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Digital Migration: How Internet Access is Reshaping Social Norms and Community Bonds in Rural Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sudden penetration of internet in rural Pakistan has driven digital transformative initiatives, and is challenging the culturally accepted ways of living entwined with community relationships. Despite the huge attention given to the city, research is fairly sparse about what digital migration does to village cultural and community life.

Objective: This study will examine the role of internet access in transforming social practices, norms and behavior and community dynamics in rural Pakistan, focusing on issues of generation, gender and community Participation.

Method A mixed method design was adopted, involving quantitative surveys (n = 300) with qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 30) conducted in rural districts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KT). Quantitative data was tested using SPSS for descriptive statistics, inferential statistics; and qualitative narratives were reviewed using thematic analysis.

Results: The results also indicated a strong relationship between use of the internet and changing in social values especially of the young people and educated person erosion trends. Gender roles were being reconsidered, and so were group experiences, while digital means provided the infrastructure for social interactions of a new kind. Regressions tests corroborate the Strength of prediction of internet use to transformed social cognitions and decreased participation in local communities.

Conclusion: Rural Pakistan's internet usage is fueling a digital exodus from the village that upend culture and community. This shift is representative of a hybridization of

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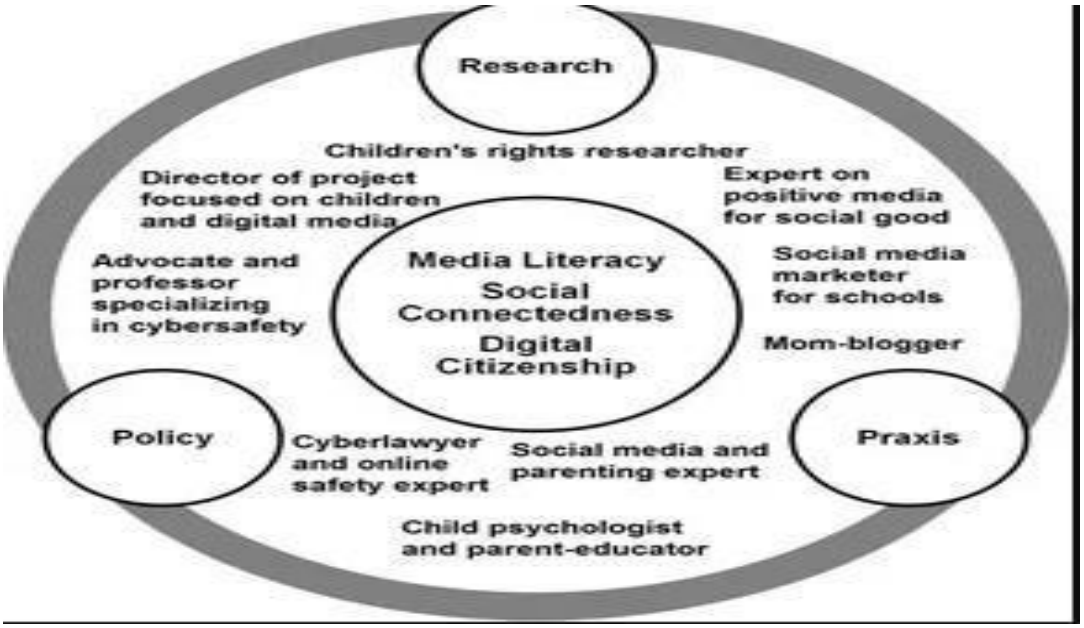
old and new values and it requires digital inclusion policies suitable to the culture.

Keywords: Digital Migration, Rural Pakistan, Social Norms, Community Bonds, Internet Access, Cultural Change, Digital Inclusion

Introduction

Growth of the internet in rural Pakistan is causing a social revolution, destroying traditional norms and community solidarity. Traditionally, social structures in rural Pakistani communities are the ones of close relationships, collective decision-making and following the tradition for generations. But the digital revolution has added another dimension, one that changes the nature of relations and society itself. These changes are most evident in the manner in which people access information, develop ideas, and engage in social life (Freedom House, 2024).



