



## Abstract

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<b>Article:</b>	<b>Social Media and Construction of Beliefs: Perceptions of Youth Regarding Role of Social Networking Sites (SNS) in Creating Gender Stereotypes</b>
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## **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the perceptions regarding role of social networking sites (SNS) in construction of beliefs about gender stereotypes by focusing on how gender is perceived among social media users. Further it explores how youth present and project themselves in terms of gender attributes on social networking sites. Current research is exploratory in nature and employed In-depth-interview as research method. The sample comprised of youth selected through purposive sampling procedure. The measures for collecting data encompassed a face sheet including demographic details and interview protocol was also developed. The findings revealed that there are diverse perceptions regarding gender stereotypes among SNS users. Perceptions regarding gender stereotypes and their self-presentations on SNS revealed that men are considered as dominating and authoritative while women are considered as emotional. SNS are constructing and reshaping gender stereotypes among users where males present themselves as charming and powerful whereas female users having beauty craze as a vibrant trait of their personality. Mostly youngsters are busy in their self praise and have become their own role models.

**Key words:** *Social networking sites, Construction of beliefs, Gender stereotypes, Perceptions*

## Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) have been attaining enormous popularity among Pakistani youth mostly because of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram ('*State of social media*', 2016). Social networking sites provide a platform to youth to share their views and opinions about gender and gender related phenomena. SNS have a pivotal role in creating beliefs about gender stereotypes, and SNS users hold different views regarding gender and gender roles that prevail in our society. According to Correa (2011) institutional settings play important role in the gender regime like school, family, work place electronic media and social networking sites, where social practices are urged as gender structured. Awareness, exposure, education and other societal factors influence the individual in perpetuating the existing stereotypes towards both genders which eventually harm the advancement in connection with gender biasness in their careers (Mirza & Jabeen, 2011). In addition, the growth of cyberspace provides certain alternate channel to express and share opinions about social issues on internet. These online platforms transform the way of exchanging and sharing information leaving traditional means of communication aside by providing several kind of platform which is better called as virtual public sphere (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Herring and Kapidzic (2015) narrates that boys and girls present themselves through SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs and chat rooms. The findings demonstrate that profile construction, profile visibility and truthfulness are the ways through which self-presentations are generated in relation to their gender. Drakett, Rickett, Day & Milnes (2018) claimed that new repetition of heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity in online sexism, embedded in "sarcasm" and "playful", functions to police, adjust and generate equitable inhabitants and vendors of such spaces. Baruah (2012) states that arise of social networking sites give a new dimension to the mass communication. Communication finds new technological ways to enhance its reach and boundaries. SNS makes the process of communication i.e. transfer of text, photos, audio,

video, and all kind of information very efficient, quick and cast effective (p.9). Whereas, traditional media does not allow interaction and sharing of ideas with such flexibility as provided by social media. There are several social networking websites like twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn where online communities can share and interact virtually (Manno & Shahrabi, 2010). This interaction leads to the free flow and sharing of views and beliefs as there is no such phenomenon like gate keeping etc. Hence relatively huge amount of information travelled on SNS as compared to traditional media. According to Joosten (2012) SNS are virtual places where people share; everybody and anybody can share anything anywhere anytime. Wanta and Dimitrova (2000) studied about the dynamics of online chat rooms, and the work of Woong Yun and Park (2011) provided a strong contribution to anonymity of social media user. Scholars have also offered a comparison of offline and online applications. Nguyen, McDonald, Nguyen & McCauley (2020) revealed that the members practiced numerous self-presentation practices containing a best advert, ability and an affirmative appearance. Gurrieri & Drenten (2019) coined that body-related hashtags converse canons of beauty and body ideals, presenting perceptions into the means in which cultural thoughts of the body are erected in social networking sites.

