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Digital Visibility and Gendered Boundaries: Fashion influencers in Quetta and the Reconfiguration of Social Norms

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Abstract

Fashion influencers and models have become key cultural intermediaries in Pakistan's digital landscape. Yet most scholarship centers on metropolitan hubs (Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad), leaving conservative, culturally distinctive regions such as Quetta under-examined. This exploratory qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews with eight influencers and models in Quetta to understand how they negotiate gender norms, social stigma and industry constraints. Thematic analysis reveals four clusters: (1) gendered expectations and social surveillance; (2) professional/personal risks and thin markets; (3) social media as both empowerment and strain; and (4) resilience strategies (peer networks, "calculated authenticity," selective self-disclosure). Results align with broader literature on gendered digital labor and influencer authenticity, while the Quetta context amplifies risk and narrows legitimate expressive space. Policy and industry implications include stronger cyber-harassment enforcement, mentoring pipelines, fair contracting, and gender-sensitive digital entrepreneurship training.

Keywords: Balochistan, Digital Labor, Fashion Influencers, Gender Norms, Pakistan, Social Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, social platforms have intertwined with fashion scenes to shape aesthetics, identity performances and commercial influence. Influencers curate personas and communities, mediate brand culture, and often test the limits of "appropriate" gendered self-presentation (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016). In Pakistan, this dynamic unfolds in ways deeply conditioned by local norms, media ecologies, and regulation. However, research attention has skewed toward large cities; the micro-ecologies of conservative regions like Quetta remain poorly documented.

Baluchistan's gender order is structured by tribal custom, religious authority, security concerns, and rural-urban divides. Recent

development evidence for Quetta and Balochistan shows low female labor force participation, high informality, and home-based work dominance conditions that constrain women's public visibility and economic autonomy (World Bank, 2023; Balochistan Gender Parity Report, 2024). These structural factors shape the viability and risks of fashion/modeling careers and of being "visible" online. [World Bank+2Dawn+2](#)

This article addresses that gap by asking: How do fashion influencers and models in Quetta (1) understand and position themselves amid cultural constraint; (2) confront industry and social risks; and (3) contest, conform to, or subtly rework gender norms? In doing so, it contributes a regionally grounded account of gendered digital labor and influencer practice in Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Influencers, authenticity, and attention

Scholarship treats influencer culture as a nexus of visibility, intimacy, and aspirational labor. Marwick (2015) describes "Instafame" as the curation of luxury aesthetics for attention economies, while Abidin (2016) conceptualizes "subversive frivolity," showing how selfies operate as commercial yet reflexive practices that can both reproduce and tweak norms. The gendered burdens of visibility performance, policing, and precarity are captured by "digital double bind" analyses of self-enterprise (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). Credibility and Para social dynamics shape consumption outcomes (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). [ScienceDirect+3Duke University Press+3SAGE Journals+3](#)

2.2 Gendered digital labor and risk

Gendered digital labor literature highlights unequal pressures on women and gender-nonconforming creators to be "relatable yet respectable," with authenticity carefully calibrated to platform cultures and social sanctions (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). Risk is not only reputational; online harassment and cyberstalking are well-documented and disproportionately affect young women (Lenhart et al., 2016). In Pakistan, these risks are refracted through evolving legal regimes (e.g., PECA 2016) and debates on intensified social-media regulation, which alter the compliance and safety landscape for creators. [Reuters+4SAGE Journals+4Taylor & Francis Online+4](#)

2.3 Digital adoption and platform ecologies in Pakistan

Pakistan's digital penetration and social-media adoption continue to expand, increasing the potential rewards and scrutiny for creators. Recent national reports document growth in internet and social-media use, shaping creator markets and audience exposure. [DataReportal – Global Digital Insights+1](#)

2.4 Balochistan/Quetta: constraints and opportunities

Quetta's labor market and gender norms are distinctive. A World Bank Quetta Urban Household Survey shows that only 16% of working-age women participate in the labor market and that over 78% of employed women are home-based workers, limiting mobility and public-facing occupations (World Bank, 2023; Dawn, 2023). The Balochistan Gender

Parity Report (2024) further documents wide gender gaps in employment and leadership, alongside pervasive informality. These structural realities shape the costs/benefits of influencer visibility, collaborations, and offline activations (events, shoots, shows). [World Bank+2Dawn+2](#)

Gaps: Research on Pakistan's influencer economy largely emphasizes metropolises; regionally specific, qualitative accounts from conservative cities (e.g., Quetta) are scarce. There is limited analysis of how local gender regimes, safety concerns, and thin creative markets inflect influencer practice and identity work.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

An exploratory qualitative design was chosen to elicit lived experience and meaning-making among fashion influencers/models in Quetta. Semi-structured interviews enabled depth and comparability, complemented by field notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Sampling and participants

Given the small, partially hidden population, we used purposive sampling to recruit eight participants (5 influencers; 3 working models; 5 women, 3 men), active primarily on Instagram/TikTok, with 2–5 years' experience. This size is appropriate for exploratory thematic saturation.

3.3 Data collection

Interviews (45–70 minutes) were conducted via secure online calls. Guides covered: career pathways; gendered reception; safety/harassment; platform strategies; collaborations; mental health; and future aspirations.

3.4 Analysis and trustworthiness

Audio recordings were transcribed; we applied Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis (familiarization, coding, theme generation/review, definition, reporting). Analyst triangulation (researcher and peer coder) and an audit trail (Excel codebook, memos) supported credibility and dependability. [SAGE Journals](#)

4. RESULTS

4.1 Demographic profile

Participants were aged 22–28 (M≈25), mostly with bachelor's degrees. Instagram was the primary platform, reflecting its centrality to fashion micro-creator markets in Pakistan (DataReportal, 2025). [DataReportal – Global Digital Insights](#)

4.2 Themes

Theme 1: Gender norms and social surveillance

Pressure to conform. Women described dense scrutiny from family networks and online audiences concerning clothing, demeanor, and venue choices: *"It feels like I'm always being watched for crossing a line"* (R3).

