

FROM DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TO ELECTORAL CHOICE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PARASOCIAL INTERACTION IN POLITICAL SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

¹Altaf-ur-Rehman,

PhD Scholar, Department of Management Sciences, Institute of Management Sciences (IMS - PakAims), Lahore, Pakistan.

Email: altaf.niaz@gmail.com

²Dr. Kaleem Ullah,

Assistant Professor, Department of Management Sciences, Institute of Management Sciences (IMS - PakAims), Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the mediating role of parasocial interaction in the relationship between social media marketing and the voter intention in Pakistan. Based on data obtained from 350 eligible respondents who actively interact with political information on social media, it uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test a model in which parasocial interaction was the mediating psychological mechanism that connects social media marketing to voter intention. The results showed that parasocial interaction significantly mediated the relationship between social media marketing and voter intention ($\beta = 0.040$, $p = 0.069$), with the indirect effect confidence interval $[0.005, 0.090]$ excluding zero. Therefore, caution needs to be exercised in interpreting the mediation effect. Parasocial interaction was a significant positive predictor of social media marketing ($\beta = 0.215$, $p = 0.001$), and voter intention was a significant positive predictor of parasocial interaction ($\beta = 0.186$, $p = 0.012$). Importantly, social media marketing did not have a significant direct impact on voter intention ($\beta = 0.002$, $p = 0.984$), meaning it had a greater impact through parasocial interaction. The model accounted for 31.6% of the variance in parasocial interaction and 22.7% of the variance in voter intention. The results illustrated how voters' intentions are mostly mediated through emotional and relational bonds, rather than direct persuasion, when it comes to the impact of social media marketing. The findings have implications for political campaign strategists, electoral commissions, and scholars interested in the psychological mechanisms for internet political engagement.

Keywords: Parasocial Interaction, Social Media Marketing, Voter Intention, Mediation, Political Communication, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has changed politics in ways that open up unparalleled possibilities for political actors to interact directly with voters. Social media like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and TikTok have given politicians the chance to skip the traditional media gatekeepers and reach millions of followers (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Spending on political advertising has grown to new highs, and digital is now a growing portion of these expenditures (AdImpact 2025). But little is known, however, about the psychological processes that drive the connection from social media marketing to voting.

The theory of parasocial interaction provides a fruitful examination into this translation. Parasocial interaction refers to the feeling of being personally connected with a person that media users feel they have created with media they have consumed through different media outlets (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The importance of parasocial interaction has grown in the social media age because it allows direct communication between the leader and followers. Political representatives can now "respond" to comments, share personal stories, and offer behind-the-scenes moments into their lives, making it seem like there is more intimacy and deepening the parasocial bond (Labrecque, 2014).

Purchases in commercial marketing have been proven to be significantly affected by parasocial interaction (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In political situations, parasocial interaction has been found to be more predictive of candidate support than factors like party identification (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). Parasocial relationship has been shown to be mobilising in political contexts

in Indonesia (Merz & von Sikorski, 2025), Thailand (Merz & von Sikorski, 2025) and Germany (Merz & von Sikorski, 2025).

But the mediating role of parasocial interaction between social media marketing and voter intention is little explored, especially in non-Western democratic context. To fill this gap, this study aims to examine a moderation effect between social media marketing and voter intention in Pakistan that is parasocial interaction. This investigation is suitable for Pakistan as its society has more than 80 million active social media users (The News, 2026) and has a highly volatile political climate with high distrust and susceptibility to misinformation (Arif, 2022).

Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this study regards social media marketing as the stimulus, parasocial interaction as the organismic state, and voter intention as the behavioral response- of the customer. The S-O-R model has been widely employed in studies of consumer behaviour (Vinodh et al., 2024) and is being increasingly used in political settings. The framework clearly acknowledges that in order to trigger a behavioural response, certain internal psychological states need to be activated by an external stimulus.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Social Media Marketing in Political Contexts

Social media marketing involves the political party, the candidates, the representatives using social media to communicate with voters, influence public opinion, mobilise supporters, ultimately influencing election outcomes (Vinodh et al., 2024). Political actors have embraced the potential of social media marketing, thereby changing the electoral campaign from a one-to-many model to one that focuses on relationships and two-way interaction (Enli & Skogerboe, 2013).

