

Coalescing of Trans-community and the Role of Social Media

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Conducted user interviews from the trans-community of Karachi, Pakistan to find and identify the social structures present on social media. Found key insights on social structures; mobile and social media usage and webs of class structures in the user group, leading to the identification of inter-contextual groups.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: human-Computer interaction, social media, trans-study, ethnography, trans-user-group, trans-community, transgender

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1 INTRODUCTION

Transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses people whose gender identity or expression does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes people who identify as transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, non-binary, and other gender-nonconforming identities.

Understanding the underlying social impacts of social media has been under study by many past and contemporary studies. We aim to study a similar problem which has been tackled before and look into the affordability of social media applications and the use of technology in bridging gaps between the trans-community. However, we aim to look past the apparent chasms and results and try to connect the disconnected webs or use the asset-based approach to identify solutions that may improve how these inter-contextual communities interact.

We aim to build on previous studies combining our understanding from the qualitative data we collect to synthesize new solutions to existing problems and create an empathetic sense of community and connectedness within the user group through participatory design. Our research question is as follows. How is social media helping in bridging gaps between the transgender community in Pakistan and how has their interaction with other groups bridged? The main research question itself requires a collection of some pre-requisite questions that were drafted before and during the interviews.

Many of our prejudices and preconceived notions were replaced by newer understandings of the community which helped us brainstorm newer approaches and gave us a fresher outlook on the problems and the interactions of the community.

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2 BACKGROUND

Around 300,000 transgender population was recorded in the 2019 census [4]. But in reality, this number is higher because many of them are unregistered in NADRA.¹ A study conducted in US stated that people of colour who identify as trans are more likely to be victims of gender-based discrimination in employment, health, and other socio-economic factors. [1]. The transgender community in Pakistan encounters substantial obstacles due to their limited acceptance within society. Their daily routines are made more arduous by societal structures. Additionally, bullying and harassment in workplaces hinder their education and career prospects. Until recently, their identities were not formally recognized. Nonetheless, the Government of Pakistan enacted the Trans Protection Act in 2018 [2] to safeguard their rights as Pakistani citizens. However, despite the implementation of National Identity Cards (NIC), many transgender individuals cannot obtain them due to the requirement for parental documents. Given that most of them live independently, this poses a significant challenge. Securing a NIC also enables them to qualify for local government income support programs. Recently, various awareness campaigns and movements have brought transgender rights issues to the forefront of mainstream media, leading to greater empathy for the community.

Unfortunately, a stigma attached to the transgender community often hinders genuine efforts to understand their issues.

3 INTENDED USER GROUP

The target population of this study is the transgender community residing in Karachi, Pakistan. Additionally, we aimed to engage with influential social media personalities from the wider Pakistani trans community, as well as allies of the community to provide an external perspective on the challenges faced by this group. Our research methodology will involve conducting in-depth interviews with members of the community and reviewing relevant literature from past studies. We already identified the underlying community which is stronger than most other groups that helped us with conducting our research aided by the asset-based participatory design.

4 RELATED WORK

There have been some studies looking at the impact of social media and studies involving participatory design based on an asset-based approach. We will mention three of these studies. These studies helped us understand some of the challenges that came up and aided in coming up with similar approaches to the issues.

4.1 Related work-1

A study conducted at the University of Michigan focused on Trans people and the use of technology for their needs [6]. Trans people who are already marginalized socially, politically and culturally, are at risk of being further marginalized at the hands of technology if these design interventions are not introduced. There are a number of mainstream apps which have either banned trans people or limited their use. The solution discussed was to follow a Participatory Design approach in designing technological interventions. This approach allowed individuals to first list down problems they face. And then secondly, visualize solutions to those issues. This design process not only helped identify broader themes of problems faced but also produced creative ideas to address these issues. The major issues under discussion were healthcare, safety, lack of resources and gender expression.

