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Digital Spaces and the Shifting Paradigm of Women's Persona: A Case Study of Qandeel Baloch's Online Image

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores into the complex dynamics surrounding the representation of women's persona in the digital age, particularly within the realms of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, and online comments. Through a comprehensive analysis of the online images of Qandeel Baloch, a prominent figure in the online sphere, this was investigated that the ways in which these images are appropriated and manipulated. This study is firmly rooted in a gender perspective, enabling to contextualize the objectification of these images within the broader discussions of masking, the gaze, and power structures within society. By examining the digital spaces where women's identities are crafted and shared, further this paper sheds light on the evolving landscape of women's persona representation, offering insights into the complexities of their portrayal and the societal implications therein. This study is firmly grounded in a gender-oriented perspective, underscoring the significant role of gender dynamics in shaping these online representations. In doing so, the research endeavors to provide a contextual understanding of how these images are objectified and the broader consequences of this objectification, particularly in the context of concealing one's true self, the act of observing, and societal power structures. The study is particularly concerned with how these digital spaces serve as the arena for crafting and sharing women's identities, thereby shedding light on the continuously evolving landscape of women's identity representation.

| **Keywords:** | Facebook, Gender, Twitter, Visual Image, Women's Agency |

Introduction

Qandeel Baloch her family name was Fauzia Azeem, born on March 1, 1990, in Dera Ghazi Khan District, Punjab, Pakistan, belonged to the Baloch family and became a prominent Pakistani figure, drawing significant attention and controversy through her bold and outspoken online presence. Sadly, she met a tragic end on July 15, 2016, at the young age of 26. Qandeel Baloch rose to fame in Pakistan due to her audacious and unconventional behavior exhibited on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Her posts often included selfies, videos, and statements that challenged the established norms and expectations prevalent in a conservative society. Her unwavering and unapologetic stance towards her choices, along with her vocal advocacy for women's rights and gender equality, rendered her divisive yet empowering figure to many. However, her ascent to notoriety came hand in hand with controversy, as she encountered criticism and threats from conservative factions within Pakistan. Tragically, she met her demise in a widely condemned honor killing, allegedly at the hands of her own brother in the name of family honor. This heartbreaking incident triggered a nationwide discourse on topics related to gender, patriarchy, and violence against women in Pakistan.

Qandeel Baloch's life and the tragic circumstances surrounding her death serve as a poignant symbol of the intricate and often perilous challenges that confront women in conservative societies when they dare to challenge societal norms and expectations. Her story persists as a subject of discussion and contemplation concerning women's rights, empowerment, and the urgent need for transformative social change.

A cursory look at the literature on visual images gives us the idea that visual images play a significant role in shaping our opinion in this time and age. Hence if the scholars of visual images term this age as a pictorial age, it will not be a surprise, not at least to many us who are accustomed to touch screens of their cell phones, digital world, and the onslaught of social media. This is the age truly represented through images. However, no picture or image is a standalone artifact, cut off from its surroundings, the cognitive understanding about the image on a personal and collective basis and through social process, through which people comprehend images. We do through constantly interpreting images. The study of visuals is grounded in the postmodernism (Marshall, 2007).

Visuals are thus associated with the cultural connotations, and cannot be seen in disassociation of the culture where it is produced. It is further supported through the other theories, such as the semiotic theory, which representation of visuals into texts, for their understanding. The visual is therefore needed to be studied in the cultural-linguistic style. In order to the perceive the image, we need the cognitive perspective to perceive the image. The power of visual can be realized by the fact that the thinking process is done in a particular medium. Be it a form of art in the form of sketch work, painting, photograph, video, film and digital image. Thinking in the realm of visual is therefore done in form, structure; thinking in the linguistics on the other hand depends on words, sentences, etc. Furthermore, a visual experience could be entirely different than a linguistic experience, due to vision-sensory elements involved in the visual. It is also interesting to see how images help in understanding about the culture and how power relations are portrayed through the images (Sokal, 2008). The term 'visual image' pertains to the visual perception. It also describes the image in the visual system. We will consider this nominal and synoptic definition of visual image, for this research. Wherever the term image is used, it means the visual image, otherwise specified.

