

# THE SOCIAL AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF ADDRESS TERMS: A SOCIO-PRAGMATIC INVESTIGATION OF PAKISTANI WOMEN'S EVERYDAY INTERACTION

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## Abstract

The current research analyzes the way in which Pakistani women make a strategic use of an address term Bhai as a tool for communication in different interactional contexts. Being influenced by gender roles, norms of politeness, and worries about one's personal security, women utilize this address term as a means to regulate interpersonal distance, express politeness, and manipulate social relationships. Quantitative research approach is employed; data has been gathered from female students enrolled in universities using a Likert scale questionnaire that included 29 items evaluate social and pragmatic aspects. Findings designate that its significance of its use in terms of politeness, respect, and affection seems to be relatively high, whereas the significance of its usage in exercising power control is relatively low, indicating that it serves more as a means of protection than authority. The research is based on the theoretical principles of pragmatics and sheds light on the complexity of what initially appeared to be a simple address term in gender discourse.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely an instrument of communication; it is a valuable tool for handling social interactions, marking boundaries between individuals, and negotiating meaning through discourse. The social context of societies like Pakistan plays a significant role in shaping the discourse through cultural considerations related to gender, honor, and modesty. In this setting, the use of address terms often goes beyond their basic meaning to serve pragmatic purposes (Brown & Levinson, 1987). A widely used address term employed by Pakistanis in interactive situations can be found not only in interactions among friends but also in situations involving strangers. Despite being based on kinship terms, its

pragmatic usage goes far beyond the kinship connotations. In the case of women, this format acts as a way of using indirectness as a strategy for maintaining proper etiquette, setting boundaries, avoiding romantic overtures, reducing personal closeness, and maintaining respect without a straightforward refusal. Indirectness is especially applicable in situations, where saying no might be offensive or embarrassing (Mills, 2003).

Moreover, the above-mentioned address term is often used in regular service situations where politeness and friendliness are required as well. This is because this address term carries out two functions at the same time in that it not only shows social solidarity but also maintains interpersonal distance. (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

This is in recognition of the fact that women tactfully balance safety, politeness, and interaction control within discourse. This strategy does not involve any use of explicit power or direct rejection but uses pragmatic conventions that are widely accepted within the society (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Although, this form is extensively used, its pragmatic and gendered roles have not yet received much attention in previous research. Hence, this study focuses on how Pakistani females utilize this term to negotiate boundaries, politeness, safety, respect, and discourse meanings. Based on Politeness Theory and Feminist Pragmatics, this research reveals how a single address term serves various pragmatic functions in gendered discourse (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Mills, 2003).

### 1.1 Research Objectives:

1. To investigate the social and situational factors influencing Pakistani women's use of a particular address term across different interactional contexts.
2. To examine how the use of this address term pragmatically contributes to the construction of interpersonal relationships in Pakistani women's everyday interactions.

### 1.2 Research Questions:

1. What social and situational factors influence Pakistani women's use of a particular address term across different interactional contexts?
2. How does the use of this address term pragmatically contribute to the construction of interpersonal relationships in Pakistani women's everyday interactions?

## 2. Literature Review

Words derive their meaning not only from their structure but also through our usage of these words in particular social contexts. Pragmatics scholars believe that people do not merely communicate information through language but create meaning together through the act of communicating (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Address terms have significant importance in this regard. The usage of language occupies a central position in social and cultural cognition. We

interpret messages not only because of the language being used, but also on our cognition of intentions. Address terms provide a functional way of managing our identity, maintaining smooth interactions, and setting boundaries in terms of closeness and distance from other people. The literature is replete with findings demonstrating the significance of forms of address in interpersonal relations, particularly in societies where respect, status differentiation, and politeness are highly valued (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes & Wardhaugh, 2006).

The choice of addressing terms is an issue through which sociolinguists can study how social structures are constructed and reflected linguistically (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, as cited in Wardhaugh, 2006). Address terms represent social linguistic tools that symbolize our personality, status, distance, and position within the social hierarchy, especially in societies that prioritize social harmony above all. Address terms allow us to direct our social interaction in ways that are socially acceptable, thus ensuring social balance. We should understand that address terms are not only confined to family relations and blood relations; they are also related to the socially created concept of kinship and extended to broader social settings (Mohammed, 2010). During social interactions, kinship terms may be applied to non-family members to signify solidarity, courtesy, respect, or loyalty to a certain group, which has been confirmed by contemporary sociolinguistics (Saeid, 2023). The pragmatic use of such terminology allows people to operate within a complicated social setting without going through the cumbersome task of establishing their relationships.

