

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL IDENTITY AND MOTIVATION OF PAKISTANI ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with understanding the relationship between ESL learners social identity and motivation to learn English. Second language learners' social identity is a complex product of various factors such as parental influence, religious values, sociocultural elements and pedagogical effects. This study investigates this intricate relationship of various factors on learners' social identity and motivation to learn English through mixed method approach. Data was collected by using survey questionnaire and semi structured interviews. The survey was administered to 345 undergraduate students across various universities in Pakistan. To support survey findings researcher conducted semi structured interviews with ESL educators having at least five years of experience teaching ESL learners. The results of the study show that Learners identity (LER) and parental involvement (Par_Fa) have a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.496$ $p < 0.01$). Learners identity and religious influence (REL) have a moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.454$ $p < 0.01$). With respect to societal factors and learner identity, sociocultural factors (Soc_cul) exhibit a moderate correlation with LER ($r = 0.349$ $p < 0.01$) suggesting that identity construction is influenced by external societal factors. The results show that there is a moderate correlation between pedagogy (PEDG) and LER ($r = 0.312$ $p < 0.01$) suggesting that instructional methods have an impact on how learners form their identities. With respects to the learner identity and motivation, the strongest correlation between LER and MOT ($r = 0.518$ $p < 0.01$) is found among all variables. This suggests that learners who have a strong sense of self are much more motivated to learn English. Qualitative findings further supports this correlation of various factors on learners' social identity and motivation to learn English language, ESL educators emphasize on inclusive ESL learning environment where learners develop a positive sense of identity, which foster motivation of learners.

Key words: ESL learners, Socio-cultural, religious, Parental influence, pedagogy, mixed method, correlation.

1 INTRODUCTION

In multicultural and multilingual societies like Pakistan, applied linguistics has devoted significant attention on understanding how social identity and motivation interact in language learning (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025; Ahadin et al., 2023). This study explores how social identities—shaped by Parental influence, culture, pedagogy and religion—affect the motivation of Pakistani ESL learners to acquire the English language. Social identity is an important topic of study since it affects learners' attitudes as well as their objectives and perseverance in learning a second language (Ahmad et al., 2022). According to Ajmal et al (2020) social identity is a crucial area of study, as it influences learners' attitudes, goals, and perseverance in learning a second language. The researcher's strong desire to understand the broader sociocultural factors influencing language acquisition in Pakistan served as the primary motivation for this study.

In a linguistically diverse nation like Pakistan, where English holds both a prestigious status and a colonial legacy (Amjad et al., 2021), learners frequently experience identity conflicts (Zahid &

Ghani, 2018). These conflicts shaped by socio-economic pressures, religious beliefs, and cultural norms, directly or indirectly impact their motivation to learn English (Wadho et al., 2016). The researcher's interest in this topic was further reinforced by interactions with ESL students and personal academic experiences. A significant theoretical and practical knowledge gap was identified, as few studies (Aqoob et al., 2014; Wadho et al., 2016; Zahid & Ghani, 2018; Ajmal et al., 2020; Memon, 2023; Ameen & Rehman, 2024) have examined how social identity affects learners' motivation in the Pakistani context. Recognizing the urgent need to provide parents, educators, and researchers with insight into the socio-psychological factors that support or hinder language acquisition, the researcher sought to explore this complex relationship. The study aims to contribute to the research by understanding the relationship between social identity and motivation of Pakistani ESL learners.

1.1 Context of the Study

In order to understand the complex interplay of learner identity and motivation it is crucial to situate the research in a specific context. For this purpose, Pakistan provides a unique background for investigating this phenomenon. Pakistan is a multilingual and multicultural context with complex sociocultural structure and complicate linguistic landscape (Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). English in Pakistan holds significant importance due to its colonial legacy (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024; Ramzan et al., 2025). During British colonial rule English was recognized as the official language which continued even after independence, this legacy strengthened English as a language of privilege and route to upward social mobility (Bukhari & Cheng, 2017; Rahman, 1966). Nevertheless, attitudes regarding English language are influenced by cultural and religious values (Akram et al., 2020; Ramzan & Khan, 2024). English is as a colonial product that threatens local identities on the other hand it is also seen as a necessary component of modernization and global integration (Haider, 2012; Ramzan, et al., 2023).

