



## Connecting Language, Gender, Literacy and Facebook: A Case Study with Multilingual Teenagers in Pakistan

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### Abstract

*The aim of this research is to examine the interrelationship among language, gender, and literacy practices of multilingual youth on Facebook in Pakistan. The data, collected primarily through observations, comprised the participants' literacy practices on Facebook which was observed for three months. A convenience sampling technique was used for drawing the sample. Ten participants, five boys and five girls, participated in this research. Data analysis reveals that social media is widely used by young boys and girls to exhibit their gendered identity through language choices, content and purpose of using social media. The research is informed by recent research on the ethnography of digital literacy practices.*

**Key Words:** Language, Gender, Literacy, Social Media

### Introduction

The obsession of youth with internet and social media in today's world is widely acknowledged across the globe (Lenhart et al., 2010). Being active inhabitants of the modern digital 21<sup>st</sup> century, statistics reveal that up to 95% of teenagers use the internet and out of these, 80% are regular visitors of social networking websites including Facebook and Twitter (Lenhart et al., 2011). By 2014, Facebook is at the top of the most favorite and visited social network website (Duggan et al., 2015) with nearly "a billion monthly active users" (Facebook, 2013). Boyd and Ellison (2008: p.211) define social network sites in the light of its following characteristics which enables its users to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. So, Facebook serves as a platform where people communicate with others. It hosts different features which include creating a profile, posting pictures and videos, updating status and commenting on different posts/pictures and playing games (Zuckerberg, 2011).

Since time immemorial, men and women have remained a site of intrigue, exploration, and research. Researchers have long been investigating the similarities and differences between men and women across disciplines including, but not limited to, linguistics, psychology (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Junco, 2013), sociology (Hargittai, 2010), gender studies (Carstensen, 2009), anthropology and education (Koles & Nagy, 2012). Beginning with differentiating the terms *gender* and *sex*, in the Glossary of Gender-related Terms and Concepts developed by the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), *sex* "refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male", whereas, *gender* "is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time, and varies widely within and across cultures. Gender is relational and refers not simply to women or men but to the relationship between them." Eckert and McConnell differentiate between *gender* and *sex* by saying: "Sex is biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex" (2005: p.10). In contrast to *sex* which is predetermined and static in nature, *gender* is "a complex and diverse category rather than as a fixed and essential characteristic we each possess" (Jones, 2012: p.161).

We are always in the process of negotiating and displaying our gendered identities even through the mundane activities of everyday life (Suciu, 2007). In the last decade, social media have emerged as another

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interesting site where the users perform their gender in unique ways. Almjeld (2008: p.43) believes that “*parlors and bedrooms were once the sites of much gender identity construction, online spaces now provide opportunities for users to perform and craft gendered identities alone or within a community.*” Keeping in mind the communication and language differences/similarities which exist among men and women, the aim of this post-doctoral research is to examine either social media is proving to be yet another site of defining/ (re)defining gendered identities in relation with the language choices and literacy practices of young male and female multilingual teenagers who form the sample of this research. Rather than exploring the academic literacy practices of teaching, learning and assessment in the schools which are associated with English and Urdu, the out-of-school digital literacy practices of young multilingual teenagers will reveal their attitude and motivation behind preferring one language over the other.

## Literature Review

Facebook continues to inspire people belonging to different age groups in Pakistan. Among all, young teenagers are particularly fascinated by it as it is their favorite social networking website. The number of people joining Facebook is constantly on the rise as, according to statistics provided by Pakistan Advertiser’s Society (2014), there are 12.6 million Facebook users in Pakistan. Islamabad, with its 2.9 million users, is the third-largest city in Pakistan followed by Karachi and Lahore. Almost 50% of the users belong to the age group 18-34 with males (70%) and females (30%) users. The most ‘liked’ pages of Facebook users include telecom, fashion, beauty and food pages.

