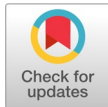


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Digital Hope among Pakistani Youth: Technology, Aspirations, and Social Mobility

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Abstract

The focus of this study is youth and digital hope. According to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-2025, more than half of the population is under 30, which means that Pakistan has a predominantly young population. This paper analyzes how young people in Pakistan are increasingly using digital spaces to find direction, identity, and opportunity within an already complex economic environment. This study explores the use of digital media by Pakistani youth in terms of their expression of success, modernity, and personal development. Their day-to-day activities increasingly involve social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and freelance websites, which may offer a sense of freedom, independence, and self-worth that appears attainable online but may be difficult to realize in everyday life. The research methodology used in this paper is a qualitative study. Interviews and digital ethnography are both used in this qualitative study to understand how factors such as physical location, gender norms, and socioeconomic background affect who can access online opportunities. Appadurai's concept of aspiration, Bourdieu's capital theory, Beck's focus on risk, and Connell's Southern Theory are all crucial to the research's understanding. The previously mentioned hypotheses demonstrate how technology serves as both a space for new possibilities and a platform with structuring limitations. Digital participation is an optimistic factor that gives power to the youth. Young people's emotional strength is enhanced by digital participation, yet this optimism often clashes with algorithmic pressure, societal demand, and unequal resources. Emotional strength, if remained intact, can lead the young to the top of the ladder. With the goal to better understanding the difficulties faced by young people and how the youth in the Global South deals with uncertainty, envision mobility, and search for meaning in a world that is becoming more and more mediated, this paper introduces the concept of "digital hope."

Keywords: digital hope, digital platforms, Global South, inequality,

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Introduction

In today's world, digital media has transformed into more than just a means of communication, and even across modern Pakistan, it has become a significant component and an important platform for young people where they build their goals, aspirations, and future visions. According to the worldwide trends in mediated identities, social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and global freelancing services are becoming potentially effective cultural spaces for young people seeking exposure, income, and self-making (Couldry & Hepp, [2017](#)). According to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-2025, Pakistan is witnessing a significant generational shift in how opportunities are imagined, with more than half of its population under 30. At a point when access to conventional routes of higher education, social mobility, government jobs, and established employment appears increasingly unstable, the digital sphere provides an alternative route. Young people often seek greater certainty and stability while making decisions about their future. Therefore, many young Pakistanis may view the internet as a potential pathway that can transcend some limitations of material resources, supporting Appadurai's ([2004](#)) argument that media can increase underprivileged groups' capacity to aspire.

In this study, hope is understood as a positive orientation toward achievement of a promising future. However, deep concerns, systemic obstacles, and unequal access coexist with optimism regarding digital engagement. For their part, the government narratives glorify “digital economy” while ignoring some points; they do not keep in view how opportunities and access to digital tools differ with respect to class, race, gender, and geography in ways that reflect how structural inequalities shape life chances (Bourdieu, [1986](#)). This race, class, gender, and geography divide has a dismissive impact. Structural inequalities give an inferiority complex to young minds. The promising future of digital empowerment may be accompanied by risks and new types of precarity, much like Beck's ([1992](#)) vision of recent society, where people must cope with their own concerns. These inconsistencies highlight serious concerns. They raise fundamental questions regarding how Pakistani youth view technology: as a means for empowerment, as a source of emotional stress, or as a questionable promise of mobility.

Therefore, grounded by the experiences highlighted by Connell's (2007) postcolonial evaluation of knowledge and experience, this study investigates how Pakistani youth engage with technology, both practically and psychologically, and how digital media becomes a space where inequality and hope coexist. The following research objectives serve as a guide:

- To investigate how young people in Pakistan use digital platforms to express their aspirations and hopes.
- To explore how social background influences involvement in and access to digital content.
- To understand how concepts of mobility, identity, and success are influenced by technology.
- To develop "digital hope" as a sociological framework for Global South youth studies.

These goals will also contribute to the academic literature on how technology influences aspirations and social mobility in Pakistan. The purpose of this study is to address several significant questions, including:

- How do young people in Pakistan use digital media to imagine social and economic mobility?
- What narratives regarding success and hope can we find online?
- How do location, gender, and class influence digital experiences?
- How does "digital hope" help young people make sense of uncertainty?

The mentioned research questions investigate how youth draw attention to social elements that can either encourage or prevent young people from participating in digital environments. Explore how youth's participation with digital environments is linked to expectations for a brighter future. They investigate how goals and optimism on the internet can be useful tools for managing uncertainty and making sense of a complicated social and economic landscape. Lastly, they explore how ambitions are shaped by online representations and the symbolic and cultural relevance of "digital hope."

