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## Methodological Challenges in Interviewing Elite Women in a Patriarchal Society

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### Abstract

The current article reflects on the challenges of selecting and accessing participants from societies where power relations are gender-based. The paper discusses the methodological difficulties of gaining research access to professionally and educationally elite women in Pakistan's patriarchal society and suggests a strategy of "referral in-group" for recruiting interview participants. Drawing on the author's purposive sampling-based research in Pakistan, this article proposes a methodological strategy to recruit an elite population to participate in research interviews on a culturally sensitive subject, namely, patriarchal control over Pakistani women's digital lives. Furthermore, coupled with purposive sampling, this article contributes to the existing literature on elite interviewing and the growing literature on conducting research in challenging cultural environments, specifically for women.

### Keywords

purposive sampling, elite interviews, referral strategy, methodological challenges, patriarchal culture

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# Methodological Challenges in Interviewing Elite Women in a Patriarchal Society

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The current article reflects on the challenges of selecting and accessing participants from societies where power relations are gender-based. The paper discusses the methodological difficulties of gaining research access to professionally and educationally elite women in Pakistan's patriarchal society and suggests a strategy of "referral in-group" for recruiting interview participants. Drawing on the author's purposive sampling-based research in Pakistan, this article proposes a methodological strategy to recruit an elite population to participate in research interviews on a culturally sensitive subject, namely, patriarchal control over Pakistani women's digital lives. Furthermore, coupled with purposive sampling, this article contributes to the existing literature on elite interviewing and the growing literature on conducting research in challenging cultural environments, specifically for women.

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## Introduction

Feminist research is mainly directed at women's lives and experiences by adopting feminist theoretical and methodological approaches. Feminist analysis has effectively portrayed and provided in-depth knowledge about the inequality that women experience. These include feminist subjectivity, ontology, epistemology, and theory and ethics, rather than merely a specific method of collecting information (Wickramasinghe, 2009). Besides that, feminist research also elaborated on the research process and argued researcher and respondent relation and interview process for explicit details to reveal hidden actualities (Conti & O'Neil, 2007).

The current paper addresses the second concern in feminist research: participants' recruitment, gaining access to them, and the relationship between the researcher and participants to explore hidden truths and realities. It is also pertinent to mention that the current article is based on the first author's now-completed doctoral thesis involving in-depth interviews with educated women in Pakistan regarding their media use in a patriarchal society. The original doctoral thesis theorized about professional Pakistani women's digital lives and social media practices within a patriarchal society. It delved into the influences of digital patriarchy on the online and offline lives of highly educated, economically self-sufficient women from Pakistan's upper class, that is, elite women. Sexual harassment, gender-based threats of violence, and other gender-related issues surrounding women's privacy, reputation, safety, and well-being emerged from the doctoral research interviews, inadvertently overlapping with concerns often highlighted in feminist discourse. Engaging with this feminist discourse and resuming the original study's research focus on elite women, this paper aims to

unpack the methodological challenges of accessing, recruiting, and interviewing elite Pakistani women regarding their digital lives and social media activities. However, the article doesn't intend to discuss the research findings nor the themes that emerged from the interview study. Rather, we draw our attention to challenges during the sampling phase of the study. The researcher faced two significant challenges: (i) gaining access to professional independent, that is, "elite" women to interview; (ii) convincing them to participate in research interviews that essentially required them to discuss their personal experiences and their private (possibly radical) views regarding patriarchal control over their digital lives.

Over time, as we reflected upon the challenges of gaining access into their social circle and drawing out their lived experiences of digital patriarchy, it became evident that not only was the study feminist in nature, but the sampling approach was also guided by principles of feminist methodology, where participant recruitment was driven by a sense of sisterhood that facilitated introductions and referrals from one woman academic to another.

Drawing upon an in-depth interview study exploring the digital lives of women academics in Pakistan, this paper discusses the challenges of gaining research access to interview independent Pakistani women professionals about patriarchal controls over their social media use. Thus, although the population of women under study can be described as independent and autonomous, given the patriarchal backdrop of the society in which they live, the culturally sensitive interview topic warranted caution and concern among potential participants.

