

Political Discussions on Social Media: Impact on Young Minds in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This research is designed to investigate the influence of political polarisation via social media on Pakistani youth, exploring the pattern by which digital media is being used to reshape political participation, identity formation, and ideological rigidity. Given that social media currently plays a significant role as a source of political information among young people, a grave concern has arisen regarding the possibility that it could exacerbate partisan divisions and foster an overly emotional political discourse.

Methodology: This study employs a quantitative design, with samples consisting of (n=100) students attending universities across Pakistan. The study aims to elucidate the trends in using and consuming social media and political media information, as well as perceived polarisation.

Findings: It has been revealed that young people are extensively engaged in political discussions on the Internet, often subscribing to parties, expressing their views, and receiving real-time information. However, such interaction seldom results in a change in political loyalties. On the contrary, respondents exhibited strong affective polarisation, indicating a tremendous emotional attachment to their preferred parties and a strong mistrust or aversion to their perceived opponents. In addition, social media was generally considered more reliable and quicker than mainstream media, thereby supporting the concept of selective exposure and the creation of echo chambers.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the research paper establishes that social media acts as a driver of political thought, as well as a contributor to the corruption of Pakistani youth. These results reiterate the necessity of intervention measures that include enhancing digital media literacy, facilitating topic-oriented discourse among the general population, or developing a more critical approach to the content of online media sources. Those interventions would, in turn, create a more enriching and accommodating democratic society.

Keywords: Political Polarization, Social Media, Youth, Pakistan, Confirmation Bias, Affective Polarization, Digital Politics, Political Identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become one of the most influential platforms for communication, engagement, and political participation, particularly among youth. Unlike traditional media, social media allows real-time interaction, multidirectional communication, and user-generated content (Acharya, 2024). It provides a democratic space where every user, regardless of their social or political status, can share opinions, debate ideas, and contribute to public discourse. However, this democratization of communication has also contributed to a rising trend of political polarization and the fragmentation of society into ideologically opposed groups with little common ground (Hossain, 2024; Safdar et al., 2025; Safdar and Khan, 2025).

This phenomenon is increasingly evident in Pakistan, where social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and WhatsApp have emerged as primary sources of political information, especially among university students and youth (Warraich & Ahmed, 2024). While these platforms have enabled youth to become more politically aware and active, they have also facilitated the spread of biased content, hate speech, and misinformation, further intensifying political divisions. Youth, who are both the most active users of digital platforms and the most impressionable demographic, are uniquely affected by the polarizing nature of online political discourse (Asia et al., 2024; Safdar and Fatima, 2024; Safdar et al., 2018).

Political workers and leaders are becoming increasingly reliant on the social media ecosystem worldwide to bypass the gatekeeping function of traditional outlets and directly reach the electorate. This approach was presented in the Pakistani context during the 2013 general elections, both before and after the election, when the mainline parties in the country, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) launched similar digital efforts to woo voters. This is how they tried to engage electoral cadres, distribute narrative preferences, demean competitors, and influence the agenda through the dissemination of content that would address specific audiences (Ghauri et al., 2023; ; Safdar et al., 2015; Safdar et al., 2015a).

Social media platforms have grown up, and their algorithmic resources have increasingly created ideological echo chambers. In these contexts, men and women are exposed to a preponderance of information and viewpoints that align with their existing beliefs. Its effect has been to sideline inter-party discourse and exacerbate both the personalization, and the emotive aspect, of political interchange. In the case of Pakistani Youth, entering into civic life anew as a matter of adulthood, the environment of political learning is growing by stealth on the Twitter accounts and TikTok feeds of social-media influencers, memes, and partisanized video content, instead of through established forms of policy processing or civic education (Norris, 2023).

