Cultural Norms, Social Networking and Visual Self-Presentation:The WhatsApp User Experiences of Young Muslim Women in Assam

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Abstract

Social media and its features are expanding at an alarming rate. Billions of people around the world use social media to share information create content, photos, lifestyle videos, etc, are among few things. From young teens to old, nearly everyone has a smartphone and internet connection. To facilitate people's communication and contact in the network society, major social media have appeared one after another. A great connector in itself but with a dark side. It is in this backdrop the paper explores a new phenomenon- the growing popularity of the use of picture symbols that is,'emoji', a status feature of WhatsApp, a social media chat App. In the absence of verbal cues, use of 'emojis' not only express emotions but significantly imply a certain kind of cultural values. With respect to values that pervades their offline life, young Muslim women exercise strategic ways while negotiating with the multiple contact users of social media and have developed a community code with the emojis. Drawing from an in-depth interview with the young Muslim women of Karimganj, the paper explores the cultural motivation behind the use of emojis in online photos. The findings suggest that being specifically identified with the 'Muslim' faith, women from the said community are subjected to higher surveillance by the community gatekeepers.

Introduction

This paper explores the 'visual self-presentation' (Mishra & Basu, 2014) of young Muslim women on WhatsApp status.Whatsapp is one of the largest social network sites of the 21st century (Ahad & Lim, 2014). It is a popular smartphone messaging application that allows the users to share messages, photos, videos, etc. It serves as a convenient communicator not only between two persons, but also between a large numbers of community of people who share a distinct social bonding such as, family

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groups or student groups. Thus, the growing importance of WhatsApp as a means of communication often allows WhatsApp users to express their thoughts, emotions and opinions on their Whatsapp status. This status is seen in most of the users contact list itself. Busabaa et al. have characterized the significance of "WhatsApp statuses as a new form of announcements" (2022, p.1) since they express emotional, religious, personal and cultural issues.

Digital technology and social media have changed the way individual socialize and build social connections. Social media sites such as, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp allow users to participate in activities such as,putting a display picture (DP), managing users with whom they share a social bond, and viewing their activities(Bourgeois et al.,2014). The social networking sites, to a certain degree, may offer a space for young Muslim women to express and make themselves publicly visible in a way they want, yet for some of these women it has also become a site for scrutiny and surveillance from their own families and from the community members (Mishra & Basu, 2014: Mahmudova & Evolvi,2021). According to Subramanyam and Smahel (cited in Mishra & Basu, 2014), an individual's online representation closely resembles and matches their offline identities. When it comes to these Muslim women, they are made aware of offline societal expectations by 'collapsed contexts'(Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Afnan et al., 2022) eventually making these women to modify aspects of their online presentation. The research participants of this work emphasized that Islam requires both men and women to behave modestly in private and public life, but the uneven retention of religious knowledge puts additional onus on women to uphold the family's reputation through their own action. Due to an embedded patriarchal attitudes and norms, "self-disclosures of Muslim women in online becomes more intense" (Pielacited in Misra & Basu, 2014). Thus, while exploring the visual presentation in online settings, one cannot afford to ignore the perceived influence of offline socio-cultural environment. Hence, this paper attempts to explore the experiences of Muslim women'sonline self-presentationand highlights the key strategies they employ in their everyday social media use.

Theoretical Framework: Contextualising and Integrating with the Field

Erving Goffman's principles of dramaturgical performance described in his classic work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life* have been used as a theoretical framework for developing this essay. Goffman, a Canadian born sociologist and ethnographer of the 20th century, in his book used the metaphor of a theatre to demonstrate how people interact face-to-face with one another in social settings. He defines social interaction as a theatrical performance in which people, like actors in stage plays variety of roles, tailoring their impressions they want to present to each audiencein different settings. Goffman's underlying idea on social interaction is 'performance' and 'impression management' which is so relevant to the study of social media where the desire and risk of the 'self' is played out. According to Goffman, performance is defined "as all the activity of a given participant on a

given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). Extending the concept of offline performance in online settings, the process of self-presentation too can be looked at as a performative behaviour (Mishra & Basu, 2014). The process of what people do when they are in the presence of others, according to Goffman, is that, they attempt to control or guide the impression that people might have of him either by expressively accentuating some and suppressing the others. Attributes of performing oneself, like in theatrical performances, in social life, can create a tactful social manoeuvres of impression management in two ways:a) "the expression that one'gives', and b) the expression that one 'gives off'" (Goffman, 1959, p.2). Goffman uses the concepts such as, frontstage and backstage behaviour, impression management which often gets associated with the world of drama to construct a similar expression of interaction order of social life.In fact, Goffman's simple idea explains so much about conflicting experiences of participants and provides a better understanding of the participants' situations.