## Social Media, Language, Gender and Literacy: An Overview

The proliferation of researches conducted on social media reveals that media have long been playing a significant role in defining gender-based identities in today’s world (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Hermes, 2007). For men and women, social media have proved to be yet another site of exhibiting gender disparities. Researchers have identified that subtle differences exist when it comes to the usage of social media by men and women including time spent on social media websites (Brenner, 2012; Rideout et al., 2010; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012), the use of language (Guiller and Durndell, 2007), the reasons behind joining Facebook (Sheldon, 2008), purpose of using social media (Simpson & Stroh, 2004), the nature and expression of emotions (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005), the number of friends men and women have on Facebook (Acar, 2008), profile differences among teenage girls and boys (Manago et al. (2008), the prevalence of gender-based stereotypes on social media (Bailey et al., 2013), the differences between sharing information and privacy issues (Hoy and Milne, 2010), selection of profile pictures (Rose et al., 2012), the difference in Facebook activities (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), and exploring critical literacy practices on social media (Maranto and Barton, 2010; Coad, 2013; Patrick, 2013).

Researchers have documented that women spend much more time on Facebook as compared to men (Shepherd, 2014; Hoy & Milne, 2010; McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012) as women are “more likely to post photos, tag photos, view photos, comment on content, and post status updates” on Facebook (Junco, 2013: 2333). Similarly, the purpose of using Facebook varies among men and women as women tend to use Facebook as a place where they can create and maintain social relationships, whereas, men primarily aim for information-gathering (Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, & Schmitt, 2001). As compared to men, women are keen on sharing their pictures and personal information with their friends. When it comes to profile pictures, women pay a lot of attention while selecting their profile display pictures as it is considered to play a pivotal role in creating one’s identity in the world of social media as McAndrew and Jeong (2012) concluded that women are “*more likely to use profile pictures for impression management*” and “*engaged in more online family activity*” (p. 2359). Interestingly, men pay more attention to the profiles of others as compared to their own (Haferkamp et al., 2012). Differences lie in the nature of activities men and women are engaged in as social media users. Women’s activities are mostly social in nature where their motivation is to foster relationships by creating a positive self-image. The activities of men are mostly practical in nature such as reading newspapers etc. (Adrianson, 2001). This shows that men and women are poles apart in their approach to using social media.

The differences in communication patterns and language usage among men and women on social media are widely explored. When it comes to expressing one’s personal emotions, women use social media as a means of

expressing their personal feelings, likes and dislikes through status updates, and sharing pictures and videos. Men, on the other hand, are interested in sharing their opinions and viewpoints. Guiller and Durndell (2007) found out that evident differences exist among the usage of language by men and women as men's active, direct and strong use of language signals authority and dominance, whereas, women's neutral and passive language's aim is to support others through positive feedback. Kapidzic and Herring (2011) conducted a pragmatic analysis of five teenagers' language use in different chat rooms and concluded that boys' messages had a lot more directives as compared to girls.

Apart from basic communication differences, the choice and preference of language become a complex task in the digital literacy practices of multilingual users using social networking sites as they have to select one language over the other as Danet and Herring (2007: p.21) note, "... wherever multilingualism exists, language choice becomes an issue. Language choice online depends on the technological, socio-cultural, and political context."

## Theoretical Framework

The research is informed by New Literacy Studies (NLS) tradition and the ethnography of digital literacy practices which approaches literacy from a social perspective viewing literacy as closely intertwined within a particular socio-cultural context. Gee (2008: p.82) believes that "Literacy has ... indeed, no meaning apart from particular cultural contexts in which it is used." Literacy is not just a mere set of reading and writing skills; rather, it takes into account the "... multimodal and digital texts" (Walsh 2008: p.101). According to O'Brien and Scharber (2008: p.66-67), digital literacies are defined as, "socially situated practices supported by skills, strategies, and stances that enable the representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools."

