

DECONSTRUCTING MASCULINITIES: ANALYZING TRADITIONAL NORMS AND CONTEMPORARY SHIFTS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This research involves critical examination of the changing constructions of masculinity in Pakistan by deconstructing established gender norms and examining the impacts of socio-cultural changes and contemporaneous practices of masculinity. This proposed study is situated within the frameworks of Social Learning Theory and Social Constructivism, which will examine how masculinity is framed, enacted, appropriated, and challenged across generations in Pakistan. From a phenomenological qualitative approach, the present study will utilize semi-structured interviews of participants from different age groups to explore how men interpret, negotiate and reconstruct masculine identity in a society undergoing change. Results of this study revealed that dominant male roles like being obedient, suppressing emotion, and being economically responsible have typically been reinforced within families, via religion, through forms of media, and so on. With the onset of things like globalization, urbanization, education, and movements for gender equality, these roles are increasingly under challenge. The study discusses both pushback and acceptance of changing gender norms, and explores the tensions of maintaining cultural and family continuity, while simultaneously moving towards a more progressive interpretation of gender fluidity. This research contributes to the field of gender studies in South Asia specifically, with targeted comparisons for the complexity of masculine identity within a transitioning Pakistani patriarchal context.

Keywords: Deconstructing, Masculinity, Traditional Norms, Intergenerational, Changing Gender, Contextual Agency, and Resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Masculinity, a socially constructed and historically situated reality, has long affected gender relations, societal expectations, and individual identities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Seidler, 2006). In Pakistani context, masculine, traditional norms are based on a patriarchal worldview, historical religious

interpretation and cultural expectations which often privilege male power, emotional restraint, as well as male authority in the domestic and society (Zia, 2009; Saeed, 2018; Weiss, 2014; Ali, 2017). However, in the last few decades, there have been gradual but significant changes, as globalization, education, digital media, and

feminist movements have begun to encourage and shape masculinity (Flood, 2019; World Health Organization, 2022). This study comes from an increased awareness that rigid gender norms not only constrain women's rights and opportunities but also limit men to prescribed definitions of identity and behaviour (Mahalik et al., 2003; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). While some discussions about gender equality are becoming increased, there is still little substantive, qualitative, local and contextual detailed research on how different generations of men's understandings and internalisation or contestation of a changing masculinity.

The key question the study confronts is how traditional masculinity continues to influence male identity construction in Pakistan as well as the disconnect that exists between those norms and societal change (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Saeed, 2018; Khan, 2020). The research examines how traditional gender roles are both sustained and resisted through generations, as well as perceptions that men have around their roles in shifting gender relations (EEOC, 2024). The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Pakistani men across different generations define and experience masculinity?
2. What socio-cultural, religious, and familial influences shape these definitions?
3. In what ways are contemporary shifts in gender norms influencing male identities and behaviors?

The importance of this study is that it has the potential to be part of the existing dialogue around gender equity in South Asia - both in academia and policy levels. The study is utilizing a qualitative approach to critically engage with masculinity and shed light on male experiences and male engagement through the lens of gender sensitization. This research serves to add male perspectives to the existing dialogue surrounding gender and possibly lead to more equitable social practices.

Literature Review

Masculinity has received a lot of scholarly attention and study in sociology, gender studies, and psychology. Where masculinity has been studied for many years, it is typically associated

with values such as aggressiveness, emotional restraint, authority and control, and heterosexuality (Connell, 2005; Seidler, 2006). In South Asian societies, masculinity, including Pakistan, is embedded in patriarchal forms which create social structures for not only male privilege, but also male power over families or economic spaces, and across political institutions (Khan, 2016; Ali, 2017). Global and multi-sector movements for more gender equality, with a growing presence of feminist dialogues, are beginning to challenge the rigidity of these masculine ideals and have encouraged scholars to explore how identities of masculinity change as patterns of society change (Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011; Flood, 2019; World Health Organization, 2022). As it is now being recognised, reconstructing identities of masculinity is fundamental to gender justice, especially in societies where traditional male identities are reinforced by religious teachings and cultural narratives (Jeffery, 2014).