Significance of the Study

The main aspects of the study include the aspirations, hopes, and growth



of the youth. The importance of putting young people's goals in a digital environment is growing worldwide as well as in local settings. Despite the growing body of research on digital culture worldwide, most of it concentrates on Western experiences, which tend to take high connectivity, individualistic self-making, and somewhat stable work markets for granted. These assumptions are largely based on Western experiences. However, the situation is different in Pakistan; such assumptions do not fully match the circumstances of Pakistani youth, who engage in digital activities despite facing institutional instability, social limitations, and economic instability.

As the youth is considered to be a revolutionary force around the world, the perspectives and experiences of young people are important. This study highlights the views by unveiling the viewpoints and experiences of Pakistani young people. This study broadens Southern epistemic perspectives and makes a significant contribution to the literature that is already present. The study highlights a two-sided experience: young people may hope to reproduce or extend valued social practices and opportunities online, while also experiencing frustration when digital participation does not overcome local inequalities. The study looks at a wide range of topics, but in existing research, there is a lack of information about the emotional variables; they don't keep the emotional factor in view, which drives people to engage with digital environments, such as pride, fear, uncertainty, and desire.

The study improves postcolonial media theory, digital sociology, and youth studies by examining these lived experiences. The final product can benefit educators, legislators, and development experts who create youth empowerment initiatives.

The result can help education professionals, policymakers, and development specialists who design programs for youth empowerment. Many youth empowerment programs focus primarily on skills development while giving less attention to cultural norms, emotional labor, and social barriers that influence young people's technology use. By creating more integrated and compassionate policies, a more practical ground for how such digital empowerment initiatives may be conceived one that responds to the situations of young people could be formed.

Problem Statement

In the modern world, digital media platforms are a source of growth and

success. With the recent advancement in technology, there are so many social networking sites, and platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and freelance websites serve as role models for Pakistani youth development and empowerment. Geographical inequality, gender normativity, and financial differences continue to limit access to significant digital opportunities despite them being associated with these platforms; these factors are becoming major barriers in the way of youth betterment. Economic opportunity is a key topic in the national dialogue on digitalization, even though online spaces may reproduce existing imbalances. At the same time, studies usually focus on financial outcomes rather than the emotional and social investments that young people make in their digital lives. This study therefore considers emotional and social needs alongside financial outcomes. It investigates how “digital hope” emerges as an organizing concept for young people's ideas of opportunity, uncertainty, and success. It focuses on both the benefits and drawbacks of technology and examines its positive and negative effects on young people's urge for mobility. It also examines how young people in Pakistan use digital media to communicate their aspirations, imagine better futures, and overcome challenges. Each of these programs aims to close the gap.

Literature Review

Technology is a broad concept that involves the application of knowledge and tools to achieve practical objectives. Digital transformation is a rapidly evolving aspect of current technology, which is a development of information and communication technologies, and is generally referred to as modern technology. It is the most advanced and dynamic instrument. These days, young people negotiate identity, opportunity, and goals mostly through digital media, commonly referred to as communication media, due to its global reach.

Researchers in the Global South have shown that social media, online learning environments, and digital labor markets are not merely technological tools, but socially constructed spaces where risk, ambition, and hope flourish (Couldry & Hepp [2017](#); Lupton [2015](#)). These circumstances empower and give young people opportunities. The circumstances provide young people with creative and useful opportunities for social mobility, even if participation is negatively impacted by local socioeconomic constraints, cultural expectations, and structural disadvantages. Pakistan's majority is young people; having so

many youthful mindsets is no less than a blessing. Over 60% of Pakistan's population is under thirty (Government of Pakistan, [2025](#)), and digital technologies have a big impact on their goals and aspirations. It is important to analyze connections in this examination of the relationship between access, agency, and emotional engagement.

The connection between youth, technology, and aspiration has drawn more attention from academics in recent years. Digital platforms still have many aspects that are not fully known and are being thoroughly examined by media studies specialists and sociologists. These platforms have immense importance because they serve as the fundamental locations for young people to develop their identities, form connections, and share narratives about what they have envisioned for their future.

However, a substantial portion of this research is rooted in Western contexts with predictable labor structures and stable internet access, which makes it challenging to find solutions in postcolonial societies like Pakistan (Connell, [2007](#)). Pakistan is a postcolonial society that continues to experience the long-term effects of colonialism. There are substantial empirical gaps, particularly with regard to the emotional and symbolic aspects of digital involvement in the Global South, despite the literature demonstrating complex relationships between desire, mobility, and digital participation.

According to research, for political, social, and economic engagement, digital media gives many young people in the working class and developing nations access to opportunities (Shaw & Wheeler [2023](#)). In this case, access to global information flows, and networking, learning, and freelance opportunities can give young people an expanded variety of social comparisons in economic domains, and may even have a self-expansion effect (Shaw & Wheeler, [2023](#); Lybeck et al., [2024](#)). Digital involvement in these situations takes the shape of what could be referred to as "digital capital," a resource that, when combined with opportunities, skills, and access, can enhance prospects in life.