The concept of political polarization refers to the separation between different and opposing political camps due to the increased gap in ideologies and increase in hostility between the different camps (Ullah, 2025). Such phenomenon develops in the two inter-connected dimensions: issue polarization, divergence in policy preferences, and affective polarization, harsh disliking and distrust expressed publicly by the adherents of each side in opposition to one another. In modern digital environment, polarization dynamics is not only amplified but also sped by the rapidity of online information along with contagiousness (Avery & Graham, 2013; Safdar et al., 2016; Safdar et al., 2014).

In history, the political sphere of Pakistan has been characterized by severe differences on ethnicity, religious, regionalism and ideological planes. This fragmentation has however been heightened by digital platforms. Political language in the modern world has become aggressive and so emotional that often it is governed by misinformation and personal attacks and not by rational arguments. The young people as active citizenry in the digital front take the center stage in this change as they consume, share and contribute materials that set the national political tone (Ullah et al., 2025).

The demography of Pakistan is highly unbalanced in terms of younger age groups as over the 60 percent people so far were below the age of 30 (Ullah & Iqbal, 2025). Combined with the surge in smartphone

penetration and the increasingly good internet connection, this youth bulge has spawned a digital generation of people that approaches politics in a way that is entirely dissimilar to various previous generations. Where passive viewing of television programs or meeting of friends in the networking environment used to be, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube serve as platforms of political articulation and identity bargaining. A significant number of youths are followers of the politicians, communicate with authorized pages of parties, discuss policy, and even participate in online political activism movements (Shah et al., 2024).

Most importantly, the online interactions are guided by the structural design of social networks, calculating approaches of political players, as well as peer influence. Thus, political sentiments and orientations of young people are becoming shaped more and more by material that is often delivered through emotionally tinged provocative forms (Ullah, 2024).

Political polarization though being a transnational process, takes a particular and multidimensional form in the Pakistani environment. A combination of political unrest and military interference, sectarian violence and intermittent media censorship means the country develops an impossibly sensitive political culture. In this kind of environment, social media has become a tool of civil participation as well as platform of ideological wars (Baber & Ullah, 2020).

Narrative control, bashing the opposition, and enlisting the support of fans on social media is now done through a sophisticated social-media operation by the political parties. In order to realize these tasks, these campaigns often resort to using disinformation, manipulated images, appeal-laden messages, so-called keyboard warriors who engineer trending hashtags and viral news periods (Shah et al., 2020). The young people, whose civic education tends to be quite restricted to the formal level, are particularly vulnerable to such manipulations. The situation raises valid questions of the quality of democratic discourse and the possible dilution of political evaluation.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Even with the increased reliance on forms of social media as a source of political information, empirical guideline although little knowledge as to the impact of this online association on youth attitudes, affiliations, and perceptions has been found in the case of Pakistan. Some youth start to be more active and informed in politics and it could be appreciated as a good quality whereas other youth fall into echo chambers, extreme opinion, or even distrust in a democratic system. There is thus a necessity to establish whether political content on social media is increasing from polarization or just reflecting the ones that already exist. Political communication has become even more contentious and dispersed and the counterweight, which was the role of traditional media, is now diminishing. What is the content of political items embraced by youngsters? What are their ways of perceiving and consuming this content? And how far does it influence their political behaviour and identification?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the social media platforms most commonly used by Pakistani youth for political information.
2. To analyze the patterns of youth engagement with political content on social media.
3. To assess the extent to which political polarization is influenced by exposure to social media.
4. To examine whether political content on social media affects youth party affiliation or political preferences.
5. To explore the perception of credibility and trust in social media versus traditional media among youth.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the academic understanding of digital politics in Pakistan by focusing on a highly relevant demographic of university students. It offers practical insights for educators, policymakers, media regulators, and political parties on how social media use among youth is transforming political engagement and potentially undermining social cohesion. The findings may also help inform the development of digital literacy programs to counter misinformation and promote healthy political discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital age has redefined political communication. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp have reshaped how political messages are disseminated and consumed, particularly among youth. Social media is no longer simply a source of news; it is a powerful tool for identity formation, opinion shaping, and, increasingly (Ullah & Jan, 2021). Social media's ability to bypass traditional gatekeepers' editors, journalists, and regulatory authorities has democratized political participation (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Unlike conventional media, which tends to be unidirectional, social media platforms foster interactive and participatory communication where users create, share, and comment on political content. This interactivity has turned citizens into producers of political narratives and enabled real-time engagement with political events.

