypes are in comments, memes, images, and videos. Responses provided that women are usually portrayed in really stereotypic domestic roles and objectified based on their appearance. Gender stereotypes are widely shown in advertising, with a tendency to display men in professional jobs more frequently and women in non-working, leisure ones. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in nations with high levels of gender disparity (Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015).

The respondent women reported significant psychological and behavioural impacts as a result of encountering gender stereotypes on social media platforms. Respondents expressed that dealing with comments and online gender stereotypes made them frustrated, self-doubtful, angry, and sometimes unfit for this world. For instance, Respondent from Sindh said that she feels 'degraded and devalued' when there is more emphasis on physical appearance than professional accomplishments. Another respondent from Punjab added that she thinks she has lower self-esteem, which creates self-doubt in myself and my capabilities. This is also in line with past research, wherein Individuals, especially women on the Internet, face a wide range of dangers, such as harassment, bullying, revenge pornography, and doxing (Nithya, 2018). Furthermore, Women are more prone to being targeted for online assault compared to men (Danielle Keats Citron, 2014).

The different coping strategies and mechanisms adopted by female respondents ranged from complying with norms and ignoring negative comments to actively addressing stereotypes through education, humour, and advocacy. Most respondents mentioned focusing on their work and achievements while ignoring the negative comments. They also believed that they try to comply with positive social norms. It is evident from the writings of Oberst (2016), where he mentioned that Individuals frequently comply with gender norms in interpersonal interactions to avoid social marginalization. A respondent from Gilgit Baltistan mentioned that she ignores negative comments on Facebook and Instagram and focuses on positive interactions on these platforms. Besides, Women were also seen to challenge stereotypes more actively and confronting than being silenced and confirming social norms. For example, humour was used by Respondent from Sindh to create memes through which she criticised and challenged online stereotypes; her posts were funny and informative in this manner. It is congruent with the argument of Guo (2022) that amusing memes serve a purpose beyond mere amusement, as they function as vehicles for articulating emerging trends in gender ideology across society. Key coping strategies by the women included blocking toxic users and relying on supportive communities.

7. Conclusion and Suggestion

The study investigated women's experiences at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, regarding gender stereotyping on social media platforms. The findings revealed that gender stereotypes are pervasive across SNS, significantly shaping women's online perceptions and interactions. The findings also revealed that the gender stereotyping encountered online, predominantly through comments, memes, visual content, advertisements, and direct messages, plays an important role in the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and objectification of women. These stereotypes are not only prevalent but also profoundly influence how respondents view themselves and engage in digital spaces. The psychological and behavioral impacts were substantial, with many women experiencing lowered self-esteem, frustration, and anger. However, these experiences also motivated some women to become activists and advocates, using social media to challenge and redefine these stereotypes. The strategies employed to counter gender stereotypes ranged from passive approaches, such as ignoring harmful content or conforming to norms, to more proactive measures, including using humor to critique stereotypes, blocking toxic users, befitting responses, and engaging in online activism. Few respondents transformed the experience into a source of empowerment, fueling their efforts to challenge the status quo and promote gender equality.

Future research may focus on emerging platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat to identify new patterns, trends, and challenges in gender representation. It is crucial to investigate the impact of digital activism with a nuanced understanding of the complexities and strategies employed by gender experts and activists in combating gender stereotyping in digital spaces. This expanded focus will provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in the digital age and will inform policy makers to promote inclusivity and equality in online spaces.

