Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING GENDER IDENTITY AND GENDER STEREOTYPES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an influential part of university students' daily lives, shaping their communication, social relationships, personal expression, and understanding of gender identity. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube provide opportunities for students to explore their identities, express their opinions, interact with different communities, and develop their understanding of gender roles. However, these platforms also contribute to the promotion and reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes through online content, advertising, entertainment, influencers, and social interactions. Female students may experience pressure to maintain particular beauty standards, demonstrate acceptable feminine behavior, and gain social approval, while male students may face expectations associated with strength, confidence, dominance, and emotional control. At the same time, social media can challenge conventional gender expectations by providing access to discussions about gender equality, diversity, empowerment, and individual freedom. This study examines the role of social media in shaping gender identity and gender stereotypes among university students, with particular attention to online self-presentation, peer influence, digital representation, and social acceptance. It also investigates how students interpret gender-related content and whether their social media experiences reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. The study adopts a mixed-method research perspective to understand both the measurable relationship between social media engagement and gender perceptions and students' personal experiences. The research highlights the importance of digital awareness, critical media literacy, and inclusive online environments in encouraging positive attitudes toward gender equality.

KEYWORDS:*Social Media, Gender Identity, Gender Stereotypes, University Students, Gender Roles, Digital Communication, Self-Presentation, Social Influence, Gender Equality, Online Representation, Social Networking Sites, Youth Culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become one of the most important communication tools in contemporary society, particularly among university students. The rapid development of digital technology has transformed how young people communicate, share information, develop relationships, and understand themselves and others. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube have become important spaces where individuals express their personalities, opinions, lifestyles, and social identities. University students frequently use these platforms not only for entertainment and communication but also for educational purposes, social awareness, cultural discussions, and personal development. As a result, social media plays an increasingly important role in influencing students' attitudes, beliefs, values, and perceptions of gender identity.Gender identity refers to an individual's personal understanding and experience of their gender. It is an important aspect of personal and social identity that develops through individual experiences, family backgrounds, cultural values, education, and interactions with society. During university life, students experience new social environments and interact with individuals from different cultural, educational, and economic backgrounds. These experiences may influence their understanding of masculinity, femininity, gender diversity, and social expectations. Social media further expands these interactions by exposing students to different perspectives and representations of gender. Through online communities, discussions, and digital content, students can explore different ways of understanding and expressing gender identity.Gender stereotypes are widely held

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

assumptions about the characteristics, responsibilities, attitudes, and behaviors associated with men and women. Yulandari, E. S., & Wahidah, B. Y. K. (2025). Found that Traditional stereotypes often associate women with beauty, emotional sensitivity, domestic responsibilities, and caring roles, while men are frequently associated with leadership, financial independence, physical strength, and decision-making authority. These assumptions can influence the way individuals evaluate themselves and others. Social media can reinforce such stereotypes through advertisements, entertainment videos, celebrity culture, influencer marketing, and viral trends. For example, images presenting women according to unrealistic beauty standards may create pressure to maintain particular appearances, while online representations of masculinity may encourage men to demonstrate strength, financial success, and emotional control.However, social media is not only a platform for reproducing traditional gender expectations. It can also serve as an important instrument for challenging gender discrimination and promoting equality. Online campaigns, educational videos, awareness movements, and discussions about women's rights and gender diversity provide students with opportunities to question traditional beliefs. Students can access alternative representations of masculinity and femininity and learn about the experiences of people from different gender backgrounds. Research by Scarcelli and Farci (2024) demonstrates that young people negotiate traditional and alternative representations of femininity and masculinity through social media practices. This suggests that online platforms can simultaneously reproduce existing gender expectations and create opportunities for resistance.

Bakhyt, T. S., Mambetalina, A. S., Almat Sabitovich, N., Lawrence, K. C., & Evlogieva Ilieva, S. (2025.found thaThe relationship between social media and gender identity is also influenced by peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance. University students may compare their appearance, clothing, behavior, achievements, and lifestyles with the content shared by others. Likes, comments, shares, followers, and online reactions can influence how students present themselves and evaluate their personal identities. Some students may change their online behavior to receive positive feedback or avoid criticism. Such practices can strengthen stereotypical expectations by encouraging individuals to follow socially accepted ideas about how men and women should look and behave. Iftikhar et al. (2024), in their research on Instagram use among young adults, highlight the importance of conformity pressure and gender differences in social media experiences.Furthermore, algorithms and digital content recommendations influence the type of gender-related information students encounter. Social media platforms often recommend content according to users' previous interactions, interests, and viewing patterns. Consequently, students may repeatedly encounter similar ideas about beauty, masculinity, femininity, relationships, and professional roles. This repeated exposure can make certain gender expectations appear normal or socially acceptable. At the same time, students who actively search for alternative perspectives may encounter content that challenges traditional gender stereotypes and promotes greater acceptance.In Pakistan and other societies with strong cultural and social traditions, the influence of social media on gender identity is particularly important.

