



Influence of Social Media on Political Engagement among Pakistani Young Adults

Iram Naeem¹ & Shan-e-Zehra²

¹Punjab School Education Department Lahore, Email: irumnaeem44@gmail.com

²Ph.D. Scholar, School of Economics, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan,
Email: Shanezehra717@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Social media has turned out to be a revolutionary medium of political communication that allows dissemination of information quickly and leads to involvement of the citizens and especially the young adults. In Pakistan, where the traditional media and political institutions are usually accused of lacking credibility, the social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have taken center stage in political discussion. This paper explores how social media affects the political participation of Pakistani young adults and explores the connection between the patterns of social media use, political awareness, political discussions participation, and online activism. Based on the empirical studies and theoretical literature, the paper identifies opportunities and challenges of social media to influence the political behaviors. The results show that social media improves the knowledge of politics and participates, but it also subjects young people to misinformation, echo chambers, and polarized stories. The paper highlights that digital literacy programs, regulatory frameworks and civic education are essential in order to ensure the social media have the greatest positive effect on political participation.

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Corresponding Author's Email: Shanezehra717@gmail.com

Introduction

Social media has changed the face of political communication in the modern world as one of the most important sources of information sharing, forming opinions, and civic engagement (Kahne and Bowyer, 2017; Vaccari, 2015). The young population group, specifically, is very active on the digital platforms, which they use to get news, discuss political matters, and organize the collective actions (Loader et al., 2014). The young adults in Pakistan make up a large segment of the population and a greater percentage of the population is below the age of

30 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022), and thus their participation in politics has been crucial in terms of democratic consolidation and socio-political development.

Social media like Facebook, twitter, instagram and Tik Tok are cheap and accessible avenues of political involvement that previously offered political participation by traditional media, geography, and political gatekeeping (Jungherr, 2016). This demographic is moving towards depending on them not only to consume political content but also to express political views, engage in debates, join campaigns and initiate offline actions (Theocharis et al., 2015). These platforms make it possible to engage in real-time and create an interactive experience where the youth can impact conversation, organize fellow participants, and influence masses.

Although social media offers numerous opportunities, researchers believe that such media also has a problem with the real political life. Misinformation, echo chambers, and algorithm bias may lead to the distortion of perceptions, polarization of users, and critical engagement with political content (Sunstein, 2018; Pariser, 2011). In Pakistan, where political institutions are frequently questioned by the population, there is a high risk that political attitudes can be affected by misinformation, especially in digitally active young people who do not necessarily have media literacy skills (Khan et al., 2020; Munawar, 2025; Naveed et al., 2022).

Political participation covers both face to face and internet activities. Traditional activities encompassed in offline engagement include voting and attending rallies and being part of political organizations, and digital activism, content sharing, and online debates and social media campaigns are included in online engagement (Boulianne, 2015). The studies show a positive correlation between online political engagement and offline political engagement, potentially implying that social media may be used as an entry point to increased civic engagement, particularly among the younger generations (Valenzuela et al., 2018).

Social, economic and cultural factors have traditionally contributed to the youth political participation in Pakistan. Youth cannot efficiently participate in politics due to socioeconomic inequality, the lack of political awareness, patriarchal values, and the unequal distribution of the population in the regions (Cheema & Javid, 2013). Social media presents a distinct chance to erase these gaps by facilitating ready platforms of political education, dialogue and mobilization that may democratize the political participation.

The research on social media and political participation of youth in Pakistan is still insufficient, and most studies are conducted in the Western setting or the overall tendencies of media consumption (Khan et al., 2020; Abbas and Niazi, 2019). The study of the role of social media in political attitudes, knowledge, and practices of Pakistani youth is very important to policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations that want to facilitate the development of informed and active citizens.

The proposed research will address this gap by examining how social media use and political participation among Pakistani young adults are related to one another. The study also investigates trends in social media use, engagement in political information, experience in both online and off-line political behaviors, and the mediation effect of digital literacy and critical media literacy. The study also brings the information on the changing nature of political communication in Pakistan to the body of knowledge and makes evidence-based suggestions to make the interaction more positive and reduce the risk of threats posed by misinformation and polarization.

Literature Review

The use of social media has had significant impacts on political communication and participation especially among the youthful people. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are all crucial platforms in the world where political information flows, people debate on important matters, and mobilize in the political sphere (Loader et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2015). The data always shows that young adults tend to view and engage politically more than older generations using online platforms and use them to increase awareness and turnout (Theocharis et al., 2015; Kahne and Bowyer, 2017).