¹National Database & Registration Authority

4.2 Related work-2

The paper titled "Safe Spaces and Safe Places: Unpacking Technology-Mediated Experiences of Safety and Harm with Transgender People" explores the experiences of safety and harm that transgender individuals encounter in technology-mediated spaces. The study analyzes how these experiences are influenced by social and cultural factors, such as discrimination, marginalization, and gender norms and expectations. The authors stress the importance of creating safe spaces for transgender individuals in technology-mediated contexts, which can be achieved through policy interventions, community engagement, and technology design. The paper highlights the significance of promoting well-being, social justice, and equality by establishing safe spaces for transgender individuals. Furthermore, the authors recommend that future research in this field should focus on comprehending the complex intersections of gender, technology, and culture and developing innovative interventions to advance safety and well-being for transgender people in technology-mediated spaces. "Online communities can also serve as safe spaces for transgender individuals. Research has also uncovered the benefits of online communities in that they provide support and inspiration specific to this user groups' needs" [7]. The study's primary outcome highlights the advantageous nature of online platforms in promoting activism and outreach, as well as facilitating the discovery of safe physical spaces and support networks as a means of avoiding unsafe environments.

4.3 Related work-3

The study explores the impact of TikTok on the social acceptability and socioeconomic status (SES) of transgender and transsexual individuals in Pakistan. The study was conducted by surveying 200 transgender individuals who use TikTok as a platform to express themselves. The paper highlighted the current situation of transgender and transsexual individuals in Pakistan, where they face significant discrimination and marginalization in society. The authors argue that social media platforms like TikTok have provided a space for transgender individuals to express themselves and challenge societal norms.

The article also discusses the concept of social acceptability and its importance for transgender individuals in Pakistan. The authors highlight the role of social media platforms in creating a more inclusive society where transgender individuals can share their experiences and be accepted for who they are. The study findings suggest that TikTok has played a significant role in improving the social acceptability and SES of transgender individuals in Pakistan. The authors report that 60% of respondents agreed that TikTok has helped them gain social acceptance and reduce discrimination, while 64% reported an improvement in their SES due to increased earning opportunities on the platform.[3]

Overall, the literature review and study findings suggest that social media platforms like TikTok can be a powerful tool for social change, providing a space for marginalized communities to express themselves and challenge societal norms. However, it is important to note that the study has certain limitations, such as small sample size and potential bias due to the use of a convenience sampling method. Therefore, further research is needed to fully understand the impact of social media on the lives of transgender individuals in Pakistan.

5 METHOD

5.1 Empathizing and Defining

To empathize and understand our user group we first made user personas to get a clearer picture of our general user group. We identified a trans-person that has some social standing and privilege and is an active user of social media. Then based on our understanding of the problems we developed a storyboard to visualize the problem and help others

empathize with the challenges that the intended user group may face. The main problems that we identified were problems due to lack of acceptance in society, these included healthcare, employment and utilities and education.