References

- Abusalama, S. (2016). Women revolt: Between media resistance and the reinforcement of oppressive gender structures.
- Aksar, I. A., & Firdaus, A. (2021). Impacts of social media on women's psychological wellbeing in a Patriarchal culture. *Higher Education and Oriental Studies*, 1(4).
- American Psychological Association. (2022). Gender stereotype. In APA Dictionary of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/gender-stereotype>
- Ariani, R. T. (2013). Gender stereotypes and reinforcement of patriarchy in the reality show Pilik-Pilih Mantu. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 2(1), 1-15.
- Boneva, B., Kraut, R., & Frohlich, D. (2003). Using e-mail for personal relationships. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(3), 530–549.
- Citron, D. K. (2014). Hate crimes in cyberspace. Harvard University Press.
- Dasgupta, D. (2018). Gender portrayal in the age of social networking sites: An analytical discussion. *Amity Journal of Media & Communications Studies (AJMCS)*, 8(1), 1-10.
- Demirhan, K., & Çakır-Demirhan, D. (2015). Gender and politics: Patriarchal discourse on social media. *Public Relations Review*, 41(2), 308-310.
- Eriyanto. (2001). Analisis wacana: Pengantar analisis teks media. LKiS Yogyakarta.
- Felmlee, D., Inara Rodis, P., & Zhang, A. (2020). Sexist slurs: Reinforcing feminine stereotypes online. *Sex roles*, 83(1), 16-28.
- Felmlee, D., Rodis, P. I., & Francisco, S. C. (2018). What a B! tch!: Cyber aggression toward women of color. In *Gender and the media: Women's places* (pp. 105-123). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Fouzia, Y., Mustafa, N., & Mustafa, M. (2020). Patriarchy and social media: Women-only Facebook groups as safe spaces for support seeking in Pakistan.
- Frison, E., & Eggermont, S. (2016). Exploring the relationships between different types of Facebook use, perceived online social support, and adolescents' depressed mood. *Social Science Computer Review*, 34(2), 153–171.
- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *The Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 173–199.
- Ghaffari, S. (2022). Discourses of celebrities on Instagram: Digital femininity, self-representation, and hate speech. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 19(2), 161-178.
- Gill, M. J. (2004). When information does not deter stereotyping: Prescriptive stereotyping can foster bias under conditions that deter descriptive stereotyping. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(5), 619–632.
- Guo, X. (2022). Identifying different types of gender stereotypes displayed by social media. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1, 1-5.
- Haider, S., & Malik, A. A. (2020). Facebook as a gender inclusive public space: perspectives from

female users in Pakistan.

- Hamid, B. A., Ismail, H., & Shamsuddin, C. M. (2018). Haters will hate, but how? The language of body shaming cyberbullies in Instagram. In T. K. Hua (Ed.), *Stop cyberbullying* (pp. 80–102). Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Hancock, J. T., & Toma, C. L. (2009). Putting your best face forward: The accuracy of online dating photographs. *Journal of Communication*, 59, 367–386.
- Harris, D. (2008). Celebrity bodies. *Southwest Review*, 193(1), 135–145.
- Hentges, B., & Case, K. (2013). Gender representations on Disney Channel, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon broadcasts in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, 7(3), 319–333.
- Hussain, S., Zhou, R., Siddiquei, A. N., Anwar, M. A., & Asmi, F. (2023). Why women avoid sexting: Mediating role of depression and guilt. *Current Psychology*, 42(17), 14132–14146.
- Idemudia, E. C., Raisinghani, M. S., & Adeola, O. (2017, August). The effects of gender on social media adoption: An empirical investigation. In *Proceedings of the Twenty-Third Americas Conference on Information Systems*.
- Imbuwa, M. (2021). Portrayal of women through Zambian memes. *Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 32–51.
- Keller, J. (2015). *Girls' feminist blogging in a postfeminist age*. Routledge.
- Koenig, A. M., Eagly, A. H., Mitchell, A. A., & Ristikari, T. (2011). Are leader stereotypes masculine? A meta-analysis of three research paradigms. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137(4), 616–642.
- Kumar, S. (2020). 'Social distancing' before COVID-19: Interrogating the universalization of caste-based discrimination and its horizontality in race. *Social Science Research Network*.
- Lauzen, M. M., Dozier, D. M., & Horan, N. (2008). Constructing gender stereotypes through social roles in prime-time television. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52(2), 200–214.
- Masse, M. A., & Rosenblum, K. (1988). Male and female created they them: The depiction of gender in the advertising of traditional women's and men's magazines. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 11(2), 127–144.
- Oberst, U., Renau, V., Chamarro, A., & Carbonell, X. (2016). Gender stereotypes in Facebook profiles: Are women more female online? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 60, 559–564.
- Ouvrein, G., Hallam, L., De Backer, C. J. S., & Vandebosch, H. (2021). Bashed at first sight: The experiences and coping strategies of reality-TV stars confronted with celebrity bashing. *Celebrity Studies*, 12(3), 389–406.
- Pramaskara, T. E. (2022). Social media affordances: Instagram content as a means to perpetuate gender stereotification. *PERSPEKTIF*, 11(3), 866–877.
- Prentice, D. A., & Carranza, E. (2002). What women and men should be, shouldn't be, are allowed to be, and don't have to be: The contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(4), 269–281.
- Rehman, M., Irem, K., & Ilyas, M. (2014). Social media: A prospective or a dilemma the case of Pakistan. *International Journal of Management Research and Emerging Sciences*, 4(1), 1–12.
- Rizwan, S. (2017). From 'whore' to 'son of the soil': The socio-cognitive representation of 'powerful' women on Pakistani social media. *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan*, 24(1), Page Numbers.
- Rose, J., Mackey-Kallis, S., Shyles, L., Barry, K., Biagini, D., Hart, C., & Jack, L. (2012). *Face it: The*