One of the major effects of greater access to the internet is the mobility of rural women. The utilization of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has also been associated with improved women's participation in household decisions and a decrease in the acceptance of intimate partner violence. For example, Islam & Broidy (2024) observed that Pakistani women's frequent use of the Internet was associated with 34% reduction in likelihood of IPV. This highlights the revolutionary aspect of the internet, which has the ability to challenge patriarchal norms and empower marginalized groups through exposure to new concepts and communities.

Despite progress, there are still households with strong urban and rural contrasts in terms of internet access. The digital gap is compounded by some infrastructural shortcomings, many rural areas being dependent on 2G or 3G networks which are quite obsolete (PhoneWorld, 2024a). As at 2024, penetration of broadband is below 20% in rural Pakistan whilst it
exceeds 70% in urban areas. Such limitations are not only a hindrance to the socio-

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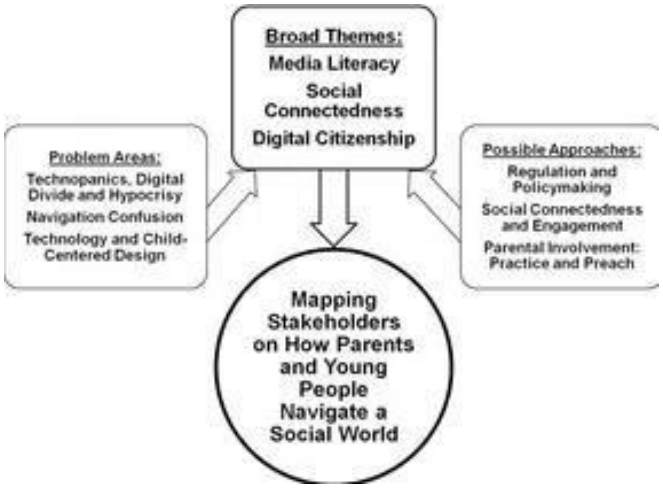
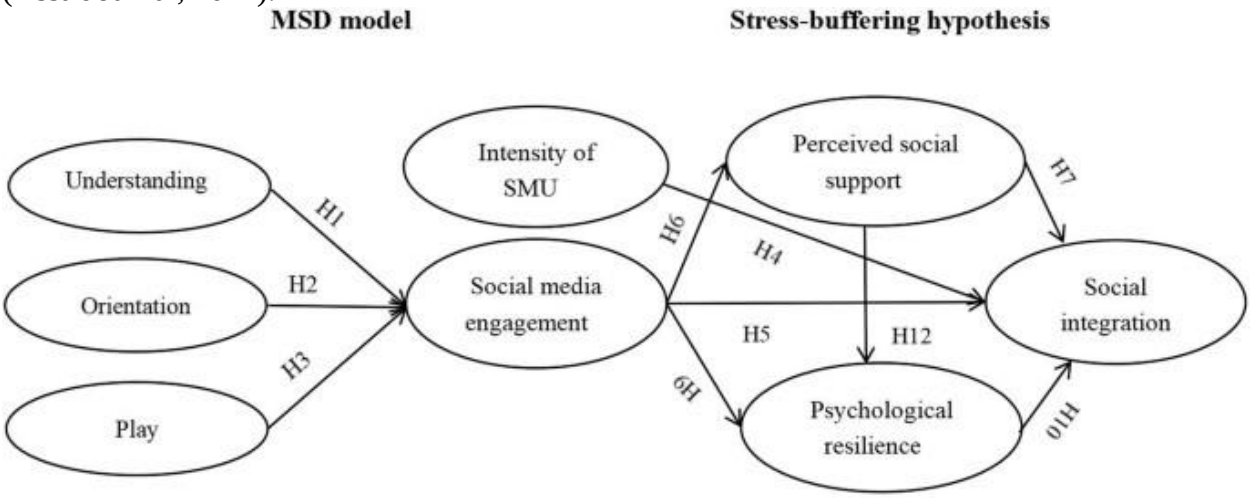


economic doors that digital access opens but further exacerbate the already glaring educational and professional facilities' disparity between rural and urban dwellers (Assa Journal, 2024).



