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YouTube Content and Women's Identity: A Mixed-Methods Study of Content-Identity Linkages and Audience Perception among Women in Lahore, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study examines how the content of five leading Pakistani YouTube channels relates to women's identity, and how Pakistani women themselves perceive and define that identity.

Methodology: A mixed-methods design combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 452 videos from five popular Pakistani YouTube channels (Sistrology, Fatima Faisal, Rabeeca Khan, Ghazal Jawad Vlogs, and Kitchen with Amna) with in-depth interviews with (n=20) female viewers in Lahore.

Findings: Content analysis showed that 77.4% of the videos carried an identity theme, producing five distinct images of Pakistani womanhood: collective/family-focused, beauty-expert, celebrity-marital, religious-modest, and domestic-professional. Interviews showed that women largely described identity as self-authored and self-chosen rather than imposed by fixed relational labels, though this sense of freedom was consistently described as partial and shaped by family upbringing and the judgment of wider society and culture. Education and career achievement emerged as the clearest pathway to a confident, self-chosen identity.

Conclusion: YouTube functions not as a space of passive viewing but as a site of active engagement, exposing Pakistani women to multiple, sometimes competing, models of womanhood that they filter through family, culture, and critical awareness.

Keywords*:* Women's identity, YouTube, Social Learning Theory, Digital Media, Content Analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The concept of digital media has transformed the nature of communication, learning and self-understanding and the understanding of others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). YouTube has emerged as one of the most influential platforms in which the behaviors, values and lifestyles of content creators, especially women vloggers and influencers are modeled to large audiences, among the platforms which now form the backbone of everyday life. The understanding of women identity is a multi-faceted construct that is growingly influenced by digital content and is being shaped by the relationship between women, their educational backgrounds, their families and their cultures, by deciding what they publish and how, content creators are shaping the images and judgements of women's roles in society.

In Pakistan, this situation is particularly pronounced, as the globalized digital media culture is constantly balancing conservative cultural and religious ideas regarding modesty, family and gender roles (Furedi, 2015; Shabir et al., 2014; Aral & Walker, 2012). Digital platforms have created space for connecting outside the domestic sphere and have become a "public space" where Pakistani women may challenge social and cultural constraints on their bodies and options (Byerly, 2016). But the space is far from free of constraints women may be between sustaining inherited personal and cultural values and seeking to achieve the newly afforded opportunities of mobility and visibility, of achievement and recognition, of digital platforms (Kabeer, 2005; Roomi & Parrott, 2008; Putnam, 1995; Ellison et al., 2007).

The tension has started to be documented in research specifically about Pakistan. He et al. (2024), and more recently, scholarship on gender identity and digital style focusing on Pakistan, has reported high levels of the reproduction of cultural norms offline in online spaces, which in turn helped to construct and negotiate young Pakistani women's gender identity. Increasingly this scholarship has focused not on women's passivity as consumers of digital content, but on women as agents who both uphold and counter gendered expectations that they find online. Rather, through multimodal discourse analysis of the Facebook posts of South Punjabi women. Pakistani women employ visual and linguistic resources imaginatively to negotiate between conformity and resistance, such as posting photos of their modest appearance and religious messages and showing signs of financial independence. The negotiation between women and digital platforms is a recurring theoretical thread in the recent literature on Pakistani women and digital platforms.

This has been expanded in more recent scholarships. Akmal and Usmani (2024) shed light on the legal and the Islamic aspects of women's digital rights in Pakistan, positing that the notions of modesty and visibility continue to be subject to debate in today's Islamic legal thought, and thus have ample space for competing conceptions of obscenity and morality in cyberspace. Tahir and Qayyum (2025) analyzed the thumbnails and comments of popular Pakistani YouTube videos using a multimodal approach and concluded that women were perceived as 'things', which were used to create a misleading or provoking visual framing for women, and that this visual framing was linked to cyberbullying, moralizing comments and victim blaming was common: Pakistani YouTube was found to be not only a space for women's visibility, but also a site of gendered surveillance. In another qualitative study, Jabeen et al. (2026) identified a boost in economic autonomy, self-confidence and participation in decision-making for women after entering digital entrepreneurship, alongside exposure to cyberbullying, online fraud, and family disapproval associated with the notions of public visibility of women held by patriarchy.

Abdulwahab et al. (2026) also refer to Pakistani influencers on social media as having a "divided" identity, sometimes conflicted between different platforms, and as having to mediate between western views of influencers and local sense of modesty and family honor. YouTube podcasting has enabled Pakistani media to delve into the topics that were previously taboo due to religious and nationalistic sensitivities, which further underscores the fact that YouTube is a forum for continuous (re)negotiation, (re)reward, and (re)policing of women's identity. (Cheema, 2025) This is supported by research by Iqbal

and Chinnasamy (2025) that attests to instances of coordinated online harassment and credibility attacks against Pakistani women journalists when they make themselves visible online.

