

Instagram, Youth, and Law Enforcement in Pakistan: A Study of Perceptions, Trust, and Civic Engagement

Farrukh Javeed

253074017@formanite.fccollege.edu.pk

M. Phil. Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan

Adeel Ahmad Aamir

adeelaamir@fccollege.edu.pk

Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Adeel Ahmad Aamir adeelaamir@fccollege.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

Social media now plays a central role in how young people discuss public issues, especially in societies where access to traditional media is restricted or uneven. In Pakistan, Instagram has become a popular platform for sharing opinions, shaping narratives, and engaging with matters of public concern, including the role and performance of law enforcement agencies. This study explores how Pakistani youth engage with law enforcement related content on Instagram and how such engagement influences their perceptions, levels of trust, and broader civic attitudes. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research adopts a quantitative survey based approach. Data were collected from active Instagram users between the ages of 18 and 30. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS, applying descriptive measures along with correlation and regression analysis. The survey examined patterns of Instagram use, types of interaction with law enforcement content, underlying motivations, and the perceived impact of this content on views about policing. The findings indicate that Instagram plays a meaningful role in shaping youth awareness and opinions about law enforcement in Pakistan. Visual posts, hashtags, activist driven campaigns, and content shared by peers and social media influencers emerged as particularly influential. At the same time, respondents expressed concerns about misinformation, selective exposure, and the lack of contextual depth in some content. Overall, the study positions Instagram as a significant digital space for civic learning and participation among Pakistani youth. The findings offer important implications for law enforcement institutions and policymakers seeking to improve public trust, transparency, and constructive engagement with young citizens through social media platforms.

Keywords: Instagram, Pakistani youth, law enforcement, digital activism, civic engagement, social media

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has transformed communication, public opinion, and civic engagement worldwide. In Pakistan, Instagram has gained particular importance due to its visual nature and strong popularity among youth, especially those under 30 years of age. (PBS, n.d.) What began as a social networking platform has increasingly become a space for political discussion, activism, and public debate.

Pakistan's traditional media often faces political and regulatory constraints, particularly when covering sensitive issues such as law enforcement practices. As a result, young people increasingly turn to digital platforms to share experiences, express concerns, and engage in discussions related to justice, accountability, and policing (Batool, 2024) (Sidra Awan, 2022) Instagram's use of images, videos, stories,

and hashtags enables powerful visual narratives that attract attention and shape civic discourse (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

Public trust in law enforcement in Pakistan has remained fragile due to concerns about misconduct, corruption, and lack of accountability, especially among youth (Transparency International, 2024; HRCP, 2024). Instagram has become a key space where such issues are highlighted through visual evidence, activist campaigns, and peer-driven content, often amplifying public voices and influencing perceptions of law enforcement institutions (Noor Mandviwalla, 2021). (Aljazeera, n.d.)

Youth play a central role in this digital engagement. Most Instagram users in Pakistan fall within the 18–30 age group, making them the most active participants in online discussions (NapoleonCat.com, 2025); (Baig et al., 2023). Their activities include sharing content, commenting, reposting, and participating in hashtag activism, reflecting information seeking, identity expression, and civic motivation (Katz et al., 1973); (Baig et al., 2023).

Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study views youth as active media users who select Instagram to fulfill needs such as information, self-expression, and participation in public life (Katz et al., 1973). While visual content on Instagram strongly shapes awareness and perceptions of law enforcement, challenges such as misinformation, selective exposure, and echo chambers may reinforce bias and mistrust (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), (Zafar et al., 2024)

Despite Instagram's growing influence, limited empirical research in Pakistan has examined its role in law enforcement-related discourse, with most studies focusing on Facebook and Twitter (Ali, 2022) Sidra Awan, 2022). This study addresses this gap by examining how Pakistani youth use Instagram in relation to law enforcement practices and how such engagement shapes perceptions, trust, and civic awareness.

Research Questions

- How do Pakistani youth engage with law enforcement agencies through Instagram?
- What factors motivate Pakistani youth to interact with law enforcement related content on Instagram?
- In what ways does engagement with law enforcement content on Instagram influence Pakistani youth's perceptions of law enforcement agencies?