Studies show that social media use increases exposure to political content and can foster civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). However, the nature of that engagement is highly variable. While some users become more informed and active, others are exposed to misinformation, bias, and hate speech. In developing countries like Pakistan, where media literacy is low, the line between political mobilization and manipulation can be thin (Khan & Ahmad, 2021).

Political polarization refers to the growing ideological distance between political groups, often resulting in reduced willingness to compromise, heightened partisan hostility, and social fragmentation (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). 1. It is broadly categorized into: Issue polarization: Divergence in policy preferences. 2. Affective polarization: Hostility toward opposing political identities.

Social media contributes to both forms. Algorithms that prioritize engagement tend to show users more of what they already agree with, reinforcing echo chambers and limiting exposure to dissenting views (Sunstein, 2001). Moreover, the emotional nature of viral content, memes, edited videos, and hashtags often fuels divisiveness rather than dialogue (Tucker et al., 2018).

In highly polarized environments, political content on social media often uses moralistic or populist framing that portrays opponents not just as wrong, but as dangerous or evil. This rhetoric intensifies emotional investment in politics and reduces tolerance for differing views especially among youth (Kashmir et al., 2019). Youth themselves are the most obviously dynamic group of social media users, and their political orientations are not as fixed as they are among older adults, who often form generations as a basis for their political connections. Thus, political socialization the developing of the sense of political self and the formation of central values now takes place in close communication with the Internet experience (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). In most young individuals, who form an increasing majority, influences, hashtags and video channels trending in politics have replaced classroom education and conventional news as the principal sources of politics-related information.

Media research supports this claim, asserting that youthful consumers are attracted to the use of political messages that are emotional, visually appealing, and those that peers can share through viral networks. However, a substantial part of this material is shallow and limited in its contextual scope, as it makes it more susceptible to trivializing and polemic framing. At the Global South level, Pakistan, being just one of them, this trend is exacerbated due to a lack of civic education field infrastructure, the pervasiveness of distrust in institutions, and an overall despair with parties' politics as usual (Khan et al., 2023). In turn, social media represents both a place of empowerment and a potential medium of manipulation.

Echo chambers refer to online spaces where users are predominantly exposed to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. Over time, this leads to reinforcement of ideological biases and the silencing of alternative viewpoints. Social media platforms, through their algorithmic designs, often facilitate the creation of such environments (Pariser, 2011).

Filter bubbles, a concept closely linked to echo chambers, refer to the personalized information ecosystem created by algorithms that tailor content based on user behavior. For young users who primarily consume their political content through social media, this means their worldview is increasingly curated and narrowed (Flaxman et al., 2016). Confirmation bias, the tendency to favour information that confirms one's beliefs, intensifies within these environments. When exposed only to agreeable content, users become more certain and extreme in their political opinions, contributing to issue and affective polarization.

In Pakistan, political polarization has long roots fueled by ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, and ideological divisions. However, social media has given polarization a new speed, scale, and emotional intensity. Political parties in Pakistan, such as PTI, PML-N, and PPP, have established dedicated digital media wings to promote their agendas, attack opponents, and dominate online discourse (Ahmad, 2019).

These teams often rely on hashtags, coordinated campaigns, edited videos, and online trolling to influence public perception. Disinformation is a common strategy, especially during election periods or political crises (Ullah, 2018). Journalistic integrity is often compromised as both professional and citizen journalists share unverified political content for engagement. Youth are central to these dynamics. According to recent studies, over 70% of social media users in Pakistan are under the age of 30 (GSMA, 2022). These users are not only consumers of political content but also its amplifiers. Many people engage in political debates, form online communities, and adopt political identities that are shaped almost entirely online.