1.2 Problem Statement

While there is a growing volume of scholarship on digital media, identity and gender in Pakistan, there remains an important question that has yet to be adequately considered: What is the relationship between the content of Pakistani female-led YouTube channels and women's identity, how it is being shaped, and how do the women who watch this content understand and define it? The present state of the knowledge of the above question has 4 gaps.

First, Western and East Asian-based identity/self-presentation models have been little examined empirically in the context of Pakistani women (Chua & Chang, 2016). Second, larger discussions on social media and identity in Pakistan rarely focus on the dynamics of the longer video format, or the unique culture of thumbnails and comments, on YouTube. Third, existing research has been dedicated to the international content creators and not Pakistani content creators, although Pakistanis have a significant presence on the platform. Fourth, the discussions around identity formation on Pakistani digital platforms have not been explored in detail in the socio-cultural context of Lahore, where modesty and the role of women are shaped by traditional and religious norms that are still prevalent despite the rapid growth of digital engagement (Ahmed et al., 2025). In the present study, the author aims to fill these gaps to create a culturally embedded picture of the relationship between Pakistani video content on YouTube and the identity of female viewers of these videos in Lahore, as well as to capture the voices of those women themselves, who articulate what “women's identity” means to them.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

Theoretically, Lahore was chosen as a study site, and practically this was the only place that could accommodate the researchers. Lahore is a city with a high literacy rate (79.6%) and mobile internet penetration of 70-75% which is also above the national average of around 46% (DataReportal, 2025; TechMag, 2025), creating the ideal setting to examine digitally engaged women's identity formation (Hussain et al., 2024).

The decision to select YouTube instead of other social media platforms is made because it is a video-based platform that uniquely provides opportunities for observational learning and social evaluation. Visual framing practices in Pakistan's YouTube videos are consistently employed to influence viewers' moral and cultural outlook of women, making it an important consideration for comprehending how women's identity is negotiated in Pakistan's digital space. Chosen for this study were five channels due to their wide viewership among Pakistani women viewers namely Sistrology, Rabeeca Khan, Ghazal Jawad Vlogs, Kitchen with Amna, and Fatima Faisal.

The mixed methods design of this study, which involves systematic content analysis and in-depth interviews with Lahori women viewers, is again rooted in literature. In addition to the systematic and replicable patterns that can be identified through content analysis, identity shaping experiences through qualitative interviews that quantitative surveys could not.

Sajid et al. (2025) also show that in Pakistan's digital media, qualitative, multimodal content analytic methods unveil multileveled meanings that would not be captured by quantitative methods. The triangulation of content analysis and in-depth interviews thus enables this study to use textual and experiential data, which were both essential to the research. Finally, the study has been motivated by the ever-existing interpretative void between the theory developed in the West and the lived experience of Pakistani women; using the socio-cultural setting of Lahore will create findings that are empirically and culturally valid for this setting (Hussain et al., 2022).

1.4 Research Objectives

This paper addresses the first two objectives of a broader study on digital media and women's identity in Lahore, Pakistan:

1. To observe the video content of the chosen YouTube channels and analyze the relation of the content with Women's identity.
2. To gain the understanding of the concept of Women's identification as perceived by women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 What Is Women's Identity?

In the field of feminist studies, the emergence of digital identity is increasingly seen as a socially constructed, evolving phenomenon, rather than a predetermined property. Safa et al. (2025) analyzed 357 Bangladeshi women on Facebook and discovered that Facebook is a place of contestation of identity construction, negotiation and resistance, where women have a public identity in their larger network, and a more exploratory "private identity" in their closed groups. In general, this aligns with Social Learning Theory but offers an updated perspective of the processes of modelling and reinforcement from offline role models to algorithmically curated peer groups.

Hussain (2021) explored the relationship between the media coverage and women empowerment in four aspects, self-esteem, mobility, resource control and decision making and concluded that the media representation of women's success stories had significant impact on their self-esteem and self-perception, while the structural dimension most understood was mobility. This indicates that media has more power than directly changing women's structural autonomy in the sense of molding the psychological aspect of identity. In a study based on qualitative-interpretive analysis of literary and cultural texts. Identity is not a static entity but is continually constructed through continuous cultural conversations.

Jafri & Rizwan (2025) analyzed the use of online activism by Pakistani women in challenging religious and social norms that limit their gender identity and found that the traditionalists view feminist voices as an attack on Islamic norms and the authority of men. With a post-colonial feminist approach, Khushbakht (2022) concluded that Muslim women in Pakistan have an internal conflict between internal religious conservatism and the external Islamophobic framing, leading to complex and often contradictory notions of self-mediated by religious, national and gender identity markers. In a feminist political ecology study, Yasmin and Safdar (2023) identified that empowerment is not a mere outcome but rather a process of ongoing negotiation with the dominant patriarchy in Pakistan.