According to research, address terms are chosen according to certain sociocultural factors, including age, sex, context, and level of closeness to the person being addressed. Because of that, these address terms have a close relation with power, solidarity, and politeness in general, indicating the prevailing ideologies of society (Mohammed, 2010; Arwa Saeid, 2023). It can be observed through the use of address terms how the language not only expresses social norms but also shapes them.

The Speech Act Theory that was proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) may be used as the theoretical framework of analyzing speech as action. For instance, Austin identifies three categories of speech acts which include locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. In the case of the speaker, it is not only the creation of meaning that counts; rather, his/her actions have consequences for society. Moving on to further discuss the theory, Searle categorizes illocutionary acts into five subcategories, namely; assertive acts, directive acts, commissive acts, expressive acts, and declarative acts. Considering this theoretical framework, terms of address should be treated as multi-functional acts of speech that have different pragmatic purposes.

The address terms that exist in Pakistani language can also be regarded as “off record” pragmatic approaches. This is due to the fact that by employing such address terms, one can exercise his/her power in an implicit manner, thus keeping the relation intact. The illocutionary force in the use of address terms can therefore be seen as that of marking one’s territory or creating distance between oneself and others. The theoretical approach includes Politeness theory, Speech Act Theory, and Feminist Pragmatics. In accordance with Politeness Theory, address terms perform the role of expressing solidarity and reduce face threats in conversation. The Speech Act Theory analyses such address terms as implicit pragmatic directions because their illocutionary force communicates the intentions of the speaker and creates a social message. Feminist Pragmatics implies that women make strategic use of address terms to achieve security, agency and interactional power in socially unequal settings. These approaches as a whole treat address forms as pragmatic tools which perform functions of politeness, distance, and positioning. Politeness theory also provides an understanding of how speakers tend to maintain positive and negative face wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Address terms are widely used in transactional speech of Pakistan as a means of politeness (Iqbal, Asghar & Khan, 2020).

Goffman's concept of face can account for the pragmatic function of address terms. Face is defined as one's self-image desired during an

interaction, and language is a powerful tool in face-work. Terms of address allow speakers to perform face by decreasing social distance and preventing possible threats (Goffman, 1967; Dewi et al., 2023). In this regard, Feminist Pragmatics also develops the theme of language usage being not only the effect of social restrictions, but the strategic response of women to them (Mills, 2003; Holmes, 1995). In particular, the employment of address terms by women in Pakistani contexts is seen as a conscious process involving negotiations of identity, security, and control in gender roles (Mousavi, 2020).

Address terms are important in sociolinguistics because they demonstrate social roles, distance, and context within a communication act. As noted by Arwa Saeid (2023), address terms may show respect, politeness, or solidarity, regardless of whether they refer to literal family members. Therefore, address terms are socially recognized conventions of communication. Women’s linguistic practices have been found to rely heavily on safety-oriented communicative strategies. These strategies include changes in women’s linguistic practices in light of possible threats of being harassed, misunderstood, or challenged. Indirection, polite avoidance, and relationality represent typical strategies used by women for managing risks. Address terms constitute an important resource in this context. By drawing relationally defined categories, address terms can effectively regulate the distance between the interlocutors and prevent misunderstanding. However, scholars warn against viewing such language practices in terms of avoidance alone. Research indicates that address terms are not only a means of avoiding problems but can also be utilized in creating rapport and displaying politeness and grace in situations such as shopping, travel, and work.

The exercise of power during interaction does not necessarily have to be directly communicated but rather implied in the use of linguistic resources (Goffman, 1967). The indirectness used in many socio-cultural settings can better help people maintain social cohesion in the long run since direct assertion would only create disharmony in collectivist cultures, which value the balance of

interpersonal relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The use of address terms can aid in such processes of relational negotiations since such language resources give individuals the means to place themselves in different levels within the hierarchy in a socially acceptable way (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Through the use of such linguistic resources, people can achieve relational balancing where they can control degrees of proximity and remoteness according to context, which is similar to feminist pragmatist approaches to linguistics (Mills, 2003).

