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From Representation to Self-Representation: Negotiating Pashtun Ethnic Identity on social media in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Since 2001, the Pashtun borders were represented for Pashtun people by colonial archives, national cinema and news media and by a security discourse that linked Pashtun borders with militancy. In the past, this representation was made possible by the traditional media; now, social media has changed that by giving Pashtun the opportunity to speak for themselves to national and transnational audiences. It is a study of the negotiation of Pashtun ethnic identity on social media in Pakistan and the enabling role of social media in moving away from representation to self-representation. The study is qualitative and interpretive in nature, and a thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed literature from 2017 to 2025 on Pashtun identity, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), Pakistani digital culture and minority self-representation takes place. Based on postcolonial theory on representation and the concept of networked counterpublics, the analysis elaborates five themes: speaking back to the stereotype of the "violent Pathan"; private grief and collective testimony; claiming rights and citizenship; performing cultural identity through language and heritage; and the contested boundaries of digital visibility. The results reveal that social media has offered Pashtuns, and especially young, educated and urban Pashtuns, new ways to assert themselves as citizens and articulate their complaints in new ways, rather than as suspects. Concurrently, digital self-representation is constrained by state counter-narratives, by internal disagreements about who represents Pashtuns, and by gendered norms of visibility, limitations of online mobilisation. The research finds that while social media has not supplanted the older images of Pashtun, it has helped to generate a contested arena in which such images can be responded to.

1. Introduction

For over two decades, the other people have been creating images of Pashtun Pakistanis. These Orientalist depictions of the Pashtun frontier people as uncivilized, primitive, and violent were conveyed from colonial historical-ethnographic narratives into postcolonial discourse (Z. A. Shah et al., 2022; Yousaf, 2019). Since 2001, the War on Terror (WoT) had thrust the Pashtun

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belt of tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into the heart of military operations and national security discourses, and Pashtun identity was slowly becoming synonymous with the language of militancy and threat (Akhtar, 2021; Yousaf, 2021). Popular culture reinforced these associations. Contemporary Pakistani cinema, for example, has repeatedly cast the Pashtun as the noble savage, the violent Islamist or the simple-minded buffoon, positioning Pashtuns outside the imagined community of the nation (Rizwan, 2023).

In all these instances, however, Pashtun were the represented, not the representers. Their image was constructed in colonial archives, newsrooms, film studios and official statements, with limited opportunities for Pashtuns themselves to answer. This imbalance did not go unnoticed. In the past, the military operations, displacement, and racialising state policies were faced by the communities of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) (A. Khan et al., 2023; Mahsud, 2024). Their concerns were also ignored by the legacy media and established institutions (Hameed et al., 2023).

Societies and cultures have evolved over the past few years due to the proliferation of smart phones and social media, which have altered the environment in which Pashtun identity is reflected. The gatekeeping function of traditional media has been replaced by social media where people or movements are allowed to publish. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) is a good example of that, as a group of young Pashtun men protested in Islamabad, the capital city in early 2018, when they marched from Waziristan (Akhtar, 2021; A. R. Shah, 2020). The research indicates that the PTM leveraged social media to identify problems, assign blame, share plans of action and motivate participation, elevating the visibility of a previously-ignored community in legacy media (Hameed et al., 2023). In addition to activism, survey research in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shows that the social media platform has become a means for young Pashtuns to relate to, preserve and promote their culture and values (U. Khan et al., 2021).

This transition can be referred to as a transition from representation to self-representation. Representation is the images of a group made by others, typically people in power; self-representation is the group's work to represent itself in its own terms and to spread those representations publicly. Empirical studies from other situations reveal that social media can facilitate marginalised communities to create what Kuo (2018) calls 'networked counterpublics', online communities that challenge dominant discourses and engage wider publics (Jackson et al., 2018; Kuo, 2018). This study focuses on whether and how this process is taking place in the case of Pashtuns in Pakistan.

The question is not easy to answer. Digital self-representation happens in a political space of state counter-narratives alongside the criminalization of activism (Qadir, 2025). The military has framed the PTM as a threat to the state (Jan & Khan, 2024). The movement has also been surrounded by polemics and conspiracy theories (A. R. Shah, 2020). There is also disagreement among Pashtuns regarding the representation of the community and which Pashtun identity should be represented (Amin, 2023). Moreover, there are norms of gender, class and respectability in Pakistan that limit who can appear and how (Alam, 2020; Kamran, 2023). Thus, self-representation is not to be interpreted as a straightforward erasure of stereotypes, but can be seen as a process of negotiation.