According to Appadurai ([2004](#)), the concept of "digital hope" implies that ambitions are not only subjective but also socially and culturally constructed. When used for young people's visual representations of potential futures, Appadurai's ([2004](#)) concept of the "capacity to aspire" is a particularly helpful perspective for comprehending how young people in

restricted environments nurture an imagination about what might be fulfilled through media use as a means of building aspirations. He highlights that cultural exposure and accessibility to narratives of social potential encourage desire; desire is a powerful driver of behavior and growth, because these settings are often areas where more conventional channels of travel have been closed. Platforms are therefore particularly important in these circumstances. Research conducted in South Asia supports this. Young people frequently engage with online tools to significantly change their lives by imagining endless possibilities and disregarding social norms. In contrast, the study demonstrates how South Asian youth may use digital communication to create identities that cut beyond transnational cultural settings and regional hierarchies (Hedge, [2011](#)).

Bourdieu's ([1986](#)) framework provides a more thorough way of analyzing how digital engagement may create advantages through the concepts of capital and habitus. Existing social and cultural resources play a major role in the ability of individuals to convert digital access into financial or symbolic capital, even though digital access has become more widespread. Access to these opportunities varies and is not uniform, reflecting broader societal inequalities. Bourdieu's ([1986](#)) concepts are valuable in the present case because they help illuminate how underlying structural constraints coexist with the emergence of new forms of social and symbolic capital through digital mediation.

Higher socioeconomic urban youth in Pakistan may be better positioned to utilize digital platforms because they often have more reliable access to social networks, broadband, electronic devices, and other forms of support (Shair et al., [2023](#)). At the same time, gaps remain in relation to gender and location. Females and young people in rural areas may face institutional and social challenges, including family restrictions, gender-based limits on mobility, and language-related barriers (Afridi et al., [2025](#)). These differences show how, even in situations where digital participation can be empowering, digital hope depends on structural characteristics that determine who may successfully turn online activity into an actual or conceptual advantage. These observations are consistent with Bourdieu's ([1986](#)) concept of capital and habitus, which emphasizes the relationship between emerging forms of capital and preexisting patterns of inequality. Language problems, gender, location-based inequality, restrictions, and other issues are examined in this research. Personal accountability, risk, and

uncertainty in digital marketplaces are also investigated. According to Becks ([1992](#)) risk society concept, youth face stress and instability and may experience additional pressure in an environment where opportunities and career prospects are uncertain. Young people often seek more stable and reliable opportunities. Supportive resources and conditions can therefore be important in helping young people develop and pursue their aspirations. Building on this concept, Graham et al. ([2017](#)) apply it to digital job markets, showing how gig labor and online freelancing give workers freedom but also expose them to algorithmic choices and market swings.

According to the United Nations Development Programme ([2022](#)) Report, digital social media offers new ways for groups to communicate, find shared interests, and even form movements. However, recent developments in digital communications technology have also affected social networks in ways that may create new challenges alongside these opportunities. Young people need to act responsibly while producing online content. Online content production involves planning, creating, and refining material. This mix of empowerment and financial and emotional instability is common among young Pakistanis who work and produce content online.

A further noteworthy approach is provided by Connells ([2007](#)) Southern Theory, which emphasizes the ways in which local social institutions and digital involvement interact. Studies performed in Pakistan illustrate the importance of cultural effects. Womens access to the digital world might be influenced by gender norms, and some women experience difficulties related to online identity while also discovering new avenues for self-expression (Afridi et al., [2025](#)). According to recent research conducted internationally, women in communities with limited incomes are about 16% less likely to use mobile internet. This difference is particularly evident in rural areas. According to an Asian Development Bank report from 2025, a complex combination of social, cultural, and economic factors contributes to Pakistans digital gender gap. Specific programs must be designed to address this problem. Due to several barriers, women are less likely to own their own mobile devices. Limited mobility and cultural norms also come into play, particularly when interacting with government services. Women who are allowed to use the internet are actively using it for socializing, studying, information searching, and staying in contact with friends and family despite these difficulties.

Nirman ([2025](#)). states that womens lack of internet access can have

significant consequences. It can limit access to essential services and opportunities related to finance, healthcare, and education. Additionally, women may miss opportunities to participate in online political or civic discussions. As a result, existing gender gaps may become more pronounced and occasionally worse.

According to a report from the Asian Development Bank ([2025](#)) about Pakistan, access to technology, broadband, and digital skills is not the same for everyone. It varies in accordance with a number of factors, including where you reside, your social circumstances, your financial condition, language difficulties, and your level of knowledge. For technology-driven initiatives to have significant consequences, greater emphasis and broader implementation are frequently needed. The majority of individuals still lack a thorough understanding of their online rights and duties, the risks associated with the digital world, and the importance of data protection. Many people have a limited reach because of low media coverage of cybersecurity and privacy issues, they don't have the basic knowledge about digital skills, and have unequal access to technology.