Exposure to polarized content on social media has psychological consequences. It heightens anxiety, anger, and distrust toward opposing groups (Martherus et al., 2021). In youth, whose political and emotional maturity is still developing, this can lead to radicalization, decreased tolerance, and identity-based hostility. Social polarization also affects interpersonal relationships. Studies show that people increasingly avoid friendships, marriages, and even workplaces where political disagreements exist (Iyengar et al., 2012). In the Pakistani context, where political loyalty often overlaps with ethnic and regional identities, this fragmentation has broader implications for social cohesion.

2.1 Gaps in Existing Literature

Although much research has been conducted on social media's impact on political communication, few studies have explicitly focused on how it shapes political polarization among youth in Pakistan. Most existing literature is based on Western democracies, which have higher levels of media literacy, stronger institutions, and more regulated information environments. There is also a lack of qualitative and Study-based research that explores. How youth in Pakistan interpret political content on social media. What types of content do they trust or reject. Whether social media leads them to change or entrench political views. How polarization manifests in their behavior and social relationships.

2.2 Theoretical Approach

Using a multi-theoretical approach to the study, the current research integrates Framing Theory, Confirmation Bias Theory, and Social Identity Theory, proposing to explore how social media influences youth opinions on the political environment. The Framing Theory, as proposed by Entman (1993), suggests that media institutions can influence the audience's perception by bringing certain aspects to the forefront and pushing others to the background of Reality. In the context of politics, such a framework sheds light on the process by which social media platforms serve to highlight specific problems, stories, or emotive cues, influencing how the audience perceives them.

The Confirmation Bias Theory, as described in the literature of psychology, explains that people tend to seek, file, and maintain information that supports their preconceived notions. These mental habits invite youth audiences to consume media content that helps confirm their political orientations and, thus, worsen ideological polarization.

The Social Identity Theory, in turn, explains how political affiliation comes to be associated with self-concept, strengthening group identity and, at other instances, leading to inter-group conflict. Collectively used, these theories offer a strong analytical framework through which a researcher can assess how social media is impacting the youth, not just in terms of information consumption, but also in the development of political identity, emotional affiliation, and behaviour in polarised digital communication.

A careful overview of modern literature reveals that social media is not a politically neutral medium; instead, it has a profound impact on the belief system, emotional conditioning, identity formation within groups, and the overall structuring of societal cleavages. Dependence on digital platforms is replacing traditional forms of political education, such as daily newspapers, television, and face-to-face discussions among Pakistanis. This shift creates new opportunities for participation, communicative interaction, and mutual access to information. However, it also creates some grave side effects, such as the increase in speed of misinformation, the algorithmically enhanced extremism of ideological bubbles, and a noticeable increase in partisanism. This kind of development can discourage such valuable analytical potential, distort the state of Reality, and destabilise the principles of democratic speech. It is in this regard that the present study aims to fill the ongoing academic gaps concerning the political behaviour of Pakistani youth in the digital space, introducing current and empirical data into the picture against the background of an increasingly topical problem in political communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used to examine how political polarization through social media affects the youth of Pakistan. It details the research design, population and sampling strategy, data collection tools and procedures, and the methods used for data analysis. The rationale behind selecting each method is explained, ensuring the study's reliability and validity within its social context.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, Study-based research design. Given the objective to measure the extent of political polarization, patterns of social media usage, and youth perceptions, a quantitative approach allows for a broad, generalizable understanding of the phenomenon across diverse demographics. A cross-sectional Study method was selected to collect data at a single point in time, suitable for exploring relationships between variables such as social media usage, exposure to political content, and perceived polarization. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to university students in Pakistan.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The study focused on a specific population group of Pakistani university students between the ages of 18 and 30 years who attend both government-owned and private universities. This population was deliberately chosen, with a target set, as these individuals form one of the most visible layers of social media users in the country. However, in addition to their extreme digital fluency and daily use of the platforms, these young adults are also characterised by a high level of political awareness and a tendency to participate in civic activities. Having reached their adolescent and young adult years, when their nascent political identities are under development, they are particularly susceptible to becoming ideologically polarized as well as to external influence, through online ecosystems. Due to these qualities, the generation becomes a critical object to question the role of social media in influencing political attitudes and behaviours.