Existence of Pashtuns in colonial literature and film has been the subject of previous studies (Rizwan, 2023; Z. A. Shah et al., 2022; Yousaf, 2019). Others have studied the PTM as a social movement and as peripheral nationalism (Ahmed & Khan, 2022; Aslam & Neads, 2021; Mahsud, 2024). Fewer studies have combined these aspects to consider how Pashtuns engage with these representations via social media platforms, and the extent to which they can do so. This study seeks to fill that gap.

The study is designed to answer three questions. First, how do Pashtuns use social media to construct and present their ethnic identity in Pakistan? Second, how does this digital self-representation contest, negotiate or reproduce earlier representations of Pashtuns? Third, what political, cultural and gendered constraints shape Pashtun self-representation online? In answering these questions, the paper contributes to research on ethnicity, media and digital activism in South Asia and extends the concept of networked counterpublics to an ethnic minority context in Pakistan.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews literature on the representation of Pashtuns, the PTM and the politics of Pashtun identity, social media and Pashtun identity in Pakistan, and self-representation among marginalised groups, before setting out the digital arenas examined, the research gap and the theoretical framework. The methodology section describes the design, and the thematic synthesis. The findings are then presented in five themes, followed by a discussion of their causes and consequences, recommendations and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Representing Pashtuns: From Colonial Archive to National Screen

From the literature of the Pashtuns, it is clear that there is a remarkable consistency between colonial and postcolonial images. British colonial historical and ethnographic discourses left their mark on the Pashtun people of the frontier, and interviews with Pashtun intellectuals in Peshawar and Charsadda show that these categories are still present in analyses of Pashtun society

(Z. A. Shah et al., 2022). The generalisation of the tribal Pashtun as a violent and warrior people began with British military expeditions and continued after 1947, although tribal jirgas and the PTM have shown a strong local desire for peace (Yousaf, 2019). A later study describes a "postcolonial burden" through which colonial narratives continue to portray Pashtun people as uncivilised, primitive and violence-condoning (Yousaf, 2021).

These images were recreated into national popular culture post 2001. Pakistani cinema depicts the Pashtun as a noble savage, violent Islamist, vengeful patriarch or simple-minded buffoon, portrayals grounded in colonial discourse, post-9/11 political discourse and Punjabi majoritarianism (Rizwan, 2023). In this analysis, cinema creates a binary opposition between Punjabi and Pashtun; the former represents the nation and the latter are not defined as such in the national image. The literature then sets the stage for the "representation" aspect of the present study, and gave rise to a long story of how Pashtuns have been described, categorised and visualised by others.

Representation has also been realised via the state's institutions. Public education institutions have established a "regime of truth" that facilitates an assimilationist nation-building process (U. Khan et al., 2021). An ethnographic study describes the historical, cultural and political erasure faced by Pashtuns in Pakistan's formal educational institutions (U. Khan et al., 2020). The studies reveal that the issue of representation is not just about the media: it is also about the curriculum and the classroom and it has excluded Pashtun history and culture from the nation. This institutional side of things is crucial to understanding the significance of informal and digital spaces as alternative sites for narratives.

2.2. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement and the Politics of Identity

The PTM of 2018 was a milestone in the pashtun politics. Fieldwork in North and South Waziristan shows that conflict, securitisation policies and a feeling of discrimination among Pashtun youth gave birth to a nonviolent movement that stood for progressive values and provided young people with an alternative to militancy (Mahsud, 2024). The movement has been described as having exploded the myths of the "war on terror" in a praetorian state (Akhtar, 2021). It is also embedded in a larger narrative of peripheral nationalism in Pakistan (Ahmed & Khan, 2022). A wider Pashtun neo-ethnonationalism has developed among various social groups, such as leftist, Islamist and modern groups, and this identity is dynamic rather than static or primordial (Amin, 2023).