Given the conflate of offline performance in online settings, as a point of reference in this regard, the participants perform a front stage performance in online settings while maintaining and embodying the 'manner' and 'appearance' of offlinescripted moral standards. More precisely as in real life, negative impression of a woman is bound to have severe consequences, hence in online settings women carry the values of offline world as social networking Apps allow both to watch others as well as being watched off by others, thus, increasing the necessity of managing impressions (Pearce, 2015).Contradiction between appearance and manner and the two types of expression, 'gives' and 'gives off' is bound to happen through 'unmeant gestures' and 'inopportune intrusions', which creates embarrassment for the participants. Goffman argues that to reassure the audiences and take control of the scenes created unintentionally or intentionally by the outsiders, the participants segregate the outsider audiences from seeing a performance that is not meant for them. Given, Goffman's focus on the techniques of impression management, it is not hard to see how the successful implementation of the front stage behaviourby the actors relies on the extent of collaborative relationship and the subsequent strategies,which is something the audiences and the participants share. As Goffman (1959) notes in many cases, unacceptable situation permits the audiences to give 'hint' to the performer for 'better modification of the staged show'.Therefore, Goffman's theoretical framework is appropriate to understand the compact intricacies of how participants engage in selectively highlighting certain attributes while keeping in check other aspects of their life which gives some inkling of how managing impressions is at work in online spaces. Indeed, Goffman is considered as a "product of televisual age" whose dramaturgical approach is often cited as a useful framework for understanding presentation of self in online platforms (Hogan, 2010).

Methodology

The research participants of this work are selected through purposive and snowball sampling, consisting of 10 young Muslim women of Karimganj district. The women are students pursuing bachelor degree and master programme and while one participant is in teaching profession. The age range of the participants is between 18-30 years. The age group is chosen deliberately as they are often described as 'active social media users' (Sirola et al., 2021), and 'digital natives' (Mahmudova&Evolvi, 2021) because they are actively involved in accessing information from the internet along with constructing construct online identities. The relationship status of the participant varies, as some are single, others are engaged or dating, and while one is married. Except one, all the participants wore hijab. The participants have their own personal Android and two of them have I-Phone. They all use WhatsApp app in their own electronic device.The interviews are conducted by the researcher in Bengali and English mediums. The interviews lasted forabout 45 minutes with each participant.

To explore the experience of young Muslim women's use of social networking sites,semi-structured in-depth interviews are performed. In essence, this method allows direct communication with the interviewee of the study and offers possibilities for free-flowing interactions, probing and follow-up questions (Morris, 2015). By performing interviews with the women who use Whatsapp and exercise agency in posting certain types of pictures as their WhatsApp status, the findings speak of media practices, strategies,and life experiences, which otherwise cannot be documented in quantitative study. Moreover, the researcher's positionality as a Muslim woman and belonging from the same place as that of the participants allowed the interviewees to decide how they wanted to narrate their stories and opinions in a more relaxed atmosphere. However, the findings in this essay, in no way intends to generalize the experiences of Muslim women's use of social media, as there exists heterogeneity of Muslim lives.

Oversharing can be Dangerous: Posting Photos and Family Values

In an online environment, where the youngsters are encouraged to upload everything, it makes sense that they feel pressure directly or indirectly to show off their lives regardless of their insecurities.