A dominant framework for understanding male identity is the theory of hegemonic masculinity, developed by Connell (1995). This concept refers to the culturally exalted form of masculinity that legitimizes men's dominance over women and marginalizes alternative masculinities. Research conducted primarily in Western contexts has shown how men internalize and enact these hegemonic norms, often at the cost of their emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships (Mahalik et al., 2003; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). Yet, such studies often fail to reflect the complex socio-cultural, religious, and economic realities of masculinity in non-Western settings like Pakistan.

Specifically in the context of Pakistan, researchers like Ali (2011) and Zia (2009) have highlighted the role of religious interpretation, culture-based honor expectations, and economic expectations in producing masculinity and male identity. Ali (2011) explains how the role of breadwinner is central to the male identity in Pakistan, which causes widespread stigma toward those men who do not fulfill that expectation. Zia (2009) critiques the instrumentalization of religious discourse, by providing and enforcing patriarchal control and placing men—through religion—as guardians of morality and family value. While these studies have illuminated the entrenchment of traditional gender relations, the studies do not

explore the ways in which those attachments may be changing, especially in the case of younger or more urban men (Shah & Sahito, 2023).

There is an emerging literature on alternative masculinities in South Asia. For example, Chopra et al. (2014) consider how Indian men involved in gender equality movements adopt more caring and nurturing masculine identities. Saeed (2017) interviews a small but significant number of young urban men in Pakistan who support better gender relations. However, a lot of this work is limited in focus—either by only looking at a particular subgroup, or more commonly, methodologically limited in exploring the experiences of men due to reliance on surveys that are less than ideal in revealing their lived experiences.

These gaps indicate a need for qualitative research that can examine how masculinity is conceptualized and negotiated across different generational cohorts in Pakistan. There is little understanding of how young men are conceptualizing masculinity in a conservative, religious, and media saturated context, especially with rapidly changing norms around gender (Chaudhry & Rahman, 2009). Understanding how masculinities are formed and understood across generations remains largely unexamined, although family and kinship are important in mediating gendered identities in Pakistan (Asghar & Ajmal, 2022).

In order to fill this gap, the present research takes a qualitative, phenomenological approach to understand how men of different age groups construct and negotiate their masculine identities. The analysis draws from the following conceptualizations: hegemonic masculinity, emotional expression, gender role enactment, and cultural negotiation. These concepts provide theoretical significance and practical implications particularly as it relates to gender equality programs that seek to engage men in a positive way.

This research is based on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which assumes that gendered behaviors are learned by observing, imitating, or having behaviors reinforced in family and social contexts. Boys learn what it means to "be a man" through the modeled behaviors in family life, the media and their peers. It also draws from Social Constructivism which is the notion that gender is socially constructed, shaped out of social

discourse and cultural interaction as opposed to biological determinism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Together, these theoretical frameworks provide an excellent foundation for how masculine norms are reproduced and resisted across time and across social space.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the ways in which masculinity is perceived, constructed, and experienced across generations in Pakistani society. This study chose phenomenology in order to capture and understand the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they attach to those experiences (Creswell, 2013). The goal was to engage deeply with the experiences and stories of participants while capturing the socio-cultural understanding of masculinity from both traditional and contemporary definitions of masculinity in Pakistan.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling that encompassed three generational age cohorts of men: older (50+ years), middle-aged (30-49 years), and young (18-29 years). The sample consisted of 18 participants, 6 from each group, recruited from urban and semi-urban areas, such as Lahore, Islamabad, and Sargodha. Participants had a range of socio-economic circumstances and occupational representation, including representation from education, business, manual labor, and media. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Urdu and/or English and lasted between 45-60 minutes. The interview questions covered issues of gender identity, emotional expression, gender roles, and intergenerational influence. Field notes were also taken to record contextual cues and non-verbal behaviours that contributed to the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In order to promote trustworthiness, four elements were taken into account for the study in accordance with Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. The study elements of credibility were done through member checking and prolonged engagement with participants; dependability was done through an audit trail of decisions made around methods; transferability was done through an incredibly rich contextualization of studies described population and study context; confirmability was done

through member checking, reflexivity of the researcher to myself, and triangulation of data sources, including interviews and field notes. These elements promote trustworthiness and strengthened the reliability and authenticity of the finding.