Literature Review

The rapid expansion of digital technology and the internet has heralded a new era in communication and self-expression. Within this digital realm, social media platforms have emerged as potent tools for individuals to shape and present their identities. This review of literature delves into the evolving role of digital spaces in molding the image of women, with a specific focus on the case of Qandeel Baloch. She was a Pakistani social media sensation who challenged conventional norms through her provocative online presence.

The digital age has provided unprecedented opportunities for women to assert their autonomy and question societal conventions. Women globally are utilizing social media to share their viewpoints, narratives, and life experiences. Research has demonstrated that online platforms can serve as arenas of empowerment, enabling women to actively engage in public discourse, advocacy, and self-expression (Senft & Baym, 2015).

Qandeel Baloch, originally named Fauzia Azeem, gained prominence as a Pakistani social media figure renowned for her daring and unconventional online demeanor. Her activities on platforms like Facebook and Twitter contested traditional norms, evoking both admiration and outrage. Baloch's online persona epitomized the intricate interplay between empowerment, controversy, and the backlash that women often face in digital spheres (Hussain & Abbas, 2018).

Baloch meticulously curated her online persona, incorporating elements of empowerment and rebellion. Research has illuminated how individuals employ social media to construct and perform personas that may diverge from their real-world identities. Baloch's persona serves as a compelling case study in the deliberate crafting of an online image (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Baloch's audacious online presence also exposed her to vehement criticism and threats from conservative segments in Pakistan. Her tragic demise, frequently categorized

as an honor killing, underscores the real-world consequences that can arise from challenging gender norms in digital spaces. This highlights the persistent influence of patriarchy and the constraints of online empowerment (Yasin & Javed, 2019).

The Qandeel Baloch case vividly illustrates the intricate interplay between empowerment and the subsequent backlash that women can encounter within digital spaces. It emphasizes the evolving nature of women's persona construction and the enduring challenges posed by patriarchal norms. As digital spaces continue to mold the identities and experiences of women, further research is imperative to explore the nuances of empowerment, resistance, and the broader sociocultural implications of women's online personas. Baloch's legacy serves as a poignant reminder of the transformative potential and inherent risks in the digital age for women's empowerment and self-expression.

Material and Methods

Qandeel Baloch, who had celebrity status in Pakistan. First of all visual images, videos and textual content were collected which was available on the internet by clicking on the name Qandeel Baloch, on the famous search engine of Google, for about a week's time. The wide variety of images and content was analyzed. The idea was to reach at patterns, for instance the images of Qandeel, which show defiance, agency and boldness, in the images where she is shown facing the camera, at a press conference or during the TV interview. Similarly, the written content available through blogs mostly in the aftermath of her murder, continue to talk about her boldness, and projected her as someone who was the torchbearer against the traditions based on patriarchy in the society. It was observed and gone through the social media websites, by her name, and accessing the digital images available on social media, along with comments by the viewers. Findings in this research are based on the review of digital images and content available on social media, such as digital images, videos, blogs, and the available comments on social media, by simple process of clicking on the name of Qandeel Baloch on the internet through the search Google engine.

The use of social media for visual research provides us the unique opportunity to get the ideas in a more robust manner. Counting on Jacques Derrida's seminal work, It focused on the potent existence of pauses and silence, especially during the videos and interviews. The concept of gaze also remained an interesting way to see the image through the viewer's eyes and mind. Going beyond images, tried to see the power and agency, especially for the women in Pakistan, in view of inequalities based on gender.

Results and Discussion

The constructed persona on internet in the western world is not a new phenomenon; .Qandeel Baloch's images were the landmark images toward constructing one in Pakistan. However, the social media has taken the leverage to decide what is socially acceptable and what is not. It has the power the influence others, through its influence on the mainstream media, and on the educated people in Pakistan.

