Shamelessly cute: Understanding gender ambiguous identity performances via “The Desi Bombshell” Snapchat video selfies
by Fatima Aziz

Abstract
Indigenous Pakistani transgenders — khwaja sira — employ gender ambiguous identity performances as a resistance tactic against politics of shame. This article explores how a tactical performance of a gender ambiguous identity portrayed via Snapchat’s cute animal lenses can subvert the culture of gendered shaming. Drawing on two feminist resistance tactics: performative shamelessness and weaponized/agentic cuteness, I investigate how Snapchat’s animal lenses can be used to achieve a subversive effect as identified in the case of “The Desi Bombshell” — a fictive online persona. Through close reading and content analysis of “Desi Bombshell” video selfies, I propose the concept of shamelessly cute. I argue that a shamelessly cute, gender ambiguous performance is a novel resistance tactic on social media as it explicitly displays a clumsy, Snapchat enabled identity, while implicitly it challenges the Pakistani politics of shame from within its culture by reworking indigenous practices and gestures.

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Background: Gendered politics of shame in Pakistan

There is no inherent truth to gender, it is constructed by social expectations and performed through bodies (Butler, 1990) that are in turn regulated and controlled through the State (Foucault, 2008). In regulating bodies, shame as affect is a powerful force that works on and through bodies and regulates social bonds (Lewis, 1971; Barbalet, 1998; Scheff, 2003; Probyn, 2005). In Pakistan, gender binary is a sticky issue, it sticks to bodies that are regulated through a complex politics of shame functioning at different levels of society. Without any intention of oversimplifying the complex state of gender binary and shame politics in Pakistan that deserve to be understood through a varied and nuanced lens, this background section is an attempt to provide a brief overview of how some gendered bodies, mainly women are subjected to shame, while the often-derided gender ambiguous community is pushed to the fringe of Pakistani society.
This section seeks to highlight how Pakistani women and transgender community have and continue to fight back shame. The relevance of this background section to our case study is twofold. First, it provides a contextual understanding of how shame is entwined to gender politics in Pakistani society. Second, it highlights how dominant secular and religious feminist movements in Pakistan have overlooked the potential of the Pakistani non-normatively gendered people’s resistance tactics — gender ambiguity. In this regard, “The Desi Bombshell” online persona crafted and performed by Muhammad Moiz, a nonbinary Pakistani individual, makes a significant case study as it draws on indigenous gender ambiguous tactics and blends them with social media advocacy.

As a starting point, gendered politics of shame in Pakistani society can be understood through the lens of “collectivist cultures” where familial bonds with close and extended family members play a crucial role in shaping personality. In the patriarchal family set-up, an obvious manifestation of inequitable gender roles is the power delegated to males and older family members who safeguard family honor, *izzat* by monitoring female family members and punishing shameful behavior that could tarnish the family reputation (Mann, 1994; Khan, 2018; Begum, et al., 2020). In collectivist cultures, the importance of family honor primes over individual freedom. Pakistan is estimated to have the highest global rate of honor killings (Fatima, et al., 2017) and women pay the heaviest price, often with their life (Abu-Lughod, 2016).

Associating female household members with family honor in collectivist cultures can be understood through parenting and parent-child relationship. In a study of parenting typologies in Pakistan led by a team of developmental psychologists Stewart and colleagues, shame was discovered as part of parental strategy that led to dominating control, and also correlated negatively with self-esteem of girls (Stewart, et al., 1999). Since childhood, female chastity in Pakistani society is equated to family pride (Hennink, et al., 2005; Hadi, 2017; Rizvi, 2014). Although, a significant pushback against archaic conceptions of women’s physical and psychological health is gaining traction, especially in urban settings, abusive cultural practices such as exchange marriages, female nose-cutting for adultery and child marriages are still prevalent in rural settings (Niaz, 2004). Furthermore, irrespective of class and social boundaries, close and extended family members in both urban and rural setting, such as uncles, aunties, grandmothers, mothers-in-law and cousins also act as harsh critics and abuse perpetrators (Aplin, 2017; Bates, 2018).