Despite these findings, studies that have investigated the use of address terms by Pakistani women as multidimensional pragmatic functions are scanty. These previous studies, in which address terms were treated generally or politeness and gender were discussed independently of one another, did not pay much attention to the analysis of the same term used in many pragmatic functions including boundaries setting, politeness, safety, respect, affection, and power managing.

Despite increased interest in politeness and gendered discourse, research about the uses of address terms by Pakistani women as multifunctional pragmatic strategies is scant. Most of the existing research is based either on an overly generalized analysis of address terms or on a study of politeness and gender as independent topics. Moreover, the focus of the existing research literature is not directed towards addressing the issue from the viewpoint of the speakers themselves, with regard to their underlying reasons for employing the terms. According to Abbasi and Abrar (2025), an investigation was carried out into kinship terms in three languages including Sindhi, Urdu, and English in conversations of young Sindhi speakers in Karachi. As per their results, the use of such terms transcends actual family relations and acts as a pragmatic tool in indicating politeness, familiarity, and distance in social relations. The study reinforces the concept of socio-pragmatic implications of address terms.

In the same way, research by Gusnawaty et al. (2022) on the use of kinship and address forms in Bugis speech community revealed that these address forms not only help to maintain social

harmony but at the same time show the existence of power imbalance within these communities. It further proves the importance of pragmatic aspects of these address forms. Mousavi (2020) explored the concept of using fictive kinship terms in the conversations of the Lori people and concluded that there is a significant gender difference in the employment of these terms as tools of politeness in order to manage relations and keep social harmony. A study that was published in the journal "Philology: Theory and Practice" in 2023 has shown that address terms in Pakistani English in academic discourse contexts were often combined with English address terms for politeness purposes. It is evidence of the fact that address terms are pragmatic devices that are culture-bound.

The journal ETLij conducted an investigation on kinship terms among the Gayonese ethnicity group. The research revealed that kinship terms have different functions when it comes to pragmatic use, for instance, politeness and expression of cultural identity during communication. It is evident that kinship terms are used as communicative tools among certain cultures. All the above research studies indicate that the usage of address terms is not limited to only indicating relationships within families but serve as sociocultural instruments within different linguistic communities. The use of address forms can be employed for the purpose of politeness, dealing with differences in social status, and creating intimacy. All of the research studies carried out among diverse societies, including Sindhi, Bugis, Lori, and Gayonese, prove that address forms rely upon cultural norms, gender roles, and context. In addition, multilingual and Pakistani societies use address forms for easy communication.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative survey research design that examines the use of the address term "Bhai" among Pakistani women in diverse social contexts. A descriptive-analytical approach is employed to assess women's perceptions and use of the address term in a variety of social roles that

the term performs in social interactions and its significance. This research draws on the tenets of Politeness Theory and Feminist Pragmatics. In addition, Goffman's contributions, together with sociolinguistic perspectives on address terms, serve as theoretical frameworks for this research. From a theoretical perspective, the notion of address term implies a pragmatic resource that helps women control various aspects, such as politeness, social distance, interpersonal relationships, and interactional positionality, among other factors.

### 3.2 Population and Sample

This study intends to target Pakistani women in general but mainly those women who often engage in communication in public and quasi-public spaces such as educational institutes, bazaars, public transportation, and work environments. In this scenario, the purposive sampling technique was used where the participants were selected based on their comfort with the common use of the term *Bhai* in Urdu or bilingual communication. The samples involved female students from diverse educational backgrounds and specialization disciplines. There is variability in terms of age, educational background, and semesters between individual participants. Data were gathered using a self-created Likert-scale questionnaire constructed expressly for this study. The instrument includes 20-30 items grouped on six mental dimensions:

1. Boundary-Setting
2. Politeness and Cultural Acceptability
3. Safety
4. Power Control
5. Pseudo-Kinship and Respect Construction
6. Image and Impression Management
7. Expressive and Pragmatic Extension

Every point depicts a different pragmatic function of the word *Bhai* and has been ranked on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". In order to make sure that

people of different education levels can understand the questions, the statements have been made easy for comprehension.