The power relations are also significant to explore in embodiment of self-images by women especially on the newly acquired so called liberation through the social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter accounts. Within those spaces available for self-expression, through selfie, and uploading of self-photographs, would these challenge the established power structures. It is interesting to note how the images especially focusing on projecting sexuality by women become not only an entry point to understand the intercultural relations, but also the perceptions beyond those images, such as the issues of morals and ethics in a society. Qandeel herself continued to talk about her images as breaking the gender barriers and taboos around embodiment of expression for women in Pakistan.

Deciphering of the Images

The celebrities on the internet methodically adopt the Para-social interaction to ensure their following, liking and to develop intimacy with their fans on the internet. They also disclose their personal information but up to an extent with their followers on social media, which creates a sense of illusory intimacy, which is strategically focused toward increasing the following. In case of Qandeel, this intimacy was provided through sharing her bold images, videos, and teachers, announcements, to continuously engage her followers.

While it seems to be a one way traffic of celebrity sharing the intimate details about him or herself and the viewer just responding on the social media through clicking on emoticons such as love or like, sharing it with friends or writing comments. However, no disclosure is demanded from the viewer as part of the reciprocal disclosure, hence the viewer is saved form the disclosure reciprocity. This gives the viewer in this case a male viewer on the social media the status of voyeur who used the gaze for pleasure, in his comfortable home or office settings.

In several of her photographs, we see a confident Qandeel Baloch facing the camera, keeping in view of the aesthetics of the images, such as light and shade, angle, frame, props used in the photograph, and a penchant for using bright color in the dress and makeup. She does not use distortion of images such as using shadows, or surreal effects, such as filtering the profile pictures, or gloomy effect of evening lights. She uses bright day light, or brightness of studio lights, in most of her photographs.

This consistent use of brightness depicts that she craves for such colors and brightness in her life, and may have been contented and happy with the sense that it brings to her life, while neglecting the not so bright situation in her life, for example her relation with the past, and the present poverty-stricken family conditions, to name just a few as constant reminders. Besides the sexualized undertones, the images make us believe in the notion what she wants us to believe, that is image of a woman who is in love with herself, her body, her celebrity image, her comfort zone that is within the realm of her portrait through social media.

Qandeel may have been also disconnected from the reality as appears from most of her images. However, she acknowledges in her comments as someone who is in constant battle at many fronts with the power structures, such as the clergy and media. The integral feature is the power and agency associated with such images, that a woman of her background could feel in her huge following for such images.

Qandeel Baloch has not disclosed her true identity and was maintaining the pseudo name after acquiring the celebrity image. She belonged to a poor family, and was married at an early age. It said that she had a son from her former husband. She always termed this as a marriage, without her consent. Her use of pseudo name also depicts that she was not comfortable with her previous identity. He selected use of presenting herself could be termed as dishonest but she was carefully progressing with her image building of what she perceived the image through which she could be successful. Those viewers consider the internet as a safe space for themselves to reflect on a net socialite or celebrity's highly charged personal and intimate images on the internet. Since the information remained the exchange of only the superficial information, it remained till the initial level of communication, to the sense of illusory intimacy and do not come down to the next level.

Image as a Social Issue

We have considered the image contextualized in terms of social issue. To us the images not only qualify the context these are in, but also serve as propaganda tool, thus creating the context of its own.

