

 Journal of International Law & Human Rights	Journal of International Law & Human Rights ISSN (Print): 3007-0120 ISSN (Online): 3007-0139 Volume 5, No.8, 2026, 67-79 DOI: https://doi.org/10.59075/jilhr.v5i8.245 Journal Homepage: http://journals.centeriir.org/index.php/jilhr	 Center of Innovation in Interdisciplinary Research
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Constructing the Algorithmic Self: Algorithmic Visibility, Digital Language Practices, and Identity Formation among Pakistani Youth

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Abstract

Social media has turned identity into a digital phenomenon regulated by algorithms and cultural norms. While research on the influence of algorithms is taking place around the world, there is a lack of empirical research from South Asia, particularly Pakistan, on how algorithms influence the identity of young people through visibility and cultural negotiation. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the role of algorithmic visibility in identity construction among young people in Pakistan and the role of cultural negotiation. The study drew on literature from the fields of digital sociology and algorithm studies to conceptualise identity as an "algorithmic self" that emerges as a result of continuous negotiation between visibility mechanisms and socio-cultural norms. We carried out a quantitative cross-sectional study at COMSATS University Islamabad. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 420 social media users, aged 18-30 years. A structured questionnaire with Likert-scale responses was used to gather data and Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and mediation analysis using the PROCESS Macro (Model 4), with 5,000 resamples, were employed. Results showed that algorithmic visibility significantly influenced identity construction ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and cultural negotiation ($B = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). Cultural negotiation significantly predicted identity construction as well ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). All variables had strong positive correlations ($r = 0.62-0.71$, $p < 0.01$). The regression analysis accounted for 63% of the variance in identity construction ($R^2 = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$). The mediation analysis established that cultural negotiation partially mediated the link between algorithmic visibility and identity construction, showing a significant indirect effect ($B = 0.24$, 95% CI: 0.18-0.31). In summary, the construction of identity among Pakistani young people is mediated through a dynamic interplay between algorithms and culture, in which cultural negotiation is an important interpretative process converting algorithmic visibility into cultural digital identities.

Keywords: algorithmic visibility, cultural negotiation, identity construction, social media, Pakistani youth.



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Article History: Received: 05-08-2026

Accepted: 01-09-2026

Published: 10-10-2026

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Introduction

The growth of social media platforms has reshaped the ways in which people conceptualize, display and negotiate their identities in the modern world (Yau et al., 2020). In particular, for young people, digital platforms play a key role in defining not only a space of communication but also of socio-technical production and evaluation of the "self" (Jörissen et al., 2022). Here, the concept of "algorithmic self" - a networked identity mediated by algorithmic feedback - is a crucial concept for understanding how social media algorithms decide what is seen,

how to represent the self and how to connect socially (Smith, 2020). Algorithms determine visibility, promotion, and concealment, thereby mediating users' actions and enacting norms of engaging and being made visible on the particular platform (Schmøkel, 2025).

In the Pakistani context, for youth, this is further compounded by cultural, religious and social influences (Safdar et al., 2021). Social media provides a platform for youth to express themselves and connect, but also exposes them to value contradictions (Davis, 2012). Young people may be caught between cultural and social obligations and the demands of digital visibility for trends, styles and performative authenticity. This might result in mixed and fluid identities, drawn from local and global online trends (Gorea, 2021; McGregor, 2015).

Additionally, the pursuit of visibility, in the form of likes, shares and followers, has shifted social recognition. Algorithms preferring certain types of content lead users to optimize their content, resulting in identity splitting or curated self-representation (Zhang, 2025). This echoes the early approaches to understanding self-representation, such as the dramaturgical view of identity construction in mediated social contexts, yet extends this in the algorithmically curated environment (Haroon et al., 2025). It raises issues of authenticity, agency and interoperability between the self-presented and algorithmic identity. In a socio-cultural paradigm like Pakistan, where the notions of modesty, collectivism and respect are a must, interactions between online and offline self-presentation are more complex (Salih, 2025; Waheed et al., 2025).

