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Digital Engagement and Electoral Behavior: The Impact of Social Media on Youth Political Participation and Voting in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the relationship between digital engagement and youth political participation and orientations towards voting among the students at university and college in Hazara Division, KPK Pakistan. This was a quantitative cross-sectional survey of 400 respondents between 18-35 years of age, using an online and onsite questionnaire. The following statistical tools were used: descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, independent-samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, and multiple regression. There was a strong level of political discussion ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.01$), political opinion expression ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.03$), and social media motivating political engagement ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.05$) and political empowerment ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.08$) as measured participatory activities online. The electoral effects perceived were moderately positive: social media influenced voting ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.04$) and social-media campaigns affected political choices ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.06$). Overall, a greater item was associated with greater youth political involvement ($M = 3.66$, $SD = .93$). The results reveal that digital engagement is most clearly linked to discussion, expression, participation, exposure to political campaigns, and perceived influence on the election process, and that we cannot conclude from the available cross-sectional data whether digital engagement has a causal impact on voting or who votes.

Keywords: Social Media, Youth, Political Participation, Electoral Behavior, Political Socialization, Political Awareness, Political Trust, Digital Engagement, Pakistan, Hazara Division.

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1. Introduction

The production, circulation, interpretation and contestation of political information is replete with digital communication and thus changed. Social media is a medium where users can consume, comment, share, reinterpret and produce political content as opposed to traditional mass media. Political communication has consequently become more interactive, decentralized, personalized and networked (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). For young citizens, this transformation is significant because political identities, attitudes, knowledge and behavioral orientations are still in the process of formation and development through the interactions with the social institutions and communicative environments (Hyman, 1959; Jennings et al., 2009; Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Social media is gaining more importance as a tool of political communication in Pakistan. Social media is becoming more prominent in Pakistani political communication. Citizens, journalists, activists and political party actors are using digital platforms to distribute campaign messages, to discuss public issues, to communicate with political actors and to mobilize their supporters. Political involvement for youth can therefore be manifested beyond voting, party membership, rallying and membership in political organizations; into following political actors, commenting, sharing political posts, engaging in online discussions, supporting political causes, and creating political messages (Iqbal et al., 2022; Vromen et al., 2015). This context continues to grow: By the end of 2025, Data Reportal estimated there to be 117 million internet users and 79.9 million social-media user identities in Pakistan; and warned that identities derived from platforms are not unique individuals. How digital engagement relates to political participation and electoral decision-making among young citizens is the main question. Social media can connect users with information about campaigns, candidate messages, peer discussion, and expression and mobilization opportunities. Political awareness, trust, knowledge, and socialisation are mentioned as they may provide an explanation for the process of digital exposure and how it can turn into participatory or electoral behaviour, but are not the main outcome of this paper.

This study aims at this problem in light of the evidence from the comparatively under studied regional environment of Hazara Division of KP. Its primary focus is on the link between social media use and youth political participation and orientations towards voting. As mechanisms and contextual factors which could link digital engagement with participation and electoral choice, political discussion, awareness, trust and information evaluation are retained. The paper is not a political socialization study, however, as it focuses the empirical account on participatory and electoral outcomes.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Media, Youth Participation and Political Information

Social media has created new opportunities for political information and participation, and has removed geographical as well as organizational barriers. There are two ways in which young people might be exposed to political information: deliberately (when they look for it or follow political actors), and inadvertently (when it's tailored for them by algorithms and is shared with them by people). The digital platforms thus provide perpetual learning moments for politics (Papacharissi, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). The more exposure does not necessarily translate in the same direction to increased accuracy. Political information can be framed with partisan language, include rumors, present manipulated information, or include misleading information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018).

An essential difference, then, between exposure and awareness and knowledge. Awareness of political actors, political events, parties and issues may be raised on social media, but not necessarily accurate awareness. Political discussion can offer an extra layer for users to consider interpretations, challenge claims, reinforce identities, and rethink opinions. Political conversations and online participatory studies indicate that this relationship between information exposure and wider civic participation is possible (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015; McClurg, 2013).