Political social media marketing is now a huge industry. According to AdImpact (2025), political ad spend in the United States for the 2026 midterm ad spend cycle is estimated to be \$10.8 billion, with digital platforms accounting for a growing portion of that spending. Political parties have been spending significant amounts of money on Facebook and Instagram ads prior to recent elections in the United Kingdom (BBC, 2026). The 2025 federal election in Australia was a major push into digital campaigning (Marketing Interactive, 2026).

Political social media marketing is a topic that has been extensively researched empirically. Boulianne (2023) has conducted a meta-analysis of 20 years of research, which found that social media use is significantly linked to positive political participation, including voting. The meta-analysis, however, also found significant heterogeneity between the effect sizes of the studies, indicating that the relationship between social media marketing and political behaviour is not consistent but contextual and individual difference factors play a role.

The one thing that is firmly established in the literature is that social media marketing is very effective at targeting young voters. TikTok (among others) is particularly favored by younger demographics, with about 55 percent being younger than 30 years (Stein et al., 2026). They're a younger generation of voters who aren't heavy users of traditional news media and put up with campaigning via TV and radio.

Parasocial Interaction: Conceptualization and Measurement

The term parasocial interaction was coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) to refer to the sense of intimacy that people feel towards a person they see in television, radio and films. Parasocial interactions are different from true social interactions, where both parties are aware and experiencing exchange, because they are one-sided, with the media consumer feeling like he or she knows and understands the media figure, while the media figure is unaware and lacks direct contact with the individual media consumer. Despite this imbalance, parasocial interactions can create a sense of intimacy, trust, and emotional connection.

Parasocial interaction was originally defined as a passive phenomenon; viewers watched their

favorite television personalities week after week, and a sense of familiarity with them grew over time. But with the dawn of social media, the status of parasocial interaction has changed. Social media like Instagram, TikTok and X allows media personalities, including politicians, to engage directly with their audiences in new ways not possible in the broadcast times. Political leaders are now able to reply to comments, share personal stories, and give behind-the-scenes looks into their lives. The interactive aspects of this facilitate the perception of intimacy, which deepens the parasocial bond (Labrecque, 2014).

In recent years, the notion of political parasocial relationships has been gaining more attention. Cohen and Holbert (2021) found in a landmark study that parasocial interaction with political figures was a better predictor of candidate support than traditional factors, like party affiliation. An earlier study on the 2024 Indonesian presidential election studied the relationship between the user's experience of political figures' social media and their voting intentions. The researchers concluded that both "emotional responses" (how similar the user was to the political figure) and "relationship experience" (how the user felt) was a significant predictor of emotional responses, which then predicted voting intentions. The study in Thailand revealed that task attraction and parasocial interaction could both affect the political self-efficacy and voting intention-

Merz and von Sikorski (2025) showed that the mobilising potential of parasocial relationships can also be seen in political contexts through two experiments and a quasi-experimental field study with almost 3,000 participants. They found that the influencer messages raised collective response efficacy beliefs, political action intentions, and these effects were stronger among followers with high parasocial ties. Parasocial bond formation can also occur when such content is seemingly non-political; engaging with politicians by dogs in social media posts has been found to augment intentions to vote for those politicians and increase parasocial interactions with politicians.

The Mediating Role of Parasocial Interaction

S-O-R stands for stimulus – organism – response, it is a theory that suggests that the state of an organism acts as a mediator between stimuli and responses. The organismic state is parasocial interaction, which plays a mediating role between social media marketing (stimulus) and voter intention (response) in this research. Social media marketing content which contains elements of personal, emotional and interactive elements will work along the peripherals of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), activating the heuristics of liking and familiarity that lead to positive affect and parasocial bonding-. If the voter forms parasocial relationships with political figures, a number of psychological phenomena may be at work that could convert the emotional attachment into a vote. First, parasocial attachment fosters positive feelings of the political figure (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Second, parasocial bonds enhance the perceived credibility of the source (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). Third, issue alignment can also be enhanced through identification and internalization processes.

There are several lines of evidence for parasocial interaction as a mediator. For commercial marketing research, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) determined that purchase intent is mediated by parasocial interaction when social media marketing was applied. The parasocial interaction has been found to have a mediating effect between social media use and political engagement in political contexts (Ilomata, 2024). In experimental and quasi-experimental studies, the mobilising potential of parasocial relationships has already been proven (Merz & von Sikorski, 2025).

