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Social Media and Performative Maleness: Masculinity in the Age of Likes (A Pakistani Contextual Analysis)

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ABSTRACT

The study explores how Pakistani males aged 18-25 perform and negotiate masculinity on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, over the past seven years. By applying the conceptual framework of Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity theory with reference to Butler's theory of Performativity, the study is based on secondary sources like peer-reviewed journals and reputable media. The paper examines how Pakistani social media platforms are idealized by hegemonic masculinity, such as strength, emotional stoicism and heterosexuality. At the same time, some users are adopting a new hybrid form of masculinity that accommodates both toughness and softness. Former masculinity norms on social media are often reinforced through fitness posts and sexual bragging, but now youth sometimes also adopt feminine traits like sensitivity and interest in art. This shift is increasingly visible on social media platforms. Studying this is very important because these performances are not just random but deeply connected to Pakistan's society. The paper will conclude how these practices on social media serve as both a stage for hegemonic masculinity and a site of subtle change.

Introduction

Masculinity in Pakistan is often shaped by the patriarchal culture and social expectations. Pakistani men are traditionally shown as public actors such as brave, rational and emotionally restrained; similarly, women are often associated with dependency and domesticity (Lak et al., 2025). These kinds of norms not only elevate the man's position but also demand that they perform strictly and strongly (Salam, 2021; Lak et al., 2025). In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful tool where gender identities are acted out. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram offer Pakistani men to perform masculinity, often shaped to receive approval through likes, comments and shares. In the meantime, a discussion is going on media about the performative male, meaning men who adopt the feminine activities and interests just to attract the opposite gender (Qureshi, 2025; Azeem, 2025).

Although social media is a very common platform but unfortunately, online practices of Pakistani men are still under-researched. Existing literature shows that social media platforms often support existing patriarchal gender roles, but sometimes they also allow men to act differently (Salam, 2021; Lak et al., 2025). Studying this is very important because these digital platforms not only reflect society but also play an important role in changing norms and creating new ways to express identity.

Research Objectives

To explore how young Pakistani men aged 18-25 perform and negotiate masculinity on social media platforms.

Research Question

1. How do young Pakistani men perform and negotiate masculinity on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube?
i) What dominant masculine ideals are reinforced through online performance?
ii) How are hybrid and soft masculinities challenging the hegemonic masculinity norms?
iii) What is the role of audience feedback through likes, comments and shares in shaping their online identities?

Background and Context
Patriarchal Masculinity in Pakistan

Society in Pakistan has long-standing norms and ideologies dating back to the Zia-ul-Haq era, when religion was politicized, and patriarchal control became stronger (Salam, 2021). Research scholars demonstrate it as a strict gender divide that men occupy the public sphere as leaders and protectors, while women are limited to taking care of the household (Lak et al., 2025). According to this framework, men are expected to show rational thinking, toughness and emotional restraint (Lak et al., 2025; Salam, 2021). Any kind of feminine behavior was discouraged and often punished socially. Research finds that any type of harmless traits, like openness of emotions, can lead to exclusion and harassment for men (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2024; Salam, 2021). As one of the studies highlights that hegemonic masculinity in Pakistan requires men to reject all behaviors associated with femininity, positioning them as an unquestioned standard (Salam, 2021).

Social Media in Pakistan

A rapid growth of the internet and social media has been experienced in Pakistan. As of early 2023, around 72 million Pakistanis were using social media, which is 30% of the population (Kemp, 2023). This usage is heavily crowded by males, around 73% of males and only 29% of females (Kemp, 2023). Among the social media platforms, Facebook is one of the most popular, with around 37.3 million users, of which 80% are male and this is followed by YouTube with 37 million users (72% male) and Instagram with 13 million users (66% male) (Kemp, 2023). Notably, the largest community on Instagram is 18-25 years old (*Instagram Users in Pakistan*, 2023), which directly overlaps with our study's focus. These figures show that young men in Pakistan dominate the social media platforms.

These different social media platforms offer various ways for self-expression. Instagram offers visual self-presentation, Facebook mixes both private and public sharing and YouTube hosts the long-form of content like podcasts, vlogs and music. Each platform provides an opportunity for Pakistani men to idealize their identities. For example, the Instagram community is more inclined towards fitness and bodybuilding, where young men display muscular physiques and status symbols like cars and travel, just to gain likes and popularity. Researchers from Unisa note that when men get likes and positive comments on their body-related posts, it strengthens hyper-masculine ideals or can even contribute to body-image problems like muscle dysmorphic (Donnarumma & Mingoia, 2024). In Pakistani patriarchal culture, such approval is a strong reward that reinforces hegemonic masculine norms and discourages men if they perform beyond these fixed norms.

