

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF PAKISTANI YOUTH ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A NETNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

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Original Article

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Abstract

Social media platforms have embraced a critical role in the political landscape of the contemporary Pakistan. Pakistani youth as netizens use digital spaces to negotiate identities vis-a-vis expressing their political stances as an enactment of political engagement. Drawing on the theoretical framework based on cultivation theory, this netnography explores the interplay of social media and political discourses and their influences on political sensibilities and engagement of Pakistani youth. For this purpose, virtual participant observation was conducted on various social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter along with in-depth interviews from young male and female Pakistanis belonging to diverse age, educational and ethnic backgrounds. To further process the collected data, thematic and textual analysis techniques were employed. The findings of the study argue that social media platforms have become pivotal tools of political mobilization and activism where Pakistani youth vehemently exhibit their political allegiance while confronting ferociously their political opponents giving birth to a digital political niche. The discourses of financial corruption, accountability, morality, development, and patriotism are some of the prevalent themes of this digital culture generating cut-throat debates over social media platforms. Finally, the study suggests that a deep understanding of digital spaces is compulsory to understand the discursive construction of politics in Pakistan.

Keywords: Digital activism, social media, political discourse, netnography, Pakistan

Introduction

The mounting presence of social media in contemporary life engendered a digital culture in which virtual spaces emerged as important sites of political discourse production. Earlier, social media platforms were consumed primarily for social networking and entertainment purposes. Nowadays, netizens negotiate their political outlooks and

positionalities using a wide range of online platforms including Facebook (FB), Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Kenton, 2019). While discussing the vibrant role of social media in the political sphere of Pakistan, the undertaking of this article is to explore the discursive construction of political discourses on social media platforms and how do they construct and deconstruct the political sensibilities of youth in the country? The

chronological exploration reveals that before the advent of social media, people were not able to engage in political affairs online, however, the upsurge of social networking sites (SNSs) has allowed people to actively participate in political discussions and activities in virtual space. Most of the people who do not read newspapers or watch news channels are becoming more dependent on these SNSs for national and international current affairs. Accordingly, people's knowledge, views and behaviors are influenced by the information and news streamed and circulated via these SNSs (Weeks et al., 2015). Thus, there is a nexus of online and offline political participation where virtual activities influence offline political perceptions and practices and vice versa. Consequently, social media has become an important tool for propaganda, and government, politicians, opponents and supporters of political parties use this medium flagrantly to generate and influence political discourses (Zaheer, n.d.).

With time, the ubiquity of the internet and social media has made political activism more digitalized and virtual expanding and offering new opportunities to participate in civil society action and democratic processes (Dubow, 2017) which includes engagement in the protests and activities to bring political change or to highlight a social cause. Netizens are utilizing social media for different causes in the political sphere including reporting and breaking news ignored by television and press media, engaging the public in humanitarian campaigns and social causes, political transformation, promoting political awareness, and enabling the public to communicate with the politicians (Karamat & Farooq, 2016). Social media users often create online movements to raise issues and use Hashtag Activism (the use of hashtags in posts, statuses, stories etc. on SNSs) to display support for a cause or to highlight their concerning issues (Suciu, 2019). In Pakistan, the usage of social media by the political

parties, particularly Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), has rapidly augmented in the last few years in order to inflate their support-base enticing and mobilizing people to participate in the political affairs particularly the large chunk of country's young population (Eijaz, 2013). Historically, the 2008 elections were the first election in Pakistan in which the political parties of Pakistan employed the Internet for political purposes creating their websites to propagate their manifestoes (Riaz, n.d.). Initially, PTI was one of the first political parties that started using social media for different political purposes (Jarral, 2018) including inviting the public to its political rallies, promoting its political agenda, mobilizing youth to vote and bashing and criticizing the former ruling party (Hussain & Shahzad, 2018). After seeing the effectiveness of conveying messages and conducting campaigns via online networking sites and social media, other national and regional political parties also joined the race (Dunya News, 2018).

