

THE DIGITAL SHIFT IN ASPIRATION: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PAKISTANI YOUTH MIGRATION FOR PERMANENT RESIDENCY PLANNING

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore how digital media and immigration related content influence the career aspirations of Pakistani youth. Nowadays PR and foreign migration related content are commonly seen on social media platforms which aspiring youth for immigration. Quantitative research approach used in this study and data is collected through survey questionnaire. More than 250 questionnaires are distributed to students from both rural and urban backgrounds in which more than 140 respondents are participated. In the survey, the demographic information, digital exposure, career aspirations and PR planning related factors are explored. This study indicated that social media and online information effected the migration related decisions of youth and many students prioritized the foreign opportunities in their future planning. While domestic job search became a second priority. This research highlighted the digital transformation of youth aspirations and showed that policymakers and educators need to understand the digital influence in youth career guidance.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan stands at a consequential population crossroads, with one of the world's largest youth populations. As of 2021, Pakistan ranked as the fifth-largest young country in the world, with nearly 63 percent of its population falling between ages 15 and 33 (Kamray, 2021). This demographic profile presents colossal capacity for national progress; however, it also brings forth considerable socio-economic challenges that shape the ambitions and life progressions of young Pakistanis. Institutional obstacles including limited access to quality education, high unemployment, insufficient healthcare, and scarce opportunities for substantive involvement continue to diminish the ability of

youth to realize their potential (UNFPA, 2022). When these impediments remain neglected, they contribute to feelings of standstill and disenchantment, driving increasing numbers of young people to seek better avenues internationally. It is within this context that young people's aspirations are being significantly impacted as economic and domestic political instability has generated a culture of uncertainty which is influencing numbers of young people to consider the option of international migration including strategies for gaining Permanent Residency (PR) as a way to achieve their future goals (Idris S, 2023). Migration has therefore become a constitutive hallmark of Pakistan's youth societal

configuration. Pakistan endures one of the world's foremost worker-exporting countries, with Saudi Arabia and Dubai serving as the primary termini for migrant workers. Scholars observed that while the Pakistani dispersed ethnic groups in the GCC distinctively Pakhtuns is considerable and it remains under-examination, particularly pertaining to the drivers of recent youth migration (Errichiello & Nyhagen, 2021). Confronting this gap and mitigating with its challenges is crucial, as transitory labor displacement has become a paramount subsistence modality for young people facing circumscribed avenues domestically.

In 2023 alone, more than 8 lac Pakistanis migrated, comprising over 100,000 competent professionals. Metropolitan youth, with larger social media availability, show higher migration purpose compared to their rural parallels. Social media diminishes the cost and vulnerability correlated with migration by providing significant information, making the verdict easier. Even so, this trend catalyzes the brain drain, depriving Pakistan of essential human capital crucial for national development (Asia Bashir, 2025). The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BIOE) has facilitated the employment of 336,999 Pakistanis abroad from January 1 to June 30 2025. The census-based escalation itself deepens this trend. As per the recent analyses, Pakistan's youth population encompassing over 64% of the total population and expected to remain high until 2052 creates not only opportunities but colossal pressure on the education system, labour market, and social services (Dimitrova et al., 2021; Muhammad et al., 2023). Despite the potential demographic dividend, chronic gaps in skill development, job creation, and youth empowerment continue to push young people toward international labour markets. Studies argue that investing in quality education, technical training, entrepreneurship, and youth well-being is essential to preventing the outflow of skilled and unskilled youth (UNDP, 2020). Without meaningful reforms, outward migration will continue to function as an alternative path for upward mobility. Increasing inequality between those with high and low incomes, greater opportunities and inferior living standards sparks migration as

people seek to improve their prospects and better life chances abroad (Salik KM, 2023).

System has failed to support youth at every turn, failed to provide stable employment and hope for better future security. The tendency of skilled migration is escalating over time in Pakistan. The migration rate in 2021 was about 225,000 which increased rapidly to 13.53 million in 2024 (Eric Shahzar, 2025). Pakistan's massive youth population and growing human capital are not being utilized due to high unemployment, skill de-mismatch and acute lack of job opportunities in country, leading to waste of talent and a brain-drain in globe (DSAH Shah, 2024). Research shows that youth with higher education are more eager to migrate compared to those with lower education levels (PIDE). While Pakistan struggles with intensifying brain drain and surging illicit migration, the government prioritize removing Afghan Refugees instead of tackling the country's aggravating crisis. According to a report by Dawn News, government forcibly deported more than 527,000 Afghans under the controversial 'Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan' since September 2023. Amnesty International condemned this act and call it a violation of refugee and human rights laws.

