

Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)

Journal Homepage: <https://pjsel.jehanf.com/index.php/journal> *ISSN*

2521-8123 (Print)
2523-1227 (Online)

Social Media Use and Youth Political Activism in Post-2024 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: The Mediating Role of Political Efficacy

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Original Article

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Keywords

Social Media Use;
Political Efficacy;
Offline Political
Activism; Youth
Political
Participation;
Communication
Mediation (O-S-O-
R); Khyber
Pakhtunkhwa;
Pakistan

Abstract

University students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa(KP) were among the most visible participants in the digital politics surrounding Pakistan's 2024 general election. However, high levels of online political activity do not obviously translate into offline participation such as voting, attending rallies, or contacting representatives. This study addresses the question of whether political efficacy accounts for that translation. Based on the orientation–stimulus–orientation–response (O-S-O-R) communication mediation model and political efficacy theory, this study tests a mediation model that explains how social media use for political purposes drives offline political activism through political efficacy. The primary data were gathered from 400 university students across KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA using a structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale, along with well-established multi-item scales to measure social media use, political efficacy, and offline activism (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80, 0.81, \text{ and } 0.79$, respectively). SPSS and Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 4 (using 5,000 bootstrap samples) were used for analysis. Social media use was moderate ($M = 3.10$), political efficacy was moderate ($M = 3.00$), and offline activism was relatively low ($M = 2.05$). The use of social media was a significant predictor of efficacy ($\beta = 0.478$) and offline activism (total effect $\beta = 0.363$). The relationship was partially mediated, with an indirect effect of 0.113 (95% bootstrap CI [0.066, 0.165]) accounting for about 36% of the total effect, via political efficacy. The findings position efficacy as a partial bridge between digital exposure and offline action, while results that diverge from earlier Pakistani studies are addressed directly rather than reconciled away.

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have increasingly become a way for young people in Pakistan to engage with politics: Facebook, X, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp are regular channels for university students to get political news and partisan expressions. This was made evident at large scale during the 2024 general election, when party discourse and candidate messages proliferated online, and parties deliberately leveraged digital channels to engage youth (Luqman, Abbasi and Raza, 2025). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where party competition is intense and students are concentrated in a handful of universities, online political life was unusually active. This kind of involvement has been proven to increase youth interest and awareness of political issues in Pakistan (Ida, Saud and Mashud, 2020). The question, however, is not whether students use social media for politics, but whether that “political expression” translates into more expensive offline activities, like voting, canvassing, and attending rallies.

The evidence from Pakistan is indeed contradictory on this issue, and this is one reason for the study. Some research studies have found that social media exposure increases citizens’ political interest, awareness and participation (Iqbal, Hussain and Iqbal, 2022; Zeib & Tahir, 2022). Some other work has found a weak or nonexistent relationship between online engagement and offline action, and in some instances, that digital engagement actually increases polarisation rather than mobilization (Barati, 2023; Ibrahim, Shafi and Haider, 2025; Safdar et al., 2025). These are not marginal disagreements; they concern whether the central claim that online engagement feeds offline participation holds at all.

A way to explain this inconsistency is to examine the psychological circumstances in which exposure turns into action. Political efficacy is defined as a person’s confidence in his or her ability to comprehend politics (internal efficacy) and in the system’s responsiveness to individuals similar to himself or herself (external efficacy), and it is a long-standing predictor of participation. If using social media increases efficacy, and efficacy increases the likelihood of engaging in offline behavior, then efficacy would account for when and why social media exposure leads to behavior. Some of these studies approach efficacy as a mediating role (Tan, 2024; Hussain, Yasmeen and Ali, 2025), and others report that offline participation does not occur through efficacy when other factors are taken into consideration (Tariq, Zolkepli and Ahmad, 2022; Safdar et al., 2025). The mechanism is contested.

This study focuses on this mechanism directly in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa context following the 2024 election. It examines the relationship between social media use for political purposes and offline political activism, using survey responses from 400 university students to determine whether political efficacy serves as a mediator. The goal is narrow and empirical that efficacy might have some effect on offline action in this population at this time.

2. Problem Statement

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa university students engage extensively with social media related to politics, but their offline political involvement following the 2024 elections remains unclear. Most previous research examines the direct link between social media usage and political involvement. It shows a positive relationship between social media and offline participation, but offline participation is less consistent than online participation. A few studies provide details of the psychological process that would link the two. One possible mediator of this process is political efficacy, which has not been tested previously for offline activism and has rarely been tested in a Khyber Pakhtunkhwa sample in a post-election context. The problem addressed here is therefore both substantive and mechanistic: whether digital political engagement

among Khyber Pakhtunkhwa students translates into offline activism, and whether political efficacy is part of what makes that translation occur.

