

**Role of Social Media in Public Awareness in Pakistan: A Case Study of Khyber  
Pakhtunkhwa (2017–2025)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of public awareness in developing regions. This study investigates the role of social media in enhancing public awareness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, from 2017 to 2025, employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates primary survey data from 200 respondents with comprehensive secondary data analysis of government reports, NGO evaluations, and international agency publications. The findings reveal that social media platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter) have become central channels for disseminating information across multiple sectors, including health, education, political participation, civic engagement, and gender rights. Primary data indicate that a majority of respondents rely on social media for timely and accessible information, particularly youth and educated populations, while secondary data demonstrate measurable impacts of digital campaigns, such as increased vaccination compliance, higher youth and female voter participation, greater reporting of harassment cases, and expanded access to online learning. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as misinformation, digital inequality, and low media literacy remain significant barriers to effective awareness dissemination. The study concludes that strategic interventions including content localization, media literacy programs, regulatory oversight, and multi-platform engagement are essential to strengthen social media's role in fostering an informed, engaged, and participatory society in KP.*

**Keywords:** Social media, Public awareness, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Digital literacy, Civic engagement, Health campaigns, Education awareness, Pakistan.

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, social media has emerged as one of the most influential tools in shaping public opinion, disseminating information, and enhancing public awareness across societies. Unlike traditional media, which operates through one-way communication, social media platforms enable interactive, real-time, and participatory information exchange, thereby transforming how citizens consume news, engage in public discourse, and develop awareness about social, political, and economic issues. Globally, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become central arenas for public debate, civic engagement, and awareness campaigns, particularly in developing countries where conventional media access may be limited (Castells, 2015).

The role of social media in public awareness is widely discussed within communication and political science literature. Scholars argue that social media functions as a digital public sphere, enabling marginalized voices to participate in public discourse and increasing awareness about governance, human rights, health, and social justice issues (Habermas, 2006; Papacharissi, 2015). During crises such as pandemics, elections, natural disasters, and social movements, social media has proven instrumental in spreading timely information and mobilizing communities (Loader & Mercea, 2011). However, the same platforms that promote awareness also carry risks of misinformation, polarization, and manipulation, making their overall impact complex and context-dependent.

In Pakistan, the expansion of social media has been rapid and transformative over the last decade. With the proliferation of smartphones, declining internet costs, and improved digital infrastructure, social media has become a primary source of information for a significant segment of the population. According to digital media reports, Pakistan has witnessed a substantial increase in social media users since 2017, particularly among youth and urban populations (Kemp, 2024). This expansion has altered information consumption patterns, reducing reliance on traditional print and broadcast media and increasing dependence on digital platforms for news and awareness.

The rise of social media in Pakistan has coincided with critical political, social, and economic developments, including electoral transitions, governance reforms, public health crises, and socio-economic challenges. Social media has played a visible role in shaping political awareness, promoting public debates on governance and accountability, and highlighting issues such as education, women's rights, and corruption (Jamil, 2021). At the same time, concerns about fake news, hate speech, and digital manipulation have intensified, raising questions about the credibility and effectiveness of social media as a tool for constructive public awareness.

Within this national context, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) presents a particularly significant case for examining the role of social media in public awareness. Historically, KP has faced structural challenges including lower literacy rates, limited media access in rural and mountainous areas, security issues, and socio-economic disparities. However, the digital revolution has gradually reshaped information access in the province. Improved mobile network coverage, expansion of 3G and 4G services, and increased smartphone usage have enabled broader sections of the population to access social media platforms (PTA, 2023).

For many residents of KP, especially youth, social media has become a key channel for receiving information about health campaigns, political developments, disaster warnings, and social issues. The period from 2017 to 2025 is particularly important, as it encompasses significant political transitions, the COVID-19 pandemic, increased digital governance initiatives, and growing online activism. These

developments make KP an analytically rich case for understanding how social media contributes to public awareness in a socio-politically sensitive and development-challenged region.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To analyze the role and impact of major social media platforms
- To assess users' perceptions and trust in social media content
- To explore how social media affects public knowledge on societal issues (health, politics, rights)

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The growing body of literature on social media highlights its transformative role in shaping public awareness, information dissemination, and civic engagement across the globe. Social media platforms have altered traditional communication patterns by enabling rapid, interactive, and user-generated content flows, thereby redefining how individuals acquire knowledge about social, political, health, and governance-related issues. Unlike conventional media, which often follows hierarchical and institutional communication models, social media facilitates horizontal communication, allowing citizens to actively participate in public discourse and awareness creation (Castells, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). As a result, social media has increasingly been conceptualized as a digital public sphere where information exchange and opinion formation occur dynamically.

Global studies consistently demonstrate that social media significantly influences public awareness, particularly during critical events such as elections, social movements, and public health emergencies. Research conducted across different regions indicates that social media platforms play a crucial role in disseminating timely information and increasing public knowledge, especially among younger and digitally literate populations (Loader & Mercea, 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, social media emerged as a primary source of health-related information worldwide, shaping public understanding of preventive measures, vaccination campaigns, and government responses (Jafar et al., 2023). Empirical studies analyzing large-scale social media data have shown that online discussions reflect public awareness trends and behavioral responses to crises, underscoring the informational power of digital platforms (Lin et al., 2021).