In context of Pakistan ESL learners' identity is often shaped by sociocultural status, religion, education and parental influence. Considering sociocultural landscape of Pakistan, learners' in ESL classrooms have different attitudes towards English learning which shape their motivation. According to Shamim (2008) learners from Urban and Elite Background see English as a symbol of social mobility and prestige as they have rich resources and easy access to quality language instruction. On the other hand students from low-income or rural communities encounter numerous obstacles including inadequate instruction and little exposure which alienate them from language (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Pham, 2021; Rahman, 2004; Ramzan et al., 2023). In this regard learner positive social identity have positive attitude towards language and is more motivated to learn English as compared to the learner feeling alienate with English. The self-identity and motivation of learners to interact with English are greatly impacted by this disparity in access and perception.

1.2 Problem Statement

Social identity which is shaped by individual beliefs, cultural norms and group affiliations is a key component in motivating students in Pakistan where ESL instruction is influenced by a complex interplay of social, cultural, religious and educational factors (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Gardner,

1985). English is a colonial legacy and a means of upward social mobility in Pakistan causing conflicts between local and global identities (Rahman, 1996). This study explores how learners' motivation is impacted by identity factors like religious teachings, parental influence, societal norms and pedagogical practices. Learner motivation is greatly influenced by parental attitudes for example, while less privileged households may consider English to be less important wealthy families frequently emphasize the languages advantages for socioeconomic advancement (Chao, 1994; Choi et al., 2024; Rahman, 2002). Similarly, religion which is fundamental to Pakistani society shapes the identities of students by portraying English as a cultural threat (Masita, 2022). Furthermore, social norms have the power to either strengthen the status of English as a modernity symbol or encourage opposition because of perceived cultural imperialism (Akram & Oteir, 2025; Coleman, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2024). The role of identity in motivation is also frequently overlooked by traditional rote-based pedagogies but collaborative culturally sensitive teaching methods have the potential to improve student engagement and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Norton, 2000; Dörnyei, 2009; Memon, 2023). This study intends to fill knowledge gaps regarding the relationship between social identity and motivation in Pakistani ESL learners and provide guidance for more beneficial successful teaching methods.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

This study seeks to expand our understanding of how learners' identities are shaped by education, society, religion, and family, and how these identities, in turn, impact their motivation to learn English. By examining these interconnected components, the study will provide valuable insights into how educators and parents can work together to create an environment that supports learners' identity development and enhances their motivation to learn English.

This study aims to achieve following objectives:

1. To assess the extent of parental influence on the development of learners' identity.
2. To understand how religious teachings and practices shape learners' identity.
3. To find out the specific social influences contributing to the formation of learners' identity.
4. To examine pedagogical methods that shape learners' identity.
5. To identify specific aspects of learners' identity that positively correlates with motivation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have been investigating research for years it has evolved from early foundational models to dynamic context-sensitive frameworks, In 1985 Gardner made a distinction between instrumental motivation which is motivated by practical objectives like career advancement and integrative motivation which is motivated by learning a language to blend in with its culture. His research as well as Clément et al. (1994) and Gardner and Lambert (1990) connected motivation to attitudes toward target language communities and self-confidence. Further, Norton (1995)

proposed the idea of investment; he demonstrated how social identity and opportunity access are additional factors that drive motivation beyond cognitive abilities. In 2000 Deci and Ryan presented Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which state that autonomy is essential for long-term engagement and intrinsic motivation is prioritized over extrinsic rewards.

goal-setting studies by Locke and Latham (2002) and Zimmerman (2002) showed that clear difficult goals improve performance; while, Schunk (2003) cautioned that too many extrinsic rewards could erode intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, Dörnyei (2005) demonstrated how cultural values influence learning objectives by integrating social identity into motivation. Ushioda (2009 2011) highlighted motivation as a dynamic process influenced by social and personal identities while Kim (2009) discovered that motivation for learning English is influenced by global identity. The research on motivation and social identity has evolved in different contexts in different aspects. Following are the empirical studies relevant to the study.