At the State level, Pakistani legislation inherited a set of freedom restrictive laws known as the Hudood Ordinance of 1979 that were enacted during the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq. In this repressive era, the Zina (adultery) Ordinance regarded adultery and rape as the same crime and gender segregation was implemented in all public social gatherings. These excessive laws especially targeted women’s mobility such as the doctrine of modesty shawl and four walls *chadar* and *chardeewari*. Women’s dress code also came under close scrutiny and became a measure of their modesty, chastity and spiritual purity (Malik, 2019). In sum, General Haq’s extreme instrumentalization of Islam not only tarnished the religion’s reputation but also made it easier for clerics and self-proclaimed moral guardians to target women and subject their body to gendered shame politics.

However, since the 1980s feminist movements have emerged to fight against Haq’s repressive regulations such as the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) and several progressive laws have also been been implemented in favor of Pakistani women’s rights regarding their professional freedom and safety. Nonetheless, the legacy of Haq’s gendered politics of shame continues to be visible in other institutional forms. State television, especially advertisements (Ali, 2018) and print media (Yasmin, et al., 2015) continue to perpetuate stereotypical and state-sponsored ideals of Pakistani femininity that associate piety with traditional female roles of a nurturing mother, a devoted wife and an obedient daughter (Ahmad, 2010).

Although, transnational feminist TV serials are pushing back against such state-sponsored narratives (Zubair, 2016; Malik, 2019), a significant shift in Pakistani media is visible in feminist cinema (Shahzadi, 2015). Inspired by liberal feminist ideology, some Pakistani films are acting as a platform to voice female political, reproductive and economic rights (Yousaf, et al., 2017).

The Internet is also being invested by Pakistani feminist movements. Online solidarity initiatives such as
the Girls at Dhabas [5] and the Feminist Collective (TFC) [6] inspired by leftist socialist ideas are beginning to provide online spaces for feminists and queer activists to organize events across Pakistan. In addition to creating civic spaces of engagement on corporate social media, secure online spaces, free of conservative rhetoric are also emerging such as the Hamara (our) Internet initiative. However, as the independent Pakistani feminist researcher Rehman observes, language, technology and social class barriers continue to remain the main causes of exclusion of semi-literate women from working classes as they regard these online spaces as ‘Western’ and elitist (Rehman, 2017). Moreover, some gender exclusive female support groups maintain gender segregation online (Younas, et al., 2020) and therefore shut out the potential for intersectional collaboration.

Contrary to widespread misconceptions of Muslim women as powerless and subjugated beings, who are shamed and shackled to the precepts of a repressive Islam, Asian scholars argue that Islamic movements and self-actualization for women in Islamic counties are not entirely incompatible concepts. In an ethnographic study of Bangladesh’s (former East-Pakistan) rural women, Sarwar Alam, a public policy analyst, discovered Islam to have a positive impact on women’s identity (Alam, 2018). In the Pakistani context, Zaman also contends that Islam acts as an equalizer in hierarchical family set-ups. According to Zaman inter-gender inequities occur mostly between women and an in-depth study of Islamic values and principles can provide junior female family members with knowledge of their rights and duties to push against unjustified discrimination (Zaman, 2020). Thus, contrary to popular belief the study of Islamic principles can provide Asian Muslim women with the knowledge needed to question the authority of a patriarchal cultural framework. According to the Indian English cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha, feminism based on Islamic values can also provide ‘a third space’ of critical inquiry that extends beyond cultural limitations.

“Homi Bhabha and bell hooks argue that the contradictions within this space allow for a renegotiation of binary codes and predetermined boundaries, enabling critical inquiry and social change. Such a space also allows feminist responses to move beyond culturalist explanations, which simply reduce Pakistani women’s subordination to gender or religion.” [7]

However, for Pakistani feminists to move beyond the cultural stranglehold is a challenge. Serez, a Canadian human rights activist, notes the existence of two dominant and antagonistic forms of feminism in Pakistan. On the one hand there is a secular liberal feminism based on universal human rights that advocates for a separation between State and religion. On the other hand there is modern Islamic feminism that calls for a more traditional approach to gendered roles as laid out in the Qur’an. The significant class divide between these two brands of popular and competitive feminist movements has created inter-feminist hostilities and a lack of much needed unity (Serez, 2017). In this complex constellation of feminist struggles against sexism and shame politics, the gender binary debate overshadows the non-normatively gendered community in Pakistan.