3. Research Question

To what extent does political efficacy mediate the relationship between social media use and offline political activism among university youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa following the 2024 general election?

4. Research Objective

To examine the mediating role of political efficacy in the relationship between social media use and offline political activism among university youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the context of the 2024 general election.

5. Rationale and Significance of the Study

The fundamentals lie in the lack of connection between the two existing fields: the influence of social media on political awareness among Pakistani youth and political efficacy and its impact on political participation. However, what is lacking is an understanding of how the two relate to one another in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa following the 2024 elections. The literature is dominated by national and urban studies with a smaller presence of studies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which are notable for their focus on digital campaigning (Munir & Zaheer, 2025). The gap is sharpest for offline activism: studies reporting strong social media effects typically measure cheap online participation rather than costly offline acts, and the relationship shrinks once offline behaviour is isolated. Theory and practice are both important in this case because testing the efficacy of the mechanism driving such shrinkage is an important question about whether and how online political engagement can be translated into offline political participation.

6. Literature Review

Social Media and Youth Political Participation

In developing democracies, youth have turned to social media as a first-choice space for political mobilization, to learn about politics, share their views, and reach out to parties and other youth. In Pakistan, university students are involved in sharing political content, commenting on it, and following political actors, and several studies attribute this involvement to political awareness and participation among university students (Iqbal, Hussain, and Iqbal, 2022; Zeib & Tahir, 2022). A comparative study of Pakistan and Indonesia indicates that social media serves as a medium for political learning and participation and also promotes political efficacy among the youth in both countries (Ida, Saud, and Mashud, 2020). In the 2024 election, digital campaigning played a key role in youth engagement with political parties, and qualitative research on the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's social media strategy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reveals a systematic approach to developing narratives and mobilizing supporters through both online and offline channels (Munir & Zaheer, 2025). Tariq, Zolkepli and Ahmad (2025) also conceptualize the use of social media as a stimulus that triggers the flow of its influence via expression and efficacy to involvement. This direction of work is consistent throughout: Exposure is correlated with engagement.

The Online–Offline Gap: Slacktivism and Mobilization

The problematic question here is whether online engagement extends to offline behavior. Two interpretations compete. The mobilization perspective views social media as reducing the costs of acquiring information and engaging people who are not otherwise engaged. The slacktivism belief is that easy online activities replace difficult offline ones, rather than creating them. Barati (2023) uses fixed-effects and instrumental-variable models to demonstrate that casual social media use increases online political participation but not offline participation or

voting. Ibrahim, Shafi, and Haider (2025) note that heavy use of social media among educated youth in Islamabad can increase engagement but also foster polarization rather than constructive involvement. The relationship between online and offline participation is neither convincing nor precise, and neither is the existence of an intervening psychological variable.

Political Efficacy as Determinant and Mediator

There are two aspects of political efficacy: the feeling that one can comprehend and participate in politics, and the feeling that institutions are responsive. It is one of the most consistent measures at the individual level. Within the social media arena, efficacy is seen as a consequence of exposure and as a motivator to participate. Tareen and Adnan (2021) hold the view that social media affects the internal and external efficacy of Pakistani youth through the transmission of political knowledge. Cadelina (2024) identifies that there is a moderate positive relationship between efficacy and social-media-based political participation among students who voted. In a study conducted by Tang and Wen (2023) involving college students in western China, they found that social media use is a strong predictor of online participation, and that this relationship is conditioned by the efficacy of social media use, which increases with its use. The mediating interpretation is best captured in Tan (2024), who found that political-informational use of social media mediated the relationships between political-informational use and offline, online, and cyber participation, and that these relationships were directly mediated by political efficacy. In a similar vein, Hussain, Yasmeen, and Ali (2025) find that the link between perceived efficacy and collective identity is a two-way street, as perceived efficacy also serves as a psychological resource for civic engagement, which is, in turn, mediated by collective identity. Therefore, efficacy operates as a contributing psychological resource rather than the sole mediator.