There are several studies on the strategic and plural character of digital self-presentation. In the Arab world, young social media users actively and strategically create their online identity as separate from, but interwoven with, their offline identities, Ben Ayed (2025) found. Based on a review of psychometric measures of gender identity, Fisher et al. (2025) found that self-identification is based on general evaluations of typicality, satisfaction, and salience, rather than fixed traits. Joseph and Bouko (2025), in their analysis of 630 Instagram profiles, came up with a total of eleven feminist identity markers and six types of profiles, finding that feminist identity online is not monolithic but strategic and plural. In the Pakistani context specifically, Abdulwahab et al. (2026) discovered, upon using Bauman's theory of "liquid modernity," that the identity of the influencers is built through mediation and the collision of seemingly contradictory roles played on platforms, which directly influences the construction of multiple and sometimes conflicting identity models by Pakistani women YouTubers.

2.2 Media and Women's Identification

The classic cultivation theory claims that the more people consume media, the more their perceptions of social reality are influenced by that media which is in line with the empirical studies conducted on the Pakistani media. Noor et al. (2024) conducted a critical discourse analysis of the Pakistani television

dramas and discovered that male writers were more inclined towards portraying women as fearsome, unfaithful or subservient, while female writers presented more powerful, more independent characters who defied the norms of patriarchy. Naseem and Mustafa (2022) identified that the language in the discourse around digital-inclusion policy in Pakistan is often essentialist, that is, digital platforms don't automatically drive gender parity but can instead reinforce gender inequalities. In relation to the discourse analytic analyses of Pakistani youth media, male characters are routinely seen as rational, strong and dominant, whereas female characters are seen as emotional and sacrificing.

This is complicated by platform-specific research. Kira et al. (2023) analyzed the beauty YouTube community and discovered that women creators are deliberately challenging traditional beauty definitions despite being in a business model that commodifies their identities. He et al. (2024) conducted a survey of 240 females in Pakistan and concluded that social media provides a platform for social and emotional engagement in patriarchy but is also a space for women to face body shaming and gender-based harassment.

Tirocchi and Taddeo (2024) examined the phenomenon of #StayAtHomeGirlfriends on TikTok and how it simultaneously asserts and challenges women's traditional roles. Anwar et al. (2025) have also found that there is an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity in the study of the Pakistani television drama series, which has seen a gradual shift over the past two decades towards a “hybrid” woman who is powerful, modern, yet still constrained by moral and family obligations. Similarly, Tariq, & Husnain (2025) identified that during the last two decades, the Pakistani television dramas continue to focus on the woman's marriage story with only slight attempts at structural empowerment.

The study conducted on YouTube specifically provides confirmation of its unique identity in the context of identity formation. In fact, YouTube stars have a great effect on how adolescent girls develop their personal identities, aspirations and lifestyle without their parents' awareness. Based on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. Hillary Clinton's self-presentation was complex, on one hand traditional roles (wife, mother, daughter) and on the other hand a strong and independent leadership identity. Female YouTubers do not sell themselves short, but rather, that their choices of content and interactions with their fans serve as a way for them to negotiate their own identity.

Research on genres of content confirms this picture. The concept of authenticity in beauty and lifestyle channels on YouTube is a performance between “amateur” and “professional” styles that is strategically managed by the creator, not a reflection of their life, and thus also influences how Pakistani beauty channels create relatable yet aspirational identities on the platform (Torjesen, 2024). In the light of the above, a cross-national study of mom vloggers conducted by Mizoroki et al. (2025) revealed that motherhood content not only replicates the dominant “good mother” discourses but also simultaneously pushes for communal-solidarity and individual-monetization discourses. In a sentiment analysis of more than 100 STEM channels, Kalyanasundaram and Keerthi (2026) discovered that negative comments far outnumber positive ones on female-hosted channels and that negative comments appear to be more about appearance than content, again providing direct evidence that YouTube audiences view women creators by appearance, not content. Riaz et al. (2026), who studied Pakistani food vlogs, concluded that most of the videos included cultural symbols and a significant portion of the vlogs discussed hybrid identity explicitly, making Pakistani cooking a place of cultural preservation and identity performance.

2.3 Digital Media and Women’s Identity

Safdar et al. (2020) carried out a study of 585 female university students in Punjab in 2020, which revealed that digital media has become a part of students' life and has helped students to access foreign cultures but sometimes conflicted their traditional orientations. Similarly, Salam (2022) claims that negotiation of Pakistani women's online identity is necessary to meet and challenge cultural norms, as online media can be a liberating but limiting space for women's identity.

A few studies take this analysis one step further and focus it on certain platforms and genres. Kira et al. (2023) found that the beauty industry on YouTube can be subversive, and that there are ways for the individual to express their identity in an unconventional manner, but on the other hand, it can be algorithmically influenced and benefit the individual's identity. However, a system review by Xu et al. (2025) found that curated and posted self-representations on social media lead to distorted self-perception through objectification and social evaluation. In relation to feminist identity, the algorithmic design of TikTok impact's identity discourses explored by users and has been described as a space for self-exploration and a tool for business that adds layers to the self-representation of users (Pritchard 2024). Likewise, the algorithmic architecture of Instagram, TikTok, X and YouTube reinforce gendered content as noted by Rafique et al. (2026) as the platforms shape and/or hide some feminine identities, not just the ones produced by women.

