

NEGOTIATING YOUTH IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL ASPIRATION: AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

In the current digital Era, social media has become one of the most important contexts for adolescent identity development. This paper examines how young people's engagement with different online platforms has constructed and presented their identities (Avci, Baams, & Kretschmer, 2024). Basically, this research investigates the influence of digital aspirations on self-concept and the relation to peers. Social media is considered a highlight reel in which individuals showcase idealized images and versions of being a teen to make others perceive their lives as successful or attractive. Mainly, these Dynamics are fulfilling the needs of media literacy, younger adolescents lacking experience and critical thinking skills, who have a tendency to struggle with discerning facts from different forms in the online world (Digitale, 2023). Whereas this research also identifies the psychological impacts in managing different identities in the digital world that can induce identity fatigue, basically mental strain, and diverse curated personalities, which challenge well-being due to fragmented self-reception and the multiple online selves concept. For example, there is a huge difference between the online personality perceptions as well as the offline networking and socialization within the friend circle or family, despite physical distance. Similarly, the social platform should be contacted when in-person contact is limited, and connectedness is not developed. Social media at that time was considered an active medium for maintaining relationships. So the studies suggest that the social media conception is not just the reflection of your views, but it actually shapes The Identity of youth. For instance, the participation of adolescents in social media comparisons exhibits the exploration of identities, all of which is also a form of distress. The intermixed nature of digital engagement, aspirational culture, and self-construction provides a difference in how younger people navigate their identity in the digital world through their networking. This paper has idealized the role of digital aspirations and social media consumption in impacting the youth identity.

INTRODUCTION

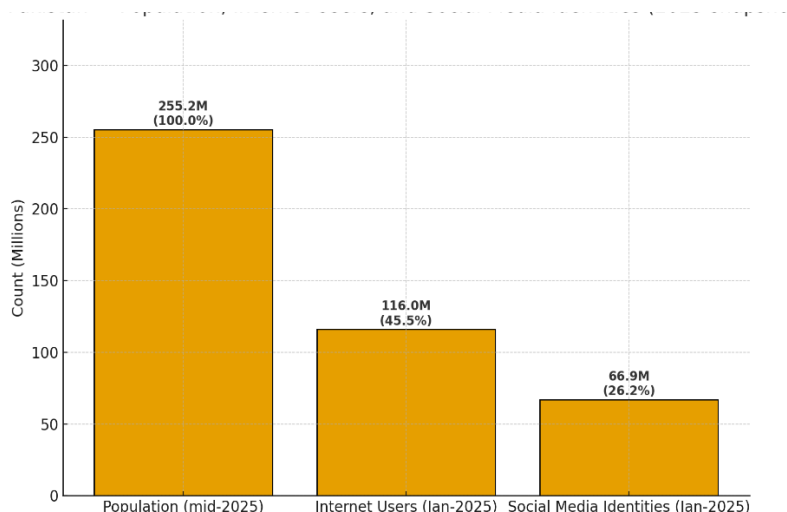
The digital world nowadays is something everyone is aware of, whether a basic or very advanced phenomenon; we are all dependent somehow on the electronic world to address our needs. Digital

technology has shaped the identities of individuals across the nations and has a great influence on personal, professional, and social life. Especially, the main element of this regulation is the youth

who are imbued by digital technologies to form their identities in different contexts, which sometimes also leads to extinction or destruction. For example, the day-by-day emergence of technologies has engaged the youth's personal and public space by merging them, due to which different identities are formed that may sometimes cause inefficiency in daily life activities (Hallgren & Bjork, 2022). One of the main roles among digital technologies is social media, which has taken as much as possible consumption of youth. Due to its potential and idealization, the youth have indulged in the unnecessary fear of representing their fake selves, genders, and their identities just to protect themselves from false evaluation, also self-esteem as well as their social, cultural norms, and the psychological factors are affected by these online personality comparisons. People are in complexes of perfection in the online world, which has made their identities different from in-person to the digital world (Iqbal, Shaari, & Nor, 2025). Social media is considered a mesmerizing world where the youth is caught not only in false self-perception, but also in something that has incorporated time and physical activity completely, whereas social media consumption has also raised the status considerations, for example greater the financially stable you are, the greater the brand you are wearing, the more the value you have. Although social media has positive impacts on learning, such as awareness and knowledge, educating people across different domains, and easy accessibility to

every kind of knowledge for everyone, it has also created a separate world where a single individual represents more than one self, which has negative impacts. In simple words, the social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and many other networks have uncontrolled traffic, and according to some resources, the statistics of 2025, almost 5.66 billion social media user accounts represent the Global population of about 68.7%. Whereas these numbers did not indicate the unique individual identities, many users have maintained multiple profiles across different platforms. On average, each internet user manages around 8.4 separate social media accounts. This phenomenon is known as identity multiplicity.

