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Faith, Youth, and the Feed: Exploring Social Media Uses and Gratifications Among Students in Pakistani Madrassah

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Abstract

Background: Social media has become a primary tool for youth communication and identity formation worldwide. However, in culturally conservative societies, especially among students in Madrassahs (religious seminaries), its usage patterns and psychological effects may vary considerably from global trends. Understanding these differences requires a culturally grounded framework like the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which considers media users as active agents aiming to satisfy specific personal and social needs.

Objectives: This study aims to investigate the motivations behind social media use among youth enrolled in Madrassahs in Kohat, Pakistan. It seeks to identify the primary gratifications these users derive from digital platforms, assess the impact of social media on their educational, religious, and personal lives, and examine the challenges they face in managing online engagement.

Methods: Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from (n=384) participants through a structured survey instrument. The analysis employed UGT as the guiding theoretical framework and categorized responses into key gratification domains, including social interaction, information-seeking, entertainment, personal identity expression, religious and cultural engagement, and practical utility. Descriptive statistics were used to assess usage patterns, while Likert-scale items captured participants' perceptions and attitudes.

Key Findings / Conclusion: The findings indicate that social media serves multiple functions for seminary youth: maintaining social connections, accessing news and information, entertainment,

and expressing opinions. YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok were the most used platforms. However, some participants reported an improvement in religious knowledge through social media, while a greater number disagreed. Challenges included time management, exposure to harmful content, and interference with education or religious obligations. Despite these concerns, the youth were found to be active, discerning users of digital media. The study affirms the relevance of UGT in non-Western, religiously grounded contexts. It highlights the urgent need for targeted digital literacy programs to promote balanced and meaningful engagement with social media.

Keywords: Social Media, Madrassah, UGT, Entertainment, Identity, Religious, Cultural

Introduction

In the rapidly changing digital age, social media has fundamentally changed how individuals communicate, share information, and engage in social interaction around the world (Herrada-Lores et al., 2025). Its influence is especially prominent among youth, who tend to be early adopters and intensive users of these platforms (Ullah & Iqbal, 2025). In religiously and culturally conservative societies, like Pakistan, the integration of social media into daily life introduces unique dynamics (Asif et al., 2025). These dynamics influence how individuals' access, interpret, and sharing information, maintain social relationships, and negotiate their identities within traditional value systems (Rizvi, 2021). To understand these behavioral patterns among Pakistani Madrassah (Islamic seminaries) students, it is crucial to use a theoretical perspective that emphasizes user agency and intentionality. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offers such a framework by asserting that media users are active participants who engage with content to satisfy specific psychological, social, and cognitive needs. (Katz et al., 1973).

There are more than 50,000 madrassahs in Pakistan, which serve as key institutions for religious education across the country. These madrassahs provide instruction primarily in the Quran, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh), and Arabic language, playing a central role in shaping the religious understanding and moral values of their students (Shahab, 2021). Enrollment usually starts at a young age, with children as young as five years old beginning madrassahs to learn Quranic memorisation (Hifz) and basic Islamic studies. The age range of students often goes up to 35 years, covering different levels of religious knowledge. Both boys and girls go to madrassahs, though they are usually in separate places due to cultural and religious customs (Sodhar & Rasool, 2013). Therefore, these institutions not only provide religious education but also act as key community centres in Pakistan's social and educational landscape (Shabir et al., 2012).

The use of social media in Pakistan has grown exponentially over the past decade, with even traditionally conservative institutions now witnessing its widespread adoption. Despite a growing body of global research on UGT and digital media, there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies focusing on the motivations and challenges faced by youth in religious educational settings within South Asia. This study seeks to address that gap by presenting grounded evidence of how Madrassah students navigate social media to meet personal, social, and spiritual needs.

Literature Review: Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Media

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) emerged as a significant paradigm in media and communication research, shifting the focus from “*what media do to people*” to “*what people do with media*” presented in the 1940s and gaining prominence in the 1970s with scholars like Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, UGT posits that individuals are active, goal-directed media consumers who consciously select media content to satisfy their psychological, social, and cognitive needs (Katz et al., 1973). This active audience perspective contrasts sharply with earlier models that viewed audiences as passive recipients of media messages. UGT identifies several categories of gratifications that individuals seek from media. These typically include:

- **Cognitive Needs:** Acquiring information, knowledge, and understanding.
- **Affective Needs:** Experiencing emotional, pleasurable, or aesthetic experiences.
- **Personal Integrative Needs:** Enhancing credibility, confidence, status, and stability; gaining insight into oneself.
- **Social Integrative Needs:** Connecting with family and friends; strengthening interpersonal ties.
- **Tension Release Needs:** Escaping from problems, relaxing, or diverting oneself.

