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Cultivating Masculinity: Examining Netflix Exposure and the Moderating Role of Religiosity

ABSTRACT

With the rise of streaming platforms like Netflix, young audiences have been exposed to different narratives about gender identity. Netflix introduces them with alternative masculinity ideals that differ from traditional masculinity by portraying men as soft and less rigid, offering new versions of masculinity that move beyond toughness, dominance, and traditional gender expectations. This study is supported by the Cultivation theory. A survey analysis was conducted using a multi-step cluster sampling technique among 300 students from Foundation University, Islamabad, Pakistan, aged from 17 to 35, who are active users of Netflix. The findings revealed that the higher the Netflix exposure, the lower the perception of traditional masculinity. Religiosity, on the other hand, significantly and positively moderated the relationship between Netflix exposure and masculinity, suggesting that individuals with high religiosity have stronger perceptions of traditional masculinity even after Netflix exposure, as compared to people with low religiosity. These results highlight how Netflix can affect beliefs regarding changing gender roles in Pakistan.

KEY WORDS

Cultivation. Gender Identity. Gender Roles. Masculinity. Netflix Effects.

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1 Introduction

Netflix is a widely consumed streaming platform and has become a dominant player in the global media landscape, significantly reshaping viewers' perception and competing with traditional TV consumption patterns (Kaur & Ashfaq, 2023). Media increasingly present diverse and non-traditional portrayals of masculinity (PubAdmin.Institute, 2025). These representations highlight emotional freedom, fluidity of gender roles, and alternative male identities (Díaz-Fernández, 2023; Afifulloh, 2025). These often clash with traditional masculine values that are so intricately intertwined with religious beliefs. Religiosity is a major determinant shaping gender-role values, particularly masculinity (Huberman, 2023).

Religions typically establish clear guidelines for how men behave, the way they express emotions, and how they fulfil social roles (Woodhead, 2017). In many societies, masculinity is associated with the notions of emotional control, responsibility, leadership, and certain gender roles. Men are frequently advised to show strength by exercising self-control, patience, and emotional suppression (Ashfaq et al., 2018). Masculinity is often described through expectation of authority, toughness, and provision, while femininity is described through nurturance, sensitivity, and obedience (Huberman, 2023). Religious teachings often place strong moral boundaries around masculinity that emphasize authority and responsibility. These values form a coherent framework that supports traditional masculine roles.

The rapid expansion of streaming platforms in Pakistan, with Netflix penetration growing significantly among urban youth (Farooka & Hussain, 2025), creates a potentially transformative cultural encounter (Hashmi, 2020). Pakistani youth now face a tension between globally mediated portrayals of masculinity and locally grounded religious constructions of gender (Saeed, 2013). The current study aims to address this gap by investigating how Netflix exposure shapes perceptions of traditional masculinity among Pakistani university students and whether religiosity moderates this relationship.

1.1 Pakistani Society and Masculinity

Religion plays a significant role in shaping traditional masculinity in Pakistan (Eliason et al., 2017). Islamic teaching emphasizes the idea that men are the protectors and providers, and women are expected to be obedient and devoted to family responsibilities. However, with the emergence of Netflix, people get exposed to content that is contrary to their religious values (Gehrau et al., 2016), which can create a conflict with the traditional religious framework of masculinity. Thus creating a dissonance in how youth adopt and perceive gender role expectations.

1.2 Streaming Platforms and Masculinity Portrayals

Over the last decade, the idea of masculinity in films and dramas has changed noticeably on Netflix. Instead of reinforcing the stereotypical image of men as emotionally unavailable, controlling, and dominant, Netflix highlights men as compassionate, emotionally available, and vulnerable. The qualitative content analysis of the film *Fatherhood* redefines the concept of masculinity by portraying a single father as nurturing, caregiving, and adopting traits often associated with motherhood and femininity, emphasizing compassion, emotional availability, responsibility, and gender equality over rigid masculine ideals (Afifulloh, 2022). A similar study of qualitative discourse analysis was conducted on Netflix series *The Witcher*, where the male protagonist exhibits nurturance and caregiving, replacing stoicism and violence as central to masculinity (Cuklanz & Erol, 2021).