Wadho et al. (2016) presented that parental involvement and teachers' support both have a significant impact on learners' desire to learn English with parental rewards serving as important extrinsic motivators. Likewise, Al Mubarak and Prasetya (2019) discover that language learner identity changes as a result of classroom experiences, school policies and parental support. Zahid and Ghani (2018) highlighted the importance of addressing social identity issues, as the results of the study show when the demands of language learning clash with their cultural values, Pakistani learners experience increased anxiety. Similarly, Ajmal et al. (2020) find that although English can improve access to opportunities and knowledge around the world it may also put traditional cultural identities in jeopardy in Pakistani secondary schools requiring balanced teaching methods.

Using Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System in Indonesian pesantren Farid (2021) discover that while students in conservative environments are highly motivated for Arabic because of its religious significance their motivation for English is conflicted and partially motivated by a desire for dawah and international communication. Dos Santos (2021) investigated Spanish learner heritage in the United States. Findings present social influences, dual Latin American identities and career goals as key motivators and suggested specialized institutional support. Similarly, Ameen and Rehman (2024) showed that learning English has a significant on learners' self-identity as ESL learners frequently try to fit in with English-speaking cultural norms. This suggests that motivation is crucial for identity reconstruction.

3 FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The research framework of the study focuses on two primary relationships: Learners' identity and motivation to learn English. Lamb (201) states that learners' identity —their motivation is influenced by how they view themselves in relation to English as a language. A student may be naturally motivated to acquire the language, for instance, if they have a strong sense of identification with English-speaking or global societies (Lantolf, 2000). On the other hand, they may become less motivated, if studying English contradicts their cultural or religious identity (Farid, 2021). This framework integrates these relationships into a structured model as shown in figure 1.

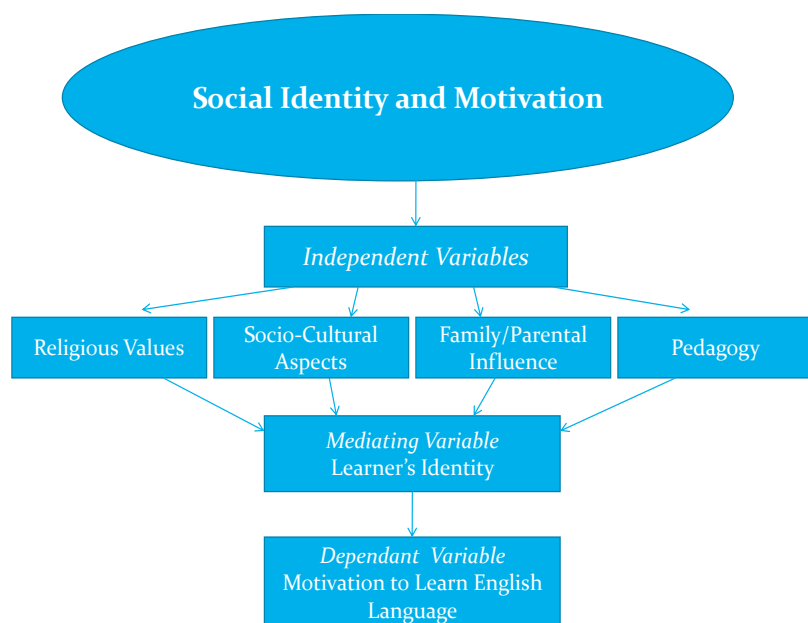


Figure 1. Framework of the Study

This framework lays the foundation of following hypothesis

H1: Religion has a major and beneficial impact on how students build their identities.