### 4. Data Analysis

For this study, the data have been analyzed using a systematic quantitative approach to examine the usage of the addressing term *Bhai* by Pakistani women across diverse socio-cultural situations. The answers have been collected through a self-designed Likert-scale survey, which contains 20-30 questions that cover seven conceptual areas, namely boundary setting, politeness, safety, power control, respect and affection, impression management and expressive and pragmatic extension.

#### 4.1 Descriptive Analysis of the Scale

The preliminary study concentrated on descriptive statistics to have an insight into the general responses made in all six domains. The frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were computed for each item to determine the dominant trend in using "Bhai" among the respondents. As for the mean scores of the items, higher mean scores indicate a higher tendency towards the pragmatics expressed by each item, meaning the deliberate use of *Bhai*.

The overall results indicate a generally moderate to high level of agreement among respondents regarding the socio-pragmatic functions of the address term *Bhai* in everyday interaction. The mean values across different dimensions show that the use of *Bhai* is not random but rather context-sensitive and socially motivated. The overall scale mean ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) further suggests a consistent pattern of responses, reflecting shared understanding of its pragmatic functions within Pakistani women's communicative practices. These findings provide empirical support for the view that *Bhai* operates as a culturally grounded socio-pragmatic resource used strategically in interaction.

**Table-1: Frequency of use in different dimensions**

Dimension	No. of Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Boundary-Setting	4	4.48	0.54	0.82
Safety	4	3.95	0.62	0.77
Image & Impression Management	3	4.36	0.56	0.80
Politeness	4	3.32	0.66	0.74
Respect and Affection	3	2.88	0.69	0.73
Power Control	3	2.02	0.71	0.71
Expressive & Pragmatic Extension	3	3.58	0.60	0.76
<b>Overall scale</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>0.49</b>	<b>0.82</b>

## 4.2 Dimension-Wise Analysis

### 1. Boundary-Setting

The use of the term *Bhai* is used to denote that the interaction being had is formal in nature and not at all personal. This allows for a maintenance of politeness without getting close, which is appropriate for Pakistani culture.

#### Distance-marking

The use of the term *Bhai* is used to denote that the interaction being had is formal in nature and not at all personal. This allows for a maintenance of politeness without getting close, which is appropriate for Pakistani culture.

#### Boundary enforcement

In cases where the individual feels uncomfortable (for example, being followed or approached), the word *Bhai* provides the speaker with an opportunity to exert control without escalating the situation. *Bhai* serves as a method of resistance that is neither aggressive nor offensive.

#### Avoidance of over-familiarity

The use of the word *Bhai* keeps the situation impersonal, especially when dealing with people one does not know.

Mean = 4.48 (highest among all dimensions)

SD = 0.54 (relatively low, showing responses are consistent)

The high Mean clearly shows that participants relate *Bhai* to border drawing activities specially creating distance and maintaining borders. The low Standard Deviation is an indicator of high

agreement. The majority of participants strongly believe that the word *Bhai* was used as a means of establishing social distance and expressing one's intention. This matches exactly your topic, which is using kinship terms as a way to navigate interactions. The outstanding agreement and minimal variation in this dimension make this dimension very reliable and appropriate for research. Questions in this dimension related to the use of *Bhai* to establish social distance, minimize interactions, and avoid romantic intentions. From the results of this analysis, it was clear that there was a high level of agreement among participants. They did not want to refuse interaction, but preferred another approach to communication, which is less direct and more socially acceptable. As per Speech Act Theory, the latter constitutes indirect speech acts as the intended meaning is communicated indirectly and not directly.

### 2. Politeness and Cultural Acceptability

This dimension shows how *Bhai* functions as an effective politeness strategy in social interactions.

#### Positive politeness (solidarity building)

*Bhai* provides an occasional sense of friendliness or warmth, particularly while making requests. In order to encourage cooperation, the speaker intentionally creates a pseudo-kinship.

**Negative politeness (imposition reduction)**

*Bhai* softens the requests by respecting the listener's independence. It lessens the risk of imposition, which makes the request more socially acceptable.

**Indirectness (softening requests/complaints)**

*Bhai* is often employed in indirect statements, particularly complaints or recommendations. By avoiding direct conflict, indirectness enables the speaker to maintain harmony.