Particularly talking about gender and gender stereotypes, according to social scientists' gender is a social construct, it is not something that we are born with, and not something that we have, but something we do (West and Zimmerman ,1987 cited in Eckert & Sally, 2013). Whereas, gender stereotype refers to convictions about the psychological qualities and attributes of, and also the actions suitable to men or women. These are attitudes and beliefs about masculinity and femininity. Stereotypes affect the conceptualizations of women and men and form social classifications for gender. These classifications depict what people consider and even when convictions differ from reality, the convictions can be so influential powers in judgments of self and others (Begley & Sharon, 2000). Stereotypical

representations of girls as sexualized stuffs pursuing male responsiveness are normally found in social networking sites.(Bailey, Steeves, Burkell & Regan, 2013). Internet is the communication medium of new century (Aktas, Akyol, Kartal & Gürel, 2014). Social scientist Gragomir and Otilia highlight gender stereotype as (a system built on beliefs and consensual opinions regarding woman and man characteristics, along with assumed qualities of masculinity and femininity, having a descriptive and prescriptive character (Rapeance, 2014).

### **Aim of Research**

It attempts to know the role of social networking sites in construction of beliefs by focusing on the perceptions of youth regarding gender stereotypes. The study also attempts to understand how youth is presenting and projecting themselves in terms of gender attributes.

### **Research Questions**

This exploratory study primarily focuses on the following questions

1. What are the perceptions of users of social networking sites regarding masculinity or femininity?
2. What role do social networking sites play in constructions of beliefs regarding gender stereotypes among its users?
3. How youth presents themselves on social networking sites with regard to gender attributes?
4. What are the major stereotypes associated with both genders on social networking sites?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

Current research is exploratory in nature and employed *In-depth-interview* as method. Semi structured format was followed and interview guide was prepared. The *population* of

the study comprised of youth of Lahore. The proportionate sample of fourteen (N=14) respondents (both males and females) was chosen through *purposive sampling* method. The *inclusion criteria* of the subjects were aged between 18 to 24, minimum education as intermediate level (12 years) and active social media users studying in private universities.

### **Measures and procedures**

For making variables operational, and determining the relationships of different concepts, data was collected through face sheet including demographic details. An interview protocol was developed to get complete information regarding the research topic. Furthermore, an informed consent Performa was designed to formally introduce the issue and to get consent of the participants. Respondents were accessed and ensured about confidentiality of information. The average time for the interview was 45- 90 minutes. The interview was managed by one to one. An interview protocol was developed which included demographic details, perceptions of youth about gender and gender stereotypes, self-presentation youth on SNS, materialistic approach of youth on SNS, and positive or negative perceptions regarding gender on SNS.

### **Results**

In the sample of the current study equal representation was given to boys and girls(Table1). The age limit for the present study is 18-24 years. Majority of respondents (57%) belong to 18-20 years of age and 43% students are of age between 21-24 years. Whereas, 14.0% respondents' education is level is 12-14 years (under graduation), education level of 43.0% respondents is 14-16 years (graduate), while 43.0% respondents' education level is 16-18 years (post-graduate). All the participants are unmarried and currently residing in Lahore.

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics**

Variable	Frequency	Valid Percentage
<b>Age of Respondent (18 – 24 years)</b>		
18 – 20 years	8	57.0%
21 – 24 years	6	43.0%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	7	50.0%
Female	7	50.0%
<b>Education</b>		
Undergraduate	6	43%
Graduate	6	43%
Post Graduate	2	14%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Unmarried	14	100%

Respondents were interviewed and categories were developed inductively and themes were derived (Table 2 and figure 1&2). It is evident from the findings that men is generally perceived macho, sophisticated, dominating and authoritative. A macho man is considered as an educated man having angry looks, average moustaches on face. Imperious voice, tanned muscular body with stiffed dressing. Whereas, both boys and girls associate sophistication with a man, only he has a mature personality, respectful towards others and confidently perform different tasks. Moreover, his handsome looks, light shave on face, short silky hair and formal dressing are some other brightening features of his personality. Participants believe that a man holds a dominant personality because of his political hegemony, physical strength and financial stability. lastly, man in our society is considered authoritative because he is an earning hand and he is not dependent on others and that's why he cannot be easily influenced.