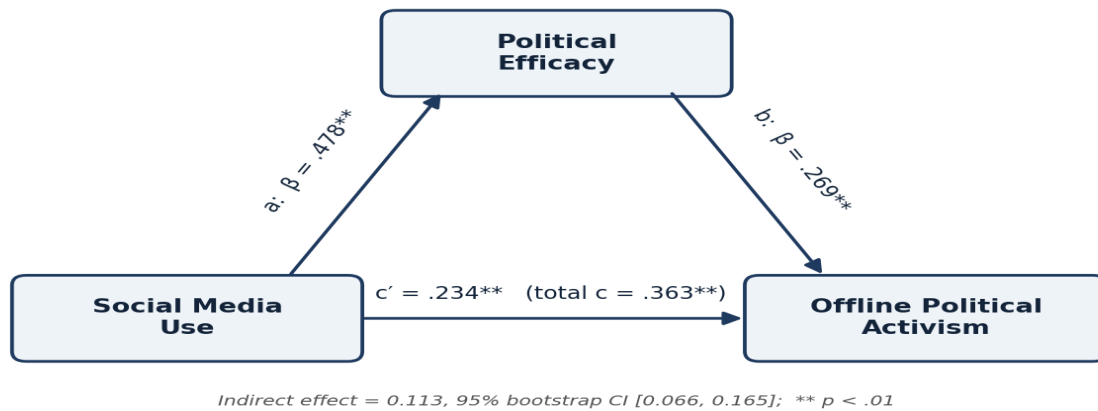
Contradictory Evidence and Research Gap

The mediation claim is not settled, and some of the disconfirming evidence comes from Pakistani data. In a sample of Pakistani young voters, Tariq, Zolkepli, and Ahmad (2022) found that although other orientations (political expression) affected offline political participation, but did not affect the political efficacy. While examining youth political activism during the 2024 election, Safdar et al. (2025) conclude that social media can increase political interest, which in turn can increase activism. However, political efficacy, even though it is viewed as a predictor, is not significantly associated with activism. These results sit awkwardly beside the mediation findings above, and the two studies from the same research team (Tariq, Zolkepli and Ahmad, 2022, 2025) do not fully agree on whether efficacy carries the offline effect. This unsettled evidence, the concentration of existing research outside Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the rarity of mediation tests focused specifically on offline activism together define the gap which this study addresses.

7. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study is based on the orientation – stimulus – orientation – response (O-S-O-R) model of communication mediation (McLeod, Kosicki and McLeod, 1994; Shahzad, 2018), which treats communication as a stimulus that brings about citizens' orientations rather than as an immediate cause of citizens' behavior. The first orientation (O1) is pre-existing disposition (such as political interest); the stimulus (S) is the use of social media for political purposes; the second orientation (O2) is the mental state that this activates; and the response (R) is behavioral participation, which runs substantially through O2. Political efficacy supplies the content of O2: internal efficacy (understanding politics) combined with external efficacy (belief that the system responds) makes participation seem worthwhile. This yields a model in which

social media use increases efficacy, which in turn increases offline activism, alongside a possible direct path (Figure 1).



Social media uses political efficacy to offline political activism

Figure 1. Conceptual mediation model. Standardised coefficients shown; total effect (c) in parentheses.

Four expectations follow. First, the total effect of social media use on offline political activism is positive. Second, the use of social media is positively correlated with political efficacy. Third, political efficacy is also positively associated with offline political activity, even after controlling for social media use. Fourth, the indirect pathway from social media use to political efficacy to offline activism is statistically significant. In the past, the efficacy effect has been reported to be both substantial and null; thus, the fourth expectation remains an open empirical question.

8. Methodology

The study examines association and mediation among three constructs at a single post-election point. It uses a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, which is suitable for this study but cannot make causal inferences. The target population is students at universities aged 18+ who are exposed to some extent to political content in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The sample size was 400, resulting from convenience sampling due to access issues and a lack of a sampling frame for the politically active student population; hence, the results cannot be generalized to the broader Khyber Pakhtunkhwa student population. The social media use (9 items) and offline political activism (9 items) subscales, along with the political efficacy subscale (10 items, covering internal and external dimensions), used a 5-point Likert scale adapted from existing scales in political communication research and contextualized for Pakistani students. Demographics included age, gender, place of residence, education, year of study, and platform used. The study was conducted on a voluntary and anonymous basis with informed consent, and no personal identifiers were collected. Data were analyzed in SPSS; Cronbach's alpha was used to determine reliability, and descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were used to describe constructs. Mediation was tested using PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2018), which estimated indirect effects using 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals. Covariates were age, gender, place of residence, and education level and had no impact on the substantive pattern.