From the Data reported, (Kemp, 2025) Pakistan's digital landscape reveals a gap between general internet access and the presentation of social media in mid-2025. The ratio of population is approximately 255.2 million, of which 16 million, at an average of 45.5%, are using the internet in January 2025, where the social media user identities are recorded as 66.9 million, which is approximately 26.2%. So, this data represents that half of Pakistan's population has internet access, whereas the social media identity representation reflects factors like multi-account, behaviors, different structures of age, digital literacy, economic barriers, regulatory constraints, and much more.



Basically, The Identity multiplicity has highlighted a complex structure of the digital environment, where youth navigate their presence online. Where the information is easily accessible, shared, and scrutinized in an unprecedented way. So, for this kind of source and content the critical thinking has become an essential criterion in identifying the misinformation, male information, and disinformation to form a credible and reliable online claim (Tomassi, Falegnami, & Romano, 2024). Actually, it helps to develop a sense of how you engage with multiple online personalities and consume the diversity of content, which provides valuable insights into how digital platforms are shaping Identity formation and self-presentations.

Review of Literature

This study has mainly highlighted the fact that identity, especially the youth's identity, is influenced by the consumption of media in the digital world. It has also focused on how globalization has varied the pattern of utilization of digital technologies.

To investigate the relationship between the addiction of social media addiction and the comparison between social media and the mental health of Pakistani University students, a quantitative Research was conducted in which 165 students, including 87 males and 68 females, were considered at the University of Karachi using a standardized scale in terms of social media addiction. It was basically a comparison between mental health and social media. The Main findings that came through this research show that social media addiction is strongly correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress levels (Yaqoob, Khan, Hafeez, & Khan, 2025). Also, the addiction predicts a higher level of social comparison, through the comparison with others, which has been seen to sometimes have a protective effect against depression. On the other hand, regression results showed addiction as the most significant predictor of internalizing symptoms. Social media addiction disturbs mental health issues, but the role of social comparison is nuanced in terms of context and cultural factors. That moderates its impact, so the intervention should address both individual coping Strategies and broader social

support. The social comparison has discussed the race of Identity in terms of lifestyle and many other social factors. That may sometimes lead to mental health issues, which are caused by the excessive use of digital media.

The main focus is to idealize how digital technology shapes youth identity formation and education in everyday contexts. Basically, the main argument is that the digital technology collapses the boundaries between public/ private, online /offline, and school/ leisure in terms of making identity practices more Complex. So the main insight of this research was that youth use digital spaces for self-expression, exploration of sexuality, and experimentation with multiple identities Basically, the risk of harassment as well as harmful comparisons in identity pressure, opportunities that include creativity, community, and empowerment are produced in terms of using the excess of digital spaces So prior research shows the most of the studies treat identity narrowly representation but there is also an existential practices a dynamic process of being becoming and belonging that recommends a Holistic ethical sensitive methodology. Such as techniques guided and social media and ethnography, to study youth identities. So the researchers and educators must recognize how digital technology integrates identity, socialization, learning, and required flexibility in a youth-centered approach.

In the online media, there is a sense that the Adoption of new culture has risen, which is inspired by the Other regions' cultures and dignity. Basically, the media has shifted the intentions of the youngsters toward the modern world, and by adopting the foreign culture, they think they have raised their standards of living and identity. This article examines how the online media has basically influenced the cultural values of University students in Central Punjab of Pakistan. This article contains the survey of 1346 students across the major public universities of Lahore, Sargodha, and Faisalabad. So, according to their findings, students are deeply influenced by the digital media in terms of Fashion, Dressing style, Physical appearance, and adaptation of foreign customs (Safdar, 2021). Also, there is an interest in frequent use of foreign languages,

which shows the observation of a decline in participation in religious activities. Whereas there is no significant link was found between online media use and a reduction in moral values. In Conclusion, the online media has basically penetrated into the student culture, which actually promotes cultural shift towards foreign and global influences, which has weakened the traditional practices, which may lead to an Identity crisis towards cultural phenomenon.