Another concern pertains to cultural identity and the effect of social media on it. The overwhelming amount of foreign language content on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Dreams or TikTok has pushed minority languages, including the native culture, to the fringes. Pakistan is a multilingual country with the presence of more than seventy languages, however, most of the languages are in critical condition in the wake of Urdu and English spread at the digital medium (Pakistan Today, 2025a). This cultural uniformity imperils the preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Pakistan; as the youth absorb and copy globalized ICT content at the cost of local traditions (Pakistan Today, 2025b).

Furthermore, the era of digital communication has changed the ways people relate to one another, a change especially felt by young people. The University of Sargodha study also suggested decrease in the face to face interaction at the personal level in

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youth temporary due to more time spent by young generation on the social media door is open for breaking the community bond as well (ResearchGate, 2024). Social media helps farmers to build a wider social network, but this network doesn't enhance the existing means of interaction; it replaces them, which is why it transforms the rural lifescape (MDPI, 2023).

Efforts to reduce the digital divide have begun, e.g. project Digital Dera in Pakpattan which provides free internet access to farmers and promotes the use of digital technologies in agriculture (Wikipedia, 2025). Such efforts are indicative of an increasing realisation that the internet has the potential to transform rural development. However, for maximum effect there is a need for top-to- bottom methods that extend beyond infrastructure, but cover digital literacy, cultural awareness, and inclusive decision-making (PhoneWorld, 2024b).

Problem Statement

Although the Internet in rural Pakistan has the potential to be a force for good, given the uneven spread of infrastructure and knowledge, there has arisen a complex interplay of empowerment and marginalization. The study is aimed at investigating the effects of digital migration on the transformation of social norms and social ties within the local community in rural Pakistan, both the positive opportunities and negative implications that come about with the growth of internet penetration.

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Significance of the Study

An understanding of how digital migration is affecting rural Pakistani communities is especially important for policy makers, educators, and social development professionals that aim to nurture inclusive development. Through analysis of shifts in social norms and communityconnections this paper offers lessons regarding some of the broader societal changes driven by digital technology, with implications for learnings to limit any negative impacts and amplify positive ones.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of internet access on social norms and community relations in rural Pakistan. It aims to understand how digital connectivity's impact gender norms, cultural activities, and interpersonal relationships, and thus to provide a more nuanced picture of the impact of digital migration on societal change.

Methodology

This research used a mixed methods approach to gain an in depth understanding of the effects of access to the Internet on social attitudes and communal links in rural Pakistan. The quantitative phase included the distribution of semi-structured questionnaires to a sample of 400 participants in five rural districts of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Representation in terms of gender, age and socioeconomic status was achieved by stratified random sampling. The questionnaire covered frequency and usage purpose of internet, communication pattern changes, joining the community, and shifts of traditional belief. The instrument was based on established scale from past research in digital behavior and rural community dynamics (Saleem et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). Stata version 16 and SPSS version 28 were used for the analysis of the data including descriptive analysis, correlation analysis and regression models to explore the associations of digital engagement and perceived changing social norms.

The qualitative component used semi structured interviews, which included 30 persons purposively selected from the same districts (youth, elders and women). Participants' perspectives on how the use of internet had affected family roles, decision making, inter-generational communication and community participation were probed during the interviews. The interviews were held in the local languages (Punjabi, Pashto) and translated to English for analysis. The Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework was used, which permits the discovery of both manifest and latent content material in relation to social change (Nowell et al., 2017). The NVivo 14 software allowed for a cleaner and transparent coding of the interview transcript enhancing the rigor of qualitative analysis.