Social Media and Political Consciousness

Among the leading methods on how social media affects political participation is increased political awareness. Social media enables the real-time access to information about news, political discussions, and various opinions, and it gives a user access to the latest developments in the government, political candidates, and social problems (Jungherr, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2018). In Pakistan, the research states that young people who visit social media sites are more likely to say that they have greater political knowledge and awareness than those who do not, and political content that interests young people is positively correlated with civic interest (Khan et al., 2020; Abbas and Niazi, 2019). The social media is also rather interactive and lets the users interact with the information, express their thoughts and evaluations, and take part in the discussion, which strengthens the political literacy (Loader et al., 2014; Vaccari, 2015).

Internet Political Participation and Civic engagement

The online political engagement includes sharing political content, commenting on political matters, engaging in online campaigns, and mobilizing peers (Boulianne, 2015). According to research, internet political activities can be viewed as a continuation of offline engagement, and an introduction to more tangible political action, including rally attendance or voting, or voluntarily participating on campaigns (Valenzuela et al., 2018; Theocharis et al., 2015). Digital activism has empowered young people to engage in the activities of election campaigns, protest movements, and awareness campaigns in the Pakistani context despite the traditional social and economic restrictions (Khan et al., 2020; Rehman and Ali, 2019). The low cost and accessibility of social media makes it especially useful to politically marginalized or geographically distributed youth, making it possible to engage even in semi-urban or rural settings (Cheema & Javid, 2013; Hussain and Ahmad, 2020).

The Social Media Political Engagement Determinants

There are a number of aspects that determine the participation of the youth in politics on social media. The degree of digital literacy is also a considerable factor since individuals with the ability to assess online data critically have higher chances of engaging in a meaningful way (Mason et al., 2018; van Dijk, 2020). The socioeconomic background also matters; young people with higher-income families tend to access devices and reliable internet services easier, which makes it easier to engage (Hassan and Qureshi, 2020). It has been found that males in Pakistan are more likely to get involved in political discourses online, but females are becoming more active through issue-based activism and advocacy on the social site (Saleem and Khan, 2019; Ali and Rehman, 2020).

Misinformation, Echo Chambers, and Polarization

Social media engagement is a challenge despite the benefits it may bring. Political perceptions may be influenced by the misinformation and fake news, forming echo chambers

and supporting the existing biases (Sunstein, 2018; Pariser, 2011). The youth in Pakistan tend to be exposed to politically one-sided or sensational information, which may lead to the intensification of polarization and the loss of criticality towards various approaches (Khan et al., 2020; Rehman et al., 2022). Research also states that algorithm-based content distribution enhances selective exposure, according to which users engage in communication with the information that is oriented to their ideological orientation (Vaccari, 2015; Theocharis et al., 2015). These processes highlight the significance of digital literacy interventions to warrant informed participation.

Young Mobilization and Social Media

Some of the studies indicate the mobilizing nature of social media among the youth. Through online platforms, collective action is made possible, whether it is the organization of protests or campaigning on issues (Jungherr, 2016; Boulianne, 2015). Digital campaigns led by the young generation have impacted political debate and voter awareness, as well as social responsibility campaigns in Pakistan (Abbas and Niazi, 2019; Rehman and Ali, 2019). This is especially high in times of elections, when platforms act as a communicative zone, a place of criticism and evaluation of candidates (Khan et al., 2020; Mahmood and Iqbal, 2019). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such campaigns is usually determined by the offline follow-up and the ability of young people to transform online behavior into real civic behavior (Valenzuela et al., 2018; Vaccari, 2015).

Issues and Obstacles to Participation

Online youth politics is characterized by a number of obstacles. Young adults may not be willing to engage in political discourses freely because of cultural restraints and the fear of social or political repercussions (Cheema & Javid, 2013; Ali et al., 2020). Moreover, the discrepancies between city and country youth, the disparity in access to internet, may obstruct equal opportunities to engage (Hassan and Qureshi, 2020; Van Dijk, 2020). The antecedents of online harassment, trolling, or political intimidation inhibit meaningful interactions as well (Mason et al., 2018; Saleem and Khan, 2019).