In the general elections of 2013, political parties in Pakistan had established their social media cells and used these platforms not only to highlight and propagate their vision and mission but also to defame the other political parties (Sadiq et al., 2018). Online political combat between PTI and PMLN was witnessed on social media during that time trying to highlight themselves and defame each other which continues till day. As a result of online electoral campaigning of political parties, the majority of voters recorded in 2013's general election were also social media users (Sadiq et al., 2018). Since then, political parties have started using social media to attain their political goals. The tweets, posts, memes, statuses, pictures, and videos created and shared by the netizens related to current affairs and political events often get viral all over social media to attract supporters, distort the opposing party's image,

and attain other political goals. Moreover, in the 2018 elections of Pakistan, Facebook and the government collaborated by adding a feature to link the Pakistani voters to the website of the Election Commission allowing them to get authentic updates and advisory messages about the elections (Jamil, 2018).

The debate on the impacts of the internet and social media in political spheres has been opulent since its advent and consequently, there is a large body of research regarding the use of social media and its inter [lay with promoting different kinds of political participation or involvement (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019; Alarqan, 2020; Calderaro, 2018; Abdullah et al., 2021). Many politicians and political parties in different countries including India (Kanungo, 2015; Meti et al., 2015), Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2019), Turkey (Yunus, 2015), Canada (O'Neill, 2010), Australia (Bruns & Moon, 2018), Netherland (Effing et al., 2011) have vigorously been using SNSs during and after the election campaigns for their political benefits. Likewise, Gil de Zuniga et al. (2014), Dimitrova & Matthes (2018), Boulianne (2015), Yang & DeHart (2016), Ahmad et al., (2019), Heblch (2016), and Theocharis & Lowe (2015) studied the interplay of social media with online as well offline political participation and its impact and factors influencing the political perceptions and practices of netizens.

This liaison of social media and political behavior can be understood in relation to the cultivation theory, given by George Gerbner, which advocates that the colossal exposure of media is a vital force in shaping or inculcating viewers' notions of socio-political realities (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Shrum, 2017). While employing the aforesaid theoretical framework, the study aims to explore whether continuous use of SNSs for the fulfilment of various needs including infotainment, entertainment, or projecting one's views, activism, and interactions in virtual space affect and shape netizens'

political perspectives, including political subjectivities, allegiances and practices in the real world?

Research Methodology

This netnographic study aims to explore the interplay of social media, digital activism and political discourse production among Pakistani netizens employing online participant observation and in-depth interviews as main data collection methods. The methodological triangulation helped in order to obtain comprehensive and detailed data, dimensions, perspectives, and interaction patterns of social media users. Online participant observation was carried out by joining the virtual community such as political groups on Facebook and following accounts and pages of political figures and parties on Facebook and Twitter. The interaction patterns such as posts, content, likes, comments, and discussions of the followers or members of those groups, pages, or accounts were observed and relevant content was collected in the form of screenshots and notes. Moreover, in order to conduct in-depth interviews, an interview guide was designed to address all the research questions of the present study to assimilate all the significant areas. By employing the purposive sampling technique, the sample of twenty-five social media users of the age range of 20 to 32 years was selected from Riphah International University Rawalpindi and International Islamic University Islamabad. To maintain the heterogeneity, the selected sample involved both male and female students from different political interests, educational and ethnic backgrounds. In-depth interviews were conducted informally in bilingual i.e. Urdu and English languages allowing respondents to talk freely in a relaxed manner. The average time of three months, from November 2019 to January 2020, was taken to for the fieldwork. The interview duration ranged between 45 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews were later transcribed to analyze the collected data.

The current study is comprised of two types of analysis; thematic and textual analysis. In the thematic analysis approach, the data collected through interviews and participant observation are identified and sorted out of common components and patterns for analysis, and multiple themes are generated based on the content of collected data to organize, analyze and address the findings of the research (Nowell et al., 2017). However, in the textual analysis approach, social life is examined by analyzing words and images from documents, videos, literature, music, and other cultural products and media. This approach also examines how and in which context the content is used, to determine the underlying meanings and discourse production (Crossman, 2020). Finally, the textual analysis was embedded in the thematic analysis to create a link between both types of analysis.