Objectives of the Research

- To systematically examine patterns of Instagram use among Pakistani youth in the context of law enforcement practices.
- To assess the relationship between levels of Instagram engagement and Pakistani youth's perceptions of law enforcement institutions.
- To explore the underlying motivations driving Pakistani youth's participation in law enforcement related discussions on Instagram.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The widespread use of Instagram among Pakistani youth makes it an important platform beyond social interaction. With a large youth population and growing internet access, Instagram is especially popular among users aged 18–30 (NapoleonCat.com, 2025)(*Digital 2025*, 2025) Research shows that youth use the platform not only for entertainment but also for sharing information, expressing opinions, and engaging with civic and legal issues(Sidra Awan, 2022).

Meta’s advertising data further confirms the rapid growth of Instagram users in Pakistan, underlining its importance for studying youth engagement and its influence on perceptions of law enforcement (Ahsan, n.d.).

Instagram has increasingly become a platform for civic discussion and digital activism in Pakistan. Users now engage with content related to governance, justice, and law enforcement through images, videos, stories, and hashtags (Sidra Awan, 2022)Its visual format makes civic issues more engaging and widely shareable(Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

In a context where traditional media faces restrictions, Instagram offers an alternative space to discuss sensitive topics such as police accountability. Youth-led campaigns and hashtag activism further highlight the platform’s role in amplifying public voices and encouraging civic engagement(Baig et al., 2023).

Social media plays an important role in shaping political awareness among Pakistani youth. Instagram increases exposure to political and legal information, even though this awareness does not always lead to deep political understanding(Sidra Awan, 2022). Still, the platform allows youth to engage in activism by sharing content, supporting causes, and discussing law enforcement and governance issues(Zara Haroon et al., 2023).

Hashtag activism is a key feature of this engagement. Justice and accountability campaigns often spread through visual storytelling and peer sharing, influencing public opinion and, at times, institutional responses(Baig et al., 2023)

Visual communication plays a key role in shaping perceptions of law enforcement on Instagram. Images and videos of police actions often trigger strong emotional responses and spread quickly, influencing trust, awareness, and attitudes toward law enforcement institutions (Highfield & Leaver, 2016);(Tahir et al., 2021).

At the same time, this emotional impact carries risks. Algorithm-driven visibility and selective exposure can reinforce biases and create echo chambers, which may further intensify mistrust toward law enforcement (Zafar et al., 2024); (Jeanis et al., 2021).

Misinformation, Echo Chambers, and Digital Risks

While Instagram facilitates civic engagement, it also poses challenges related to misinformation and biased narratives. Algorithmic filtering can limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs among youth (Zafar et al., 2024). The rapid spread of unverified content related to law enforcement incidents can contribute to public confusion and mistrust (Jeanis et al., 2021). Research also highlights broader digital risks associated with social media use, including cybercrime, online harassment, and privacy concerns, which affect youth participation and perceptions of public institutions(Ahmad et al., 2022);(Saud, 2018). These challenges underscore the need for digital literacy and responsible platform use. Influencers

and peer networks strongly shape how law enforcement is perceived on Instagram. Influencer content reaches wide audiences and helps frame narratives around justice, misconduct, and reform, while peer sharing further amplifies these messages among youth (Noor Mandviwalla, 2021); (Wang et al., 2019). However, influencer-driven content can raise concerns about credibility, motives, and the spread of exaggerated or misleading information. This highlights the need for ethical communication and responsible engagement on digital platforms (Farrah et al., 2021). Law enforcement agencies in Pakistan continue to face challenges related to public trust and accountability, especially among youth, due to reports of misconduct and inefficiency (Transparency International, 2024; HRCP, 2024, 2024). Instagram has emerged as a space where these concerns are openly discussed through citizen-generated content and visual evidence (Aljazeera, n.d.) Research suggests that law enforcement can use social media to improve transparency and youth engagement by sharing accurate information and responding to public concerns (Shahid Mahmood, 2024) However, the success of such efforts depends on consistent, credible, and open communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative, survey-based research design to examine how Pakistani youth use Instagram in relation to law enforcement practices and how such engagement shapes perceptions and civic attitudes. A quantitative approach was appropriate as it allows systematic measurement of attitudes and behaviors and supports objective statistical analysis of relationships between social media use and public perceptions (Sidra Awan, 2022).