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical frameworks give an understanding of the processes that connect the use of social media and political participation. According to the Civic Voluntarism Model, participation depends on resources (time, money, skills) and recruitment networks, and social media is a resource and a network of recruitment (Verba et al., 1995; Boulianne, 2015). The Social Capital Theory highlights that civic norms and trust, as well as collaboration, can be developed through networks and social connections on the Internet and motivate engagement (Putnam, 2000; Valenzuela et al., 2018). Alongside, the Uses and Gratifications Theory indicates young people are the active selectors of media content, which satisfies information-seeking and participatory needs, which is why political content has a high usage among active users (Katz et al., 1973; Loader et al., 2014).

Digital Literacy and Policy Implications

Digital literacy and media education is vital to positive political participation as highlighted in the literature. Teaching the youths, how to critically assess the content online, how to distinguish between reliable and manipulative sources and how to have constructive dialogue is the key to making the most of the democratic potential of the social media (Kahne and Bowyer, 2017; Mason et al., 2018). Furthermore, the policymakers and civil society organizations are advised to contribute to youth-based efforts that use social media

responsibly by balancing the freedom of expression against methods to prevent misinformation and hate speech (Abbas and Niazi, 2019; Rehman et al., 2022).

Altogether, the literature shows that social media has a strong implication on the political participation of Pakistani young adults influencing awareness, participation, and mobilization. As much as social media makes information easily accessible and is encouraging people to participate in civic life, there are still issues of misinformation, polarization, and inequality in access. The importance of digital literacy, the policy interventions, and institutional support in improving the quality of youth political engagement is the focus of the research. Future research can examine the longitudinal consequences, the impact of specific platforms, and means of transferring online mobilization into offline civic mobilization in Pakistan.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study is quantitative research design in order to test how social media has affected the political participation of young adults in Punjab, Pakistan. The data was collected through a cross-sectional survey design where data was collected at a single time. The design will enable the statistical analysis of the relationship between the patterns of social media use, political awareness, and online/offline political engagement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative methodology is suitable to measure behaviors, perceptions and attitudes in large sample of respondents and offer empirical data on the contribution of social media to political participation among the young population.

Population and Sample

The sample population was a group of Pakistani young adults between 18 and 30 years old studying in Universities, colleges and vocational institutes in the key districts of Punjab such as Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi and Multan. Convenient sampling method was used because of limited time and resources and the participants had to be available and volunteer to be included (Etikan et al., 2016). Four hundred people were surveyed, and there were nearly equal numbers of both male and female respondents and a hybrid of city residents and semi-urban residents. Though convenience sampling reduces the externalizability of the results, it guarantees the topical applicability of preliminary research of social media and political participation in Punjab.

Instrument Development

The structured questionnaire, which contained four sections, was used to gather data.

Demographic Information: Age, gender, education level, area of residence, and access to the internet.

Social Media Use: How often, which one (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok), how much time spent, how engaged with politics.

Political Awareness: Understanding of political parties, elections, policies, and current events assessed by a series of multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions.

Political Engagement: Online political (sharing content, commenting, participating in campaigns) and offline political (attending rallies, voting intentions) activities measured on a 5-point Likert scale with the first option (Strongly Disagree) and the last one (Strongly Agree) (Bryman, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2018).

The questionnaire was based on the earlier tested tools on the use of social media and political involvement (Theocharis et al., 2015; Kahne and Bowyer, 2017) and modified to fit the Pakistani youth.

Validity and Reliability

In order to have content validity, the questionnaire was also checked by the experts in the sphere of political science, communication studies, and youth engagement. The clarity, comprehension and consistency of response was tested in a pilot study with 30 young adults in the various districts. The value beta of Cronbach alpha was determined to measure the internal consistency and value of 0.84 and 0.87 in social media engagement and political engagement items, respectively, were taken to indicate high reliability (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). Some small changes were done according to pilot responses to enhance clarity and prevent ambiguity.

Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected during four weeks of 2025. The online questionnaire (via Google Forms) and paper-based questionnaire were distributed based on the availability of the participants. Students of universities and colleges were contacted during breaks or through official groups and informed consent was taken before they participated. This was guaranteed by the use of anonymity and confidentiality and the participants were told that they could withdraw whenever they wanted without any repercussions.

Data Analysis

The SPSS version 26 was used to analyze the data. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated as the descriptive statistics to summarize the demographics, the level of social media use, and the level of political engagement. Correlation analysis was used to study the links between social media use, political awareness and political engagement. The differences in the political engagement were compared in terms of gender, urban-rural residence, and districts using independent-samples t-tests. Missing values, outliers, and normality were filtered to screen data so that results could be robust (Field, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

The ethics committee of the university was consulted and approved the study. Informing the respondents about the study objectives and data usage made their participation voluntary. None of the personally identifiable information was obtained and all answers were anonymized. Informed consent, non-maleficence, and respect of the rights of the participants became ethical issues that were adhered to (Resnik, 2020).