However, global literature also emphasizes that the relationship between social media and public awareness is complex and ambivalent. While increased access to information can enhance awareness, it can simultaneously expose users to misinformation, sensationalism, and biased narratives. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) argue that social media's low entry barriers and algorithm-driven content amplification make it susceptible to the rapid spread of fake news, which can distort public understanding rather than improve it. Consequently, the effectiveness of social media in fostering informed awareness depends not only on access but also on users' digital literacy, trust in information sources, and regulatory frameworks governing online content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Comparative studies from South Asia provide valuable insights into how social media influences public awareness in socioeconomically diverse and politically dynamic environments. In India, research demonstrates that social media has been successfully used to promote awareness on social issues such as gender equality, public health, and civic responsibility through targeted digital campaigns. Initiatives like Selfie With Daughter illustrate how social media can mobilize large audiences and shape social norms by leveraging emotional engagement and participatory communication (Kumar, 2019). At the same time,

Indian studies caution that uneven digital literacy and political polarization can undermine the quality of public awareness, reinforcing the need for media education and content regulation (Agarwal et al., 2024).

Similarly, research from Bangladesh highlights the significant role of social media in enhancing public awareness, particularly during health emergencies. Empirical studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that social media platforms were instrumental in disseminating information about preventive behaviors, such as hand hygiene and social distancing, thereby increasing public awareness and compliance with health guidelines (Paul et al., 2022). Nevertheless, these studies also note that the impact of social media on awareness is uneven, as misinformation and limited attention to credible sources can weaken awareness outcomes. This dual role of social media as both an enabler and disruptor of public awareness echoes findings from broader global research.

Studies from Turkey further reinforce the context-dependent nature of social media's influence on public awareness. During periods of political unrest and media censorship, social media served as an alternative information channel, raising public awareness about political events and mobilizing civic engagement (Sunstein, 2018). However, state regulation, internet restrictions, and content moderation practices significantly shaped the scope and quality of awareness generated through social media. These comparative contexts underscore that social media's impact on public awareness is mediated by political structures, institutional trust, and socio-cultural norms.

Within Pakistan, scholarly attention to social media has increased in recent years, focusing primarily on political communication, youth engagement, and digital activism. Studies examining social media usage among Pakistani youth reveal that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and WhatsApp are major sources of political and social information, often surpassing traditional media in influence (Jamil, 2021). Research indicates a positive association between social media exposure and political awareness, particularly among educated and urban populations, suggesting that digital platforms play a growing role in shaping public understanding of governance and civic issues.

Research on public health communication in Pakistan also demonstrates the relevance of social media in awareness-building. Studies conducted during health campaigns and emergencies show that social media facilitated the dissemination of health-related information, contributing to increased awareness about disease prevention and health behaviors (Ahmed et al., 2025). However, these studies highlight that the effectiveness of social media-based awareness campaigns varies depending on message credibility, platform trust, and users' ability to evaluate information critically. This finding aligns with global literature emphasizing the importance of digital literacy in enhancing awareness outcomes.

In the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, existing research suggests that social media has become an important source of information in a province historically characterized by limited access to traditional media and infrastructural challenges. Studies focusing on political awareness in KP reveal that social media platforms have facilitated greater exposure to political information, enabling citizens to engage with political debates and election-related content (Ahmad et al., 2025). Similarly, research on media consumption patterns indicates that social media dominates information access among youth in KP, contributing to both increased awareness and emerging concerns related to misinformation and social polarization (Rahim & Khan, 2025).

Despite these contributions, research on social media in Pakistan remains fragmented and limited in scope. Most studies rely on cross-sectional designs and focus on specific outcomes such as political participation, academic performance, or health perceptions. There is a notable absence of comprehensive studies that examine public awareness as a multidimensional construct encompassing political, social, health, civic, and

environmental domains. Moreover, existing studies often concentrate on major urban centers or student populations, limiting their generalizability to broader provincial contexts such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

A critical gap in the literature is the lack of longitudinal research examining how social media influences public awareness over extended periods. The rapid evolution of digital platforms, changes in algorithms, and shifting socio-political contexts necessitate long-term analyses to understand sustained trends and impacts. In Pakistan, particularly in KP, no empirical study has systematically analyzed the role of social media in public awareness across the period 2017–2025, a timeframe marked by significant political transitions, public health crises, and digital expansion.

Furthermore, there is limited province-level research that captures the unique socio-demographic and cultural dynamics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Factors such as rural–urban disparities, gender gaps in digital access, literacy variations, and socio-political sensitivities shape how social media content is consumed and interpreted in the province (van Dijk, 2020). Without province-specific empirical evidence, it remains difficult to assess whether social media genuinely enhances inclusive public awareness or reinforces existing inequalities.