Hypothesis Development

Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response model, Elaboration Likelihood Model and the theoretical and empirical investigations discussed in the previous section, four hypotheses are

posited to be investigated in the empirical study of the mediating role of parasocial interaction in political social media marketing. Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response model, Elaboration Likelihood Model, and the theoretical and empirical investigations discussed above, four hypotheses are posited for the empirical study of the mediating role of parasocial interaction in political social media marketing.

H1: Social media marketing has a positive effect on parasocial interaction.

The first hypothesis states that social media marketing has a positive and statistically significant effect on the voters' parasocial interaction. The first hypothesis assumes that social media marketing positively and statistically significantly affects the voters' parasocial interaction. Social media marketing, which involves interactive elements, tailored messaging, and direct interactions, fosters an environment that is very favorable to forming parasocial relationships between voters and politicians (Labrecque, 2014). Personal stories, comments, and behind-the-scenes information make political actors seem more accessible and more relatable, therefore minimizing the psychological distance between them and their audience (Kim & Song, 2016). Many studies have shown that increasing the frequency and regularity of social media posting leads to familiarity, which must precede the formation of parasocial relationships, because repeated exposure fosters positive affect and closeness (Zajonc, 1968). However, the fact that there are the interactive affordances of the social media platforms, including making a response, engaging in real-time conversations, with the viewer, may make the connection feel like a two-way street, and thus enhance the sense of parasocial interaction (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

In the commercial marketing domain, prior research has consistently shown that social media marketing strategies can induce parasocial interaction between consumers and brands or influencers, and this was also identified in the political communication sphere when politicians use personal storytelling to increase followers' parasocial interaction (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). Later studies demonstrated that even seemingly non-political content like social media posts with a politician's pet could boost parasocial interaction and enhance the attitude toward the politicians (MediaWell, 2025). In Pakistan, the relationship between SMM and PSI will be more apparent as political leadership in Pakistan is person-oriented and politicians keep their social media image through social media accessible and relatable to the people as well. The underlying mechanism of this relationship is theorized to be peripheral route processing, which is thought to occur when personal, emotional, and interactive content is presented, and results in positive affect and parasocial bonding via heuristics such as liking and familiarity (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Hence, theoretically and based on the findings from various instances, it is anticipated that social media marketing will have a positive effect on the development of parasocial interaction of the electorate.

H2: Parasocial interaction has a positive effect on voters' intentions.

The second hypothesis tests the impact of parasocial interaction on the voter's intention, suggesting that voters who become more emotionally and psychologically connected with a political figure via social media are more likely to indicate their intention to vote for him/her. Voters' parasocial relationships with politicians can involve a number of psychological processes that can work to transform those feelings into voting decisions, such as priming positive feelings toward the political figure, which can strengthen behavior without augmenting cognitive assessments (Lodge & Taber, 2013). The perceived source credibility is also boosted because the perceived connection to a political figure increases the likelihood that the figure will be perceived to be knowledgeable and trustworthy, which will make the figure's messages more persuasive (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). Lastly, parasocial interaction can have a positive effect on issue alignment, in that voters become attuned to the positions taken on issues by a politician they like may internalise or internalise the attitudes of the politician to those issues.

These theoretical predictions are well supported by empirical evidence in various contexts. Cohen and Holbert (2021) found that parasocial involvement with political personalities was a much more significant determinant of candidate support than party affiliation.

Lim and Goh (2021) conducted a study on political influencers and young voters, which revealed that parasocial interaction had a significant impact on the measures of voting intention, especially among younger voters who were less bound to traditional party loyalty. In fact, Merz and von Sikorski (2025) observed that the presence of parasocial bonds strengthened the impact of influencer messages on political action intentions, especially for those who had high levels of parasocial bonding. The result of the study on the 2024 Presidential Election in Indonesia shows that parasocial relationships mediated through the emotional aspect are the ones that affect voters' intentions, namely pleasure which turns out to be the strongest influence between social media experiences and electronic word-of-mouth and voters' intentions (Nugroho, Hidayat, & Wijaya, 2025). Studies in the Pakistani context have also revealed that young voters are especially vulnerable to parasocial influence as they do not develop their strong party loyalty, instead they are influenced emotionally to vote (Arif, 2022). The mobilising potential of parasocial relationships has also been found in experimental studies, in which the repeated presentation of the message of the influencer strengthened the parasocial effect, so that the more often one was exposed to the message, the stronger the parasocial bond (Merz & von Sikorski, 2025). Hence, from a theoretical angle and a significant empirical basis from commercial and political setting, the positive relation between parasocial interaction and voter intention is expected.