The state's response has been at the forefront of the movement. The military discourse created the PTM as an enemy Other and it created a symbolic order that enabled the movement to be delegitimized and its repression to be normalized (Jan & Khan, 2024). The movement has been surrounded by polemics and conspiracy theories since it came into the limelight in early 2018 (A. R. Shah, 2020). The military's response to the PTM has also changed over time, with implications for military accountability and democratic change (Aslam & Neads, 2021). The state has been trying to label PTM and Pashtun activists as terrorists, defamers, seditionists and hate mongers to justify the violation of these activists which they expose as crimes (Qadir, 2025). The PTM has been characterised as a civil rights movement (Jan & Khan, 2024; A. Khan et al., 2023). It is non-violent strategy based on the culture of resistance within the Pashtun community (A. Khan et al., 2023).

The different emphases of these studies can be attributed to the methods and theoretical lenses used in each study. According to one study, it is based on new social movement theory and asymmetric federalism, and semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and personal observation were used in Waziristan (Mahsud, 2024). Another draws on Foucault's biopolitics and Mbembe's necropolitics to trace the genealogy of violence in the tribal borderzone, identifying three state discursive strategies that construct and naturalise the exceptional space of the borderzone and the expendable status of its inhabitants (A. Khan et al., 2023). A third draws on an interview with a PTM activist and on the narrative of criminal cases brought against PTM activists (Qadir, 2025). Together, these studies reveal that the PTM is both a rights movement and a manifestation of ethnic grievances as well as the result of the security policies of the War on Terror. This multiplicity is of significance for the current study because it implies that Pashtun representation online operates with multiple linguistic registers, one of which is about rights and citizenship, one more is about ethnic identity and the other is about being a victim of conflict.

The aims of this scholarship are also changing. One study states that its intent is to stimulate indigenous and emancipatory perspectives on the Pashtun tribal areas and their people in the academic literature, and argues that the State's racial and biopolitical policies enact the logics through which tribal bodies are exposed to violence that remains largely invisible (A. Khan et al., 2023). The legal machinery creates dangerous imprisoned Pashtun activists and the state wants to imprison the politics of resistance under the guise of the War on Terror (Qadir, 2025). These studies show that Pashtun self-representation must be situated within the political context where discussions about state violence are considered security issues.

2.3. Social Media and Pashtun Identity in Pakistan

Through increasing research, social media platforms are recognized as important platforms for doing Pashtun identity work. Research using social movement framing theory found that the PTM's social media content was clear about the issues

confronting Pashtuns and who was responsible for them, but offered fewer concrete solutions (Hameed et al., 2023). The same study finds that social media was used as a medium of campaigning and sharing information, making the community's voice more visible than it had been through traditional media and social institutions (Hameed et al., 2023). Earlier work offered an interpretation of social media's role in Pakistan that contrasts with its common association with terrorism, examining how social media was used during the War on Terror (Hassan, 2018).

The PTM framing study is also instructive for what it reveals about the functions of different frames (Hameed et al., 2023). They applied quantitative content analysis to 458 posts in English that appeared on social media across several areas of study informed by social movement framing theory: diagnostic framing; prognostic framing; and motivational framing. The posts containing a frame were mostly motivational (61%), urging sympathisers to join the movement's campaigns online and offline, with the state and army being identified as responsible for violence against the Pashtun community being the most prominent theme, while only 12% of the posts were prognostic. The authors also note that social media was used by activists due to the lack of coverage of their protests in the mainstream media in Pakistan. This trend is important for the topic of self-representation. It suggests that digital activism among Pashtun is more effective at mobilizing Pashtun supporters and identifying injustices than articulating a programme of change, but this is generalizable only within the confines of the single event, English only sample.

The cultural roots of this activism are being emphasized in recent studies. From this perspective, the PTM offers the world an organic counter-Pashtun narrative rooted in the Pashtun cultural practice of non-violent resistance (A. Khan et al., 2023). An ethnographic study discusses the historical, cultural and political erasure of Pashtuns in Pakistan's formal education system and the reconstruction of Pashtun identity in the face of this erasure (U. Khan et al., 2020).

Social media can also be involved with cultural, not explicitly political, strategies of self-representation. A survey of 200 young people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa examined the impact of social media on the maintenance and promotion of Pashtun culture and values (S. R. Khan et al., 2021). More broadly, Pashtuns have used informal spaces to create an alternative story of themselves in order to resist the "regime of truth" of state educational institutions (U. Khan et al., 2021). In sum, these studies suggest that Pashtun self-representation is not limited to political activism, but also applies to the daily struggle over culture, values and history.