- impact of gender on social media images. *Communication Quarterly*, 60(5), 588-607.
- Rousseau, A., & Eggermont, S. (2018). Television and preadolescents' objectified dating script: Consequences for self- and interpersonal objectification. *Mass Communication and Society*, 21(1), 71–93.
- Rudman, L. A., Moss-Racusin, C. A., Phelan, J. E., & Nauts, S. (2012). Status incongruity and backlash effects: Defending the gender hierarchy motivates prejudice against female leaders. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(1), 165–179.
- Sainz-De-Baranda, C., Adá-Lameiras, A., & Blanco-Ruiz, M. (2020). Gender differences in sports news coverage on Twitter. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(5199)
- Sambasivan, N., Checkley, G., Batool, A., Ahmed, N., Nemer, D., Gaytan-Lugo, L., Matthews, T., Consolvo, S., & Churchill, E. (2018). "Privacy is not for me, it's for those rich women": Performative privacy practices on mobile phones by women in South Asia. *Proceedings of the 2018 Symposium on Usable Privacy and Security (SOUPS 2018)*.
- Sant, T. (2008). Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks, Theresa M. Senft (2008). *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 4(2-3), 189-193.
- Santonnicolo, F., Trombetta, T., Paradiso, M. N., & Rollè, L. (2023). Gender and media representations: A review of the literature on gender stereotypes, objectification, and sexualization. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(10), 5770.
- Shifman, L., & Lemish, D. (2011). "Mars and Venus" in virtual space: Post-feminist humor and the Internet. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 28(3), 253–273.
- Stephen, C. A., & Nithya, N. (2020). A study on the impact of the me-too movement with special reference to Bangalore city-the true story unveiled. *International Journal of Management (IJM)*, 11(2).
- Sue, A. B. (2018). Reinforcing sexism and misogyny: Social media, symbolic violence and the construction of femininity-as-fail. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(3), 16-31.
- Tartaglia, S., & Rollero, C. (2015). Gender stereotyping in newspaper advertisements: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 46(11), 1103–1109.
- Ullah, H., & Naseer, H. (2014). The objectification of women in television advertisements in Pakistan. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(2), 26–35.
- Vandenbosch, L., Fardouly, J., & Tiggemann, M. (2022). Social media and body image: Recent trends and future directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45, 101289.
- Zia, A. (2007). Media and gender: Pakistani perspective. In 16th AMIC Annual Conference, June (pp. 25-28).