"I have used emoji few times in photos where I don't want to show my face, rather, I want to show the dress and the place that I have visited", explains Jannat, a bachelor degree student. She started to give emoji on her photos a few months ago after an online incident happened with one of her friends. When I met her friend Marie to know her incident, she narrated and the researcher quotes: "My brother secretly gifted me a smartphone. My parents are unaware of it. I had my own WhatsApp account. Like everyone else, I used to share my individual selfies as well as photos clicked with my friend. Once one classmate of mine took a screenshot of my photo and showed it to her male cousin who somehow managed to get hold of the photo as well

as my contact details. He started bothering me day in and day out to talk to him. He started threatening me with the photos that I have shared in WhatsApp saying that he would morph my image with some 'undeserving' elements… (Breathing heavily). When I complained to my brother, he got furious as he had directed me earlier not to post any photos of mine. Seeing no way out, my entire family had to get involved in this matter. False rumours of romantic courtship spread like wildfire. Although I am sure that if he did something I would approach the [cyber] laws. Though he did nothing, yet my brother went out of his way to settle the matter 'privately'".

Other participants also expressed the concern of mobile screenshot, sometimes taken by their known persons. They shared their experiences of how acquaintances broke their trust, despite being in their 'closed circle' by seeking out personal information and spread rumours out of nothing.This led to the participants using emojis instead of their photo,when the extent of trust in an interpersonal relationship is low (Zhang et al., 2021).

When Yumnah, a hijabi[3]and a post-graduate student, set her WhatsApp profile picture in Western attire, she received backlash in the form of indirect comments from her friends. They mocked her for preferring Western attire with 'small' hijab. When the researcher asked what kind of comments she got to hear, she replied in a very shy tone, "Why you have clicked photo exposing your breast? Getting modern?" After a brief silence, she added that she witnessed an immediate reaction from her friends."When I posted that picture, immediately some of my friends (male as well as female) started posting WhatsApp status with 'right' way of wearing hijab and 'wrong' way of wearing hijab. Obviously, their posting of status is meant for me, Personally, I felt it."

Shirin, another participant, shared:

> *"Once I uploaded a group photo of our batch. I wore unna[4]covering my hair and a male classmate stood next to me. Some of my cousin started discussing about it in our cousin WhatsApp group saying stuff like I am going out with that guy, and now I am declining this, but I would elope with the guy in future and what not !! Whereas I am not (defensively)."*

The narratives mentioned above illuminate several analytical points. In the case of Yumnah and Shirin, the disapproval comments has been communicated privately as well as publicly. Yumnah's case clearly shows instances of online body shaming and clearly highlights the presence of what Murtiningsih et al. have termed as'online patriarchy' (Murtiningsih cited in Aksar et al.,2020, p.69) in a digital world. Importantly, wearing a hijab highlights the responsibility of representing Islam in a positive manner. This suggests self-presentation behaviours are therefore, not only

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[3]Muslim women who wear hijab(head covering).

[4] A scarf that comes with shalwar kameez, an outfit favoured by women of South Asian region.

limited to the wearer in offline spaces but extend out to their religious practices in online spaces too. This implies a much deeper notion of self-presentation for Muslim women. Posting 'proper'photos should reflect one's practices and beliefs and thus, conversation flowed to the criteria of upholding religious responsibility even in offline spaces. As Pearce and Vitak noted, "classmates… take a strong interest in monitoring their peers and will punish behavioural code violators through a mixture of shaming…" (Pearce &Vitak, 2015, p.7).

Shirin faces the irk of her cousins when she transgressed the boundary by putting photos perceived as 'taboo photo (Afnan, et al., 2022). In the offline spaces, male family members are typically charged with monitoring and vetting the women's movements. Similarly, with the rise of social media, their domain of responsibilitynow extends to their female kin's online activities. Pearce and Vitak's(2015) findings demonstrates that it is common for brothers to closely monitor the profile of the female folk for possible behavioural violations. This concurs with El Guindi's statement where she argues that "both body and interactive space needs to be regulated and controlled and both men and women must abide by this temporary desexualisation to make public interaction between them possible" (Guindi, 2000, p.136).

A Lot of People Watching: Evil Eye and Social Control

All the research participants informed of having a personal smartphone as well as their account in WhatsApp. In their social media account, their circle consists of multiple audiences of their life- family, friends, and relatives. One of the prominent features of social media application is that it brings people from offline context and collapses with the online audiences (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). One participant, Suraya puts it, "Now everyone is in WhatsApp, what one is doing, with whom and where one is, everyone gets the information by seeing the photos. As I post photos in WhatsApp, I get to listen to numerous talks". When the researcher asked what kind of talks she listens to, Suraya replied,"Girls from good Musalman families don't show their photos to strangers, society considers use of social media as bad because it is an uncontrolled sphere with lot of unknown and unfamiliar faces." Ana, another participant likewise, feels that her parents disapprove of her posting photos online. She says that "one day, one of her cousins called her mother saying 'control' your daughter's movement, she is going out of her way and posting photos on Instagram and Whatsapp".