The method of participant recruitment employed non-probability purposive sampling, which was planned to increase the relevance to the research questions. Ease of access was prioritised over generalisation; the eligibility specifications were that respondents should be between the ages of 18 and 30, use social media at least once a day, and be willing to participate. Such a sampling framework was found to be the most effective in this study because it ensured that each respondent was directly relevant to the study's aims. The methodology inevitably limits the external validity of the results; however, this limitation yields richness of context and analytical sharpness, as it focuses on the closest people to the digital political content that is the subject of the inquiry.

In the last sample, 100 individuals participated in the survey. This figure provides an acceptable foundation for any descriptive statistics, such as the allowance for stratifying the data by types of variables, including gender, partisan affiliation, type of institution, and others. The appropriate balance between a reasonable scale and the variability of the analysis further aids the research design, which aims to shed light on the patterns of youth political participation through the use of social media in the Pakistani context.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The sources of information for this inquiry were collected over four weeks in April and May 2025. Since the sample covered a large geographic region, and digital communication has increased in its importance since the COVID-19 epidemic, the mixed-method approach was considered to be no less than essential. The study group distributed both the paper and online versions of the survey to maximize access and increase the rate of participation. The virtual tool was developed in Google Forms and disseminated through WhatsApp groups, university mailing lists, student organizations, and other social mediates. At the same time, the hard copies were distributed selectively on the campuses of the major cities of Kohat, Islamabad, Lahore, and Peshawar to provide access to all those whose internet connection may be weaker.

It was done on a purely voluntary basis. The respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the questionnaire, ensuring that the subject was aware of their rights and the project's framework before proceeding.

After getting the data, it was entered twice, and the data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The descriptive methods were used extensively in the analysis, including frequency distributions, percentage distributions, and means of essential variables to characterise the demographics of the sample and to study trends in political interest, social media use, and appraisals of online political communication. These steps, carried out in SPSS, provided a systematic organisation to the data and yielded results that were easy to understand and analyse, aligning with the research goals.

4. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The findings from the Study conducted among 100 university students across Pakistan to examine how political polarization on social media affects youth. The analysis includes descriptive statistics of respondents' demographics, social media usage patterns, political content engagement, and perceptions about political affiliation, trustworthiness, and polarization. The results are interpreted in light of the research questions and theoretical framework.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

A. Gender Distribution			
Gender	Frequency (f)	Cumulative Frequency (CF)	Percentage (%)
Male	42	42	42.00%
Female	58	100	58.00%
Total	100		100.00%
B. Educational Qualification			
BS (Undergraduate)	29	29	29.00%
MS/MPhil	49	78	49.00%
PhD	22	100	22.00%
Total	100		100.00%
C. Geographical Background			
Urban	57	57	57.00%
Rural	43	100	43.00%
Total	100		100.00%

The Study was completed by 100 respondents aged between 19 and 38 years, with a mean age of 28.96 years. The gender distribution was 42% male and 58% female, indicating a higher female participation rate in the study.

In terms of educational qualification:

- 29% were undergraduate (BS) students
- 49% were MS/MPhil students
- 22% were PhD students

Geographically, 57% of the participants belonged to urban areas, while 43% came from rural backgrounds.