The research ethics were profoundly followed throughout the study ensuring the anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms. Names of the social media pages and account, from where the contents have been taken, were also kept confidential hiding them from the figures to maintain privacy. The reflexivity technique was used to avoid the issues in the research, which refers to the acknowledgement of the researcher's assumptions, and preconceptions in the research (Wilkie, 2015).

The Interplay of Social Media and Political Discourses

The past decade has been revolutionary in the context of using digital technology, the Internet, and social media. Social media has become the most accessible platform for the netizens for political activism and participation. Political activism refers to the "use of active and coercive online initiatives and campaigns to create awareness about political issues and/or promote political reforms" (IGI Global, 2019). The use of social media in electoral

campaigns and other political activities has intensified all over the world. Students, bloggers, vloggers, television celebrities, political leaders, political parties, their supporters, have significantly been using the internet as a medium of digital campaigns for political and non-political goals (Shah et al., 2013). The prominent use of social media for political and electoral purposes can be traced back to the 2008 US presidential campaign (Muntean, 2015). In this campaign, Barack Obama with the help of his volunteer team encouraged people through the integration of digital devices and the internet (emails and websites) to vote for him that increased voters' turnout that year (Howard, 2018). The 2016 US presidential elections between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton extensively altered the political campaigns and delivery of political news. Trump used social media, especially Twitter as a new form of smart politics to interact with the public and promote his agendas (BBC, 2020).

The power of new media to overshadow traditional media in this campaign made everyone realize its importance and changed the political landscape (Calderaro, 2018). This change provided political organizations to directly interact with the public without any interference from any other channel and promote their political agendas. Social media did not only facilitate the politicians but also the general public to directly engage in politics. The two-way interactive feature of the new media rapidly made other political leaders adopt the use of social media as a communication strategy for their political organizations (Wetwiski, 2017). As mentioned earlier (see page 2), the prominent political leaders and parties of Pakistan did not recognize the importance of new media till 2013 and focused more on traditional media and the press. According to a survey conducted by Dawn news before the 2018 elections, social media is more impactful than traditional media on the outcomes of the

elections (Dawn, 2018). Imran Khan, the leader of PTI, being a renowned former cricketer of Pakistan had a lot of followers and his political party used social media power as an opportunity to instantly reach out to millions of people, especially youth (Yousuf, n.d.; Jarral, 2018). Considering the insights of the cultivation theory, we can see that social media is used by political parties to propagandize and publicize their ideologies to influence the public's opinions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). PTI set their agenda by chanting the name of youth and grabbed their attention and support persuading them to vote. Eventually, after seeing the effectiveness of PTI's online campaign, other political parties also recognized the potential of social media campaigns and actively started virtual political campaigning.

During the 2018 elections of Pakistan, PTI and PMLN created social media cells as a communicating strategy to reach out to the public. Abu Talib, a 21-year-old student of BS. English mentioned that the political media cells influence the minds of the public by posting their agenda online. He further stated:

“Media cells run the campaigns through which a political party attracts voters and supporters and propagates its promises to win the elections claiming they will transform the lives of people. Concomitantly, they present the other parties as corrupt and abortive”.

In the same context Ahmed, a 21-year-old student of International Relations, insisted that political parties are well aware of the 'emotional button' of the public that triggers their feelings. Therefore, they adeptly use online platforms to play with the public's minds and emotions to gain support to achieve their vested interests. While arguing about online political campaigning, Kajsa Falasca (2014) states that it often seems that political parties interact online with their followers, which is an

illusion because the politicians do not have dialogues or interactions with their followers. She calls the followers and supporters “free labor” of the online political campaigns as she believes that the political parties are not the ones who do the actual work in online campaigns but their supporters do. She stated, “They pump out their messages and then let their followers do the work”. She further elaborates that the leaders only post their messages online and the followers do the rest of the work by liking, commenting, or spreading those messages (Falasca, 2014). Although, the publicity of the content largely depends upon the impact of the message.