University students often experience differences between traditional family expectations and the more diverse ideas presented through digital platforms. Social media exposes them to discussions about women's empowerment, professional opportunities, gender equality, and changing social roles. These discussions may influence students' attitudes toward education, employment, relationships, leadership, and family responsibilities. Therefore, understanding how university students interpret and respond to gender-related social media content is

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

essential for examining the changing nature of gender perceptions in contemporary society.This research examines the role of social media in shaping gender identity and gender stereotypes among university students. It focuses on how digital content, online interactions, peer influence, and social media representation affect students' perceptions of masculinity, femininity, gender roles, and gender equality. It also explores whether social media primarily reinforces traditional stereotypes or provides opportunities for challenging them. By investigating these issues, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of digital communication and gender-related attitudes among university students.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How does social media influence the formation of gender identity and the reinforcement or challenging of gender stereotypes among university students?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the role of social media in shaping gender identity and gender stereotypes among university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has emerged as an important environment for identity development, particularly among young people who use digital platforms to communicate, explore personal interests, and express themselves. Gender identity is influenced by multiple social and psychological factors, including family, education, culture, peer relationships, and media representation. Social media adds another dimension to this process by allowing students to interact with different identities and viewpoints beyond their immediate social environments. Through digital communication, students can explore how gender is represented in society and compare these representations with their own experiences and beliefs. Online profiles, photographs, videos, comments, and personal narratives provide opportunities for individuals to communicate aspects of their identities. These activities may influence how students understand themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others. Social media therefore operates as a space in which gender identity can be expressed, negotiated, and sometimes reconsidered. However, its influence is not identical for every student because personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual preferences shape the way online content is interpreted. Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2025) explain that social media is an increasingly significant context for identity development, particularly in relation to identity exploration, commitment, and self-concept clarity. Their systematic review provides a useful foundation for understanding the relationship between digital engagement and identity development.Social media provides opportunities for university students to present themselves through photographs, videos, written posts, personal descriptions, and online interactions. Through these activities, students can communicate their interests, values, clothing preferences, lifestyles, and personal characteristics. Gender expression may be influenced by the content students observe and the responses they receive from online audiences. Luo, S., Kim, S. J., Duan, Z., & Chen, K. (2024). Explan thjatFor example, some female students may use fashion and lifestyle content to communicate femininity, while male students may use sports, fitness, professional achievements, or entertainment content to express masculinity.

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P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

However, these patterns should not be considered universal because individuals express gender in diverse ways. Social media also allows students to challenge conventional expectations by presenting alternative styles, opinions, and identities. Scarcelli and Farci (2024) investigate how young people negotiate representations of masculinity and femininity in digital environments. Their research demonstrates that online self-presentation can reflect traditional gender expectations while also creating opportunities to question and transform them. Simões et al. (2023) similarly examine how young adults use social media applications to perform and negotiate gender-related practices. Their work highlights the importance of considering platform features and everyday digital practices when examining gender expression. Consequently, social media should be understood as an interactive space in which students actively participate in constructing their public identities rather than simply receiving gender-related messages Panda, D., Sahu, G., Bhuyan, B., & Mishra, S. (2026explanthat.One of the major concerns regarding social media is its potential to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are socially constructed expectations concerning how individuals should behave according to their perceived gender. Online content may repeatedly present women as primarily concerned with physical appearance, fashion, relationships, and household responsibilities, while men may be represented as financially successful, physically strong, competitive, and authoritative. These representations can influence students' expectations about appropriate behavior and social responsibilities. Influencer culture, entertainment content, commercial advertising, and viral trends may contribute to the circulation of such assumptions. Repeated exposure to stereotypical content can make particular gender roles appear natural or socially necessary. Research examining social media representations also shows that gendered portrayals can coexist with more diverse and inclusive forms of representation. A 2025 study by researchers examining corporate Instagram communication found that diverse portrayals and traditional gender stereotypes could appear together within company social media content. This indicates that digital visibility does not automatically eliminate stereotypical representation. Furthermore, students may reproduce these stereotypes when they share, comment on, or imitate content without critically examining its underlying messages.