A textual analysis of the Netflix show *Sex Education* reveals how it influences youth perspectives through characters like Adam, Eric, and Otis, who embody expressiveness, vulnerability, affection, supportive relationships, and emotionally intimate friendships, rejecting dominance and aggression (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021). In *Bridgerton* (Season 1), a qualitative character analysis uncovers the protagonist's vulnerability, insecurity, emotional openness, hesitation, intimacy, gentleness, care, reflection, and authority through commanding language, romantic leadership, and protectiveness (Ha & Vu, 2024). Afifulloh's (2025) textual analysis of Netflix originals *Don't Look Up* and *I Am All Girls* identifies fluid emotionality and expressive portrayals, redefining masculinity as inclusive and unbound by traditional power norms, similar to soft masculinity emphasizing empathy (Lee et al., 2020).

Sangra (2021) analyzed the Indian series *Little Things* through discourse analysis, finding the male protagonist calm, empathetic, emotionally expressive, comfortable with his partner's male friends, supportive of her career success, cooking for her, carrying her purse and bags, sharing household responsibilities and finances, and unbothered by her paying bills, reflecting gentle, mature masculinity prioritizing equality over dominance, aggression, or jealousy. In the Netflix series *Elite*, Díaz-Fernández (2023) conducted textual and discourse analysis, concluding that it challenges heteronormative portrayals by showing teenage boys as fluid, emotionally expressive, and exploratory of sexuality, positioning Netflix as a catalyst for openness and gender fluidity. These studies demonstrate Netflix's promotion of non-traditional masculinities across contexts (Afifulloh, 2022; Cuklanz & Erol, 2021; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Ha & Vu, 2024). Streaming platforms frequently include portrayals of sexual and gender nonconforming identities. These depictions of men directly collide with religious teaching that frames masculinity within the rigid heterosexual and binary gender norms. As a result, masculinity on streaming platforms is not merely diversified but actively redefined, positioning men outside the boundaries of religiously framed gender roles.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Cultivation theory, originally introduced by Gerbner and colleagues in the late 1970s, posits that prolonged and cumulative exposure to media content shapes individual perceptions of social reality by gradually cultivating shared beliefs, norms, values, and social roles (Gerbner et al., 2002). Although initially developed to examine the effects of violent content on traditional television audiences, the theory's core assumptions have demonstrated robust applicability in the digital media era. Recent empirical work has extended cultivation theory to streaming platforms. Munawar and Khan (2020) illustrate cultivation theory's relevance in Pakistan's new media environment, encouraging researchers to examine its propositions within local socio-cultural contexts in the face of digital convergence. Cevher and Özer (2025) found that algorithmically curated content on platforms such as Netflix intensifies cultivation effects by repeatedly exposing viewers to alternate gender roles and identity themes. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) argued that even amid increased audience selectivity and fragmentation, the cumulative nature of media exposure remains central to cultivation processes. Heavy television viewers consistently overestimate the prevalence of televised behaviors in real life; this cognitive mechanism can also influence how audiences perceive and internalize idealized or non-traditional masculinities portrayed on streaming platforms (Shrum, 2008).

2 Methodology

This research used a quantitative approach, using a survey as the primary tool for data collection, to examine the effects of Netflix exposure on perceptions about masculinity while keeping religiosity as a moderator.

2.1 Population and Sampling

Young adults have been selected to be a part of this study as they represent the most active segment of the streaming platform users and are more likely to engage with Netflix as part of their daily media consumption (MatrixBCG, 2026). A sample was drawn from the university students of Foundation University, Islamabad, Pakistan. 300 students who were active Netflix users were included in the study. The selection of a single university is acknowledged as a limitation to external generalizability; however, Foundation University was purposively selected because it enrolls students from diverse socioeconomic and regional backgrounds within Pakistan, thus offering reasonable variation in both religiosity and media consumption habits.

Multi-step cluster sampling was adopted to ensure equal representation and minimize the researcher's bias. In the first stage, academic departments were identified as primary sampling clusters. In the second stage, classes within each department were randomly selected. In the third stage, students within selected classes who reported active Netflix usage were invited to participate.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Netflix Exposure

Netflix exposure is individual engagement with the streaming platform. It is measured through the conceptual definition of Schaffner et al. (2025), who measured the exposure through behavioral indicators, i.e., frequency, binge-watching, viewing duration, and session length. Based on the literature, Netflix exposure is measured through two dimensions, frequency and binge-watching. Frequency is defined as the amount of time or number of hours an individual spends on a particular platform. It is measured through the indicators "Days per week" and "Hours per week", while binge-watching is defined as prolonged viewing periods and session length while watching more than one episode in a single sitting (Sung et al., 2018). Binge-watching was measured through indicators "Hours per session" and "Hours on Weekend". All responses were recorded on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 indicated one day or one hour, and 7 indicated 7 days or 7 hours".

