



SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN PAKISTAN: AN ANALYSIS (2015 - 2025)

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in the political mobilization of youth in Pakistan from 2015 to 2025. Using a qualitative research approach, the study analyzes social media content to understand how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have influenced youth political awareness, engagement, and participation. The findings reveal that social media has played a significant role in mobilizing young people by increasing awareness of national issues, facilitating political dialogue, and encouraging participation in campaigns and online movements. However, the study also identifies challenges, including misinformation, echo chambers, and selective engagement, which in some cases limit critical thinking and informed participation. The study concludes that social media has reshaped youth political participation in Pakistan and emphasizes the need to promote digital literacy, ethical online activism, and inclusive political discussions to ensure constructive and informed engagement among young citizens.

Keywords: *Social media, Digital Literacy, Echo Chambers, Misinformation, Political engagement, Online Movements.*

Introduction

The lack of the gatekeeping apparatus makes it gem inappropriate for material such as news that spreads fast, frequently distorting the truth and enlightening the minds. Computational content curation, also, has been linked to the establishment of ideological echo chambers in which subscribers are even given permission to watch something that confirms the preconceived notion in their minds. This not only restricts the exposure of different opinions; it also brings about even more levels of the political polarization of the youth who are yet to have formed political identities. Such partition is capable of causing increased tension to the unstable Pakistani politics and further disintegration of the society. Moreover, the social media does not simply permit to be part of the process, but also confronts the standard and the effectiveness of the political participation. It is not always necessary that clicking or liking sharing or commenting on a page will lead to taking genuine action on the ground politics.



Another issue of concern is that most young users of media and social media platforms do not have sufficient media literacy skills that enable them to distance themselves as political actors and interest groups rely on it to appear authoritative even when they have limited information. Such concerns make the case towards the necessity of more in-depth comprehension of the effects of social media on the political attitude's awareness and actions of youth in Pakistan. Currently, the role of social media in the youth political mobilization in Pakistan is not extensively researched in the scholarly literature. Majority of the available literature is either general in nature on political communication or youth engagement is a sideline topic. Not much research has been done to investigate how social media in particular influence the political behaviors and awareness of the Pakistani youth or the ways of the virtual commentary that people make through social media converts into actual and observable political implications. As the young generation begins taking the center stage in the future politics of Pakistan, this knowledge gap must be bridged at once. The social media and political youth mobilization are evolving, and there is no opportune time to know more than now, since Pakistan is at the phase of political and digital transition. The study presents timely and needed information of a society that is fast evolving in its political culture, a process that is fast gaining momentum, contributed to by the activism and the voices of the young and networked citizenry.

Literature Review

This study examined the relationship between political youth and the media using the 2013 Pakistani general elections as an example. It examined the youth-oriented ads (YOAs) of three main political parties that were published in national Urdu dailies before the elections: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML (N)), and Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarian. The results showed that PML (N) released the fewest adverts for young voters, while PTI published the most (41%). The information that political parties utilized in their YOAs was divided into five primary categories, including data, play on words, endorsements, emotional language, and personal appeals. The main strategy employed by all three political parties to get young people's attention was endorsement. Additionally, this study discovered that the primary drivers of youth attention were their strong effects within families. The significance of door-to-door political campaigns, active polling engagement, their potential and future contribution to the success of the party, their involvement and vigor in demonstrations, strikes, and protests, and their role in party fundraising. Based on the results, this study recommended that commercials make reasonable promises rather than overpromising, which could cause young people to get very frustrated when their promises are not fulfilled in the future (Hussain, Sajid, & Jullandhry, 2018).

Social media users who focus on and pay attention to politics are more likely to be able to purposefully find pertinent political content through social media. One of the indicators and forecasters of political involvement in the context of general elections is the use of social media for political actions and activities namely for voter turnout and mass participation in the system (Strandberg, 2013).

