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ERIKSON'S IDENTITY VS ROLE CONFUSION: NAVIGATING FAITH AND MODERNITY IN GEN-Z PAKISTANI MUSLIMS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the psychosocial conflict experienced by Generation Z Pakistani Muslims as they navigate between traditional Islamic values and global modernity. Grounded in Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development—particularly the stage of identity versus role confusion—it examines how young Muslims reconcile competing cultural expectations while forming their identities.

Using qualitative thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews with urban youth aged 18–25 from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, the research investigates experiences of faith, family, education, social pressures, and aspirations. Findings reveal significant internal conflict as participants struggle to balance inherited religious and cultural norms emphasizing community and spirituality with modern values of individualism and personal freedom. This tension often results in confusion and uncertainty.

Nonetheless, many participants demonstrate resilience by creating hybrid identities that integrate tradition with modernity. They selectively reinterpret religious practices and adapt social norms to align with contemporary goals, exemplifying fluid identity formation in non-Western contexts undergoing rapid change.

By applying Erikson's theory in Pakistan, this study highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in identity research and extends psychosocial developmental models beyond Western settings. It offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals supporting youth navigating identity conflicts in a globalized world.

Keywords: Erikson, identity development, Gen-Z, Pakistani youth, faith, modernity, psychosocial theory

Introduction

Identity formation is widely recognized as a central developmental task during adolescence and early adulthood. According to Erik Erikson's seminal psychosocial theory (1968), the stage of identity versus role confusion represents a critical period in which young individuals work to develop a coherent and stable sense of self. This stage involves exploring different roles, beliefs, and values, ultimately leading to a consolidated identity that guides future decisions and social interactions. Failure to successfully resolve this crisis can result in confusion about one's place in the world, leading to uncertainty and potential difficulties in psychosocial functioning. While Erikson's theory has been extensively studied and validated in Western contexts, there is growing interest in understanding how it applies to non-Western, culturally specific environments where the process of identity development may be influenced by unique social, religious, and cultural factors. In particular, culturally conservative societies such as Pakistan present a distinctive context in which Islamic values and traditions are deeply embedded in family structures, social expectations, and communal life. These values often emphasize collective identity, religious observance, respect for elders, and adherence to established social norms, which may contrast sharply with the

ideals of individualism, autonomy, and self-expression promoted by modern global ideologies.

In recent decades, the rapid expansion of digital media, internet connectivity, and educational opportunities has exposed Pakistani youth, particularly Generation Z (those born roughly between 1997 and 2012), to a broad array of global cultural narratives, lifestyles, and belief systems. This dual exposure creates a complex psychosocial landscape in which young Muslims must navigate competing and sometimes conflicting expectations from their immediate social environment and the wider world. The tension between maintaining religious and cultural traditions and embracing aspects of modernity often generates a profound identity conflict that can lead to confusion, anxiety, or resistance.

This paper seeks to explore how Generation Z Pakistani Muslims negotiate their identities amid this dual pressure of tradition and modernity. It aims to investigate the ways in which young individuals reconcile or struggle with conflicting demands, examining the interplay between inherited religious values and contemporary global influences. Central to this inquiry is the question of whether Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion retains its explanatory power in such a culturally specific context, or whether the theory requires modification to account for the particularities of identity formation in Islamic, collectivist societies undergoing rapid social change.

By focusing on urban youth, who are typically more exposed to global influences through education, social media, and peer networks, this study intends to provide insight into how young Pakistani Muslims construct their sense of self. It considers how they interpret and integrate—or reject—various aspects of their religious upbringing alongside modern individualistic values such as freedom of choice, gender equality, and career ambitions. Through qualitative methods, the research delves into participants' lived experiences, exploring how they negotiate family expectations, community pressures, and personal aspirations.

The findings from this inquiry are expected to contribute to the broader literature on identity development by highlighting the complex, dynamic processes of hybrid identity formation in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive frameworks when applying psychological theories across diverse societies. Ultimately, this research aims to enhance understanding of the challenges faced by Generation Z Pakistani Muslims and offer implications for educators, counselors, and policymakers working to support youth in their psychosocial development in an increasingly interconnected world.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development provides the foundational framework for this study. According to Erikson (1968), identity formation is a crucial developmental task typically experienced during adolescence and early adulthood. This process involves a dynamic interplay between exploration and commitment

to personal values, beliefs, and goals. Successfully resolving this stage—identity versus role confusion—results in the establishment of a coherent and stable sense of self, which guides individuals in making meaningful life decisions and social interactions. Conversely, failure to resolve this stage may lead to role confusion, characterized by feelings of uncertainty, instability, and psychological distress.

