

# Power, Ideology and Identity in Digital Literacy: A Sociolinguistic Study

Fatima Zafar Baig<sup>1</sup>, Wajeeha Yousaf<sup>1</sup>, Fareeha Aazam<sup>1</sup>, Sarah Shamshad<sup>2</sup>, Iqra Fida<sup>2</sup> & Muhammad Zammad Aslam<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> National College of Business administration & Economics, Multan, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup> University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan

Correspondence: Muhammad Zammad Aslam, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. E-mail: zammad.aslam@gmail.com

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## Abstract

This study investigates the significance of digital media in terms of social implications. It draws its theoretical insights from the Darvin and Norton model of investment (2015) as it gives purely a new dimension to the concept of digital literacy. The study is designed in order to evaluate some important aspects of Social media, particularly Facebook, as an important digital literacy practice. Firstly, the study examines the way power is operated in the digital mediated construction of social identities. Certain social identities position other identities and accord or refuse them power. These even shape social ideologies and identities as English-language speakers hold a privileged position in society while Urdu-language speakers are marginalized all over the world. Secondly, it explores the role of digital media in the investment of language and digital literacy practices to represent social ideologies at three different angles of marriage, adulthood and family. Having established a sampling frame consisting of nine Facebook pictorial postings from three Facebook pages, the findings suggested that the text and visual representations of Facebook postings use various linguistic features like literary devices that are playing an evident role in the representation of social ideologies.

**Keywords:** digital media, social media, Facebook, digital literacy practice, social identities, social ideologies

## 1. Introduction

Digital literacy was introduced as an attempt to capture the ways in which literacy has been changed in our digital society. According to Martin (2006), digital literacy should be regarded as an umbrella term or “framework for integrating various other literacies and skill sets.” In simple terms, digital literacy is literacy via technology. Also, Futurelab’s definition contains a subtle and situated understanding of digital literacy. It is largely about understanding and conveying meaning just like literacy, but this time mediated through a digital domain. “Digital literacy refers to the subtler and situated practices associated with being able to create, understand and communicate meaning and knowledge in a world in which these processes are increasingly mediated via digital technologies” (Futurelab, 2010).

Initially, about some 3000 years ago, the term literacy meant being an effective public speaker and being able to use the rhetorical tools of persuasion. So, basically, literacy is the sharing of meaning through language. Guttenberg redefined literacy to include reading and writing. With the invention of portable camera, educators introduced the concept of visual literacy that enhanced the significance of looking at images and understanding the way images communicate and carry meanings. When new powerful technologies were introduced with the emergence of databases, information literacy was created because new strategies for searching, finding and evaluating information were required. Media literacy followed shortly with hundreds of TV channels to choose from. Richard Lanham (1995, p. 198) suggested that “literacy” has extended its reach from old meaning “the ability to read and write” to new meaning “the ability to understand information however presented.” Moreover, the Internet, the World Wide Web, smartphones, Facebook are very recent terms. We are not only consumers but also producers of what is happening on the web and digital spaces. Not only the form of reading has been altered from books to online reading but also the material is changing from simple text to infusion of the visual into text

which has given a new dimension to literacy. Literacy needs to encompass understanding and interpretation of the visual symbols of all kinds and images.

Literacy practices are in the simplest sense ‘what people do with literacy’ (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000, p. 7) and are internal to individuals whilst at the same time being social processes that connect people with one another. Digital literacy practice can be defined as the way people use digital texts in order to represent and construct their attitudes, feelings, and social relationships.

### *1.1 Statement of the Problem*

With the increase in technological development, today’s generation seems to be encapsulated in digital culture. Activities like social networking, texting, video streaming and others offered by digital media are a basic element of their daily routine. These activities are important digital literacy practices and they have greater social implications on people engaged in with. People, in most circumstances, lack the insight in how to gain benefit from being involved in such activities. More specifically, they do not really know how to capitalize on technology. The text of digital literacy practices can be created, viewed, distributed, modified and preserved on digital electronics devices for a much longer time. This text has a significant, wide-ranging and complex impact on society and culture in a way that it represents and constructs various social ideologies. This current study is an attempt to find out the social meanings the text of digital literacy practices carry that play a vital role in the positioning of social identities. It concentrates on how these social identities are positioned in certain ways by virtue of their gender, race, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation. It demonstrates how certain social identities position other identities and accord or refuse them power. Nevertheless, the truth is that today’s generation appears to be unaware of this vital role digital media is playing. The most common problem is to understand the nature of digital literacy practice and its different linguistic, discursive and social implications on people. So, this study tries to develop a critical digital literacy in order to provide insight regarding operation of power in digital media. Also, it focuses upon how digital media shape our ways of thinking and constructs various ideologies.