Results

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the qualitative interview data collected from 18 participants across three generations and three cities (Lahore, Islamabad, and Sargodha). The thematic analysis identified four sections: (1) Traditional Masculine Expectations, (2) Masculinity and Economic Responsibility, (3) Evolving Gender Roles and Identity Crises, and (4) Masculinity and Emotional Expression.

Theme 1: Traditional Masculine Expectations

This theme highlights the prevalence of traditional masculine norms such as being strong, emotionally controlled, authoritative power, and being the head of the household. Those who were older (especially participants from Sargodha and Islamabad) endorsed masculine norms of stoicism and control.

“In my time, a man had to be strong, not show emotions. If you cried, people thought you were weak.”

— Participant A, Male, 55, Sargodha

In rural and semi-urban contexts, these characteristics were associated with honor and social respect. Whilst younger participants pushed back against this notion, they recognized the pressure to conform.

Theme 2: Masculinity and Economic Responsibility

There was a strong association of masculinity and economic provide for all generations of men. Older and middle-generation men strongly identified as a "provider."

“Even if my wife earns now, I still feel it is my duty to provide everything. That’s how I was

raised.”

— Participant C, Male, 38, Islamabad

Younger participants, especially those in cities like Lahore, identified the need to have two people bringing in income and they encouraged financial responsibility between partners, which showcased an evolution in their masculine identity.

Theme 3: Changing Gender Roles and Identity Conflicts

Younger participants talked about shifting gender expectations, but also discussed internal/external conflict(s) when they did not align with traditional roles. Men who supported gender equality sometimes faced backlash from peers or family members.

“I believe in equality, but sometimes society doesn’t. They mock men who support feminism or household work.”

Participant F, Male, 26, Lahore

This theme reflects a generational tension. Younger participants are embracing change, whereas the traditional 'norms' still influence younger generations, particularly in more conservative zones.

Theme 4: Masculinity and Emotional Expression

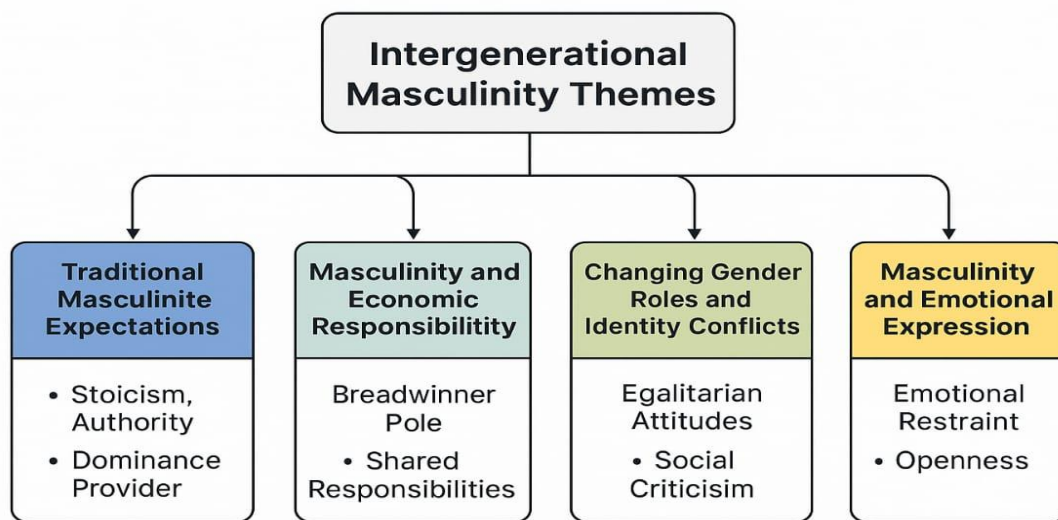
For older participants, emotional suppression was seen to be masculine and they generally supported this view. For middle and younger generations, there was more support for emotional openness, and they believed that emotional repression was linked to mental health.