2.2.2 Masculinity

Masculinity refers to the societal construction of behaviors, attitudes, and expectations associated with men in a particular culture. Masculinity has been associated with dominance, toughness, independent behavior, and emotional restraint (Brannon, 1976). Traditional masculinity has some common features, i.e., restrictive emotionality, self-reliance through mechanical skills, negativity toward sexual minorities, importance of sex, avoidance of femininity, toughness, and dominance (Levant et al., 2010).

In this study, masculinity was measured through MRNI-R (Male Roles Norms Inventory Revised), given by Lavant and his colleagues in 2010. The scale originally had 7 dimensions and 49 items, but due to the needs of the study, only six dimensions and 16 items were selected. Masculinity was measured by the following dimensions: Restrictive Emotionality, Self-Reliance Through Mechanical Skills, Negativity Toward Sexual Minorities, Avoidance of Femininity, Toughness, and Dominance. The dimension of "Importance of Sex" was excluded as pilot testing

indicated that respondents found these items culturally sensitive in a way that threatened response validity. The scale was refined by retaining items that were culturally relevant to Pakistani and Islamic understandings of masculinity and demonstrated strong statistical reliability. Items with low correlations or poor response patterns were removed to ensure the accuracy and validity of the measurement.

7 point Likert scale was provided in the original MRNI-R scale, where 1 indicated *strongly disagree* and 7 indicated *strongly agree*. A higher score reflects stronger endorsement of traditional masculinity perceptions, while a lower score reflects a decline in traditional masculinity perceptions.

2.2.3 Religiosity

Religiosity is a multifaceted concept and has been studied across different dimensions from personal beliefs to spiritual connection to institutional involvement. Some researchers have focused on personal belief and devotional behavior, while others have highlighted the community practices, institutional affiliation, or emotional experiences (Delener, 1990; Canda et al., 2019; Pollack, 2003; Hill et al., 2000; Rowold, 2011). Desouky & Umarji (2021) defined religiosity as a multidimensional concept that includes the salience of religious belief, attitude, spiritual practices, connection to God, connection to religious institution, and contribution.

The BASIC model defines religiosity into 5 dimensions (Desouky & Umarji, 2021): Belief, Attitude, Spiritual Connection, Spiritual Behavior, Institutional Connection, and Contribution. The scale originally had 28 items, but after pre-testing twice, 18 items were selected, and the scale was adapted to suit our study. Each dimension is measured through different indicators. Belief was measured through three indicators, “conviction”, “commitment”, and “divinity”; Attitude is measured by “acceptance”, “patience”, and “contentment”; Spiritual Behavior was measured by “prayer frequency”, “discipline”, and “recitation of the Qur’an”; Spiritual Connection was measured by “spiritual awareness”, “concentration”, and “divine connection”; Institutional Connection was measured by “community identity”, “community belonging”, and “social participation”; and Contribution was measured by “volunteering”, “activism”, and “wellbeing of society”.

Each item is assessed using a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*low religiosity*) to 5 (*high religiosity*). This scoring will allow for a comparative analysis within the sample.

3 Results

3.1 Reliability Analysis

In this quantitative study, the reliability analysis of the internal consistency and accuracy of the scale was conducted to see if the items consistently give the same results. The internal consistency and accuracy of the Netflix exposure items, the MRNI-R scale for masculinity, and Yaqeen’s BASIC scale for religiosity were measured. Table 1 shows that all variables have reliability greater than 0.7, which is sufficient to proceed further.

# Variable	Cronbach Alpha (α)	N of Item
Netflix Use	0.83	4
Masculinity	0.81	16
Religiosity	0.85	18

Table 1: Reliability analysis of Netflix use, masculinity, and religiosity adapted scales

Source: own processing, 2026

3.2 Descriptive Statistics of the Population of the Study

The study consisted of 300 respondents. Table 2 shows the frequency of the age and gender of respondents who participated in this study. The participants were undergraduate and postgraduate students who actively used Netflix as part of their regular media consumption.

# Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	17-21	155	51.6%
	22-25	112	37.3%
	26-35	33	11.1%
Gender	Male	126	42%
	Female	174	58%

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the population of the study

Source: own processing, 2026

3.3 Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variable

The table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables, including Netflix exposure, masculinity, perceived religiosity, and demographics. The results indicate moderate levels across most variables, with masculinity traits such as dominance and toughness showing relatively higher tendencies. Additionally, the sample consists of relatively young participants, reflecting the overall characteristics of the study population.