Poor technical skills, concerns about digital surveillance, and social pressure can significantly restrict one's opportunities and reduce productivity. These outcomes support the idea that we need to be aware of the unique social and cultural characteristics of each society by showing that people's use of technology implies more than simply conforming to Western concepts of empowerment (Connell, [2007](#)). The concept of "digital hope" is vast, and it will advance significantly along with future technological advancements. As we go deeper into the topic of digital hope, we discover that researchers have a broad viewpoint and are able to look beyond simple explanations about things like how technology empowers us and take into account the more significant structural, social, and emotional aspects involved.

In the modern age, fast access to information, international communication, and economic prospects all depend on being online. Online presence has its own significance, which is both emotional and symbolic. The emotional and symbolic significance of being online, includes outcomes such as the blend of optimism, anxiety, and moral development that come with using digital tools. These are sometimes overlooked when contemporary research examines the relationship between young people, disparity, and digital participation. Research often examines how young



peoples usage of the internet can help or hurt them financially, but it often overlooks the more complicated ways in which they deal with uncertainty. This distinction is especially important in times of uncertainty when youths use their own lived experiences to support their dreams, as Appadurai (2004) emphasized with regard to cultural creation. We cannot predict the thought process of young people. We cannot determine how the Pakistani youth views the benefits and drawbacks of the internet. This study seeks to fill a gap by investigating the relationships among media usage, emotions, and social mobility in a postcolonial context, by defining the concept of "digital hope."

Rationale of the Study

Technology is rapidly growing across the globe, as well as in Pakistan. The quick expansion of technology in Pakistan has altered the social environment and interpersonal interactions. Discussions of digital technology often emphasize its potential benefits, such as expanded access and opportunities, while giving less attention to the social, cultural, and experiential limitations that shape how individuals use digital technologies. Exploring "digital hope" may provide a greater understanding of how young people manage enthusiasm and desire while pursuing uncertain aspirations. This research is broad and thorough. It relates both theoretical ideas and real-world scenarios. By connecting theoretical ideas to practical situations encountered in everyday life, this research enhances our knowledge of how culture influences online experiences. The findings could improve decision-making, especially in programs related to youth development, digital skills, and economic participation. This paper aims to shed light on the emotional and social aspects that often get overlooked in purely technical discussions.

Theoretical Framework

The study brings together four perspectives. Each theory addresses a different part of the relationship between aspiration, inequality, risk, and context; together they provide a framework for interpreting digital hope. Appadurai's (2004) capacity to aspire explains how people learn to navigate toward possible futures. Digital media exposes young Pakistanis to occupations, lifestyles, and routes of mobility that may not be visible in their immediate surroundings. The relevance of the theory lies not only in the expansion of imagination but also in its unequal distribution. People with greater access to education, networks, and cultural resources are often better

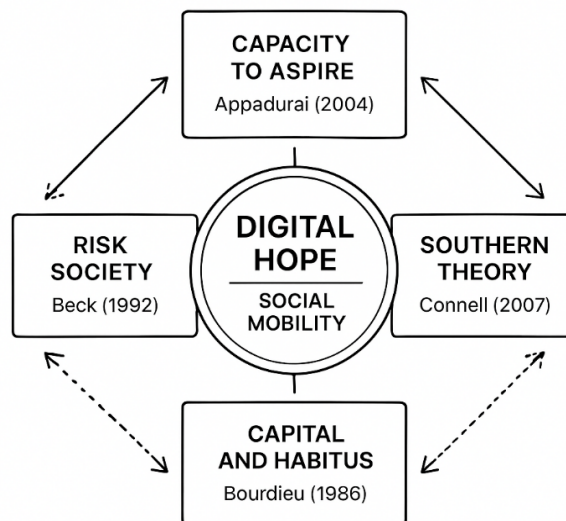
able to turn aspiration into a workable plan.

Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capital and habitus clarify why equal access to a platform does not produce equal outcomes. Devices and connectivity reflect economic capital; language competence and digital skills operate as cultural capital; contacts, mentors, clients, and supportive peers provide social capital. Habitus draws attention to the dispositions through which users judge what is realistic, respectable, or appropriate for someone in their social position. In the present study, this perspective helps explain why some participants approached digital platforms as manageable career spaces while others experienced the same platforms as uncertain or socially risky.

Beck's (1992) risk society framework highlights the transfer of uncertainty onto individuals. Freelancers and content creators must deal with inconsistent earnings, day to day shifting algorithms, scrutiny from the public, and continuous skill development. Rather than being structural aspects of platform economies, these concerns are frequently portrayed as distinct issues. The framework therefore helps interpret the pressure participants feel to remain motivated even when success is unpredictable.