With the rise of the internet and subsequently social media platforms, UGT has found renewed relevance. Social media, characterised by its interactive, participatory, and user-generated content nature, offers a rich environment for users to fulfil diverse needs (Saeed & Ullah, 2021). Early research on social media through UGT lenses focused on platforms like Facebook, identifying gratifications such as maintaining social ties, seeking information, entertainment, and self-expression (Ullah & Iqbal, 2025). As the social media landscape diversified, studies expanded to platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, revealing platform-specific gratifications while reinforcing core UGT tenets (Ullah & Iqbal, 2025). For instance, Twitter users might seek information and opinion expression, while Instagram users might prioritize self-presentation and visual sharing (Mulyono, 2023).

Research on youth and social media consistently highlights the prominence of social interaction and entertainment as primary gratifications (Kim et al., 2025). Young people often use social media to connect with peers, maintain friendships, and alleviate boredom. However, beyond these common uses, studies also reveal the increasing role of social media in information seeking, particularly for news and educational content, and for personal identity formation and expression (Kim et al., 2025). The interactive nature of social media allows youth to experiment with different identities, receive feedback, and build online communities that reflect their interests and values (Armita, 2025).

In non-Western and culturally specific settings, the UGT has been commonly used to examine how people engage with different media. Different research studies conducted on Asian and Middle Eastern countries indicates that although common gratifications such as social interaction and entertainment are still relevant, the way people use media and the types of content they seek are often influenced by local cultural and social norms (Asia et al., 2024; Ullah & Jan, 2021). For example, in societies where religion holds a central place, social media is

frequently used for religious education, spiritual support, and participation in online religious discussions.

This study focuses specifically on youth studying in madrassahs in Pakistan. While they belong to the broader category of young social media users, their patterns of use and motivations may differ due to their religious training and cultural background. Exploring their experiences helps to better understand how digital platforms are used within religious educational contexts. Many researchers, like Asia et al. (2024); Ghauri et al. (2023); Kim et al. (2025); Ullah and Iqbal (2025) research on social media use and identified its role in political participation, social awareness, and entertainment. However, the specific intersection of religious education, social media, and UGT in the Pakistani context, particularly among seminary (Madrassah) students, remains an underexplored area. This paper aims to contribute to this gap by providing empirical data on how this specific group of young individuals leverages social media to fulfill their diverse needs, including those related to their religious identity and learning. By examining both the positive gratifications and the perceived challenges, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of their social media experience.

Methodology

Data Source and Participants

The data was collected from 384 students of 30 Madrassahs in the Kohat region using the Krejcie and dan Morgan (1970) sample size formula. The participant was recruited through a convenience sampling method. Data was collected from April to June 2025, over a three-month period. The demographic profile of the participants indicates a strong focus on youth. Approximately 68.5% of participants were aged between 15 and 24 years, and a combined 97.4% were between 15 and 34 years. The average age was calculated to be approximately 23 years, with the median and mode also falling within the youth category, indicating a youth-centric sample with a positive skew.

The majority of participants had completed "1st year of dasanama (24%) and 2nd year of dasanama (19.3%) levels of education, with a notable 14.6% having completed or pursuing "Dora Hadith," signifying a diverse range of religious educational backgrounds.

The participants were primarily drawn from Madrassahs in Kohat, Pakistan. The top three contributing institutions were Anjuman Taleem ul Quran Paracha Town Kohat (24.7%), Darul Uloom Haqqania Noorabad Kohat (17.9%), and Qazi Husamuddin Kohat (14.8%). These three institutions collectively accounted for over 58% of the total sample, providing a representative cross-section of students from these specific religious educational environments.

Results of the Study

The analysis of the study, reveals a multifaceted picture of social media use among students from madrassahs in Kohat, Pakistan, firmly aligning with the tenets of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The demographic data confirms the study's focus on a young population. The vast majority of participants (68.5%) were aged 15-24, with 97.4% falling within the 15-34 age group. The mean age of approximately 23 years further highlights this youth-centric sample. Educationally, participants primarily represented intermediate religious education levels (1st and

2nd year of dasanama), with a significant segment also pursuing advanced religious studies ("Dora Hadith"). The concentration of participants from specific seminaries (e.g., Anjuman Taleem ul Quran, Darul Uloom Haqqania) highlights the study's specific cultural and educational context.

