
Online Social Media, Image Culture, and Marginalization of Muslim Women

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Abstract

This paper joins the growing body of HCI literature that focuses on Muslim Feminism and explores the impact of online image sharing platforms on the lives of Muslim women in Bangladesh. Based on a nine month long ethnographic study in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, this paper documents how digital image mediated online social media culture generates different forms of marginalizations and victimizes the women with religious values. Drawing from a rich body of literature in critical image theory and Islamic feminism, this paper demonstrates a subaltern experience of using social media in the Global South.

Author Keywords

Muslim Feminism; Image-Sharing; Social Media; Global South

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI);

Introduction

The rapid growth of digitization and ubiquitous computing has increased the number of active social media users in Bangladesh [7]. Availability of cheap smartphones, affordable data packages offered by cellular network companies, and increasing social demands have motivated people

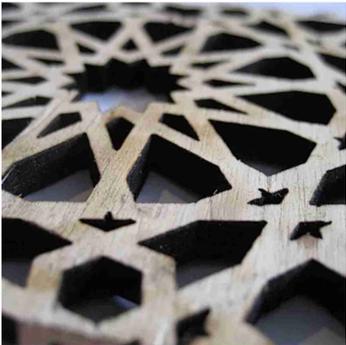


Figure 1: Profile pictures collected from our participants' social media profile.

from different socio-economic classes of Bangladesh to become active in the online world[8]. Like any other developed or developing countries, sharing images and videos have become one of the most popular ways of keeping online profile alive in Bangladesh as well. Hence, everyday, Bangladeshi people share thousands of images and videos on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok [1]. This online cultural phenomenon of extensive image-sharing on social media has drawn significant attention in mainstream HCI and ICTD research [2, 9]. However, how this image sharing practice is impacting the Islamic cultural identities of women from the Global South is still understudied.

In our work, we address this gap through a nine-months long ethnographic study in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where we conducted more than 30 in-depth interviews with adult Muslim women from middle-income generating families, who are currently exposed to social media induced image-sharing culture. We document three forms of marginalizations faced by women and critically points toward the limitations of the popular image-sharing digital platforms. Finally, we explore the design implications for HCI communities to address some of the emerging concerns regarding this issue ¹.

Findings

Our data reveals a wide variety of ways how Bangladeshi women with particular religious values are getting marginalized in digital image-sharing culture. This section describes, through three cases, three different forms of marginalization that women, who practices Islamic veiling system, are facing in their day to day offline and/or online lives due to culturally insensitive designs of image sharing platforms.

¹A full paper related to this will be presented in CHI 2020 [6]

Spatial Marginalization

Case 1: Mrs. Mazeda is a 50 years old housewife living in Moghbazar with her family. She is a practising Muslim. She wears hijab, whenever she goes outside her house, or whenever a guest comes to her house. She has two daughters and one son. It is Mrs. Mazeda, who takes care of the household and the family members. Similar to many other middle-income Bangladeshi families, Mrs. Mazeda's family believes that private spaces inside a house within the family members is a culturally alien concept. Hence, most of the time during the day, all the doors of the room of their apartment are kept open. Mrs. Mazeda used to have full access to all the household spaces in her apartment all the time. However, when her son and daughters started using online social media, Mrs. Mazeda's movement inside her house started to get limited. For instance, when his son plays guitar on Facebook Live or daughters take pictures inside their house for Instagram, Mrs. Mazeda avoids being around them. She says,

"I do not know who are watching those photos or videos online. For me, it is like bringing the whole outside world into my house without maintaining any Islamic "purdah"². Hence these days, I usually try to remain within the kitchen or in my own bedroom, when they start Facebooking. I feel extremely uncomfortable to appear in photos without hijab and it is not possible for me to wear hijab all the time. Now it feels like I can not move freely even within my house." (Mrs. Mazeda, 50, Housewife)

This and many other stories from our participants demonstrate how Muslim women have been facing a threat of los-

²'cover' that women are required to maintain according to Islam



Figure 2: Top: Online product seller showing her audience a Saree on Facebook Live. **Bottom:** Product image (Jamdani Saree, collected from rural weavers) from Ms. Shetu's Facebook Page

ing their privacy at home with the wide use of social media. This has often resulted into limiting their movement, anxiety, embarrassment, and conflicts with other members of their family.