The paper begins with the background of the study to familiarize readers with the sociocultural context and participants' positioning in the Pakistani setting. We problematize the intersectional positioning of Pakistan women academics negotiating their status as both "elite" and also "second-class" / "marginalized" members in a social structure that is both patriarchal and class-based. The second part of the article draws upon both research involving "elite" participants and feminist literature. The third section presents our case study's sampling process, including the researcher's own positionality vis-à-vis the research topic and the research sample, as well as a detailed report of the chains of referrals connecting the researcher from one participant to another. In the next section, we elucidate our "feminist sisterhood sampling" method, offering guidance for researchers facing similar sampling challenges due to tensions between the research topic vs. its sociocultural contexts. Finally, we present our discussion and conclusion.

### **Digital Experience of Pakistani Women in Patriarchal Culture**

Women constitute almost fifty per cent of the population; however, they face cultural and gender disparities at the public and private levels in Pakistan (Roth, 2019). Although women's literacy rate is increasing, limited opportunities are given to women in top management positions and to participate in national-level politics. Despite government-level efforts to collaborate with international organizations, legislative measures have been introduced to improve women's living standards and legislative protection (Aksar et al., 2021). Still, a wide gap exists, and women are deprived of equal rights in the health, education, and employment sectors. In a patriarchal sociopolitical context, this structural setting forces women to quietly follow the dominant cultural norms (Habiba et al., 2016) and mainly, women adopt teaching as a profession. The constitution of Pakistan bestows social, political, and legal independence to women, and articles 25 and 32 guarantee women's equal participation in all fields (education, health, employment, and politics). However, contrary to legal protection and efforts by the government, Pakistan remained patriarchal in social structure, and the progress in achieving gender equality is relatively slow (Choudhry et al., 2019).

Women's status in Pakistan is multi-layered, varies across the country, and is defined by gender and social class. Women's lives are different in rural and urban areas. The situation of women living in rural areas is worse, where they face cultural and religious pressures and their fundamental rights, like education and health, are also denied. Though women in urban areas and from the upper class, educated and working, live better lives in Pakistan, they also face cultural and gender hindrances. Cumulatively, Pakistan ranks lowest in the gender equality index, and a wide gender gap exists (Choudhry et al., 2019). Despite living in metropolitan cities, the studies presented multiple problems women face. In the field of education and career, these include harassment, gender-discriminatory behaviour, partner violence, low chances of promotion, lack of decision-making or inclusion in the decision-making process, and the burden of house chores responsibilities along with career (Abrar-Ul-Haq et al., 2016; Adeel et al., 2017; Aksar et al., 2020; Asif & Pervaiz, 2019; Murshid, 2017; Rafay et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2022).

Likewise, digital spaces are male dominated in Pakistan, and only 27% of women can access new media technologies. In this situation, combining highly educated and working women from urban areas and their online practices provides an interesting perspective to understand their digital experiences in a patriarchal culture. The internet's male dominance overrides earlier assumptions about technologies empowering underprivileged segments of society, particularly women. Since the beginning, feminists have advocated for including women in online technologies (Khan & Du, 2017), and a well-reputed feminist scholar, Ellen Balka, initiated the debate, "Internet as women's medium" (Van Zoonen, 2002).

Consequently, scholars concluded that the internet offered new opportunities to women, enhanced their communication skills, made their lives more comfortable, and broadened their vision (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Van Zoonen, 2002). Due to open communication, interaction, and sharing in virtual forums, the scholars argued for renewed, nuanced understandings of power, coercion, cultural influence, and exploitation in digital media cultures (Khan & Du, 2017). Successively, feminists urged media researchers to take into consideration the power and diversity of social media users and expand research based on race, class, sexuality, and geographic location, along with gender and impact on, access to, and experience of using digital media in cultural settings (Gajjala et al., 2010).