Participation is not always deep and meaningful in the digital realm. It takes less resources to post an opinion or share content as it does to join an organization, attend a political meeting, campaign or participate in a protest. Social media can thus reduce the barriers to political engagement but not necessarily generate offline mobilisation, as argued by Boulianne (2015) and Theocharis and van Deth (2018).

2.2 Social Media and Electoral Behavior

Voting continues to be a primary method of political participation, and social media can have an impact on election environments by communicating about the campaign, delivering candidate messages, building a peer network, creating political advertising, endorsing candidates, and providing information about the election. But the power of social media to influence elections should not be limited to “direct persuasion.” Information, discussion, identity development, assessments of political actors, and social influence can lead to the gradual formation of political preferences (Prior, 2007 and Zaller, 1992). This implies a route in which digital engagement leads to awareness and discussion, and can contribute to a greater level of participation in and change of electoral orientations.

Findings from this current research align with this larger perspective. Social media was seen as influential in politics (voting and campaigns) and somewhat more influential in political belief, socialization and participation. This trend implies that the broader context in which political decisions are made is a more likely medium through which social media has political impact than direct conversion of votes.

2.3 Political Trust, Misinformation and Digital Literacy

The use of trust and information evaluation is central to digital political engagement. Users need to evaluate the credibility of political claims, the trustworthiness of sources, and whether conflicting claims are accepted, challenged, or corroborated. Misinformation may cause political learning to be impaired, and digital literacy can enhance the users' capacity to compare sources and identify manipulated or misleading information (Guess et al., 2020; Bode & Vraga, 2018). As a result, social media interaction can create opportunities for information and credibility issues.

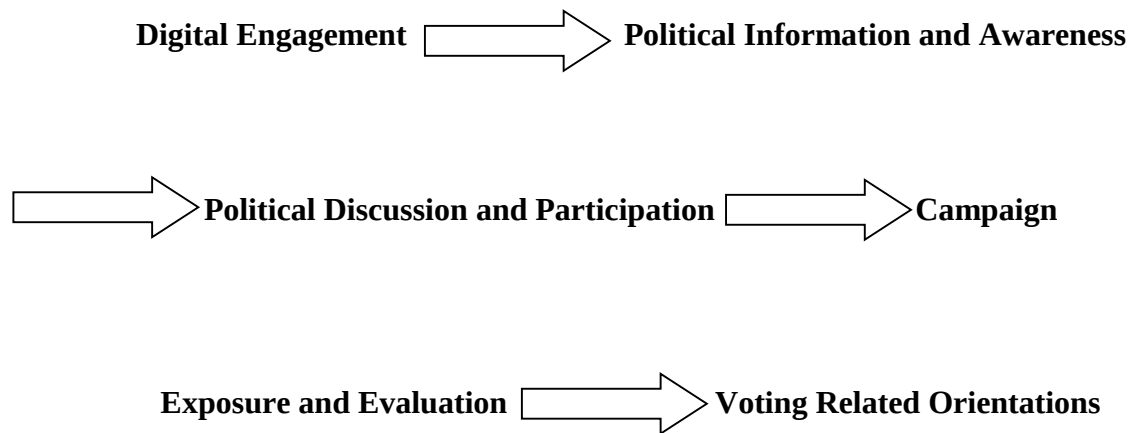
The current study adds political trust and information verification as crucial aspects of the digital political engagement. Political information was found to be moderately trusted but there was not unconditional trust in the information, and the verification behaviour was moderate and awareness of fake news was high. This is a sign of an ongoing, but critical engagement with social media as a political information source, as opposed to either full trust or complete rejection of it.

2.4 Integrated Theoretical Framework

The study is an integration of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Social Engagement Theory (SET). Media users are seen as active audiences, who choose media to meet information, social, expressive and other needs (Katz et al., 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). Within the context of the present, young people can access political information, follow political actors, gain

knowledge of political events, engage in social interaction and dialogue with other young people, share opinions and join political communities. The aim of SET is to complement the role of UGT and highlight the interpersonal nature of political engagement. Political meanings are understood and negotiated through discussion, sharing, commenting, challenging and responding to others. The integrated framework is therefore structured on an electoral-participation pathway in this paper: digital engagement creates possibilities for political information and interaction; awareness, knowledge, trust and discussion can influence willingness to participate; and participation can further include campaign engagement and voting. Political socialization is the broader developmental context for this pathway, but not the main point of focus.