Emergent Performative Male Trend

In the recent timeframe, the Pakistani mainstream media and online community spotlighted the trend of the "performative male". The slang term refers to young men who take up interests stereotypically aligned with feminine traits, for example, carrying floral tote bags, drinking matcha and reading feminine literature just to attract women (Qureshi, 2025; Azeem, 2025). One of the Pakistani news articles explains that "Performative male is a man who claims interests in things that appeal to women for the sake of standing out and winning their attention" (Qureshi, 2025). These kinds of men are often mocked on social media and also featured in satirical contests, where participants exaggerate soft masculinity by saying things such as "I hate period cramps" or "I support women's rights" just to score points or attention from women (Qureshi, 2025; Azeem,

2025). Critics argued that the word performative is often associated with insincerity, as one participant commented that such men "pretend…to be woke…for female validation" (Azeem, 2025). While this trend is framed humorously, it points to a bigger issue that gender itself is always performed, specifically in online spaces. According to one of the cultural observers, calling men performative is useless because "gender has always been a performance" (D'Orso, 2025). However, in Pakistan, this discussion is new. The performative male meme shows how young people navigate with fixed gender expectations. In short, Pakistani social media now places both hyper-masculine images and feminine-coded performance of masculinity because both attract public attention and commentary.

Conceptual Framework

This paper employs Connell's (1995) theory of "hegemonic masculinity" as its primary framework. The hegemonic masculinity describes the socially dominant form of men, which emphasizes strong emotions, toughness, male authority and heterosexuality (Lak et al., 2025). This concept in Pakistan, as discussed earlier, is closely linked to culture and society. It reinforces male privilege and draws a fine line that how men are expected to behave (Salam, 2021). From this lens, every post or comment on social media platforms is seen as a performance that negotiates with acceptance, power and identity.

We also discuss Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" as a supporting concept. He argued that gender is not something natural, specific and fixed, but something that is constituted through repetitive behaviors and actions. Butler's work implies that social media can be understood as a literal stage where these gender performances are carried out. For example, an author applied Butler's theory to interpret how Pakistani Facebook users express gender online (Salam, 2021). While our main analysis focused on hegemonic masculinity, with the notion: gender is performed and either these digital platforms appreciate or constrain this performance. Indeed, recent research on "Mascara Boys" supports this phenomenon; their content on Instagram includes both feminine and masculine traits, intentionally mixing styles to challenge traditional masculine norms (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2024).

This conceptual framework looks for evidence of traits linked to hegemonic masculinity and notes the fact that when men adopt alternate identities or traits. Audience feedback (like, comment and share) is considered, either reinforcing or challenging these performances. The finding will be interpreted with the expectation that where masculinity is reinforced traditional way and where men subvert norms through hybrid performances.

Methodology

Qualitative secondary analysis, based on the literature review of recent research and commentary (2018-2025) concerning social media, masculinity and Pakistani youth, is studied in this paper. No new empirical data were collected. Existing reports, peer-reviewed articles and credible media accounts were examined systematically.

Data Collection

Academic databases like Google Scholar, Research Gate and Springer were used with keywords such as "Pakistani men Instagram", "Pakistan masculinity social media", "performative masculinity Pakistan" and "gender Facebook Instagram". Relevant qualitative studies from credible media sources were carried out for contemporary cultural commentary.

Selection Criteria

Sources from the last seven years, particularly focused on Pakistani contexts, were included. The paper prioritized the work that examined the social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) and discussed identity and gender roles. Informal sources were excluded unless they reported significant cultural trends.

Qualitative Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used. The text patterns related to hegemonic masculine performance and alternative performance were analyzed. Also, attention was given to the social media mechanism (like, comment and share) shaping these kinds of performances with reference to cultural factors.

Theoretical Interpretation

The gathered themes were primarily analyzed by Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to see whether online practices strengthened the dominant gender ideals or showed resistance. Also, Butler's theory of performativity was used to further explain how masculinities are practiced and negotiated online.