Posting and displaying political status updates disseminating political messages to the public writing and disseminating political notes within their networks that is party employees getting public feedback on their posts sharing political views participating in live streaming political events following candidates and downloading political applications are examples of these political activities. These political posts then show up in the news stream on the user's wall where



their friends may also view them. Users of social media can see what their followers are discussing and what their supporters are publishing. Through the News Feed on their homepage they can receive updates from other party members and about pertinent party activities. In a similar vein all of these activities take place in Pakistan. Political events such as following the candidate of their constituency have changed to click like on the candidate's profile as a result of Facebook's modernization and updates (Vitak, 2011).

Devices that assist people in connection forming relationships with family friends and other network members include long distance informal conversation locations email administrations texting video and photo sharing sites and comment posting. Between 1997 and 2010, there were approximately 1.5 billion users of person-to-person communication websites worldwide. There is no doubt that the number of clients using online life has increased since 2008. Online networking has occupied many people especially young people (Alia, 2010).

Informal groups have the same influence on public life as do political associations. Youth political and public activities might be abruptly altered by the internet and web based life. Furthermore, social systems increased political viability and investment in Egypt, Japan, and Canada (Attia, et al, 2011, Conroy, et al, 2012).

Facebook users in Pakistan are reaching 8,055,680, according to Facebook insights from 2013. In Pakistan, this number was used by 70% of male clients and 30% of female clients. Data also shows that the largest age group is young people between the ages of 18 and 24. Online networking was used in Pakistan by political organizations and trailblazers to collaborate and involve people. They focused especially on young people whose numbers are rapidly growing through web-based networking platforms. Numerous ideological groups, including the PTI, PPP, PML-N, and others, operate in Pakistan. Many of these groups use the internet and maintain their own accounts and systems on Facebook, Twitter, and Skype to connect with people and organize them to participate in political processes. Among the most popular ideological groups on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are PTI and PML-N (Kugelman, 2014).

Social Media Landscape in Pakistan (2015 - 2025)

Social media has become one of the most effective platforms for communication political participation, activism and entertainment in Pakistan's swiftly evolving digital landscape. In the early years of this era urban educated youth were the main users of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter for news sharing and connection. Pakistan had a tremendous increase in internet users over time particularly once 3G and 4G services were introduced. The presence of mobile data made WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube widely used by 2020 and capable of surpassing the traditional media in terms of both reach and influence. During this era, digital journalists and social media influencers that were known as independent content producers started to appear on the digital platform often forming public opinion by skipping the editorial filter of the traditional ones.

Lobbying mobilization efforts and warfare of narratives are among the most important uses of social media in politics. Political parties especially PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) used digital outreach strategies to mobilize the youth and dispute traditional media narratives. Online pro-Imran Khan Followers used Twitter trends, hash tags and live streaming as part of their strategy to promote their agenda and counter criticism in Imran Khan Administration (2018-2022) that saw unprecedented levels in terms of online participation. Following the ouster of Khan in 2022, the social media space has been the arena where the groups that favors and reject



the status quo have engaged in combat. Higher levels of surveillance and control of the content and intermittent internet outages especially at politically sensitive meetings were the responses by the state. With these constraints, youth-led internet campaigns such as #ReleaseImranKhan and #HaqeeqiAzadi trended globally proving that grassroots digital mobilization has massive potential.

Evolution of Internet and Social Media Penetration in Pakistan (2015- 2025)

