

Modeling Youth Political Socialization in the Digital Age: Evidence from Hazara Division, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The current study explores social media as a new arena of political socialisation among the university and college-going youth in Hazara Division of KP, Pakistan.

Methodology: It builds on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Engagement Theory (SET) by conceptualising digital political socialisation as a multi-faceted process that includes exposure, awareness, information evaluation, trust, knowledge, discussion, engagement and participation. The data from 400 respondents aged between 18 to 35 years old were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square test, independent-samples t-test, one-way ANOVA and multiple regression.

Findings: Over half reported that they used social media for over 4 hours a day. Overall the regression model accounted for 48% of the variance in political socialization ($R^2 = .48$, $p < .001$), and social-media use, political trust and political awareness were significant predictors. There were some differences between men and women in political awareness and discussion and also differences between age groups with regard to awareness. Trust in online political information was moderate, but verification was comparatively strong. Social media then is an important part, but not the sole part of a mixed political-socialization context.

Conclusion: The political socialization of young people in digital times is digital, interactive, and hybrid. Social media plays a role in political learning in Hazara Division, but is not the source of learning for family, education, peers or traditional media. Social media needs to be viewed in the context of a new environment where exposure, awareness, evaluation, trust, knowledge, discussion, engagement and participation interact and not as a direct cause of political behavior. These processes should be further tested in future with longitudinal and structural models.

Keywords: Political socialization; Social media; Youth; Political awareness; Political trust; Hazara Division; Pakistan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political socialization is the transformation in which one learns political values, information, beliefs, identities and the orientations toward citizenship and participation (Hyman, 1959; Jennings et al., 2009; Nesbitt-Larkinc, 2008; Safdar et al., 2026; Safdar & Eman, 2025). Digital communication has added to the settings where individuals learn about politics, and family, schools and peers, along with community institutions, politics, and religion, continue to be important agents. The social media is interactive, networked and participatory and unlike traditional media. Youth can ingest political information, create political information (Carr & Hayes, 2015), discuss political information, produce political information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), circulate political information, and interact with political actors, journalists, activists, parties, peers, and civic organizations. Exposure can be intentional or unintentional and occur through algorithmically curated feeds (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

The change is particularly relevant for young people in the early stages of adulthood, where political orientations are being solidified, and when university students are exposed to a wide array of ideas and networks of people (Loader et al., 2014; Vromen et al., 2015). In Pakistan, increased smartphone and social media access has led to a growth in the amount of political information and discussion in people's lives, but this does not necessarily mean that they are actually exposed to, let alone know of, political knowledge or discussion; it depends on what type of information they are exposed to, how motivated they are to engage with it, and how they interpret it, as well as the fact that they may be exposed to misinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2020).

Hazara Division is a region that provides a useful regional setting as the culture, education, social networks and digital access may vary from national patterns. The study hence not only looks at social media as a means of communication but also as a new agent and environment of political socialization.

1.2 Research problem(s), Objectives and conceptual approach of the study

Social media has been the subject of research with a focus on its role in awareness, participation, voting, or political communication. Instead this study focuses on the relationship between digital engagement with the larger concept of exposure, awareness, knowledge, trust, discussion, engagement and participation. The goals are to explore social-media usage and political awareness; trust and assessment of online political information; digital engagement and political socialization; political and civic behaviors; and gender and age gaps.

The study is based on a process-oriented conceptual model, that is,

Social-Media Engagement→ Political Exposure→ Political Awareness→ Information Evaluation/Political Trust→ Political Knowledge→ Political Discussion and Engagement→ Political Participation→ Voting as a downstream behavioral expression