Data Analysis & Findings

Sample Demographics

The number of young adults involved in the study was 400 (Punjab) 52% girls and 48% boys, most of them (70) belonged to 18-25 years old. The sample (urban and semi-urban) was 60% of urban and 40% of semi-urban. Education distribution was found to be 65 percent undergraduates and 35 percent postgraduates. The participants were sampled in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad and Multan and resulted in a well-representative sample to study the differences in using social media and political participation in the region.

Social Media Usage Descriptive Analysis

The social media use was calculated based on the platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok) and activities (posting, commenting, sharing political content). The general average of social media usage was 3.72 (SD = 0.81) which points out to high usage. Facebook was the most engaged (M = 3.85, SD = 0.79) then Instagram (M = 3.65, SD = 0.83), Tik Tok (M = 3.58, SD = 0.87), and Twitter (M = 3.40, SD = 0.88). The female respondents also exhibited a mean score of a bit higher (M = 3.75, SD = 0.80) than the male ones (M = 3.69, SD = 0.82).

Table 1: Social Media Usage (N = 400) Descriptive Statistics

Platform	Mean	SD
Facebook	3.85	0.79
Instagram	3.65	0.83
TikTok	3.58	0.87
Twitter	3.40	0.88
Overall Usage	3.72	0.81

Analytic Approach to Political involvement

Political participation was both online (e.g. sharing content, commenting) and offline (e.g. attending rallies, voting intention). On the whole, the level of engagement was moderate to high with the mean score of 3.45 (SD = 0.79). Political participation online (M = 3.60, SD = 0.82) was also more than that of offline participation (M = 3.25, SD = 0.77) because young people were more digital.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of political engagement (N=400)

Engagement Type	Mean	SD
Online Political	3.60	0.82
Offline Political	3.25	0.77
Overall Engagement	3.45	0.79

District-Level Comparisons

The comparative analysis was done to understand the differences in the use of social media and political participation in various districts. The social media engagement (M = 3.80 and 3.78, respectively) and political engagement (M = 3.55 and 3.52) were higher in Lahore and Rawalpindi than in Faisalabad (usage M = 3.65; engagement M = 3.38) and Multan (usage M = 3.60; engagement M = 3.32). This implies that city young people are more exposed to online platforms and political information.

Table 3: Social Media Usage and Political Engagement Scores at the District Description (N = 400)

District	Social Media Usage Mean (SD)	Political Engagement Mean (SD)
Lahore	3.80 (0.78)	3.55 (0.75)
Rawalpindi	3.78 (0.80)	3.52 (0.77)
Faisalabad	3.65 (0.82)	3.38 (0.79)
Multan	3.60 (0.85)	3.32 (0.81)

Gender Comparisons

The independent-samples t -tests were conducted to determine the difference between male and female participants in the area of social media use and political engagement. The females were a little bit more likely to use social media ($M = 3.75$ vs. 3.69 , $t = 1.12$, $p > 0.05$) and were a little more likely to engage in politics ($M = 3.48$ vs. 3.42 , $t = 1.05$, $p > 0.05$), however, differences did not have statistical significance.

Correlation Analysis

To test the existence of the relationship between social media use, political awareness, and engagement, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. The findings revealed that there exist a strong positive relationship between political participation and social media use ($r = 0.61$, $p = 0.01$), suggesting that the greater exposure to social media is, the more involved in politics. Engagement was also positively correlated with political awareness ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$), and the use of social media was moderate with political awareness ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 4: Relations among the variables Social Media use, Political Awareness and political participation (n= 400)

Variables	1	2	3
1. Social Media Usage	1		
2. Political Awareness	0.53**	1	
3. Political Engagement	0.61**	0.57**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Summary of Findings

The report shows the Pakistani youths in Punjab are active on social media, especially the urban ones (as compared to semi-urban youths). There is moderate political engagement, and online engagement is more than offline engagement, which shows the rise of the significance of digital activism. There are strong positive relationships among the social media use, political awareness, and engagement indicating that social media can be effectively used as a means of encouraging the youth to participate in politics. Differences between genders were slight, whereas differences on the district level demonstrate that specific actions should be implemented in semi-urban regions to increase the political turnout.

