Decoding the Intricacies of Cultural Identity Formation Among Youth through Psycho-Social Dynamics of Social Media in Pakistan

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Abstract:

This study explores the complex psycho-social fragilities of social media and its impact on cultural identity formation in Pakistani context. The systematic approach, adopted by the study is grounded in the six-phase thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) that explains themes, emerging out of the cross-cultural investigation of identity formation on various social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and X. This analysis, based on a focus group discussion, delves into the various ways the young Pakistanis adopt to navigate through their online cultural identities, map out patterns of self-presentation, use language, and develop interactions. The research explores main themes through careful coding and understanding of recurrent patterns about identity assimilation, social comparison, and the psychological influence of digital interactions. While focusing on the social media users in Pakistan, this research reveals the patterns the Pakistani youth adopt to communicate their cultural identities in global digital space. It also contextualizes the results in view of broader cultural landscape of Pakistan, and provides insights into the interplay among psychological processes, use of social media, and formation of cultural identity.

Keywords: Social Media, Cultural Identity, Digital Diasporas, Psycho-Social Dynamics, Pakistani Youth

Introduction:

The contemporary digital realm has transmuted into a dynamic showground where individuals navigate their sociocultural identities and nuances, and build linkage with people from diverse regions and cultures. Social media, central to this transformation, has been a ubiquitous force in shaping the psycho-social dynamics of people across the globe (Purnama & Asdlori, 2023). The advent of various social media platforms revolutionized the way people perceive and present themselves to the world. Ahmed et al. (2023) while quoting Walsh (2022) consider Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Reddit and Twitter as digital media platforms that have fostered global communication involving people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds to give rise to a rich universal social structure. People engage themselves in a myriad of activities in modern digital landscape, share personal experiences,

express opinions, and construct their identities. The online milieu offers a unique space of interplay between psychological and social dynamics, where the individuals carefully develop their online identities, and negotiate balancing between aspiration and authenticity (Peng, 2023; Wei, 2023). Social media enables an amusing tapestry of self-expression, and allow users to showcase their socio-cultural associations, interests, and ideologies. The individual's identity presentation, a performative act, on social media platforms is influenced by various psychological and social factors (Ganda, 2014; Umar & Idris, 2018). The language choices, curated content, and the interaction patterns contribute to online identity construction that reflects, strengthens, and transforms various aspects of cultural identity of social media users. Culture, a multilayered notion involving shared ideologies, beliefs, practices and values in a society, significantly influences the patterns of social media engagement of the individuals (Dan, 2020; Samuelsson, 2023). Cross-cultural analysis is imperative to understand the nuances of social media identity construction. Such an analysis paves way to explore how different socio-cultural contexts negotiate the online space and helps understand whether cultural distinctions manifest in different online behaviors. The intricate association between psychological perspectives and cultural identity formation is contextualized within the global digital landscape, to provide an understanding of the patterns in which people from different cultures navigate the online space (Granic et al., 2020; Sarwar et al., 2023).

Cultural Hybridity, Digital Diasporas, and Psycho-Social Implications of Social Media Use

The psychological implications of social media usage play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions and experiences of individuals. The "psychological" framework rooted in social comparison theory elucidates how people assess themselves concerning others, especially within digital environments (Chen et al., 2024; Fox & Vendemia, 2016; Hillman et al., 2023). Content or material shared on digital media influences how individuals perceive themselves, shaping discussions about cultural identity negotiation. Similarly, identity assimilation occurs when people adjust their online behaviors, potentially leading to either cultural convergence or divergence between their true cultural identity and their pursuit of personal authenticity (Zhang et al., 2023). Understanding these psycho-social dynamics provides valuable insights into how identities are expressed and negotiated through social media. Additionally, digital diasporas introduce another dimension to the intricate interplay among cultural image, new media, and psychology. Throughout the globe, people utilize different social media platforms to establish and sustain connections, showcasing their distinct cultural identities (Flache, 2018; Ward et al., 2018). This worldwide digital connectivity fosters cultural hybridization, as individuals navigate the amalgamation of diverse cultural impacts while shaping their identities in the global online realm. Digital "diasporas" provide a distinct perspective for examining the adaptation and evolution of cultural identity in response to globalized digital communication (Candidatu et al., 2019). The dialogue of cultural selves amid different societies informs us about the adaptive strategies individuals employ to show their cultural legacy when interacting with varied and wide online communities (Andersson, 2019).