Understanding identity making in such a technologically mediated space is vital to understanding social change. It draws attention to the ways in which the technological and the cultural intersect to change young people's aspirations and identities. Thus, the examination of an algorithmic self here provides an insight into how visibility regimes and cultural negotiations combine to produce new forms of youth identities for Pakistan.

Research Objective

To understand how algorithmic visibility affects identity-making among young people in Pakistan, and how this may be mediated by cultural negotiations.

Literature Review

Identity construction in online spaces has undergone a major transformation in the last decade, with the rise of social media platforms and their underlying algorithms. Recent work defines identity as a dynamic and ongoing process. Avci et al., (2025) systematic review shows that social media provides an opportunity for adolescents to continually explore, experiment, and shape identity through interactive and iterative learning environments. This is increasingly mediated by the feedback of audience and platform visibility. Consequently, identity is produced through processes of display and appraisal in networked environments.

The rise of algorithms has brought about a pivotal shift in identity production and experience, ushering in the era of the "algorithmic self". This view emphasizes that identity is jointly constructed through person-algorithm interactions. Algorithms organize, rank and recommend content, which feeds into the user's information environment. Young people often perceive algorithmically curated feeds as a reflection of their interests and identity (McDonald, 2024). The "algorithmic mirror" effect reinforces behaviors. In this way, identity is co-produced by algorithmic visibility and participation strategies.

Visibility is a core organizing principle of social media platforms, and a form of social capital and currency. Visibility in these spaces is algorithmically mediated. As a recent systematic review (Ahmmad et al., 2025) demonstrates, recommendation algorithms boost visibility of some content, but reduce visibility of other content. This creates a "visibility economy" in which users compete for visibility, resulting in increased self-reflection, comparisons with others, and impression management, where users accentuate traits the algorithm is likely to

'like'.

In this regard, Cultural negotiation, which has been implicit in previous studies, is an important element of identity negotiation in the digital environment and should be explicitly developed. Drawing on cultural hybridity theories, adolescents' identities are a blend of local and global digital cultures. Research indicates that social media connects users to global norms and places users' identities into the local cultural norms, leading to the tension between individual and group expectations (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014). This is particularly relevant in non-Western and Global South contexts in which identity is constructed with a negotiation between moral, religious and social norms.

In Pakistan, this is particularly evident given the socio-cultural emphasis on modesty, collectivism and reputation. Research conducted in South Asia provides evidence that young people strategically engage in self-presentation to navigate cultural norms while seeking visibility online (Dey et al., 2018). Thus, identity is not only algorithmically but also culturally influenced, resulting in hybrid identities that blend traditional and global elements of culture online.

Algorithmic platforms also affect psychosocial processes associated with identity. Jung et al., (2024) contend that algorithms on social media influence attitudes, beliefs, and social interaction through interlinked psychological processes. These impacts are not limited to the digital realm, as online and offline identities intersect. Identity thus exists within contexts of socio-technical systems, and involves both human and algorithmic activities. This brings attention to users as both agents and algorithmically directed.

Current literature also highlights the impact of algorithmic bias. Williams, (2025) demonstrate how algorithms can embed, entrench and reproduce social inequalities by privileging certain identities over others. This results in differential visibility, especially for young people in culturally charged settings. Although users may learn to navigate these environments, their capacity to critically challenge algorithmic power is constrained. Therefore, identity negotiation is a process that emerges from the interaction of individual, cultural and algorithmic power.