Table 2: Social Media Usage Patterns

Social Media Usage Frequency			
Usage Frequency	Frequency (f)	Cumulative Frequency (CF)	Percentage (%)
Daily	97	97	97.00%
3–4 times per week	2	99	2.00%
Rarely	1	100	1.00%
Total	100		100.00%
Daily Time Spent on Political Content			
1–3 hours	28	28	28.00%
3–6 hours	43	71	43.00%
7–10 hours	28	99	28.00%
More than 11 hours	1	100	1.00%
Total	100		100.00%

Almost all respondents (97%) reported using social media daily, with an average daily usage time of 5.35 hours. A small minority (2%) used it 3–4 times weekly, and only 1% used it rarely. Specifically, regarding time spent on political content:

- 28% spent 1–3 hours daily

- 43% spent 3–6 hours daily
- 28% spent 7–10 hours daily
- 1% spent more than 11 hours per day

4.1 Political Engagement on Social Media

The current research presents an alarming picture of the political involvement of Pakistani university students on social media. Most of them, 93 per cent, claimed to have seen posts or activity related to parties on such sites, and 97 per cent said that they actively sought political information online. These numbers demonstrate that political information is the most prominent and popular in the digital environment where these respondents go online. Notably, 66% disclosed that they outwardly shared political news with friends or acquaintances who do not consistently use social media, thus carrying digital interaction into the real world and highlighting the work of youth as digitally connected information channels to the larger community.

With regard to authorized party accounts, 69 % stated that they followed at least one of such accounts on Facebook, Twitter (now X) or Instagram, and 31 % did not pledge their allegiance to those accounts in any manner. The majority are involved in online participation in formal political discourse. Still, there is a significant minority who is not connected with official party messages and, at this scale, prefers to rely on independent or peer-produced material. Overall, the results collectively indicate an increase in the pivotal significance of social media as a platform for political visibility, investigation, and exchange among Pakistani young people.

4.2 Perceptions of Influence and Polarization

4.2.1 Change in Political Affiliation

When asked whether social media influenced their political preferences:

- 84% of respondents said they had not changed their political affiliation due to social media
- Only 16% reported changing their views or party alignment after consuming content online

This suggests that while youth consume and share political content frequently, it rarely results in a change of political allegiance.

Table 3: Importance of Staying Informed

Response Category	Frequency (f)	Cumulative Frequency (CF)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	33	33	33.00%
Agree	44	77	44.00%
Neutral	17	94	17.00%
Disagree or Strongly Disagree	6	100	6.00%
Total	100		100.00%

Respondents' agreement with the idea that social media helps them stay informed about political issues:

- 44% agreed
- 33% strongly agreed
- 17% were neutral
- 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed

This table indicates that 77% of respondents agree or strongly agree that social media keeps them informed about political issues. This strongly supports the hypothesis that youth view social media as a

preferred and timely platform for accessing political information and news, surpassing many traditional channels in immediacy and accessibility. This supports the hypothesis that youth value social media as a timely and preferred source of political updates.

Table 4: Early Access to Political Information

Response Category	Frequency (f)	Cumulative Frequency (CF)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	22	22	22.00%
Agree	43	65	43.00%
Neutral	20	85	20.00%
Disagree or Strongly Disagree	15	100	15.00%
Total	100		100.00%

Regarding whether they receive political updates before others due to social media:

- 43% agreed
- 22% strongly agreed
- 20% were neutral
- 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed

This data shows that a majority (65%) of respondents believe social media helps them receive political updates faster than others, reinforcing its role as a primary and real-time source of political information for youth. This perception aligns with the increasing reliance on digital platforms for immediate news consumption and engagement.

Table 5: Emotional and Personal Connection to Political Content

Response Category	Frequency (f)	Cumulative Frequency (CF)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	21	21	21.00%
Agree	38	59	38.00%
Neutral	21	80	21.00%
Disagree or Strongly Disagree	20	100	20.00%
Total	100		100.00%

Respondents were asked whether social media made them feel personally connected to the political parties or candidates they follow:

- 38% agreed
- 21% strongly agreed
- 21% remained neutral
- 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed

This table reveals that 59% of respondents felt a personal connection to political figures or parties through social media, reinforcing the idea of affective political affiliation in digital environments. These connections are shaped not just by information but also by emotional and interactive engagement with political content online. This suggests that a majority feel a closer connection to political figures through their social media interactions, supporting the concept of affective political affiliation in digital spaces.