Table 1. Analysis of Daily Social Media Usage Duration

Daily Usage Duration	Frequency	Cumulative Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	137	137	35.70 %
1 – 2 hours	157	294	40.90 %
2 – 3 hours	78	372	20.30 %
3 – 4 hours	7	379	1.80 %
4 – 5 hours	3	382	0.80 %
More than 5 hours	2	384	0.50 %
Total	384		100 %

The table indicates the “daily social media usage”, which shows a moderate engagement, with 76.6% of participants using social media for two hours or less daily. The largest group (40.9%) reported 1-2 hours of daily use, suggesting a balanced approach to social media consumption that likely coexists with their academic and other commitments. Only a small fraction (2.3%) reported using social media for more than three hours daily.

Table 2: Which Social Media Platforms Do You Use?

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Cumulative Frequency	Percentage
YouTube	193	193	29.60 %
Facebook	143	336	21.90 %
TikTok	125	461	19.20 %
WhatsApp	116	577	17.80 %
Instagram	47	624	7.20 %
Twitter	28	652	4.30 %
Total	652		100 %

The table shows that YouTube emerged as the most popular, utilized by 29.6% of users. This was followed by Facebook (21.9%), TikTok (19.2%), and WhatsApp (17.8%). Instagram (7.2%) and Twitter (4.3%) were less popular among this demographic. This preference for visual and interactive platforms (YouTube, TikTok) and messaging apps (WhatsApp) over text-heavy platforms suggests specific content consumption habits.

Table 3. Primary Reasons for Social Media Use (Uses and Gratifications)

Primary Reasons	Frequency	Cumulative Frequency	Percentage
Communication with Friends & Family	205	205	20.30 %
Religious Education	170	375	16.90 %
Education	124	499	12.30 %
Entertainment	117	616	11.60 %
Islamic Lectures	107	723	10.60 %
News and Information	95	818	9.40 %
Online Business	59	877	5.80 %
Discussion	35	912	3.50 %
Make New Friends	34	946	3.40 %
Online Islamic Teaching	32	978	3.20 %
Total	1010	—	100 %

The Table identified several key gratifications driving social media use among the participants:

Social Interaction Gratification: This was the most common motivation among participants, with 205 responses (20.3% of total) choosing “Communication with Friends and Family” as a main reason for using social media. This supports the social integrative needs outlined in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), highlighting the platform’s role in maintaining personal relationships, especially in madrassahs where social and geographic isolation is frequent.

Information Gratification: Responses related to information-seeking included “News and Information” (95 responses), “Education” (124), and “Religious Education” (170). Together, these reflect a strong cognitive motivation, showing that users turn to social media not only for general knowledge and current affairs but also for academic and religious learning. This suggests that social media serves as a complementary educational tool in the lives of seminary students.

Entertainment Gratification: The 117 responses (11.6%) under “Entertainment” indicate that a significant number of students use social media for leisure and relaxation. This aligns with UGT’s affective and diversionary gratifications, where users seek stress relief and emotional enjoyment through engaging content such as videos, humor, and music.

Habitual Use and Psychological Gratification: Beyond the frequency responses, general survey feedback shows that many participants consider social media part of their daily routine. However, its role in providing psychological comfort was mixed, some found it emotionally supportive, while others expressed discomfort or fatigue. This highlights a gap between habitual use and emotional satisfaction, suggesting the need for more mindful engagement.

Religious and Cultural Gratification: A combined 277 responses were recorded for “Religious Education” and “Islamic Lectures,” confirming a strong interest in religious content. Still, some

participants expressed doubt about the credibility of online religious information. The popularity of scholars like Mufti Tariq Masood and Maulana Tariq Jameel, along with trusted pages like “Al Burhan”, suggests that users prefer content from familiar and reputable sources. This points to selective religious engagement, where users rely on a few authoritative voices for spiritual content.

Utility Gratification (Decision Making): social media also plays a functional role, especially in decision-making about products and services. A significant proportion of participants agreed that digital platforms help them evaluate options through reviews, recommendations, and influencer content. This reflects a crucial instrumental gratification, especially in settings where offline access to such information may be limited.

Perceived Impacts and Challenges

While social media offers various gratifications, the study also revealed significant challenges and perceived negative impacts:

Overall Impact on Personal Life: A large majority (78.1%) of participants confirmed that social media impacts their personal lives. Qualitative responses, frequently cited time wastage, neglect of responsibilities (academic, domestic, social), mental distraction, negative thoughts, and weakening of family ties. Some also viewed social media as a "fitna" (mischief/temptation) or a source of "misguidance."

Misleading Content: A notable 51.8% of participants reported encountering inappropriate or misleading content on social media, underscoring concerns about information accuracy and reliability.