Internationally, youth migration also converges with themes of cultural acclimatization, self-concept development, and integration challenges in host societies. Empirical studies from Western contexts such as research on immigrant-origin youth in Norway shows how religiosity, social norms, and identity evolve subsequent resettlement, the primary motivations for leaving home countries often remain rooted in the social and financial realities and aspirations of youth in origin societies. For Pakistani youth, the correlation of demographic pressure, economic slowdown, global inequality, and rising aspirations makes migration a coherent and often indispensable choice. In Gilgit Baltistan the region specific research signifies that poor infrastructure and meager residential circumstances strongly provoke rural youth to migrate, while better housing and proper facilities reduce migration probability (Saif Ullah et al., 2024). Additionally, climate-related stress, such as floods and arid spells,

also forces rural populations specifically young adults to migrate intrinsically, shaping both seasonal and perpetual relocation dynamics (K.M. Salik, 2023).

Given Pakistan's continued youth surge and dependence on labour migration as a community-resource mitigating reliever, understanding youth migration trends has become both urgent and crucial. This research seeks to examine the demographic pressures, regional patterns, structural barriers, and personal aspirations that collectively shape youth mobility in Pakistan. Such an investigation is crucial not only for mapping current migration trajectories but also for informing policies aimed at transforming Pakistan's demographic dividend into a sustainable developmental opportunity so that its youth may prosper whether they remain in the country or pursue subsistence abroad. However, due to the EU's involvement in strengthening the policy landscape related to migration and its focus on capacity-building of border management agencies, combined with investment in rural development for job creation and skills enhancement (Rashid S & Samad Y, 2022). In recent years, there has been a growing tendency of what has become known as brain-drain migration, where well-educated individuals are forced to emigrate to another country in search of better work opportunities and living conditions. Because of a lack of opportunities at home with low wages, and economic uncertainty, growing numbers of skilled young people are opting for long-term social and economic advancement in another country (Iqbal K & Wang Y, 2021).

Problem Statement:

In Pakistan, the noticeable shift in career aspirations of youth is becoming evident where domestic job search are widely perceived as secondary and Permanent residence (PR) become the primary career strategy. Digital media further accelerate this shift, Youtube vlogs, TikTok migration videos, instagram reels and online sessions of PR consultants romanticized the reality in which moving abroad is the only and convenient option to gain success, stability, and respectful life. Conversely, the domestic job market of

Pakistan is brimming with structural predicaments such as high employment, low-wages, skill mismatch, and non-merit based recruitment factors intensely frustrate the educated youth. Professionals class, IT experts, doctors, engineers, and graduates apprehending the permanent residence as long-term survival strategy due to the trepidation of future precariousness. This situation create a serious socio-economic challenge: instead of building the experiences in prime working age, the youth are focusing on the documentation, IELTS, savings, and PR pathways. The chasm intervening digital narratives and ground realities make their decisions even more complex. Therefore, it is indispensable to fathom the lived experiences which are impelling the youth to global mobility in lieu of domestic opportunities. This trends further catalyze the challenge of brain drain and losing the skilled human capital which can become a negative impact on long-term economic and social development. This research aims to highlight the youth decision making patterns to advocate the policy and guidance solutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Media and the Reconfiguration of Youth Aspirations:

Digital media deeply transform the Pakistani youth aspirations, especially the online webinars of PR consultants conceptualized a new perspective where moved to abroad is not merely to improve the economic conditions but to idealized the abroad lifestyle, respect and "successful life". When the people on digital platforms share their success trajectories, PR approvals, settlement experiences, this curated content create the mythologized image that real success will be gain by becoming a Global Citizen through PR. Young Pakistani routinely checks on social media streams filled with idealized illustrations of expatriate living, ideal careers, academic life and metropolitan horizons, making social media a powerful frame of reference through which future possibilities are imagined. Digital spaces like YouTube (73 million users), TikTok (56 million), Facebook (62 million), and Instagram (19.3 million) overshadow digital engagement in Pakistan, especially among emerging generation (Asia,