“Boys are told not to cry, to ‘man up’—this damages us. I think real masculinity means being human first.”

— Participant J, Male, 21, Islamabad

Female participants also voiced concerns about men’s emotional unavailability, noting its impact on relationships and communication.

Figure 1: Illustrates the Findings of the Study, Highlighting key Themes and Patterns that Emerged from the Data Analysis.



Intergenerational Masculinity Themes

Source: Researchers vision

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate both continuity and change in the construction, performance, and challenge of masculinity across generations in Pakistan. Our thematic analysis produced four major themes: (1) Traditional Masculine Expectations, (2) Masculinity and Economic Responsibility, (3) Change in Gender Roles and Identity Conflicts, and (4) Masculinity and Emotional Expression. These themes were recognized and analyzed using the framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and provided an insight into how gender norms are both reproduced and resisted.

At the older age group, participants continued to reinforce hegemonic ideas which tied masculinity with dominance, stoicism and leadership—the same predominant ideas were found in previous studies which aligned with patriarchal values inherent in South Asian cultures (Ali, 2011; Khan, 2016). The middle-aged participants showed more fluid dispositions as they drifted between traditional roles and shifting realities. The younger participants showed a

greater tendency for emotional expression and a challenge of the singular responsibility of economic provision. The contradictions seen in the findings of the participants across ages is consistent with a growing body of research (Saeed, 2017; Chopra et al., 2014) suggesting there is a slow shift occurring to free gender norms among urban youth in South Asia.

Theoretical Implications

The research builds on Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to illustrate that its relevance is context-dependent and generationally influenced (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The study further supports the relevance of Social Learning Theory with respect to how masculine behaviors were understood through role models and cultural practices across generations. In addition, the ingrained existence of identity conflict and changing roles among younger men also supports the view of gender as a construct—a dynamic that is not fixed but is negotiated in ever-changing socio-cultural discourses.

Not only does this research highlight that masculinity in Pakistan is not a singularity, but an intersectional phenomenon - constructed through the primacy of age, class, urban-rural divide, education, and exposure to global discourse.

Cultural or Contextual Insights

Pakistan is a collectivist society based on religious ideology, and with masculinity being so intimately connected to the social role of being a provider, protector, and responsible moral authority (Manzoor, 2014), the results showed that urban and the younger participants may not appreciate rigid roles, whereas men from semi-urban and more orthodox communities still experience significant perceived threats to social stability when they deviate from these prescribed forms of masculinity. Additionally, the ongoing merchant of economic obligations (royalties) remains a significant marker of manhood despite women's increased participation in the workforce.

Cultural narratives around honor and shame served to restrict men's emotional expression, though older men classified vulnerability as weakness. Increasingly, young participants showed support for emotional literacy and gender equity amongst others and are still considered a subtle but significant degree of cultural change.

Unexpected Findings

One unexpected finding was that there was intrapersonal conflict among some of the younger men who espoused equality even amongst themselves. Some participants agreed with the Haque (2022) that the goal of gender parity, but hesitated to take on non-traditional roles in practice for fear of social repercussions from others. This suggests that there was a change in attitudes, but not behaviour, and reflects the ambivalence when undergoing social change.

An additional surprise was that the women participants, while not the focus of the study, indicated a concern for the emotional repression of men - highlighting a gendered cost of patriarchy that serves to afflict both men and women.

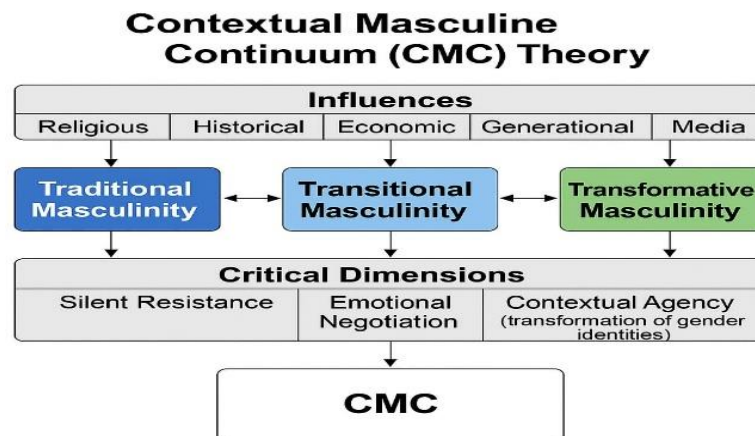
Link Back to Research Questions and Framework