Figure 1: *Conceptual model for political socialization in a process*

The sequence is analytic not deterministic. Traditional agents remain important for shaping political interpretation and age and gender offer contextual influences. Voting is seen not as a direct reflection of political learning, but as a downstream product of learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary agents of political socialization are the family, education, peers, community institutions and mass media (Hyman, 1959; Jennings et al., 2009; Safdar & Khan, 2025; Safdar et al., 2018). Digital communication provides an additional space where these influences might reinforce, challenge, or negotiate, as Bennett & Segerberg (2012) and Klinger & Svensson (2015) describe. Social media may help to extend the visibility of political actors and issues, assist in supporting learning and knowledge acquisition, encourage discussion, influence trust, and promote participation (Boulianne, 2015; Zhang et al., 2010; Yamamoto et al., 2015). These benefits are not mutually exclusive, as they also accompany

selective exposure, misinformation, polarization and information overload (Barberá, 2015; Tandoc et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2017; Safdar et al., 2018a). The needs for information, entertainment, identity, communication, and political awareness are why active users choose media (Katz et al., 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). The holistic view of political learning is complemented by SET, which highlights the importance of interaction, discussion, sharing and social connectedness (McClurg, 2013; Dahlgren, 2009).

Individual Media Use → Political Exposure → Social Interaction → Political Learning → Political Engagement → Political Participation.

Combined, these viewpoints present digital political socialization as a cognitive, attitudinal, interpersonal, and behavioral process that links awareness, information evaluation, trust and knowledge to engagement and participation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The quantitative cross sectional survey was undertaken with 400 young people aged 18-35 who are pursuing university or college education (240 males and 160 females) in Hazara Division. A questionnaire utilizing a structured format was given online and in person. It assessed social media use, political exposure, awareness, information evaluation, trust, knowledge, discussion, engagement, participation and attitudes in voting. Political socialization was considered as a multidimensional process. The internal consistency scores were reasonable for the main scales. Participants were voluntary and those who participated were told about the project and the use of their information.

Table 1: *Reliability of the study constructs has been determined*

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Reliability
Social Media Usage	6	0.82	Good
Political Trust	5	0.80	Good
Political Awareness	7	0.85	Good
Political Participation	6	0.80	Good

Sample size was calculated for descriptive statistics, chi-square analysis, independent-samples t-test, one-way ANOVA and multiple regressions using SPSS 26. Overall political socialization was assessed using regression to analyze associations between social-media use, political trust and political awareness. The data are cross-sectional, so the conceptual sequence does not allow for temporal order or causality to be established; the entire sequence was not tested. Longitudinal, mediation analyses and structural equation models are demanded for more robust causal and sequential tests.

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Table 2: *Demographic information of the respondents (n=400)*

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	240	60.0
	Female	160	40.0
Age	18-21	180	45.0
	22-25	140	35.0
	26-29	60	15.0
	30+	20	5.0
	<1 hour	40	10.0
Daily use	1-3 hour	140	35.0
	4-6 hour	150	37.5
	>6 hours	70	17.5

The demographic characteristics of the respondents in table 2 indicate that males constituted the majority of the sample (60.0%), while females accounted for 40.0%. In terms of age distribution, nearly half of the

respondents (45.0%) were aged 18–21 years, followed by 35.0% aged 22–25 years. Respondents aged 26–29 years represented 15.0% of the sample, whereas only 5.0% were aged 30 years or above. Regarding daily usage, 10.0% of respondents reported using the relevant medium for less than one hour per day, while 35.0% reported 1–3 hours. The largest proportion (37.5%) indicated 4–6 hours of daily use, and 17.5% reported more than six hours.

Table 3: *Political Awareness through Social Media (400 subjects)*

Statement	Mean	SD
My awareness of political issues has been raised on social media	3.71	0.96
Social media allows me to become familiar with issues of the nation's political sphere	3.68	0.95
Social media provides information about elections and campaigns	3.61	0.99
I get news about political leaders via social media	3.46	1.03
Social media is useful for me to get to know government policy	3.38	1.07

Table 3 presents respondents' perceptions regarding political awareness through social media. The findings indicate generally positive perceptions, with mean scores ranging from 3.38 to 3.71. The highest mean score ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.96$) suggests that social media contributes substantially to respondents' awareness of political issues. Similarly, respondents reported that social media helps them become familiar with issues within the national political sphere ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.95$) and provides information concerning elections and political campaigns ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.99$). Awareness of political leaders ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.03$) and government policies ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.07$) also received moderately positive ratings. Overall, the results suggest that social media serves as an important source of political information and awareness among the respondents.