In depth interviews with a sample of 15 female digital entrepreneurs in the city of Lahore revealed how social media contributed to the transformation of female entrepreneurs from "someone who sells things online" to an acceptable "businesswoman" (Jabeen et al., 2026). In an online survey of 78 educated cities-dwelling Pakistani television watchers of Korean dramas, Iftikhar and Aamir (2025) discovered that viewing foreign media was correlated with an increase in questioning traditional gender norms.

2.4 Research Gaps

Combined, this literature clearly indicates three gaps that can be addressed in this study. First, while there is ample research on women's digital identity in the western and Indian contexts, the experience of digitally engaged women in Lahore is under-researched. Secondly, although a few studies have explored how digital media affect Pakistani university women (Safdar et al., 2020), many studies conducted are either quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews; only a few studies combine systematic content analysis with in-depth interviews in the Pakistani context.

Third, research has so far focused mainly on TikTok and Instagram (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024; Pritchard, 2024; Xu et al., 2025), and the role of international digital culture within the context of locally established religious and patriarchal values on YouTube has been less researched. To fill these gaps, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach that includes a content analysis of five Pakistani YouTube channels and a qualitative in-depth interview with women viewers in Lahore.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theoretical Foundations of Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (SLT), developed by Albert Bandura (1977) and later extended into Social Cognitive Theory (1986), is one of the foundational theories in social and behavioral psychology. SLT holds that human behavior is shaped by the social context of the observer together with the observer's own personal experiences a premise directly relevant to how Pakistani women encounter and interpret YouTube content in this study.

There are three propositions that underline theory. People observe and mimic others, an observation Bandura called vicarious learning. Second, the observer doesn't just observe but actively engages in the process of observing and interpreting what is seen. Third, learning and behaviour change are intertwined; individual and environment continually influence each other, and Bandura (1986) called this reciprocal determinism. According to Bandura (1977), "most human behavior is learned observationally through the process of modeling: by observing others, a person learns a concept of how a new behavior is executed, and subsequently, this coded information is a guide for action".

Bandura's theory also includes self-efficacy, defined as an individual's confidence in his or her ability to carry out an action and attain a result. When viewers see a woman doing well on YouTube, whatever that may be, from the arts to beauty, or home, it can boost their confidence in themselves. Bandura (1977) studied the four processes of observational learning: attention (observing the model), retention (encoding

of what is observed), reproduction (ability to reproduce the observed behavior), and motivation (enough reason to imitate). Both research objectives presented in this paper are dealt with within the framework of these four processes.

3.2 Social Learning Theory and YouTube: Theoretical Relevance

YouTube is an ideal platform to practice SLT. At the end of 2024, YouTube was the second most popular search engine in the world with over 2.7 billion monthly users, creating an abundance of behavior models for observational learning. YouTube is also one of the most popular platforms in Pakistan, expected to have 54.3 million users by the end of 2025, but there is a notable gender divide in the identified digital user base with 28.8% of users being women, compared to 71.2% men (Kepios, 2025). An SLT perspective is that this gendered digital divide can exacerbate the modelling effects within the smaller population of women who are actively watching and observed on the platform, whilst also limiting the reach of the modelling effects.

To conclude, once a viewer has interacted with content in a particular category, e.g., beauty, family vlogging, lifestyle, or fitness, YouTube starts to promote more similar content, making observational learning on YouTube an algorithmically curated and continuously developing environment instead of a static one (Bucher, 2018). This algorithmic logic has a direct impact on the models that Pakistani women viewers see most often, as Safdar and Abbasi (2024) point out.

3.3 Objective 1: YouTube Channel Content and Its Linkage with Women's Identity

The content that is shared on a YouTube channel is itself a part of the formation of women's identities. The principles of SLT, to the extent that they can be applied, are most relevant here how content gets into, and changes, women's cognitive frameworks for identity. In SLT terms, the medium is never message free: it represents a field of behavioral models, with explicit and implicit messages regarding how women should look, speak, act and define themselves.

Bandura (1977) suggested that attractive models, similar models, and high-status models attract more attention and thus have a greater influence on the observer. Applied to this study, creators who reflect their audience's own cultural context – for example, through hijab styling, Urdu-language narration, and shared religious or family references – are, from an SLT perspective, more likely to function as high-similarity models capable of shaping viewers' identity schemas than creators whose content is culturally distant from the audience. This is in line with recent studies conducted in Pakistan regarding youth content on YouTube: Tahir and Qayyum's (2025) multimodal discourse analysis of Pakistani youth content on YouTube found that the space of YouTube is gendered and, at times, punitive, with some expressions of femininity encouraged and others discouraged, thereby shaping the range of identity models available to youth viewers within each channel.