Figure 1

Integrated Theoretical Framework for Digital Hope and Social Mobility



Connell's (2007) Southern Theory provides a necessary corrective to accounts that treat Western experiences of connectivity, individual autonomy, and labor markets as universal. Digital participation in Pakistan is shaped by household relations, gendered respectability, multilingual communication, unequal urban infrastructure, and postcolonial economic conditions. Connell's perspective encourages analysis from these lived conditions rather than measuring participants against an idealized model of the independent digital entrepreneur. Digital hope sits at the intersection of these perspectives. It is an aspirational capacity, but one that depends on capital; it sustains action in a risky environment, but it is interpreted through local social relations. The framework therefore treats hope as both enabling and constrained.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is a process that clarifies the information-gathering process and makes sense of the researchers expected study. The goal of the research design is to appropriately address a research problem in a logical and consistent way. Research method and research design both make it possible for the research to be carried out smoothly, logically, and clearly.

Research Design

A qualitative interpretive design was adopted because the study sought to understand how young people explain their digital practices, aspirations, and uncertainties in their own terms. The aim was not to estimate the prevalence of a particular behavior, but to identify recurring meanings across participants' accounts and to examine how those meanings were connected to social position and platform experience.

Participants

The study included 30 participants aged 18–30 from Lahore, Karachi, and Multan. These cities were selected to provide variation across major urban settings while retaining a focus on places with comparatively developed digital infrastructure. Participants included both men and women and came from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Participants were selected on the basis of regular engagement in relevant digital activities, including content creation, online freelancing, social networking, self-presentation, online education, and skill development.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The included participants were between 18 and 30 years of age, lived in one of the three selected cities, used at least one digital platform regularly, and had direct experience of using digital media for learning, work, networking, self-presentation, or content creation. Participation also required informed consent and willingness to discuss personal experiences of digital engagement.

Individuals were excluded when they fell outside the stated age range, did not live in the selected study locations, used digital platforms only occasionally without relevance to the study objectives, did not complete the interview, or did not provide consent. These criteria have been made to make sure that participants had adequate background knowledge. This is important for the participants to provide insightful comments about the limitations and goals of digital technology.

Sampling Strategy

In this study, the method used for sampling is purposive in nature. This method is used to select people who consume digital media in a meaningful way on daily basis in routine life. The goal of using this technique was to build deep, culturally grounded insights about the experiences of digital engagement of young people instead of trying to make statistical assumptions because the research was exploratory and interpretative.

In this study, a total of 30 participants aged between 18 and 30 years were included. Participants were selected from Lahore, Multan, and Karachi to capture regional contextual diversity while focusing on major urban locations with comparatively higher digital access.

Some measures were taken on purpose. Gender, financial status, and level of education were all purposely varied in the sample. In Pakistan, the majority belongs to the middle class, but the chosen sample has varied financial backgrounds. Participants come from different types of financial backgrounds. The participation of respondents from lower-middle, middle-class, and upper-middle-class households made it possible to conduct an analysis of how structural inequalities influence digital engagement. Digital engagement is influenced in many ways and by many aspects. In order to investigate gendered aspects of access, visibility, and limitation in digital spaces, efforts were also made to interact with both male and female participants. The opinions or experiences of both genders are important to

reach a conclusion, because drawing a judgment requires many aspects. Several digital practices were used by the participants, such as: producing content for online platforms like YouTube and TikTok, using online marketplaces to freelance, using social media for networking and self-presentation, and online education and skill training.

To communicate with individuals who are actively involved in digital ecosystems but may not be reached through standard sampling frameworks, recruitment was conducted using a combination of snowball sampling and informal social networks. Even though the sample does not claim to be representative, it is analytically helpful in highlighting the range of lived experiences that Pakistani youth draw on to create, negotiate, and sustain "digital hope." For data collection, the strategy was to conduct interviews in busy cities, including Lahore, Karachi, and Multan. We interviewed young persons aged between 18 to 30, interviews were in-depth, semi-structured. The goals, digital behaviors, emotions, aspirations, and challenges of the participants were focused. Digital ethnography examines information. It analyzes the data by conducting interviews to learn how young people describe their aspirations, truth, and self-worth, alongside exploring content present on websites such as YouTube, TikTok, and Fiverr. In order to investigate how national narratives about digital commerce affect the expectations of young people, we also examine media and policy.

Data Analysis

The interview material and digital field notes were analyzed thematically following the stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researchers read the material repeatedly to become familiar with the range of experiences. Second, initial codes were developed for statements concerning aspiration, access, skills, visibility, identity, family expectations, emotional responses, income, and uncertainty. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the full material to check that they captured both recurring patterns and relevant differences. Fifth, the themes were named and defined in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Finally, representative verbatim excerpts were selected to retain participants' voices in the presentation of findings.