H2: Culture has a major and beneficial impact on how students build their identities.

H3: Parental influence has a major and beneficial impact on how students establish their identities

H4: Learners' identity development is significantly and favorably impacted by educational influence

H5: Learners' motivation to study English is significantly and favorably impacted by their identity

4 RESEARCH METHOD

The study follows mixed method design due to its flexibility to deal with the complexity of research topic. Creswell et al. (2018) state that mixed method research is ideal for investigating research issues that require both extensive narratives to comprehend the underlying processes and numerical data to identify trends. The research administers survey questionnaire to 345 undergraduate students enrolled in various universities of Pakistan in order to collect quantitative data to find out the relationship between social identity and motivation to learn English. In the

quantitative phase, a sizable sample of undergraduate students is given questionnaire survey. This stage identifies statistical patterns, correlations, and trends in the ways that educational, cultural, parental, and religious elements affect learners' identities and motivation to learn English. In order to provide further insights into data and to validate the research, semi structured interviews were conducted with 15 ESL experts who had at least five years of experience with ESL learners. Both quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between learners' social identity and motivation to learn English. .

5 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS and AMOS software. Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PF1	249	1	7	4.79	1.822
PF2	249	1	7	4.84	1.833
PF3	249	1	7	4.65	1.769
PF4	249	1	7	4.51	1.852
MOT1	249	1	7	4.64	1.894
MOT2	249	1	7	4.67	1.864
MOT3	249	1	7	4.60	1.856
MOT4	249	1	7	4.55	1.798
MOT5	249	1	7	4.61	1.911
LI1	249	1	7	4.52	1.877
LI2	249	1	7	4.53	1.882
LI3	249	1	7	4.49	1.823
REL1	249	1	7	4.70	1.873
REL2	249	1	7	4.62	1.871
REL3	249	1	7	4.58	1.846
REL4	249	1	7	4.60	1.748
REL5	249	1	7	4.48	1.807

REL6	249	1	7	4.45	1.922
PEDG1	249	1	7	4.61	1.855
PEDG2	249	1	7	4.40	1.689
PEDG3	249	1	7	4.59	1.945
PEDG4	249	1	7	4.47	1.845
PEDG5	249	1	7	4.58	1.830
PEDG6	249	1	7	4.59	1.873
PEDG7	249	1	7	4.54	1.858
SC1	249	1	7	4.63	1.871
SC2	249	1	7	4.65	1.794
SC3	249	1	7	4.48	1.901
SC4	249	1	7	4.97	1.660
Valid (listwise)	N 249				

Motivation (mean = 4.25) and religious influence (mean = 4.35) have comparatively higher average in the dataset, indicating a high degree of agreement or prevalence of these factors among the participants. Sociocultural factor seem to have less positive influence indicated with a lower average (mean = 3.89) Conversely, Religious Influence exhibits the lowest standard deviation (0.52), indicating a higher degree of response consistency. However, Parental Influence indicate positive influence with a moderate average (mean = 4.12).

5.2 Reliability Analysis

The reliability of the constructs was checked against Cronbach's Alpha (0.7). Every construct in this study has value higher than 0.7, indicating high reliability (Hair et al., 2019). The construct Motivation, for instance, has the highest Cronbach's Alpha (0.935), as shown in table 3. This suggests that the five items measures of motivation are highly correlated and reliable for assessing this construct.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics for Motivation Factor

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.935	.935	5

Similarly, Pedagogical Influence has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.965, as shown in table 4 demonstrating the scale's strong reliability in gauging opinions about instructional methods.

Table 4. Reliability Statistics for Pedagogy Factor

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.965	.966	7

The parental factor construct exhibits a strong internal consistency, as reflected in a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.935. The Cronbach's Alpha of parental factor is shown in table 5.