Discussion and Analysis

Reinforcing Hegemonic Masculinity Online

Many young Pakistani men continue to project the traditional masculine ideals on social media that are strengthening the hegemonic norms. For example, Facebook is the space where men often highlight their strength and dominance. Lak et al (2025) report that Pakistani male Facebook posts "mostly hold traditional norms" of masculinity (Lak et al., 2025). Posting gym selfies, showing off professional success and sharing memes that hinder emotional openness (men do not cry) are seems as common behaviors among male Facebook users. Similarly, the same patterns are observed on Instagram, where men are highlighting their male physique and lifestyle, such as tattoos, expensive cars, travel and muscles. According to the Datareportal (2023) report, Pakistani men outnumber female users on Instagram by nearly 2:1 (Kemp, 2023), which shows a heavily competitive environment for male self-presentation. It is observed that when men organize Instagram profiles, they often follow the rituals of masculinity (Goffman 1959 style), for instance, the selection of a profile picture in a gym or a travel snapshot is used to show courage, strength and adventure (Lak et al., 2025). These kinds of traits have long been associated with hegemonic masculinity ideals.

Online interactions also reflect the importance of homosocial validation, which means approval by other men. Kimmel's idea of masculinity as a "homosocial performance" is obvious in Pakistan, where males are likely to like and comment on each other's social media posts related to cars, muscles, sports or achievement (Lak et al., 2025). A study on Pakistani social media found that men often engage in showing off their professional milestones just to gain recognition from other men (Lak et al., 2025). These kinds of homosocial dynamics strengthen the hierarchical order: the man who displays more toughness and success notably receives more engagement from his audience, which significantly strengthens his status. In contrast, the post that shows vulnerability or non-conformity is often mocked by the audience. Lak et al. examine that even online, the "double standard of a patriarchal culture" still exists where men are expected to act as rational and emotionless, while women's behavior is heavily monitored (Lak et al., 2025). As a result, men's posts on social media related to dominant behavior get positive feedback from the audience as compared to the posts showing vulnerability or emotional openness, creating a cycle where aggression and stoicism are rewarded consistently.

Moreover, online harassment and criticism play a major role in strengthening hegemonic masculinity. Salam (2021) notes that both men and women are judged negatively for breaking gender roles, especially men face harsh consequences: "men who transgress the established modes of masculinity can face online harassment and sometimes offline violence" (Salam, 2021). As a result, Pakistani men on social media learn quickly what to post and what not to post. The fear of being punished on social media becomes a strong motivation to stick with hegemonic masculinity. In one interview, a Pakistani man openly admitted that sometimes he had to "dress differently for the female gaze," but in the meantime, if he dressed too differently or beyond the expectations of society, people might think that he is not manly enough (Salam-Salmaoui and Salam, 2024). Thus, these kinds of challenges encourage the repetitive performances of hegemonic masculinity and marginalize any kind of alternative performance. Put simply, social media often works like an echo chamber that makes Pakistani patriarchal norms stronger and, at the same time, discourages any kind of trait associated with femininity.

Emerging Hybrid and Soft Masculinities

Although hegemonic conformity had a strong hold on social media, there a small but noticeable shifts emerging on social media in the last few years. It is observed that some young men are experimenting with hybrid or alternative masculinity performances, where traditional masculinity performances are mixed with styles and behavior often labeled as feminine in society. On Instagram, it is observed that Pakistani men are posting stuff like peace-sign selfies, carrying books by feminine authors, or wearing fashion once recognized as only for women. "Mascara Boys", the digital content creators, intentionally present an artistic and softer style. While this trend is still a niche but it is growing rapidly. The author explains the "Mascara Boys" as they are using digital spaces (Instagram) to challenge traditional masculinity (Salam-Salmaoui and Salam, 2024). These individuals perform the hybrid masculinity traits, e.g., one day they post a weightlifting picture and the very next day they post a picture of painting their nails. Importantly, these types of acts are performed strategically just to challenge the conventional masculine hierarchies. According to the author, these Mascara Boys emerge as "agents of change" who carefully handle the cultural pressure while promoting a flexible form of masculinity (Salam-Salmaoui and Salam, 2024). According to them, they open the space for conversation regarding gender diversity in Pakistan, signaling a possible paradigm shift.