Therefore, the current study aimed to explore and understand the digital experiences of educated women in the culturally patriarchal society of Pakistan, when social media is widely used in the women's movement and digital feminism is at its peak. However, at the societal level, two opposite approaches are observed. On one side, women in Pakistan are directed to adopt a specific dress code and abide by cultural norms and social behaviour. Furthermore, on the other side, women came on the roads to demand their rights (Jamil, 2023). This situation presents a fascinating social structure to explore digital media use among educated women to assess the power of cultural and gender relations in their online.

Interestingly, likewise dual approaches in social practices, two different approaches also prevail in virtual communities. One is to provide opportunities for women to advocate their rights and utilize digital media to connect with people and spread their messages. Second is about online harassment and abusive behaviour towards women, reflecting the male-dominated culture where women's freedom is not accepted. For example, the murder of YouTube star "Qandeel Baloch" due to anti-women and abusive slogans in response to the Women's (Aurat) March on Women's Day and online trolling and threats to women activists indicate women's vulnerability in online spaces (Hassan et al., 2018). The male-dominated cultural and gender power (male supremacy) in Pakistan has refuted the online harassment policy. However, women raising voices for their rights are not tolerated, and it is termed a violation of cultural norms, which results in death threats and online backlash (Zubair et al., 2018).

Therefore, a research model integrated with women's position in society and their social media use was developed to understand women's online practices in a patriarchal context. Further, a great deal of academic literature on social media use in Pakistan is available, mainly limited to young university students as a sample and adopted quantitative design (Musharraf & Anis-ul-Haque, 2018). Since, among professional women, a significant number of women are associated with teaching, the sample was based on a female university faculty.

Studies related to Pakistani female social media users described that the patriarchal forces control and define women's online participation (Shehzad et al., 2021), resulting in a limited proportion of women connected to social media platforms (Khan & Du, 2017). Therefore, the sample selection was determined to explain and understand the power of patriarchy to control independent working women in elite positions or not. Online harassment cases have increased, and educated women complain more about online harassment (Digital Rights Foundation, 2017). Pakistani women adopt different strategies to hide their online identity to avoid cultural pressure (Aksar et al., 2020).

The study's sample was women working in universities in the capital of Pakistan, Islamabad. In the government sector, a lecturer is a government official with a grade 18, an assistant professor, grade 19, an associate professor, grade of 20, and a full professor, grade of 21. These grades from 18 are considered high government ranks and have the authority to certify documents. They have teaching and administrative responsibilities and take part in making progress at institutional and government levels. Therefore, the sample is conceptualized as elite due to their power and social status. Within a decade, female faculty has increased in universities; they also obtained foreign education and their intellectual leadership is acknowledged in academia. As educated and working women are assumed to be economically independent and decision-makers, the research also intends to explore their independence in online activities. Resultantly, an elite interview perspective is adopted to access information.

## **Literature Review**

The literature about elite women is scarce and limited studies focused on elite women, such as Zuckerman (1977), addressed some methodological challenges of interviewing elite women, including recruitment and interview. Macfarlane (2013), and later, Macfarlane and Burg (2018), mentioned that approaching the right women as participants is challenging. Interviewing elites is one of the most effective techniques to learn about the hidden facts of sociocultural, economic, and political realities. The elite interview researchers confront various barriers to access, especially if their study is based on purposeful sampling, conducted in a difficult cultural setting, and/or deals with a particular segment of society. However, the literature provides a method to access the elite, including calling to fix an appointment, sending request emails, and explaining topics and questions (Mikecz, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). Another method is an informative letter to explain the details of the project, write proposed questions, and convince them to participate in an interview (Goldstein, 2002). Further requests follow these requirements until the confirmation or rejection.

The available literature defined elites differently, depending on their social, financial, or political status and the environment that established them as elites. However, many elites are people in power and authority (Figenschou, 2010; Mikecz, 2012). More elites are found in traditional societies and developing countries, particularly where patriarchy remains pervasive, and sub-groups are formed within a social status group. Additional multi-layered power and authority present different dimensions to categorize elites, like public officials (Petkov & Kaoullas, 2016), leaders (Scheller, 2016), economists (Stephens, 2007), journalists (Figenschou, 2010), and military (Davies, 2001).