Table 6: Credibility and Trust in Political Content

Response Category	Frequency (f)	Cumulative Frequency (CF)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	28	28	28.00%
Agree	26	54	26.00%
Neutral	25	79	25.00%
Disagree or Strongly Disagree	21	100	21.00%
Total	100		100.00%

A crucial finding relates to **trust in social media versus traditional news**:

- 54% (26% agree + 28% strongly agree) believed that political information on social media was **more reliable** than that on traditional media
- 25% remained neutral
- 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed

This table highlights that over half (54%) of the respondents express greater trust in social media for political content compared to traditional media sources. The neutral stance of 25% and disagreement by 21% suggest a shift toward digital-first political trust among youth, potentially reinforcing confirmation bias and echo chambers. This confirms the increasing trust that young people place in digital-first political content, which may further reinforce existing political echo chambers.

4.3 Interpretation of Results

The main findings of this study are the results of a systematic investigation into Pakistani youths' experiences with political discourse on social media. The figures indicate a high level of digital engagement, primarily through the frequent consumption of political news and enduring support for political actors and parties. However, these actions do not always correspond to ideological or affiliation shifts in the same fashion. Instead, users appear to be more excited by the strengthening of the initial beliefs than by the search for a different opinion. These trends are consistent with the confirmation bias theory, which predicts that people will seek and share content that confirms their existing beliefs.

Moreover, indicators of affective bonds to political entities are also becoming more frequent, as reported by respondents via social media. Such a tendency is enhanced by the close, direct communicative patterns that official party pages and prominent personalities have adopted. Consequently, we can observe a shift in the passive consumption of information toward affective political identification, where an emotional commitment supersedes intellectual reasoning.

In its study, the team also finds that social media is widely evaluated among the young audiences as a more high-risk and therefore reliable conveyer of political information than it is with mainstream media. Such perception is brought about by the unmediated nature of digital resources, which provide real-time updates, video streams, and one-on-one message delivery, thereby creating a facade of openness and genuineness. Notably, most respondents confess that they share social media political material verbally with other interlocutors, who are not active in the online arena, which successfully spreads the political discourses beyond the virtual world.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that social media is a dominant medium through which Pakistani youth access political content. Nearly all respondents use social media daily, with many spending multiple hours consuming political information, debating, or following party pages. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube have become digital battlegrounds for political narratives, replacing traditional gatekeepers such as newspapers and television.

These results align with prior research by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012), who noted that social media facilitates direct access to political discourse and encourages user participation. In Pakistan, where press freedom is often curtailed and traditional media is perceived to be biased or censored, youth find in social media a more dynamic and seemingly authentic space for political exploration.

Interestingly, while social media fosters intense engagement, it does not necessarily lead to political persuasion or realignment. A large majority (84%) of respondents reported that their political preferences had not changed due to the content they consumed on social media. This suggests that youth use digital media primarily to reinforce existing beliefs rather than to seek new perspectives.

This finding supports the Confirmation Bias Theory, which posits that individuals tend to seek out, interpret, and remember information that confirms their pre-existing attitudes (Nickerson, 1998). The role of social media algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers may be deepening this bias by selectively exposing users to content that aligns with their political identity.

While ideological polarisation (issue-based differences) appeared minimal in the study, affective polarisation, emotional investment and identification with political figures or parties were strongly evident. More than half of the respondents felt emotionally connected to the political entities they followed online. They reported feeling anger, frustration, or pride depending on the political content viewed.

This supports Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that group membership, including political affiliation, forms a significant part of individual identity. Political parties in Pakistan have successfully tapped into this psychological connection by using emotionally charged content, religious rhetoric, nationalist appeals, and direct interaction with followers. Political leaders' use of emotionally resonant media (e.g., dramatic speeches, visual storytelling, viral slogans) makes youth feel personally included in the political process even if their participation remains limited to likes, shares, or online arguments.