The analysis was iterative rather than purely sequential. The researchers

moved between the coded material, the emerging themes, and the theoretical concepts in order to avoid forcing participants' accounts into predetermined categories. Particular attention was given to accounts that complicated the dominant pattern, such as participants who remained hopeful despite limited access or those who had resources but still experienced emotional pressure.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was strengthened by comparing themes across interviews and checking them against the digital observations. The researchers retained a clear record of coding decisions and revisited the source material when a theme was revised. The use of participants from different cities and social backgrounds supported analytical variation. The article also distinguishes between participants' interpretations and the researchers' theoretical explanation, allowing readers to follow how the concept of digital hope was developed.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was taken from the participants before the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to decline any question, and their right to withdraw. Personal identifiers were not included in the analysis or reporting. Interview material was treated confidentially and used only for research purposes. Because online visibility and family restrictions can be sensitive topics, the presentation of findings avoids details that could reveal a participant's identity. The researchers also reflected on their own assumptions during interpretation and avoided presenting gender, class, or location as fixed characteristics.

Results

The findings were derived from semi-structured interviews and digital ethnographic observations. The information was categorized and arranged into common themes. The extracted themes represented the experiences, viewpoints, and behaviors of the participants in relation to digital interaction. The findings are shown below in accordance with the research objectives and research questions of the study.

Success Narratives and Imagined Mobility

Participants commonly described digital platforms as places where they

could see possibilities that were not available through their immediate surroundings. Online tutorials, creator accounts, and freelance success stories made unfamiliar forms of work appear learnable. One participant stated, “I want to become a content creator,” while another explained, “I want to earn online.” These statements were not simply preferences for a particular occupation. They reflected a desire for greater control over work and a belief that the internet might provide an alternative to conventional employment.

Learning was central to this sense of possibility. Participants referred to free or low-cost access to practical knowledge, especially video editing, communication, and freelance skills. As one participant put it, “I learned skills from YouTube.” Digital platforms therefore functioned as informal educational spaces and as sources of occupational imagination.

Stories of sudden recognition had a strong influence on how participants imagined mobility. The statement “One viral video can change my life” captures the attraction of a route in which a single moment of visibility appears capable of overcoming years of limited opportunity. Even though most participants knew that viral success was rare compared to normal, the hope somehow influenced their desire to keep creating content. The gap between the present and a hypothetical future was shortened by these stories. Success seemed instant and definable in terms of views, followers, clients, or revenue. Similarly, the focus on extraordinary results led to the creation of delusional indicators, you go from reality to fictional mode by which common advancements were assessed. Visible examples of success encouraged hope, but the expectation that change would occur instantly also made it vulnerable.

Unequal Access and Digital Capital

Access was described as uneven at several levels. Some participants had personal smartphones, laptops, reliable broadband, and private spaces; others depended on shared devices or inconsistent connections. Short statements such as “No personal device” and “Internet is too slow” expressed barriers that shaped the quality and continuity of participation. Limited access affected not only the amount of time spent online but also whether participants could complete courses, meet client deadlines, edit videos, or maintain a regular public presence.

Skills also produced differences. Participants who could edit content,

communicate confidently, and understand platform practices felt better able to compete. One participant observed, “Editing helps me grow.” Digital skills were therefore experienced as a form of advantage, but acquiring them also required time, equipment, and prior educational support. The findings show that connectivity alone did not remove inequality; the capacity to convert access into opportunity remained socially distributed.

Gendered Visibility and Negotiation of Social Norms

Women’s participation was shaped by concerns about reputation, privacy, harassment, and family permission. One participant reported, “My family doesn’t allow me to post videos,” while another stated, “Girls are judged more online.” These accounts show that visibility carried different social costs. A public profile could create opportunity, but it could also invite monitoring or criticism from relatives and strangers.

Some participants responded by limiting the type of content they produced, avoiding images of themselves, using private accounts, or restricting communication with clients. The emotional effect was also clear. “I get nervous posting videos,” one participant explained. Digital participation for these women involved continuous negotiation between aspiration and social acceptability. The platform was not separate from family and community life; it extended those relations into a public and searchable space.

Precarity and the Persistence of Digital Hope

Participants involved in freelancing or content production described uncertainty as a normal part of digital work. “No fixed income” summarized the instability of online earning, while “Sometimes my content doesn’t reach people” expressed dependence on systems that participants could not fully understand or control. This uncertainty did not necessarily lead them to withdraw. Many continued to learn, post, and search for clients because the digital sphere still appeared to offer more possibility than the alternatives available to them.

Digital hope emerged from this coexistence of possibility and limitation. It was practical because it encouraged participants to acquire skills and pursue opportunities; it was emotional because it helped them tolerate delay and disappointment. However, it was not equally secure. Participants who have stronger resources could treat unsuccessful attempts as part of a longer process and don’t get demotivated, whereas those with limited time, money,

or family support faced greater pressure for immediate results.