The political parties have their official public pages and accounts on different social media platforms, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. which are followed by thousands and millions of social media users. PTI, PMLN, and PPP have 6.6M¹⁰, 2.9M, and 400K¹¹ followers respectively on their Facebook official pages and 5M, 1.7M, and 848.2k followers¹² on their official Twitter accounts. These official accounts are used as social media cells that are usually responsible for online branding and promotion of a political agenda of a party and counter the criticism of the opponents. The politicians or their hired staff keeps interacting with their followers to promote their political party's agendas and activities. Other than the official pages, there are numerous pages and groups created by the supporters of a political leader or party. Most of the respondents admitted that they follow some prominent political figures such as Imran Khan, Muhammad Nawaz Shareef, Shahbaz Sharif, Bilawal Bhutto, Asif Ali Zardari, etc. and political parties including PTI, PMLN, PPP, on social media platforms. Some of the respondents followed these political parties and leaders as their supports, however, others followed them only for information

¹⁰ The alphabet “M” is abbreviated for million.

¹¹ The alphabet “K” is abbreviated for thousand (1000).

¹² Retrieved from the official accounts/pages on: October 26, 2020

purposes. SadaqatUllah, a 25-year-old student of Bachelors, shared his thoughts that the supporters of political parties often tend to have emotional affiliation with them without knowing much about the actual policies of that party or thinking rationally. He was one of those respondents who followed political parties on social media for information purposes. To elaborate his stance, he stated:

“I do not support or oppose any party. I only support or deny the policies of political parties. I will support any party with a good policy and will oppose any party on the same basis”.

The online political pages and groups on social media are not followed by the supporters of one party only, but also by the supporters of the opposing political parties which sometimes create clashes between them. The users often upload posts, pictures, videos, tweets, etc. to support one's favorite party or to criticize or defame the opposing parties. It is observed that the admin members often conduct online polls or elections to know which political party has the maximum support on that page or group. Those polls contain the names or symbols of political parties¹³ and the followers or members of that page/group select their favorite political parties through polls or comments. While commenting or voting for their favorite politicians or parties, they upload inappropriate pictures and comments about opposing political parties, political figures and leaders on such posts which sometimes create online fights and abusive clashes among supporters of different political parties. Consequently, few supporters of one party start bashing other political leaders and their

¹³As shown in the figure #1 with caption “Whom will you vote in Facebook elections” in Urdu. The options given are the symbols and the names of the political parties translated as “1) Lion - PML-N, 2) Arrow - PPP, 3) Cycle – PML-Q, 4) Bat – PTI, 5) Kite – MQM, 6) Lantern – ANP, 7) Book – MMA, and 8) No one deserves it – None.

supporters while defending their favorite political party or a leader. Along with abusive comments, the supporters call the politicians and their supporters by inappropriate names and characteristics to insult and tease them (as shown in Figures #2 and 3). For example, *Youthia* (a slang word used for the followers of PTI), *Patwari* (a registrar who maintains the land record and is often considered corrupt; the followers of PMLN are mockingly called with this name). In this context, Figures # 2 and 3 are shown below which were posted by PTI's supporters in the comment section of a post asking about Imran Khan as the next Prime Minister in the 2018 elections and bashing the opposing parties. The first picture in the Figure #2 is captioned as “*Patwari* needed – We desperately need fresh *Patwaris*



Figure 1: A Facebook election post about the 2018 to bark against Imran Khan. *Patwaris* with a standing tail will be prioritized” and the second picture is translated as “In a country where a person like Chaudhry Nisar (Former Interior Minister of Pakistan) finds out after 35 years that what he has been considering as a lion is actually a donkey. So think, *Patwaris* would need at least 100 years to understand”. Similarly, the first picture in the Figure #3 posted by PTI's supporter is an edited picture of Fazal-ur-Rehman (President of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam), Asif Ali Zardari (Former President of Pakistan, PPP), and Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif (Former Prime

Minister of Pakistan, PMLN) standing with money on their naked bellies to show their financial corruption. The second picture in the Figure #2 is a picture of a girl marrying a dog with the caption “After such marriages, those

who bark on Army and Imran Khan, are born.” In these figures, the users have commented with inappropriate and abusive pictures and memes.