Therefore, understanding the relationship between online representation and students' attitudes is essential for identifying how traditional gender expectations continue to circulate in digital environments.Social comparison is another important factor influencing gender identity and stereotypes among university students. Social media platforms expose users to carefully selected photographs, edited videos, attractive lifestyles, fashion trends, and images of personal success. Students may compare their physical appearance, clothing, relationships, and achievements with the content shared by influencers and other users. Such comparisons can create unrealistic expectations about beauty, popularity, masculinity, femininity, and social acceptance. Female students may experience pressure to maintain particular body shapes, facial appearances, and clothing styles, while male students may experience expectations related to muscular appearance, financial success, confidence, and social dominance. These expectations can influence self-esteem and the way students present themselves online. Iftikhar et al. (2024) examine Instagram use, conformity pressure, and regret among young adults, providing relevant evidence about the social pressures associated with visual social media. The findings are important because they demonstrate that digital participation involves more than simply viewing information; it can also involve negotiating social expectations and managing personal presentation. However, social comparison does not necessarily produce negative outcomes. Some users may find inspiration, confidence, and supportive communities through online content. The impact therefore depends on the nature

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Gender, Society And
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P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

of the content, the user's interpretation, and the social environment in which online interactions take place.Peer influence plays a significant role in the development of university students' attitudes and identities. During university life, students interact with classmates, friends, teachers, and online communities whose beliefs and behaviors may influence their understanding of gender. Social media strengthens these relationships by allowing students to maintain continuous communication and observe the activities of their peers. Likes, comments, reactions, and shared posts can communicate approval or disapproval of particular gender expressions. Students may adjust their behavior according to these reactions to avoid criticism or gain social acceptance. For example, a student who expresses opinions that challenge traditional gender expectations may receive supportive responses from some users and negative comments from others. These experiences can influence the student's willingness to express similar opinions in the future. Bakhyta et al. (2025) examined the relationship between social media, gender identity, and psychosocial factors among 437 young people in Kazakhstan. Their study identified peer influence as an important predictor associated with gender identity and reported a significant moderating role for social media. This research is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that social media operates alongside other social and psychological influences rather than independently. Therefore, the development of gender identity among university students should be understood through the interaction of online communication, peer relationships, self-esteem, and social support.Although social media can reinforce traditional gender expectations, it also provides opportunities to challenge discrimination and promote gender equality. Digital campaigns, educational content, online discussions, and personal experiences can increase awareness about gender-based discrimination and unequal social opportunities. Students can use these platforms to discuss women's empowerment, equal educational opportunities, workplace participation, gender-based violence, and the importance of respecting individual identities. Online communities can also provide support to individuals who feel excluded or misunderstood in their immediate social environments.

The ability to access different viewpoints allows university students to reconsider traditional assumptions and develop more inclusive attitudes. Research on e-journalism and gender equality among university students in Pakistan by Kausar, Iqbal, and Shah (2024) provides relevant insight into the role of digital media in creating awareness about women's empowerment and gender equality. Their research, involving 550 university students in Lahore, emphasizes the importance of media in shaping awareness and perceptions of gender-related issues. Nevertheless, online activism does not always result in meaningful social change. Some discussions may become polarized, and gender equality messages may encounter criticism or misinformation. Students therefore need the ability to evaluate digital information critically. Social media can contribute positively to gender equality when it encourages informed discussions, respectful communication, and greater representation of different experiences.Algorithms influence what users see, how content is recommended, and which posts receive greater visibility. These systems generally use engagement patterns and other platform signals to personalize users' experiences. As a result, university students may repeatedly encounter content that reflects their previous interests and interactions. When students engage with particular beauty, lifestyle, fitness, relationship, or entertainment videos, similar material may continue appearing in their feeds. This process can increase exposure to particular gender representations and potentially strengthen existing assumptions. For example, repeated exposure to content associating women with beauty and men with physical strength may contribute to the normalization of traditional gender expectations. However, algorithmic recommendations can also introduce students to educational material,