### *1.2 Objectives of the study*

- 1) To examine how power is operated in the digital mediated construction of social identities.
- 2) To explore the role of digital media in the investment of language and digital literacy practices to represent social ideologies.

### *1.3 Research Questions*

- 1) How power is operated in the digital mediated construction of social identities?
- 2) How digital media invest in language and digital literacy practices to represent social ideologies?

### *1.4 Literature Review*

#### *1.4.1 Critical Digital Literacy*

Pangrazio (2016) formulated a critical digital design that served as a political model of digital literacy. He drew his inception from New London’s Group (1996) design which is considered as a basic constituent of literary education. According to Pangrazio, the understandings of discourse, ideology and power provide support to this model in the critique. This critical framework, apart from laying its focus on specific technologies, refers to individualized practice. It lays emphasis upon personal position that is a mirror of one’s emotions and beliefs. Recognizing that technology or internet and multi model features of digital tool are analyzed side by side, it evaluates the way systems of power and privilege are reproduced by these structures. It connects personal responses to digital texts with wider ideological concerns as it considers ideology to be deeply rooted into affective experiences of texts. Aiming of creating an authentic framework for critical digital design, Pangrazio is recently working on the feasibility of this framework that incorporates visualization, transcendentalism and self-reflection.

According to Santo (2013), digital spaces are tractable and one can easily reform and rearrange these spaces. This is due to the logical relationship between social and technical. So, he devised the term hacker literacies while considering the importance of critical digital literacy. Learners reconfigure with technologies and counter patterns of control through powerful entities by being as hackers. Dooley and Exley (2015) elaborated this notion by stating that with the help of afterschool digital programs, the blogosphere, watchdog groups and voices in academia, these learners gain training. Then, by being part of the subcultures, they are able to challenge the hegemonic control of established sites.

Merchant (2007), upon considering Giroux’s (1994) perspective of critical pedagogy, identified critical digital

literacy as an essential part of literacy education. Digital spaces must be nurtured, preserved and understood in relation to their constructed nature. Educational institutions own the liability for developing critical lens among learners. They promote the availability of the tools so that they can be able to analyze various discourses. Such discourses focus on topics like occurrence of power relationships due to inequities in social circumstances. There is a need for learners to indulge in digital spaces so that critical digital literacy promotes capabilities of criticizing dominant discourses in them that are available in such spaces.

Similarly, Jenkins (2006) investigated that learners must develop a critical ability to analyze the information shared in the digital spaces. This perspective, extracted from a report of twenty-first century based upon media education, elaborates the importance of critical thinking in order to get involved within participatory cultures. Considering new media literacies as a social skill, Jenkins explains that critical awareness allows learners to comprehend the way media structures our worldviews in relation to its conventions. This will enhance the interpretative ability among learners regarding the quality of availability of information on technology.

#### 1.4.2 Digital Media and Digital texts

Digital media incorporates multiple literacy practices for various social purposes. Such practices promote engagement among users. They are concerned with hybridity, vocabulary and other textual features. Hybridization involves production of new text forms through reconstruction and blending of literate cultural practices. While concerning textual features, Black (2009) explained the creative production of texts by female users of online fanfiction sites. By disregarding definite social patterns, these users primarily focused upon modified textual patterns by investment in linguistic resources.

Lee (2007) researched upon computer-mediated communication and explored the presence of new textual practices such as lexical choices, language-based shortenings and improper verb forms leading towards grammatical mistakes. The study data contained 70,000-word corpus of e-mail and instant messages texts. The population of study involved users of online text from multilingual Cantonese youth of Hong Kong. He explained that there are various ecological factors that influence language of instant messages text.

#### 1.4.3 Digital Media and Power

Sanford and Maddil (2006) studied digital practices of youth in online spaces. Their main focus was the patterns of power and marginalization that were conveyed through digital practices. Through a case study regarding adolescent males' engagement in video games, they explained that videogames play a prominent role in imparting knowledge, intertextuality and text design. This study also highlighted that such digital practices of video gaming not only give opportunity to inhibit institutional authority but also strengthen hegemonic representation of masculinity.