Pakistan's adoption of social media and the internet has changed dramatically. Pakistan's internet development was still in its infancy in 2015. Greater internet accessibility was sparked by the 2014 rollout of 3G and 4G services particularly in urban and semi-urban areas. At the time 15% of people had access to the internet mostly from the urban middle class. Facebook was the most popular social networking site and the majority of users accessed the internet using mobile devices. As the dominant messaging app WhatsApp started to supplant SMS while journalist's politicians and young people in cities became the main users of Twitter. YouTube's contentious material led to its prohibition from 2012 to 2016, however when it was unblocked in 2016 the amount of video content created and consumed skyrocketed. The percentage of people having internet connection had increased to about 35–40% by 2020. Over 76 million people have broadband subscriptions, according to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and mobile internet is now almost universal in big cities and towns. Social media use varied despite numerous prohibitions due to content concerns TikTok gained enormous popularity among young people in rural areas and those with lower incomes for fun and self-expression. Instagram became popular among young people in cities particularly for influencer marketing fashion and lifestyle. As political parties especially PTI used Twitter and other social media platforms to engage young people shape narratives and plan demonstrations and events political discourse also grew more digital. But this time also saw an increase in digital spying online harassment and disinformation which fueled calls for regulatory change.

More than 115 million people or more than 50% of the population, will have access to the internet by 2025 thanks to reasonably priced smartphones, growing 4G coverage, and a small number of 5G experimental projects. The ecosystem of social media has grown increasingly dynamic and fractured. Even though Facebook is still quite popular, the younger generation is now using TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube Shorts in place of it. Even though it is more divided, Twitter (X) is an important media and political discourse platform, whereas WhatsApp is nearly everywhere. (Khan & Shahbaz, 2015). Online education and commerce Telemedicine remote employment have succeeded and prospered due to the increased use of digital technology that has been further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, another feature of the landscape is the growth of state control since the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) is employed to control and sometimes suppress dissent. These issues notwithstanding, despite these issues, social media has contributed much to communication identity and civic engagement in Pakistan between 2015 and 2025 which not just affects the way people communicate, but also how they perceive the world.

Evolution of Social Media in Pakistan's Political Landscape

The social media in Pakistan has not only become a tool of secondary communication, but it has also become the platform of the most important interaction and discussion of the politics. In 2015, the scale of political involvement in social media was increasing at a tremendous rate, especially to the middle classes and urban youths who are well educated. The Facebook and



Twitter (since changed to X) have become a necessity in the promotion of political ideas of both types, i.e., events live and also the voice of the opposing opinion. In terms of applying to digital technologies to attract the younger generation and make stories Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has become a trend setter. The use of hashtags on Twitter became one of the most common ways of political mobilization and political content by 2016-2017. Also, civic society and anti-government opinions began to rely on Facebook and YouTube in order to disprove state reports, especially in those regions or circumstances when the mainstream media was either silent or forbidden. (Haq, 2025)

Social Media and Youth Political Engagement

Over the last decade, social media has seen a shift in participation by young people in politics, evading more traditional methods such as party participation and voting, leading to more active participatory and often decentralized means of political participation. Social media have risen as virtual forums where the young people are able to express their ideas to organize others challenge authority and create awareness about issues such as human rights, climate change, corruption and the government. The social media offers a more open, interacting and uncensored means to the young people who are often excluded in the inherent political process to promote their grievances and request accountability.

Electoral Campaigning and Digital Propaganda in Pakistan

The introduction of digital technology and social networking sites has brought about a drastic transformation in the election scenario of the Pakistan. Political Communication that previously belonged to analogue technologies and TV commercials posters and people conducting public intimidations in the streets transformed into a mechanism of an informational inflated algorithm and regularly of an emotion-shaping character. The political parties especially Pakistan Tehreek-e- Insaf (PTI), used them first to disseminate the campaign messages, to attract volunteers, and to control the media narrative. Viral videos, warfare memes, hashtag-trending speeches, and live-streaming speeches happen to be handy centerpieces of campaign strategies. The use of beautiful language and personalized web campaign communications transformed young voters who are hundreds of thousands of young voters, first-time voters, into an effective force over the internet. (Lima et al., 2024).