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P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

alternative identities, and discussions that challenge stereotypes. The influence of algorithms is therefore complex and depends on the relationship between user behavior, platform design, and content availability. Research on digital gender practices suggests that social media applications are not neutral communication environments because their design can influence how users participate and represent themselves. Simões et al. (2023) highlight the importance of examining the relationship between platform features and gendered social practices. Similarly, the 2025 research by Bakhyta and colleagues illustrates how social media interacts with broader psychosocial influences in identity development. These studies suggest that university students should develop algorithmic awareness so that they can recognize how personalized content may shape their perceptions.The influence of social media on gender identity among university students in Pakistan is particularly significant because students often negotiate traditional cultural expectations alongside changing digital attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is designed to examine the role of social media in shaping gender identity and gender stereotypes among university students through a systematic investigation of their social media habits, experiences, opinions, and attitudes. The study proposes a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques to develop a broader understanding of the research problem. The target population consists of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in public and private universities, with particular consideration given to students between the ages of 18 and 25. A proposed sample of approximately 300 university students may be selected through a stratified sampling technique to ensure representation across different academic disciplines, educational levels, and gender backgrounds. Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire containing demographic questions and statements related to social media usage, gender identity, online self-presentation, gender stereotypes, peer influence, beauty standards, and gender equality. A five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree will be used to measure students' attitudes and perceptions. In addition to the questionnaire, approximately 15 to 20 students may participate in semi-structured interviews to provide more detailed information about their personal experiences with gender-related social media content. The questionnaire will examine how frequently students use platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube and how often they encounter gender-related messages. Interview questions will explore whether online content influences students' perceptions of masculinity, femininity, professional responsibilities, physical appearance, and social expectations. Both male and female students should be encouraged to participate, while allowing students with diverse gender identities to describe their experiences voluntarily and respectfully. Participation will be entirely voluntary, and informed consent will be obtained before collecting information. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the research, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw. No personally identifying information will be included in the research report.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design of this study will follow a descriptive and correlational mixed-method design with a cross-sectional approach. The descriptive component will examine the existing patterns of social media use among university students, including the platforms they prefer, the amount of time they spend online, the types of content they consume, and their

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Gender, Society And
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P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

interactions with gender-related information. The correlational component will investigate whether differences in social media engagement are associated with differences in students' perceptions of gender identity and gender stereotypes. The study will not assume that social media is the only cause of changes in gender attitudes because students' beliefs are also influenced by family backgrounds, educational experiences, cultural traditions, peer groups, and personal values. The cross-sectional approach will allow the researcher to collect information from participants during a particular period and identify relationships between the selected variables. Social media engagement will serve as the principal independent variable, measured through frequency of use, time spent online, interaction with content, and exposure to gender-related messages. Gender identity awareness and perceptions of gender stereotypes will be examined as the main outcome variables. Peer influence, digital literacy, cultural background, and social support will also be considered as relevant contextual factors. The quantitative component will provide measurable information about students' attitudes, while the qualitative component will provide explanations of how students understand and respond to online representations of gender. The research will be conducted among students from selected universities, with an effort to include different academic departments and educational levels. The use of a mixed-method design is appropriate because gender identity and stereotypes are complex social phenomena that cannot be fully understood through numerical measurements alone. Combining surveys and interviews will allow the researcher to identify common patterns while also recognizing differences in individual experiences. Since the research will be cross-sectional and non-experimental, its results will identify associations rather than establish definite causal relationships between social media exposure and changes in gender identity.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process will involve organizing, examining, interpreting, and presenting information collected through questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative responses will first be reviewed to identify incomplete questionnaires, inconsistent answers, and missing information. The completed responses will then be coded and entered into statistical software such as SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, will be used to summarize students' demographic characteristics, preferred social media platforms, daily usage patterns, and opinions about gender-related content. These statistics will help identify which platforms are most frequently used and how students perceive the representation of masculinity, femininity, and gender equality in online environments. Reliability analysis, such as Cronbach's alpha, may be applied to evaluate the internal consistency of questionnaire items measuring social media engagement and gender-related attitudes. Correlation analysis will be conducted to examine the relationship between the intensity of social media use and students' endorsement or rejection of traditional gender stereotypes. Where appropriate, regression analysis may be used to investigate whether social media engagement is associated with gender-related attitudes after considering factors such as age, academic discipline, educational level, and cultural background. Differences in responses across relevant demographic groups may also be examined using suitable statistical tests. Interview data will be analyzed through thematic analysis, following a systematic process of familiarization with responses, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, development of themes, and interpretation. Possible themes may include online gender expression, traditional masculinity, feminine beauty standards, peer pressure, social comparison, digital empowerment, gender equality awareness, and online discrimination. The quantitative and qualitative findings will subsequently be compared to identify areas of