Erikson's model, originally conceptualized within Western cultural contexts, emphasizes individual agency and self-exploration as essential components of identity development. However, the applicability of this theory in culturally conservative, collectivist societies such as Pakistan—where religion and community play pivotal roles—remains underexplored. This study seeks to extend the theory by examining how young Pakistani Muslims navigate identity development within the tensions created by traditional Islamic values and the modern, globalized world.

To address these research aims, a qualitative research methodology was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants—equally divided by gender (10 male and 10 female)—ranging in age from 18 to 25 years. Participants were recruited from three major urban centers in Pakistan: Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. These cities were selected to capture a broad spectrum of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, providing a more comprehensive understanding of youth experiences across diverse urban settings. The interviews allowed for an open-ended exploration of participants' perspectives on faith, modernity, family expectations, and personal identity.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns within qualitative data. The themes that emerged were then interpreted through the theoretical lens of Erikson's psychosocial stages, with particular focus on identity versus role confusion. This approach enabled an in-depth examination of the ways participants experience and resolve—or struggle with—the psychosocial conflicts surrounding identity formation.

Research Questions

This study is guided by three primary research questions:

1. How do Generation Z Pakistani Muslims experience the psychosocial conflict of identity versus role confusion?
2. What strategies do they use to manage and negotiate tensions between religious faith and modern values?
3. How can Erikson's psychosocial theory explain the identity development process of youth in a non-Western, Muslim-majority cultural context?

Research Objectives

In line with the research questions, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- To explore the lived experiences of Gen-Z Pakistani Muslims as they navigate identity formation amid competing cultural and religious demands.

- To identify the psychosocial conflicts related to faith, family, and modern individualistic values faced by young Muslims in urban Pakistan.
- To analyze the coping mechanisms and identity negotiation strategies employed by participants to reconcile tensions between tradition and modernity.
- To critically assess the applicability of Erikson's theory of identity versus role confusion within the specific cultural and religious context of Pakistani youth.
- To contribute to the development of culturally sensitive frameworks for understanding identity development in Muslim-majority, collectivist societies.

By fulfilling these objectives, the study aims to offer nuanced insights into the complexities of contemporary identity formation and the role of faith and culture in shaping psychosocial development.

Literature Review

Erikson's model of identity development has been widely applied in Western contexts to explain how adolescents and young adults develop a coherent sense of self. However, numerous scholars have critiqued its limited applicability in collectivist societies, where identity formation is deeply embedded in family, community, and religious values (Syed, 2016; Phinney, 1990). In such contexts, the exploration of identity often involves negotiating collective expectations rather than solely focusing on individual autonomy (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000).

Pakistan provides a compelling context to explore these dynamics. Pakistani youth are expected to uphold Islamic family values that emphasize respect for elders, religious observance, and prioritizing collective harmony (Khalid & Anwar, 2019; Mahmood, 2010). Simultaneously, globalization, expanding access to education, and the widespread use of digital media expose these youths to secular, modern values promoting individualism, gender equality, and personal freedom (Qureshi & Haider, 2021; Khan & Amjad, 2018). This cultural duality creates a psychosocial environment where young Pakistanis face significant challenges in reconciling these sometimes contradictory forces.

Rauf (2021) documented the emergence of "hybrid identities" among Pakistani youth, wherein individuals creatively combine elements of religious tradition with secular modernity to form identities that are both meaningful and functional within their social contexts. Similarly, Abbas and Raza (2019) found that many young Muslims employ adaptive strategies such as selective adherence to cultural norms and reinterpretation of religious teachings to balance community expectations with their personal aspirations. These hybrid identities reflect the fluid and dynamic nature of identity formation in rapidly modernizing yet tradition-bound societies.