"No matter how many times I will be pushed down, I am a fighter, I will bounce back…"

(Qandeel Baloch in one of her last Facebook messages)

Qandeel's images generated heated debate among the liberals and conservatives, showing the further divide. She had huge following. There were more than 700,000 people on her Facebook page, and her twitter account had 41,000 followers. Two kinds of strands were quite visible. The liberal point of view, mostly through the English dailies, such as the Dawn, the News, and the daily Times, and the Express, and bloggers in English language, and the conservative or traditional point of view, by the right wing anchors on mainstream TV channels, Urdu dailies, and the comments by numerous male social media users. The liberal linking it to the patriarchal values, the argument used by feminists, by looking for the root cause in the gender discrimination. While the right of center conservatives finding it as yet another example that has saved the family and community by cold blooded murder of Qandeel Baloch at the hands of her own brother. Their stance is if the honor is restored by whatever act, no matter how heinous it appears, serves the purpose of becoming an example, for others to be afraid of, and not to repeat this. This also fulfills the community watchdog's role.

Detachment of Image from the Context

There is heated debate over alleged role of media in Qandeel's murder. There are those who are of the view, that media is free in the country, so by virtue of that, it can show what it considers to be appropriate, and there should not be any other authority or body to tell them what the need to show. However, those who support media ethics, maintain that the media by revealing the real name and identity of Qandeel put her life at risk, and that she paid the ultimate price of media's high handedness.It is however a sensitive matter to accept that there are a large number of viewers for the images. Qandeel created and shared on through social media tools, as gauged from her Facebook and Twitter account followers. This necessitated the mainstream media to take lead on the content about Qandeel.

The element of gaze is also another powerful element in understanding the image. As when Qandeel shares a selfie image on her Facebook account, would it be different from the photographs shared by her on the same account, but those are orchestrated or planned photographs, in a studio, using professional photographers. She will be looking at herself admiringly through a selfie, but in a studio photograph there will be others (men, mostly), who mirror the authenticity of the images for the audience (mostly men), on her Facebook account. How will this position be different from the one after the projection of images by self-righteous people. An image therefore is the communication between the sender (Qandeel + Photographer) to the receiver (Facebook audience). The same visual image will therefore be coded and decoded number of times before it reaches out to the audience, and be available on the social media.

Image as a Propaganda Tool

When Qandeel Baloch's video and pictures were uploaded with Mufti Abdul Qavi, the TV channels in their run for rating also projected these images for the wider audience. The TV channels have given their airtime to the issue, further adding fuel to the fire. During this time, her personal details were systematically leaked including her family, ex-husband, and she was compelled to disclose more details, to the media always hungry for the scoop. We think that the culminating point in her career as a social media celeb was her images of donning with Mufti Abdul Qavi's Qaraquli cap. Were those images harmless prank on her part, or carefully constructed leaks to down one of biggest manifestation of power in Pakistan, represented by Mufti Abdul Qavi. The tragedy unfolded later on, shown that this could not be taken lightly by the status quo force within the system/society. The

societal/traditional forces had to hit back, this time hard through her own family, and by the hand of her own brother and cousin.

Most news coverage of Qandeel's murder was loaded with the words and phrases pointing toward the role of larger segments of society toward Qandeel, throughout her brief stint as a social media celebrity, and in the aftermath of her murder. For instance, the USA Today in its online issue of July 19, 2016 edition, while reporting the murder of Qandeel, uses phrases like 'racy photos', 'posing', 'besmirching the family name', etc.

Assigning meaning to the Images

It is also important to see the power of images to transform a person's life. For instance, Qandeel's own transformation from an ordinary girl from a poor family to a resourceful woman capable of influencing so many people. The image in the age of social media platforms and internet has the power to transcend itself beyond the boundaries of class and ethnicity. Qandeel's case though an extreme one, proved that it could turn into reality.

"She died because she took the short cut to fame by showing skin. High risk high reward. In her case it back fired." (Comment by A. A. August 8, 2016)

"Yes media helped her showoff more and more" (Comment by A.S. August 8, 2016)

It is also important to see the access to images, if Qandeel would have done this in the age prior to the social media, and the age of internet. Would she be successful in attracting the huge following that she has enjoyed by uploading her images on various platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. These images are not the images as these are. The images do not only reflect Qandeel's revealing about herself and her body, but also indicate a growing acceptance of such images in the specialty. With each like and comment on her images, she is getting the message across, this is what makes the image so powerful yet unique in the sense that it has the potential to transform, not only the person hers/himself but also the viewer.