Conceptual Framework

The study draws on the notion that identity construction for Pakistani youth in digital platforms is a dynamic process that involves algorithms, culture and agency. This perspective, based on Digital Sociology, Social Identity Theory and Algorithm Studies, positions identity as an iterative process rather than fixed characteristic influenced by socio-technical factors. More recent identity theories of the digital also address the construction of identity through social platforms, visibility and social feedback (Davison, 2024). Societally, cultural and social contexts provide the underlying norms for behaviour, including religious principles, collectivist cultures, modesty and reputation protection. Pakistani youth are shaped by these cultural norms in their perceptions of expression in online and offline spaces. Recent studies affirm that online identity making is heavily shaped by the dynamics of local and global cultures of platforms, particularly in non-Western settings (Ahmad et al., 2025). At the level of digital platforms, algorithms are visibility go-betweens. Social media algorithms rank, select and recommend based on user interactions. This creates a visibility economy in which identities are elevated while others are hidden. Algorithms determine the visibility of users' actions, creating and sustaining visibility patterns and identity through curated feeds (Swart, 2021). Similarly, search and recommender algorithms influence strategies for shaping identities and tactics of visibility (DeVito et al., 2017). On the ecosystem level, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube operate as attention economies, in which visibility is currency. There is evidence algorithmic amplification profoundly affects youth engagement, visibility and identity performance in platform ecosystems (Subhani et al., 2025). These promote engagement-based visibility, resulting in identity performance oriented towards visibility. Micro-level user agency and identity performance concentrate on youth's identity construction, management and performance. This includes self-disclosure, impression management, identity experimentation and conforming to algorithmic-cultural norms. Recent research

shows youth are active in algorithmic cultures, and use platform affordances to enact identity, visibility and inclusion (Morales et al., 2024). These factors interact to produce visibility outcomes, like likes, shares, followers and metrics, which function as digital forms of social capital. These outcomes then inform user behaviour and subsequent enactments. Algorithmic visibility produces feedback loops where user activity and machine learning interact to shape identity construction (Yazid, 2026).

In sum, the model suggests that identity performance of Pakistani youth is a circular feedback loop in which algorithmic exposure, cultural negotiation and user agency all interact to produce hybrid, fluid and situated online identities. This triadic framework of identity construction in algorithmic societies is well supported in recent literature (Rustamova, 2025).