The results specifically answer the research questions concerning how masculinity is defined, performed, and negotiated over the generations in Pakistan. The differences across generations demonstrate how hegemonic masculine gender norms are learned and transformed through social learning, and how cultural expectations for masculinity and economic contexts provide explanations for variations in their adoption. By examining these developments through the lens of Social Learning Theory and Constructivism, it has become evident that masculinity is dynamic, and is constantly evolving through negotiations.

Researcher Contribution in building Masculinity Theory

This study offers a culturally situated and context-bound theoretical model—the Contextual Masculine Continuum (CMC) Theory—to the field of masculinity studies. Drawing on rich qualitative data from inter-generational participants across Pakistan, this study has conceptualized masculinity not as static or universal, but as a fluid continuum shaped by histories, religious traditions, socio-economics, and generations. The CMC Theory provides details on three key positionalities of masculinity—traditional masculinity, transitional masculinity, and transformative masculinity—and each has a positionality and negotiations and expressions of identity. By presenting the lived experiences and internal struggles of inter-generational men, this study offers a counter-narrative to hegemonic Western masculinities models and enables researchers to engage in academic discourse from an indigenous framework that nuances the intensity of evolution regarding masculine norms and understandings in a South Asian Muslim society. Additionally, the study's new theoretical contribution extends theoretical knowledge of masculinity by identifying the dimensions of silent resistance, emotional negotiation, and contextual agency as essential components of emerging masculine gender identities.

Figure 2: Conceptual Model Based on CMC Theory Illustrating the Contextual, Material, and Critical Dimensions of Masculine Identity Transformation



Source: Researchers vision

Conclusion

This study of intergenerational views of masculinity from Pakistan developed a grounded theory of "Positional Masculinities" that explains how men across generations confronted, kneeled to, negotiated with, or resisted the normative masculine constructs over time. Using a phenomenological perspective and thematic analysis of interview data, four themes arose: Traditional Masculine Expectations, Economic Responsibilities, Gender Role Shifts and Identity Conflicts, and Emotional Expression. The analysis revealed a scale of masculine positionalities, ranging from older men firmly rooted in traditional ideals, to some of the younger generation enacting transitional or transformative masculinities in some contexts. Overall, the generational differences illustrate a socio-cultural shift in thoughts about how the old ideals and traditional roles are now being challenged through emotional awareness, gender equity, and economic realities. The study adds to the literature by anchoring global masculinity theorizing in a contextually specific framework that is 'Pakistani' which contributes to theorizing action by creating a dynamic model of masculinity with both continuity and change.

Recommendations

This study proposes to advocate for healthy and inclusive masculinities through community awareness and education initiatives that engage men and boys inter-generationally. School and

NGO programs should educate boys about masculinity to encourage healthy emotional expression and gender sensitivity from a younger age. Future research can expand to new regions and include women and non-binary people, in order to adequately reflect upon gender relationships. Ultimately, we need to create theories that consider lived reality locally and take into account the multiple masculinities expressed within tradition, change and globalization.

In practical terms, the findings also present useful applications for gender education programs, social work, and mental health interventions. Educators and policymakers need to consider the impact of rigid masculine norms on mental health and advocate for new models masculinity that support emotional literacy and gender sensitivity.

This research also supports policy framework development through applying its findings regarding masculinity studies to gender equality agendas to develop male engagement in feminist and social justice movements that are culturally relevant.

Lastly, this research creates opportunities for future academic research by presenting possibilities for future intersectional studies, especially on how class issues, religious denominations, community divisions, or education can influence masculinities.

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