Figure 1: *Analytical framework of the paper*



3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Setting

The study was of cross sectional survey type with quantitative approach. The study population included the students of University and Colleges (18-35 years) of Hazara Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The region offers a context in which to analyse the digital political involvement beyond the main metros and incorporates urban, semi-urban and peripheral areas that have varying educational and digital access characteristics.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

The final sample was 400 respondents, 240 males (60%) and 160 females (40%). The age distribution was 180 respondents aged 18–21 (45%), 140 aged 22–25 (35%), 60 aged 26–29 (15%), and 20 aged 30 or above (5%). A survey was conducted using both online and offline questionnaires. The dual mode was designed to increase the response rate and minimize the potential of excluding respondents who may be less familiar with online surveys and/or have limited access to the internet.

3.3 Instrument and Measures

Attitudes toward social media, political awareness, knowledge, trust, discussion, participation and voting-related behavior were assessed by a structured questionnaire. The thesis conceptualized political participation as both offline and online political activity, and sought to conceptualize voting behavior as past voting experiences, voting intentions, likelihood of future attendance, and perceived social media influence. Online discussion and sharing, opinion expression, motivation

to participate, empowerment, and a more general perceived youth-participation item are other forms of participation, all of which are represented by participation in the reported empirical tables; voting is represented by perceived influence on voting decisions and campaign choices. Cronbach's alpha for the social-media use was .82, for the political trust was .80, for the political awareness was .85 and for the political participation was 0.80.

3.4 Data Analysis and Ethics

The SPSS software was used to analyze the data. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used in descriptive statistics. Chi-square, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA and multiple regression were the inferential procedures reported in the thesis. The proposed conceptual framework in the thesis suggested that voting behavior and political participation are downstream variables, but there is no report available that shows a regression with either of the dependent variables. Thus, the thesis document is not sufficient to obtain new regression coefficients without the respondent-level data set. Participants were free to join the study, informed consent was ensured, personal information was not gathered and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained.

4. Results

4.1 Social-Media Use

Social-media use was high: 40 respondents (10%) reported less than one hour per day, 140 (35%) reported 1–3 hours, 150 (37.5%) reported 4–6 hours, and 70 (17.5%) reported more than six hours. Overall, 55% reported using it for at least 4 hours a day (Table 1).

4.2. Discussion, Expression and mobilization of youth political engagement

The results of the participations focus the paper on interactive and expressive aspects of participation. The meanest ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.01$) was political discussion, followed by the encouragement to express political opinions via social media ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.03$). Motivation to engage in political activities ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.05$) and perceived political empowerment ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.08$) were somewhat lower, as were sharing of political posts or videos ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.07$). The mean for the broader item about youth participation in political activities due to social media was higher ($M = 3.66$, $SD = .93$) than was the mean for the other item. Combined, these data suggest more perceived effects on discussion and wider participation than on more challenging types of mobilization. Table 2 presents all participation items of which reports were made in the research.

Table 1: *A sample of 400 people was selected to participate in this study*

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

Table 2: *Political involvement through social media (N = 400)*

Participation item	Mean	SD
Discuss political issues with others	3.48	1.01
Share political pictures or videos	3.23	1.07
Social media encourages political opinion expression	3.39	1.03
Social media motivates participation in political activities	3.25	1.05
Have a sense of political empowerment via social media	3.21	1.08
Social media has contributed to youth being more involved in politics	3.66	0.93

Table 3: *In a sample of 400 respondents, the variables of voting, political beliefs, socialization, and perceived youth participation were found*

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
Social media influences my voting decisions	30	65	105	135	65	3.35	1.04
Political campaigns on social media affect my choices	35	60	110	130	65	3.33	1.06
Social media helps shape my political beliefs	25	50	100	150	75	3.50	0.99
Social media plays a role in my political socialization	22	48	95	155	80	3.56	0.97
Increased youth participation in politics through Social media	18	40	90	165	87	3.66	0.93