On the other hand, perceptions about women encloses the traits of femaleness, for example, an educated, confident woman must be good looking with attractive facial expressions and striking features. She speaks courageously and cover her body parts decently, moreover, she carries a stylish and sophisticated personality. Likewise, she is dependent to

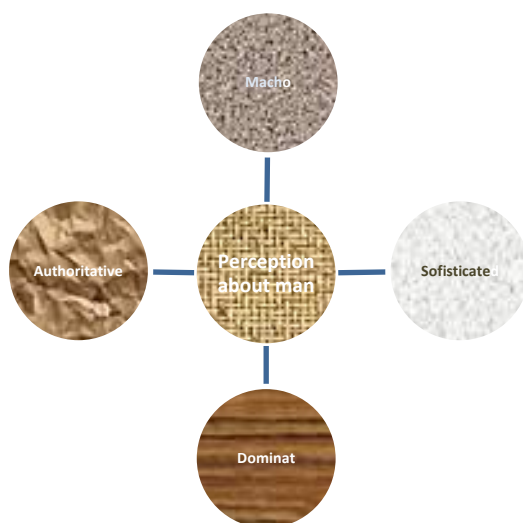
man because she is financially instable, most of time she stays at home, physically she is weak and cannot perform hard tasks as a man can do. A woman has the tendency to easily adjust her in different roles. She has the ability to perform different roles and duties of a mother, sister, house wife, sister and working lady simultaneously.

**Table 2: Inductively Developed Thematic Categories regarding gender stereotypes**

Category	Themes	Key Terms
<b>Perception about men</b>	Masculinity	Educated, angry looks average moustaches, imperious voice, muscular physique, tanned complexion, short hair, tall height and wears stiffed shalwar qameez (trousers and shirt).
	Sophisticated	Mature, educated, respectful, confident, handsome, light shave, smooth short hair, formal dressing (suits),
	Dominant personality	Physically strong, political hegemony, financially stable. Family custodian,
	Authoritative	Breadwinner, independent, not easily influenced and family custodian.
<b>Perception about women</b>	Femininity	Educated, confident, beautiful, clear skin, delicate, courageous way of speaking, Fair complexion, big eyes, long hair, normal height, decent and simple dressing that cover full body parts (face, hands and feet).
	Stylish and Sophisticated	Cultured, maintain individuality, graceful, shy light makeup, look like a fairy, modern, physically fit, neat and clean.
	Dependent	Financially reliant on other, house lady, physically weak, home oriented.  Easily adjust in different roles like, mother, sister, house wife, sister and working lady.
	Adjustable	



**Figure 1: Thematic categories regarding gender Stereotypes (Men)**



**Figure 2: Thematic categories perception about gender stereotypes (Women)**



Further findings demonstrate the self-presentation of youth on SNS. Table 4 (figure 3) shows the boys and girls self-presentations on SNS in terms gender attributes with reference to visual self-presentation, truthfulness of self-presentation and textual interaction. In visual self-presentation boys post his pictures of self-projection whereas girls post her pictures in which she looks cute. Both boys and girls present them most attractive human beings but men present themselves as not only attractive but strong as well. Moreover, in effort to presenting best of best both boys and girls have become commodity and providing fabricated and false

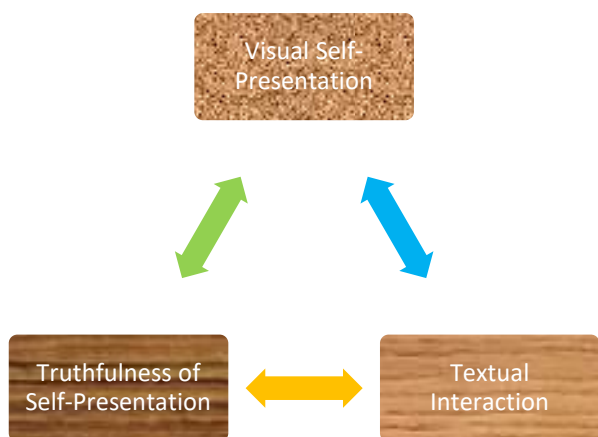
information on their profiles just to gain attention and get more likes. Showing off is another characteristic of boys as what they eat, what they buy, where they go, they share on SNS. But even than Boys like to present their more powerful image and girls like to present their more and more beautiful image. Boys present them well-mannered and girls portray them as kind and crazy.