9. Results

Descriptive Statistics

The ordering of the three constructs was as expected. Students' use of social media for politics was found to be moderate ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.64$), meaning they moderate their use of Facebook, X, YouTube, and TikTok for politics. Political efficacy was also rather moderate ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.62$), indicating a moderate or balanced level of understanding and influence in politics rather than a high one. There was less offline political activism ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.56$), below the midpoint of the scale, suggesting that few people engaged in expensive offline political activities. There is a discrepancy between online engagement and offline activism, evident in the raw methods and consistent with the participation gap found in the literature. Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Social media use	3.10	0.64	1.33	5.00
Political efficacy	3.00	0.62	1.60	4.70
Offline political activism	2.05	0.56	1.00	3.89

Note. Composite scores on five-point scales; SD = standard deviation.

Reliability

The internal consistency was satisfactory for all three scales. The social media use alpha coefficient was 0.80 (9 items); the political efficacy alpha was 0.81 (10 items); and the offline activism alpha was 0.79 (9 items). To combine the items into composite scores for the correlation and mediation analyses, these values are helpful. The reliability results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability of measurement scales (N = 400)

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Social media use	9	0.80
Political efficacy	10	0.81
Offline political activism	9	0.79

Note. $\alpha \geq 0.70$ indicates acceptable internal consistency.

Correlations

There were significant, positive correlations among the three constructs. Social media use was correlated with political efficacy ($r = 0.478$, $p < 0.01$) and with offline activism ($r = 0.363$, $p < 0.01$), and political efficacy was also correlated with offline activism ($r = 0.381$, $p < 0.01$). The pattern is in line with the model. Students who use social media more for politics also report greater efficacy and greater offline activism, and greater efficacy is associated with greater offline activism. The correlation matrix is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation matrix of key variables (N = 400)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Social media use	1		
2. Political efficacy	.478**	1	
3. Offline political activism	.363**	.381**	1

Note. ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). Diagonal entries are unity.

Mediation Analysis

PROCESS Model 4 was used to test mediation. Social media use had a significant total effect on offline activism ($B = 0.317$, $\beta = 0.363$, $p < 0.01$). Social media use significantly predicted political efficacy ($B = 0.459$, $\beta = 0.478$, $p < 0.01$), explaining about 23% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.228$). When both predictors were included in the model, the direct effect of social media use was significant, but the effect was smaller than the total effect ($B = 0.204$, $\beta = 0.234$, $p < 0.01$); political efficacy significantly predicted offline activism ($B = 0.245$, $\beta = 0.269$, $p < 0.01$). The overall model accounted for 19% of the variance in offline activism ($R^2 = 0.188$).

The indirect effect of social media use on offline activism via political efficacy was 0.113 (95% percentile bootstrap confidence interval: 0.066, 0.165). The indirect effect is significant, as zero is not included in the interval. The mediator explains about 36% of the total effect (0.113 of 0.317), with the remaining 64% being direct. The direct effect, along with a notable but incomplete indirect effect, suggests partial mediation: political efficacy does not fully mediate the relation between social media use and offline activism. Mediation results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Mediation of social media use on offline activism through political efficacy

Path / effect	B	B	p / 95% CI
Total effect (SM → OA)	0.317	0.363	< .01
Path a (SM → PE)	0.459	0.478	< .01
Path b (PE → OA)	0.245	0.269	< .01
Direct effect (SM → OA, controlling for PE)	0.204	0.234	< .01
Indirect effect (SM → PE → OA)	0.113	—	[0.066, 0.165]

Note. $N = 400$; 5,000 bootstrap samples. SM = social media use; PE = political efficacy; OA = offline political activism. $R^2 = 0.228$ for political efficacy and 0.188 for the full offline-activism model. The bootstrap interval for the indirect effect excludes zero. ** $p < 0.01$.

10. Discussion

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-Specific Interpretation

The findings reflect a digitally engaged political student population that is wary of participating in politics offline. In the meantime, social media use was well above offline activism, and modeled effects indicate that offline activity passed through political efficacy. The pattern implies that, in the post-2024 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa context, where there was extensive digital mobilization – especially against the PTI- exposure alone was insufficient to draw the majority of students into rallies, canvassing, or direct engagement with the political sphere. Those who moved were underrepresented in the sample, and they were the ones who thought they could understand politics and that the political system would respond. Efficacy, meaning, in other words, seeing the election online versus participating in it, is part of the gap between the two.