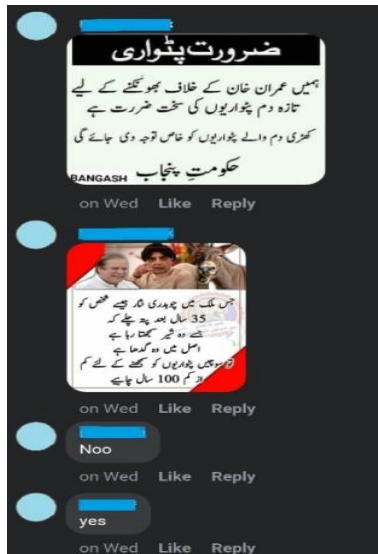


Figure 3: Comment section of a Facebook post

All respondents mentioned the abusive behavior of social media users on political posts or tweets. While discussing the abusive culture in the virtual political landscape of Pakistan, a 22-year-old female student of BBA-ITM named Masooma, shared her thoughts about saying that most of the people who use social media are educated, however, the way they misbehave and abuse others could not be expected from an educated person. She further stated:

“An educated person needs to think and act logically. Education demands that literate people should support people rationally, unlike those so-called literate people who abuse each other just to support a political leader”.



Figure 2: Comment section of a Facebook post

Most of the respondents shared similar views about the abusive practices by social media users on political posts. However, a 23-year-old student of BS Psychology named Laiba, who is a supporter of PTI, claims that abusive behavior is a positive thing as it shows one's affiliations and loyalty with the party. However, it also has a negative dimension since it affects personal relations, she added. She further divulged her experience of sharing a political post on her profile that she and her family were supporting PTI during the 2018 elections, however, one of her uncles was an ardent supporter of PMLN. At the time of the election results, she posted a status cheering PTI's victory for fun before the results were announced and the supporters of PTI and PMLN began arguing rudely on the post. Due to that post, Laiba's uncle stopped talking to her family members because of divergent political perspectives. She further said that people

often get emotional about political parties and they do not tolerate differences of opinions and people and just want their point to be accepted by all eventually ruining the personal relationships.

As social media campaigns have gained the attention of youth, they have become politically more active and aware of their rights and current affairs than in the past. The social media campaigns and online discussions about politics have made netizens aware of the power of a vote and the accountability of the candidates making voters empowered and liberated. During the 2018 elections, a video (shown in Figure # 4) got viral over the Internet, which illustrated the power of awakened voters. The video was of a member of PMLN, Jamal Laghari, being grilled over his performance by the voters of Dera Ghazi Khan. Laghari tribe is among those who are ruling South Punjab since independence (Editor, 2018). People have mostly been voting for the candidates of this ruling tribe in elections. However, the scenario changed when Jamal Laghari, a member of PMLN, was confronted by the young voters for not showing up in his area other than calling for votes during the election campaign and was questioned about his promises. The politician felt helpless and could not do much as the

youngsters were filming him on their phones.

This viral video represented the role of social media in making out youngsters aware and emboldened in political matters (Birmani, 2018). It is changing the perceptions of youth about political matters. Cultivation theory suggests that media plays a role in shaping perceptions of the audience consciously or unconsciously (Utwente, 2016) and the same is the case with social media. Social media campaigns are influencing the youngsters even if they do not pay much attention to politics because they are getting information when they scroll down to their newsfeed. As mentioned in the section above, most of the youngsters in the present time prefer social media over television media. A sense of transparency and accountability through social media and executing it to offline campaigns has been promoted, which influence young netizens (Jahangir, 2020). Voters confronting politicians and making them accountable in the viral video of JammalLaghari was a remarkable reflection of social media shaping up the mindsets and perceptions of netizens regarding political affairs in Pakistan.