Challenging implicit and explicit social messages incorporated in digital media is a main element in various critical media researches. One such critical media project, *Exploring Freedom*, was demonstrated by Domica (2006). This project was concerned with fifth grade students who were trained in interpretation and evaluation of multimedia sources (websites, books, magazines and newspapers). It placed special focus on the multimedia texts (editorials, films, reports, poetry and news broad casts) present in such sources. The main aim of the project was to develop understanding towards critical media approach so that students could learn to act positively against social issues involving unequal power relations.

#### 1.4.4 Digital Media and Identities

According to a study by McGinnis and colleagues (2007), online spaces can serve as a means for meaning construction, identity negotiations and digital literacy practices. The three case studies presented demonstrated that digital multimodal literacy practices represent and construct transnational identities. They showed how transnational youth interacts with diverse media modes and multiple language forms in their online sites in order to represent their differing identities as youth along with contest their positioning.

Norton (2010) conducted a comparative analysis of three studies regarding English language learners in Pakistan, Uganda and Canada. The analysis suggested that investment of language by learners in Pakistan is similar to investment in identities because of their ownership over the language. The Canadian learners invested in literacy practices to construct readers' identities. The Ugandan female learners invested in digital tools and literacy activities to disclose restricted identity choices available for them to adapt by their social context.

The above-mentioned studies were somehow concerned with the role of users while operating digital spaces. They focused on usage of digital skills in users during socialization and communication with other users. The very process of socialization and communication enable them to evaluate their own identities with respect to other identities in digital environment. They are also able to relate various ideologies respective to their sense of

their own evaluated identities. These studies were based upon the importance of empowering critical digital skills among users with major focus upon development of the ability to deploy digital tools, internalize the digital conventions and utilize creative textual features effectively. Comparatively, the present research was conducted to look at already present literacy practices in digital spaces. It highlights the significance and role of language of digital media in revealing various ideologies and relevant identities. It was undertaken to foreshadow the need of enhancing digital skills among users with primary focus upon incorporation of the ability to deconstruct and make judgments about literacy practices of digital resources in digital media.

#### 1.4.5 Critical Digital Literacy Framework

This research draws its theoretical insights from the Darwin and Norton model of investment (2015) and it gives purely a new dimension to the concept of digital literacy. Darwin and Norton (2015) consider that investment is a connection formed among identity, capital, and ideology (See Figure 1). This framework is a continuation of theories of identity and investment as formulated in Norton's earlier work (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2013). Being engaged in private places, learners negotiate among online and offline worlds, thus, ideologies become evident as a consequence. In this way, this framework is important in conveying the truths of digital age. This Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment (Figure 1) analyzes the role of power in social networks. It focuses on three main perspectives. Firstly, it looks at the way the learners allocate themselves across spaces proficiently. Secondly, it explains how ideologies, while being in competition, play the role of construction of learner's identities. Lastly, the course of action of various intrinsic patterns of control, occurring in institutional structures, in creation of susceptibility for social, economic and cultural capitals is examined through this model.

Darvin and Norton (2015) present their notion of modifying such criticality and suggest of developing a *sens pratique* or practical sense that will allow learners to know the "rules of the game". In other words, they will be able to evaluate that operation of power in digitally mediated spaces. Considering the insights of Bourdieu (1986), they proved that this particular practical sense will enable learners in multiple ways. Primarily, they will be able to internalize the rules and norms of particular communicative situation. Also, they will efficiently transpose linguistic codes and practices while shifting fluidly across spaces themselves. Ultimately, they will gain the insight of transforming and criticizing the digital spaces through the usage of linguistic and nonlinguistic resources. Thus, these techniques are helpful in honing their critical capabilities if repeatedly performed. The recognition skill regarding authentic news sources is also imparted among learners because of the awareness of linguistic and nonlinguistic features of online spaces.



Figure 1. Darwin and Norton's 2015 model of investment

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

The study adopted exploratory design. In such research designs, truth is multi layered and multi-dimensional. Furthermore, qualitative method was used to collect and analyze the data. The population of this study was Facebook pages. Facebook is one of social networking site in social media and social media is a part of digital media. The digital text in Facebook posts is an important digital literacy practice which bears social implications.

### 2.2 Sampling

The sampling of study was consisted of Facebook postings. Therefore, by keeping in view the aim of our

research, the sample has been drawn through completely randomized sampling which is a type of probability sampling. The data were collected within a time frame of 15th August 2017 to 30th August 2017 from three Facebook pages; Khabees Orat, The Hadharam Movement, Sarcamistan. Among all the posts from this time period, three pictorial postings from each of the three pages were randomly selected.