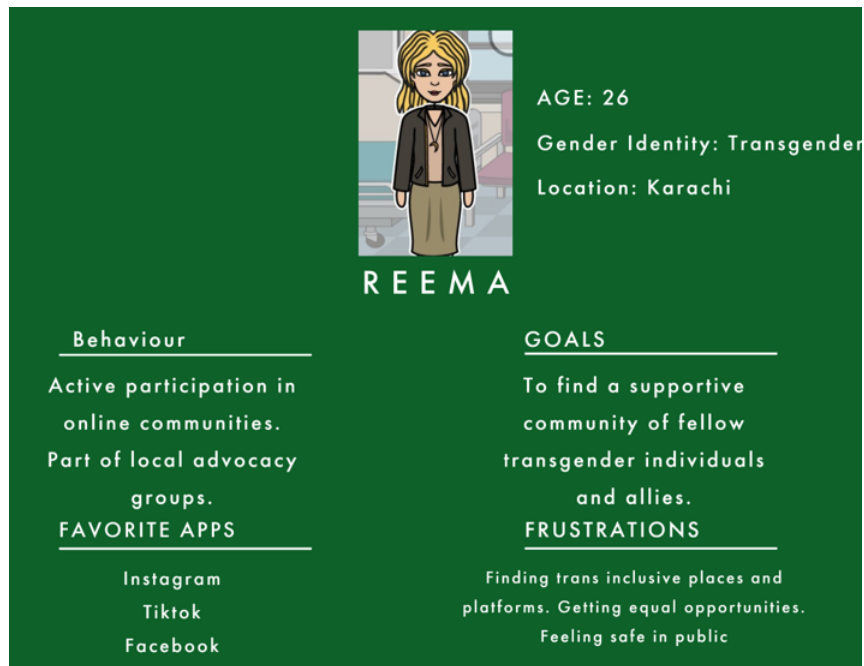


Fig. 1. User Persona

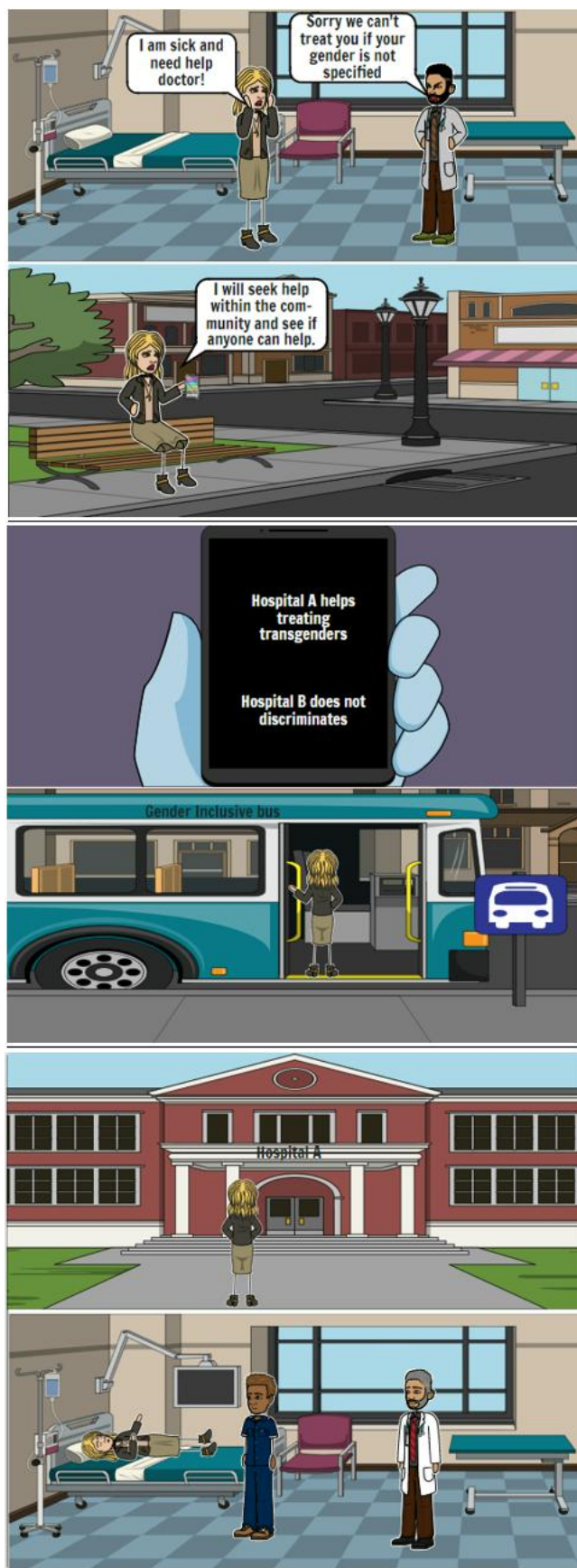


Fig. 2. Story Board

5.2 Ideating and Prototyping

In the next process of ideation, we came up with making a cultural probe, the probe had sides of some questions that had to be answered and other sides of the probe had space for suggestions of some places that were considered safe by the peers and allies. We contacted our first contact person for the study and asked them some questions to understand the usefulness of the probe. Upon inquiring we realised the social structure and educational basis of some of the participants may hinder the process of cultural probing as some of them were not that interested in sharing any information and had to be incentivized individually. This was proving to be a cumbersome task to incentivize each participant and the scope of the project did not allow us enough time or resources. The cultural probe approach was dropped and no other design was developed further.

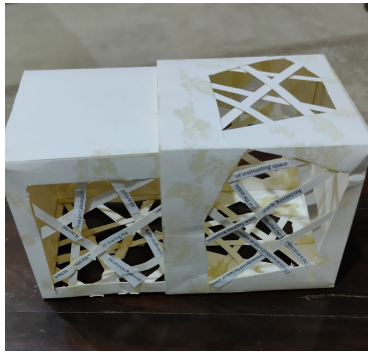


Fig. 3. intial design for cultural probe



Fig. 4. intial design for cultural probe

We then realized we needed a more concentrated group that we can connect to and conduct the interviews to understand how much social media these users use what interaction with technologies they have and how can these interactions prove to be meaningful in developing an intervention. We wanted to make a forum to connect the members that were active on social media so that they could advocate for the rights and problems of the underprivileged intercontextual group here. Prior to initiating our research, a questionnaire was formulated to elicit general information about the participants' use of technology this was our main prototype. The purpose of this questionnaire was to initiate dialogue and provide contextual information about the study to the participants.