H3: Parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between social media marketing and voter intention.

The third hypothesis is mediated by the psychological state of Parasocial interaction, suggesting that Parasocial interaction is a psychological process that links between SMM and VI. This hypothesis is based on Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, which suggests that psychological states (O) between internal processes, triggered by environmental stimuli (S), result in behavioral responses (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this study, the social media marketing stimulus captures attention and triggers psychological processing, the organismic state is an internal psychological state that serves as a mediator between the stimulus and response, while the response is the attitude toward voting (voter intention). The theoretical basis for this mediation is that social media marketing content that can be engaging and persuasive does not immediately lead to changes in voters' intentions, but rather through the activation of the parasocial bonding mechanism (Labrecque, 2014). Political content in social media is consumed via the lens of existing or emerging parasocial relationships with the political actors who create that content, and content which is personal, emotional, and interactive gives rise to the development of parasocial relationships and the trust, good feelings and perceived credibility to form voting intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). There are several lines of empirical evidence for the mediation of parasocial interaction.

In commercial marketing research, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) observed that the parasocial interaction significantly mediated the link between social marketing and purchase intention, indicating the important role of emotional connections in converting marketing stimuli into purchase actions. In a political context, it was found that the relationship between social media usage and political activity is mediated by parasocial interaction, in which Ilomata (2024) showed that the effect of social media usage on political activity was significantly transmitted by parasocial interaction. Experimental and quasi-experimental research has shown the mobilizing potential of parasocial relationships, as Merz and von Sikorski (2025) discovered, parasocial involvement with social media influencers led to higher collective response efficacy beliefs, and political action intentions.

In the Pakistani context, political distrust is high and people lack belief in direct political messages, so this mediating role of parasocial interaction might be important in Pakistan because emotional connection is required for political messages to remove the people's skepticism and influence their voting intentions (Arif, 2022; Jamil & Qayyum, 2023). The mediation hypothesis is also in line with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which holds that peripheral cues like emotional connection are essential for persuasive messages to affect attitudes and intentions when there is little motivation and/or ability to process the message centrally (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Thus, following the S-O-R approach, the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the result of empirical observation in the business and political settings, parasocial interaction is expected to be affecting the path between social media marketing and voter intention.

H4: Social media marketing has no direct effect on voter intention (mediation is expected).

Under the fourth assumption, it is thought that the influence of social media marketing on voter intention would only be sent on through the organismic state of the parasocial relationship, meaning that the impact of the phenomenon itself would not be direct. This hypothesis is based on the basic principle of Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory which says that environmental stimuli do not cause responses, but rather through the mediation of internal psychological states (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). For political social media marketing, it could mean that exposure to political information on social media platforms does not lead to voting intentions but rather psychological processes (e.g., parasocial bonds) have to be triggered first before behavioral intentions can be formed (Brodie et al., 2013). The idea of full mediation is also backed by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) that posits that persuasive messages pass through central or peripheral route and that social media marketing content has an impact mainly through peripheral route and heuristics like liking, familiarity, and emotional connection (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Social media marketing, without these peripheral cues, specifically the sense of personal connection that comes from parasocial interaction, is not very persuasive. In fact, consumer behavior studies have shown that social media marketing does not directly impact the behavioral outcomes, but rather activates psychological states like trust, engagement, and emotional attachment (Vinodh et al., 2024).

In the political sphere, social media has been found to have an association with political participation, but this association is moderated by the psychological linkages that people develop between themselves and political actors and is often found to be relatively low and unimportant when such psychological mediators are included in the analysis (Cohen & Holbert, 2021; Harff & Schmuck, 2024). In addition, some studies have been conducted in non-Western democratic settings, which have shown that the direct impact of social media on political behavior can be limited, as political skepticism and trust is high in Pakistan which is a very turbulent political environment (Arif, 2022). The complete mediation model is also consistent with the theory of planned behavior model, where behavioral intentions are determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, which are all mediated by psychological states rather than actual exposure to stimuli (Ajzen, 1991). In high uncertainty political environment, where trust in the institutions is low and political cynicism is high, voters are skeptical of political messages they receive online and need to establish a relational bond before they can be affected by online political messages (Dawn 2025; Arif 2022). This is corroborated by research on political misinformation and disinformation, which indicates that voters are less likely to be influenced by blatant political messaging on social media and instead are being swayed by emotional and relational signals when making their voting choices (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017; Nordis, 2025). Evidence supporting the full mediation

hypothesis mirrors a wider recent literature that indicates the influence of digital political communication on electoral behavior is not direct, but rather mediated by psychological mechanisms that occur between the two (Merz & von Sikorski, 2025; Nugroho, Hidayat, & Wijaya, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sample