The Pakistani Context: Navigating Cultural Identity in the Digital Age

Pakistan, a nation known for its diverse cultural heritage, faces challenges in navigating identity in the modern digital era. The widespread adoption of social media platforms has offered individuals a means to showcase their cultural backgrounds, exchange stories, and engage with a worldwide audience. As cited by Ahmed et al., (2023), there have been approximately 70 million active social media users in Pakistan (Chaudhary, 2023; PTA, 2022). The substantial presence of users on social media platforms in Pakistan underscores the connection between entrenched

traditional values and contemporary influences. The "negotiation" of cultural identity within these digital spaces reflects a rich and multifaceted tapestry of Pakistan's cultural environment, wherein people exhibit tendencies to either adhere to, reinterpret, or contest prevailing traditional norms (Rafiq, 2020). The interplay between enduring traditional values and the pervasive impact of global trends is visible within digital spheres, where individuals grapple with the nuanced articulation of their cultural identities amidst evolving socio-cultural landscapes. Studying how people in Pakistan use digital media provides important insights into how cultural identity is managed in a society that balances traditional values with the influences of globalization. Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are important tools for Pakistani people to share their thoughts and connect with others, both locally and around the world (Ittefaq et al., 2022). To grasp the complexities of how young people in Pakistan shape their cultural identities using social media, it is crucial to thoroughly understand the influences of psychological and social factors. Given that young people make up the majority of the Pakistani population and are often influenced by religious and cultural norms, a comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon is necessary.

Objectives of the Study:
To decode the intricacies of the cultural identity formation among Pakistani youth through psycho-social dynamics of social media, the study revolves around the following objectives:
1. To explore the patterns of cultural identity construction on social media platforms among Pakistani youth
2. To understand the psycho-social dynamics involved in the online presentation of cultural identity among Pakistani youth
3. To identify the thematic patterns about Pakistani youth's negotiation and expression of their cultural identities within the digital landscape.

Research Questions:
In view of the context of the study, following research questions have been dealt by the thematic analysis:
RQ1. How do Pakistani youth construct and present their cultural identities on social media platforms?
RQ2. What psycho-social processes are involved in the online presentation of cultural identity among Pakistani youth?
RQ3. What thematic patterns do Pakistani youth follow for negotiation and expression of their cultural identities within the digital landscape?

Rationale for the Study:
By examining the niceties of the formation of cultural identity among youth in Pakistan through psycho-social dynamics of social media, this research explores the patterns, dissimilarities, and universalities of the phenomenon. This research attempts to contribute to the existing and growing body of literature on the psycho-social dynamics of the social media platforms and cultural identity formation, while focusing on the experiences of Pakistani youth for which the researchers conducted a focus group discussion involving 10 students of three public sector universities in Islamabad. The focus group involved five male and five female participants with ages between 18-25 years who belonged to diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the study also seeks to offer insights into the implications of the psycho-social dynamics of social media in context of Pakistani culture, and contributes to culturally-sensitive understanding of the emerging digital landscape in the country.

Theoretical Framework: The study bases its theoretical framework in social identity theory that provides an understanding of how people categorize themselves and others into different social groups. Keeping in view the context of social media, the study extends the scope of its theoretical framework to online communities, where individuals express and negotiate their cultural identities. The social identity theory, as proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, argues that people derive a sense of belongingness and self-esteem from the memberships of various groups (Harwood, 2020). In view of this study, the social media platforms facilitate users with the spaces where they can prominently display their identities. The performative aspect of self-presentation on social media by the users of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram contributes to the negotiation and construction of online identities (Brandtzaeg & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2020). Grounded in the social identity theory, the dramaturgical approach and the concept of life on the screen depict the performative nature of the identity construction (Cerulo, 1997).

Methodology: Focus group discussions are a frequently used qualitative approach to gather an in-depth understanding of the social phenomena. Focus group methods collect data from purposely-selected individuals that could yield in depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Nyumba et al., 2018).

Population: The population for this study comprises Pakistani youth, a diverse group of individuals with varied gender, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and academic disciplines.

Sampling Frame: Keeping in view the nature of population for the research, the study has taken into consideration 10 university-going male and female students with age limits of 18-25 years, belonging to either of the ten regions of Upper Punjab, Central Punjab, Southern Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pushtun Region), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hazara Region), Baluchistan, Sindh (Urban), Sindh (Rural), Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan.