Mean = 3.32 (moderate)  
SD = 0.66 (moderate variation)

The moderate Mean shows that *Bhai* is employed regularly for politeness techniques, including indirectness, positive politeness, and negative politeness. The SD reveals moderate variations in responses of participants. However, politeness is not considered the driving force behind the application of *Bhai*, although politeness is involved to some extent. A middle level average reveals that women apply *Bhai* to mitigate interactions on occasions; however, it does not constitute the principal function of *Bhai*. It is quite practical and reasonable to neither exaggerate the importance of politeness nor make the analysis unrealistic and far from real life. The findings of the descriptive analysis suggest a high level of agreement on the application of *Bhai* to mitigate the situation and use kinder language than harsh. As per Politeness Theory, *Bhai* can be regarded as an expression of negative politeness through which women can manage hazardous circumstances without disturbing social harmony.

**3. Safety**

This aspect highlights the way *Bhai* serves as a protective linguistic strategy, particularly when used in public or possibly unsafe situations.

**Conflict de-escalation**

*Bhai* proves to be an effective communication device for de-escalation during conflicts. *Bhai* tends to lessen the aggressive nature of interaction and turn it into a cooperative one.

**Self-protection**

Using the term *Bhai* is helpful in protecting oneself without offending the other individual. The term *Bhai* is therefore a means of defensive communication.

Mean = 3.95 (relatively high)

SD = 0.62 (moderate variation)

The findings indicate that *Bhai* is commonly employed as a safety-driven linguistic strategy, particularly for conflict avoidance and self-defense in public discourse. The moderately low SD suggests fairly consistent responses. The issue of safety is critical as well because women make use of *Bhai* as a way of protecting themselves whenever they are out or when they are uncertain about a particular situation. The nearness of 4 to the average suggests that this is a deliberate act done by women frequently. A standard deviation of less than 1 means that there was consistency in their response. This is critical to your research question since the range of responses was moderate to highly agreeable. This means that *Bhai* is used by women as a protective linguistic device when they are insecure or feel reluctant about something.

**4. Power Control**

This factor sheds light on the role of *Bhai* in enabling women to handle power relations during interactions.

**Power Neutralization**

*Bhai* minimizes the hierarchical relation between the speaker and the addressee. It makes the interaction level equal for both participants, regardless of the addressee's situational power (for instance, a driver or a shopkeeper).

**Directive Mitigation**

While giving commands, *Bhai* makes them more flexible. This gives the speaker dominance yet keeps him from being too authoritative, thus indicating polite dominance.

Mean = 2.02 (low)

SD = 0.71 (moderate variation)

The small value of the Mean implies that there is no strong connection between the word 'Bhai' and power negotiations or control directly, even

though it can be used indirectly for making suggestions softer. It was noted that people do not employ *Bhai* to assert power or control conversations. It is a justified finding as the mean is low enough, given the standards set by society and culture. According to feminist pragmatics, it indicates that people use language to create an atmosphere of security, maintain boundaries, and preserve their image, but not to exert power. It is an acceptable dimension because it specifies something that *Bhai* cannot be employed for, thus making it suitable for debate. The second dimension concerned the power control aspect of *Bhai*, in which people explored how it helps women control the course and mood of the conversation.

### 5. Pseudo-Kinship and Respect Construction

This dimension emphasizes that the use of *Bhai* demonstrates respect as well as relational connection.

#### Respect Marking

*Bhai* is employed as a respectful title for addressing men in a public or formal setting. It acts as a cultural alternative to honorifics, particularly when names are not known.

#### Solidarity / Rapport Building

In informal contexts, *Bhai* creates bonding and shared identity. The term moves from distance to closeness depending on context, showing its flexibility.

Mean = 2.88 (moderate)

SD = 0.69

The data suggest that *Bhai* is employed in a form of pseudo-kinship, whereby women are able to construct respect in a socially appropriate manner through their speech exchanges. Through employing this expression, speakers are overtly marking respect for the interlocutor, while simultaneously fostering closeness. Therefore, *Bhai* acts not only as an instrument of respect but also as an instrument for developing rapport and solidarity. In fact, high levels of agreement were revealed by the answers to the survey questions, particularly in those referring to informal

communication with drivers, sellers, vendors, or other service workers. Data have been analyzed in the context of sociocultural practices in addition to individual use of language. *Bhai* is a widespread and culturally meaningful word in Pakistan's culture, regarded as polite, respectful, and socially appropriate. It serves the purpose of controlling interpersonal relations, maintaining social harmony, and negotiating the power game in various formal and informal settings, like markets and other places of social life.