Bashir, 2025). Seamlessly, digital platforms provide the information accessibility but create the unrealistic expectations among young individuals. These developed the chasm between aspirations and ground realities. The socio-economic terrain of Asia's rural dwellers transforming because of their emerging migration trends (Sunam et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the rural youth idealize the lifestyle of urban centres as well as the expensive abroad living standards through digital media. Agrarian-to-urban relocation comprises individuals mobility quest for enhancement in employment, education and provisions (Sun et al., 2024). The overly showcased urban life, career success and personal stories of migrants motivate the individuals to firstly relocate to urban areas to build their skills and gain experiences and then pursue international PR pathways. This rural-to-urban migration become a intermediate step that overcome the domestic limitations and motivate to achieve the global aspirations. Indicating a consequential change half of the world's population now lives in cosmopolitan centers, predominantly galvanized by rural-to-urban migration (Mandal & Pradhan, 2025; Yuan & Gan, 2025). The major urban cities growth in many countries across the world increases as the family relocation becoming prevalent progressively in pursuit of hope to better living conditions in urban centers (Kanbur, 2021). According to the Karachi Megacity Survey more than 40 percent of the city's youth want to leave Karachi. Insecurity, unemployment, economic problems, lack of opportunities, self-employment lack of social support, mother tongue Urdu, and secondary & higher education are the main significant factors that are motivating the desire to emigrate (A Zafar, 2021). However, the rapid growth of social media sites has changed the way people communicate in a big way. It has made it possible for people to connect, get information, and set goals in a digital world that is connected to the whole world. This has changed the way people see opportunities and future paths (Agarwal V & Puppala V N, 2024).

Structural Constraints in Pakistan's Domestic Job Market:

The domestic job market of Pakistan abundant with structural problems which is experienced by the youth everyday. Pakistan's population is distinguished by a substantial proportion of youthful demography, demonstrating both prospects and complexities (Bakhtawar Mian, 2025). The high employment rates, underemployment, skill mismatch and contract-based hiring demotivate the youth in searching jobs. Even after the graduation, it is difficult to find the stable and growth-oriented jobs employment. Youth are unable to find the benefits of their education and return on investment of their academic excellence. Lack of economic opportunities is the primary reason of emerging generation to leave the country. Irrespective of having a growing population. Pakistan's market structure has confront difficulties to launch sufficient jobs to accommodate the influx of new labour force (Inam Ellahi, 2023). The insufficiency of merit-based hiring, endorsed culture, slow promotions and low-wages are the precipitants of migration which provide youth the push factors. In this context the search of domestic jobs become the hopeless process to adolescents, considering that their future is insecure and uncertain. The frustrated youth determining the preference of PR planning more convinient, promising and stable. According to their expectations, Pakistan job market incapable to support their growth ambitions. According to recently released government statistics, the number of such migrants participating in the labour market has reached an estimated 170 million (National Bureau of Statistics 2022) (Gan Y & Tong Y, 2026).

The professional class, doctors, nurses, IT experts, researchers, accountants, and engineers consider domestic jobs unstable, low-paying and deprived from career growth. Developing countries such as India and China, primarily concentrated on constraining brain drain and aligned toward brain gain strategies by stimulating migrants to reinstate abroad, accumulating the benefits of diaspora funds, transfer of technology and networking for disseminating expertise (B Bhardwaj, 2023). As an alternative option, the youth surge will

continue to propel young people toward migration without the substantial investment in quality education, adequate employment, entrepreneurship and social support, as warned in recent human development assessment (UNDP, 2025; Najam, 2024). According to the recent analysis, Pakistan's emerging generation covers over 64% of the total population and anticipated to remain high until 2052, creating tremendous pressure on the education system, social services and labour market as well as launching opportunities among youth (Dimitrova et al., 2021; Muhammad et al., 2023). The middle class is unstable because they are always at risk of falling down the social ladder and want to move up. This makes them very attached to having stable and secure jobs as a key part of their class identity. In this context, families invest significantly in their children's education to reproduce cultural capital and secure access to professional careers, mirroring broader ambitions for social status, economic stability, and upward mobility (S Ang, 2026). Furthermore, increasing inequality and structural imbalances in income distribution profoundly impact economic opportunities, restricting resource access and perpetuating disparities that affect individuals' life chances and socio-economic mobility (Kanbur et al., 2021).