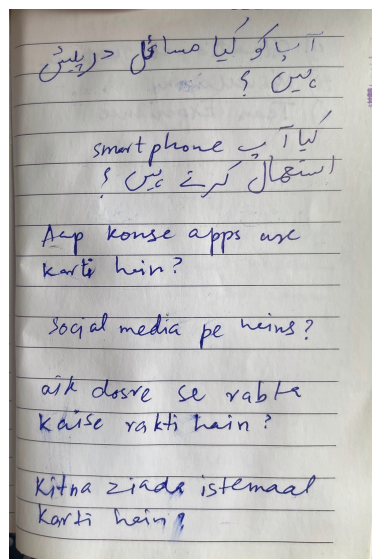


Fig. 5. Questionnaire (1)

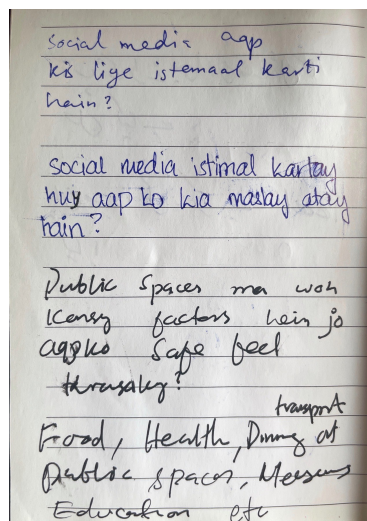


Fig. 6. Questionnaire (2)

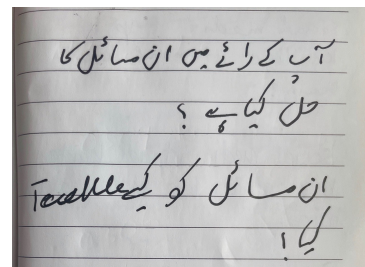


Fig. 7. Questionnaire (3)

The initial questionnaire included the following questions:

- 1) What issues do you face?
- 2) Do you use a smartphone?
- 3) Which apps do you use on smartphone
- 4) Are you on social media?
- 5) How do you communicate with each other?
- 6) How frequently do you use social media?
- 7) What purpose do you use social media for?
- 8) Do you face any difficulties while using social media?
- 9) In public spaces, what factors can help you feel safe? (Public spaces include dining at restaurants, public education institutes and hospitals etc)
- 10) In your opinion, what is the solution for these issues?
- 11) How did you tackle these issues?

The questions that follow were derived from a brainstorming session conducted among all authors. However, as we progressed with the interviews and discussions with participants, we revised some of the questions to emphasize solely those areas in which they felt at ease discussing. Our goal was collect insights therefore we focused on collecting qualitative data.

In our research methodology, we initially attempted to approach trans individuals in public settings, however, we encountered difficulties due to their busy schedules and reluctance to engage in conversation. Subsequently, we contacted the Trans Pride Society, an NGO led by a lawyer, via their Instagram account. We were subsequently invited to attend one of their social gatherings where approximately 60 trans individuals were in attendance. It is worth noting that the participants represented diverse age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. This was the testing phase of our prototype.

During the gathering, we presented a comprehensive overview of the study's goals and background to the attendees. Next, we organized small group discussions, each involving 3-4 individuals, to encourage active involvement and meaningful conversations. The average interview length was 15 mins each. Towards the end, we had the opportunity to interact with their revered Guru, who provided insights into broader issues. It's worth noting that the 'chelay' or students hold their Guru in high esteem, and the Guru, in turn, guides them throughout their journey.

During the interview sessions, all 3 authors took notes on personal notebooks/phones. The result section describes the major themes that emerged.

6 RESULTS

6.1 Devices

During our individual and group sessions, we enquired about the type of phone the participants use. Out of the 60 individuals, 20 reported owning a feature phone or no phone at all. Some participants who possessed smartphones admitted to not carrying them to work or public places and only using them at home.