Summary in Relation to the Research Questions

The findings answer the research questions in four connected ways. Young people imagined mobility through visible examples of digital work, learning, and self-employment. Online success narratives encouraged hope but often emphasized exceptional and rapid outcomes. Class, gender, education, location, and household support shaped the quality of participation and the risks attached to visibility. Finally, digital hope helped participants continue acting under uncertainty, although it could not compensate for unequal resources or platform instability.

Table 1

Summary of Key Themes and Indicators

Major Theme	Description	Example Indicators	Verbatim Expressions	Expected Outcome / Interpretation
Aspirational Narratives & Use	Expressions of ambition, dreams, and future planning shaped by digital media	Desire to become content creator; future-oriented platform use	"I want to become a content creator."; "I want to earn online"	Digital hope; imagined mobility
Success Narratives	Influence of online success stories and viral culture on youth aspirations	Exposure to viral success; influencer culture	"One viral video can change my life"; "One video can change life"	Reinforcement of digital hope and opportunity belief
Barriers, Access & Inequality	Structural, social, and economic constraints limiting participation	Lack of devices; poor internet; gender restrictions; family pressure	"No personal device"; "Internet is too slow"	Uneven digital opportunities
Emotional Experiences	Feelings associated with digital engagement and participation	Confidence after posting; fear of judgment; discouragement from algorithms	"I feel bad when no views"; "I get nervous posting videos"	Emotional labor of digital life
Identity & Self-	Construction and	Use of filters; branding;	"I try to look professional";	Digital self-making

Major Theme	Description	Example Indicators	Verbatim Expressions	Expected Outcome / Interpretation
Presentation	management of online identity and visibility	follower management	"I edit my photos before posting"	
Digital Skills & Capital	Skills, competencies, and symbolic/social value gained through digital engagement	Editing skills; English proficiency; freelancing knowledge	"Editing helps me grow"; "I learned skills from YouTube"	Digital capital as social advantage
Risk, Precarity & Uncertainty	Instability and risks linked to digital work and content creation	Algorithm changes; inconsistent income; online harassment	"No fixed income"; "Sometimes my content doesn't reach people"	Precarious digital economies
Negotiating Social Norms	Interaction of cultural, gendered, and class-based norms with digital behavior	Family expectations; surveillance; gender restrictions	"My family doesn't allow me to post videos"; "Girls are judged more online"	Postcolonial digital constraints

Note. Verbatim expressions are reproduced from the participant expressions contained in the original study material.

From an ethical standpoint, any personal details have been kept confidential and the participants have been asked for their consent. Throughout the study, the researcher aims to maintain sensitivity by remaining self-aware to avoid preconceptions, assumptions, or stereotypes.

Discussion

The findings show that digital media operates simultaneously as an infrastructure of opportunity and an infrastructure of imagination. Participants used platforms to learn skills, observe possible careers, and picture lives beyond conventional employment. This supports Appadurai's (2004) argument that the capacity to aspire develops through cultural exposure and navigational practice. The online environment gave participants more examples of what a future might look like and more language for describing it. Digital hope was therefore grounded in repeated encounters with tutorials, role models, and success stories rather than in

abstract optimism.

The results also qualify celebratory accounts of digital empowerment. Access did not translate automatically into mobility. Participants' experiences were shaped by devices, connectivity, private space, English-language competence, editing ability, and supportive networks. This pattern aligns with studies on Pakistan's digital divide (Shair et al., [2023](#)) and the Asian Development Bank's ([2025](#)) analysis of differences in skills, infrastructure, and affordability. Additionally, it adds to the claim made by Lybeck et al. ([2024](#)) that access, expertise, and greater resources interact to determine digital capital.

Uneven accumulation of anything is not beneficial. The uneven rise of digital opportunity can be explained by Bourdieu's ([1986](#)) framework. Individuals with cultural capital may learn advanced skills and express themselves professionally; those with social capital could rely on family support, mentors, or clients; and those with economic capital could invest in equipment and connectivity. Users were occasionally able to create new types of capital using digital platforms, but their initial position continued to have an impact on the process. The finding is important because it shifts attention from simple platform access to the conversion of digital activity into durable educational, social, or economic advantage.

Gendered accounts further demonstrate that digital participation is embedded in local social relations. The concerns expressed by women about family permission, public judgement, and harassment correspond with evidence on Pakistan's digital gender gap (Asian Development Bank, [2025](#); Global System for Mobile Communications Association [GSMA], [2025](#)) and with Afridi et al.'s ([2025](#)) findings on the interaction of material and cultural barriers. Hegde's ([2011](#)) work on gender and transnational media is also relevant: visibility is never merely technical, because it is interpreted through norms of respectability and belonging. The finding that some women restricted their image, content, or communication shows that opportunity may be present while participation remains carefully negotiated.

Connell's ([2007](#)) Southern Theory strengthens this interpretation by discouraging the use of individual autonomy as an unquestioned standard. In many Western accounts, online self-expression is treated as a personal choice. Participants' experiences show that such choices are relational.