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Netflix Exposure				
Frequency	6.6	3.5	2.00	14.00
Binge-watching	6.9	3.1	2.00	14.00
Masculinity				
Restrictive Emotionality	8.0	4.4	3.00	21.00
Self-Reliance	10.7	2.8	2.00	14.00
Avoidance of Femininity	11.6	3.9	3.00	21.00
Toughness	12.9	4.2	3.00	21.00
Dominance	13.3	4.5	3.00	21.00
Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities	8.2	3.7	2.00	14.00
Perceived Religiosity				
Belief	12.8	2.66	4.00	15.00
Attitude	9.9	2.80	5.00	15.00
Spiritual Behavior and Connection	19.9	3.26	10.00	27.00
Institutional Connection	10.0	2.75	3.00	15.00
Contribution	9.6	2.56	3.00	15.00
Demographics				
Age	22.06	3.35	17	35
Gender	1.58	.494	1	2

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the study variable

Source: own processing, 2026

3.4 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis: Perceived religiosity positively moderates the relationship between Netflix exposure and perception toward masculinity, such that people with high religiosity will endorse traditional masculinity even when exposed to Netflix.

The purpose of this study was to examine the moderating effect of religiosity on the relationship between Netflix exposure and perception of masculinity. A moderation regression analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 1 (Hayes, 2022).

The results from Table 1 indicate that the predictor variables collectively explained 27.4% of the variance in masculinity with $F(3,300) = 37.978, p < .001$. Netflix exposure is found to be a significant negative predictor of masculinity ($B = -0.507, p < .001$), such that the higher the Netflix exposure, the lower the perception of masculinity. Religiosity also positively and significantly predicted masculinity ($B = 0.623, p < .001$), such that more religious individuals endorse a stronger perception of masculinity. Most importantly, a significant interaction was found between Netflix exposure and religiosity in predicting masculinity ($B = 0.036, p < .01$), indicating that religiosity moderated the relationship between Netflix exposure and masculinity. These findings support the hypothesis.

The findings reveal that higher exposure to Netflix is associated with lower perception of traditional masculinity, but those who score higher in religiosity score higher on traditional masculinity as well. This interaction shows that religiosity changes how strongly Netflix affects traditional masculinity. Specifically, Netflix has a stronger negative effect on masculinity for users with low religiosity, whereas this effect becomes weaker for highly religious individuals. In simple terms, religiosity acts as a buffer.

Variable	B	SE
Netflix Exposure	-.507***	.129
Religiosity	.623***	.083
Netflix Exposure × Religiosity	.036**	.014
R ²	.274	

Note: Predictor variable: Netflix Exposure; Outcome variable: Masculinity; Netflix Exposure × Religiosity = interaction term; SE = standard error(Precision); R² = variance explained. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4: Regression of perception of masculinity on Netflix exposure and religiosity

Source: own processing, 2026

A simple slope analysis was conducted, as shown in Table 5, and it revealed that at a low level of perceived religiosity, Netflix has a strong negative effect on masculinity ($B = -.911, p < .001$). However, at a high level of perceived religiosity, the effect of Netflix exposure on masculinity was non-significant ($B = -0.15, p = .446$). This indicates that Netflix affects masculinity less as perceived religiosity increases. Religiosity acts as a buffer that protects users from Netflix exposure; this pattern provides further support for the hypothesis.

Level of Religiosity	B	SE
Low	-.911***	.195
Moderate	-.438***	.132
High	-.147	.192

Table 5: Simple Slope analysis for the moderating effect of religiosity

Source: own processing, 2026

Figure 1 illustrates the moderating effect of religiosity on Netflix exposure and traditional masculinity. Netflix exposure reduces the perception of traditional masculinity, but strength differs across different religious groups. For individuals with low religiosity, the slope is very steep, indicating a sharp decline in masculinity. For moderately religious individuals, the decline is smaller, while for highly religious individuals, masculinity remains relatively stable with almost

no drop. This visual pattern confirms that religiosity buffers the influence of Netflix exposure, supporting the hypothesis.