Table 5. Reliability Statistics of Parental Factor

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.935	.935	4

The reliability analysis for the sociocultural factor presents a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.906, reflecting high internal consistency among the four items as shown in table 6.

Table 6. Reliability Statistics of Sociocultural Factor

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.906	.906	4

The reliability statistics for the religious factor indicate a strong internal consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.933. The reliability statistics for the religious factor is clearly presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Reliability Statistics for the Religious Factor

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.933	.933	6

A Cronbach's Alpha of 0.887 as shown in table 8 indicates that the identity factor construct has strong internal reliability.

Table 8. Reliability Statistics of Learner Identity Factor

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.887	.887	3

5.3 Correlation Analysis

A correlation matrix was created for this study in order to investigate the relationships between the constructs, which include learner identity and motivation and various factors such as parental influence, pedagogy, religion and sociocultural influence. The relationships between construct pairs are displayed in the correlation matrix in table 9.

Table 9. Correlation Analysis of Different Variables

Correlations							
		PEDG	REL	MOT	Par_Fa	Soc_cul	LER
PEDG		1	.389**	.339**	.275**	.214**	.312**
REL		.389**	1	.410**	.481**	.386**	.454**
MOT		.339**	.410**	1	.589**	.380**	.518**
Par_Fa		.275**	.481**	.589**	1	.410**	.496**
Soc_cul		.214**	.386**	.380**	.410**	1	.349**
LER		.312**	.454**	.518**	.496**	.349**	1

****.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Learners identity (LER) and parental involvement (Par_Fa) have a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.496$ $p < 0.01$) indicating parents have a greater role in shaping learners' identities. Further the matrix shows strong correlation between parental involvement and motivation (MOT) ($r = 0.589$ $p < 0.01$) supporting the idea that parents are important in motivating their children to learn English. Learners identity and religious influence (REL) have a moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.454$ $p < 0.01$) suggesting that learners' identities may be influenced by their religious beliefs. Furthermore, there is a significant correlation between REL and motivation ($r = 0.410$ $p < 0.01$). Meanwhile sociocultural factors (Soc_cul) and learner identity LER, exhibit a moderate correlation ($r = 0.349$ $p < 0.01$) which suggests learner identities are slightly influenced by sociocultural factors. At the same time Soc_cul has a positive correlation with motivation ($r = 0.380$ $p < 0.01$).

The results show that there is a moderate correlation between pedagogy (PEDG) and LER ($r = 0.312$ $p < 0.01$). Additionally PEDG and motivation are correlated ($r = 0.339$ $p < 0.01$) highlighting the significance of good teaching practices in motivating learners. With respects to the learner identity and motivation, the strongest correlation between LER and MOT ($r = 0.518$ $p < 0.01$) is found among all variables. This suggests that learners who have a positive social identity are more motivated to learn English.

To enhance understanding of the relationship between social identity and motivation in the context of learning English, semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data from five English language instructors who have significant knowledge of the pedagogical and sociocultural factors influencing learners' motivation and identity formation. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Following are the main themes of the study.

5.5 Parental Influence on Learners' Motivation

Parental influence was frequent code in the interview data, which shows that parents have primary role in shaping learners' identities. Numerous participants mentioned that this kind of support not only strengthens students' academic identities but also increases their motivation to learn English. One of the participants said, parental participation is essential, highlighting the fact that a large number of students are from rural regions where students do not have enough exposure to English language in such situation parents who invest in their child's education foster learners' motivation to interact with new language. One of the participants mentioned learners who have private tutoring are usually more confident and proficient. Other stated that Positive reinforcement is also an important factor as I have observed children who receive rewards from their parents for their strong English performance are more motivated. However, the data also revealed prevalence of negative influence of parental involvement on learners' motivation. A few participants noted that some parents discourage their children from learning English because they fear it will dilute their culture or language.