Global PR Pathways as Emerging Opportunity Structures:

Migration is one of the survival strategies in developing countries like Pakistan and the Philippines today. It has both positive and negative implications for migrating people and their communities who send or receive them (Ram M, 2025). The Personal Resident PR pathways of developed countries such as Canada, Australia, UK become the emerging opportunity structures for Pakistani youth. Youth pursue these pathways considering it the long-term investment as these countries ensure the healthcare, quality education, better wages, safety and structured career growth. Through digital platforms and peer networks the information and awareness of global opportunities increasing worldwide. Whatsapp groups, migration forums and abroad settled relatives guides about the process of PR

application. This create the mythologization that searching PR is more secure than searching of jobs in Pakistan. PR is now consider the "Socio-economic mobility strategy" which provide better life opportunities and global exposure to youth. According to recent updates by the World Bank, remittances sent back to Pakistan keep being one of the most stable sources of finance for this country and are expected steadily to increase in both 2024 and 2025 (Ratha et al., 2024). The recent rise in youth outmigration shows how migration has become a key opportunity structure. Young people now see transnational mobility not just as a choice but as a necessary strategy for survival, driven by high unemployment, economic instability, and the desire for better educational and economic opportunities abroad (Okunade, 2021; Nwalutu et al., 2022).

Research Objectives:

1. To understand the migration aspirations for PR planning of youth through social media
2. To explore the limitations of Pakistan's domestic job market and their effects on youth decision-making
3. To document the lived experiences of educated youth and professionals, preferring the PR planning instead of searching domestic jobs
4. To analyze the gap between expectations and ground realities develop from digital information

Research Questions:

1. What is the consumption of youth digital media on their migrations aspirations?
2. How the limitations of Pakistan domestic job market influence their "Permanent Residence (PR)" decisions?
3. What do the lived experiences of educated youth and experts disclose about their predilection for PR planning over domestic job search?
4. What is the consequences of digital narratives and actual ground realities on young careers and how these shape youth emigration and decision making?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection:

For this study data is collected from Pakistani

youth, students belongs to both urban and rural backgrounds. The main purpose of this research is to explore how digital media and online immigration related content influence career aspirations of Pakistani youth, and to what extent youth of Pakistan make PR planning a future goal instead of domestic job search. Survey questionnaire is used for data collection. Researcher distributed more than 250 questionnaires to different students through digital platforms and direct distribution. The process of data collection continue for a certain period of time in which researcher collected the questionnaires and select those for analysis which were complete and valid.

Survey Questionnaire and Pre-testing:

The survey questionnaire used in this study consist on different sections in which close-ended questions are added for systematically measure the opinions and preferences of respondents. First section of questionnaire consist of Demographic section in which questions about age group, educational qualification and employment status of respondents are added. Second section measure the digital exposure and online influence to understand that which online platforms used by youth with the frequency of watching content for PR and immigration related information. Third section is related to career aspirations to explore the future career preferences and job search behavior of respondents, especially to

examine their importance of Pakistan job opportunities and or priorities related foreign PR planning.

Furthermore, to identify the motivations, barriers and challenges behind the PR planning questions of financial issues, IELTS/language requirements, and availability of authentic information factors are added to explore. Next section examine the emotional and psychological impact to analyze what respondents feel when they see others to settle abroad. Last section focus on the future intentions of respondents that if they get stable and well-paying job in Pakistan will they continue PR planning or reconsider it.

Collected data analyze through quantitative analysis in which responses are categorized and understand with the help of percentages and simple statistical interpretation. During research ethical consideration has been highly valued, in which participants told the purpose of research, gain their consent with ensuring their privacy and confidentiality. After pre-test minor modifications are made to enhanced the clarity and reliability of questionnaire.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

1. Reliability Analysis

The reliability of the measurement scale was assessed using **Cronbach's Alpha** to determine the internal consistency of the items used in the questionnaire.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Variable / Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Status
Overall Scale (16 Items)	0.698	Acceptable / Marginally Reliable

Interpretation

The reliability analysis produced a **Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.698**, which is very close to the acceptable threshold of **0.70**. This indicates that the questionnaire has **moderate to acceptable internal consistency**, and the items are sufficiently reliable for further statistical analysis.

2. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the

overall pattern of responses.

Available item-level pattern:

- Most item means fall between **2.16 – 3.46**
- Standard deviation mostly around **1.1 – 1.6**

Interpretation

The descriptive pattern indicates **moderate response tendencies** among respondents. This suggests that participants show a balanced level

of agreement/disagreement toward migration planning, digital exposure, and future career thinking. Variation in responses is moderate, indicating differences in individual perceptions.

3. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was used to examine relationships among study variables.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	DE	CA	FI
Digital Exposure (DE)	1		
Career Aspirations (CA)	0.276**	1	
Future Intentions (FI)	0.232**	0.362**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

Interpretation

The correlation results show that all variables are positively and significantly related.