However, hybrid performances of masculinity often face a lot of criticism and are not fully accepted in Pakistan. On one hand, in big cities like Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, public events and contests demonstrate that there is a genuine fascination with hybrid performances, as many young boys are adopting the soft boy styles in public, reflecting how social media trends spill into real life (Qureshi, 2025). On the other hand, mainstream media commentary like Dawn and Tribune often treats these shifts as comical. The new aesthetics, like quoting feminist slogans or drinking matcha tea, are often described as "appealing to the female gaze" (Azeem, 2025) or a "growing suspicion" that the behavior is inappropriate (Cunningham, 2025). In reality, men who entirely step outside traditional norms are often labeled as "pick-me boys" if they show interest in the traits typically associated with women (Azeem, 2025). In short, hybrid masculinity is present on digital platforms in Pakistan, but it usually rides in tension with dominant gender norms.

Performative Lighting and Audience Feedback

One of the key elements in all these performances is the social media feedback loop, wherein likes, comments and shares serve as immediate rewards or can push towards strong backlash. Many scholars emphasize that social media is considered a visibility-driven economy. In this, Pakistani men often shape up their posts to gain maximum approval from the audience. For example, a pro-nationalism post on Facebook is likely to get more likes from peers, thus strengthening the fact that such a message is valuable and authentic (Lak et al., 2025). Likewise, the viral contests on Instagram use audience voting to determine the "best performative male" (Qureshi, 2025). These contests are evidence of how masculinity is not merely expressed but actively gamified by the audience. Thus, such dynamics underscore that being a man online means how you look and act so people will approve, notice and reward you.

Research from the lens of other contexts also supports this pattern. A young man who really cares about getting more likes and appreciation on social media is involved in extreme body obsessions (Donnarumma & Mingoia, 2024). This suggests that Pakistani users on social platforms are driven to amplify those traits just to gain social approval. An example of this is a muscular session that receives many likes, validates and reinforces the idea of a valued form of masculinity. Conversely, a man who uploads feminine-related posts, such as makeup or pastel colored clothing, often faces ridicule through negative comments and memes. This is portrayed as a form of virtual sanctions. The Express Tribune reports that the men who participate in the performative-male contests often joke about "the female oppression," and similarly, these kinds of men also raise voices against this kind of situation if that behavior brings attention, likes and fame (Qureshi, 2025). Hence, this behavior proves that the audience does not react in the same way. Sometimes they mocked the exact thing and sometimes they support for the exact thing, all depending upon the platform and situation.

In sum, likes and comments function as social validation. In this era, likes and views decide what is socially valid or not, which was once judged by cultural policing. Popularity through likes and comments also shows some rule-breaking actions. For example, if a man dressed in feminine clothing might also go viral, in the sense of different content, not just accepting it silently. This is basically a double-edged sword. Hybrid performers often gain popularity or visibility, but in the sense of joke or meme content. The current "performative male" meme is the best example of this (Azeem, 2025). Although this behavior is criticized, but it makes space for people to talk about these ideas. Finally, although the mechanism of likes supports conventional masculinity but they also accidentally give attention to and sometimes help in accepting new ways of being a man.

Platform-Specific Observations
Facebook

Even though all social media platforms work on the same dynamics, each platform works differently and has its own specific way of shaping behavior. In Pakistan, Facebook is used by almost all age groups and often it reflects the virtual society. According to the researcher, the interaction on Facebook in the Pakistani community is closely linked with religion and cultural values (Salam, 2021). Many men use this platform to strengthen traditional gender roles. For example, by uploading a criticism post about women's modesty or family honor, which clearly supports hegemonic masculinity (Salam, 2021). Facebook mostly shows traditional content, but at the same time, its old features, such as group and text posts, allow men to share non-traditional content in private spaces. In these close spaces, men usually talk about mental health issues, which are considered taboo or soft in hegemonic masculinity. In the study "Men Will Be Men", the authors analyzed different modes of communication on Facebook and suggest that mostly men are engaged with traditional forms of masculinity, but there is a small sign that a few men started to deviate from traditional masculinity norms (Lak et al., 2025). For example, a man on Facebook shares a post about the mediation or reading a novel not to impress or get the attention of anyone, but to step out from the traditional dominant norms. However, these changes are still very new because most of the time, users on Facebook give more likes to tough and macho content.