In this study, the positive and negative effects of social media on society by discussed. Akram and R. Kumar are highlighting both the benefits and drawbacks of social media on society (Akram & Kumar, 2017). Basically, social media is an online platform that enables interaction, sharing, and exchange of Ideas, information, images, and videos. Also, it has been deeply integrated into daily life, especially among youth, due to mobile devices and internet accessibility. Talking about the positive effects, there are many facilities provided by social media, for example, health facilities, business interaction, education, and Society development. Whereas the negative effects include risk of misinformation, negative reviews, hacking, reputation risk, as well as cyberbullying, scams, destruction, wastage of time, etc., so basically social media has potential for many things, but it can also possess significant risks towards the youth.

The meaning of social media is used in everyday life, filling empty slots, everyday transformations, and mood management. So basically, in this article, Bengt son and Johnson examine the everyday use and meaning of social media among young adults in Sweden (Stina & Johansson, 2022). During its individual and group interviews, conducted with 65 participants aged 18 to 25. They explore how social media has become integrated into the daily routines, not only in spanning multiple platforms, and identify three main functions in which everyday transformation is caused due to the small, meaningful shifts in daily practice. Where are the empty filling slots using social media tools by the ideal time? Whereas mood management includes regulating emotions and states of mind, these functions highlight the temporal, social, and Technical dimensions of

social media and its role in shaping the daily life of younger adults.

The article 25 Years of Social Media is a review of social media applications from 1994 to 2019. It focuses on the most cited definition in Alternative sources to describe the facts of social media (Aichner, Grunfelder, Maurer, & Jegeni, 2021). The authors basically analyze similarities and differences across the definition to clarify how social media has been conceptualized and applied. While their findings and guidance for both Research and practices in intermittent prayer, studies, insurance, compatibility of results, and identifying a propagated application of social media research. So, basically, it helps us to understand Spain and the evolution over the past 25 years of social media usage.

Marzo Conducted across sectional online survey across 10 countries to examine house social media need relate to quality of life using different instrument over 90% of respondents in several countries were active social media user with young adults comprising the largest show that higher education positive overall quality of life so the analysis that effective need of social media can had a slide negative effect on psychological help where as social media integrative need positive Association (Marzo, et al., 2024). Basically, the main highlight of this study underscores the importance of targeted mental health intervention and stresses the value of class cultural evidence for guiding Global digital health policy.

This examines social media's impacts on society, focusing on how social behavior, politics, and cultural norms are affected. As a fact that uses identity and social media. Platform features like character limits, emojis, and hashtags have shaped communication style with the Rapid information. Dissemination facilitation has engaged and sent the missing information. So, the study emphasizes the need for collaboration among the users, policy makers, and Technology developers, to promote digital literacy, responsible use and politics and policies that protect their user rights and put a balance between innovation with article consideration for maximum social media positive contribution.

Krause conducted a week-long randomization control trial with 381 adult Instagram users, to examine the impacts of active social media use, operationalization as posting pictures on wellbeing. Results showed that posting pictures increases users' positive affect but has no significant effects on other aspects of well-being. So basically, this finding challenges the widely held assumption that active SNS use universally enhances well-being and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of social media effects (Wani, et al., 2024). So, basically the study found the opposite of the impact on user positive effect, indicating that sharing content can moment but there is no significant effect. On other well-being dimensions, such as life satisfaction or perceived social support. Where are the study also underscores the heterogeneity of social media facts by suggesting the facts and benefits that may be context-dependent and dependent on short-term and conceptual research on social media behavior. By the examination of Chinese University learners, it is found that problems with social media use are linked with the bad and poor learning outcomes. According to data from 480 students the social media use has correlated with higher foreign language anxiety, greater academic burnout, English attainments, and negative perfectionism traits. In comparison to the non-problematic social media usage, basically, the study highlights the social media usage to be excessive as an educational tool and its utilization for learning languages and wellbeing (Shu, 2023). On the other hand, to promote healthy habits while using social media and leverage non-problematic social media usage for improving language outcomes.

According to the global scoping review of 22 recent studies on college students regarding social media usage. It is found that there is a consistent and firm link between social media extreme usage and mental health problems that are leading to depression, excessive stress, and emotional dilemmas in many countries. It has also included factors like fear of missing out, excessive hours, online leading to poor sleep quality, and consistent use towards mental health (Fatima, et al., 2025). By reviewing the noted students and a social comparison online. It is concluded that the

problems through social comparison and fear of missing out, for which they recommend, schools adopt integrated theory-driven interventions on media literacy and habit management, in order to foster healthier digital habits in youth.