The existing elite interview literature recognizes the importance and difficulty of accessing elite participants (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). However, elite interviews are more complex in societies where more difference exists in power relations based on gender and social status. In particular, methods for securing research interviews with elites in developed and industrialized democracies (e.g., Mikecz, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002) do not necessarily meet with success when approaching elites in traditional societies or challenging cultural, political, and economic environments (Roberts, 2013). Context, such as the gender or background of participants, also plays an important role (Stephens, 2007). Another factor is topic and questions; if the topic and questions are personal and culturally sensitive, these methods also fail to provide the expected outcomes (Conti & O'Neil, 2007). So, the literature identifies two issues, one accessing the elite and the other is specific cultural or gender context. The current paper focuses on both concerns and theorizes an inter-related approach to access the elite in a traditional society where the participants are purposefully selected as "elite women" to disclose cultural realities.

Though the current research was multidisciplinary, it focused on women in a specific patriarchal culture and revealed women's positioning in the social context. Therefore, it aligns well with the feminist approach as the nexus of feminist research focused on exploring, explaining, and understanding women's lives in culturally gender-discriminatory structures. The feminist researchers discussed the oppression of women, primarily in patriarchal settings, and provided insights to empower and liberate women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). The multi-dimensional approach is employed in feminist research to present women's status based on gender, societal inequalities, actualities of social experience, and oppressive, submissive, and sub-ordinated status (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000). However, women's social and cultural experience is not uniform and varies from culture to culture and country to country. Likewise, there is no consistent method in feminist research and no distinction between feminist and non-feminist research (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). The studies exploring and discussing women's lives employed feminist theoretical and conceptual notions. The widely used methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographies, are adopted to address women's issues and explore hidden actualities, which they do not discuss openly due to cultural pressures (Olesen, 2007).

## **Methodology**

The paper focuses on methodological challenges in reaching women participants and gaining in-depth insights into their digital practices. The participants were highly educated and higher education professionals, that is, "elites" in society. Therefore, considering their socioeconomic status and feminist approaches, the researchers also gained help from "elite interview" literature.

### **Sample: Defining Women Faculty as Elite**

Defining the study sample as elite was the first conceptual challenge of the study. Identifying the elite for an elite interview is imperative (Mikecz, 2012). As mentioned, numerous definitions of the elite based on affiliation and social status are available in the literature. However, many studies involving elite interviews focused on politicians (Berry, 2002; Goldstein, 2002), conglomerates (Harvey, 2011), and government officials and professionals (Stephens, 2007). In simple terms, elites are defined in abstract notions and associated with organization, occupation, and privileged societal position (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). Applying the concept of "elite" for the study, we argue that though the sample has

authority or power, assigned authority in academia makes them elite members of society (Zuckerman, 1977).

Further, "the concept of "hybrid elite" by Parry (1998) shows that the sample has intellectual power and leadership qualities in organizational settings. Therefore, we conceptualize this sample as elites based on their intellectual possession, official rank, and influence on the academic community and society. Like any other researcher using purposive sampling, the author's access has been surely difficult and shaped by elite respondents' characteristics and their perceptions of the author.

### **Purposive Sampling Method**

Researchers prefer purposive sampling for interviewing the elite (Mikecz, 2012) based on specific criteria and research objectives (Tansey, 2009). Elite interview researchers, using purposive sampling, list the elites they want to interview before starting their research. As the research population is highly visible, finding the respondents' names and professional contact details for researchers using purposive sampling is relatively easy (Mikecz, 2012). However, while identifying potential interview participants is easy, access to elite participants is not always that straightforward.

Even though researchers using snowball sampling get considerable help from their mediators to sample and access their respondents, researchers using purposive sampling are alone in their access effort. They must contact and convince potential interviewees to meet and talk to them. Besides, as the method depends on interviewing specific individuals, replacing one interviewee with another can be difficult given the scarcity of "elites" and the greater access challenge, not to mention its impact on the research findings, given the highly subjective nature of qualitative research. In purposive sampling, identifying, that is, sampling, may be easier than many other methods, but it is harder to access the sampled individuals.