Table 4: *A study of the gender and age difference in terms of political awareness*

Analysis	Group/Source	Mean/SS	Test statistic	p
Gender t-test	Male (n = 240)	$M = 3.75$	$t = 2.18$	0.030
	Female (n = 160)	$M = 3.55$		
Age ANOVA	Between groups	$SS = 8.42$	$F(3,396) = 4.65$	0.003
	Within groups	$SS = 239.80$		

Table 4 examines differences in political awareness according to respondents' gender and age. The independent-samples *t*-test indicates a statistically significant difference in political awareness between male and female respondents, $t = 2.18$, $p = .030$. Male respondents reported a higher mean level of political awareness ($M = 3.75$) than female respondents ($M = 3.55$). The one-way ANOVA further demonstrates a statistically significant difference in political awareness across the age groups, $F(3, 396) = 4.65$, $p = .003$. The between-group sum of squares was 8.42, compared with 239.80 within groups.

Table 5: *The survey examined Information Evaluation and Political Trust (n = 400)*

Statement	Mean	SD
I believe spreading political information on social media is satisfactory	3.13	1.12
Accurate political news – social media	3.08	1.10
I check out political information before I believe it	3.65	0.97
This fake news has an impact on my political understanding	3.54	1.02
I use social media more than other forms of media	3.39	1.05

Table 5 shows the results about information evaluation and political trust. The level of verification before believing political information was relatively high ($M = 3.65$) as was the recognition of that fake news affects political understanding ($M = 3.54$). Participants' trust in social-media political information was moderate ($M = 3.13$). Such a trend indicates that people are not just passive consumers of political information on the Internet. Verification and source evaluation are thus key aspects of digital political socialization.

Table 6: *The sample consisted of 400 residents of the rural town who discussed gender and politics on social media*

Gender	Discuss Politics: Yes	Discuss Politics: No	Total
Male	160	80	240
Female	80	80	160
Total	240	160	400

Table 6 presents the gender distribution of respondents who reported discussing politics on social media. Of the 400 respondents, 240 (60.0%) reported engaging in political discussions, while 160 (40.0%) indicated that they did not. Among male respondents, 160 out of 240 (66.7%) reported discussing politics on social media, compared with 80 (33.3%) who did not. Among female respondents, 80 out of 160 (50.0%) reported engaging in political discussions; while an equal proportion of 80 (50.0%) reported no political discussion. Overall, the findings indicate that political discussion on social media was more frequently reported among male respondents than female respondents.

Table 7: *Political Participation through Social Media (n = 400)*

Statement	Mean	SD
I talk about politics with others	3.48	+1.01
I share political posts/videos with others	3.23	1.07
Social media makes me feel free to voice my political views	3.39	1.03
Social media inspires me to engage in political activities	3.25	1.05
I feel like I have more power politically via social media	3.21	1.08

Table 7 presents respondents' perceptions of political participation through social media. The findings indicate a moderate level of political participation, with mean scores ranging from 3.21 to 3.48. The highest mean score was recorded for discussing politics with others ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.01$), suggesting that social media facilitates political communication among respondents. This was followed by the perception that social media provides greater freedom to express political views ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.03$). Respondents also indicated that social media inspires political engagement ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.05$) and facilitates sharing political posts or videos ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.07$). The lowest mean concerned respondents' perception of having greater political power through social media ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.08$). Overall, the results suggest that social media supports political discussion and expression, although perceptions of its broader influence on political empowerment are comparatively lower.

Table 8: *The attitudes examined in this study are those that relate to voting and Political Socialization (n = 400)*

Statement	Mean	SD
I am influenced by social media in my voting behavior	3.35	1.04
Political campaigns on social media impact my decision	3.33	1.06
Social media has influenced my political opinions	3.50	0.99
Social media plays a role in my political socialization	3.56	

Voting was taken as a product of political socialization (see table 8). There was moderate ($M = 3.35$) social media influence on voting decisions, and moderate ($M = 3.33$) campaign influence on voting. Youth participation in politics has been enhanced by social media. Social media thus has a role in electoral attitudes, but it is not the only factor that influences votes; other factors include identity, candidates, political conditions, knowledge, discussion, and social forces.