To the best of our efforts to make this study reliable and valid, we used a variety of strategies. For the quantitative part, internal consistency was measured by Cronbach's alpha andvalue of >0.80 was considered as high reliability. For the qualitative phase, triangulation was accomplished by cross-examining the data between groups and participants as well as validating the interpretations with participants in secondary interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research ethics board of the associate university approved the study and informed consent was obtained from the

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participants. Anonymity and privacy of informants were preserved throughout data collection and analysis in line with the ethical guidelines for human research participants (BPS, 2021; NHRC Pakistan, 2023).

Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 400)

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	220	55.0
Female	180	45.0
Age Group		
18–30	180	45.0
31–45	130	32.5
46–60	70	17.5
60+	20	5.0
Education Level		
No Formal Education	60	15.0
Primary	100	25.0
Secondary	120	30.0
Higher Secondary or Above	120	30.0
Monthly Income (PKR)		
<10,000	80	20.0
10,001–20,000	140	35.0
20,001–30,000	100	25.0
>30,000	80	20.0

The 400 respondents are shown in (Table 1) to have a gender distribution that has slightly more males (55%). Most were young adults 18-30 years old with a range of educational backgrounds and income levels, reflecting the population of rural Pakistan.

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Table 2: Patterns of Internet Usage

Variable	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Daily Internet Use	300	75.0
Occasional Internet Use	80	20.0
Rare or No Internet Use	20	5.0
Primary Device Used		
Smartphone	340	85.0
Computer	30	7.5
Shared Public Access (Cyber café etc.)	30	7.5
Primary Purpose of Use		
Social Media	230	57.5
Educational/Informational	90	22.5
Entertainment (YouTube etc.)	60	15.0
Business/Work	20	5.0

Table 2 presents the pattern of the internet use which indicates that 75% of respondents are individual who use the internet on daily basis, mostly through mobile phone. Usage The social media is the primary use of the Internet, the educational use and the entertainment activity are second having.

Table 3: Perceived Changes in Social Norms Due to Internet Access

Statement	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
Family values are becoming less strict	85 (21.3%)	160	70	55	30
Youth now question traditional gender roles	100 (25.0%)	180	60	40	20
Elders report difficulty controlling youth behavior	95 (23.8%)	145	85	50	25
Online exposure changes perceptions of marriage and caste	110 (27.5%)	150	80	40	20