Challenges to Democracy in the Age of Fake News

Misinformation and disinformation have become serious dangers to the integrity of democracy around the world in the digital era. Although both phrases describe the spreading of inaccurate or misleading information, misinformation usually refers to the inadvertent sharing of inaccurate content whereas disinformation refers to the purposeful production and distribution of false narratives in order to mislead or influence public opinion. Social media platforms have made it possible for such content to proliferate more quickly and extensively than in the past while eluding conventional fact checking methods. Unrestricted spreading of such information distorts facts, polarizes communities, influences elections and undermines trust in institutions in democracies where informed community opinion is central to the functioning of election and the state. (Mckay & Tenove, 2021)

Role of the State and Regulatory Framework in the Digital Age

In the digital era, the state and regulatory structures in Pakistan have been proposed to play a much greater role in political mobilization. Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) and



other state authorities balance digital spaces by enforcing law such as Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 that has been utilized to encroach and police political activity online. According to a 2023 report by the Digital Rights Foundation, over 60% of politically active internet users in Pakistan believe that online surveillance by state agencies discourages free political expression. This regulatory environment often leads to self-censorship and restricts the ability of political parties and civil society groups to mobilize effectively online. Although the internet has enabled more people to reach, the state has been tightening its control over the digital communication channels and there has been a growing concern over the issue of democratic rights and digital rights in the country (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023).

Internet Blackouts and Digital Surveillance

The regulatory forms in the state and Pakistan have increased say in the form of political mobilization in the internet era. Digital spaces are regulated by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and other state institutions through legislation such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, in order to track the political discussions on the internet and limit those that are deemed politically controversial. More than 60 percent of politically active Pakistani internet users believe that the act of online surveillance by state agencies suppresses free political speech in 2023, according to the Digital Rights Foundation report. Political parties and civil society organizations are unable to successfully mobilize online due to this regulated environment, which frequently results in self-censorship. Although the internet has made it possible to reach a wider audience, the government's growing control over digital communication channels has raised worries about the nation's democratic freedoms and digital rights (Groen-Reijman et al., 2023).

Government Policies and Internet Regulations

Governments around the world increasingly regulate the internet through varied approaches ranging from content censorship and data localization to complete shutdowns often justified by national security or public order concerns. For example, shutdowns imposed by states surged in recent years: in 2024, 54 countries implemented government-initiated internet blackouts, with Myanmar alone responsible for 85 such outages, highlighting an alarming 35 percent rise in national participation compared to two years prior. Other regulatory tools include net neutrality frameworks, which aim to ensure that internet service providers treat all data equally a principle enshrined in the EU's Net Neutrality Regulation 2015, though critics argue it contains exploitable loopholes. Simultaneously, the EU has introduced comprehensive oversight of digital platforms via the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act in 2023, aiming to enhance transparency and consumer protection. The fashions describe a web of colorful history of ruling, which wavers between control, market fairness and internet rights (Khan, 2023).

Conclusion

The increased penetration of mobile internet and the stable growth of youth digital literacy that empowered the young people to express themselves politically caused a significant increase in political awareness and the active voice of youth in this period of time. Because of the ongoing domination of conventional channels by the state or corporations, social media entered to serve as the leading chorus of the voices of youth demanding accountability, transparency, and reform. One of the most prominent trends during this period is the phenomenon of the youth-led internet movements. Social media also provided young people with a direct way of influencing the national



conversation without passing through the institutions of the gatekeepers by way of campaigns on platforms like #JusticeForZainab, #StudentsSolidarityMarch and support of mainstream political parties like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), along with demonstrations on issues related to student rights and education policies, which students were able to take up with the help of social media. The movements demonstrated the effectiveness of internet networks in organizing group activities to create support and to hold people in leadership positions in society accountable.