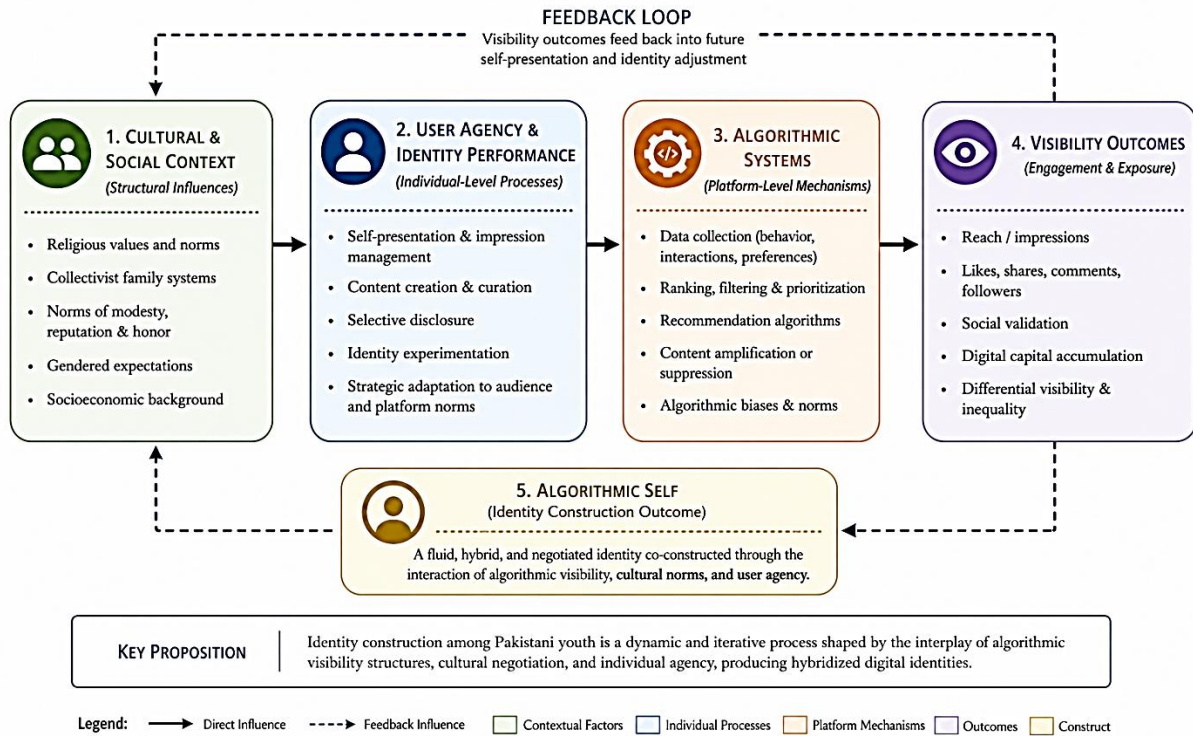


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Algorithmic Self among Pakistani Youth: Interaction of Algorithmic Systems, Cultural Context, and Identity Construction

Methodology

Study Design and Setting

This is a quantitative cross-sectional study of the links between transparency of algorithms, cultural negotiations and identity expressions among Pakistani youth. Data were collected at a single time point without manipulating the natural environment, which is ideal for examining associations in the digital environment. COMSATS University Islamabad was chosen as the study site due to its multicultural and multi-regional student population from different social backgrounds.

Study Duration and Population

The research was conducted over a six-month period (January- June 2025) involving tool development, data collection, analysis and reporting. The study targeted university students between the ages of 18-30, who are

active users of social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube) in which algorithms have important roles in identity construction.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Participants in this study were recruited using the purposive sampling technique. This approach was chosen to ensure that participants who were relevant to the research question and fit the inclusion criteria were recruited. A sample of 420 participants was selected to conduct this study and was considered sufficient for statistical analysis and for drawing accurate and valid conclusions about the relationships between the variables under study.

Inclusion Criteria and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were that the participants were university students of COMSATS University Islamabad, between the ages of 18 to 30 years, and used at least one of the social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and/or YouTube). Only those who were active users of social media and were able to provide informed consent were recruited. Participants were excluded from the study if they were under 18 years or over 30 years of age, or if they did not use social media. Those who were unwilling to take part or failed to give consent were also excluded. Finally, questionnaires that were not properly filled were excluded to ensure the quality of the data.

Data Collection

A self-administered questionnaire was used to gather data, which was constructed by the research team in line with the conceptual framework of the study to ensure it was relevant to the research aims. It was crafted to measure aspects of social media visibility, cultural negotiation, identity construction, and social media usage among the study participants. The questionnaire consisted of items rated on a Likert scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree), to indicate the level of agreement with each statement.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyze the data. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were calculated to describe the demographic and key variables in the study. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the questionnaire's reliability and confirm its internal consistency. Pearson correlation was used to assess the relationship between algorithmic visibility, cultural negotiation and identity construction. In addition, multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess whether the independent variables predicted identity construction. Results with a p -value < 0.05 were deemed significant. Moreover, mediation analysis was also performed to determine the indirect effect of algorithmic visibility on identity construction via cultural negotiation using the PROCESS Macro (Model 4) by Andrew F. Hayes. The indirect effect was estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) was computed. The indirect effect was deemed statistically significant if the confidence interval did not contain zero. This helped to better evaluate the mediating effect of cultural negotiation on the link between visibility and identity in the context of social media algorithms.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the institutional authorities of COMSATS University Islamabad before data collection began. All respondents were informed about the study and provided with informed consent before proceeding with the survey. The anonymity and privacy of the respondents was ensured throughout the study, and no personal data was collected. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study if they chose. Data were collected only for academic research, and were stored securely to ensure confidentiality and data privacy.