The target population comprised Pakistani youth aged 18–30 years who actively use Instagram, as this group represents the most engaged users of the platform and is more likely to interact with law enforcement related content ((NapoleonCat.com, 2025) (*Digital 2025*, 2025)). A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used due to the online nature of the study and ease of access, while ensuring diversity across gender, education, and residential background (Sidra Awan, 2022). Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via social sight Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. This method suited the digital habits of the target population and enabled wider geographic reach within a limited timeframe (Batool, 2024). Participation was voluntary, respondents were informed about the study purpose, and no personal identifying information was collected. The study examined Instagram usage and engagement as the independent variable, including frequency of use, interaction with law enforcement content, exposure to visual narratives, engagement with influencer and peer content, and participation in discussions and hashtag activism. The dependent variable was youth perception of law enforcement, measured through trust, perceived credibility, and awareness of policing issues, civic interest, and views on accountability. All variables were measured using Likert scale items developed in line with the study objectives and existing literature. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and usage patterns, while correlation and regression analyses were applied to examine the strength and direction of relationships between Instagram engagement and perceptions of law enforcement (Sidra Awan, 2022). Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any stage. The study followed standard ethical guidelines for social science research involving human participants.

RESULT

This section presents the results and findings of the study based on statistical analysis of the data collected. The study examines how Pakistani youth use Instagram in relation to law enforcement practices. Data was collected online from 604 respondents, and after removing 111 non-Instagram users, 493 valid responses

were analyzed. The findings are reported through frequency tables, descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and hypothesis testing to assess Instagram’s influence on youth perceptions of law enforcement.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability and validity assess the quality of a research scale. Reliability indicates consistency, while validity reflects measurement accuracy (Bahariniya et al., 2021).

		N	%
Cases	Valid	493	100.0
	Excluded^a	0	.0
	Total	493	100.0

a. List wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 1 Case Processing Summary

Reliability of All Items

Table 1 shows that all 493 cases (100%) were included in the reliability analysis, with no missing data. This indicates complete responses for all 23 variables, enhancing the accuracy and reliability of the results.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.902	23

Table 2 Reliability Statistics

The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.902 for 23 items, indicating excellent internal consistency and confirming the reliability of the survey instrument for further analysis.

Trust in Law Enforcement

Awareness scores were slightly higher, with Instagram updates (M = 2.55) and civic interest (M = 2.72), indicating that Instagram helps inform youth, though its impact on civic responsibility remains moderate.

Awareness and Civic Interest

Awareness variables were slightly higher, with IG updates (M = 2.55) and civic interest (M = 2.72). These results indicate that Instagram does help keep youth informed, but its impact on civic responsibility remains moderate.

Youth Activism & Engagement

Youth engagement showed the highest scores, particularly for campaigns/hashtags (M = 3.08) and interactive features (M = 2.87), indicating strong online participation. However, lower means for offline discussions (M = 2.56) and real-world change (M = 2.76) suggest that online engagement does not consistently translate into offline activism.

Critical Evaluation of Content

Respondents showed a cautious and critical approach toward law enforcement content on Instagram, with low trust in authenticity, concerns about exaggeration, and hesitation to post due to fear. Youth commonly cross-checked information and recognized media bias, reflecting skepticism rather than blind trust. While Instagram effectively engages youth through interactive features, limited credibility restricts the conversion of online engagement into real-world activism

Hypothesis 1

There is a significant relationship between Instagram usage frequency and Pakistani youth’s perception of law enforcement.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.177 ^a	.031	.029	4.69294

Table 3 Model summary

Table 3 indicates a weak but positive relationship (R = 0.177), with Instagram usage explaining 3.1% of the variance (R² = 0.031), which is acceptable for behavioral research.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	348.431	1	348.431	15.821	.000 ^b
	Residual	10813.638	491	22.024		
	Total	11162.069	492			

Table 4 ANOVA^a

The ANOVA results show that the regression model is statistically significant (F = 15.821, p < 0.001), indicating that Instagram usage frequency significantly predicts the dependent variable and the relationship is not due to chance.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	17.063	.393		43.443	.000
	Instagram usage frequency	.778	.196	.177	3.978	.000

Table 5 Coefficients^a

The regression results show that Instagram usage frequency positively predicts the dependent variable (β = 0.177). The model indicates that a one-unit increase in Instagram usage leads to a 0.778-unit increase in the outcome (t = 3.978, p < 0.001). Although statistically significant, the effect size is small, suggesting that Instagram usage influences the outcome but is not the sole contributing factor.

Summary of Findings

The regression results support Hypothesis 1, showing a positive and significant relationship between Instagram usage frequency and the dependent variable, though the explained variance remains low ($R^2 = 0.031$).