By the exploration of social media and student well-being (Zhang, Tang, & Liu, 2023) among Chinese college students, the psychological well-being and subjective well-being are counterbalanced by using the data of over 1000 students. It is found that social media usage improves the following, but only through the mediating factors. Whereas the students who are using social media have self-esteem and online social support, which has boosted psychological well-being as well as subjective well-being, while cyberbullying and culture have weakened the positive uses of social media. For instance, when cyberbullying was high, the indirect benefit of social media on well-being weakened. In simple words, the social media impacts on well-being depend on the psycho social Pathways. Reducing cyberbullying and helping the students build self-esteem online can preserve the media's positive effects on well-being.

With the help of interviews with trafficking survivors (Khan, et al., 2025), It is documented that the internet and social media have facilitated human trafficking in Pakistan. It is found that these groups use digital tools at every stage to exploit and recruit. For instance, fake online jobs, ads, relationship ads on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and live-streamed descriptions are common contexts to empower the trafficking techniques. In contrast, the technology is considered to be a tool for fresh challenges of law and enforcement, and trafficking. Basically, this highlights that social media and the apps on mobile are integrated into different schemes for trafficking. There is a need to develop policy-making and increase a sense of awareness on tech-based trafficking and dark strategies to combat these online methods of trafficking.

By reviewing the youth attitude towards e-cigarettes in Pakistan (Rahman, et al., 2024), it is noted that e-cigarettes are a rising concept among teenagers. For instance, the flavored waves and the toxic markets have made vaping seem "chic," and

it is considered Safer than smoking. Although e-cigarettes also carry hazards to health in terms of cardiovascular, neurodevelopmental, and respiratory issues due to excessive use of nicotine and other toxic elements. By reviewing the Pakistani youth, it is found that cigarettes and vaping are a fashion that is influenced by the result of using Western media. Whereas social and religious norms consider it an addiction, and in simple words, the trend of this aggressive online marketing has risen. Due to social media influencers, there is a need for strict culturally formed interventions to prevent the usage and access of youth, to protect health, and help public education campaigns for better lifestyles.

Based on the Generation Z Pakistani consumers' service (Bhutto, Khan, Sun, Hashim, & Khan, 2023), It is countered that the intention to repurchase organic food is. It has been found that not only does social media influence mental health, but it has also shaped Gen Z behavior of buying behavior based on social media inference, for instance, due to exposure to brands. On social media positive brand experience has increased awareness and satisfaction. On the other hand, consumer satisfaction strongly matters to the trust of buyers for that specific product. In simple words, generations have used digital platforms to make themselves susceptible to online branding efforts. According to the author, there is a need to build brand presence and Loyalty via social media in order to repeat purchases and increase the consumption rate.

The concept of digital repression (Earl, Maher, & Pan, 2022) States that the use of online tools raises the cost of activism. Basically, it describes the encompassing range of actions. For instance, arresting bloggers and the online protesters, who are using surveillance and high Technology to spread the disinformation, propaganda, and social movements. In other words, it distinguishes the repression from converting individuals or groups that force the activism of platforms or Corps their behavior. Actually, it shows that the Digital offer is required for organizing and separation. There are different categories of digital depression. For example, online harassment, censorship, and

surveillance clarify how digital technology has worked on evolving protest dynamics.

By exploring the entrepreneurship in Pakistan (Sargani, et al., 2021) One of the main questions, why Pakistani men and women differ, has been raised, which has found that the attitude, social norms, and education influence interaction. Based on different genders. For example, there is a direct interaction of a man towards personality traits, internships, and education. On the other hand, women have less influence on these factors, so best for the gender relations toward formal entrepreneurship education and the personality traits. It is proven that intentions for starting a business are more important than the cultural and social values. For example, education factors play a larger role in comparison to social barriers and lower encouragement. Whereas the youth identity towards Digital Technology has suggested that these programs based on education and the potential online courses and media in order to boost the career and entrepreneurship among Young women. By recognizing the potential rather than the difference of gender between men and women, one to pursue entrepreneurship.