Non-normatively or nonbinary gendered Pakistanis have experienced their fair share of a longstanding history of discrimination and shame that can be traced back to British colonial rule in India. Historian of gender, Jessica Hinchy traces sexual regulation of non-normative gendered peoples to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a colonial law that criminalized nonbinary genders, referred to at that time as “eunuchs” or hijra [8], because they posed a dangerous threat to colonial rule and order (Hinchy, 2019). According to Hinchy it was during this criminalizing colonial context that the appellation hijra, formerly known as a free-spirited people, became a pejorative identity label. It was only in the first decade of the twenty-first century that the gender nonbinary community in Pakistan adopted the medieval term khwaja sira as a self-claimed identity which was reserved as a title for the chief eunuch of the Mughal court (Khan, 2016). Anthropologist Faris A. Khan argues that the contemporary appropriation of the identity khwaja sira can be considered a successful tactical move because it serves as an umbrella term for several unacknowledged gender subcategories that were finally granted legislative recognition in 2012 [9]. In comparing khwaja sira with other sexual minorities in Pakistan who identify themselves with globalized LGBT categories, Khan
notes a strong condemnation of the latter by the general population for being influenced by imperialist, Western forces and for the overt expression of their sexual preferences. In contrast, Khan argues that the khwaja sira community’s choice of an indigenous identity label, one that is rooted in Islamic and Mughal traditions, accompanied by the non-disclosure of their sexual preferences have been successful moves. Moreover, Khan argues that the khwaja sira strategies of obfuscating their sexual preferences, especially in media, are culturally informed gestures of resistance which hold practical and political values. In this way, in an Islamic cultural set-up where avoiding public disclosure of private sexuality is appreciated khwaja sira maintain gender ambiguity to gain widespread public endorsement.

Consequently, the khwaja sira community has steadily gained acceptance in Pakistani society with the aid of educated, English speaking middle-class activists, who have joined their cause and fought for the term transgender to be synonymous for khwaja sira and intersex peoples [10]. These collective efforts have resulted in a landmark Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act passed in May 2018 (Khan, 2019). Khan rightly observes that although ‘queer’ as an identity label resonates less with the Pakistani khwaja sira and transgender communities their tactical approach does nonetheless share similarities with Western gender queer feminism due to its potential for social and political transformation. It is important then to understand to which aspects of Western queer feminist resistance does the Pakistani transgender community’s politics of gender ambiguity relate to.

To provide this understanding, on the theoretical level this paper builds on two feminist resistance tactics: shamelessness (Dobson, 2014; Sundén and Paasonen, 2018) and “agentic cute” [11] — an explicitly non-threatening and submissive position adopted by female Singaporean Influencers, which is in fact an implicit way to subvert gendered hierarchies (Abidin, 2016a). To demonstrate how shamelessness and “agentic cute” resonate with gender ambiguity I will use Muhammad Moiz’s “The Desi Bombshell” online persona as a case study. “The Desi Bombshell” is the name given by Moiz — a non-normatively gendered queer — to the fictive online persona of Shumaila Bhatti — performed as a young, educated, middle-class Pakistani girl. I argue that Moiz’s video selfies as Shumaila display a noteworthy intersection of gender ambiguity performed via shamelessness and subversive cute in his scripted performances.

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**Contribution to queer feminism & visual activism**

Shamelessness has been theorized by feminist media scholars as a feminist tactic to counteract shaming. Amy Dobson argues that displaying shamelessness online is a way for young women “to appropriate cultural signs, symbols and affectations” in order to protect themselves (Dobson, 2014). In the Nordic context of online shaming and misogyny, Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen contend that if shame makes identity, shamelessness as a tactic is not the opposite of shame nor the absence of it, instead it is a disruptive play.