2.4. Self-Representation, Visibility and Networked Counterpublics

Concepts from international research are available to aid in understanding these practices. Transgender women on social media have deliberately curated a networked counterpublic that responds to histories of misrepresentation and advances struggles over self-definition (Jackson et al., 2018). Through hashtag activism, marginalised communities gain access to networks and larger publics (Kuo, 2018). Exploring the potential of social media for the representation of marginalised groups reveals that Muslim women, religious minorities in Pakistan and Adivasi-led initiatives in India are using social media to critique stereotypes and the erasure of their culture and present themselves in their own terms (Batool et al., 2021; Islam, 2019; Termolino, 2025). A key finding of these studies is that online self-representation is an expression and a response to representations found there.

The comparative studies also show the diversity of ways for self-representation. The online documentary YourAverageMuslim counters three dominant narratives – Muslim woman as oppressed, Muslim woman as subjugated, and Muslim woman as foreign Other – letting Muslim women speak for themselves rather than be spoken for by others (Islam, 2019). A survey of Christian social media users in Pakistan observed that online groups inspire the community to solve its issues and are positively associated with awareness of social problems (Batool et al., 2021). Adivasi-led initiatives such as Ango Khabar, Adivasi Lives Matter and Trilingo.in raise the question of whether social media can counter a cultural erasure that began in the colonial era and persists today (Termolino, 2025). The strategies used here a direct refutation, a collective raising of issues, and cultural reclamation can be used as a vocabulary to analyse the way Pashtuns present themselves online.

Pakistan research adds a much-needed qualification. The social media personality Qandeel Baloch questioned gender, class and national identities, and her story demonstrates the risks of being visible in the digital public sphere (Alam, 2020). Working-class women on Pakistani social media were able to perform gender transgressions while maintaining "digital purdah" and obscuring their identities (Kamran, 2023). These studies demonstrate the uneven nature of visibility online in Pakistan and the extent to which it is firmly controlled by social norms, which is directly relevant to the gendered aspects of Pashtun self-representation.

The studies are both helpful in that they illustrate visibility as influenced by class and gender. Qandeel Baloch's "do-it-yourself activism" used selfies, marriage proposals and online celebrity to challenge the moral authority of a powerful cleric and to expand the boundaries of national belonging to include culturally rebellious women of limited economic means (Alam, 2020). The reception of a popular social media app in Pakistan was divided along class lines: middle-class and elite women looked down on it, working-class women adopted it, and it became marked as a "low-class" feminine identity (Kamran, 2023). Both

studies illustrate that opportunities to be represented online in Pakistan is an unequal opportunity, and that online representation also poses social risks, which vary from one gender to another and one class to another, although neither studies focus on Pashtuns.

2.5. Digital Arenas in Context

There are three digital spaces where the Pashtun people express themselves, which will be identified in the literature and that will be analyzed in the following. The first one is political activism on social media platforms surrounding the PTM, which involves voicing grievances, capturing state practices and engaging followers (Hameed et al., 2023). The second is cultural self-presentation, in which Pashtun culture, values and history are expressed and discussed outside formal state institutions (S. R. Khan et al., 2021; U. Khan et al., 2021). The third is the broader Pakistani context of social media, where issues of class, gender and respectability determine who can be seen and how (Alam, 2020; Kamran, 2023). The opportunities and constraints of Pashtun identity work vary across the arenas.

2.6. Research Gap

The literature has confirmed that Pashtuns have long been represented by others (Rizwan, 2023; Z. A. Shah et al., 2022; Yousaf, 2019, 2021). The PTM has reshaped Pashtun politics (Akhtar, 2021; Mahsud, 2024). Social media was instrumental in its emergence (Hameed et al., 2023). However, these strands have largely developed separately. Research on representation rarely addresses Pashtun responses to representation and research on the PTM often concerns politics and the state. Self-representations in online culture are still poorly studied, and many studies consist of surveys. There is a need for synthesis that brings together representation and self-representation, political and cultural modes of digital Pashtun expression, and the limits these are imposed by. The present study aims to fill this gap.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

The study takes two points of view. The first is postcolonial critique of representation which suggests that images of groups of colonized and marginalized people are created from positions of power and that these images continue to live on in postcolonial institutions (Z. A. Shah et al., 2022; Yousaf, 2021). From this viewpoint, the issue of Pashtun is not just negative portrayal, but denying the right to define themselves. The second view is networked counterpublics theory, which describes how marginalised groups rely on digital networks to produce spaces for discussion and self-definition, and project their arguments into broader publics (Jackson et al., 2018; Kuo, 2018). There is no separation between counter publics and dominant publics, but rather they are in tension and affected by the reactions of dominant publics.