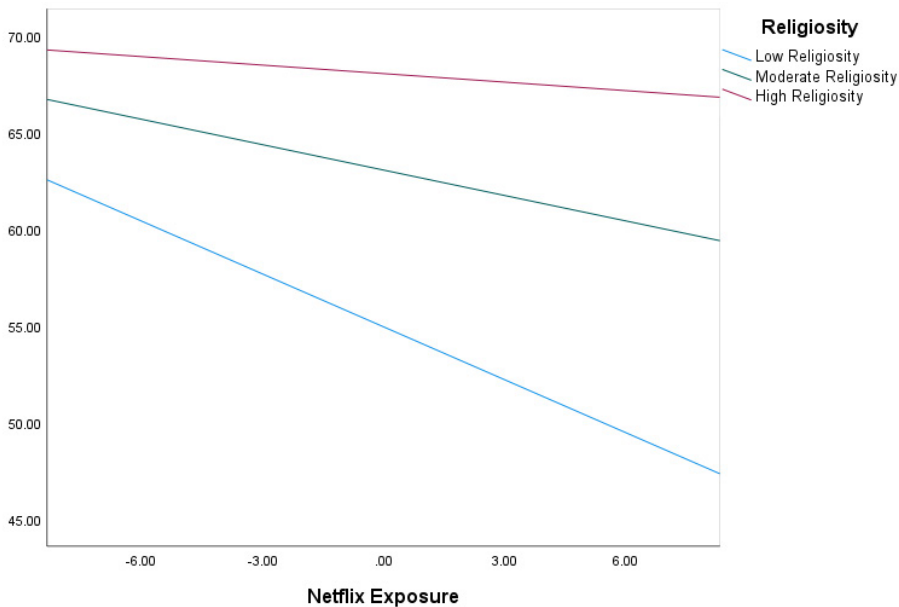


Figure 1: Regression of perception of masculinity on Netflix exposure and religiosity

Source: own processing, 2026

4 Discussion

Netflix exposure was found to be a significant negative predictor of traditional masculinity, such that the higher the Netflix exposure, the lower the perception of traditional masculinity among students. This pattern is consistent with previous cultivation-based research showing that repeated exposure to media messages can gradually shift viewers' perception of reality (Clemens, 2013; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010), and in this case, perception of traditional masculinity. Religiosity also positively and significantly predicted masculinity, indicating that students with higher religiosity were more likely to endorse traditional masculine norms, which aligns with past work linking religiosity to more conservative gender attitudes (Aslam, 2014).

The findings reveal that people with lower religious values were more affected by Netflix exposure, whereas those with stronger religious values were less affected. This pattern connects with a previous study showing that religious belief can function as a protective factor that weakens the influence of media messages on attitudes and behaviors (Almenayes, 2014). At the very highest level of religiosity, the negative effect of Netflix exposure became non-significant, suggesting that strong religiosity can nullify the impact of non-traditional gender portrayals. These findings suggest that religiosity acts as a shield against Netflix exposure, providing people with a stable belief and value system that reinforces their traditional gender values (Aslam, 2014). Taken together, these results support the notion within cultivation theory that media effects depend upon viewers' pre-existing beliefs and values (Mustafaj & Van den Bulck, 2021; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

Theoretically, this study contributes by extending the applicability of Cultivation Theory. It demonstrates that the application of Cultivation Theory is not only platform-specific, i.e., television, but now extends to streaming platforms like Netflix as well.

5 Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between Netflix exposure and perception about masculinity among Pakistani youth while keeping religiosity as a moderating variable. Grounded in Cultivation Theory, the findings indicate that exposure to Netflix contributes to shaping masculine values and gender roles. Streaming platforms provide continuous access to diverse and global representations of masculinity. Repeated exposure may gradually influence viewers' perception and normalize non-traditional masculinity. The study's findings revealed that exposure to Netflix has a significant influence on shaping perceptions of masculinity. Continuous exposure to streaming platforms, such as Netflix, introduces a diverse portrayal of gender roles and masculine identities, which may gradually influence viewers' perceptions of social reality. The results further demonstrate that religiosity plays an important moderating role in this relationship. Individuals with stronger religious values tend to limit the influence of Netflix exposure, and they see media through their already existing set of religious beliefs. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of religiosity are more open toward change in traditional masculinity through Netflix exposure.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of media influence in the digital era by highlighting the role of global streaming exposure, i.e., Netflix, and religious values. It suggests that masculinity in Pakistani youth is shaped not only by media consumption but also by deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs.

This study focused on the first-order effect (perception); future researchers should examine 2nd and 3rd order effect (attitudes and beliefs). Samples should be taken from different cities, which can improve the generalizability, while exploring how the different genres, i.e. romantic, violent, LGBTQ, and documentary, uniquely influence each of the masculinity dimensions. While different variables such as family structure, personality, bullying, and socio-economic background should be studied, they may offer different insights.

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