> “shamelessness plays with the inflicted shame and those who
> inflict it and by playing with and performing shame (they)
> intervene in its affective power, its dynamics of operation and
> turn them around by knowingly ignoring or ridiculing attempts
> to shame.” [12]

The operations of turning shame around or of rewriting shame are then considered productive as they liberate the shamed individual from a sense of paralysis into an active productive state. On the productive nature of shame, Probyn attributes a generative quality to the affect that when experienced can bring about a strong self-reflection (Probyn, et al., 2018). Given these productive, dynamic characteristics of shamelessness, it would be important to investigate what operations in addition to self-reflection, self-ridicule and avoidance constitute its dynamics. This article proposes to investigate tactical gender ambiguity, faith-inspired boldness and subversive cuteness via “The Desi Bombshell” case study and to
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consider these as possible tactics of performative shamelessness.

On the subversive use of performative or agentic cuteness, Abidin in her study of Singaporean Influencers posits cuteness as a strategy to “mask a counter-hegemonic discourse” and “reinforce stereotypical power relations that position Influencers as non-threatening” [13] while they are in fact acting from a position of power. For Abidin, performative or agentic cuteness is a form of “soft power” that operates through deception and cunning (Abidin, 2016a).

Inspired by Abidin’s work I seek to expand her concept of agentic or performative cuteness, and its uses by analyzing Snapchat’s cute animal filters used by Moiz to perform gender ambiguity. In the performance of “The Desi Bombshell” Moiz acts as Shumaila through the regular use of Snapchat’s physically cutifying animal lenses that apply an overlay of long eyelashes and rosy cheeks to his bearded masculine face (Figure 1). “The Desi Bombshell” case study can help understand how the use of these cute animal lenses can be leveraged to perform gender ambiguity that can be considered as a feminist strategy in the context of the Pakistani non-normative gender community.

Snapchat video lenses are playful, and its video selfie features use face-detection technology that enable real-time graphic overlays on the face and head. These playful features have contributed to the application’s popular use for oral performances (Soffer, 2016) and spontaneous conversations (David, 2015; Cavalcanti, et al., 2017). However, most “cute” beautifying lenses meant to enhance facial features, either through dysmorphia or make-up, are considered problematic as they reinforce normative gendered stereotypes of beauty ideals. These include slimming of jawlines and enlarging of eyes and lips, as well as the lightening of complexions (Nguyen, 2017; Barker, 2020). Nonetheless, the academic exploration of Snapchat’s problematic digital adornment has overlooked some of its uses for advocacy. For example, the use of the fire breathing dinosaur Snapchat lenses by Indian sexual assault survivors to publicly share their stories without the risk of being identified (Sachdev, 2016) and the use of the “puppy dog” lens by trans teens on 31 March under the hashtag #transdayofvisibility to negotiate their visibility within normative cisgender identity frameworks (Steinbock, 2017).

Performing cuteness and shamelessness are context dependent (Abidin, 2016a; Dobson, 2014; Sundén and Paasonen, 2018). In this paper through “The Desi Bombshell” case study I argue that Snapchat’s “cute animal” lenses in the context of performing gender ambiguity by Moiz — a queer Pakistani — is a culturally informed tactical gesture with a twofold purpose. First, it allows Moiz as a non-normatively gendered individual to publicly perform as a female character — Shumaila Bhatti. Second, Moiz performing as Shumaila succeeds in addressing taboo topics online from an intersectional perspective.

**“The Desi Bombshell” case study**

“The Desi Bombshell” was launched by Moiz as a Facebook community page in 2016 [14] with a presentation of his online persona of Shumaila Bhatti introduced in a minute-long video entitled ‘Episode 1: Shumaila meets the world and doesn’t get an egg’ [15]. Initially, Moiz performed Shumaila for his friends on his private Snapchat account but encouragement from his close friends motivated him to perform Shumaila regularly and publicly as an online character. Since, Moiz has used different Snapchat animal lenses, most frequently the deer lens [16] to perform as Shumaila (Figure 1) and has uploaded 78 video selfies on YouTube [17], Instagram [18] and Facebook [19]. For this case study, a selection of 12 video selfies, shot between 2016 and 2018, were chosen from “The Desi Bombshell” Facebook playlist. This selection was based on specific shaming situations that were identified in the video titles, descriptions and scripts. A close reading analysis of the video script was applied to this selection with a focus on the concluding remarks in each video. A content analysis of recurrent Snapchat animal lenses was done to identify how Moiz negotiated his physical facial features to give visibility to a nonbinary female character.
Figure 1: Frequent use of the “Deer” Snapchat lens by Moiz to perform Shumaila Bhatti. Detail of “The Desi Bombshell” Snapchat video selfies.
Shumaila’s fictional stories are woven from a contextually rich tapestry of recurring stereotypical characters from Pakistan’s collectivist culture: overbearing uncles, aunties and mother-in-laws. Each video installment follows a regular pattern in which Shumaila starts by narrating several stories to arrive at a conclusion. These conclusions are often a mixture of emotional support and self-reflective comments that are pronounced in her signature pedagogical style: ‘so the moral of the story is’. An example of how Shumaila dispenses her moral lessons can be read in the following translated transcript of her video:

“(…) the destruction in the world is caused by the ignorance of the women from the time period of our mothers and grandmothers and it does not even amount to that of the infamous, characterless education girls of today. They say, ‘we have lived our age, have a child the husband will get alright, if he is gay get him married to a girl, he will be cured himself otherwise his gayness will become public’. Curse on this! Repentance! Beyghairat (shameless) I am also shameless. I tell inside stories.” [20]

As mentioned in the background section of this paper, family honor primes over individual rights in collectivist cultures where senior family members can mistreat younger female members in the name of protecting a family’s reputation. Marriage remains the dominant backdrop against which younger adults: males, females, transgender or agender persons are denied the freedom to choose their partner. In the above-mentioned ‘moral of the story’ Shumaila condemns widespread hypocritical attitudes of senior family members, in this case mothers and grandmothers, who behave as unquestionable authority figures and experts on dysfunctional marriages and male homosexuality. Male sexual education in Pakistani society is a taboo (Ali, et al., 2004) and male homosexuality is still considered by some conservative families as an illness that can be cured through marital sex.

Shumaila’s closing statement: “I am also shameless. I tell inside stories” can be understood through what Abidin has characterized as “reflexive-shame” — directed towards the self as a performance that adds value (Abidin, 2016b). In acknowledging her own shamelessness by publicly divulging family secrets, Moiz’s Shumaila demonstrates how shamelessness remains the only course of action to be undertaken to unmask shamers. In playing with shame and turning it around Shumaila disrupts its affective power. It is a tactical act that Sundén and Paasonen (2018) qualify as a disruptive and productive operation of shamelessness.

Self-reflexive shame combined with straightforwardness can also be viewed as a strategy used by online performers to appear authentic in order to build a relationship of trust with their audience (Aziz, 2018). Shumaila often adopts an admonishing tone in her performances, a position she justifies by referring to her religious upbringing. She mentions her position in the video “Episode 33: Mahira Khan, Sharmeen Obaid, harassment, and Pakistan’s ‘ghairat [21] bros’”:

“I am asking all the honor brothers when your country’s sisters and daughters whom you respect so much only God knows since when (sarcastic tone.) When in offices, home and hospitals when they have to survive by reciting the Ayat-ul-Kursi [22] verse. So please make a syrup of your honor and drink it! Don’t make us drink it, because even this syrup we will have to take while reciting the Ayat-ul-Kursi. I am also straight forward, when I come to talking, I say the truth and say it to the face.” [23]
In this video selfie Shumaila refers to the physical insecurity that most Pakistani women endure in domestic and professional spheres at the hands of the “honor brothers” [24]. It must be noted that in the context of conservative collectivist cultures, calling out “honor brothers” is a daring act and Shumaila defends her position by attributing her boldness to her religious upbringing. The reference to ‘Ayat-ul-Kursi’ recitation for self-preservation in challenging situations is another culturally informed gesture that situates Shumaila’s defiance at the intersection of both liberal and modern Islamic Pakistani feminists. Reciting a holy verse bears testimony to a practical understanding of Islamic faith for self-protection. In performing within a lived-religion framework, Moiz introduces another productive operation to the dynamics of shamelessness embodied through Shumaila: a faith-inspired practical defiance to speak up against domestic shaming practices.