The existing research methodology literature suggests that the researchers try to access specific respondents by sending letters, emails, and faxes, or call the potential interviewee's office to explain the project and request the interview (Mikecz, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). However, recent works show that these textbook methods often fail researchers (Conti & O'Neil, 2007), particularly those conducting research in challenging environments.

In this article, the first author draws on her research experience in Pakistan to discuss researchers' access-related problems using purposive sampling. The first author interviewed highly educated professional women about their social media use. Social media use is an open topic; however, it is pretty sensitive in gender perspective and cultural background, particularly in a highly patriarchal society like Pakistan. Women using social media and maintaining digital online lives face a contentious issue.

Considering the characteristics mentioned above of elites and the context of the study – Pakistan, which is an emerging economy, politically unstable, socio-culturally conservative, and with high power relation and gender relation differences – resulted in more challenges to conduct with the elite, specifically for women in a higher position, and share their digital experiences.

The second author was still a student when she conducted the study of educated Pakistani women's social media use. She encountered problems specific to accessing a group of women through purposive sampling, exacerbated by Pakistan's cultural environment. As a research student, she followed various access methods ascribed in elite interview literature but often failed to secure interviews. The most observed issue in contacting elite interviews was the researcher's position and the power difference between the researcher and respondents. The respondent perceives the researcher's position in terms of social status, gender, and affiliation with the organization. Consequently, it determines the quality of the interviews and information



collected during the research. This challenge is consistent in the literature, noting that researchers' age, gender, ethnicity, race, or native language affects respondents' approach to them, the interview, the questions, and the research (Ganter, 2017).

Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) concluded with the successful elite interview when the researcher and respondents are from similar backgrounds, including social status, gender, age, and class. While discussing the gender of the researcher, the studies provided both accounts, negative and positive, in gaining access to elite interviews (Broom et al., 2009; Figenschou, 2010; Hoskin, 2019). In addition, the research described social status and institutional affiliation as positive factors in conducting the elite interview (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). Likewise, the difference between experienced and novice researchers impacts the elite interview. However, the discussion about the researcher's position in the elite interview is inconsistent (Mikecz, 2012).

## **Data Collection**

Before initiating primary research in Pakistan, the second author (hitherto referred to in the first person) made a list of participants she wanted to interview to delineate women's online practices in a patriarchal culture. I drafted a request letter, explained the research context and objectives, and requested time for their interviews following the traditional method. I obtained the email addresses of selected participants through the official web pages of higher education institutions. In the first week of March, 2019, I started sending them emails. However, until the middle of March, there were no responses to my email invitations to participate in the study. So, I started sending them follow-up emails requesting them to respond. However, until May of 2019, even after repeated emails and requests, I didn't receive a single mail either accepting or rejecting the request. Initially, I selected 30 women for interviews, fearing that not all would accept. However, after two months, I concluded that no one would be interviewed. All these selected participants were the associate professors and heads of departments.

In the second stage, after consultation with my doctoral supervisors (first author and third author), I explored department administrative or supportive staff to find the email address of their assistants, but this method also failed. So, I re-wrote the request letter and introduced myself as a researcher with previous work experience in the industry and teaching with many publications, introducing and reframing myself as a part of the teaching fraternity. After this new introduction, I received three responses with queries and requests. They pointed out questions about personal use of social media and profile information. One suggested eliminating questions, and two sought my confirmation to ensure the confidentiality of respondents. One respondent also highlighted the urgency of this research and was guided about the issue's sensitivity. In response, I thanked them for their suggestions and ensured their confidentiality. However, they still declined to be interviewed, citing their busy schedules.

I returned to literature and tried to find new methods of approaching elites, including the second author's doctoral thesis. She employed chains of referrals within a network of media professionals to gain access to interview journalists. In continuity, the discussion with the second author and elite interview method reading, we both discussed the methods of reaching respondents. Considering the chain of referrals, I found a "referral strategy" as a marketing tactic to use recommendations from satisfied customers (Firdaus et al., 2022). I adopted this strategy, making a list of friends and acquaintances who worked in the same departments. Then, I asked my friends and acquaintances to spread the word about my research to get a favourable response from my intended respondents.