**Table 3: Inductively Developed Thematic Categories regarding self-presentation of youth regarding gender attributes on SNS**

Category	Themes	Key Terms
<b>Boys self-presentation on SNS</b>	Visual self-presentation	Self-projection, attractive, dashing, strong man, self-commodification, well dressed.
	Truthfulness of self-presentation	Fabricated information, lie about age, more macho image, try to impress others. Show themselves well mannered, show off.
	Textual interaction	Authoritative language, taunting way, aggressive tone, flirtatious, expert of all fields.
<b>Girls self-presentation on SNS</b>	Visual self-presentation	Cute, attractive, extra beautiful, decent, self-commodification, stylish dressing.
	Truthfulness of self-presentation	False information, lie about age, impression of more beautiful, smart, kind, crazy.
	Textual interaction	Formal language, reactive, emotional way, positive tone.

During textual communication and interaction boys use authoritative language and girls use formal language. On controversial issues, boys become taunting and girls turn to be reactive. Boys usually use aggressive tone and girls act in positive way. Lastly, boys use more flirtatious language as compare to girls, however girls behave in more emotional way.

**Figure 3: Thematic Categories of self-presentation of youth regarding gender attributes on SNS**



## Discussion and Analysis

Present study was designed to know the perceptions regarding the role of social networking sites in creating gender stereotypes. Every culture and society has its own perceptions of gender attributes and gender stereotypes. To social scientists, the term "gender" refers to the socially constructed differences between men and women. Since gender is socially constructed (as opposed to being a biological fact the way sex is) gender construction is the process of creating the gender differences that exist in a society. SNS users' perceptions about men and women vary in different ways. These findings are in accordance with the study of Lorber and Farrell (1991) which also emphasizes that individuals differ in their perception about gender construction. Findings of current study revealed that SNS users perceive men and women in stereotypical ways. Men are usually perceived as macho, sophisticated, dominating and authoritative. A macho man is considered as an educated man having angry looks, average moustaches on face. Imperious voice, tanned skin, muscular body and stiffed traditional dressing. Both boys and girls associated sophistication with men, who have mature personality and confident in performing different duties. And his handsome looks, light shave on face, short silky hair and formal dressing are an addition to make him more suitable in Pakistani society. Macho and sophisticated are two dominating

features of a Pakistani man. Similarly, boys' self-presentations on SNS show that a man always project him as strong and dominated, and he likes to show his hegemony over others. In Pakistan, men are dominant in every field whether its politics, economy or social strength, man are dominating everywhere. Authoritative behavior is another powerful stereotypical trait of Pakistani man because he is an earning hand, he not only financially supports his family but he contributes to this society as well. Because of these reasons, he believes that he cannot be easily influenced.

On the other hand, a woman encompasses the traits of femininity as educated and must be confident. She must be beautiful with attractive facial expressions and striking features. She speaks courageously and cover her body parts decently. Moreover, she carries a stylish and sophisticated personality. In our society women are still considered dependents. Women are perceived as physically weak. In addition, women are considered to stay at home and her duty and responsibility is to facilitate her family. One of the best traits perceived about women is their adjusting quality as to mold themselves in different roles. Women are performing different roles and duties of a mother, sister, house wife, sister and working lady simultaneously. There are some other stereotypes like, intelligence, daring, boldness, firm, well mannered, emotionally stable, polite and decent are also associated with women and characteristics like brave, intelligence, loyalty, honesty, leadership and decision making are associated with men. These stereotypes to some extent differ with Basow (1992) who defined stereotypes.