Results

Among the 420 participants, females constituted 52.86% (n=222) while males accounted for 47.14% (n=198), shown in table 1. The majority were aged 18–21 years (41.90%), followed by 22–25 years (38.57%) and 26–30 years (19.52%). The majority were undergraduate students (68.10%) and 31.90% were graduates. Regarding social media engagement, 47.86% spent 2-5 hours per day, 34.52% more than 5 hours and 17.62% less than 2 hours. Instagram was the most commonly used platform (84.76%), followed by YouTube (76.67%), TikTok (70.95%), Facebook (57.38%), and Snapchat (28.33%).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics and Social Media Platform Usage of Participants (N = 420)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	198	47.14
	Female	222	52.86
Age Group	18–21 years	176	41.90
	22–25 years	162	38.57
	26–30 years	82	19.52
Education Level	Undergraduate	286	68.10
	Graduate	134	31.90
Daily Social Media Use	<2 hours	74	17.62
	2–5 hours	201	47.86
	>5 hours	145	34.52
Social Media Platform Usage	Instagram	356	84.76
	TikTok	298	70.95
	Facebook	241	57.38
	YouTube	322	76.67
	Snapchat	119	28.33

The test-retest reliability showed good internal consistency for all constructs in the study, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for algorithmic visibility (8 items), 0.84 for cultural negotiation (7 items) and 0.88 for identity construction (9 items), while the total questionnaire (24 items) had an alpha of 0.87, suggesting high reliability (table 2).

Table 2: Reliability Analysis of Study Scales

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Reliability Status
Algorithmic Visibility	8	0.86	Good
Cultural Negotiation	7	0.84	Good
Identity Construction	9	0.88	Good
Overall Questionnaire	24	0.87	Good

Participants expressed high levels of agreement for all constructs, with algorithmic visibility items ranging from 3.92 ± 0.88 to 4.35 ± 0.71 , especially for platform recommendations based on interests (4.35 ± 0.71), depicted in figure 2. Similarly, cultural negotiation showed high agreement with means ranging from 4.05 ± 0.85 to 4.33 ± 0.69 , particularly for cultural norms impact on online identity (4.33 ± 0.69). Identity construction items also presented high means, ranging between 4.14 ± 0.81 and 4.36 ± 0.68 , with audience reactions having the greatest impact (4.36 ± 0.68).