Image and the Media

Role of both mainstream and social media presents serious questions of bringing Qandeel Baloch to lime light, made a celebrity out of her for a brief period, and then let her face the music. An ordinary girl from South Punjab had the opportunity to have huge fan following on social media, got invitation by the TV channels to comment on social and political issues, and enjoy her celebrity status. She was led into playing the fame game, with expectation of her followers compelled her to create new stints and actions that have raised her further on the throne of fame. She appeared to be highly tech savvy in terms of music uploads, interactions with the followers, presenting a sensational image that becomes the instant hit, with those who were following her, on the social media. However, this image was given negative attributes associated with an image. Her stints with Mufti Abdul Qavi, uploaded by her on the social media, were made part of mainstream media and she was labeled as a promiscuous and salacious woman (Samiuddin 2016). This relationship between a person uploading images to the media shows her fame hungry attitude, however media's role has also become as the client's representative, or a client itself, towards greed for more rating. This symbiotic relationship of feeding a rating hungry media with the controversies was based on Qandeel Baloch fetishes with fame, and media's greed for viewership, and providing what the viewers loved to watch and crave for, culmination into other symbiotic relationship between the media and the audience.

The episode of Qandeel and Mufti Abdul Qavi was given much of air time preference by almost all major TV channels in Pakistan. The channels were selling the narrative about Qandeel, that they have constructed carefully. And it was a perfect moment to cash that. After

we have gone through scores of newsfeeds, comments on the social media, blogs, and images and videos uploaded on the social media, the highhanded ness with which media treated her visual images can be determined. The social media let Qandeel use her personal and private images on internet to the benefit of social media and media at large (look at her fan following).

Women's Space through Images

It is an interesting debate to see how a woman in Pakistan is perceived in the public space, and how it challenges men, and their ego. Looking at Qandeel's case, she was the first internet celebrity in Pakistan (Zaidi 2016). However, the path to fame remained through projecting her body image on social media tools such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. What was shocking for majority of people otherwise not comfortable with women expressing so candidly about their sexuality in the public space. On the other hand, Qandeel's persona was built around images expressing her sexuality, on social media. Since her following was in thousands. So those who were blaming her of disgrace on account of the images of her body were actually seeing looking through the images, in order to comment on it. While hers is an extreme case, for those women and girls in the public space, doing jobs, or studying it is an ordeal on every day basis, to pass through the gaze.

The power and agency of women also depends in our society, on the institutions of family, and kinship. Qandeel uses the part pseudonym as Baloch, signifying her intention to use this as to enhance credibility of her persona through kinship identification. However, in our society based on patriarchal values, kinship based associations have also a moral binding to defend the family and tribal honour. Women seem to fell victim to flagship honor project that the tribal and customary practices are upholding, as dearest value system. Qandeel use of the pseudonym thus become liability for her, and a prize for others (such as her brother) to reclaim.

Why were the images shocking for most of her male viewers, because the views have been used to see women images in the exact opposite, the images of their family women in certain limitation, confined space, *chadar* cladded images. When they become young, they have the access to forbidden images, and videos, and films sexualized in nature, and related text. Then there are innuendos with the focus on specific body parts of male and female in the verbatim. So these streams are parallel but go hands in glove, with the knowledge that these exist, yet nobody claims in public. It used to seldom happen that the space reserved for one affects the others, or transforms the other stream. This happens when the boundaries are not that visible or diminish. In case of Qandeel Baloch, the boundaries of images for personal and public space diffuse with each other. This also happens partly due to the use of social media tools that were at her disposal. Hence the transformation was inevitable, and it is evidences through the huge following that she had on her Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts.

The liberal feminists consider showing off, posing as expression of diverse sexualities, and hence acceptable, it may be acceptable in the western societies, but in a country like Pakistan, it will not be simply termed as visuals depicting gender identity but a challenge posed by a woman which according to the moralistic codes of the society are not acceptable. There often is shame used as a tool for the immediate and extended family to intervene is such matters, mostly as a final blow.