The Online–Offline Gap

The most obvious aspect of the data is the disparity between online engagement and offline activism. This is consistent with a body of work demonstrating that social media platforms reliably increase participation in expressive and informational activities while raising offline participation by much less (Barati, 2023; Ibrahim, Shafi, and Haider, 2025). The mediation results clarify the commonly accepted interpretation of this gap. The gap is not simply that online activity fails to convert; it is that conversion depends on a psychological resource that only some students possess in sufficient measure. When efficacy is low, exposure remains online; when it is high, exposure shifts from online to offline action.

Slacktivism and Mobilization

The findings do not vindicate either the slacktivism or the mobilization position cleanly. In contrast, the extensive total and direct impact of social media use on offline activism is problematic for a purely slacktivist model, in which online activity would be an inert or substitute for offline activism. On the other side, the low level of offline activism, and the fact that only about a third of the total effect is attributable to efficacy, argues against a strong mobilization account, which predicts that high exposure would lead to high mobilization. A conditional reading is better suited to the data; efficacy determines the amount of stimulus required to elicit offline behavior, with social media as the stimulus. In this interpretation, the two traditions do not contradict one another; they describe different students.

Why Efficacy Makes the Difference between Engagement and Action

The mechanism is easily understood in terms of efficacy. Exposure to political content, debate and political campaigning can increase internal efficacy by fostering familiarity and a sense of competence. It also has the potential to form external efficacy through perceptions of party and institutional responsiveness. Students who are empowered to see that they know something about politics and that action may be worthwhile have more to lose from offline action. Having acquired information but not confidence, or the impression that the system is not responsive, students have less reason to participate, and participation remains at the low-cost online level. The mediation was partial, so efficacy is one pathway among many; the social ties, mobilizing contact by parties and expression, are plausible additional pathways that are not integrated into this model.

Comparison with Prior Literature

The mediation result is consistent with the literature supporting efficacy as a mediator between digital exposure and participation (Tan, 2024; Tang & Wen, 2023; Cadelina, 2024), and previous studies conducted in Pakistan that established social media's mediation between digital exposure and participation (Tareen & Adnan, 2021; Iqbal, Hussain, and Iqbal, 2022).

Nevertheless, it goes against two studies from Pakistan that are directly relevant to the offline issue. Other studies have revealed that political efficacy is not a predictor of offline participation, nor is it a mediator between the social media–offline relationship, as found by Tariq et al. (2022), and Ahmad et al. (2022). According to them, political efficacy was not significant for youth activism during the 2024 election. The findings of the present study, however, differ within the same country context, and this difference should not be ignored. It may be explained by several differences: the way offline participation is measured (broad activism in this study, narrower behavioral measures elsewhere); the composition of the sample (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa university social activists versus broader, differently located youth samples elsewhere); the method of estimation (regression-based mediation in this study as compared to PLS-SEM elsewhere); and the specific intensity of digital mobilization in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after 2024. These are possible explanations, but not definitive ones. As the study highlights, the honest conclusion from this sample is that efficacy positively mediated offline activism, whereas it failed to do so in other samples. In those samples, efficacy was not found to mediate activism offline, so this is an open question that can only be answered by a second cross-sectional study.

11. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate whether political efficacy mediates the relationship between social media use and offline political action among university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after the 2024 general election. Based on 400 students and bootstrapped indirect effects from PROCESS Model 4, it was determined that social media use was a significant predictor of efficacy and offline activism. A partial mediation (indirect effect 0.113, 95% CI [0.066, 0.165]) was confirmed, as a direct effect remained after partial mediation. The study provides evidence on offline participation, not online, that is specific to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It embraces the second orientation of a communication mediation account, which is political efficacy, and it differs from other findings in Pakistan. In practical terms, fostering a sense of students' potential to grasp and impact the political process can help to translate more online activity into offline participation than merely expanding online reach. Some restrictions apply to these findings: the study used convenience sampling, which limits the generalisability of the results; because the study is cross-sectional, it does not allow for causal inferences to be made; self-reported measures have the potential for social desirability and common-method bias; and the model accounts for only about 18.8% of the variance in offline activism. Longitudinal designs are recommended for future studies, as are a wider and more diverse sample and separate measures of internal and external efficacy. Other mediators should also be included, including political trust and political expression.

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