I decided to adopt this referral strategy; however, my previous experience of gaining responses was also evaluated, where I introduced myself as part of the faculty. Therefore, here I combined both methods to access the intended respondents. First, I listed contacts in selected

institutions for the referral strategy. Then I categorized the references into "just acquaintances" and "good acquaintances." Finally, I prepared a plan to have my good acquaintances serve as my "fans" to introduce me to my prospective respondents.

Additionally, I introduced myself as part of their group, a female (gender identity) and working as a teacher (professional identity), belonging to the upper-middle class (social identity). I contacted one good acquaintance to test this strategy, shared the whole project with her, and briefed her to introduce me as a teacher and researcher – a new mom with professional and academic challenges. The next day, she met with her head of department (HoD), discussed my research project, and shared my story as a new mother and my sacrifice, leaving behind my newborn son in Pakistan for eight long months to pursue my PhD overseas in Malaysia. Her HoD appreciated my PhD efforts and sacrifices immensely and agreed to my interview. After a week, the interview time and place were confirmed. The HoD shared her experience and difficulties in getting a higher education and appreciated that I didn't give up despite domestic and financial constraints. I enjoyed a productive one-hour-long meeting and interview with the respondent.

After conducting this elite interview successfully, I drew the following conclusions:

- Adopting purposive sampling for elite interviews may delay or fail the research project. Conversely, not reaching selected study participants may significantly harm the strength of your research and the robustness of your findings.
- Second, suppose you research a sensitive topic based on personal accounts and challenging sociocultural environments. In that case, you will probably encounter more difficulty accessing the elites in your purposive sample.
- I assessed my initial failure to gain access to elite interviews on factors such as my position, status in society, and the kinds of questions I would be asking about personal social media use and the effects of culture on their online practices. Additionally, I realized that office assistants served as gatekeepers posing a barrier to gaining access to my intended elite interviewees.

Based on the referral strategy and establishing an in-group identity for the elite interview, the second author concluded that position in society and background information about the researcher is essential in convincing elites to interview. Based on this experience, the author developed an access strategy, the "referral in-group strategy," making access to elites easier for researchers conducting purposive sampling based on elite interview research, especially in challenging research environments.

### **Analysis: In-Group Referral Sampling**

The second author adopted different strategies to reach the sample, but respondents were not replying, and a few declined the interview and discussed their social media use and online activities. Therefore, the author consulted with supervisors (first and third authors) and studied the literature about interview strategies. With guidance from the first author and her previous work, reading alternate methods of reaching elites, the referral and in-group strategy was adopted for the study to reach an elite and purposive sample. The second author (corresponding author) chalked out a plan and concluded that a referral strategy could help the researchers using purposive sampling to overcome their access related problem to a large extent by enabling faster access and partial in-group membership, that is, insider to their elite research group.

Although the referral suggests snowball sampling, another widely followed sampling method in qualitative research, the referral is not like a snowball, referring to extended

respondents with the help of respondents. In snowball, the criterion of inclusion and exclusion is predetermined, but here in purposive sampling, the respondents are selected according to the specific objectives of the research. Further, in a snowball, a referral chain is assumed as a network of respondents; here, the referral strategy is adopted as a marketing tactic to use acquaintances to market researchers to reach the elite for interviews.

Using an in-group referral strategy to access elites for interviews helped further to conduct ten interviews. Based on this experience, the second author argues that using an in-group referral strategy in purposive sampling helps to gain access to elite interviews. The in-group referral strategy facilitates bridging the gap between researcher and respondent and making them familiar by using a common acquaintance and presenting the researcher's identity as part of their group. However, the acquaintance must be a "big fan" to introduce the "researcher" and promote "research." As marketing tactics, the referral strategy distinguishes the product, service, or organization, and makes it prominent in the competition. This also establishes a position of the marketed product or service (Berman, 2016). Similarly, the referral strategy introduces the researcher to respondents, presents significant similar and in-group characteristics, and urges the respondents to agree to the interview (Firdaus et al., 2022).