Shameless attitude is a recurrent theme in Moiz’s other videos. For example, in the “Episode 35: Shia-Sunni marriage and physical examination by rishta aunties (and braving ‘kuffr kay fatway’ [25] Shumaila wishes you all a Happy New Year)” Shumaila draws attention to family pressure:

“When our families and parents are under pressure because of their honesty and respect and can tolerate our humiliation, it is the very good for the us to take the stand for ourselves yes! I am also a bit defensive. If nobody defends me then I defend myself.” [26]

In addition to performing shamelessness through her outspoken and coarse criticism of hypocritical behaviors, Moiz infuses Shumaila’s persona with linguistic clumsiness. In the Austrian ethnologist Konrad Lorenz’s well-known, longstanding theory of “child schema” (Kindchenschema) clumsiness is listed as a behavioral attribute of cuteness (Lorenz and Leyhausen, 1973). Shumaila performs her linguistic clumsiness by adding an extra ‘s’ or by mispronouncing English words or as in the above-mentioned example through the incorrect use of the definite article “the” in her commentary, “it is the very good for the us to take the stand for ourselves yes!” Although, this clumsiness adds a certain amount of self-ridicule, it is nonetheless motivated by Moiz’s choice to increase Shumaila’s social appeal as a non-elitist, middle-class, educated girl who does not belong to a Westernized Pakistani upper-class. It should be noted that the status of English as a social class identifier in Pakistan dates back to its colonial past and continues in current day Pakistan where the elite governing class have maintained English language’s superiority by making it the official administrative language (Umrani and Bughio, 2015). In this linguistic context, it is important to note that Shumaila’s flawed spoken English skills reflect the socio-economic inequities of class divisions. Thus, linguistic clumsiness is not gender specific but an indicator of social class differences and to bridge these inequities, Shumaila’s linguistic flaws increase her widespread social appeal.

Other examples of Shumaila’s linguistically performed clumsiness can be identified in her spontaneous and incoherent narrative style that makes no explicit effort to link her video selfies. However, Shumaila performs recurrent themes are performed entertainingly through a colorful use of self-deriding comparisons. A useful example of how she combines clumsiness and self-ridicule to justify her shamelessness is provided in the video “Episode 32: On aging, latest rishta [27] trends, and rejections”, in which she draws a parallel between herself and a donut:

“(…) this is bullshit! These mothers send their sons to perform a girl’s physical checkup from head to toe and report back if she is up to their standard. I mean am I a donut.” [28]

In refusing to be reduced to a mere sweet treat Shumaila confronts the dehumanizing, male gaze of her potential suitor through ridicule and expletives rather than self-pity. Further along in the same video Shumaila implicitly expresses her gender ambiguity by comparing herself to cattle:

“We are not going to get anything from human rights and
women’s rights. We are cattle, our age is slipping away. Maybe we can get our rights from animal rights because we are not going to get anything from women’s rights.”

Shumaila’s reference to animality begs a deeper understanding and even more so because she is always represented through Snapchat’s cute animal lenses. Besides Shumaila’s sarcastically pronounced claim to gain at least some rights under Pakistan’s developing animal rights, one can rightly question Moiz’s motives — a nonbinary individual — for performing through animal lenses. At first glance, the relative technical ease for Moiz to slip into a ready-made, dynamic lens seems a plausible answer, especially when compared to the professional assistance required for his make-up for on stage drag character (Figure 2).

Figure 2: From Snapchat embellishment to professional make-up. Sources: (1) Still of Shumaila Bhatti in her signature Snapchat deer lens, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1806329486311687, accessed 20 November 2020; (2) Still of Muhammad Moiz during a hair and make-up session for an on stage drag performance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_Ak9ZR54gQ, accessed 20 November 2020.

However, the persistent use of the animal lenses to perform a feisty, bearded female persona (Figure 3) demands a deeper understanding of how the cute animal aesthetic fits in with Shumaila’s shameless, clumsy performances.