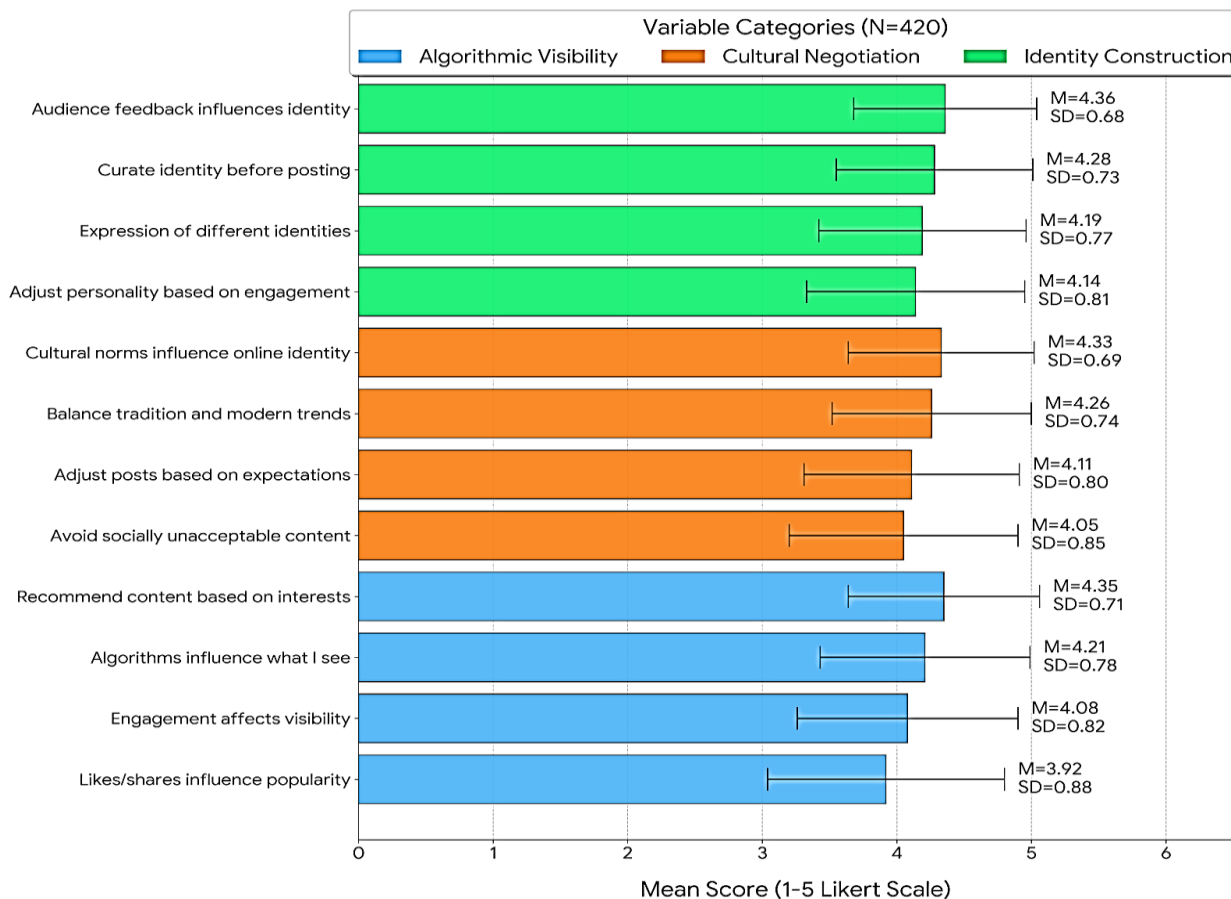


figure 2: Perception of Algorithmic Visibility, Cultural Negotiation, and Identity Construction (N = 420)

Pearson correlation analysis indicated significant positive correlations between all variables ($p < 0.01$), with algorithmic visibility highly correlated with identity construction ($r = 0.71$) and cultural negotiation ($r = 0.62$), while cultural negotiation was also highly correlated with identity construction ($r = 0.68$), suggesting mutual associations between the variables (figure 3).

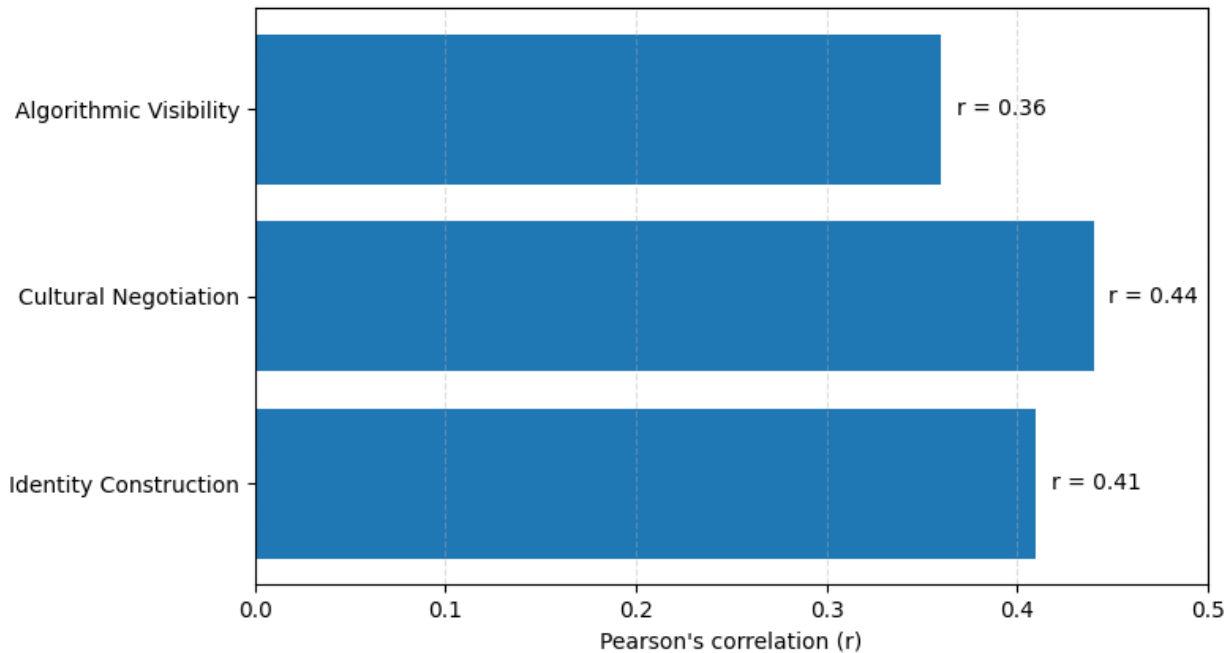
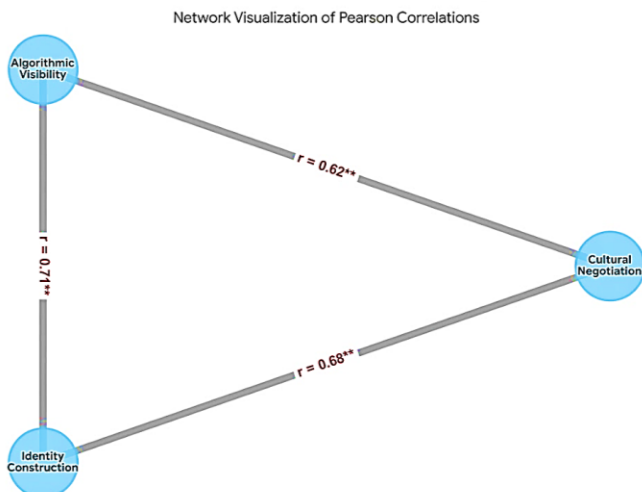