Further findings explained certain difference between the perception about gender stereotypes and self-presentation of boys and girls on SNS. Self-presentation on SNS happens through social media profiles. Many SNS permit users to create a profile and visually display acquaintances to their social network (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) . The findings of the current study reveal that self-presentation through profile and profile picture play a significant role in

self-projection of boys. Boys always want to present them as authoritative but having personality of a prince charming whereas, girls portray them as decent and cute. Both boys and girls present them as most attractive human beings. Girls present them cutest girl and boys also show them most handsome, good-looking and charming guy these findings gives answer to RQ 2 that no doubt SNS play a signification role in creating gender stereotypes. Boys want to present them as handsome macho. Moreover, in effort to present themselves best of the best both boys and girls have made themselves commodity and intentionally or unintentionally. In addition, providing fabricated and false information on their profile just to gain attention is also common, boys are more liar than girls. They like to show off and exaggerate their personality but each and everything they or just see. Boys present their more macho image and girls present their more and more beautiful image. Boys present themselves well-mannered and sophisticated through profile pictures. These findings provide sufficient answer for RQ 3. Earlier Bandura (1986) considers manners of thinking and recognizes the part that they play in choosing if a behavior is to be imitated or not. Thusly, this social cognitive theory gives a more exhaustive clarification of human learning by perceiving the part of mediational procedures (cited in McLeod, 2016).

Undoubtedly SNS is a platform that provide space to everyone to express his or her feelings, thoughts, behaviors and opinions that sometimes may not possible in reality. SNS are easy way to get quick and first-hand information, guidance about different social issues and awareness about rights and suggestion about any phenomenon. Moreover, SNS are very helpful in reducing conspiracies regarding gender and provide equal opportunity to males and female users to express their views. But some negative aspects of SNS also exist in our society, as social cognitive theory argues that social behaviors are learned through direct along with vicarious observation (Bandura, 2001) and SNS are developing new kind of streotypes like boys belive in making virtual relations more than girls and if particularly

talikg about girls, they try to give possitive and attractive picture of her personality and think craziness a vibrant trait of their personality. Mostly,Youngsters are busy in their self praise and have become their own role models.

Other findings show that, boys are expected to use more authoritative language and reply negatively in textual communications and interactions, while girls support others in positive and emotional way. These findings are consistent with the findings of Herring (1993) who also reported the authoritative use of language by boys and emotional, supportive and explicit behavior of girls in textual communications. During textual communication and interaction boys use authoritative language and girls use formal language. On controversial issues, boys become harsh and start criticizing but in such situations girls turn to be reactive and start argumentation. Boys usually get aggressive tone and girls try to remain positive in textual communications. Lastly, boys use more flirtatious language as compare to girls, they try to trap girls through semiotic appeals. However, girls behave in more emotional way more than boys and use emoticon to express her feelings. These finding provided sufficient answer for RQ4. The social media is creating and reshaping the beliefs among its users. As *social cognitive theory* (Bandura, 2001)suggests that most social behaviors are learned through direct along with vicarious observation, for example interaction to social networking sites. The *Cultivation analysis* by Geroge Gerbner also determined the role of long term exposure of media to construction of beleifs among its user. This study extends the implications of both theories (Cultivation theory and Social cognitive theory) to use of social media and construction of beleifs and perceptions regading gender streotypes.

## **Conclusion**

Masculinity and femininity are socially constructed beliefs and it differs society to society and culture to culture. This study concludes that men and women, apart from the biological differences, are associates and perceived with certain attributes and roles. The

stereotypical perceptions about women in our society are characterized with stylish, sophistication and their easy adjustment in different roles with dependency on man whereas the perceptions about men are quite different from women. Social media is giving a platform to youth to represent and project themselves and in this way constructs the beliefs and shapes the perceptions of its users. The use of social networking sites is playing a part in creating the perceptions and beliefs of its users regarding gender stereotypes.

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