Conclusion

The regression analysis confirms a significant positive effect of Instagram usage frequency on the dependent variable. Although the effect size is small, it is statistically meaningful, leading to the acceptance of Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2

The perceived impact of Instagram activism on public opinion is significantly shaped by engagement with law enforcement content.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.769 ^a	.592	.591		1.91778

Table 6 Model summary

The model summary shows a strong positive relationship between H2 IV and H2 DV ($R = 0.769$), with a high level of explained variance ($R^2 = 0.592$), indicating that the independent variable is a strong predictor of the dependent variable.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2619.034	1	2619.034	712.101	.000 ^b
	Residual	1805.846	491	3.678		
	Total	4424.880	492			

Table 7 ANOVA

The ANOVA results indicate that the regression model is highly significant ($F = 712.101$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that H2 IV strongly and significantly predicts H2 DV.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.245	.356		3.494	.001
	H2 IV	.576	.022	.769	26.685	.000

Table 7 Coefficients^a

a. The regression results show that H2 IV positively predicts H2 DV ($\beta = 0.769$), with a strong effect size. A one-unit increase in H2 IV leads to a 0.576-unit increase in the dependent variable ($t = 26.685$, $p < 0.001$).

Summary of Findings

The regression results strongly support Hypothesis 2, showing a significant and substantial positive effect of H2 IV on H2 DV, with a high level of explained variance, confirming the strength and reliability of the relationship.

Conclusion

The regression analysis confirms that H2 IV has a strong and significant positive effect on H2 DV ($R^2 = 0.592$), explaining more than half of the variance. Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 is accepted, indicating that increases in H2 IV lead to meaningful improvements in H2 DV.

Hypothesis 3

The type of content shared on Instagram significantly affects public perception of law enforcement.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.591 ^a	.350	.348	1.98289

Table 8 Model summary

The model shows a moderate positive relationship between H3 IV and H3 DV ($R = 0.591$), with 35% of the variance explained ($R^2 = 0.350$), indicating a meaningful association.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1038.224	1	1038.224	264.054	.000 ^b
	Residual	1930.543	491	3.932		
	Total	2968.767	492			

Table 8 ANOVA

The ANOVA results show that the regression model is statistically significant ($F = 264.054$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that H3 IV significantly explains variation in H3 DV.

Table 8 Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.714	.381		4.492	.000
	H3 IV	.471	.029	.591	16.250	.000

The regression results show that H3 IV positively predicts H3 DV ($\beta = 0.591$). A one-unit increase in H3 IV leads to a 0.471-unit increase in the dependent variable ($p < 0.001$), indicating a moderate but significant effect.

Summary of Findings

The results support Hypothesis 3, showing a positive and significant effect of H3 IV on H3 DV, with 35% of the variance explained, which is acceptable for social science research.

The regression analysis confirms Hypothesis 3, demonstrating a significant positive relationship between H3 IV and H3 DV. Although the effect size is moderate compared to Hypothesis 2, the findings are statistically meaningful and consistent, indicating that increases in H3 IV lead to improvements in H3 DV.

Correlation

Correlation measures the strength and direction of the relationship between two or more variables. It indicates how closely variables are related, with values ranging from -1 to +1, where values closer to either extreme show stronger relationships.

Hypothesis 1

There is a significant relationship between Instagram usage frequency and Pakistani youth’s perception of law enforcement.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Instagram usage frequency	1.69	1.081	493
H1 DV	18.3793	4.76310	493

Table 9 Descriptive Statistics

		Instagram usage frequency	H1 DV
Instagram usage frequency	Pearson Correlation	1	.177**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	493	493
H1 DV	Pearson Correlation	.177**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	493	493

The correlation analysis examined the strength and direction of relationships between the independent and dependent variables across all hypotheses. For Hypothesis 1, Instagram usage frequency showed a positive and statistically significant correlation with H1 DV ($r = 0.177$, $p < 0.01$). Although the relationship is weak, it indicates that higher Instagram use is associated with a slight increase in the dependent variable. Such weak yet significant correlations are common in behavioral research, where outcomes are influenced by multiple factors.

Hypothesis 2

The perceived impact of Instagram activism on public opinion is significantly influenced by engagement levels with law enforcement content.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
H2 IV	16.0264	4.00727	493
H2 DV	10.4726	2.99894	493
		H2 IV	H2 DV
H2 IV	Pearson Correlation	1	.769**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	493	493
H2 DV	Pearson Correlation	.769**	1

	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	493	493

For Hypothesis 2, the correlation analysis shows a strong and positive relationship between H2 IV and H2 DV ($r = 0.769$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that increases in H2 IV are closely associated with substantial increases in H2 DV. The high correlation value reflects a strong linear association, confirming that H2 IV has a major influence on the dependent variable.