Table 4: *The differences between men and women and their roles in the political process*

Test/Outcome	Statistic	p	Interpretation
Gender vs. Online political discussion	$\chi^2(1)=11.12$	0.001	Significant Association
Gender difference in political awareness	$t(395)=2.18$	0.030	Male mean 3.75, Female mean 3.55.
Gender difference in social media use	$t = 1.54$	0.124	Not Significant
Gender difference in political content engagement	$t = 1.62$	0.106	Not Significant
Gender difference in political participation	$t = 1.75$	0.081	Not Significant
Age group difference in political awareness	$F(3,396)=4.65$	0.003	Significant

Table 5: *Multiple regression for prediction of political socialization (N = 400)*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Social-media use	0.42	0.08	0.36	5.25	< .001
Political trust	0.28	0.07	0.24	.00	< .001
Political awareness	0.31	0.09	0.21	3.44	0.001

4.3 Awareness, Trust and Information Evaluation as Explanatory Mechanisms

The concepts of awareness and trust are understood as processes that can shape participation and electoral judgment, but do not automatically result in them. There were age differences in political awareness, $F(3,396) = 4.65$, $p = .003$. Moderate trust in political information ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .97$) was found, with the verification behavior being relatively stronger. The results offer background information to help gauge youth's reactions to political information on the internet prior to engaging in discussion, dissemination, action, or decision about voting.

4.4 The nature of electoral behavior, campaign influence and voting decisions

Perceptions on voting were moderately positive. The respondents generally agreed that social media had an influence on their decision to vote ($M = 3.35$; $SD = 1.04$), and that political parties had an influence on them through social media ($M = 3.33$; $SD = 1.06$). Social media also was thought to influence political opinion ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .99$). The socialization item from the same thesis table as the political-socialization is kept as contextual evidence only, but not as the main result of socialization, for conceptual separation with the political-socialization paper. Table 3 presents the entire block of thesis voting / participation, for each participant to make electoral evidence clear. These measures reflect perceptions of influence, rather than measures of behavior, such as turnout, vote switching, and actual ballot choice.

4.5 Gender Differences in Digital Engagement and Political Participation

There was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores for male and female participants for political participation (male $M = 3.45$, female $M = 3.30$, $t = 1.75$, $p = .081$), daily

social-media use ($p = .124$), political-content engagement ($p = .106$), or political trust ($p = .262$). However, there was an association between gender and the reporting of political discussion on the internet: 160 of 240 males compared to 80 of 160 females reported discussing politics online, $\chi^2(1) = 11.12$, $p = .001$. Another contextual difference was that males ($M = 3.75$) were more politically aware than females ($M = 3.55$), $t(398) = 2.18$, $p = .030$, but it is not the main result. Table 4 shows an overview of inferential tests most relevant to participation.

4.6 Supplementary Regression: Political Socialization

The model was significant, $F(3,396) = 121.65$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .48$; social-media use ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$), political trust ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$), and political awareness ($\beta = .21$, $p = .001$) were significant predictors. This model is kept as additional evidence of mechanisms around participation and electoral orientation as it reflects the socialization process as a whole. It should not be viewed as a retrogressive voting or participation test. The dataset for the participation/voting regression is not included in the thesis document, but would need to be downloaded separately.

5. Discussion

The main result is that social media is an integral part of the participatory repertoire of Hazara Division's university and college students. Opinion expression, sharing of opinions, motivation to participate and political empowerment were also moderately engaged in, whereas the highest engagement was in discussion of politics. The general opinion that the use of social media encourages youth participation had the highest mean in the “voting/ participation” block. The results give preeminence to participation rather than to political socialization as the dominant behavioral theme of the paper.

Political discussion and opinion expression is particularly salient in relatively accessible and expressive forms of political participation, indicating the salience of this aspect of political participation on Digital Platforms. Discussion, posting, sharing, and opinion expression require less organizational effort than do rallies, campaign volunteering, or formal party activities. The thesis discussion also mentions that the expressive participation was more frequent than intensive institutional participation. This is consistent with other literature, which indicates that civic and political engagement is positively correlated with directly political uses of digital media, especially directly political news and discussion (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

To understand the informational context of participation and election decisions, it is important to look at the state of political awareness, the level of trust, and the level of trust in information. They should not however, take the place of participation and voting as the major results of this paper. The findings confirm that respondents were moderately trusting and had higher verification behavior, indicating that their trust in the credibility of political information may come between the exposure of the content, its political discussion, engagement with the campaign, and electoral outcome.