The integration of these viewpoints enables the analysis to take Pashtun self-representation online as a response to a particular history of representation, and to question what extent a digital counterpublic can change this history. It also draws attention to the responses from the other actors and the state, which securitisation and enemy-image construction makes visible (Jan & Khan, 2024). The negotiation as conceptualized in the title of this study, reflects this process: Pashtun identity is not imposed but rather negotiated with the aid of exchanges between the self-representation and the dominant representation, as well as the restrictions of social media and the political climate in which they interact.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive design using peer-reviewed research that is themed. Thematic synthesis was used because the empirical data on Pashtun digital self-representation is fragmented in various disciplines such as media and communication studies, political sciences, sociology/cultural studies and has not been compiled before. The analysis could summarise the results of the previous studies and look for trends that these studies, which had been based on a specific movement, context or method, could not uncover alone.

3.2. Sample

Research papers were found by searching the SciSpace and Consensus scholarly databases for various terms related to Pashtun identity, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, social media, digital activism, self-representation and Pakistan. To be included in the analysis, the study had to be peer-reviewed, published between 2017 and 2025, have a persistent identifier and address one or more of the following: representation of Pashtuns; Pashtun identity politics and the PTM; Pashtun or Pakistani social media practices; or self-representation by marginalised groups on social media. Twenty-five studies are included in the final sample. Twenty focus on Pashtun or Pakistan and five international studies were incorporated for conceptual comparison on the topics of self-representation and networked counterpublics.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers documented the objectives, setting, medium, method, sample and main findings for each study. The analysis subsequently went through three rounds of thematic synthesis. First the findings of each study were coded line by line, and then coded included stereotype, counter-narrative, grievance, testimony, rights claims, language, heritage, state response, internal contestation, gender and visibility. Second, related codes were clustered into summarising descriptive themes of what the studies reported. Third, the descriptive themes were then understood in terms of the theoretical framework, and emerged as five analytical themes that answered the research questions. The analysis was an iterative process, back and forth between themes and original studies, to assure that each theme was supported by the evidence.

3.4 Limitations of the Design

The benefits and drawbacks of the studies that are the source of a thematic synthesis are transferred to it. The work in this field has largely been concerning the PTM's political activities on social media, with very little work available on the Pashto language and female voices in particular. Some of the studies are relatively new and some are limited qualitative case studies. The synthesis cannot determine whether or not the patterns it has found are applicable to all Pashtun social media users. In the conclusion these limitations are discussed and directions for empirical research are given.

4. Findings

4.1. Theme 1: Speaking Back to the "Violent Pathan"

The first theme is the use of social media to counter the stereotype, which has been the dominant representation of Pashtun. However, the literature demonstrates that the image of the violent and warrior-like Pathan, which has been portrayed in the colonial narratives and reimagined in the post-9/11 era of security discourse and popular cinema, continues as a benchmark for the Pashtun self-representation (Rizwan, 2023; Yousaf, 2019, 2021). This image is a target for digital activism. The PTM's non-violent nature, the call for justice and the dissemination of the issues faced by Pashtun communities through social media makes Pashtuns look like victims of the violence instead of its perpetrators (Hameed et al., 2023; Mahsud, 2024; Yousaf, 2019).

This is speaking back as it is significant as a reversal of the direction of representation. Pashtun were represented by others in the colonial archive and on the cinema screen, but they represented themselves – and in doing so represented those that represented them, on social media. The PTM provides an organic alternative narrative to state discourses that fix the tribal borderspace as exceptional and its population as expendable (A. Khan et al., 2023). Comparative literature reveals that this is a phenomenon of marginalised populations generally on the internet, who often organize around not being represented by particular stereotypes (Islam, 2019; Termolino, 2025).