Based on the Pakistani social media users (Iqbal, Shaari, & Nor, 2025) to understand the over use of social media factors like psychological false presentation and social comparison are counter that resolved in fear of being judge negatively according to the service the user and idealize false presentations which entered drive them to use social media even more because these constantly worry about others opinion about themselves and comparison to the personal and others usage on social media has boost the concept of their self esteem but it has also fouled the usage because this user chase those positive feelings there are other important factors like gender that has played a role to for example women should strong connection between the self esteem and social comparison based on the experience of self presentation and the fear of effect similarly the internal psychological pressure highlights the excessive use that can we cop up by digital literacy and emotional awareness interventions to help people recognize this pattern and reduce compulsive social media habits.

In one of the studies of Korean youth (Hyun-Jee & Park, 2020) it is confirmed that social media has played a central role in forming the Identity of young people. Later on, the surface has shown that social media is fully inculcated into the lives of teens where they compare and integrated themselves as how they are represented on digital world and comparison with other it is viewed by the participant observation that social media has its own identity surface that has crafted the aspect of online profiles and interaction. In fact, youth have reported that their social media behaviors have a huge impact on self-identity. Whereas they see themselves as unitary online, and these online identities have been used differently from the online self. Whereas emotional factors also play a role in shaping multiple identities, the study helps understand young people's patterns of social media usage and explains the reasons. Behind what the post is about and why someone did the post. Which is a response to support identity development, and simple words with social media is considered an important constraint for exploring and solidifying The Identity of an individual, who they are.

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative approach with 8 semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore how youths negotiate identity in the digital era. The interview guide covers social media usage, youth identity, and self-presentation, with open-ended questions asked during 120-minute sessions conducted either in person or through secure platforms like Zoom, depending on participant preference. Participants were university students from diverse degree programs who use social media daily, selected to capture varied youth experiences, and were properly guided about the study before giving informed consent for audio-recorded sessions conducted in Urdu or English. Data collection followed ethical considerations, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, while field notes documented nonverbal cues. For analysis, recordings were manually transcribed, repeatedly read to understand context and emotion, and examined to identify emerging ideas such as self-image, pressure to post, cultural

norms, comparison, influencer impact, and private versus public self.

Results and Discussions

According to the findings of the research, several key themes emerged as dominant responses to the interview questions. These themes include Digital Self-Presentation, Social Comparison and Emotional Impact, Cultural Influences on Online Identity, Aspirations Shaped by Social Media, and Conflicts Between Online and Offline Self. Thematic analysis revealed that these themes are closely interconnected and collectively explain how youth negotiate identity in digitally mediated environments.

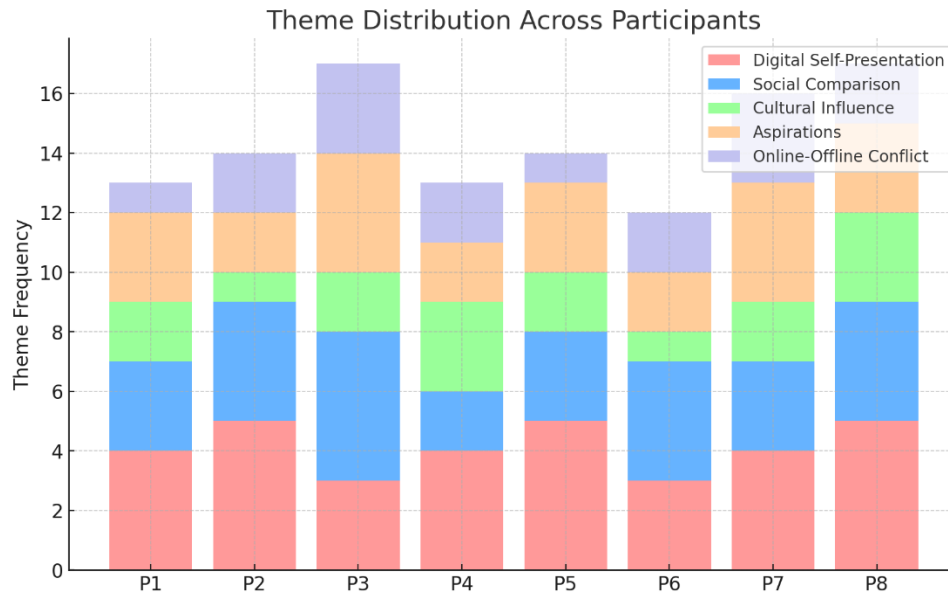
Through the research, it is observed that many participants emphasized their self-presentation on social media, particularly through carefully curated content such as selected photographs, captions, and lifestyle displays. This form of digital self-presentation is largely shaped by continuous social comparison, where participants compare their lives, appearances, and achievements with peers, influencers, and celebrities. Such comparisons often induce mixed emotions, including motivation, admiration, pressure, and feelings of inadequacy. The findings suggest that curated online identities function not only as tools for self-expression but also as benchmarks against which individuals measure their own self-worth.