Interference with Education/Religion: 66.1% of participants stated that social media "sometimes" interferes with their educational or religious activities, with 20.6% explicitly saying it does interfere. This suggests a struggle to balance social media use with academic and spiritual commitments.

Major Challenges: When asked about significant challenges, "time management" was the majority (41.6%), followed by "exposure to harmful content" (27.7%), "lack of relevant content" (18.8%), and "privacy concerns" (11.9%). These findings reinforce the negative aspects of social media use and the difficulties users face in navigating the digital landscape.

The results paint a comprehensive picture of social media use among this specific youth demographic. While widely used for social connection, information, and entertainment, its impact on religious learning is mixed, and significant challenges related to time management and content quality persist.

Discussion

This study provides compelling evidence for the applicability of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in understanding social media consumption among madrassahs students in Kohat, Pakistan. The data consistently pointed that these young individuals are active media consumers who selectively engage with social media platforms to fulfill different needs, aligning well with the core tenets of UGT.

The important of social interaction gratification among participants, highlighted the basic human need for social connection, even within culturally specific environments, like madrassahs. This finding is consistent with available global research that identifies social networking as one of the primary motivations for social media use (Kim et al., 2025; Shifman et al., 2025). In case of madrassah students, whose social lives can be formed by the organized community and religious standard, social media is most likely to provide an extra, and often more extensive source of preserving personal connections. It helps them feel connected to their loved ones and counter physical separations that may occur due to distance. They can also pursue broader networks than they are physically bound to (Jones-Ahmed, 2022).

Information gratification also emerged to be a great motivating factor. Many participants indicated that social media is the source toward which they are using both general information and that of the local, national, and international news. This indicates that social media can serve as a device of both social communication and startling news intake and instruction and overcome the omnipotence of traditional sources of information, e.g., Newspaper, radio and television (Ullah & Iqbal, 2025). The fact that YouTube is one of the most popular services among users also contributes to this tendency, since videos are a very convenient method of presenting educational and informational information in them. The results correlate well with the conclusions of the Uses and Gratifications Theory in relation to the cognitive needs of the people when searching the knowledge and broadening the sphere of information they possess. (Youn et al., 2024).

Entertainment gratification emerged as another strong driver of social media use among participants. This suggests that with the religious educational backgrounds aside, young people in the madrassahs, just like their counterparts all around the globe, fervently pursue leisure and distraction using the online platforms. These kinds of usage contribute to the idea that entertainment is one of the most basic human needs, which only social media can serve because it provides easy and convenient access to the content resulting in releasing tension, engaging users emotionally, and having a momentary break of common responsibilities (Xia, 2025). Entertainment in this sense is not a mere activity which serves no purpose but, it is rather a significant emotional fulfilment in the entire dynamic of media utilization.

It is also notable that the ratio of the students that responded to use social media as a personal means of identity and self-expression is high. This is an interesting finding especially since madrassahs have a structured and conservative environment. It implies that the youth in these environments uses social media articulation of their views, engaging in discourse, and monitoring their web-based identity. Such behaviors correspond to the personal integrative needs identified in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which accentuate self-expression and self-presentation and the opportunity to seek power, or social recognition (Ifedayo, 2018). The results can also show that young people in religious establishments can more strongly wish to have voice and agency due to a more profound desire to be heard and feel empowered, and digital platforms are uniquely positioned to support them in such a context rather than cross-cultural traditions.

The mixed results concerning habitual use and psychological gratification offer a nuanced perspective. While over half reported social media as a daily habit, a significant majority disagreed that it provides peace and comfort. This contradiction suggests that while social media is deeply integrated into daily routines, its psychological impact is complex. For many, the constant engagement might lead to feelings of obligation or even stress, rather than relaxation. This aligns with the "pleasure vs. utility conflict" mentioned in the source document, where the perceived benefits (utility) might outweigh the psychological comfort (pleasure). This finding warrants further qualitative exploration to understand the underlying emotional experiences of these users.

The findings on religious and cultural gratification are particularly insightful given the sample's background. This indicates a potential scepticism or dissatisfaction with the quality or authenticity of religious content available on social media, or perhaps a preference for traditional sources of religious learning. However, the high following of specific religious scholars (Mufti Tariq Masood, Maulana Tariq Jameel) and Islamic Facebook pages (Al Burhan) suggests that while the overall impact on *personal* religious knowledge might be debated, social media is undeniably a significant platform for accessing and engaging with religious figures and content (Ullah et al., 2025). This points to a selective consumption of religious material, where users might trust specific sources more than the general religious discourse on social media (Asif et al., 2025).