There are several different types of this speaking back. Some are denials, that is, someone puts up evidence of wrongs that is supposed to be averted; others are solidarity and repetition, with hashtags and shared posts repeating the same allegations across networks. Activist hashtags help move arguments beyond the group that originally created them (Kuo, 2018). Marginalised users can also curate their networks in ways that legitimate their identities in larger publics (Jackson et al., 2018). In the Pashtun case, speaking back is intertwined with the issues of whose interpretation of Pashtun identity is legitimate, and who's not. In earlier media, others determined this.

4.2. Theme 2: Turning Private Grief into Collective Testimony

The second theme is about the individual's experience of loss becoming a collective claim. The increase of the PTM in 2018 is a result of years of military operations in the tribal areas and the experiences of the Pashtuns in conflict, loss, and displacement (Akhtar, 2021; Mahsud, 2024). Pashtun activists have publicly exposed rights violations, and such allegations are used against them in criminal proceedings as evidence of “terrorism” and other crimes (Qadir, 2025).

Earlier media could not have enabled such testimony on such a scale as was possible with social media. There might be accounts that would have stayed within the families or the local jirgas that could now be disseminated nationally and internationally, bringing together disparate experiences and creating a common thread around the suffering. The PTM's diagnostic framing on social media centred on violence against the Pashtun people and blamed the state and its institutions for that violence (Hameed et al., 2023). In this way, testimony served as a form of self-representation, which brought about Pashtuns not as a security threat but as a community with grievances that needed to be heard.

Yet a second layer is added with analysis of the state's discursive practices which have produced the borderspace of the tribes as abnormal and their members as expendable, such that the testimony of Pashtuns defies a state system where there is very little sense of their lives being lived with a high death toll and many of them being maimed. (A. Khan et al., 2023). In this way,

testimony not only bring information but it is also a refusal of invisibility. Every common account puts the speaker into a larger community of loss, thus reinforcing a sense of Pashtun identity as a people who have suffered the effects of war.

4.3. Theme 3: Claiming Rights and Citizenship

The third theme is related to the notions of citizenship and rights that are used to frame Pashtun identity. The PTM rose to speak for the rights of Pashtuns against government policies in the former tribal areas (Mahsud, 2024). It was termed as an Indigenous civil rights movement against the discursive regime of the military (Jan & Khan, 2024). The framing is important to self-representation because it denies the representation of the Pashtun as a security threat and brings the Pashtun in the image of a citizen asserting rights.

There are indications in the literature that this rights-based framing is argued against. Polemics and conspiracy theories have surrounded the movement (A. R. Shah, 2020). The military's rhetoric created the PTM as an enemy of the state (Jan & Khan, 2024). The relationship between the military and the movement has also changed over time (Aslam & Neads, 2021). The state, in the spirit of the War on Terror, tries to define Pashtun activism as acts of terrorism, sedition and hate speech, and considers rights demands as threats (Qadir, 2025). Claiming citizenship was therefore a core component in the Pashtun self-representation online, which required a contest with strong counter-narratives.

4.4. Theme 4: Performing Cultural Identity through Language and Heritage

The fourth theme takes a step further in the field of political action, transcending to the self-representation of the people in terms of everyday culture. Young people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa use social media to safeguard and promote Pashtun culture and values, and social media plays a role in bringing together people with common interests (S. R. Khan et al., 2021). Outside formal state institutions, informal spaces have given Pashtuns room to create alternative accounts of their history and identity (U. Khan et al., 2021). Social media can extend such informal spaces by making Pashtun history, language and everyday customs visible to audiences far beyond the local community.

This cultural self-representation is complementary to, but not necessarily shared with, political activism. Pashtun neo-ethnonationalism transcends ideologies and embraces left-leaning activists, Islamists and modern professionals (Amin, 2023). In India, for example, cultural content has been found to be a strong tool to combat erasure, as seen in the work of the Adivasi community (Termolino, 2025). For Pashtuns in particular, the online circulation of language and heritage is an identity of culture, hospitality and creativity as opposed to the canvas dominated by conflict in the external representation.