Instagram

Instagram, with mostly younger users and with its visual focus, seems to be the leading platform where the ideas of traditional masculinity are shifting with a hybrid form of masculinity. The research on Mascara Boys reveals that Instagram is the space for subversion where some Pakistani men post images that blur the traditional gender norms (Salam, 2021). This platform emphasizes visual storytelling, such as photos, stories and reels, which enable men to portray themselves creatively. For instance, a user shares interior design content or some makeup tutorials, usually signaling traits labeled as feminine. Because the algorithm on Instagram promotes engaging and polished content, these non-traditional performances can quickly gain followers and visibility if they resonate with the audience. Some Pakistani male influencers consciously adopt styles linked to "Western soft boy" culture, such as carrying a book by feminist authors or pastel clothing (Salam, 2021). These actions are clearly political because they challenge the traditional male-dominant norms or "heteropatriarchal structures" (Salam, 2021). However, because Instagram heavily rewards the visual conformity to fitness, wealth and beauty, many Pakistani men use it to showcase their gym results, luxury lifestyle, brand outfits and expensive cars, thus strengthening the traditional hegemonic masculinity.

YouTube

YouTube plays a distinct role in shaping masculinity in Pakistan. Approximately 71.7 million Pakistani users, 72% of whom are male (Kemp, 2023), reach almost every household in Pakistan. Young men in Pakistan both consume and create content on YouTube, ranging from fitness vlogs to comedy skits to music. Although this platform has been studied very little in the research but some patterns are evident. Most of the content creators on YouTube show business success, fitness and luxury as masculine traits. For example, daily vloggers on YouTube often showcase their wealth, fitness routine and financial achievements, following the typical idea of masculinity without making it obvious. YouTube offers a longer form of content than other platforms, which allows people to narrate their lives, but the comment section often reveals a conservative audience.

Comedy sketches and memes about gender roles frequently mock non-traditional masculinity or femininity. However, some emerging channels talk about men's mental health issues or promote more flexible gender identities, showing acceptance of hybrid masculinity. Unfortunately, these kinds of efforts often face criticism in Pakistani society because such kind of acts are considered unmanly. In conclusion, YouTube is the platform that largely reinforces traditional masculinity ideals, though it also provides limited spaces for alternative or hybrid performances.

Conclusion

The study of Pakistani young men's engagement with social media platforms reveals a complex landscape of Pakistani masculinity. These platforms display both traditional hegemonic masculinity and hybrid or performative masculinity traits. Feedback from the audience regarding both attributes is different. On the one hand, online platforms reinforce dominant masculinity where young men's posts on Facebook and Instagram frequently display aggression, strength and heterosexual dominance (Lak et al., 2025). These digital platforms reward this kind of mechanism and thereby sustain the culture of hegemonic dominance. On the other hand, new patterns of masculinity are emerging where some men adopt the hybrid or performative masculinities by showing interest in aesthetics previously associated with feminine traits. These acts are widely discussed by the media, which indicates a subtle shift. Research on Pakistani digital content creators, "Mascara Boys," shows that Instagram can be a space for resistance as these men intentionally craft a hybrid identity that challenges traditional gender expectations (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2024). However, these alternative performances strongly face cultural pushback, as they are often treated as unusual rather than accepted straightforwardly. Viewed through Connell's theory, Pakistani social media can be seen as a battleground between the traditional hegemonic masculinity and the emerging hybrid form of expression. The hegemonic model remains the dominant one, but social media has made it easier for men to try out different performances. Similarly, Butler suggests that gender norms are enforced and repeated again and again online. But sometimes, any small act of deviation also helps change the way people think about gender. The popularity of performative male memes depicts that people are now talking about whether someone's masculinity is fake or real. However, these discussions are often presented humorously or funnily, but the important thing is that they bring gender questions into public spaces. In short, the masculine performance on Pakistani social media constitutes a high-stakes practice, where young men shape their social media profile under the awareness of an intensely judgmental audience.

Future Direction and Recommendations

Future research could quantify these dynamics further by studying how different types of content correlate with likes and shares, or by exploring intervention strategies such as media literacy programs to reduce harmful gender stereotyping. These findings imply the need to support a healthier form of masculinity on social media platforms. For example, promoting content that shows emotional openness and equitable attitudes, not just toughness and strength. As Pakistan's digital generation grows, the "age of likes" may slowly change what it means to be a man, creating a balance between traditional norms and evolving alternate global norms.

Disclosure Statement

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