5.6 Social, Cultural and Religious Identities

Social influence, cultural norms, religious beliefs were also frequently mentioned codes in the data, as these codes were interlinked these emerged as a single theme. The ESL experts stated that although English is frequently linked to modernity it can also be at odds with traditional values. According to one participant, religion often sets the guidelines for proper behavior and conduct which often comes at odds with English language which usually associated with identity of the other. Another participant mentioned that students from conservative backgrounds might experience conflict. People in the surroundings could demoralize pupils. Because they think they could be exposed to unnecessary influences through English. Additionally, the prevalence of regional languages like Sindhi can cause opposition to English. Participants suggested the need for culturally appropriate second language teaching resources. One of the participants said, adding cultural studies to the language curriculum could be a game-changer. When the learners observe representations of their culture and religion in the curriculum students could feel more connected and willing to learn English.

5.7 Institutional Dynamics and Collaborative Learning

Institutional dynamics and collaborative learning emerged as another theme from the interview data. The language experts believed that students' motivation and sense of self are highly influenced by collaborative learning and institutional support. One participant said, learning collaboratively creates a feeling of belonging; Support from peers and teachers is essential in this regard. In Pakistan most of the students comes from rural backgrounds and are quite hesitant to use English; in such cases teacher's support plays a pivotal role in engaging learners and shaping positive self image which fosters their motivation. Apart from this, one of the participants pointed out, although our institution has made an effort to put English support programs into place they are not especially made to cater to the needs of all students. To better match academic support with students varied identities interventions such as culturally appropriate materials and mentorship programs were suggested.

5.8 Use of Culturally Relevant Educational Resources

The language educator suggested that teaching materials that are culturally relevant can help close the gap between learners' identities and English language proficiency. One of the participants noted, when students perceive that the curriculum reflects their experiences they are more likely to participate and develop a positive identity. In order to make learning English more relatable these resources can incorporate examples from history or regional customs. According to the participants, students can be inspired while maintaining their identity when their norms and values are represented. The study emphasizes on the need for broad inclusive strategy that strikes a balance between cultural aspects without being unduly prescriptive.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study support all of the five hypotheses as the findings present, parental influence and socioeconomic background are key components of influence of learners' identity on motivation of ESL learner. The results show that Supportive parents encourage learners' confidence and motivation by highlighting the importance of English for social and economic mobility as suggested in Norton's (1995) investment theory. Parental involvement is crucial as learners' performance is frequently fostered by parental expectations drive their engagement with English which is reflected in Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System. Nevertheless, parents driven by cultural or religious concerns may impede engagement; supportive parents increase confidence.

Another important influence for learner identity and motivation emphasized in this study is Social, cultural and religious factor. Rural learners may oppose English because they fear cultural deterioration while urban learners may incorporate it into their social identities (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2017; Ramzan et al., 2023, 2020, 2021). This tension reflects the findings of Lamb (2012) and Farid (2021). The present study shows that motivation is further influenced by collaborative learning and institutional dynamics. This supports Ushioda's (2011) narrative inquiry that peer interactions, group activities and teacher support are highlighted as ways to foster a sense of community and strengthen identity as fluent English speakers. However, institutional policies frequently overlook students varied sociocultural needs which emphasizes demand for specialized interventions (Ameen & Rehman, 2024; Akram & Li, 2024). The findings has implications for teachers and policy makers that incorporating culturally appropriate teaching materials into curricula—such as regional and religious contexts—helps learners feel connected to the second language. When students perceive that the curriculum reflects their experiences, it fosters motivation to learn English language.

This study present several gap for future studies in this field of study. in this era of modernization and technological advancement, learners have exposure to various social and digital platforms, which also affects learners' sense of self (Kim & Reeves, 2007). The impact of digital tools and online identity on ESL learners' motivation is in another important area of exploration.

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