Ethnographic studies, therefore, can be useful in reconceptualizing the construction of Pashtun identity as a mode of resistance in reaction to the erasures of formal institutions (U. Khan et al., 2020). Read alongside research on informal spaces, this suggests that self-representation often starts outside formal channels – in families, communities and informal networks – before moving onto social media (U. Khan et al., 2021). Similarly, the PTM's non-violent approach is rooted in the Pashtun cultural tradition of resistance (A. Khan et al., 2023). So cultural and political self-representation are linked: both are based on Pashtun traditions as responses to state institutions' assigned identities.

A comparison with other marginalised groups is helpful. Adivasi initiatives use social media not only to maintain their cultural knowledge but also to redefine what it means to be Adivasi on their own terms, even as they recognise the difficulties that come with this (Termolino, 2025). Self-representation is not only argumentative but also ordinary (Islam, 2019). Within Pakistan, social media also makes it possible to raise awareness of issues affecting minority communities (Batool et al., 2021). This self-representation of culture online, for Pashtuns, can then be interpreted as a more subtle politics: the presence of the 'ordinary', of daily life, of the Pashtun condition, implicitly challenges the perception of Pashtun identity as synonymous with conflict and security.

4.5. Theme 5: The Contested Limits of Digital Visibility

The fifth theme is about limitations that affect the representation of Pashtuns. State's counter-narrative is the first constraint. The military's discourse constructed an enemy image of the PTM (Jan & Khan, 2024). Conspiracy theories about the PTM have also circulated widely (A. R. Shah, 2020). So, self-representation in social media is happening within a battle for representation that is carried out by the power of official representation.

The second is internal contestation. Pashtun identity is contested by various social forces, as leftists, Islamists, developmentalists, modernists and professionals all claim to represent it (Amin, 2023). The PTM in particular has been surrounded by polemics (A. R. Shah, 2020). Self-representation then brings to the fore the issue of who speaks for Pashtuns, one that is not answered by social media, but rather exacerbated.

The third restriction is gender. The findings from this research indicate that norms of gender, class and moral respectability govern the visibility on social media platforms in Pakistan. Self-presentation in the digital environment for women has the potential to both present opportunities and dangers (Alam, 2020). Women also combine transgression with practices of digital purdah to safeguard their identities on social media (Kamran, 2023). The results indicate the possibility of female voices being silenced or voiced in a concealed and risky way in relation to Pashtun self-representation online, with a tendency for a male voice.

The fourth constraint is between online visibility and political outcomes. The least common frame in the PTM's posts is the prognostic frame, which offers solutions (Hameed et al., 2023). However, criminal prosecution is another potential response to activism, where rights assertions become crimes (Qadir, 2025). The use of digital self-representation can expand visibility and change the narrative, but it is not enough to ensure recognition or policy change.

5. Discussion

5.1. Causes of the Shift to Self-Representation

We can understand the significance of social media as a focus of Pashtun identity work in three ways. The first is from being left out of the mainstream media. Social media provided an alternative platform for pashtuns to speak directly to national and international audiences as national cinema and news media portrayed them in narrow stereotypes and did not pay them much attention (Hameed et al., 2023; Rizwan, 2023). The second factor is generational and social change. The PTM was spearheaded by a young generation of Pashtuns (A. R. Shah, 2020). Its activists turned to social media because their protests did not receive attention in the mainstream media (Hameed et al., 2023). The third is the conflict experience. The War on Terror created a bank of grievances – such as military action, displacement and racialisation of state policy – that needed to find expression and could be represented through personal testimony shared online (Akhtar, 2021; A. Khan et al., 2023; Mahsud, 2024).

5.2. Consequences for Pashtun Identity and Inter-Ethnic Relations

The implications for this change are mixed. Social media has also helped Pashtun citizens to reject the stereotype of the violent Pathan and to make their grievances visible, and to express an identity based on citizenship, culture and non-violence. Theoretically speaking, Pashtun digital activism is a networked counterpublic which fosters solidarity and extends arguments to the broader Pakistani public sphere (Jackson et al., 2018; Kuo, 2018). The phenomenon of a more widespread Pashtun neo-ethnonationalism shows the changing nature of the process (Amin, 2023).