Sample Size: A suitable sample size for thematic analysis depends on factors such as the scope of the research, diversity within the population, and the complexity of the themes under investigation. For an in-depth "thematic" analysis encompassing a range of cultural expressions, a sample of 10 university students, comprising both males and females aged between 18 and 25, was selected. This sample size facilitated the identification of recurrent patterns while maintaining a dataset of manageable proportions conducive to rigorous analysis. Optimal participation in a focus group discussion typically falls within the range of 8 to 10 participants.

Sampling Strategy: Purposive sampling was employed in consideration of the multifaceted nature of the research, aiming to capture a comprehensive spectrum of cultural identity dynamics. The study was conducted consisting of students from three public sector universities comprising National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, International Islamic University, Islamabad, and Quaid.i. Azam University, Islamabad. The focus group discussion comprised at least one participant hailing from each defined region, thereby serving as a representative imbued with the cultural code of their respective locale.

Thematic Analysis: This study used "thematic" analysis to investigate how young people from Pakistan shape and showcase their cultural identities on social media. It aimed to understand the psychological and social factors at play, as well as the common ways in which they navigate and express their identities online. Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to find

and examine themes or patterns in a set of data (Dawadi, 2020). This method is commonly applied to written documents, surveys, interviews, and group discussions to understand the underlying ideas within the information (Lochmiller, 2021; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). It provides the researchers a systematic and flexible approach to allow researchers explore and interpret the underlying meanings and patterns in a given data set (Nowell et al., 2017). The thematic analysis involves six steps as (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating codes (c) generating themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) locating exemplars (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Participant	Age (Years)	Gender	Geographic Ethnicity	Academic Affiliation
P1	22	Male	Southern Punjab	NUML
P2	20	Female	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pushtun Region)	IIUI
P3	23	Female	Azad Jammu & Kashmir	QAU
P4	21	Male	Baluchistan	NUML
P5	24	Female	Sindh (Urban)	IIUI
P6	22	Female	Upper Punjab (including Pothohar)	QAU
P7	19	Female	Gilgit Baltistan	NUML
P8	25	Female	Central Punjab	IIUI
P9	18	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hazara Region)	QAU
P10	20	Male	Sindh (Rural)	NUML

Table 1 of this research represents demographic data of all ten male and female participants belonging to ten different geographic regions of Pakistan that include Southern Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pushtun Region), Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Baluchistan, Sindh (Urban), Upper Punjab (including Pothohar), Gilgit Baltistan, Central Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hazara Region), Sindh (Rural) and represent unique socio-cultural values and traditions of their own. The table also reflects age range between 18 to 25 years as well as affiliation to any of the three selected universities.

Table 2: Main Themes and Individual Reponses Explored as Sub-themes through Focus Group Discussion

Participant	Iconography	Language Choice	Tradition and Modernity	Social Comparison	Cultural Pride Narratives	Digital Diaspora	Authentic Representation Challenges	Cultural Activism
P1	Cultural symbol integration	Linguistic harmony display	Dynamic cultural balance	Societal norm alignment	Cultural triumph narrative	Digital belonging cultivation	Online identity struggles	Cultural activism advocacy
P2	Cultural Attire Integration	Linguistic Diversity Switch	Tradition-Modernity Harmony	Persona Alignment Comparison	Cultural Achievement Storytelling	Trans-cultural Online Connections	Online Representation Struggles	Sociopolitical Cultural Advocacy
P3	Symbolic Heritage Embrace	Seamless Bilingual Transition	Dynamic Tradition Evolution	Cultural Expression Comparison	Prideful Achievement Narratives	Trans-cultural Virtual Meetup	Authenticity Navigation Struggles	Sociopolitical Cultural Expression