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Performing gender ambiguity via Snapchat cute animal lenses

Beyond Lorenz’s evolutionary reading of cuteness as a trigger for nurturing affection and concern, different approaches in social sciences have demonstrated that cute — both as an aesthetic and as an affect — facilitates socialization. Cute or cuteness is a transferable affect, it can be assigned to non-human creatures and hybrid forms. Indeed, it is this transferability of cuteness which ties its emotional and biological aspects to commercial ones (Genosko, 2005). In addition to transferable qualities of cuteness, ambivalence is another one of its characteristics. It has been argued that cuteness beyond its juvenile attributes is neither the sublime nor the well-proportioned, but as Kao and Boyle (2017) contend it is a paradoxical aesthetic or “the aesthetic threshold: “too cute” is a backhanded compliment. And more than the pop-cultural kawaii (literally, “acceptable love”), “cute” the aphetic form of “acute” — also carries the sense of “clever, keen-witted, sharp.” [29]

Uncertainty is then also a part of cuteness or as the American cultural theorist and feminist scholar Sianne
Ngai has remarked cuteness is grounded in contradictory feelings (Jasper and Ngai, 2011). Eliza Steinbock, professor of film and literary studies, in her work on trans-animal cute aesthetics further builds on Ngai’s concept of ‘weaponized cuteness’ (Ngai, 2005). Steinbock (2017) extends Ngai’s concept of ‘weaponized cuteness’ to cat memes and Snapchat animal lenses and posits how their use on social media can serve in negotiating transgender identities. Steinbock notes that the Snapchat animal lenses provide an ontological affordance that is not limited to displaying a nonbinary gender through animality. Instead, these animal lenses are used as a deflecting shield to subdue the audience’s scrutiny regarding the appropriateness of their gender performance. In short, to weaponize the cuteness of Snapchat’s animal lenses is then to count on these digital embellishment’s disarming effect that can be understood through the Shakespearean metaphor pronounced by Lady Macbeth to the king, “Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under ’t”. [31]

As mentioned earlier, gender ambiguity in Pakistan is a culturally informed tactical gesture used by the khwaja sira transgender peoples to conform to cultural mores of modesty in order to gain widespread endorsement. As a nonbinary individual Moiz combines indigenous gender ambiguity tactics with Snapchat’s animal lenses to increase Shumaila’s social appeal in the following manner. First, the preference for specific animal lenses: deer and other cute animal ears allow him to blend his physical masculinity with a hybrid cutified animality (Figure 3). Animality in presenting a gender ambiguous person shields Moiz and Shumaila from derogatory comments. Second, the video selfies are always shot with a focus on Moiz’s face, which in keeping with Shumaila’s defiant style, becomes a dynamic canvas of contrasting visual elements: the permanent fluffiness of plushy animal ears swaying softly on a frowning brow or the delicate animal muzzle from which admonishing comments and expletives are spewed create a contrasting image (Figure 3). Contrasts in Shumaila’s ambiguous appearance and flawed English are strategic operations to increase her appeal and lower the risks her rejection.

However, in spite of this paradoxical interplay between soft, fluffy lenses and a defiant, biting script, Moiz’s message is clear, Shumaila is first and foremost a gender fluid identity performed from an intersectional perspective — that is she addresses social shaming as women as well as of homosexuals, she criticizes intersex shaming that claim victims across the social and class spectrum of Pakistani society. In an interview Moiz explains how his intersectional perspective rooted in indigenous methods might appear patriarchal from a Western feminism lens:

“When Pakistani women’s struggle is analyzed through Western feminism lens, their actions appear to be patriarchal, even though at heart these Pakistani women are simply practicing self-preservation Shumaila doesn’t follow Western precepts of feminism. She is imperfect, she has her own biases, insecurities and vulnerabilities but she deals with them on her own as an independent thinking girl, resourceful honest, straightforward and relatable with the Pakistani culture where boys and girls like her.” [32]

Moiz’s gender ambiguous performance through Shumaila’s video selfies can be considered as a grassroots movement as she infuses social credibility in her character through indigenous tactics such as speaking in a straightforward manner mixing her flawed English with Urdu and Punjabi. Shumaila doesn’t mince her words, she doesn’t employ a feminist academic conceptual language regarding gender and transgender issues. Instead, she weaves her stories based on first-hand, even second-hand and third-hand experiences. She resorts to self-ridicule and linguistic clumsiness to make her stories interesting and colorful. Even her references to Islamic values are not abstract concepts but grounded in her practical experiences and upbringing. In short, in situating Shumaila within the framework of Pakistani collectivist culture, Moiz demonstrates the potential of indigenous tactics of gender ambiguity as a performance capable of criticizing and subverting societal dysfunctions from within and in a language comprehensible across Pakistani social classes. The ultimate ‘moral of Shumaila’s stories’ is that to stand up for oneself is to rewrite shame politics.
Conclusion