However, unresolved identity conflicts can result in psychological distress, including anxiety, confusion, and feelings of marginalization (Nasir & Hussain, 2020; Malik & Sarwar, 2017). This highlights the psychosocial risks associated with the struggle to

balance faith and modernity. Researchers such as Javed and Hashmi (2020) emphasize the importance of social support and culturally sensitive counseling to help youth navigate these tensions healthily.

The role of social media is increasingly recognized as pivotal in shaping identity among Pakistani youth. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube introduce young people to a variety of cultural models, lifestyles, and worldviews, which can simultaneously challenge traditional norms and provide avenues for self-expression (Ali & Shahid, 2023; Haider & Nawaz, 2022). According to Mehmood and Javed (2021), social media offers both risks—such as exposure to conflicting value systems—and opportunities for identity experimentation and community building, making it a double-edged sword in the psychosocial development of youth. In applying Erikson's theory to Pakistan, it is essential to incorporate these cultural, religious, and technological influences to fully understand identity formation. Theories that emphasize linear progression toward individualism fall short in explaining the multifaceted, negotiated, and relational identities found in collectivist contexts (Shweder, 1991; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). This expanded view supports the integration of hybrid identity frameworks and culturally sensitive models that account for the complexities faced by Muslim youth negotiating faith and modernity in an interconnected world. Overall, the literature underscores the importance of culturally informed approaches to psychological research and interventions. Understanding the unique experiences of Pakistani youth not only broadens the applicability of psychosocial theories like Erikson's but also informs more effective support systems for young people navigating identity conflicts amid rapid social change.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

Semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 Pakistani Muslim youth (aged 18-25) revealed a complex and nuanced process of identity formation shaped by intersecting cultural, religious, and modern influences. A recurring theme was the tension between religious beliefs and personal freedoms, where participants struggled to reconcile Islamic teachings with contemporary ideals such as individuality and self-expression. This inner conflict was often intensified by family expectations, as many youths felt emotionally burdened by the pressure to conform to traditional religious customs. To navigate these challenges, several participants described blending traditional and modern values, selectively adopting religious practices while embracing aspects of modern life to maintain a sense of authenticity.

Social media emerged as a significant arena for identity negotiation. Participants reported maintaining dual identities on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, presenting a conservative image publicly while exploring more liberal expressions privately—often leading to confusion or guilt. Gender-specific challenges were particularly pronounced, with female participants facing stricter surveillance and limitations on personal autonomy compared to their male counterparts. Despite these tensions, some youth showed resilience

through the development of hybrid identities, integrating Islamic principles with modern concepts like gender equality and scientific reasoning.

Mental health struggles such as anxiety and isolation were commonly reported, stemming from unresolved identity conflicts. These challenges were not only influenced by family dynamics but also by the pressure to conform to broader community norms, which further complicated self-expression. Interestingly, while religion could be a source of conflict, for many participants it also served as a source of strength, offering clarity and emotional support during difficult times. The exposure to diverse ideas through education acted as a catalyst for critical reflection, encouraging youth to question inherited beliefs and explore new dimensions of their identities.

Participants also faced difficulties in navigating romantic relationships, constrained by religious prohibitions and cultural taboos. Simultaneously, economic independence was seen as a pathway to autonomy, prompting some to challenge traditional gender roles and family structures. Religious practices, such as wearing the hijab or praying, functioned as social signals that shaped others' perceptions and levels of acceptance. Youth frequently mentioned a generational gap in values, which made it hard to communicate personal choices with older family members.

In response to these pressures, many turned to online spaces to explore alternate identities and seek support beyond their immediate environment. Those who deviated from conventional norms often reported feeling marginalized, judged, or excluded. Nonetheless, faith remained a key source of emotional support, helping many cope with social and psychological difficulties. Across the board, participants expressed a strong desire for autonomy and acceptance, hoping to carve out a space where they could be true to themselves without alienating their families or communities. The influence of globalization further expanded their horizons, introducing them to diverse belief systems that both enriched and challenged their sense of self. Despite the complexities and struggles, many participants expressed a hopeful outlook for the future, believing that coming generations would be better equipped to **harmonize tradition with modernity**

Discussion

This study offers important insights into how Pakistani Muslim youth engage with identity formation in a setting marked by both religious conservatism and global modernity. Drawing on Erikson's concept of identity versus role confusion, the findings show that identity development in this context is far from a straightforward progression. Instead, it involves navigating a complex interplay of familial expectations, cultural values, personal aspirations, and global influences.