## Profiles of Participants

Since the aim of this research is to report the digital literacy practices of teenagers residing in an urban area, the participants were selected from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. Ten participants, five boys and five girls from five families, participated in this research. Although the sample was selected through a convenience sample, a set of the strict criterion was employed for the selection of participants which was guided by the nature of this study. Among the criterion included the equal number of each gender (five boys and five girls); age (teenagers aged between 14-16 years); urban residents; middle-class families with access to the internet; Facebook users and multilingual with Punjabi as their first language. Punjabi multilingual speakers were selected to maintain uniformity of the first language among research participants since Islamabad is a host to people having different regional languages of Pakistan. Pseudonyms of participants have been used through this research in order to protect their identity. The pseudonyms of participants from each family are as follows:

S. No.	Family (F)	Male Participant	Age	Female participant	Age
1.	F1	Ahmad	16	Kiran	14
2.	F2	Sohail	15	Misbah	16
3.	F3	Rizwan	14	Mehak	15
4.	F4	Umar	15	Alia	14
5.	F5	Zaki	14	Sania	15

## Data Collection

The fieldwork took place from September – December 2018 which comprised weekly visits to the participants' homes. During the visits, we used to sit with the participants recording and observing their digital literacy practices. Going through their online *activity log*, a Facebook feature, enabled us to read their recent activities on Facebook which included status updates, commenting on their friends' posts, the images/videos they posted and the content they 'liked' and 'shared.' The collected data resulted in a log in which we carefully noted their activities on Facebook along with my personal observations and reflections. It was followed by semi-structured interviews that were conducted at the homes of participants.



AI: Stunning Kiro...

Kiran: Thank you smile emoticon smile emoticon

AW: MASHALLAH..Your hair is heart emoticon.. how are u soooo beautiful...!!!

MSN: So pretty Nimmo, MA!

Kiran: Mariam Saleem Nawaz: thanks...where have u been? kiss emoticon

SZ: Gorgeously gorgeous smile emoticon

AU: Pretty

MD: Pretty MA smile emoticon

AR: Masha Allah

MF: Wao is tis u..

Kiran: Obviously

HNR: Aap ki Haseen tasweer mein me abhi Dekhi hai MashAllah 😊

Kiran: Lol

ZT: MA

Kiran: Thank you! smile emoticon

SN: adorable!

Kiran: smile emoticon

In the above excerpts, it is evident that the male participants used more strong and direct language as compared to females. Females, while commenting, rely on positive adjectives and interrogative, whereas, boys focus more on making fun by using direct, assertive and strong language.

Another common theme discussed among the participants was the weather. All of them loved to update their status in different weather conditions revealing their feelings and emotions. Since the fieldwork has coincided with the onset of long-awaited winter in Islamabad, all the participants shared their joy at the arrival of winter by posting status updates and pictures. The following excerpt deals with the theme of weather:

Zaki's status:

Now I can drink my tea right after pouring it into a cup. #WelcomeWinter.

MN: Really...!!! Hahahahaha

MK: Bahar hawa chalti nhi or status start xD

RZ: Haha

SK: Draaaamay...

Rania updates her status as follows:

#rain a #blessing #Islamabad #Pakistan

UA: aj dobara hui?

Rania: Aisi waisi 😊

UA: hahaha ksme?

Rania: 😊؟ تے ہور؟

UA: hahaahahaha koi gaal nae Allah ithy v desi.

ZW: Was it raining today?

Rania: Yes! Around 5:00 a.m. :)

RA: Wow mn b ajaun??:-)

Rania: Most welcome! grin emoticon

AB: Lucky you

Rania: Let's go to Kalabagh!

RA: oka im cmng:)

Rania: 😊

Their everyday status updates reveal the diversity in their activities and the way they are presented. For example, boys' updates are mostly related to sports and other extracurricular activities, whereas, girls' normally status updates are related to cooking in which they share all the details of a new recipe/dessert they made and post the pictures of their dishes. For example, Kiran updates her status by posting the following picture:



Her friends' comments and the conversation among them go as follows:

#chocolate #tart

ZW: Start taking classes

Kiran: Hahaha good idea wink emoticon

Kiran: Tum ao gi? tongue emoticon

ZW: Definitelyyyyyy ! I am serious. You can do it.

Kiran: Bas sai hai i'll think about this on a serious note and then you help me organise it. grin emoticon

AB: Excellent

Kiran: come then i'll make it again

NH: Na chaair malangaan nu!!