This happens when it occurs to them that they have lost control and the intervention is most required to regain the control, to set the equilibrium regarding the customary norms back to its place. While women's agency in negotiations and contractual arrangements regarding the projection of image with the media are beyond the scope of the current study, however we feel it utmost important to see how the contracts are negotiated and finalized between a vulnerable woman who is on an all-out mission to explore all potential

possibilities to succeed in life, and the media who is bent upon increasing their viewership and rating through many antiques such as sensationalism and popularity.

To the issue of gaze, it is the male gaze, which Qandeel's images focused upon, due to an overt element of sexuality, whether the images have been seen in the private space for the individuals on social media tools of their Facebook pages, or the downloaded images in the hard drives, or public space of mainstream media. This also brings into context the gendered context of power relations between men and women. By targeting her sexualized images on men, she claims agency in considering herself as a liberator from the social and moral codes, also imposed by patriarchal values sacredly guarded for centuries.

Recommendations

Boost Digital Skills and Inclusivity: Encourage programs that teach people, especially women and those who are often left out, how to use the internet safely and confidently. These programs should be open to everyone and adapted to different ages and backgrounds.

Spread Awareness and Teach Media Literacy: Run campaigns that let more people know how women's pictures are used online and teach them to think carefully about what they see on the internet. This way, we can build a community of online users who are more thoughtful and responsible.

Hold Platforms Accountable: Ask social media sites to do more to stop online bullying and people using pictures in a bad way. This means they need to make stronger rules, improve the way people report problems, and make sure the rules are enforced.

Educational and Advocacy Efforts: Support programs and campaigns that talk about how being a man or a woman affect what you see and do online. These efforts should challenge stereotypes and educate people about how their online behavior can affect others, all with the aim of making the online world more just and inclusive.

Celebrate Positive Role Models and Offer Guidance: Emphasize the importance of showing and celebrating good online role models, especially women who inspire and empower. Provide mentorship programs to guide and support women in building genuine and positive online identities.

Strengthen Legal Protections: Push for stronger laws that specifically deal with online bullying and misuse of pictures. These laws should make it clear how women can get help when they face these problems and ensure that those responsible face consequences for their actions.

Online Support Networks: Encourage the creation of online communities and networks where women can share their experiences, seek advice, and unite against online bullying. Building a sense of togetherness can help individuals cope with and address online challenges.

Cross-Disciplinary Research and Cooperation: Promote more research that looks at how being a man or a woman, technology, and society all work together in the digital world. Encourage cooperation between researchers, policymakers, and experts in the tech industry to better understand these issues and find effective solutions.

Policy Change and Advocacy: Push for changes in the rules and policies that promote fairness and gender equality in online spaces. These policies should tackle systemic issues and make sure those who do harm online are held accountable, making the digital world fair and inclusive for all.

Ethical Tech Development: Encourage the tech industry to focus on creating digital platforms and tools that are built with ethics in mind. This means adding features that make the internet a safer and more respectful place for users.

Conclusion

A visual image becomes a powerful tool of personal testimony, which narrates the story highlighting the individual aspects as well as the social settings, it is associated with. The image also interlinks person within the social setting, at personal and social level. It subtly speaks about the image itself, the space, and the void. It also highlights the aspects of gaze, within the image, interconnecting it with the viewer. There are numerous images on social media, articles, blogs and comments with just a click on the name of Qandeel Baloch. However, they show a clear divide, maintaining either a neutral position or wither between the two sides of showing her as challenging and exposing men, and the other presenting an immoral person, with the agenda to push moral boundaries of the society, to have a joyride of fame and success, as quickly as possible. All this lead us to reiterate the importance of image and its placement in the wider social realities of this time and space, and its significance as a powerful tool of social transformation in Pakistan.

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