P4	Traditional Attire Utilization	Linguistic Fusion Mastery	Tradition-Modern Balance Navigation	Persona Alignment Comparison	Cultural Celebration Narratives	Cultural Connection Fostering	Authenticity Representation Struggles	Societal Discourse Activism
P5	Cultural Identity Display	Linguistic Harmony Fusion	Tradition-Modernity Coexistence	Narrative Alignment Persona	Prideful Heritage Narratives	Digital Belonging Cultivation	Authenticity Representation Struggles	Sociopolitical Cultural Activism
P6	Traditional Attire Landmarks	Linguistic Diversity Switching	Delicate Tradition-Modernity Balance	Cultural Expression Comparison	Prideful Heritage Narratives	Virtual Transcultural Meetup	Authenticity Representation Struggles	Active Sociopolitical Activism
P7	Cultural Symbol Embrace	Linguistic Diversity Code-Switching	Dynamic Tradition Evolution	Cultural Expression Comparison	Celebration and Milestones Narratives	Virtual Transcultural Meetup	Authenticity Representation Struggles	Sociopolitical Cultural Activism
P8	Cultural Identity Showcase	Linguistic Fusion Harmony	Tradition-Modernity Coexistence	Persona Alignment with Narratives	Celebration and Milestones Narratives	Cultural Connection Fostering	Authenticity Representation Struggles	Sociopolitical Cultural Activism
P9	Traditional Clothing and Landmarks Utilization	Linguistic Diversity Seamless Integration	Tradition-Modern Balance Navigation	Persona Alignment Social Comparison	Prideful Heritage Narratives	Cultural Connection Fostering	Authenticity Representation Struggles	Societal Discourse Cultural Activism
P10	Traditional Attire and Artifact Depiction	Bilingual Linguistic Fusion	Delicate Tradition-Modern Balance	Persona Alignment Social Comparison	Celebration and Milestones Narratives	Digital Diaspora Connection Fostering	Authenticity Representation Struggles	Sociopolitical Cultural Activism

Theme 1—Iconography: Table 1.2 portrays the visual representation of the reflective investigation of the explored theme, "Iconography" with respect to cultural symbol integration. This theme probes the diverse phenomenon of using visual symbols including traditional clothing and artifacts to actively represent and celebrate cultural identity. According to this theme, the individuals meticulously choose each visual element that further transforms into the broader narrative of cultural heritage and pride. This theme is further explained by three subthemes; Cultural Symbol Integration, Cultural Identity Display, and Traditional Attire Utilization. These subthemes explain how individuals use cultural symbols to express themselves on social media through integration of cultural attires with symbolic heritage and cultural symbols. The study found out that the respondents deliberately blended these symbols into their social media stories to eternalize the feelings of belongingness and cultural unity. Furthermore, the individuals purposefully showed off their cultural identity through pictures and presentations. The use of the traditional attire not only served the purpose of personal expression but also as a means of cultural heritage representation.

Theme 2—Language Choice: Language Choice, the second theme explored and mentioned at table 1.2," shows that individuals used a mix of languages to represent themselves on social media with a focus on Linguistic Harmony Display, Linguistic Diversity Switch, and Seamless Bilingual Transition, which also were the subthemes. The researchers explored that people use mixed language patterns, creating a sense of togetherness, unity and cohesion. People often showcase fluidity in transitioning between different languages, depending on who they talk to. By doing so, they develop a feeling of ease and comfort, and making diverse community connections and identities.

Theme 3—Tradition and Modernity:
Tradition and Modernity, the third theme expresses how Pakistani youth practices their traditional values blended with modern influences while representing their cultural identities on social media. Defined by the subthemes including Dynamic Cultural Balance, Tradition-Modernity Harmony, and Tradition-Modern Balance Navigation, it reveals that people practice tradition as an evolutionary concept, marked by dynamic blend of traditional values and modern influences. The study participants depicted a clear understanding of cultural evolution over time but also stressed upon maintaining a delicate equilibrium so that the traditional and modern values coexist harmoniously within individual cultural identities. However, they acknowledged the challenges experienced while trying to maintain cultural identities through a mix of traditional and modern values during online portrayals.

Theme 4—Social Comparison:
The Social Comparison as highlighted in Table 1.2 depicts how individuals express and compare their social identities with others on social media. The respondents stated that they try to develop social connections through similarities in the online stories shared by many others. They also expressed that they examine how other people showcase their sociocultural values on social media, focusing on evaluation and comparison among the variety of sociocultural expressions. The researchers also explored that individuals compare their social media identities in context of their alignment with individuals' personas.

Theme 5: Cultural Pride Narrative
The Cultural Pride Narrative represented at Table 1.2 reveals various aspects of expressions by individuals to honor their cultural heritage through storytelling. The respondents recounted instances when the cultural heritage facilitates them to overcome some identity barriers to their social media identity representations. They shared that they often take pride in storytelling online about their cultural accomplishments. It reflects the importance of cultural expression and celebration of individual's cultural identity. The respondents revealed that they felt proud of their cultural identities and actively participated in social media debates that centered on the stories about their native cultural traditions and festivities. Furthermore, they also highlighted the sharing of stories of their cultural celebrations and festivities that were already shared by their peers and people in their digital social circle.