In Pakistan, though, the link between social media and political mobilization was rather complex. Though to some extent these platforms empowered young individuals further, they were a medium where online harassment, propaganda, and fake news took place. Occasionally employing troll armies costing large sums of investment, political parties began to utilize the deep usage of online campaigns as a means of stunting dissent or changing the political opinion. Also, the digital divide was another significant issue where young people in poverty and the rural areas have not yet received equitable access to digital resources and high-speed internet. This angered the government to develop additional digital surveillance that switched the internet off and made efforts to locate legislators who could limit unneeded political discourse. Nevertheless, there is also the change in the attitude of the Pakistani youth towards politics in the 2015-2025 forecasts. The social media was both an indicator and a political engagement force of the young people. It has resulted in the development of a more aggressive articulate and a more knowledgeable generation of people who understand their place in the democratic process. The reason behind this is in the fact that the youth in Pakistan has proved that political participation no longer has to be exclusive to the polling stations but rather flourishes through timelines comment feeds and live-streaming be it through organized campaigns and viral hashtags and logging or online argumentation.

The complex nature of mobilizing the Pakistani youth in politics by using social media has been colossal. Although it has enabled the new political identities, new spheres of engagement and threatened the monopoly of the current centers of power, it has also come along with new threats that must be curbed by the policy of democratic protection, change of policy, and digital literacy. Access to such platforms is not just the challenge, but another challenge is to create a generation of digitally savvy and politically aware youth who can use social media to transform the world in a positive fashion and a platform to be heard.

Recommendations

- The social media companies should be collaborated with to improve freedom to political content and advertisement. These platforms should provide visible data regarding sponsored political advertisements and, in addition, the users should be aware who is funding whatever they watch. The second technological solution would be a change in algorithm that will reduce the number of echo chambers and expose the user to political diversity.
- The younger political activists are supposed to be oriented on a superior method of applying the social media tools message techniques and community mobilization methods. These programs can be introduced by Universities NGOs themselves or even youth wings of the parties and must be also grounded on the legal framework, as well as boundaries of moral values of digital activism.



- It is necessary to monitor the role of social media in influencing the political behavior and academic research institutes and think tanks both should serve this purpose. This type of analysis of the effectiveness or failure of the changing digital campaign patterns of misinformation and voter turnout of younger voters would be useful in shaping action plans and policy responses in the future. Such information in the hands of the masses can increase transparency to the masses.
- The political players who are smart in the digital environment are advised to transform their governance that makes the action of maintaining transparency in the allegations they have to remain off polarization and to get involved in factual debates. The online political environment will be healthier by promoting the ethical norm of the content creators.
- The political engagement should also be evident in the different social media apps in order to reach different categories of the audience. Local languages and the contents, which are relative to the local places, can be more accessible and can enable more inclusion of the rural and marginal groups in the political discourse. This kind of approach can address the urban rural differences in electoral cognition.
- Marginalized youth groups (peoples in rural or underserved areas) need to be provided with increased access to digital tools and training. The internet access policies that act as catalysts to the affordable mobile technology and inclusive digital facilities will be more permeable to play the political game. In addition, the number of female heads of youth programs and minorities in the political sphere should also be encouraged.
- The political parties should organize the youth advisory councils which can be effective online and are especially active in seeking the feedback of the youth on the policies. The increased influence of youth trust on long-term interest and involvement in government will have an enormous impact through these councils that will contribute to the bridging of the digital engagement/real political decision-making gap.
- Domestic and international governments ought to create digital outreach programs towards the youth in cases of elections referendums and community consultations. Such campaigns ought to incorporate interactive ads like live question and answer session on social media polls and small video advertisements to enable political processes to reach out to the youth and capture their attention.
- The schools and universities are expected to promote online debating blogs and mock elections on digital political programs run by the students. Such activities create interest in the political world and enable practical skills in the application of digital tools of civil participation contributing to the future generation of digitally literate and politically aware leaders.
- Attempts must be made to create online youth-oriented political forums that are independent of the general social websites. The latter can help avoid instances of commercial and partisan influence frequently incurred on bigger platforms since they can provide safe places to learn collaboration and activism.
- The Pakistani youth should be linked to young digital activists in other democracies to encourage cross-border collaboration and learning. Youth have the opportunity to know



about the effective digital mobilization plans and how democratic values can be efficiently safeguarded through exchange programs, webinars, and international conferences.

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