Figure: correlations between digital language choice, algorithmic visibility, cultural negotiation, and identity construction.

The results indicate positive correlations between digital language choice and algorithmic visibility ($r=0.36$), cultural negotiation ($r=0.44$), and identity construction ($r=0.41$). The strongest association is with cultural negotiation, suggesting that language choices may relate to how Pakistani youth express and negotiate cultural identities online. These relationships suggest that digital language practices may be relevant to online identity formation, although the findings require empirical verification.



Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Figure 3: Pearson Correlation Analysis

Multiple regression analysis indicated that both algorithmic visibility ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 8.92$, $p = 0.000$) and cultural negotiation ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 7.85$, $p = 0.000$) were significant predictors of identity construction, with the overall model explaining 63% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.63$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.62$) and showing strong statistical significance ($F = 142.37$, $p < 0.001$), shown in table 3.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Identity Construction

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Algorithmic Visibility	0.41	8.92	0.000
Cultural Negotiation	0.38	7.85	0.000
Model Fit: $R^2 = 0.63$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.62$, $F = 142.37$, $p < 0.001$			

Mediation analysis demonstrated that algorithmic visibility significantly predicted cultural negotiation ($B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI: 0.54–0.69, $p < 0.001$), which in turn significantly predicted identity construction ($B = 0.38$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI: 0.28–0.47, $p < 0.001$); the direct effect remained significant ($B = 0.41$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI: 0.31–0.50, $p < 0.001$), while the indirect effect ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI: 0.18–0.31) was also significant, confirming partial mediation by cultural negotiation (table 4).

Table 4: Mediation Analysis Using PROCESS Macro (Model 4)

Path	Effect (B)	Boot SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Significance
Algorithmic Visibility → Cultural Negotiation (a)	0.62	0.04	0.54	0.69	$p < 0.001$
Cultural Negotiation → Identity Construction (b)	0.38	0.05	0.28	0.47	$p < 0.001$
Direct Effect (c')	0.41	0.05	0.31	0.50	$p < 0.001$
Indirect Effect (a × b)	0.24	0.03	0.18	0.31	Significant

Discussion

Our study showed a strong association between algorithmic exposure and identity shaping among Pakistani youth, with a strong predictive effect in the regression analysis ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). The study found that increased algorithmic visibility leads to heightened identity construction on social media platforms. This is in line with research suggesting that algorithms impact youth identity through particular streams and cycles of user engagement with content, where user agency and algorithms co-produce identity (Morales et al., 2024).