The second author was introduced to respondents as a successful broadcaster, teacher, researcher, and working mother managing studies with two kids and a job, which resulted in inspiration. Unfortunately, few respondents recalled their struggles during the initial period of their careers. Therefore, selecting a referral person and crafting an introduction with a specific word is vital in purposive sampling involving elite interviews.

The authors suggest conducting a pilot study based on doctoral research and experience using purposive sampling for elites. It is quite important in both aspects of purposive sampling and elite interviews. The pilot study helps to identify barriers to contacting elites. Since every context is different, the suggested email and phone appointment methods work. If they are ineffective, the researcher can change the sampling or sample. Adopting a referral in-group strategy is suggested; however, selecting acquaintances and words to introduce the researcher are important. It is also possible that not every acquaintance may convince or arrange an elite interview.

Therefore, the selection of women participants was purposive to recruit women who use social media and are also educated enough to explain their online activities and explain them according to the cultural setting of Pakistan and relate them to their positioning in society as a woman. The study was not just concerned about their social media use; the research was focused on their online practices and activities and cultural influence in shaping or reshaping their online presence. As educated and working women are assumed to be economically independent and decision-makers, the research also intends to explore their independence in online activities.

Considering the complexity of the framework and culturally sensitive issue, selecting women as participants was challenging for the authors. Therefore, according to research objectives, women working in universities from grades 18 to 20 were selected purposively. Since these purposively selected women are government officers in higher educational institutions, the authors' access to them was another challenge. Resultantly, an elite interview perspective is adopted to access them to obtain research objectives.

## **Discussion**

While examining the research framework from a feminist perspective, studies heavily focused on underprivileged women and concluded that these women have limited access and low involvement in digital technologies. On the other hand, educated and economically independent women have greater access to digital technologies but encounter cultural barriers.

Therefore, the research focused on educated and working women in Pakistan and intended to explore whether educated and working women in Pakistan are independently using social media in the patriarchal culture of Pakistan. Additionally, the question was also to examine whether gender, status, or culture influence women's virtual presence, activities, and overall digital experience. Since Pakistan society is based on a class and creed system, women from the upper middle class with PhD education and working as high-level officers (i.e., 20-grade officers in Pakistan educational institutions) were identified to explore the relationship between gender, status, culture, and digital experience.

Therefore, the research intends to answer whether the inherent gender biases and sociocultural norms in society curtail women's independence in virtual society despite the accessibility, education, and status in society. For example, educated and working women in the government sector make administrative decisions in their organization, but how do they behave in online communities?

Looking in the gender or feminist research domain, there were three challenges: selecting the sample, reaching the sample, and gaining rich information about their digital lives. Though sampling is the identification and recruitment of interview participants, it is done straightforwardly to collect data. However, in this research, sampling was done purposively to obtain an informative and/or rich account of a social phenomenon of which they possess intimate knowledge and lived experience.

Purposively identifying women who are highly educated and working as 20-grade officers in Pakistan was done by discussing gender and status in a male-dominated society to determine which force is more powerful and to what extent status in society is like a shield to protect from cultural pressures (Habiba et al., 2018). While this is indeed a necessary and pragmatic objective in any ethnographic method, we must also acknowledge the higher calling and deeper meaning of sampling in qualitative feminist research.

The studies produced a unified model: socio-economically dependent women face more cultural hindrances than independent women. The feminist analysis provided an in-depth lens to women's lives and social experiences; however, it is equally important to explore and compare gender-based expected behaviour and social status in a patriarchal context, where power is a multi-layered phenomenon. For example, studies concerning online harassment in Pakistan described that female showbiz celebrities and female politicians are trolled online and face threats (Hassan et al., 2018; Jamil, 2020). Although showbiz personalities and politicians are from a privileged segment of society, their expressive digital presence is not accepted culturally. Similarly, as the study participants are elite thanks to their education and social class but not quite so elite thanks to their status as women (and not men), this study of women's restricted digital lives evokes the duality in the status of Pakistani women academics.