Virtual Marginalization

Ms. Taklima (18, student at a private university in Dhaka) practices Hijab in real life. On her Facebook account she uses images of flowers, trees, etc.(figure 1) instead of her face as her profile picture since anyone can view her profile anytime (her profile is not locked). She complains that since she does not use her picture as profile photo, making new friends online is becoming difficult for her nowadays. Even joining a Facebook group is difficult for her as her joining request are kept pending for a long time (sometimes never answered) compared to her friends, who exposes their faces on their profile pictures. She says,

"I understand there are lots of fake profiles on social media in Bangladesh and my profile looks like one of those at the first glance. But what else I could use as a profile picture that represents me without showing my face? I wanted to join one of the most popular "to-let for girls" groups on Facebook to find a proper accommodation near my university³. But the admin never accepted my request assuming my profile was fake." (Ms Taklima, 18, student)

Many other participants had similar complaints as Taklima's where they expressed how they are often expelled, interrogated, questioned, suspected, ridiculed, and harassed as they do not expose their faces online.

³Taklima's family lives in Kishoreganj. She migrated to Dhaka for higher education

Economic Marginalization

Mrs. Shetu (27, housewife) sells women clothing online through her Facebook page. She is trying to build up her clothing business and her targeting audience is women from 18 to 40 years old. She buys traditional women attires from different part of Bangladesh, stores those in her house, and daily posts new images of attires from her collection on her Facebook page. Her clients contacts her through Facebook Messenger if they want to buy something from her page. Once an order is made, Shetu pack the product and send it to her client's address via "Pathao" courier service. This model of small, "mom-and-pop" online business has recently received massive popularity in Bangladesh and hundreds of women are trying to financially empower themselves through these endeavours. However, as new technical features appear on Facebook, for example Facebook Story, or Facebook Live, etc., business page owners like Shetu changes their marketing strategies as well. Appearing on Facebook Live form the pages on Thursday nights (as Friday is weekend in Bangladesh) has become a new popular way of advertising and selling products. During that time Page owners appear on live in person, show 5-15 items to the viewers, answers the questions viewers have, and try to sell their products. This transition of selling products online- from posting products' images on page to appearing in person on Facebook Live- has brought a toll on Page owners like Shetu, who do not feel comfortable in appearing public to sell products. Shetu says,

"I convinced my family members about doing this online business by saying that I don't have to appear in public or a market place, where "purdah" is a big concern, to sell my products, I can do it from my home. But this new trend of selling products on Live has reduced active

viewers on my page as I do not appear on Live. For the last couple of weeks I am trying to get my page members' attention back by using Facebook Live. However, I do not appear in those videos. My 10 years old nephew shows the product and I describe the product from the back of the camera. Not knowing who is watching me terrifies me a lot." (Mrs. Shetu, 27, Housewife)

This story is similar to many other stories that our female Muslim participants shared with us. These stories demonstrate how Muslim women are often being marginalized in e-commerce over social media because of its design.

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this paper is to shed light on the struggles of Muslim, Bangladeshi women, who get marginalized in various ways by online image-sharing culture on social media. We have documented a selected set of cases that demonstrates how such marginalizations, ranging from the participants' own household to the competitive e-commerce sector, adversely impact their individual and social life. We believe, this documentation can assist HCI design communities in two possible directions: (a) designers can develop critical and speculative alternatives to challenge such emerging image-based designs and practices[3, 4], and (b) designers can emphasize more on community-based design approaches to promote local cultural narratives around Muslim identities[5].

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