Masculinity scripts: Male creators struggled to experiment with "soft" or androgynous styling without incurring accusations of unseriousness or failed masculinity: *"If I try a softer look, I'm told to 'man up'"* (R5).

Interpretation. These accounts echo national and regional constraints regarding women's mobility and public presence, and rigid masculinity norms (World Bank, 2023; Balochistan Gender Parity Report, 2024). [World Bank+1](#)

Theme 2: Industry thinness and risk

Thin market / few intermediaries. Participants reported limited local brands, stylists, and agencies, pushing them to DIY production, self-styling, and cross-city remote collaborations.

Harassment and safety: All women and one man reported online harassment (sexualized DMs, doxxing threats). Several described offline risks (unwanted approaches during shoots; stalking after public appearances). Coping includes comment moderation, blocking, private accounts for family, and "decoy" contact info. These patterns align with evidence that young women face disproportionate online abuse (Lenhart et al., 2016) and that Pakistan's regulatory environment is in flux (PECA 2016; proposed tighter controls). [Data & Society+2na.gov.pk+2](#)

Theme 3: Platforms as empowerment and strain

Voice and reach. Instagram/TikTok provides a stage for identity work, client discovery, and income diversification (affiliates, shoots, micro-sponsorships).

Mental load: Always-on engagement, metrics pressure, and hostile comments produce stress and emotional labor; two participants described taking "detox breaks." The empowerment/strain duality resonates with global analyses of aspirational labor and authenticity management (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). [Duke University Press+2SAGE Journals+2](#)

Theme 4: Resilience and "calculated authenticity"

Support networks. Participants lean on peer groups (local WhatsApp circles, creator collectives), sharing safety tips, client vetting, and rate cards.

Calculated authenticity: Many curate "relatable but careful" personas: limited personal details, conservative styling for local shoots, or separate public/private accounts. This reflects Abidin's (2016) notion of "subversive frivolity" and strategic self-presentation under constraint. [SAGE Journals](#)

5. Discussion

5.1 Continuities with global influencer scholarship

Quetta influencers exhibit familiar logics of aesthetic curation, parasocial proximity, and authenticity work (Marwick, 2015; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Their practices show reflexive calibration of persona and boundary management (Abidin, 2016). [Duke University Press+2ScienceDirect+2](#)

5.2 What the Quetta context adds

The novelty lies in how local gender regimes and market thinness intensify costs: visibility triggers higher social sanction risk, while a small ecosystem limits safe, professionalized pathways (e.g., vetted agencies, formal contracts). Structural evidence low FLFP, dominance of home-

based work, and high informality helps explain why public-facing creative labor remains contentious and precarious for women (World Bank, 2023; Balochistan Gender Parity Report, 2024). [World Bank+1](#)

5.3 Regulation, safety, and chilling effects

While PECA 2016 provides cybercrime provisions, enforcement gaps and evolving regulation generate uncertainty for creators. Intense content policing or platform restrictions can chill expression and reduce livelihood opportunities, even as stronger harassment enforcement is urgently needed. Balancing speech protection with anti-abuse enforcement is a policy tension documented in Pakistan's current debates. [na.gov.pk+1](#)

5.4 Theoretical implications: Gendered digital labor under constraint

Findings extend gendered digital labor theory by showing how "calculated authenticity" becomes a survival strategy in contexts of communal surveillance and weak industry infrastructure. The double bind intensifies: be visible to grow; be careful to survive (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). [Taylor & Francis Online](#)

6. CONCLUSION

Fashion influencers and models in Quetta are boundary negotiators at the intersection of tradition and modernity. They expand expressive possibilities and open micro-entrepreneurial paths, yet face heightened harassment, thin professional ecosystems, and normative policing. Their strategies peer support, selective self-disclosure; conservative styling contexts illustrate locally adapted authenticity. Strengthening institutional supports, legal protection, and industry professionalism could convert precarious visibility into sustainable cultural and economic participation.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 For policymakers and regulators

1. **Enforce anti-harassment laws online** (timely reporting channels; specialized cyber cells; survivor-centered processes).
2. **Clarify PECA enforcement** to protect creators' safety without disproportionate censorship. Multi-stakeholder consultation with creator groups is essential. [na.gov.pk](#)

7.2 For industry (brands, agencies, platforms)

1. **Fair contracting:** standardized model/influencer agreements; transparent deliverables; prompt payment.
2. **Safety protocols:** verified client booking, chaperone options, venue risk assessment.
3. **Mentor pipelines:** pair early-stage Quetta creators with experienced professionals nationwide.

7.3 For higher education, NGOs, and municipal actors

1. **Digital entrepreneurship training** (rate-setting, negotiation, IP, tax basics, analytics).
2. **Gender-sensitivity and online safety workshops** for creators and families.

3. **Micro-grants** for safe content spaces (community studios; women-only time slots).

7.4 For creators

1. **Operational security:** 2FA, separate contact channels, selective geotagging, post-event uploads.
2. **Community standards:** peer vetting lists of reliable clients; shared rate guides; emergency protocols.
3. **Well-being:** structured screen breaks; moderation tools; boundary statements in bios.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Small-N and purposive sampling limit generalizability. Future work should (a) compare Quetta with other provincial cities, (b) include audience studies to trace norm perception shifts, and (c) use longitudinal designs to capture career arcs and policy impacts over time.

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