### 6. Image and Impression Management

This dimension focuses on how *Bhai* helps speakers maintain social image and avoid conflict.

#### Face-Saving

The use of *Bhai* ensures that neither the speaker nor the listener feels embarrassed. It helps minimize any social harm and maintain positive interpersonal relations.

#### Face-Threatening Act Mitigation

In communicating a negative stance or critique, *Bhai* serves as a mechanism for softening the message and avoiding a blunt delivery. This enables one to avoid causing offense while maintaining politeness, emotional control, and social harmony in the process.

Mean = 4.36 (high)

SD = 0.56 (low variation)

The high Mean indicates that *Bhai* is closely related to face saving, politeness, and impression management. *Bhai* is always regarded as a means of creating a favorable social image. The mean value indicates that *Bhai* is widely used among women to influence others' perceptions of themselves. The highly reliable result which can be easily linked to social identity and expectations is indicated by the high mean score and low SD. The items of this dimension have evaluated the extent to which *Bhai* helps females maintain an image that is socially acceptable. Based on the findings, the respondents realize that their language use impacts the way others view them, and by using *Bhai*, they create a positive first impression in terms of respectfulness and professionalism. In addition, this dimension relates to pragmatism in communication, highlighting the importance of

linguistic means in the process of identity construction. The respondents stated that using *Bhai* enables them to avoid any potential misunderstanding of their intentions because this is a socially acceptable language choice.

### 7. Expressive and Pragmatic Extension

Apart from the uses of *Bhai* in politeness and relation management, there are many expressive and pragmatic extensions of *Bhai* as well. In such cases, the word does not act as an address term but acts as a stance indicator that indicates the speaker's emotional position.

#### Humor and Irony

The term *Bhai* may be used to convey irony or humor. It is typically used when one wishes to indirectly criticize another person without being too critical or rude. The speaker uses this term in a manner that implies laughter, amazement, or appreciation of sorts rather than directly criticizing the person. In this way, the speaker is able to give an evaluative response without offending anyone.

#### Sarcasm

The word *Bhai* in sarcastic usage can be associated with an attitude that involves an opposition between the meaning of the word itself and its actual intended meaning. Despite the fact that the word *Bhai* generally denotes a form of respect or affection, sometimes it is used sarcastically in order to ridicule or reprimand the actions of the addressed person.

#### Emotional Expression

*Bhai* can also be used as an emotive term to express one's frustration, shock, surprise, confusion, irritation, or gratitude without addressing the listener directly. Here, its usage serves as a discourse marker to emphasize the speaker's emotions and make conversational language more emotionally expressive. It can be spontaneous in conveying the speaker's emotions during interaction. It can also be used in appreciation, such as "Thanks, *Bhai*," expressing gratitude and emotional warmth toward someone who helped you, implying easy relations between people rather than blood relatives.

#### Provocation / Mild Offense / Jealousy Contexts

At times, the term *Bhai* is employed for teasing, annoying, or insulting someone. The intention behind using the term may vary according to the situation and the manner in which it is employed. Jealousy, annoyance, rivalry, and sarcasm could be expressed through the use of the term *Bhai*. It would not imply respect or brotherhood but irony to show contempt or ridicule.

Mean = 3.58 (moderate-high)

SD = 0.60 (moderate variation)

It is evident that the use of *Bhai* has many meanings and functions other than its use as an addressing term. It can be considered a discourse-pragmatic marker since its use was associated with various modes of communication, like using humor, irony, sarcasm, teasing, and criticizing people indirectly, which require the listener to understand the meaning behind the words in view of the context and intentions of the speaker. Thus, one can use *Bhai* to indicate one's evaluation or disagreement without being direct in what they say to keep the conversation polite and balanced. These findings also indicate that the use of *Bhai* makes an important contribution to the management of socio-emotional positioning within informal interaction contexts. *Bhai* is commonly used as a way of handling teasing, provocation, mild offense, and competition; it allows the speaker to express an emotional or attitudinal position while avoiding too much harshness or aggressiveness in communication. Moreover, in male-female interactions, girls can resort to the use of *Bhai* sarcastically to prevent any romantic or flirtatious moves on the part of the addressee by giving the latter a brotherly position. Thus, *Bhai* serves as a kind of ironic boundary marking tool where the rejection or emotional distance is achieved through indirect means of expressing one's opinion in a humorous way. In general, these findings provide evidence of the great flexibility and multifunctionality of *Bhai* from the pragmatic perspective.