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VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

agreement and differences. For example, survey responses may indicate that students frequently encounter stereotypical content, while interviews may explain how such content affects their attitudes toward appearance, relationships, and professional responsibilities. Similarly, quantitative findings may show positive attitudes toward gender equality, while interviews may reveal that students still experience pressure to follow traditional expectations. The combined analysis will provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media and gender-related perceptions. The interpretation will remain consistent with the research design and will avoid making causal claims that cannot be supported by cross-sectional data.

FINDINGS

The findings expected from this study, considered alongside the recent literature, suggest that social media plays an important role in shaping university students' understanding of gender identity and gender stereotypes. One of the major anticipated findings is that frequent exposure to social media content may influence students' perceptions of masculinity, femininity, physical appearance, and gender-related responsibilities. Instagram and TikTok are particularly relevant because their visual content frequently presents idealized lifestyles, beauty standards, fashion trends, and gender-related behaviors. Students may compare themselves with influencers and other users, which can influence their self-presentation and expectations about socially acceptable behavior. Another important finding is that social media can reinforce traditional gender stereotypes through repeated representations of men and women in conventional roles. For example, women may experience expectations concerning physical attractiveness, emotional sensitivity, and domestic responsibilities, while men may encounter expectations concerning financial independence, physical strength, and leadership. However, the study also anticipates that social media can challenge these stereotypes by increasing awareness about gender equality, women's empowerment, equal educational opportunities, and individual freedom. Students who engage with educational campaigns and inclusive online communities may develop more accepting attitudes toward different gender expressions. Peer influence is also expected to be an important factor because students may modify their online behavior according to likes, comments, criticism, and social approval. The literature examined by Bakhyta et al. (2025) identifies peer influence as an important factor associated with gender identity among young people. Similarly, research by Scarcelli and Farci (2024) suggests that young people negotiate traditional and alternative representations of masculinity and femininity through social media. The study further anticipates that students with stronger digital literacy skills may be more capable of recognizing unrealistic beauty standards, discriminatory messages, and stereotypical representations.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social media has become an influential part of university students' social and personal lives, playing an important role in how they understand, express, and negotiate gender identity. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube expose students to different representations of masculinity, femininity, gender roles, and social expectations. These representations can influence students' attitudes toward physical appearance, personal behavior, relationships, educational opportunities, professional responsibilities, and social acceptance. The research recognizes that social media has both positive and negative implications for gender identity and gender stereotypes. On the

negative side, repeated exposure to unrealistic beauty standards, stereotypical images, gender-based comparisons, and discriminatory messages may strengthen traditional expectations and create pressure to follow socially accepted gender roles. Online criticism and peer pressure can also discourage students from expressing their identities freely. On the positive side, social media provides opportunities for education, awareness, empowerment, and communication about gender equality. Students can access diverse perspectives, challenge traditional stereotypes, and participate in discussions promoting equal opportunities and mutual respect. The study also recognizes that the influence of social media depends on individual experiences, cultural values, peer relationships, and levels of digital literacy. Therefore, social media should not be considered the only factor responsible for shaping gender identity because family, education, culture, and society also play significant roles. Universities should promote digital literacy, responsible social media use, gender equality awareness, and respectful online communication through educational programs and academic activities. Students should be encouraged to critically evaluate online representations and recognize that personal abilities, professional opportunities, and social responsibilities should not be determined by gender stereotypes. Furthermore, social media platforms should encourage diverse and inclusive representations and take appropriate measures against online harassment and discriminatory content. In conclusion, social media is neither entirely responsible for reinforcing gender stereotypes nor automatically capable of eliminating them. Its influence depends on how individuals create, consume, interpret, and share digital content. A better understanding of these processes can help university students develop informed attitudes, respect individual differences, and contribute to a more inclusive and gender-equal society.

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