The Facebook page, Khabees Orat, is being run by a woman and was created on 4 July, 2015. The purpose of this page is to reveal the truth of the society in a way that may be offensive for some people. This is because various postings of this page prefer one gender over another. Moreover, it has been clearly mentioned by the creator that this page is not meant to entertain people but rather offend them. This elaborates the aspect of the extent of this page in exposing the reality of society.

The Facebook page, The Hadharam Movement, aims to present different identities through various postings in an entertaining manner. The page's impressum mentions: "The Hadharam Movement (THM) is not just a Page, it is a drug, you'll find admins who'll make your day in Few minutes." Furthermore, this page is being run by a Pakistani, so, majority postings in this page is regarding Pakistan's culture, society etc. It also includes various tweets as pictorial postings and few of them are also part of my sample.

The main purpose of the page, Sarcamistan, is to post such postings that are filled with mockery and sarcasm. This page is being run by two men named Safeer Ansari and Awais Ahmad Khan. Also, the concern of this page is to reflect various social identities in Pakistani society as the name 'Pakistan' is reformed into 'Sarcamistaan' intentionally to convey the message that the people of this country own sarcastic attitudes and use sarcastic talks.

### 3. Data Analysis

This following analysis, keeping in mind the ideologies Facebook postings represent, has been elaborated. Social identities are identified and the role of power in positioning them is explored. Finally, linguistic analysis of text has been done in order to analyze the digital literacy practices present in Facebook pictorial postings which are a part of digital media. The analysis is divided into three major themes: marriage, adulthood and family. These themes are devised in accordance with the represented social ideologies.

#### 3.1 Marriage

Marriage is an important part of a person's life. Since these pictorial postings are taken from a page run by Pakistanis, so, these postings also depict the social beliefs prevailing in the Pakistani society regarding marriage.

Table 1. Marriage

| Main Text                               | Translation                                 |
|---|---|
| Jahez mangte waqt mazheb bhool jata hai | When demanding dowry, religion is forgotten |
| Haq meher likhtay waqt yad a jata hai   | While writing Haq meher, it is remembered   |



Figure 2. Marriage

Text 1:

Social ideology

The text reveals the social norm of dowry and demands of groom and his family that are a part of marriage

ceremonies in Pakistan.

Identities

Husband (dominant)

Wife (subservient)

Literacy practice

The discourse style of Figure 2 is affective one as the subject matter, that is, the two social ideologies (dowry and Haq meher) are disclosed in the beginning instead of in the end part of the lines. This reveals that the emphasis and stress is placed towards the subject matter. Also, language seemed to be organized in a fixed pattern with rhyming scheme in the end. This has heightened the impact of the social norms implicated in the text. Moreover, the husband is standing in a way that he is enveloping the wife, thus, highlighting the dominant position he acquires in the society. The wife, on the other hand, is sitting and seems reserved, thus, signifying her recessive position.

Table 2. Marriage

| Main Text   | Translation   |
|---|---|
| Agar pore shehr ki larkion ke rishtay dekhne se<br>apko fursat mil gai ho tou yeh ainak laga ke apne<br>langoor jaise baitay pay bhi gor farma lein!! | If you have spared yourself from looking for<br>girls from the whole city, then wear these glasses<br>and observe your monkey-faced son!! |



Figure 3. Marriage

Text 2:

Social ideology

The text reveals the social belief of setting uncanny standards by a mother-in-law for her daughter-in-law

Identities

Mother-in-law (dominant)

Single girls (subservient)

Literacy practice

The word monkey-faced in the Figure 3 reveals the real image of the boy along with extreme frustration of a rejected girl. The action of this girl ordering to wear spectacles explains that mother-in-law always disregard their own condition. Moreover, they are supposed to peek at their own necks first than finding flaws in other girls. It is a simple sentence, thus, is emphasizing the impact of social ideology present in it. The double exclamation mark, at the end, has also intensified this particular social aspect.

Table 3. Marriage

| Main Text   | Translation   |
|---|---|
| Jahan dafatir main mard hazrat ki duty ke auqaat<br>main kami kar di jati hai, wahan khawatein ki<br>kitchen main duty double ho jati hai | When duty timings are reduced in offices<br>for respected males, the duty of females<br>is doubled in kitchen |



Figure 4. Marriage

Text 3:

Social ideology

The text reveals the submissive social role of wives on holidays.