3.4 Objective 2: Women's Perception of Women's Identity

The second goal that of how women perceive and construct their idea of women's identity is related to the internal, cognitive aspect of SLT: schemas of self-formed by observation. What a "Pakistani woman" is, should be and is able to be is not just an opinion, it is a sum accumulation of observational learning, and models observed, remembered and emotionally reacted over the years.

Important here is Bandura's (1986) idea of reciprocal determinism. The construction of identity is not imagined to be the process that takes place outside of the media; rather, it is a process of negotiation that is always happening when women face models on YouTube. For a woman who has already learned to understand and embody the model of femininity based on domesticity, modesty, and religious devotion, for example, a new content is likely to be understood in terms of this model, with the content that does not fit being filtered out and the content that fits being selected. This mechanism has been supported by recent research specifically focused on Pakistan: participative intimacy in the context of family vlogs on YouTube was studied in Pakistan and the research showed that people actively engaged in the process of

negotiating culture, gender roles and aspirational identities during the viewing of these videos. Positive interaction with peers' posts on YouTube and Instagram was also linked to a feeling of belonging and affirmation of identity in a "peer community," as reported by researchers in Frontiers in Psychology. Such a perceptual process would probably be more complicated for women in Lahore as it is influenced at the same moment by Islamic values, patriarchal norms, and access to global media texts.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

A mixed method design was used, combining three complementary methods: quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews. It illustrates the interpretivist epistemological stance taken toward the qualitative aspects of the data, which focuses on the construction of meaning by participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), in addition to the quantitative dimension in which patterns of content are given measurable and replicable evidence by systematically coding the data (Neuendorf, 2017).

The design took place in two sequential phases. The first conducted a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the five selected YouTube channels the qualitative dimension analyzed the implicit meanings that were discursively constructed, and the quantitative dimension systematically coded manifest content features such as content category, topic-coverage frequency and portrayal of women (Mayring, 2022; Schreier, 2012). The second phase involved face-to-face interviews with the women viewers to elicit their personal experiences, perceptions, attitudes and interpretations of the YouTube content they watched. The outcomes of the content-analysis stage gave insight into the interview guide, which led to methodological coherence and enhanced credibility, transferability, and dependability by triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

4.2 Study Area and Target Population

The study was conducted in Lahore city, which is both theoretically and practically chosen as the second most populated city of Pakistan as it is the capital of Punjab province (Hussain et al., 2022). The combination of tradition and the increasing digital access in Lahore makes it a unique environment in which to explore women's media consumption habits (Qursam & Omer, 2025), and depth of investigation was achieved in the time and resources available for this study, through a single-site design (Yin, 2018).

The target population included females aged 18-49 years from Lahore who actively use YouTube, representing the age group of most YouTube users, which is 18-49 years. This age group of women is taken in official surveys of Pakistan (Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020). The participants had to be first-hand users of YouTube content; women who had used the platform once or twice but did not engage much in the production of content were excluded to ensure that the interviews had been with women who had some actual experience of this content and were likely to be genuine users.

4.3 Sampling

Two different samples were used. In total, 20 women took part in the in-depth interviews (see table 1), which is significantly higher than the number of participants (of between eight and 12), at which thematic saturation is commonly achieved in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022); and is broadly similar to previous Pakistani and international studies on women and digital media.

Table 1: *Demographic Profile of Interview Respondents (R1–R20)*

Code	Age	Education	Occupation	Marital Status
R1	20	Undergraduate	Non-working	Single
R2	23	Graduate	Non-working	Single
R3	35	Undergraduate	Working	Married
R4	22	Undergraduate	Working	Single
R5	41	Masters	Working	Married
R6	37	Masters	Working	Married
R7	46	Graduate	Working	Married
R8	22	Undergraduate	Non-working	Unmarried
R9	29	Undergraduate	Working	Married
R10	23	Undergraduate	Non-working	Unmarried
R11	35	Graduate	Working	Unmarried
R12	22	Undergraduate	Working	Single
R13	25	Graduate	Non-working	Unmarried
R14	20	Undergraduate	Working	Single
R15	36	Masters	Non-working	Married
R16	21	Undergraduate	Non-working	Unmarried
R17	20	Undergraduate	Non-working	Unmarried
R18	42	Graduate	Working	Married
R19	33	Graduate	Non-working	Married
R20	24	Graduate	Working	Unmarried

The five most relevant and subscribed Pakistani YouTube channels regarding women issues were purposively selected, based on how many subscribers they have and their relevance to the target audience, such as Sistrology, Fatima Faisal, Rabeeca Khan, Ghazal Jawad Vlogs and Kitchen with Amna (see table 2). For the quantitative content analysis, the videos were subsequently sampled systematically within each channel's video archive, and the same videos were used for the qualitative content analysis to enable direct triangulation. Purposive sampling (Aguinis, 2024), a non-probability sampling technique was used to select both interview participants and YouTube channels as it is appropriate for developing theoretically transferable insight in the specific socio-cultural context of urban Pakistan (Yin, 2018).