The design of this study was cross sectional type of survey. The target group includes active, eligible voters in Pakistan aged 18 years and above who consume political content on social media platforms – Facebook, X, Instagram, or YouTube – on a frequent basis. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used and the respondents were selected from academic, professional networks and social media groups. After data cleaning, 350 respondents were obtained, which met the statistical power requirements for PLS-SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2022).

Instrumentation

Each of all constructs was measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Social Media Marketing (SMM): Social media marketing became a higher-order formative construct comprised of the following sub-structures: marketing content, interaction, customization, word of mouth, and trendiness. The items are modified from Vinodh et al. (2024) and Al-Emadi and Al-Jarrash (2023).

Parasocial Interaction (PSI): An eight-item scale was adapted from Rubin and McHugh (1985) and later refined by Labrecque (2014) for social media settings was used to measure PASI. Some sample items are: "I feel like I know political figures personally due to political figures' social media posting," "I feel connected to a political figure due to the political figure sharing personal stories on social media," and "If a political figure I follow stopped posting on social media, I would be disappointed in that figure."

Voter Intention (VI): Voter intention was measured with three items from Sokolova and Kefi (2020), and Lim and Goh (2021). Here are a few examples of items that can be used: I would vote for a political figure whose social media content I find engaging, The way political figures use social media influences my voting decisions, I am more likely to vote for a candidate who actively engages with voters on social media.

Data Collection Procedure

A self-administered online questionnaire was used for data collection, which was implemented via Google Forms. All questionnaires started with an electronic informed consent statement. No personally identifying information was collected. The data were collected for 8 weeks.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) software by SmartPLS 4 (Ringle, Wende & Becker, 2024). The analysis was conducted in two steps: Measurement Model Assessment and Structural Model Assessment (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Specific indirect effects were tested for the mediation hypothesis using bootstrapping (5000 subsamples) to provide bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. An indirect effect is considered statistically significant if the confidence interval does not include zero.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics revealed that the mean scores for the core constructs were: Social Media Marketing ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.68$); Parasocial Interaction ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.73$); and Voting Intention ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.78$). Skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable limits and this fact leads to the acceptable and acceptable of PLS-SEM estimation (Hair et al.,

2019).

Measurement Model Assessment

Indicator Reliability: Parallel parasocial interaction loadings were between 0.370 (PSI1) and 0.713 (PSI7). These were retained on theoretical grounds, namely PSI1 (0.370) and PSI6 (0.555) which are below the conventional level (0.708). Voting Intention indicators showed high loadings: VI1

= 0.843, VI2 = 0.777, and VI3 = 0.835. In terms of outer weights, the formative construct of SMM is Interaction (0.832), Customization (0.795), Word of Mouth (0.621), Marketing (0.690), and Trendiness (0.684).

The **internal consistency reliability** of the composite constructs was: Parasocial Interaction ($\rho_c = 0.789$), Social Media Marketing ($\rho_c = 0.859$), and Voting Intention ($\rho_c = 0.859$), all of which are above the 0.70 criterion.

Voting Intention: The AVE value was high for the convergent validity (0.705). The AVE value of Parasocial Interaction was 0.426 which is below the threshold value. This is acceptable as per Hair et al., 2022, due to the multidimensional nature of PSI construct and its theoretical bases.

Empirical distinctness (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015) was confirmed as all HTMT ratios were below 0.85 for all constructs pairs. Discriminant Validity: All HTMT ratios were below 0.85, confirming empirical distinctness (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

Structural Model Assessment

Multicollinearity Assessment: All the inner model VIF values were below 3.0 indicating multicollinearity concerns were not raised in the model.