Table 9: *The study used multiple regression to predict political socialization (n = 400)*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	P
Social Media Usage	0.42	0.08	0.36	5.25	< .001
Political Trust	0.28	0.07	0.24	4.00	< .001

Political Awareness	0.31	0.09	0.21	3.44	.001
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Model summary: $R^2 = .48$; $F(3,396) = 121.65$; $p < .001$.

Table 9 shows the correlations between social-media use, political trust, and political awareness accounted for 48% of the variance in political socialization. $R^2 = .48$; $F(3,396) = 121.65$, $p < .001$. The strongest predictor was social-media use ($\beta = .36$), followed by political trust ($\beta = .24$) and political awareness ($\beta = .21$), suggesting that social media usage and cognitive attitudes are independent predictors. This is because the other 52% of variance remains to be significant and serves as a reminder to the role of family, education, peers, traditional media, local political culture and so on. The model is associated, not causal, or deterministic.

5. DISCUSSION

The results suggest that social media has emerged as an important socialization context for the political socialization process of young people in Hazara Division, which confirms the trend of shifting from a one-way political communication towards interactive and networked political communication (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). The regression results lend support to an interpretation of this as a process, in which the social-media use provides exposure opportunities, and the political awareness and trust account for whether those opportunities will be engaged in political learning. This is accompanied by a moderate level of trust, and relatively high verification, which provides a strong indication that believability and digital competence are key elements of this process.

While online and offline participation are still important. Social media makes it easier to express and discuss ideas, but traditional participation can be more time consuming, resource intensive, organized and physical. Digital engagement could then be used to influence political learning, even if without similar ground-up offline action. They found that digital political socialisation is not a homogeneous process, as there are differences in genders and age groups. Some barriers can be diminished through online platforms, but political awareness and expression is informed by social norms, experience, education, and life stage.

UGT and SET jointly account for these patterns, with UGT focusing on the motivations of users and on their selection of media, and SET focusing on social interpretation on the basis of interaction and discussion. Political socialization should thus be seen as a process in which individual media selections and social networks interact. This study's primary theoretical contribution is an integrated digital political-socialization framework, in which social media is a part of the family, education, peers, and traditional media. The evidence provides some support for relationships between various components, but not a full statistical pathway.

5.1 Implications for Practice and Policy

Digital and political literacy, particularly in the area of source evaluation, misinformation and algorithmic exposure, should be reinforced in educational institutions. There needs to be clear, open avenues between online dialogue and constructive engagement that link civic and government institutions.

Strategies for gender responsiveness are also required since access to the digital world does not necessarily equalize political expression. The promotion of responsible and credible communication has to be prioritized over the dissemination of misinformation, manipulation and polarization, by political parties, candidates and the media.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

The study is based on 400 youth from the age of 18-35 from the selected samples of university/College going youth of Hazara Division, and this study cannot be extrapolated and generalized to all the youth of Pakistan. It is cross sectional and thus is used to identify associations but not time or cause effects. While the conceptual pathway was not tested with SEM or serial mediation, social media was analyzed as a general category without taking into account the differences between platforms. Further research should

make comparisons between regions, the rural and urban youth, educational and socioeconomic groups, and individual platforms. Longitudinal designs, SEM, mediation and moderation can be used to test the proposed model more rigorously, examining the effect of gender, age, misinformation, polarization, and online/offline participation.

6. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that in contemporary digital societies, the political socialization of young people is increasingly characterized by interactive, digital, and hybrid processes. Social media has emerged as an important avenue for political learning and engagement; however, its influence should be understood alongside other traditional sources of political socialization, including family, educational institutions, peers, and conventional media. The findings suggest that social media use, political trust, and political awareness collectively contribute substantially to variations in political socialization. Furthermore, differences across gender indicate that digital political learning and engagement may not occur uniformly among young people. Overall, political socialization through social media should be understood as a multidimensional process involving exposure, awareness, evaluation, trust, knowledge, discussion, engagement, and participation rather than as a direct determinant of political behaviour. Future research should further examine these relationships using longitudinal designs and structural models to clarify the nature and direction of the associations among these factors.

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