Theme 6: Digital Diaspora
The theme of Digital Diaspora and its subthemes as reflected at Table 1.2 demonstrated the patterns that the individuals used to feel digitally connected and develop cross-cultural relationships. It revealed that respondents actively worked to establish a sense of digital belongingness, including purposeful actions, meant to form social spaces where they felt connected to a community that valued its members. They acknowledged the significance of a supportive digital community that could help social identity navigation online. The respondents agreed that their virtual transcultural meetups also facilitated digital connections with people from diverse cultures, where they consciously built relationships, shared experiences, and appreciated different cultures to maintain and navigate their identities.

Theme 7: Authentic Representation Challenges
An important aspect of the focus group discussion, highlighted as Authentic Representation Challenges at Table 1.2 revealed the challenges individuals faced when they tried to accurately represent their cultural identities online. The study participants shared their experiences of

rejection, bullying and trolling at some occasions when they interacted with people from non-Muslim societies with lesser knowledge of Islam and Pakistani society, especially they conformed to Pakistani sociocultural norms and values. However, with detailed discussions and healthy debates with individuals from different cultures, many misunderstanding were removed, giving way to respectable relationships and positive identity representation.

Theme 8: Cultural Activism
Cultural Activism involving individuals' voluntary and conscious self-representation of indigenous cultural values through social media platforms as depicted at Table 1.2 explains how they engage in discussion of socio-political issues and promote their cultural expression. The theme explored that Pakistani youth promote cultural activism and actively back initiatives to advocate for cultural and sociopolitical causes. The individuals shared their experiences of advocating for their culture and highlighted their roles as champions for socio-political change through online conversations, and sharing their views and stories through cultural expression and activism. The study participants noted that practicing sociocultural values and their active expression during online activities and debates gives them a feeling of satisfaction and cultural pride.

Discussion:
In online communication, people from Pakistan use visual symbols such as traditional clothing and famous landmarks to show their cultural identity. This shows that they are intentionally blending cultural aspects into their online posts, emphasizing how visual representation is important in expressing cultural pride. This falls in conformity of the existing body of literature that acknowledges role of online platforms in cultural expression (Alam et al., 2025). The research also shows that people in Pakistan are skilled at using different languages on social media. They can easily switch between languages, which reflects the diverse linguistic environment of the country. Participants in Pakistan balance tradition and modernity in their online identities as evidenced by the previous global research studies (Szecsi et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2018). They aim to integrate traditional values with contemporary influences. They compare themselves with others online, reflecting a cultural norm in Pakistan. This affects how they present themselves online compared to their peers. The research shows that storytelling is important for expressing cultural pride in Pakistan as suggested by the past literature (Cerulo, 1997). People there often share stories about their cultural achievements and celebrations, which helps strengthen their sense of cultural identity and pride. This happens especially online, where digital platforms allow Pakistanis to connect with each other across cultural differences. However, it can be challenging for people to represent their cultural identity authentically online while also adhering to cultural norms. This reflects the wider discussion about how people form their identities online. Despite these challenges, Pakistanis actively participate in discussions about social and political issues and advocate for cultural expression on social media. This shows how social media can be used as a tool for cultural activism and contribute to larger societal conversations about culture.

Conclusion
People like to share their culture online by showing things like traditional clothes and famous landmarks. In Pakistan, many people are skilled at using different languages on social media, switching between them smoothly. They balance traditional and modern aspects of their identity online, recognizing that traditions change over time and trying to incorporate modern influences. People also compare how they present themselves online with others to see if they're similar.

They share stories about cultural achievements and celebrations online. In Pakistan, individuals use the internet to connect with others who share their cultural background, even if they're geographically distant. This helps foster a sense of belonging in online communities. However, it can be difficult for them to authentically express their cultural identity online due to various challenges. Despite this, people actively engage in discussions about cultural and social issues on platforms like social media. They utilize these platforms to advocate for cultural expression and voice their opinions on significant matters.

Contribution of the Study:
This research delves into how people in Pakistan use the internet to express, celebrate, and support their cultural identities. The findings shed light on various aspects of culture and digital technology, stressing the importance of being culturally sensitive and considering the context when studying how individuals present themselves online.

Future recommendations:
Additional research could explore how cultural representation influences social unity, the process of forming one's identity, and how cultural expression changes over time in the digital era, particularly within the context of Pakistan.

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