In addition, cultural influences on online identity were strongly identified across interviews. Participants highlighted how their traditional and cultural backgrounds influence what they choose to post and how they behave online. While social media encourages modern, globalized expressions of identity, participants remain mindful of cultural norms, family expectations, and societal values. As a result, many participants adopt a selective approach to online self-presentation, balancing personal expression with cultural sensitivity. This demonstrates that online identities are not created in isolation but are deeply embedded within broader cultural contexts.

Furthermore, aspirations shaped by social media emerged as a significant theme. Participants reported that social media platforms play a crucial role in idealizing certain lifestyles, personalities,

and career paths. Exposure to aspirational content motivates users to shape their personalities, interests, and ambitions in line with digital trends. However, this idealization also reinforces

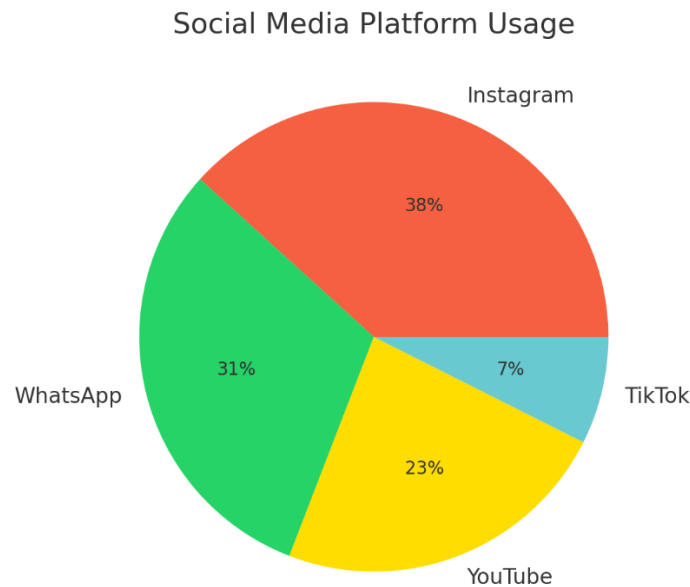
comparison and pressure, as individuals strive to align themselves with perceived standards of success promoted online.



Social Media Platform Usage

Based on the data collected during interviews regarding social media platform usage, it appears that Instagram has the highest level of engagement among youth, primarily used for self-expression and content consumption. Approximately 62% of participants reported regular Instagram usage, emphasizing its role in visual self-presentation and identity construction. WhatsApp, utilized mainly for private and interpersonal communication, shows a usage rate of nearly 50%, highlighting its function as a platform for maintaining close social ties rather than public identity performance.

For aspirational and informational purposes, YouTube is used by 38% of participants. It serves as a source of motivation, education, and entertainment, particularly through lifestyle vlogs, educational content, and influencer narratives. In contrast, TikTok, with a usage rate of 12%, is primarily engaged for short-form entertainment and trend-based content. These platform-specific patterns indicate that different social media platforms serve distinct functions in shaping identity, aspirations, and social interaction.



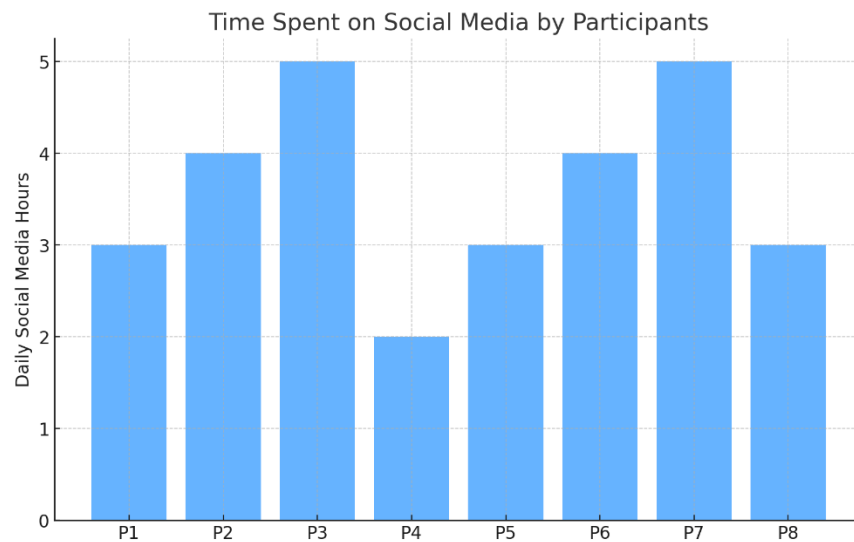
Participants' time spent on social media