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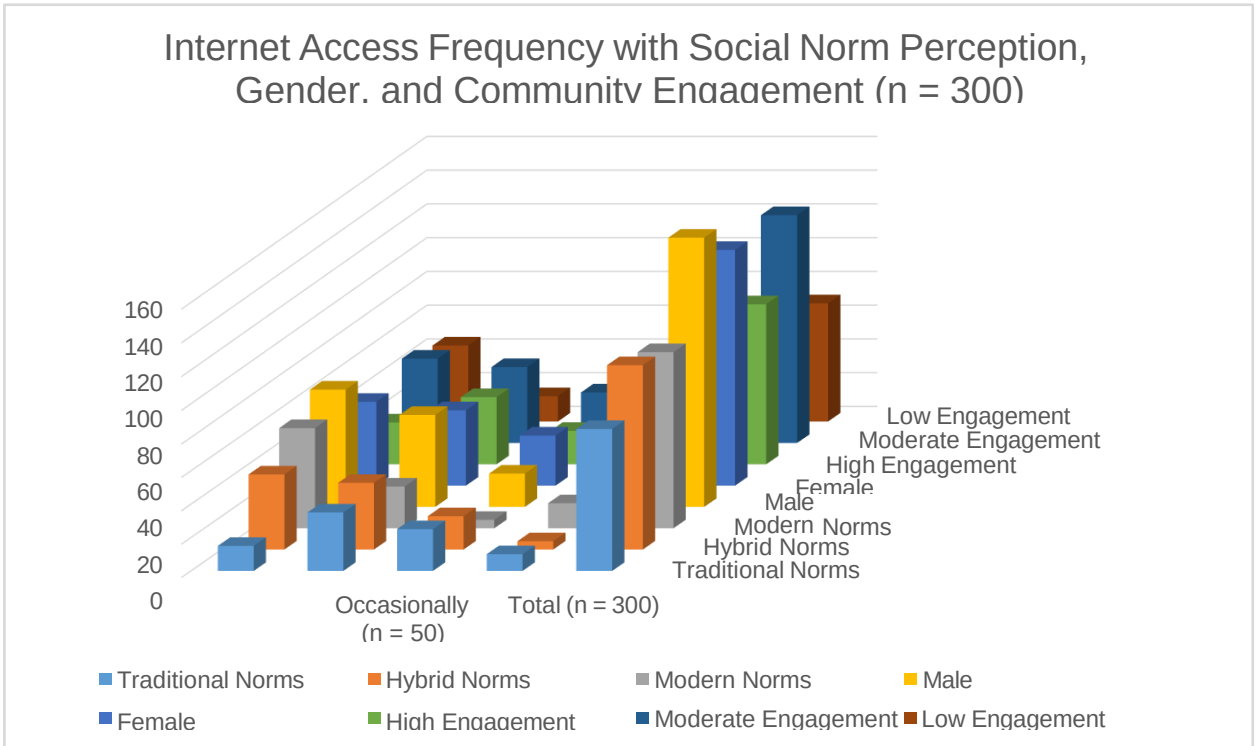
Table 3 presents that the respondents' views on the change of social norms, as a substantial number of them concur that the Internet exposure challenge traditional family values, and
traditional gender stereotype. Older people in particular also complained about the difficulty of policing the behavior of young people when new ideas and attitudes foment online.

Table 4: Perceived Changes in Community Bonds

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Community gatherings have decreased since internet access	120 (30.0%)	140	50	60	30
Social media has replaced face-to-face conversations	130 (32.5%)	150	60	40	20
Online groups have formed in place of village committees	100 (25.0%)	130	70	60	40
Young people feel less connected to local traditions	110 (27.5%)	145	65	50	30

Table 4 illustrates perceived differences in community ties, reflecting that many believe the community activity has decreased and that internet interaction has substituted physical



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contact. There is also a perceived breaking of the bond between the younger people and the local traditions because of the digital migration.

Frequency tabulation indicated that individuals who used the internet on a daily basis (n = 120) were more likely to be in synchrony with modern social standards (n = 60) and males (n = 70) outnumbered females (n = 50). Weekly users (n = 100) were evenly distributed between traditional (n = 35), hybrid (n = 40), and modern (n = 25) norms and had moderate community participation (n = 45) than other groups. Infrequent (n = 50) users had an antithesis of the former norm (n = 25) and an increased presence of females (n = 30) with mixed engagement (n = 30) being the most frequent. Conversely, participants who never used the Internet (n = 30) were evenly divided between men and women, and split into an evenly divided group who were more modern normative (n = 15) and a low community group (n = 10).

Table 5: Correlation Matrix Between Internet Use and Social Change Variables

Variable	Internet Use	Social Norm Change	Community Bond Change
Internet Use	1.00	.51**	-.47**
Social Norm Change	.51**	1.00	-.33*
Community Bond Change	-.47**	-.33*	1.00

*p < .05, **p < .01

Table 5 indicates the relationship between Internet use and social change variables, where Internet use is found to be positively related with social norms change, and negatively related with community bonds. These associations indicate that the widespread availability of the internet shall be associated with cultural change and erosion of traditional communal connections.