Many participants experienced psychological and emotional stress when trying to align their inherited religious beliefs with evolving modern values. These struggles, including feelings of alienation or internal conflict, closely mirror Erikson's concept of role confusion—where young individuals are unsure of where they fit in

society or how to define themselves. For these individuals, conflicting demands from different cultural systems hinder the development of a stable and coherent self-concept.

However, a significant number of participants demonstrated the ability to creatively synthesize multiple identities. They embraced aspects of their religious upbringing while simultaneously adopting modern perspectives on gender, education, and personal freedom. This process of selective integration highlights a flexible and evolving sense of identity, which aligns with Erikson's broader understanding of identity formation as an ongoing and dynamic journey rather than a fixed endpoint.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes that in collectivist societies like Pakistan, identity is not formed in isolation but is deeply shaped by relational contexts, especially family and community. Youth are socialized to uphold collective responsibilities, which can conflict with individualistic values promoted by globalization and digital media. Gender emerged as a critical factor, with women facing stricter expectations and limited freedom of expression compared to men, underscoring how patriarchy intersects with identity development.

The role of digital media also proved crucial. Online platforms became dual spaces—enabling exploration of alternative identities and self-expression, while also generating stress due to contradictory norms. Participants often had to juggle different versions of themselves across public and private spheres, which contributed to internal confusion but also offered new avenues for support and connection. These findings support the call for culturally nuanced applications of Erikson's theory. While the core idea of identity formation remains relevant, applying it to non-Western, religiously rooted societies requires attention to social, gendered, and technological factors. A one-size-fits-all model of identity development overlooks the unique challenges and adaptive strategies employed by youth in such environments.

In sum, this research enriches our understanding of identity development in the Global South, demonstrating how young people construct meaning through a dynamic negotiation of faith, tradition, and modernity. The insights gained can inform educators, counselors, and policymakers to better support youth in forming identities that are both authentic and socially grounded.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Gen-Z Pakistani Muslims face a unique and context-specific psychosocial conflict as they navigate the complex terrain between inherited religious traditions and the pervasive influence of global modernity. Drawing upon Erik Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion, the research demonstrates that the identity development process among this population is shaped by a dynamic interplay of familial expectations, cultural norms, digital influences, and individual aspirations. The findings reveal a spectrum of identity outcomes. On one end, some youth experience unresolved tensions, leading to confusion, internal conflict, and psychological distress. These individuals often struggle to reconcile their personal values with those imposed by family, religion, and broader societal structures. On the other end, several participants manage to construct hybrid identities—deliberate syntheses that incorporate both religious principles and modern ideals such as autonomy, gender equality, and critical thinking. These hybrid identities reflect adaptive strategies, allowing youth to function meaningfully within both traditional and modern spaces. This duality underscores the continued relevance of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development while simultaneously revealing its limitations when applied uncritically to non-Western contexts. The study affirms that identity formation is not a universally uniform process; rather, it is embedded in cultural, religious, and socio-political environments. In the case of Pakistani Muslim youth, collectivist family systems, gendered social norms, and the authority of religious doctrine significantly mediate the experience of adolescence and early adulthood. Thus, Erikson's model, while insightful, must be culturally contextualized to fully account for the complexities of identity development in transitional societies.

The implications of this study are far-reaching. For educators, it calls for curricula and learning environments that allow students to engage with diverse worldviews while affirming their cultural and religious roots. Mental health professionals must recognize the unique stressors experienced by youth balancing dual identities and provide culturally competent therapeutic support. For policymakers, the findings advocate for youth-centered strategies that promote inclusion, psychological well-being, and the respectful negotiation of tradition and change. In a world where globalization and religious revivalism often exist in tension, the lived experiences of Gen-Z Pakistani Muslims offer a compelling case study in identity negotiation. Their stories illuminate not only the challenges of reconciling faith with modernity, but also the possibilities for creating meaningful, integrated selves. This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to decolonize psychological theory and practice by highlighting the voices and realities of youth in the Global South.

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