Identities

Husband (dominant)

Wife (subservient)

Literacy practice

There is a presence of binary opposition in the text of Figure 4 as two opposite ideas are being conveyed; the former is lessened duty while the latter is doubled duty. Moreover, some sort of rhythm is present at the end of the textual pattern of these two ideas. This has heightened the overall effect of the ideology of this pictorial posting. The word 'males' is qualified by an adjective, 'respected'. Irony is used here because men, apparently, don't give respect to women who give double time in kitchen. Also, it is a conditional sentence rather than a simple sentence. The purpose of a conditional sentence is to express factual implications and their consequences, thus, the presence of the male dominance in household premises is further confirmed.

### 3.2 Adulthood

Relatives play an essential social role in the life of individuals of Pakistani society in a way that they are in most cases unsupportive and have competitive attitude.

Table 4. Adulthood

| Main Text                                 | Translation                                    |
|---|--|
| Interviewer: so why should we hire you?   |  |
| Me: ab ghar walon se paise nhi mange jate | Me: Now I cannot ask for money from my parents |



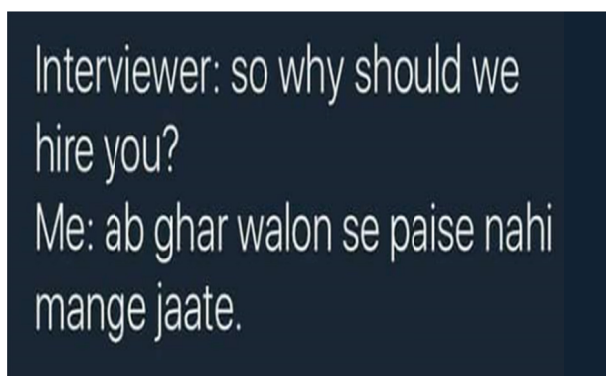


Figure 5. Adulthood

Text 1:

Social ideology

The text reveals the submissive social role of a non-earning adult of a family in the society.

Identities

Parents (dominant)

Non-earning adult (subservient)

Literacy practice

The text in the Figure 5 is in the form of a dialogue which is not only a source of engaging the reader's attention but also signifies the importance of the ideology highlighted in it. The second line, which is the reply of the adult is specifically in Urdu language, is empowering the need of the message to be conveyed. As, Urdu is the national language of Pakistan, so, its use here is creating an ease for the people to comprehend the hidden meaning.

Table 5. Adulthood

| Main Text  | Translation   |
|--|---|
| 'Beta tmhari parhaai kab khatam horahi hai?' is the new way of asking 'Beta tmhari shaadi kab horahi hai?' | 'Dear, when are your studies going to complete' is the new way of asking 'Dear, when are you going to get married.' |



Figure 6. Adulthood

Text 2:



Social ideology

The text reveals a social norm of early marriage.

Identities

Relatives (dominant)

Adult (subservient)

Literacy practice

Upon considering the textual layout of Figure 6, the presence of a literary device, transliteration, is interpreted. It is a technique of using alphabets of English language to write the words of Urdu. A blend of Urdu and English words is present in the posting and the purpose behind this is to highlight the appealing effect of the underlying meanings of the posting. In addition, particular social dialogues are incorporated to form a factual statement. This has also helped in enforcing the social ideology present in the pictorial posting. The word 'dear' signifies irony as the inquirer of such questions, relatives, mean to mock and criticize the one being inquired.

### 3.3 Family

Family is an important social institution. It plays a major role in providing framework of social values to each of its members.



Figure 7. Family

Text 1:

Social ideology

The text reveals a social belief of Parents' right to plan marriages of their children.

Identities

Parents (dominant)

Child (subservient)

Literacy practice

The style of literary text of Figure 7 is such that the core message of this text is disclosed in the end. This helps creating an overall emphasizing effect and intensifies the importance of social ideology pointed in the post. The last caption in hash tag further signifies the presence of social norm in Pakistan. Furthermore, in the end part of the two sentences a punctuation tool, ellipsis is present. Ellipsis is a set of three dots but here in the post is an occurrence of two dots at intervals. This demonstrates that Facebook postings often show deviations from grammatical rules. The ellipsis shows a substantial pause of hesitation. This hesitation can show uncertainty, irony, humor, and other effects. Thus, the occurrence of this punctuation mark has contributed in creating overall humorous and ironical impact in the core message present in it.