Fauzia (another participant) the eldest among five sisters is the first young women in her extended family to come to Guwahati to pursue her post-graduation programme. She never posts photos without her hijab. Once she participated in a university sports in which their group won. She posted a group photo in her WhatsApp status wearing sports T-shirt, shorts and without hijab. Her younger sister in excitement showed the photo to all the family members. Many of her extended family members taunted her mother for sending her outside where they believe that modern influences took over

the family girl.Venna Das, an eminent Indian social scientist and anthropologist points out that daughters are seen as "repository of family honour" (Das, 1976, p.15) and dishonourable behaviour on their part results in forever loss of face for all members within and outside the family. The participant further adds that, "I remember vividly that I wear a long sleeves inner underneath my T-shirt and under the shorts I wear an ankle length leggings. I maintain my bodily modesty and did not wear any dress that my family will disapprove."

Kiara a teacher-participant shared, "Now-a-days I do not post photos in any social media. In the past, I use to post our couple photos, every time when we are together. But for the past months I have notice that my marital relation has strain to some extent, which was not previously. My mother believes that our relationship has caught the evil eyes. This has happened, she believes, is because I always keep posting our "photos together",which online people couldn't handle it. At first, I take it as an age-old superstition but when my child start to fall sick frequently, the idea of *'nazar lagigese'*(caught an evil eye) leaves me thinking."

The narratives of Ana and Fauzia confirms the fact that an image can speak a thousand words.The way her close-knit social network spin a whole story based on a couple of photos made the young women conscious of their being evaluated in a specific way based on what society considers as 'proper' and 'improper'. Suraya's case serves as a classic example of how Muslim culture places greater emphasis on female modesty. Although the Quran instructed men to divert their eyes from women just as it ask women to dress modestly. In an offline settings, it is believed by the women that they should not flaunt their beauty to outsiders and to preserve their beauty and share it only with the one whom they would grant access. However, in an online settings, everyone keeps on monitoring and reviewingother people's status and many a times they share it with others. It is this culture of ubiquitous sharing with unknown people, and that too without the knowledge of the one who posted it, is being understood as 'uncontrolled sphere with unfamiliar faces'.

Kiara is the only participant who described herself as 'over sharer of adorable moments in online platform', believed that gaze with negative intentions from online platform has harmed her family. Indeed, her experience draws attention to a pervasive online anxiety about the potential implication of excessive social media use. Online place is where many people pretty much share their best lives. This consciously or unconsciously attracts 'unwanted', or 'envious gaze' who think they are being deprived of the same life that someone else is enjoying. Her narratives highlighted that people are watching and making assumptions with negative intent. Predominantly, in every culture be it in South Asia, the concept of *nazar* or in Middle East, the widely held belief of *hasad* is understood as the root cause of all the bad things that can harm a person. Every culture performs *nazar* removal rituals from performing prayer to reading out verses from the holy books, putting a black dot on an infant's forehead to wearing black threads or *tabeez* to protect themselves from the resentful gaze.

Taking Control in Posting Photos: Resisting and Restricting the (Online) Audiences Serves as a Technique of Self-Presentation