As we observed many of them did not have access to their own smartphones. When asked about their communication and media consumption habits, they mentioned relying on a friend's smartphone to watch videos on YouTube and TikTok. Interestingly, these individuals reported watching videos together on the same device, suggesting that video consumption was a social activity for them. Moreover, individuals with no a smartphone, would ask their friend to call someone or play a video for them because they did not know how to use a smartphone. This highlights the potential challenges that marginalized communities may face in accessing and using technology.

It's worth noting that this lack of access to smartphones could have broader implications for trans individuals' ability to access essential services such as healthcare, education, and job opportunities that increasingly rely on digital technology. This underscores the importance of addressing systemic inequalities that limit marginalized communities' access to technology and other resources.

6.2 Online presence

Most individuals utilized their smartphones for communication via WhatsApp, while also leveraging them for entertainment purposes. The most frequently used apps included YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok. We also asked about their experience with group chats and found that most individuals had a negative perception of WhatsApp groups due to spamming issues. They also expressed displeasure towards Facebook, citing a lack of moderation for user-generated content. Consequently, they preferred communicating on a 1-on-1 basis with each other for more reliable information sharing. For instance, if someone came across a job opportunity, they would communicate it over private chat or a call rather than a Facebook group. The proposal to introduce moderated Facebook groups elicited a favourable response from the participants. It is noteworthy to mention that the younger generation has acknowledged the privilege of having access to social media and technology. They further added that compared to the past, approximately 30-40 years ago, there has been a positive change due to online and offline awareness campaigns.

6.3 General insights

Our observations revealed that the participants exhibited greater ease in engaging in group discussions comprising three to four individuals. Conversely, when approached individually, they displayed reluctance in conversing with an unfamiliar person, whereas, in larger groups, effective communication became challenging. However, we found that in

smaller groups, characterized by healthy discussions, the participants were more responsive and tended to contribute to one another's ideas and opinions.

Moreover, we noted that those individuals who were accepted by their families had experienced a different upbringing, characterized by financial stability and higher education, which had influenced their perspectives towards the issues faced by the transgender community.

7 DISCUSSION

We believe that with little intervention, online spaces can be leveraged as a community-building tool for trans communities as they are already considerably active on social media. But before that, we need to explore the safety aspect of online spaces. One study conducted in US [5], reported that sharing gender transition on facebook was less stressful as compared to sharing with family and other social settings. It also mentioned the flexibility of social media platforms to choose the audience for example, creating a list of close friends or custom settings. As further steps to our study, we would like to propose an intervention keeping in mind our findings and also test it with larger audience.

Initially, we had reservations about sharing the purpose of our project with the participants in a manner that would facilitate their comprehension of the concept. Moreover, we were uncertain about how to incentivize them. However, as we conducted interviews, we observed a gradual increase in their willingness to engage. We also noted that if a question was repeated by another member, the participants understood the question and were more inclined to respond positively.

Through our conversations, we discovered that the guru occupies a position of authority within the community, and therefore, should be the focal point of intervention. This approach would benefit not only the active members but also the non-active ones. This subtle subgroup can be targeted in further studies to build an intervention specifically catering to the relationship with a credible stakeholder which can be the guru. This dichotomy may be present in all such groups and incentivizing the guru to participate will mean that the chelas will benefit from the influence of the Guru.

We also observed that individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds faced different issues. However, what stood out was the conflicting opinions regarding the root cause of these problems. For instance, an individual who struggled to secure job opportunities and grew up without familial support attributed these issues to the lack of support from the government and the general public. In contrast, an individual who had access to higher education and experienced a privileged upbringing blamed the community as a whole for their perceived weakness.

Finally, we, as a group, experienced a warm reception from the participants. They attentively listened to us as we presented our project idea and offered their valuable time and insights, notwithstanding the absence of any form of tangible compensation. During our interaction with their guru, we inquired about the most effective means of supporting their cause. She emphasized the critical role of education in this regard, stating that providing support to transgender children in their educational pursuits can significantly contribute towards bridging the societal gaps.

8 LIMITATIONS

Time limitations and limitations of access to such groups hindered our process. Trans on streets and signals were not interested even with incentives and shared dis-honest opinions or shallow information. There was also a disconnect with some groups that identified themselves as 'Khawaja Siras' and showed animosity towards other trans groups.

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