Figure4: Viral video of Jamal Laghari being confronted by the voters

As the momentous elections' time comes, political leaders and parties collaborate with celebrities and influencers, including bloggers, vloggers, and other well-known personalities, and invite them to their campaign events who share their political stances with their followers and the public through social media (Sikorski et al., 2017). They announce their support by posting on social media platforms i.e. Facebook or Twitter (Loader et al., 2016). Several celebrities being the role models of the public came forward in the general elections of 2018 to contest elections or to influence the political ideologies of the masses (Haque, 2019). Hamza Ali Abbasi, a renowned television celebrity came forward in 2018 as a strong and categorical supporter of Imran Khan and PTI (Haque, 2019). Similarly, some other celebrities including Kubra Khan, Haroon Shahid, Mawra, Urwa, Farhan Saeed, Imran Abbas, Abbas Jaffery, Shahid Afridi, Abrar ul Haq, Feroze Khan, Gul-e-Rana, Sajid Hassan, also announced their stances regarding their political affiliation on social media with their followers. The celebrities' posts are not only viewed by their followers but are also picked by journalists or news channels which gives publicity to a political party. While talking about the social media influence on political perceptions of netizens, Haider Khan, a 25-year-old student of MPhil in Project Management shared his point of view saying that these celebrities' or influencers' stances often influence their followers' political stances and voting patterns. He further added that some people idolize these celebrities and believe them to be credible and trustworthy. Amal, a female respondent studying Sharia and Law shared a similar point of view regarding the credibility of celebrities:

"I think celebrities are the people who can meet politicians more easily than the public. They might know more closely about them than us. There is a possibility that they

would genuinely know when they support or oppose someone and speak up about any unfortunate situations".

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the elaboration of the public depends upon their involvement with the endorsement, high involvement results in strong elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The people who are more actively following celebrities and social media influencers show more trust and reliability toward their political opinions. However, some people stand on their opinions and do not let their minds be influenced by any celebrities or influencers. In the same context, a 23-year old student of BS. Sociology named Naima Nadeem opposes those who get influenced by celebrities:

"They are rich and do not know what is happening on the ground level or about the complexities that the public face. Still, they post things about what they do not know and our youth start blindly following them and believing what they say".

She believes that these celebrities and influencers are specially hired by the political parties or leaders to influence their followers, especially young followers, to attract voters for them. Young followers are more prone to be influenced by influencers and celebrities as most of them are not much knowledgeable about politics and agendas of various political parties.

Pakistani netizens have been using social media platforms for political campaigns, awareness, and participation in present times. It has also changed how political parties run their campaigns, promote their agendas, and attract voters. Similarly, social media has also provided a platform to follow or support political parties, express their political stances,

and have political discussions with other users in virtual space which influence offline political affairs.

Conclusion

Social media has been hailed as a vivacious digital forum for political participation linking common citizens and political bodies to discuss politics in virtual spaces. A decade ago, politics and social media were considered to be two distinct entities however, their indissoluble connection has become an established political reality. This netnographic study shows the emergence of social media as a new political reality where discourses are produced in digital spaces influencing the overall political landscape. Pakistani youth prefers social media to traditional media and passionately use it for political participation and activism. As social media is notably evolving into a platform for socio-political activism, it is also used as a medium to raise voices against injustice or any unresolved issue to gain the attention of the authorities. People use different techniques such as hashtags to make an issue viral on the Internet to put public pressure on the authorities to take action in order to solve the problem. Consequently, social media, acting as a watchdog, has also promoted the practice of political accountability and transparency among netizens in Pakistan.

With the remarkable growth, social media is playing its role in a political context as well and have become indispensable for political campaigning in Pakistan as political parties are using it as a communication strategy to spread their political agenda and attract potential voters. Patterns of communication and campaigning of political parties have drastically changed as political parties and supporters have been using social media for political activism by sharing their political stances, political ideologies, the content of political advertisements, or agendas through social media platforms that cater to the attention of the users, and also use this

medium to defame opponent political parties. Social media has attracted Pakistani youth toward political affairs by making participation easier and more interesting for them as netizens can participate in political activities anonymously and without any physical hectic through social media. Thus, social media usage and e-activities influence the Pakistani netizens' knowledge and understanding of politics and drive their practices and participation in politics strengthening their political voices, providing virtual space for political activism and promoting more accountability for the political figures and government. The liberal social media space has also emerged as a threat in Pakistan as suppression of news and perspectives is almost an impossible endeavor. Various laws are in progress aiming to regulate these platforms, however, strong opposition has been witnessed against such efforts curbing the freedom of social media.

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