In this paper, I sought to understand how gender ambiguity — an indigenous tactic employed by the khwaja sira transgenders in Pakistan — shares similarities with the Western queer feminist tactic of shamelessness and subversive cute performances of female Singaporean Influencers. To demonstrate this, I analyzed a selection of video selfies of an online persona — “The Desi Bombshell” a.k.a. Shumaila Bhatti performed via Snapchat’s cute animal lenses by a nonbinary Pakistani individual Muhammad Moiz. To contextualize Moiz’s performance as Shumaila, I first presented a background of the gendered cultural politics of shame in Pakistan and its resistance from feminists and members of the transgender community. Then, through a close reading analysis of “The Desi Bombshell’s” video selfie scripts combined with a content analysis of recurrent cute animal lenses, I demonstrated how Moiz through Shumaila opens up an intersectional performative space online to contest Pakistan’s culturally situated shaming gendered discourses.

It can be argued that Shumaila is not the only Pakistani female online persona who calls out shamers through her shameless performance (see @NoFiltersTamkenat [33], a public figure persona performed by a Pakistani female psychologist). However, Shumaila is the most regularly performed online character played by a nonbinary Pakistani individual — Moiz who in performing as a daring, self-reflective girl — beard and all visible through Snapchat lenses — weaponizes their commodified cuteness to embody a gender ambiguous individual.

As mentioned earlier, shamelessness and weaponized, agentic cuteness as performance strategies are part of feminist tactics to counteract hegemonic discourses. The insight provided by “The Desi Bombshell” case study and its contribution to feminist tactics is threefold. First, as a performatival strategy informed by indigenous cultural gestures, gender ambiguity achieves widespread cultural endorsement. Second, gender ambiguous performance subverts the shaming discourses from within the collectivist culture framework where references to Islamic values and flawed spoken English increases outreach across social classes and lowers risks of being branded as Western propaganda. Third, as a performance the entertaining, cutified shamelessness gives visibility to a brown, gender ambivalent body and thereby increases their chances to establish a visible, non-normative, self-assigned identity.

About the author

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Notes
1. Romanized Urdu script for the word that as an adjective has the following meanings in English: local, indigenous, pure. As a noun, desi refers to a person of Indian/Pakistani heritage who lives abroad.

2. Muhammad Moiz is a nonbinary Pakistani who is a trans-disciplinary public health trainer and a developmental strategist.


8. Hijra Romanized Hindu-Urdu script to designate an intersex person.

9. Between 2009–2012 Pakistani Supreme Court granted several rights and privileges in a series of rulings that concluded in the recognition of Khwaja sira as a distinct sex/gender in addition to male and female. Legislative recognition of Khwaja sira broaden their professional horizons which were limited before this to odd jobs and mostly sex work.


11. Abidin, 2016a, p. 44.


13. Abidin, 2016a, p. 44.


17. The Desi Bombshell on YouTube, at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvwG2HMkdezjcb8GMgWsEzA/videos.


20. My translation from the video entitled “Episode 24: Shumaila Bhatti tells her most controversial story
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22. Ayat-ul-Kursi is the verse of Surah Al-Baqarah. The longest Surah of the Quran is Surah Al-Baqarah. In addition, the verse number 255 of Surah Al-Baqarah is Ayat-ul-Kursi. In this verse, Allah has defined his powers and glory. There is no one but only Allah who is the creator of everything we see in this world.


24. Hypocritical men who only pay lip service to the idea of respecting women but act otherwise.

25. Kufr an Arabic term for infidel. Fatwa an Arabic term for a legal pronouncement issued by a cleric.


27. A marriage proposal.


30. How cute objects attain agency through their affective duality — that is to appear passive yet possess the potential to become aggressive; Ngai, 2005, p. 823.


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