Table 2: *Profile of the Five Selected YouTube Channels*

Channel	Subscribers (as of data collection)	Primary Content Focus	Relevance to Study Theme
Sistrology	6.24 M	Family life, hijab styling, Eid/festive content	High – collective/family identity
Fatima Faisal	4.1 M	Beauty, grooming, skincare	High – beauty-expert identity
Rabeeca Khan	3.19 M	Fashion, styling, marital/celebrity life	High – modern-traditional identity
Ghazal Jawad Vlogs	1.21 M	Religion, modesty, family life	High – religious-modest identity
Kitchen with Amna	4.39 M	Cooking, domestic and professional life	High – domestic-professional identity

4.4 Data Collection Tools

Three instruments were used. Content variables related to quantitative analysis were operationalized with a structured coding sheet and assigned a unique numerical coding to enable systematic and repeatable data collection of key content variables such as content category, topic-coverage frequency, the representation of women and identity-related themes. The qualitative content analysis relied on an observation checklist based on existing frameworks in the field of media studies (Regueira et al., 2020; Thelwall & Mas-Bleda, 2018) and followed the model of Mayring (2022) to document content type, women's representation, visual and narrative elements, and discursive framing strategies. Finally, a structured, open-ended interview guide was used to elicit participants' reflective accounts of their use of YouTube, the channels and content they accessed, and what they felt about their perception of how it affected their self-perception. This guide was tested with two respondents and iteratively modified. Interviews were held in Urdu or English as per their comfort and no audio recording was made, rather the researcher took detailed, almost verbatim notes with the participants' consent.

For the quantitative content analysis, criteria for coding were operationalized as follows: identity theme (coded 1 if there was explicit or implicit reference to women's roles, appearance, status, or self-presentation coded as 0 if not); content category (beauty/grooming, family/domestic, marital/celebrity, religious/modest, professional/entrepreneurial, mutually exclusive based on the dominant theme of the video); and identity frame (appearance-based, role-based, or achievement-based, based on the primary lens through which women were portrayed). To ensure the content analysis was accurate and reliable, the content analysis variables were carefully and completely described and coded uniformly, following the content analysis guidelines of Neuendorf (2017). The coding scheme was pilot tested before data collection, by conducting a pilot coding exercise to verify the clarity of the categories and the level of ambiguity in the definition of categories, and to verify consistency in application to the content. This made it easier to code the results in a consistent manner and make sure the coded results were accurate representations of the content.

4.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative content analysis data was coded then entered and processed MS Excel, providing frequency distributions, percentages and cross tabulations of the coded variables (Neuendorf, 2017). Qualitative content-analysis data were analyzed by immersion in the data, development of a coding frame based on the research questions and theoretical framework, systematic coding of themes and patterns, and critical analysis (Mayring, 2022; Schreier, 2012). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, following the six-step procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022): familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, review of themes, defining and naming themes and finally writing the analytic report.

4.6 Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

All participants in interviews gave informed consent before the data was collected, including being informed of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to refuse to participate at any time without repercussion, and how confidentiality and anonymity would be observed. There were no audio recordings and detailed notes taken with participants' permission; no identifying personal information is provided in this paper. The participants in the interviews are identified by anonymous codes (R1–R20) instead of names.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Quantitative Content Analysis: YouTube Content and Women's Identity

During the study period (1 January to 29 June 2026), a total of 452 videos were analyzed across the five selected channels: Sistrology (110 videos), Fatima Faisal (150), Rabeeca Khan (114), Ghazal Jawad Vlogs (27), and Kitchen with Amna (51). Among these, 350 videos (77.4%) contained direct/indirect

mentions of women's identity, whether the channel was primarily based on a men's or women's identity (see table 3).

Sistrology had the most identity-related videos (93 out of 110, 84.6%), which focused on marital life, motherhood and domestic management and formed a unified feminine identity united around these issues. Fatima Faisal had the second highest percentage, 121 of 150 (80.8%), where content was related to skincare/grooming and self-worth/social identity. Rabeeca Khan was able to capture 88 of 114 videos (76.9%) as identity related which showed dual modern-traditional identity and focused on marriage, fashion and personal styling. Ghazal Jawad Vlogs posted 27 videos of which 19 (69.2%) were predominately Islamic and conservative in their focus on modest clothing and the role of women as wives and mothers. The lowest, but still majority, was for Kitchen with Amna (29/51 or 57.7%) which presented cooking as a feminine, domestic skill along with a hybrid domestic/professional identity.

Table 3: *Distribution of Identity-Related Content across the Five Sampled Channels (1 January–29 June 2026)*

Channel	Videos Analyzed	Identity-Related Videos	Percentage
Sistrology	110	93	84.6%
Fatima Faisal	150	121	80.8%
Rabeeca Khan	114	88	76.9%
Ghazal Jawad Vlogs	27	19	69.2%
Kitchen with Amna	51	29	57.7%
Total	**452**	**350**	**77.4%**

Women's identity was inevitably formed as a combination of appearance-based and role-based and achievement-based frames across all five channels and was determined by the relative balance of each frame depending on the genre of each channel.