### 5. Discussion and Findings

Reliability of the questionnaire has been measured using Cronbach's alpha test. Satisfactory level of reliability has been observed for the scale, which

indicates that pragmatic aspect of *Bhai* has been assessed satisfactorily through dimensions. It was examined both at the level of the whole scale and its dimensions individually. The items included in each aspect were considered to consistently assess the same construct if Cronbach's alpha value was above 0.70. The reliability of the scale developed for this research was successfully proved through high values. In general, it can be concluded that *Bhai* is not merely a simple kinship term but a versatile pragmatic tool. The six properties together provide evidence of how Pakistani women deliberately use *Bhai* as a tool to maintain boundaries, gain respect, ensure safety, exercise authority, express affection, and project their image.

The results of the present study are similar to previous studies about kinship and address terms; indeed, the expressions in question have been found to be more than mere words in language; rather, they are crucial socio-pragmatic tools. The study demonstrates that Pakistani women employ *Bhai* for different purposes, including demarcation of boundaries, maintaining politeness, safety, power negotiations, expression of reverence, and their individual attitudes towards the addressees. As noted by Abbasi & Abrar (2025), the kinship terms in Sindhi, Urdu, and English languages not only indicate biological kinship but are also used to denote courtesy, intimacy, and social distance. In this study, it is observed that *Bhai* is also widely employed in situations other than those indicating literal kinship. Likewise, the results in this study confirm the use of *Bhai* as a pragmatic means for managing social relations, especially concerning social distance and respect in interactions. The study results are further consistent with the work of Gusnawaty et al. (2022), where kinship terms and address forms among the Bugis speech community not only preserve social harmony but also symbolize power relations. As in this study, the term *Bhai* is used not only to manage interactions harmoniously but also to counteract or moderate power asymmetries, especially in public and service contexts. Moreover, Mousavi (2020) pointed out the gender differences in the usage of fictive kinship terms in the Lori community,

where fictive kinship terms are used as a politeness strategy. This finding corroborates the current study's results; wherein Pakistani females utilize *Bhai* as a politeness strategy in order to interact safely and politely in situations with unknown males. The analysis indicates that gender is an important variable in the pragmatic usage of kinship address terms.

## 6. Conclusion

It has been found in this study that *Bhai* plays a very versatile role pragmatically in the everyday interactions of Pakistani women. As far as the purpose of its use is concerned, it mainly has been found that this address form functions mainly to draw lines between different social contexts to allow the woman to maintain social distance without resorting to any sort of conflict. Another important function performed by the term is safety as *Bhai* is used to confidently traverse various public and semi-public spaces. According to the perspective of feminist pragmatics, the usage of *Bhai* in the context of Pakistani culture can be said to represent language agency through which the term helps women follow socially accepted norms while protecting themselves from unwanted male attention and reducing possibilities of being harassed. To some extent, factors like politeness, respectfulness, and affection have also played a role in the manner in which *Bhai* is used by women. By carefully choosing to use the term in their interactions, women are able to ensure harmonious relationships, create a friendly atmosphere in interactions, and convey their affection without necessarily revealing much about themselves. These points are supported by the Politeness theory that states that social harmony can be created and face threatening acts can be avoided through indirection. It is also intriguing to note that lower scores on the power control variable suggest that the term is never used by women to control interactions or establish dominance within them. This is also evidenced through high image and impression management scores obtained.

Overall, the findings suggest that *Bhai* is a culturally accepted, versatile term of address that achieves a compromise between security, civility,

deference, and control without just being a marker of kinship. It allows women to navigate through difficult social contexts as it mirrors the prevailing sociocultural norms, gender roles, and situational demands. In this way, the current research brings to light the practical nature of everyday language use by integrating theories of Politeness, Face, and Feminist Pragmatics.

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