Kiran: Hahaha abhi tou half chaira hai wink emoticon tongue emoticon

NH: Haha...lovvvvveeeellllyyy

Kiran: grin emoticon

TM: Yummmmmmmmm

Kiran: Lala grin emoticon

MB: I have an exam tomorrow. I NEED this right now

Kiran: Hahahah aww manumm januuuu. Goodluck 😊

MA: Thank youuu

NH: Kiran.. poor kid asked for the pie...not ur smooch n wish!

Kiran: Kid se wada hai aye hi tou banaungi

Umar posted a picture of himself playing football to which his friends respond:

AN: Umar in action grin emoticon

ST: When was this?

Umar: wednesday that was 4th sep 2015

NAK: Picture credits??

Umar: goes to AK

AZ: iqbal house is in finals

Umar: yeah it is

RA: My Ranaldoo... come on

When it comes to language choices, it is evident from the above excerpts that girls were seen using English and Urdu which are considered to be more prestigious and formal as compared to any other language, whereas, boys

used English, Urdu and a little bit of Punjabi in their digital literacy practices as well. The purpose of using a particular language differs as the Punjabi language is mostly used when the aim was to share a joke or to make fun of anyone.

### Gender Representation

It is interestingly noticed that social media has become another platform for young people to enact their gendered identity. The differences in the nature of their Facebook activities including language usage, status updates, comments, likes, use of emoticons, profile pictures, content, reveal that boys and girls are poles apart in the world of social media. Since there is a very close relationship between language usage and identity construction, which, ultimately, leads to create and maintain one's gendered identity as Coates (2004: p.7) believe that, "*what has changed is linguists' sense that gender is not a static, add-on characteristic of speakers, but something that is accomplished in talk every time we speak.*" The analysis of the collected data reveals that the major differences exist between the language preferences of boys and girls as, being multilingual, they have the freedom to select their medium of communication. As girls tend to prefer a language which is considered standard, refined and prestigious owing largely to the social status explanation and women's role as guardian of society's values (Holmes, 2013), they are assumed to be *polite* and *well-behaved* as compared to boys, thus, selecting English and Urdu as compared to their first language, Punjabi. Boys, on the other hand, used all the three languages but most of their social media communication was conducted in English and Urdu. Looking closely at the Pakistani society reveals that the English language is at the top of the linguistic hierarchy as it is seen as a token of prestige and superiority in society. People prefer their children to be educated in English-medium schools to make them fluent English speakers. Urdu, on the other hand, is the national language and lingua franca of Pakistan which is a common medium of communication among the people. It is widely spoken and understood across the country and is considered to be the language of the educated, hard-working middle class. Punjabi language, a major regional language of Pakistan, is stigmatized as the language of poor, uneducated people. These different ideologies associated with particular languages seem to determine the language choices of my participants who were seen making extensive use of English and Urdu as compared to Punjabi.

The masculine trend towards sports, cars, video games and movies (Doering, 2002) was evident in the posts of boys. The content of my participants' posts reveals that girls talked about the feminine stuff such as feelings, personal likes/dislikes, nature, weather, beauty more as compared to boys who talked about academic and non-academic, extracurricular activities (Sveningsson Elm, 2007) which is clear from the above-mentioned excerpts.

### Conclusion

The findings of this research endorse the existing researches (Ringrose, 2011) which claims that social media yet again proved to be another platform where boys and girls exhibit their stereotypical self through their language choices, content and the purpose of using social media. In terms of language choices, girls prefer to use English as compared to any other language in an attempt to project their refined self-image, whereas boys adopt a multilingual approach in their language choices while updating their online status or commenting as they are much more concerned about what they say rather than their language choice. The social media content serves as another differential point between the two genders where girls discuss everyday life activities such as cooking, fashion, etc. more as compared to boys. Following the same pattern as in language choices and content, the purpose of using social media of girls is to create and maintain interpersonal relationships whereas boys use social media primarily for sharing their achievements (academic/non-academic) enforcing their male gender identity.

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