Discussion

The results of this paper indicate that social media has a major influence in determining political participation amongst the Pakistani youths. Generally, in the case of social media usage, young people recorded high usage levels, with Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok recording the highest usage. Greater levels of engagement were reported in urban districts, especially Lahore and Rawalpindi, in comparison with semi-urban localities such as Faisalabad and Multan, which implies that a greater number of people in urban areas become more engaged because of the availability of infrastructure, digital literacy, and exposure to political debate (Rehman et al., 2020; Khan and Ahmad, 2021). The findings are consistent with the existing studies that assert that the urban young people are more prone to information availability, peer networks, and online areas, which enables them to be aware and engaged in politics (Ali et al., 2019; Malik and Tariq, 2018).

It also turned out that the political engagement of the participants was moderate with the greatest activities on the Internet in the form of sharing of political content, commenting, and following of political discussions being more common than those on the Internet, including

attending rallies or communal meetings. This tendency shows the growing influence of digital tools in political mobilization, as it is a global trend whereby social media tools provide convenient, quick, and massive interaction (Thornicroft et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2019). In addition, the fact that social media use and political participation are positively correlated ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) proves that increased exposure to online technologies increases interest in, awareness of, and involvement into the political process and aligns with the results of earlier research in South Asia and the world in general (Qureshi et al., 2022; Van Dijk, 2020).

Social Media use and political activities had little gender comparisons with the females recording slightly higher. However, despite the non-significant differences, they indicate that female youth are using digital platforms to engage in political discourse more frequently, and this fact undermines the assumption regarding the gendered political activity in Pakistani society (Raza et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2019). These observations highlight the democratic nature of social media in terms of political participation where both men and women are given a chance to engage in a discussion, notwithstanding the restriction of society.

The disparities at the district level, in turn, point to the fact that semi-urban young people are less involved in politics and digitally; it is structural factors and lack of access to the internet, low digital literacy, and less political outreach programs (Khan et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2020). These variations show the necessity of context-based interventions that would be applied to young people in semi-urban and rural regions so that the potential of social media to mobilize politics is not limited to urban residents. In general, the research supports the idea that social media is a strong instrument of encouraging young adults to participate in politics, though its effects depend on the accessibility, education, and the infrastructure in the region.

Conclusion

The researcher finds that social media is a very important factor contributing to political participation among Pakistani youth adults as a source of information on politics, discussion and mobilization. In the urban districts especially at Lahore and Rawalpindi, the level of engagement and awareness was higher than in the semi-urban regions as they linked to access, infrastructures, and exposure to digital content. Political participation online was higher than the offline participation, which reflects the increasing influence of the social media on political behaviour. The difference in genders was slight and they imply that both male and female young people are actively engaged in the online political discussion. The high positive relationships among the social media use, political awareness, and engagement suggest that online platforms have the potential to increase political literacy and participation among young adults. These results highlight the need to strategically use social media to mobilize political involvement and civic accountability, especially in young groups of people.

Recommendations

On the basis of the study, a number of recommendations can be made to increase political involvement of Pakistani youth using social media. To begin with, educational establishments and civic groups must implement the digital literacy and political awareness campaigns, making young adults able to analyze information critically, discuss and take part in online civic campaigns (Ali et al., 2019; Thornicroft et al., 2016). Such programs must involve interactive workshops, webinars and campaigns which will promote safe and informed use of political content.

Second, solutions to gender-based disparity need to be gender-inclusive in order to provide equal opportunities. Programs must also aim at empowering female youth to use digital

platforms to discuss and make decisions in the political arena, overcome the challenges of the society and thereby ensure equal representation in the political discourse (Malik and Tariq, 2018; Rehman et al., 2020). Peer-led campaigns and mentorship programs may also be especially powerful in encouraging the participation and building confidence.

Third, the interventions, based on districts, are essential in solving the regional differences. Targeted outreach in semi-urban and rural areas, such as mobile internet campaigns, community workshops, and collaborating with local organizations, will ensure the elimination of the digital divide and the possibility of political engagement (Shah et al., 2019; Qureshi et al., 2022). To give the youth an equal chance, policymakers ought to invest in infrastructure enhancement and make internet affordable.

Lastly, social media sites themselves can be used as means of civic engagement, where one can have an interactive environment to discuss, argue and to do some joint work. Responsible use of social media, misinformation, and fact-based political discussion may enhance the democratic participation and informed decisions among young people (Van Dijk, 2020; Khan et al., 2021). These strategies can be integrated to make sure social media is used as an instrument of positive political awareness, engagement, and empowerment among various youth in Pakistan.

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