Self-representation has also led to counter representation, in a negative sense. The more these grievances of the Pashtun were made public, the more they were disputed by the state discourse that labelled the movement as a danger (Jan & Khan, 2024). These are the dynamic risks that reenact the very securitisation that self-representation was trying to avoid: Pashtun assertion as a risk. Regarding inter-ethnic relations, findings indicate that the outcome of Pashtun self-representation is tied with the reaction of wider Pakistani audiences to it, which has often been met with suspicion and counter-narrative (Jan & Khan, 2024; Qadir, 2025).

The findings also suggest that the move from representation to self-representation is incomplete. These old voices, however, have not vanished, and are still being used in cinema and news media and official discourse with the new digital voices (Rizwan, 2023; Yousaf, 2021). Social media is not a sign of the end of representation but is a space where representation and self-representation interact and compete. In this space, Pashtun identity is negotiated and negotiated between those who speak for Pashtuns, speak about Pashtuns and those who want to silence Pashtuns.

What even constitutes as social media is also up for debate. Social media was often linked to terrorism in Pakistan's War on Terror, but its role can also be interpreted differently by examining how it was used during the conflict (Hassan, 2018). This is particularly relevant for Pashtuns, as the very social media on which they have the opportunity to represent themselves is the very social media through which their activism can be construed as a threat (Jan & Khan, 2024; Qadir, 2025). Self-representation online thus relies as much on the content produced by Pashtuns as on the interpretation of social media and of the speech flowing on the platforms of such media by the state and by broader publics.

5.3. Implications for Theory

The results also further develop the concept of networked counterpublics. In the West, counterpublics are understood as places where marginalized users create solidarity and construct arguments for the wider publics (Jackson et al., 2018; Kuo, 2018). This case of Pashtun demonstrates that, in a securitised setting, a counterpublic is not only produced by the voices it brings together but also by the reactions it evokes. In the Pashtun case, the problems of self-representation are continua.

State discourse, claims of rivals in the community, and social norms that govern the visibility, especially women's visibility, answered lly (Amin, 2023; Jan & Khan, 2024; Kamran, 2023). Self-representation is not only not the opposite of representation, but it is a step in an ongoing struggle to define meaning. This indicates that research in the area of minority self-representation in South Asia must not only consider what is said about the minorities, but also how it is received, challenged and reinterpreted.

6. Recommendations

Media outlets need to include the voices of Pashtuns by implementing a pro-Pashtun approach to reporting on Pashtun regions, involving Pashtun journalists, creators and community sources, as well as avoiding official narratives. Policymakers need to acknowledge digital expression of grievance as a legitimate way for citizens to engage in the process of policy making and address the documented grievances by engaging in dialogue and not securitisation. Digital literacy and safe online participation should be supported by universities and civil society organisations, especially the barriers for Pashtun women. Both social media platforms and researchers need to find ways to save Pashto language content and record minority voices. Going forward, this research should involve a multi-pronged approach that integrates textual and network analysis of Pashtun media with interviews with Pashtun content creators and activists, and should highlight women and the Pashtun diaspora and Pashto-language cultural production.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how Pashtun ethnic identity is negotiated on social media in Pakistan. It was based on a thematic synthesis of 25 peer reviewed studies and five themes were identified, speaking back to the stereotype of the violent Pathan, turning private grief into collective testimony, claiming rights and citizenship, performing cultural identity through language and heritage and contested limits of digital visibility. All of these themes demonstrate how social media has allowed a substantial movement towards self-representation and provided Pashtun new ways to define themselves, to record their experiences and to redefine their Pashtun identity as citizens and culture rather than threat.

The study also reveals this change is not total nor universal. While being an act of self-representation online remains a challenge to state counter-narratives, it is further complicated by internal differences in representation of what Pashtuns represent, by gendered norms of visibility, and does not, in itself, guarantee political change. The results have furthered the concept of networked counterpublics to the context of an ethnic minority in Pakistan and shown that self-representation should not be considered as a process of total transformation but as a process of negotiation.

There are limitations to the study. It is a synthesis of previous work, and thus relies in part on the extent and quality of the research that has been carried out, some of which concentrates on the PTM's political engagement in online space, and on women's voices that are under-researched, Pashto-language content being one of them. Empirical studies that directly analyze Pashtun social media content and directly interact with the users of that content, will enhance and build on these results. Yet the study shows that the identity of Pashtuns and who speaks for them – and on whose terms has been forcefully brought back to the fore in the digital age.

8. Declarations

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