Hypothesis 3

The type of content shared on Instagram significantly affects public perception of law enforcement.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
H3 IV	12.8073	3.08705	493
H3 DV	7.7404	2.45644	493
		H3 IV	H3 DV
H3 IV	Pearson Correlation	1	.591**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	493	493
H3 DV	Pearson Correlation	.591**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	493	493

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 10 Correlations

For Hypothesis 3, the correlation between H3 IV and H3 DV is moderate and positive ($r = 0.591$, $p < 0.01$), showing a meaningful relationship. Overall, all three hypotheses show positive and significant correlations. Although the strength differs—weak for H1, strong for H2, and moderate for H3 all relationships are valid and consistent with the regression results.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Pakistani youth use Instagram in relation to law enforcement practices and how this engagement shapes perceptions, trust, and civic participation. The findings show that Instagram plays a visible role in informing youth and shaping opinions, but its influence remains cautious and limited in terms of trust and real-world action.

The results support Hypothesis 1, showing that frequent Instagram use has a positive but weak effect on youth perceptions. This suggests that while higher exposure increases awareness, Instagram alone is not strong enough to substantially change attitudes toward law enforcement. This aligns with earlier studies that argue social media raises visibility but does not automatically build trust or behavioral change.

Hypothesis 2 was strongly supported, indicating that engagement with law enforcement content significantly shapes public opinion. High interaction through likes, comments, and shares increases perceived influence, confirming that active engagement matters more than passive use. This finding is consistent with prior research highlighting the power of interactive content in shaping social and political perceptions.

The results for Hypothesis 3 also confirm a moderate positive relationship between civic engagement and youth responses. Instagram contributes to awareness and discussion, but fear of backlash, harassment, or repercussions limits open expression. This explains why online engagement rarely translates into offline activism, a trend also noted in previous Pakistani and regional studies.

Overall, youth demonstrate a critical and skeptical approach. They cross-check information, recognize media bias, and question authenticity, which reflects growing digital literacy. However, low trust in credibility, responsiveness, and seriousness of law enforcement agencies weakens the platform's potential. While interactive tools such as polls, hashtags, and campaigns increase engagement, the lack of transparent responses reduces confidence.

In summary, Instagram functions as an important space for civic awareness and discussion among Pakistani youth, but trust deficits, fear, and perceived image-building by law enforcement restrict deeper engagement. For Instagram to become a more effective bridge between youth and law enforcement, consistent, transparent, and responsive communication is essential. This study explored how Pakistani youth use Instagram in relation to law enforcement practices and how this engagement shapes awareness, perceptions, and trust. The findings show that Instagram is a widely used platform among young, educated, urban users and plays an important role in spreading information and encouraging discussion about policing and public safety. While frequent use and active engagement increase awareness and influence opinions, overall trust in law enforcement content on Instagram remains limited.

The results indicate that youth approach law enforcement content with caution. Concerns related to credibility, authenticity, fear of negative consequences, and weak responsiveness from law enforcement agencies restrict open participation and reduce the translation of online engagement into offline civic action. Although interactive features such as polls, stories, hashtags, and campaigns encourage participation, engagement is often symbolic rather than transformative.

This study has practical implications for law enforcement agencies and policymakers. To strengthen public trust and youth engagement, law enforcement agencies should prioritize transparent communication, timely responses to public concerns, and consistent messaging across digital platforms. Moving beyond image building toward accountability and dialogue can enhance the effectiveness of Instagram as a civic engagement tool.

Like all studies, this research has limitations. The sample was largely urban and student based, which may limit generalization to older or rural populations. In addition, the cross sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time and does not reflect changes over time.

Future research may expand the sample to include rural youth, older age groups, and comparative regional studies. Longitudinal and qualitative approaches could provide deeper insights into how online engagement evolves into offline action. Further studies may also examine the role of specific content strategies, influencers, and platform algorithms in shaping trust and civic participation related to law enforcement.

Overall, Instagram has strong potential as a space for civic awareness among Pakistani youth, but its ability to build trust and meaningful engagement depends on more transparent, responsive, and accountable use by law enforcement agencies

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