5.2 Qualitative Content Analysis: Constructions of Women's Identity across Channels

The findings of qualitative analysis showed that there were unique Pakistani womanhood models across the different channels. From hijab styling, to celebrating Eid, to supporting one another, Sistrology's carefully planned self-presentation is a sort of blueprint for a cool and confident family identity. The channel built by Rabeeca Khan on the theme of 'celebrity aspiration' and 'marital identity', where the wedding preparation shows on a show about how marriage will change a woman's life. In Ghazal Jawad Vlogs, religion, marriage, and motherhood were woven into the fabric of womanhood, and the establishment of identity was rooted in the Islamic and culturally conservative values. Fatima Faisal's channel made the concept of beauty literacy, grooming a sign of modernity in Pakistani womanhood and a professional identity. Kitchen with Amna created a hybrid identity that was defined by traditional skill and ability as a homemaker and a professional as well, with the host being the first-ever female YouTuber to receive the Gold Play Button from Pakistan.

The five channels create a range of ideologically layered identities of construction, such as appearance, role and achievement, which reoccur across the channels but in differing proportions across channels and genres, from the attitude of Sistrology as a group and family-oriented identity, to the Islamic feminine identity in Ghazal Jawad Vlogs, and the hybrid domestic-entrepreneurial identity in Kitchen with Amna.

5.3 Interview Findings: Women's Perception of Women's Identity

Twenty in-depth-interviews (R1-R20) were carried out to explore the women's own conceptions and constructions of identity. Four themes were created from the thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Identity as a Free Choice. The term identity was used most often by participants to refer to self-constructed identity, not one that was given to them by the labels they assumed through inheritance. While identity was defined by R7 as being the product of thinking, goals and values, for R18, it was defined as self-love, equality, and having control over one's own choices, rather than simply being the

daughter, wife or sister of someone. For R19 and R20, freedom was the freedom to choose a traditional path, or professional autonomy, without being judged. Freedom was defined not as a predetermined lifestyle, but as a process of who decides on freedom.

> *"Self-love, equality, and having control over my own choices," said R18.*
>
> *"It's about who you are not just being someone's daughter, wife, or sister," said R7.*
>
> *"True freedom isn't just about rejecting tradition; it's about having the liberty to choose a traditional path without being judged as unprogressive," said R19.*
>
> *"Today, a woman's identity is defined by autonomy the freedom to choose her own metrics of success, whether in the boardroom or at home," said R20.*

Theme 2: The influence of family and upbringing on identity. The influence of family was mentioned most often. The respondents indicated more confidence and decision-making ability from more open families, and less self-doubt from more strict families. Later influences – education, culture and media – were then processed through the filter of family.

> *"Women in close family environments don't have a lot of freedom to make choices so they lose their confidence and become dependent," said R12.*

Theme 3: Society and Culture Put Pressure. Participants spoke of constant judgment, by comparison, criticism and double standard – being criticized for being too assertive, and too passive at the same time. Social media platforms make it easier to change a girl's self-image, as pressures were not new in digital spaces but already existed in the offline world.

> *"We are all at all times comparing ourselves to others," said R13.*

Theme 4: Education and Career Build Confidence. Education and professional success were clearly seen by participants as the best ways to achieve a confident and independent identity, linked to self-respect and financial independence. It was the theme that was most strongly supported by all four, implying a common belief that identity is gained through freedom from the permission or support of others.

> *"Education and professional opportunities provide the economic leverage and critical thinking necessary to reject societal scripts and build a self-made identity," said R20.*

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Women's Identity: Convergence and Divergence with Prior Research

This is like previous and impressionistic studies which found that women's videos hosted on YouTube serve as an ongoing space of identity work, not a neutral entertainment space (Farrukh et al., 2021). Given Tahir and Qayyum's (2025) argument that YouTube is a place of visibility and gendered surveillance for Pakistani women, this study has illustrated how the balance between visibility and surveillance is articulated in a systematic way on the basis of the channel genre. Sistrology's collective, family-based identity model and Ghazal Jawad Vlogs' religiously framed identity model are more similar to the reproduction of offline cultural activities in virtual space discussed by He et al. (2024), and Fatima Faisal's beauty-expert identity and Rabeeca Khan's juxtaposition of modern and traditional femininity is more similar to the cultural hybridity identified by recent studies on Pakistani youth and digital media.

The interview results confirm this view from the audience. The participants' stories of negotiated identity, rather than of total opposition or total assimilation, support the argument of that a typical Pakistani woman is likely to face opposition and conformity while constructing her online identity, and provide empirical evidence to Kabeer's (2005) assertion that empowerment is a process that is slowly unfolding and unevenly distributed across society. Interestingly, the heightened salience of family and upbringing, as compared to platforms and algorithms, contrasts with other research from abroad, including which

emphasizes platforms as the main determinants of identity. In contrast, participants here viewed family and community norms as the primary environmental factor, and digital platforms as a secondary one, which also underscored offline factors over and above other platform-based studies conducted in western societies.