Table 6. Family

| Main Text  | Translation |
|--|-------------|
| Me: Can I go on vacations with my friends?             |             |
| Mom: You can go with your husband when you're married. |             |



Figure 8. Family

Text 2:

Social ideology

The text reveals a social value of restrictions for daughter upon demanding independence.

Identities

Parents (dominant)

Daughter (subservient)

Literacy practice

The textual analysis of Figure 8 unfolds the importance of conveying social meanings through dialogue writing. This feature has made the implicit message of this post interesting and lively. The face of the daughter is zoomed in to show his shocked senses. The closed tightened lips signify her inability to contradict.

## my mom deciding who to compare me to today

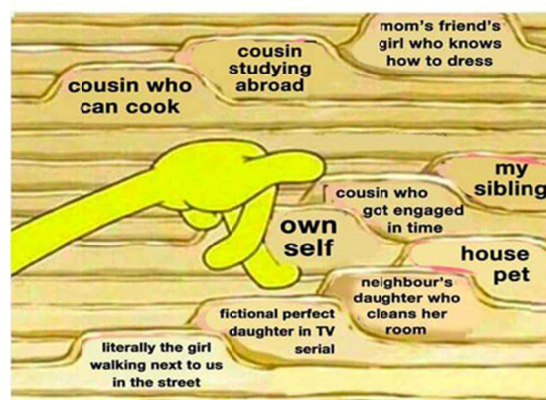


Figure 9. Family

Text 3:

Social ideology

The text reveals a social norm of mother comparing their child with his age fellows of the society.

Identities

Mother (dominant)

Child (subservient)

Literacy practice

The textual layout of Figure 9 is an attractive one as different points or parameters are set in various boxes. The texts in the boxes are concise. Absence of long sentences has created an overall emphatic effect towards the ideology represented in this pictorial posting. Furthermore, the text “house pet” in the posting elaborates the notion regarding how recessive a child’s position is considered in mother’s eyes.

Table 7. Family

| Main Text   | Translation  |
|---|--|
| I hate parents who talk to their kids like ‘chal beta bahar ja kar play kro, aur sand se mat play karna warna hands dirty ho jayainge.’ | I hate parents who talk to their kids like: “Go and play outside child, but beware not to play with sand or else your hands would look dirty.” |



زوار دی شیخ  
@ZawarDeShaykk

I hate parents who talk to their kids like  
"chala beta bahar ja kar play karo, aur  
sand se mat play karna, warna hands  
dirty ho jayainge".

2:45 am · 14 Jul 17

Figure 10. Family

Text 4:

### Social ideology

The text reveals a social norm of code-switching in native language.

### Identities

English language speakers (dominant)

Urdu language speakers (subservient)

### Literacy practice

The textual layout of this Figure 10 is such that the exact words of the parents are quoted here in order to create an emphasizing effect upon the social norm of code switching being signified from the text. Also, it is important to notice that people who practice this norm tend to use verbs and nouns of English language more in their speech rather than conjunctions or other parts of speech. By doing so, they mean to create a more impressive impact over the listeners because core message is delivered through verbs and nouns rather than other parts of speech.

## 4. Discussion

The main idea behind this study was to assess the power that is exercised in the digital mediated constructions of social identities. It proves that certain social identities are positioned as dominant entities by virtue of gender and social relations. These dominant social identities are responsible for positioning other identities by refusing them power. It demonstrates how social identities like husband, mother-in-law, parents, relatives and English-language speakers hold a privileged position in society while making wife, single girls, children/daughter, adults and Urdu-language speakers marginalized respectively.

This study has clarified the imperative role of digital media in the investment of language and digital literacy practices to represent social ideologies. The three angles deduced from the represented ideologies were: marriage, adulthood and family. Such social ideologies include social norms, values and beliefs prevalent in Pakistani society. Dowry and demands of groom and his family, uncanny standards of mother-in-law for single girls, submissive role of wife on holidays, early marriage, restrictions for daughter and code-switching in native language are some of social ideologies represented from the literacy practices used in Facebook pictorial postings. The conclusive findings also manifest the fact that the text and visual representations of Facebook postings use various linguistic features. The use of literary figures like transliteration and ellipsis in some postings are playing an evident role in representing the social ideology. There is careful selection of words, choice of language and each text carries a specific ideology for the people. The position of core words is also important as most of them are placed in the beginning of the lines, hence, constituting towards ideological representation. Thus, digital literacy practices have social implications upon people.

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