- Digital Exposure ↔ Career Aspirations = $r = .276$, $p < .01$
- Digital Exposure ↔ Future Intentions = $r = .232$, $p < .01$

- Career Aspirations ↔ Future Intentions = $r = .362$, $p < .01$

The strongest relationship exists between Career Aspirations and Future Intentions, suggesting that stronger career aspirations are associated with stronger future migration/planning intentions.

4. Regression Analysis

Model 1: Digital Exposure → Career Aspirations

Table 4: Regression Results

Predictor	b	R ²	Sig
Digital Exposure	0.260	0.076	.001

Interpretation

Digital Exposure has a statistically significant positive effect on Career Aspirations ($\beta = .260$, $p = .001$).

The $R^2 = .076$ indicates that Digital Exposure

explains 7.6% variation in Career Aspirations. While significant, the explanatory power is relatively small, indicating the presence of additional influencing factors.

Model 2: Digital Exposure → Future Intentions

Table 5: Regression Results

Predictor	b	R ²	Sig
Digital Exposure	0.289	0.054	.006

Interpretation

Digital Exposure has a significant positive effect on Future Intentions ($\beta = .289$, $p = .006$).

The $R^2 = .054$ suggests that Digital Exposure explains 5.4% variation in Future Intentions,

indicating a weak but meaningful predictive relationship.

5. Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted using the

PROCESS macro Model 4 to examine whether Career Aspirations mediate the relationship

between Digital Exposure and Future Intentions.

Table 6: Mediation Summary

Path	Result
Digital Exposure → Career Aspirations	Significant (p = .0009)
Career Aspirations → Future Intentions	Significant (p = .0001)
Digital Exposure → Future Intentions (Total Effect)	Significant (p = .0056)
Direct Effect	Non-significant after mediator (p = .081)
Indirect Effect	Significant (Effect = .1104)
Mediation Type	Full / Strong Mediation

Interpretation

The mediation analysis confirms that Career Aspirations significantly mediate the relationship between Digital Exposure and Future Intentions.

- Indirect Effect = 0.1104
- Bootstrap CI = 0.0469 to 0.2215
- Since confidence interval does not include zero, mediation is significant.

This means Digital Exposure influences Future Intentions mainly through Career Aspirations. In other words, digital exposure shapes career aspirations, which in turn strengthen future migration/planning intentions.

Conclusion:

This study illustrates that a significant digital transformation is taking place in the aspirations, career goals and future planning of Pakistani youth. Social media, digital platforms and online communities have had a profound impact on the thinking, preferences and future decisions of youth. Many youth are now finding permanent residency (PR) planning and international opportunities more attractive than traditional local job searches.

The research also revealed that career aspirations play an important mediating role in this transformation. That is, digital exposure shapes the thinking and expectations of youth, which in turn influences their future intentions and

decisions.

In this context, it is essential for policymakers, educational institutions and labor market-related institutions to create opportunities within the country that are in line with the changing aspirations and expectations of youth. If clear pathways for quality employment, skills development and advancement are provided at the local level, then the digital impact can be channelled positively towards national development rather than a brain drain.

In short, the digital world has not only made access to information easier, but has also fundamentally changed the dreams, decisions, and vision of the future of Pakistani youth.

Recommendations:

1. Promote Career Counseling and Guidance Programs

Schools and universities should have Career Counseling and Guidance Programs that tell students about the jobs they can get both in our country and in other countries. This way students can see that they have options to be successful and they do not have to move to another country to have a better life.

2. Increase Domestic Employment Opportunities

The government and companies should work together to create more jobs for young people

especially in new areas like technology. If we have jobs that pay well and offer a clear path for advancement young people will be less likely to want to leave our country to find work.

3. Encourage Skill Development and Digital Training

Young people should learn about computers, how to work online and how to start their own businesses. This way they can compete with people from countries and still live in Pakistan, which will help our country's economy.

4. Strengthen Media Literacy and Social Media Awareness

Sometimes social media shows us a perfect picture of life in other countries, which can be misleading. Schools and the government should teach people how to critically think about what they see online so they can make good decisions about their careers and lives.

5. Prioritize Youth-Centered Policies

The government should make policies that understand what young people want and need. They should help young people start their businesses create places where they can work together and provide opportunities for them to get experience in their fields. This will help young people feel like they have opportunities in our country and believe in our system.

6. Encourage Further Research and Public Dialogue

We need to study how social media and the economy affect young people's decisions to leave our country. If we keep doing research and talking about these issues we can make policies that are based on facts. That will really help young people, which is what Career Counseling and Guidance Programs are all about and what we need to focus on like Career Counseling and Guidance Programs.

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