Family authority, household reputation, language, and local labour conditions influence what can be posted, who may communicate with clients, and how public ambition is judged. Digital hope in Pakistan must therefore be understood through these social arrangements rather than as a universal form of entrepreneurial individualism.

The emotional findings extend the discussion beyond access and income. Participants managed profiles, edited images, monitored engagement, and interpreted platform metrics as signs of personal worth. This is consistent with Lupton's (2015) account of digitally mediated self-monitoring, and with Couldry and Hepp's (2017) argument that media environments shape everyday reality. A low number of views was not experienced simply as a technical result; it could become evidence that a person was failing to progress. Digital hope provided motivation, but the same hope intensified disappointment when public recognition did not follow.

The uncertainty described by participants also reflects the structure of platform work. Graham et al. (2017) show that digital labour may offer flexibility while exposing workers to unstable demand and limited bargaining power. Beck's (1992) risk society framework explains how these uncertainties are individualized. Participants were encouraged to improve themselves, post consistently, and remain patient, even though algorithms and market conditions were beyond their control. Hope, therefore, had an ambivalent quality: it protected against resignation, but it could also make structural problems appear to be personal tests of effort and resilience.

The study's main contribution is the concept of digital hope as a situated relationship between aspiration and uncertainty. The concept adds to existing work in three respects. First, it treats hope as a social practice shaped by exposure, skills, family relations, and platform systems. Second, it links emotional persistence to unequal access rather than presenting motivation as an individual trait. Third, it provides a Global South interpretation of digital mobility in which opportunity and constraint are experienced together. Digital hope does not mean that participants believed success was guaranteed. It describes the reason they continued to act when guarantees were absent.

Conclusion

This study highlights all the ways, whether they are complicated or



sensitive, that young people in Pakistan interact with modern technologies. Modern technology is faster, smarter, more efficient, secure, and transparent. As digital platforms have a lot of benefits; they also have some drawbacks. Digital platforms offer great creative potential, but they can deepen social inequities and expose young people to such kind of risks that they don't even expect. Technology has a lot of significance; it not only creates new prospects for societal advancement but also serves as a major source of hope, self-expression, and identity development. This increases optimism and holds back the pessimism. A hopeful and optimistic youth is a great source of advancement. Hope holds great significance for young people regarding their ambitions, development, and aspirations; it serves as a guiding light through which they can see their future more clearly and visibly. This enhancement, clarity, and visibility of the future path boost their confidence. Furthermore, young people need self-affirmation and acknowledgement. In order to shed light on how young people in postcolonial contexts navigate their ambitions and uncertainty, this study explores the concept of "digital hope." Future studies could examine how professions in digital media change over time or compare experiences in various Global South regions, because technology will advance at an exponential rate throughout time.

Contribution of the Study

The article contributes to digital sociology and youth studies by connecting aspiration, capital, risk, and Southern social theory within one analytical framework. Empirically, it brings forward the accounts of young people from three Pakistani cities and shows that digital participation is experienced through both material conditions and emotional judgement. Conceptually, digital hope explains why young people may continue investing in uncertain platforms without assuming that hope is either irrational or sufficient. The concept can be useful in other Global South settings where digital opportunity is expanding faster than secure employment and equal access.

Limitations

- The sample was purposive and limited to 30 participants from three major cities; the findings should not be treated as representative of all Pakistani youth.
- The urban focus means that the experiences of young people in rural

and remote areas, where connectivity and social constraints may differ, were not examined directly.

- The study relied mainly on participants' accounts and contextual digital observation. It did not independently verify income, platform performance, or long-term mobility outcomes.
- The research was cross-sectional and captured experiences at one point in time. Digital careers, platform rules, and personal aspirations may change rapidly.
- The digital ethnographic component was used to provide context rather than to analyze a formally bounded sample of posts or accounts.

Recommendations and Future Directions

- Youth digital-skills programs should combine technical training with guidance on client communication, platform rules, online safety, financial planning, and the emotional demands of public evaluation.
- Affordable devices, reliable connectivity, and access to safe shared workspaces are necessary if training is to produce meaningful outcomes for lower-income participants.
- Programs intended for young women should address privacy, harassment, family concerns, and safe participation, rather than assuming that access alone will lead to successful digital participation.
- Educational institutions and youth organizations should provide mentoring and peer networks so that participants can convert skills into professional contacts and realistic pathways to work.
- Policy discussions should avoid presenting digital entrepreneurship as a substitute for secure employment. Platform opportunity should be accompanied by attention to worker protection, income instability, and transparency in digital marketplaces.
- Future research should include rural participants, follow young people over time, compare different regions of Pakistan, and combine qualitative findings with evidence on income, skills, and employment outcomes. Comparative research across Global South contexts could further test and refine the concept of digital hope.

Author Contributions

Mahnoor Nisar: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing - original draft, writing – review & editing. **Junaid Shafique:** conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing - original draft, writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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