This means women's status is not similar to men's in society despite education and economic independence. So, the position of women in patriarchal culture is determined by gender (Aksar et al., 2022). Although many women in Pakistan are getting an education and are employed, and visible societal advancement has occurred, women still face "disproportionate status." The gender-based dichotomies of men and women are culturally deep-rooted and prevail over all social, political, and economic life domains. Therefore, women with social and economic privileges are suppressed due to their gender and culturally associated attributes. This refers to in-grounded political and ideological feminist perspectives in society, where women are viewed as an "oppressed" group.

Therefore, in feminist research and interviewing women, the notions of a "pervasive system of delusions and false values" (where women's personality and identity both are associated with husband and child-bearing) and the notion of "standpoint" (subjects' position in the society) both are challenges to obtaining expected information. The women participants in a male-dominated society share information according to their cultural identity and social

position. The inherent biases and disparities restrict women participants from expressing which doesn't belong to them and which position or status is not given to them.

Similarly, interviewing women and discussing their social media practices resulted in methodological challenges for the researchers in such a context. Gaining access to and interviewing respondents of the study was achieved through two different approaches: referral strategy and presenting the in-group identity of the researcher. The referral strategy worked as a way to access them because in-group identity helped build a relationship where respondents confidently expressed their views and provided in-depth, rich information. The researcher and her interview participants shared an in-group identity as elite Pakistani women, which afforded the researcher a form of feminine social capital. On one level, their shared identity allowed her access into each participant's social circle (e.g., bridging social capital), effectively securing their agreement to participate in her research study. On another level, their sense of shared sisterhood as both women in academia and as Pakistani women negotiating autonomy within patriarchy allowed the researcher to gain acceptance into her peers' circle of trust (e.g., bonding social capital), facilitating rich and meaningful in-depth interviews.

For qualitative studies, the researchers encounter challenges in gaining the required information, particularly whether the topic is sensitive, or the respondents are special. Both issues were faced in the current study, and the topic was sensitive in that despite the exponential use of social media, expressive women's online presence and activities are not tolerated in Pakistan. The research revealed that online harassment is increasing in Pakistan; women activists, politicians, journalists, and showbiz personalities face more online threats due to their expressive views and visual presence. Therefore, women applied security settings, avoided visual sharing in Pakistan, and made sidesteps in case of any controversial discussion. Considering all the challenges and research objectives, the in-group identity made the respondents comfortable sharing and finding a common link that eased access and established confidence and bond.

This article discussed the difficulty of obtaining elites for researchers utilizing purposive sampling in problematic situations and an alternate technique for overcoming these limitations. We add to the known literature on elite interviews and the growing literature, particularly in feminist and cultural perspectives, on the methodological challenges of doing research in challenging situations. It shifts the discourse around elite interview research from acknowledging access issues to thinking and using faster, more secure, and less expensive access tactics along with purposive sampling.

Reflecting on elite interview research experience in Pakistan, the author devised the "in-group referral sampling," which assists researchers in setting up interviews with their possible elite respondents in less time, for free, and with considerably higher commitment. Although this technique is based on the author's fieldwork in Pakistan, it applies to contacting prospective elite interviewees anywhere researchers face access constraints.

In presenting the challenges of elite interview research and suggesting an access strategy coupled with purposive sampling, this article contributes to the existing literature on elite interviewing and the growing literature on conducting research in challenging cultural environments, specifically for women. While the in-group referral strategy is useful for any researcher conducting purposive sampling, it is particularly helpful for researchers working in challenging environments or lacking pre-existing connections in their research field. In addition, these include researchers without institutional support or titles, researchers lacking time or grant for long field research, and any researcher who feels their positionality complicates their ability to make the first contact, which consists of young, female, or foreign researchers. Referral and adding in-group identity is a very realistic method.

Further, from a feminist perspective, it also provides a solution to interview women about culturally restricted issues and help gain better information by establishing a common

position between researcher and respondent. Additionally, interviewing women from a feminist perspective must go beyond apparent characteristics and focus on their actual "identity and position" to recognize the real-life experience. As in this study, as the participants are highly educated and hold an "elite" status economically, the cultural sphere has no place for women as elites. This indicates the difference between economically measured "social status" and culturally assigned "position," which is gender-based. Therefore, cultural acceptance or position is more important than socioeconomic status in exploring and understand the actualities of women's lives.

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