6.2 Theoretical Implications: Revisiting Social Learning Theory

The findings support the four processes attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, which are the basis of the theoretical model outlined in Chapter 3, for shaping women's identity because of YouTube exposure, with little exception. Attention was highly noticeable: participants looked at creators that were similar in language and social context, and who seemed more attainable than too aspirational to emulate, as Bandura (1977, 1986) suggested. In a similar manner, retention was highlighted as well: when asked about a typical image of a Pakistani woman on YouTube, participants tended to describe an amalgamated image and not the specific video(s).

The process of reproduction, however, was much more selective and conditional than a simple application of SLT might imply: Participants did not often imitate a full model as later social cognitive theory research by Bandura (2001) would indicate, but rather they often reproduced only small parts of an observed model imitating a facial care routine or a method for expressing opinions, for instance, and rejecting others an appearance standard or a domestic-behaviour expectation, for example. This selective pattern is characteristic of algorithmically curated media, where the viewers construct their own identity model by assembling a series of models, often conflicting (Bucher, 2018).

The second theoretical contribution is about critical awareness as a moderator. In classical SLT, reinforcement (direct or vicarious) is the primary driver of the reproduction of modelled behaviour. The current results indicate that self-efficacy in editing and platform curation is another moderator which can weaken the link between vicarious reinforcement (likes, views, comments) and the behavioral and attitudinal reproduction, consistent with Bandura's (2001) later focus on cognitive appraisal and self-efficacy and a limited, if credible, extension of the applicability of the theory to a digitally literate South Asian population.

7. CONCLUSION

Within the context of Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, this study analyzed the relationship of the content of five prominent Pakistani YouTube channels with women's identity, and how women themselves in Lahore are conceptualizing and defining the identity. A quantitative content analysis of 452 videos revealed that majority of the videos (77.4%) included identity related content; each of the channels created its own model of Pakistani womanhood, that is, from the collective identity of Sistrology, family-oriented identity of Ghazal Jawad Vlogs, religious identity of Fatima Faisal, celebrity and marriage identity of Rabeeca Khan, and hybrid domestic-professional identity of Kitchen with Amna. These patterns were confirmed and enriched at the meaning level by the qualitative content analysis.

The results from the 20 in-depth interviews indicate that women overwhelmingly understand identity as self-chosen and self-authored, relating to personal values, goals and voice, and that this sense of freedom is always partial, rooted in family and upbringing, and limited by the judgments and double standards of the wider society and culture. Education and career achievement have become a clear and consistent pathway to a confident, independent and self-defined identity.

Combined, the results reflect the role of women as active, selective consumers and collaborators in the models presented in Pakistani YouTube channels, as they filter these through family, society, culture and critical awareness of digital curation.

7.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn from a single city, Lahore, and from five purposively selected channels and 20 interview participants; the findings are therefore not statistically

generalizable to Pakistani women as a whole or to YouTube content nationally. Second, the purposive, non-probability sampling of both channels and interview participants, while appropriate for the exploratory and theory-building aims of this study, may have introduced selection bias toward more visible or more accessible channels and respondents. Third, interviews were recorded through detailed notetaking rather than audio recording, which, despite efforts at verbatim accuracy, may have resulted in some loss of nuance in participants' exact wording. Fourth, the content analysis coding, while guided by an operationalized coding sheet, retains an interpretive element in qualitative categorization that may be subject to coder bias, despite the reliability check described in Section 4.4. Finally, because data collection took place over a bounded period (1 January– 29 June 2026), the findings reflect a specific snapshot of channel content and may not capture longer-term shifts in either platform content or audience perception.

7.2 Future Research

Future studies could further be conducted in other metros and rural areas of Pakistan to see if similar patterns can be observed in different contexts. Incorporating the voices of YouTube content creators themselves would help to elucidate their understanding of their own identity construction and the impact of platform incentives on their content decisions. Longitudinal designs would be useful to investigate the changes in women's identity perceptions over time and future studies could train on other channels (male-hosted) as well as other platforms (TikTok, Instagram, etc.)

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Authors Contribution

Bushra Rafique Chughtai was responsible for study design, data collection and drafted the manuscript and revised it. Dr. Sajid Hussain proofread and supervised the research work. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The interview data generated and analyzed for this study are not publicly available and will not be deposited in any repository, to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, who were assured that no identifying information would be shared beyond the research team. The quantitative content-analysis coding sheet and summary tables reported in this paper may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to conditions that preserve participant confidentiality. The YouTube videos analyzed are publicly accessible content available on the respective channels (Sistrology, Fatima Faisal, Rabeeca Khan, Ghazal Jawad Vlogs, and Kitchen with Amna) during the study period (1 January–29 June 2026).

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to data collection, including information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. No audio recordings were made; detailed notes were taken only with participants' permission. Participants are identified in this paper solely by anonymous codes (R1–R20), and no personally identifying information is disclosed.

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