A significant proportion of respondents considered social media to be a more trustworthy source of political information than television or newspapers. This trust is likely due to the unfiltered nature of digital content and the direct communication channels between political leaders and citizens on platforms like Twitter or Facebook Live.

However, this finding must be critically viewed. While trust in traditional media may be waning due to state control or partisan framing, unregulated social media content often includes misinformation, propaganda, and sensationalism. Youth trust in social media may not reflect content accuracy, but rather emotional and ideological alignment, a potentially dangerous trend that amplifies polarisation.

The literature on misinformation in developing democracies (Tucker et al., 2018) warns of the long-term consequences of such shifts in media trust, especially in fragile political environments like Pakistan. The finding that 66% of respondents verbally share political content with non-social media users points to a unique offline extension of digital polarization. Youth not only consume but also disseminate political narratives among peers, family members, and communities.

This verbal transmission of politicized content blurs the boundaries between digital and real-world political engagement and contributes to the interpersonal spread of polarization. The implications are profound: even those who are not active online may be influenced by second-hand digital narratives, reshaping community-level political discourse.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The political participation of Pakistani youth in social media is critically analyzed to outline a number of theoretical perspectives that explain the existing trends. First is the Framing Theory (Entman 1993), which proves that in a political message, emotionally inflected framing is often used which in effect directs perception rather than gives dispassionate information. Participation at higher levels is not

satisfactorily associated with ideology adaptation. The Confirmation Bias Theory further notes that users of information tend to select information that aligns with their prior interests. The strong affective commitment and political attachment demonstrated by the respondents make strong correlations to the Social Identity Theory, laying emphasis on the fact that political affiliation is embedded in self and group defining traits instead of specific policies or ideological standpoints. Together, these models can explain why Pakistani young people are connected in digital political spaces and at the same time why they are limited in terms of ideological flexibility and the growing emotional polarization.

5.2 Practical Implications

The empirical evidence of the current research has substantive value for an expansive range of actors involved in the policies of political communication and youth political participation throughout Pakistan. The first could be that universities and educators should seek to incorporate media literacy and civic education into their secondary and tertiary programs, thus enhancing students' skills in critiquing political content, articulating the difference between empirical facts and opinion, and identifying and becoming counter-intuitively aware of emotionally manipulative methods of communication. That being said, political parties should consider a political repositioning of their online activities, focusing on transparency and messages driven by a cause rather than appeals based on emotions or the spread of fake news. This reorientation must be in harmony with ethical principles that foster good democratic engagement. At the same time, policymakers and regulators are requested to increase their control over political content in social media, especially when applied to disinformation and hate speech, without jeopardising the freedom of expression. Finally, civil society organisations and NGOs are suggested to organise awareness campaigns, develop tools, and promote digital empathy, thereby addressing online polarisation and harnessing the positive potential of political dialogue based on ideological lines. Collectively, these suggestions can foster a more enlightened, accountable, and inclusive political environment among the youth in Pakistan.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into youth political engagement through social media in Pakistan, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size of 100 respondents limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader youth population. Additionally, the use of non-probability purposive sampling means the results may not fully represent the diversity of youth experiences across different regions and social groups. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the possibility of social desirability bias and subjective interpretation, which can potentially affect the accuracy of responses. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures participant views at a single point in time, which restricts the ability to analyse changes in political attitudes or behaviours over time.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to track evolving political behaviors in response to shifting social media dynamics. Employing mixed-methods approaches, such as incorporating qualitative interviews or focus group discussions, would also enrich the understanding of youth experiences. Comparative studies examining political polarization across urban and rural settings, provincial and linguistic lines, or socio-economic backgrounds could reveal deeper patterns of division. Furthermore, exploring the influence of religious content and populist rhetoric on digital polarization would provide a more nuanced view of ideological entrenchment in the online political landscape.

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