The Study concluded that utility gratification for product and service decision-making highlights social media's practical role in consumer behavior. This demonstrates that beyond social and entertainment functions, users leverage social media as a resource for useful information that aids their daily lives, such as product reviews, service recommendations, and market insights.

The identified challenges, especially time management and exposure to harmful content, align with global concerns about social media use. The high percentage of participants who feel social media "sometimes" interferes with their educational or religious activities highlights a struggle with digital discipline. This indicates that while social media provides many benefits, it also presents risks that users are aware of but may find hard to control. The view of social media as a "fitna" by some participants further shows a strong awareness of its potential negative effects within a religious context.

This study confirms UGT's usefulness in explaining social media use within a specific cultural and educational context, particularly among Madrassah students. Although typical pleasures like social connection, information and diversion, are still at the heart of the matter, the nuances in the findings regarding the religious satisfaction and psychological well-being, as well as identified diligences, indicate the unique connection between technology, culture and individual requirements. The researcher points out that the madrassah users are dynamic, critical, and ambivalent consumers of the social media capable of balancing its costs and benefits in order to achieve multiple satisfactions.

Conclusion

This study, based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), offers a detailed analysis of social media usage patterns among madrassah students in Kohat, Pakistan. This research supports the core idea of UGT that media users are active participants who intentionally choose media platforms to satisfy various personal, social, informational, and psychological needs (Balabanis & Chatzopoulou, 2025).

The findings show that participants mainly use social media to maintain social relationships, gather information on topics of interest and current affairs, and seek entertainment. These motivations align closely with global patterns observed among youth in different cultural contexts (Efendi & Shasrini, 2023), thereby strengthening the cross-cultural relevance of UGT. A clear preference for visually engaging and interactive platforms like YouTube and TikTok shows how platform-specific features support gratification-seeking behaviors, especially among younger madrassah students familiar with audiovisual content.

Moreover, social media emerged as a significant tool for self-expression and identity negotiation. A substantial proportion of participants reported using these platforms to voice their opinions and influence others, an indication of growing civic and discursive engagement even within conservative religious educational settings. Additionally, the instrumental use of social media for decision-making, particularly regarding consumer choices, points to its expanding utility beyond social and informational domains (Sahr Suleman, 2025; Ullah & Iqbal, 2025).

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also highlights notable complexities and challenges. Although many participants reported daily engagement with social media, a considerable portion expressed ambivalence about its contribution to psychological well-being. The frequent use of social media did not consistently translate into feelings of peace or comfort, indicating a disjunction between habitual behavior and emotional gratification, possibly linked to digital fatigue or information overload (Shifman et al., 2025). Furthermore, participants exhibited skepticism about the role of social media in enhancing religious knowledge. While some actively followed religious scholars and Islamic content, a larger segment questioned the authenticity and reliability of such information, suggesting a critical and discerning approach to online religious discourse.

Key challenges identified included difficulties in time management, exposure to harmful or inappropriate content, and occasional interference with academic and religious responsibilities. These findings underscore the importance of context-specific digital literacy initiatives aimed at fostering balanced and responsible media use, particularly for populations navigating the dual demands of religious study and digital engagement (Hilman, 2025).

In conclusion, the research contributes meaningfully to the body of literature on UGT by validating its applicability in a non-Western, religiously conservative setting. It demonstrates that Madrassah students are not passive consumers but active and reflective users of digital media, who engage with platforms to fulfill a broad spectrum of needs while negotiating cultural and educational constraints. These insights offer valuable implications for educators, religious

leaders, and policymakers seeking to support healthy digital behaviors among youth in similar socio-religious environments.

Limitations of the Study

This study providing valuable insights, has several limitations. Being a quantitative investigation based on self-reported data, it may be affected by social desirability bias, with participants possibly giving responses they think are more acceptable. The sample was limited to students from the Madrassah in Kohat, Pakistan, which reduces the ability to apply the findings to other educational or cultural contexts. Additionally, using pre-defined gratification categories may have missed more nuanced or emerging motivations for social media use specific to this population.

Future Research

To address these limitations, future research should consider adopting mixed-methods approaches, including qualitative techniques like interviews or focus group discussions, to gain a better understanding of user experiences and motivations. Expanding the participant pool to include youth from secular institutions and various regions across Pakistan would enhance the generalizability of the results. Platform-specific studies could investigate how different social media applications meet distinct user needs. Longitudinal studies may also help track changes in usage patterns over time. Additionally, exploring perceptions of social media as a source of "fitna" (misguidance) could provide valuable insights into its influence on religious identity. Finally, future research should focus on developing and evaluating digital literacy programs tailored to the needs and challenges faced by youth in religious educational settings.

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