According to the data and observations, daily social media usage among participants generally ranges from 2 to 5 hours, while a smaller number of participants reported spending 6 to 7 hours per day on digital platforms. This extended engagement intensifies processes of self-comparison and reinforces the need for consistent self-presentation. The findings indicate that higher levels of digital engagement increase exposure to idealized content, thereby amplifying identity-related pressures.

One of the most significant outcomes of this engagement is the identity conflict between online and offline selves. Participants described a noticeable difference between their online and offline personalities. The online self is characterized by curated images, aspirational content, and digital exaggeration, whereas the offline self reflects personal values, modest behavior, and adherence to cultural norms. This contrast creates internal tension as participants

navigate social expectations, peer pressure, and cultural responsibilities while attempting to maintain authenticity across both domains.

Another important factor identified is social media-driven aspirations and influences. Influencers, celebrities, peers, and trending content play a central role in shaping participants' lifestyles, career choices, and personal goals. Participants reported drawing inspiration from influencer narratives, which often leads to comparisons with siblings and peers regarding achievements, appearance, and life choices. These trends significantly influence participants' interests, skills, and ambitions, demonstrating that young people's lives are increasingly shaped by aspirational content. Consequently, social media exerts a direct impact on both personal development and the negotiation of cultural values. Overall, the thematic analysis highlights that social media functions as a powerful space for identity formation, aspiration building, and cultural negotiation, while simultaneously creating emotional and psychological challenges for youth.



Conclusion

This research helps to understand how young people construct and negotiate their identities. By using Today's digital Saturated environment and these results, the demonstration of the formation of identity has become a layered and often demanding process. Although social media is providing opportunities and access towards visibility and a sense of belonging is influencing youth identity far more profoundly than simple social interaction. On the other hand, the participants of this study conclude that the online platforms function as an active environment where identities are shaped, refined, and judged and continuously re-adjusted. Similarly, this finding is the most important Element of Multiple digital identities, where different personalities exist on different platforms for different audiences. Fear, as it is clarified that the participants, with their online selves I don't match their offline selves. Instead, they represent A polished strategy created version designed Buy themselves to fit into society to fulfill the social expectation, and digitally, it is a trick.

This allows the jute to maintain its privacy. Cultural constraint, Social pressures, and other factors, as well as it is creating emotional and psychological tension among the youth. So, strain various identities, require Constant self-monitoring, that led to Can be described as

Identity Exhaustion, which is considered to be a form of Mental Distress That is rooted in and continuous Self-Presentation. This study has highlighted the Powerful impacts of aspirational culture and the comparison. In order to achieve success, Beauty and lifestyle are inspired by others among the youth. Basically, the influencer feels, and the trend-based imagery pushes young people to repeat self-evaluations. Some of the participants. This is considered to be inspiring, but for others, it is pressure. Whereas the social comparison is not only in certain reactions, but it is a significant driving Force that Youth interpret their own identities and Aspirations.

The cultural factors are also playing a very important role in complicating these Dynamics as Young people in Pakistan navigate their digital identities under the influence of Family values, cultural morality, and expectations. So, in results, there is a balance appearing Confident and Socially Relevant Online, while respecting cultural boundaries of modesty and appropriateness. It is witnessed that The Gap Between their real and virtual Version of self-engaging Selective attachment to online visible and caution identity expressions. Ultimately, these findings show that social media does not simply mirror who young people are, But It is actively creating who they become or who they want to be. In conclusion, the

identity construction has shifted to a dominant internal development process to shape externally, whereas the constant visible performance has been mediated through digital technologies. And the other hand, youth now operate a blended space where our physical and Virtual selves overlap by producing new pathways for the expression of Vulnerabilities, self-image Comparison, and emotional well-being.

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