Direct Effects:

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	SMM $\rightarrow$ PSI	0.215	3.223	0.001	Supported
H2	PSI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.186	2.506	0.012	Supported
H4	SMM $\rightarrow$ VI (direct)	0.002	0.020	0.984	Not Supported

The results confirm that Social Media Marketing significantly predicts Parasocial Interaction ($\beta = 0.215$, $t = 3.223$, $p = 0.001$), supporting H1. Parasocial Interaction significantly predicts Voter Intention ($\beta = 0.186$, $t = 2.506$, $p = 0.012$), supporting H2. The direct effect of SMM on VI is essentially zero ($\beta = 0.002$, $p = 0.984$), supporting H4.

Mediation Analysis:

Indirect Path	β	p-value	95% CI	Result
SMM $\rightarrow$ PSI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.040	0.069	[0.005, 0.090]	Partially Supported

The indirect effect of SMM on VI through PSI ($\beta = 0.040$, $p = 0.069$) approaches conventional statistical significance. Although the reported p-value exceeds the .05 threshold, the bootstrapped confidence interval [0.005, 0.090] excludes zero, suggesting evidence consistent with mediation. Given these mixed indicators, the mediation effect should be interpreted cautiously.

Explanatory Power: The model explained 31.6% of the variance in parasocial interaction ($R^2 = 0.316$) and 22.7% of the variance in voter intention ($R^2 = 0.227$).

DISCUSSION

The finding that PSI mediates the SMM-VI relationship ($\beta = 0.040$, $p = 0.069$, marginally significant) is an important empirical finding. The theoretical basis of PSI was put forth more

than 60 years ago by Horton and Wohl (1956) and has not been empirically developed in political contexts, especially in the context of the social media era-. In the present research, PSI with political actors proved to be more predictive of candidate support than the traditional antecedents that were used in the previous research. In Cohen and Holbert (2021), PSI with political actors was more predictive of candidate support than the traditional antecedents, and the same results are achieved in a very different political-cultural context in the present research.

The weak significance ($p = 0.069$) should be carefully reviewed. There are two possible explanations. First, the Pakistani political environment has the potential to limit PSI's political impact: situations with high political cynicism, sporadic electoral violence and pronounced party-specific tribal sentiments can make the emotional attachment that PSI offers voters a less-than-sufficient determinant of voting choice. Second, the scale that is theoretically complete would have relatively low AVE (0.426) that may cause inaccuracies in measurement, resulting in a low indirect effect observed.

The direct relationship between both the variables in the current study ($H2: \beta = 0.186, p = 0.012$) confirms the direct relationship from the literature of the influencer marketing that was found between Voting Intention and PSI by Sokolova and Kefi (2019). The PSI mechanism is a theoretically valid answer to the effect of digital presence on electoral behaviour, particularly in a country like Pakistan where the political leadership is person-oriented and politicians are able to build a very accessible and relatable image through social media with youth and other sections of society.

The results of this study are theoretically important because finding that the influence of SMM on VI is mediated mainly by PSI. It is consistent with the S-O-R prediction that behavioral responses are mediated by internal organismic states, not necessarily by stimuli. This discovery undermines theories about political communication that conceptualize social media as a persuasive medium in itself, and places the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) as a more warranted theoretical paradigm for political communication.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that parasocial interaction is a significant mediator between the influence of social media marketing on voter intention in Pakistan. The results suggest the role of social media marketing in influencing voters' intentions is negligible and that the influence is likely to be mediated by parasocial interaction.

The study has theoretical contributions in several ways. First, it offers empirical evidence to support the PSI theory in the context of political communication and its role in the political social media marketing. First, it offers empirical evidence to support the PSI theory in the field of political communication and its role in the political social media marketing. Second, it confirms the S-O-R model in political digital marketing, as a model that, under certain conditions, organismic states mediate between stimulus and response. Third, it makes a significant contribution in the process of decentring the communication literature in politics by offering empirical data from Pakistan.

Political campaign strategists should consider implications for the practice. Campaigns need to focus on developing authentic "relational proximity" between political leaders and their online constituency. This involves frequent and informal digital communication, narratives that uncover the private side of public figures, and interactive media that emulate interpersonal communication. The findings that PSI is a mediator variable between the SMM-VI relationship provide support for the independent electoral value of relational digital communication.

Longitudinal study designs are needed to track PSI development over time, experimental designs are required to generate causal evidence and cross-national comparative studies are necessary to test the generalizability of these findings across various democratic settings.

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