The electoral results reflect perceived impacts, not actual impacts. The means values for social-media influence on voting ($M = 3.35$) and the impact of campaign usage on voting ($M = 3.33$) indicate that respondents viewed digital communication as having a relevance to their electoral judgments. The thesis conceptualizes the concept of voting behavior in a broader sense, including past voting, voting intention and voting in the future, but does not report those as separate empirical tables in the thesis output. The manuscript therefore makes claims only to orientations to voting and perceptions of campaign influence and not to voting turnout or verified vote choices.

The results of the gender analysis show that there was no significant difference between the male and the female respondents in the overall political-participation score, but that there was a significant association with gender in the case of online political discussion. It is important to note this distinction, because participation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and a lack of difference in one discussion indicator does not prove a general difference in political participation between the two sexes. This finding also lends support to not making gender a key explanation of electoral behavior, but rather a contextual factor.

The paper's primary focus on participation and voting is the focus of the analysis, and age differences provide some background information. This can suggest that a variation in political experience across the youth sample, but does not assert that age differences translate into variations in voting behavior.

6. Theoretical and Practical implications

The study advances political communication and electoral-participation studies by connecting everyday digital engagement with political discussion, expression, participation, exposure to political campaigns, and orientations to voting. Together, UGT assists in understanding why young people seek and use political content and SET emphasizes the interpersonal nature of discussion and social interactions that can shape digital engagement into participation. The process of political socialization is an underlying process that is important to understand how political orientations are formed, but the substantive outcome of the paper is motivational involvement and electoral action.

The implications for Pakistan are on digital civic education. Media and political literacy can be enhanced by teaching students to check political claims, to compare sources, to spot manipulated content, political framing, evidence and opinion. Electoral institutions can increase accurate digital voter information on voting, voter rights, candidate information, polling locations, and misinformation. Digital platforms can be used for substantive policy dialogue and youth consultation, not just for campaign promotion and marketing by political parties and civil-society organisations. These measures are especially significant because digital inclusion is not guaranteed to result in informed or democratic engagement.

7. Limitations and Future Research

There are a couple of caveats to note. First, with a cross-sectional design you can only find associations and perceptions, but not the cause. Second, sample is not nationally representative of university and college students in Hazara Division of Pakistani youth. Third, the participation and voting measures are self-reported. Fourth, the thesis operationalizes voting behavior as past voting, voting intention and future participation, but the majority of the empirical tables that are reported in the research offer detailed results for perceived voting influence and campaign choice.

Future analysis of the original data should, if variables at the item level are available, estimate political participation as a continuous outcome, and voting behavior, as an outcome that is commensurate with the level of political participation being measured. Predictor variables might include social-media use, awareness, trust, engagement with political content, gender and/or age. Where the actual voting is binary logistic regression might be appropriate and where there is a validated multi-item voting-orientation scale, linear regression or structural equation modelling may be appropriate.

8. Conclusion

This study reflects that social media is a significant part of the youth political participation and Electoral communication and political mobilization in Hazara Division. The indicators of digital engagement are most clearly expressed through political discussion, opinion expression, sharing, perceived political empowerment and motivation to participate. Social media and online political campaigns were also deemed relevant to their political views and choices and their voting. Based on this evidence, it is possible to conclude that digital engagement is associated with participatory/electoral orientations, but it does not necessarily cause people to vote or influence their choice of party.

The main finding is that social media increase the sphere of social life where young people see campaigns, talk politics, voice their opinion, and engage in political life and that all those activities are part of the context in which they make electoral choices. Political awareness, trust, knowledge and political socialization are still factors that could explain, but do not explain the main results of this paper. This separation allows the manuscript to be conceptually distinct from a study based on youth political socialization and closer with the empirical narrative of political participation and voting.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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