Algorithmic mediation studies also show that recommendations are key in how users understand and construct identity on social media, and are associated with behavioral change in visibility cultures (Czaplicka et al., 2025).

In the present study, cultural negotiation was a key mediating variable with a strong effect between algorithmic visibility and cultural negotiation ($B = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests algorithmic visibility amplifies the negotiation between cultural norms and online identity expression. This is consistent with other studies in Pakistan where young people adapt online practices to family expectations, modesty, and concerns for reputation ($r = 0.68$ with identity construction in related contexts) (Ali & Akran, 2026). Similar studies on digital identity in South Asia note that cultural values play a strong role in how algorithmic environments are understood and absorbed by users (Aqeel et al, 2025).

In the current research, identity construction was highly linked with cultural negotiation ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$; see table 2), which implies that cultural balancing is significant in the digital identity construction. This is in line with previous research which found a hybrid identity among youth who experienced global and local cultural norms, leading to selective identity construction. For example, studies from Bangladesh and Pakistan confirm identity creation on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram is immersed in cultural norms, particularly with regard to gender and status (Rasel et al., 2020).

Similarly, in this study, algorithmic visibility, cultural negotiation, and identity construction were moderately to highly correlated ($r = 0.71$, $r = 0.62$, $r = 0.68$ respectively). This is supported by global research which shows that algorithmic environments increase social comparison and identity affirmation, particularly among adolescents. Current studies highlight the role of algorithms in reflecting as well as shaping user identities through personalization and engagement metrics (Babu & Ghafar, 2025).

Mediation analysis also supported the idea of partial mediation with a significant indirect effect of algorithmic visibility through cultural negotiation ($B = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$). This means the identity is not created directly in response to algorithms, but through cultural negotiation. Similar mediation effects were found in digital sociology research, where algorithms' influence on behavior is mediated through cultural and psychological adaptation processes, rather than direct behavior control (Ferreira et al., 2026).

Overall, the strong predictive power ($R^2 = 0.63$) of the model suggests that adolescents' identity construction processes are largely explained by algorithmic visibility and cultural negotiation. Likewise, studies in digital anthropology and media sociology show similar predictive powers in combining technology and culture, emphasizing that digital identities are co-produced by algorithms and culture (Manesah, 2025).

Study Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths, including a clear theoretical mediation model linking algorithmic visibility, cultural negotiation, and identity, a relatively large sample size ($N = 420$), and the use of reliable psychometric scales (Cronbach's alpha 0.84–0.88). Sophisticated statistical techniques like correlation, regression, and PROCESS mediation add to its rigour. However, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and purposive sampling from a single university reduces generalizability. Social desirability and other biases could arise from self-reporting. Longitudinal or mixed methods are needed to better understand the dynamic processes of algorithmic identity building.

Conclusion

The study shows that algorithmic visibility is an important component in the formation of Pakistani youth identities, directly and indirectly through the processes of cultural negotiation. The findings suggest that algorithms contribute to how young adults display, perceive and negotiate identities online. Cultural negotiation

is a key interpretive space where the impact of algorithms is negotiated, as individuals reconcile requirements of visibility demanded by algorithms with socio-cultural, religious and social norms and expectations. To conclude, young people's identity formation is best understood as a dynamic interaction between algorithms and socio-cultural systems, and not merely a technological influence.

Recommendations / Future Research Directions

The research calls for enhancing digital literacy in education to increase youth knowledge of the impact of algorithms on visibility, participation and identity development. Educators should encourage critical online engagement and incorporate discussions about cultural values, digital identities and algorithms to support students in hybrid online environments. Algorithmic transparency should be improved by social media platforms to minimise unconscious influence on behaviour and promote positive identity formation. Researchers should study a broader range of regions, educational institutions and socio-economic statuses in Pakistan for better representation. Longitudinal research is advised to assess changes, while qualitative or mixed methods will help understand individual perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, moderating effects of gender, personality factors and digital literacy could be examined to understand individual variability in identity formation through algorithms.

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