The interviewees shared that they use WhatsApp for a variety of reasons, including instant messaging, keeping in contact with friends, sharing study notes, etc. Through WhatsApp status (which disappears after twenty-four hours), many participants apart from posting their own photos tend to post other things such as, motivational quotes and share video links too. As argued, the nature of the responses that the photos elicit makes the women realize not to put their selves at peril in online platform. Hence, to create their own personal spaces while being aligning more with the expectations of offline communities, they apply the security features of Whatsapp such as, *who can see* their 'profile photo', and'status updates'. By applying security features, the participants shared that, only close friends could access to see their profile picture and status updates. And those who are likely to create trouble by silently observing what the young women are doing in WhatsApp are being hidden from seeing their online profiles. The participants frequently update the privacy features of WhatsApp to ensure it is working properly. As mentioned earlier, Shirin states, "I am so disturbed by the nature of my cousin's exaggerated discussion that not only I exited the group but even blocked them all. Later, I unblock them as they are my 'relatives'. Sometimes whenever I upload any group or individual photo, I block them for 24 hours. Sometimes I unblock them depending on the kind of photo I intend to give as Whatsapp status. I am not going to stop myself from clicking and posting photos, nor 'am I going to stop myself from expressing what I like."Thus, instead of opting out of her social media account, she navigates the cultural and religious expectations by utilising the privacy settings of online space while being experimenting herown self. Marie who was harassed on an online platformstates, "I stop posting photos online for a brief period. Seldom do I give photo as my Whatsapp status but whenever I do so, I blur it with the available filter depending on what I want to show to others." Yumnah stubbornly states that despite her friends trying to correct her dress, she do not change her way. "Whenever I post photos, I do not hide myself with an emoji, rather I turn my face away from the mobile camera. Other participants see their favourite celebrities put emojis on their newbornbaby's face. They take inspiration from it, evaluate its utility and start to put smiley emojis on their photo to avoid familial tension and discussion and online surveillance.The use of emoji and other creative modes of self-presentation serves as a site of women's agency by subtly undermining the online audiences' authority and discourses about female behaviour and appearance. Kiara who believes that evil eye has caused her strained-marital relation refrains from using evil eye emoji and instead use captions such as *Mashallah* (God has willed it) and *Inshallah* (if God wills it) to ward offan envy eye. She is less concern with the challenges that other participants faced but was more anxious of the costs of social media gaze. To be sure, other participants too share that they 'pay careful attention' or'worry' about and or at least contemplate when sharing 'happy moments' on any social media as 'they can never know what kind of energy the person gazing at has'. All the research participants spoken to,

express that they feel vulnerable and avoid sharing certain things as the bad energy of the online world translates into the offline world. Further, it is more common for the participants to be socialise by family members, peer and romantic partners of the costs and rewards of social media use, its restriction and access.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings highlight that young Muslim women use subtle social cue that is, emojis in WhatsApp statusas a mid-way to navigate the conundrum of socio-cultural, religious, and psychological factors. Though social media is a great connector, yet it is a tricky terrain to manoeuvre. The research participants' narratives illuminate a layered and complex issue to what appears on the surface of simply putting emojis.The narratives show that certain key strategic choices are made to display how fragile the matter of trust is in an online world. Further, the findings also highlight that since their online identities is an extension of their offline identities, they constantly reflect backon how much and what kind of information and images they need to share to uphold the reputation of their family reputation in a digital world. Again, with the development of technology, self-knowledgeable changes have occurred in the behaviour of young minds. Inan online social interactions they are constantly require to safeguard their privacy. Contrary to earlier assumptions that technology makes it easier for users to leave their bodies behind and assume new and alternative identities (Subramanyam & Smahelcited in Mishra & Basu,2014), paradoxically, the findings reveal that Muslim women in digital space face community surveillance in deciding what to post. Actual repercussions of posting made them better understand whom to hide and from what post. This suggests a conscious contextualdecision-making process involve in posting processes. Therefore, front stage behaviour of using emojis indirectly function as backstage performance in the process of impression management whereby"actors attempt to buffer themselves from the deterministic demands that surround them" (Goffman, 1959). Thus,the participants adopt social and technical ways to distance themselves from relatives and unknown faces who violate their privacy and pose as a potential threat. All the participants agree on common grounds that since families and relatives are there in WhatsApp, they remain vigilant of the type of photos they upload on social networking sites.This entails participants' heightened attention to their actions and thoughts when constituting themselves as subjects of their action (Duffy & Chan, 2019). By asserting their right of self-expression in social media platforms, these young women are purposefully resisting the social authority by creating a space of their own in the world of internet.This consciousness pave the way for women to opt for a safer option-emoji to avoid the tedious process of 'offline patriarchal constructions of femininity' in an online settings. Thus, discussing the narratives through the lens of the dramaturgical model of Erving Goffman, helps to understand the repercussions of constant monitoring which necessitates the utilisation of pre-emptive privacy techniques for the crafted impressions they want to *give off*.

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