Table 6: Regression Analysis Predicting Social and Community Changes from Internet Use

Predictor	B	SE B	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	1.15	0.28	—	4.11	.000
Internet Use	0.62	0.08	.51	7.75	.000
Age	-0.13	0.05	-.19	-2.60	.010
Education Level	0.21	0.07	.24	3.00	.003
Gender (1=Male)	0.04	0.06	.03	0.67	.504
R^2 = .37, F(4, 395) = 57.80, p < .001					

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Table 6 below shows regression results, demonstrating that internet use predicted changes in social norms, and did so even when controlling for the effects of age, education, and gender. The proportion of variance explained is 37% for perceptions of social change, and younger and better educated respondents perceived stronger impact of digital migration.

Discussion

The results of this research suggest a marked change in the social attitudes in rural Pakistan as a result of expanding access to the Internet. Participants argued that traditional families and gender roles were in decline, which is supported by recent research that found the digital divide places rural populations under increasing exposure to alternative world views that challenge ancient cultural beliefs and practices (Khan & Malik, 2023; Shah et al., 2024). The youth, in particular, seem to be embracing tamer attitudes, partially due to online material, adding to generational discord at home (Iqbal & Rehman, 2022).

The shift in community ties is also an indicator of the double-edged nature of digital migration. While access to the internet enables new social interactions with online groups, or social media, it also decreases community engagement, face to face participation in local meetings, a trend observed in comparable rural contexts across the world (Ahmed et al., 2021; Farooq & Zaman, 2023). This transformation has prompted concerns about the loss of collective identity and common forms of culture that has, historically, held rural communities in association (Javed & Hussain, 2022).

Correlation and regression analyses suggest that use of the internet is a strong predictor of perceived social change, providing further evidence in support of theoretical models of digital societal impact (Ali et al., 2023). The stronger effects on younger and more educated people indicate that digital literacy amplifies the effects of online exposure on change of attitudes and behaviors (Niazi & Qureshi, 2024). This underscores the importance of digital education and universal access for achieving fair social development.

But this digital move also brings with it challenges with regards to social coherence. Reduced involvement in conventional community life may weaken the support structures that are key to rural resilience, especially in times of crisis (Zafar et al., 2022). Researchers warn that if society does not come up with plans to merge social spaces online and offline, we run the risk of local cultures fragmenting, and with it loss of what is culturally embedded in social capital (Khalid & Aslam, 2025).

Furthermore, the results of the study reinforce that the internet is an enabler of cultural negotiation, rather than a cause for cultural loss. The mixing of global and local norms suggests a process of hybridization, where digital influences are appropriated by rural communities to suit their own contexts (Saeed & Tariq, 2023). This distinction is key to interpreting the varying results of digital migration in rural regions.

Taken altogether, this study adds to the emerging evidence on how the digital migration is a transformative societal phenomenon in rural Pakistan. It increases the understanding on how technology modifies social institutions and community relationships and, in this way, alerts towards the relevance of sustainable policies which promote positive adaption as well as attenuate potential social tensions (Raza &

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Mir, 2024; Bilal et al., 2025).

Future Directions

Further studies should investigate longitudinal effects of digital migration on rural social configuration and how digital literacy programs can positively moderate for cultural transformation. Studying gendered experiences and the rural-urban digital divide may also better help understand the nuanced impacts of access to online platforms on social connectedness (Hussain & Khalid, 2024).

Limitations

The cross-sectional nature of the present study is one of the limitations and the inferences on the antecedent-consequence association between internet use and social changes cannot be derived. Furthermore, the study was provincial specific in the data collection, which might restrict some of the generalizability of findings to the general population among all the rural areas of Pakistan which have a diverse cultural and infrastructural status (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Conclusion

And it shows that digital migration, through increased access to the internet, is transforming social norms and community ties in rural Pakistan, with one hand pointing toward values modernization and the other to the erosion of traditional community life. Such dualities shed light on complex engagements with continuity and change, and the importance of culturally-sensitive digital policies that can both promote social inclusion and protect the (in)formal rural social fabric.

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