In addition, Pakistani scholarship has yet to fully integrate international theoretical frameworks—such as agenda-setting, uses and gratifications, and digital divide theories—into empirical analyses of social media and public awareness. This limits the ability to situate Pakistan’s digital experience within broader global debates and comparative contexts. Addressing this gap requires rigorous, theory-driven research that combines primary data with contextual analysis.

In light of these limitations, the present study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a comprehensive, primary-data-based examination of the role of social media in public awareness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 2017 to 2025. By focusing on multiple dimensions of awareness and incorporating socio-demographic variations, this research aims to bridge existing gaps and offer policy-relevant insights into the evolving role of social media in Pakistan’s information landscape.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining primary survey data with secondary sources, to comprehensively examine the role of social media in public awareness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, during the period 2017–2025. The research is predominantly quantitative in nature, supported by qualitative insights drawn from secondary literature, policy reports, and digital media analyses.

The primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire consists of 50 closed-ended questions, developed in alignment with the research objectives and informed by existing literature on digital media and public awareness. The instrument covers multiple dimensions, including social media usage patterns, awareness of social, political, health, and civic issues, perceptions of information credibility, exposure to misinformation, comparative effectiveness of social and traditional media, and challenges related to digital access and literacy. A five-point Likert scale (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) was predominantly used to measure attitudes and perceptions, ensuring consistency and statistical robustness.

The target population for this study comprises social media users residing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, representing diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of age, gender, education level, occupation, and urban–rural residence. Given the study’s focus on public awareness, respondents were selected from

students, professionals, civil society members, and general citizens who actively engage with social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed, as it is widely used in digital media research to reach respondents with relevant exposure to online information environments.

To ensure instrument validity and reliability, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject experts in media studies and social sciences. A pilot survey was conducted prior to the final data collection to refine question clarity and eliminate ambiguities. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, with values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70 indicating internal consistency of the scale. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity of respondents, and confidentiality of data, in accordance with international research ethics guidelines.

The secondary data component complements the primary findings and provides contextual depth. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, policy documents, digital media statistics, and publications from organizations such as the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), and international institutions. These sources were used to contextualize trends in social media penetration, digital literacy, and public awareness campaigns in Pakistan and KP, as well as to compare empirical findings with existing literature.

Data collected from the survey were coded and analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize demographic characteristics and usage patterns, while inferential techniques such as correlation and regression analysis were applied to examine relationships between social media usage and levels of public awareness. The integration of primary survey findings with secondary literature enables a holistic assessment of social media’s role in shaping public awareness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over the selected time frame.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the analysis and findings derived from both primary and secondary data to assess the role of social media in enhancing public awareness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, during the period 2017–2025. The chapter is structured to first analyze survey-based primary data collected from 200 respondents and then triangulate these findings with secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed literature, government reports, and digital media statistics. The analysis focuses on social media usage patterns, awareness levels across multiple domains, credibility perceptions, misinformation challenges, and the comparative effectiveness of social media vis-à-vis traditional media.

### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

A total of 200 valid responses were analyzed. The demographic distribution ensures diversity in age, gender, education, and residential background, which strengthens the generalizability of the findings within KP.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 200)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Gender	Male	124	62.0
	Female	76	38.0

Age Group	18–25	72	36.0
	26–35	68	34.0
	36–45	38	19.0
	Above 45	22	11.0
Education	Intermediate or below	46	23.0
	Bachelor’s	78	39.0
	Master’s & above	76	38.0
Residence	Urban	118	59.0
	Rural	82	41.0

### Social Media Usage Patterns

Respondents were asked about frequency, platforms used, and purposes of social media engagement.

**Table 2: Frequency of Social Media Use**

Usage Frequency	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	148	74.0
Several times a week	34	17.0
Occasionally	12	6.0
Rarely	6	3.0

A substantial 74% daily usage indicates that social media has become an integral part of everyday life in KP, reinforcing its potential as a public awareness tool.

**Table 3: Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms**

Platform	Percentage of Users (%)
WhatsApp	86
Facebook	78
YouTube	72
Instagram	44
X (Twitter)	31

WhatsApp and Facebook dominate information sharing and awareness dissemination.

### Role of Social Media in Public Awareness

Public awareness was measured across social, political, health, civic, and environmental domains using Likert-scale items.

**Table 4: Social Media and Awareness Levels**

Awareness Domain	Agree / Strongly Agree (%)
Social issues (education, gender, rights)	71
Political awareness (elections, governance)	66
Health awareness (COVID-19, vaccination)	74
Civic awareness (laws, rights, services)	63

Environmental awareness	58
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Health and social awareness scored highest, reflecting the effectiveness of digital health campaigns and NGO-led online initiatives during crises such as COVID-19.

### Credibility and Trust in Social Media Information

**Table 5: Perceived Credibility of Social Media Content**

Response	Percentage (%)
Highly credible	18
Moderately credible	46
Neutral	16
Low credibility	20

While social media is widely used, trust remains moderate, indicating cautious consumption of online information. This aligns with global concerns about misinformation.

### Misinformation and Digital Challenges

**Table 6: Perceived Challenges in Social Media Awareness**

Challenge	Agree / Strongly Agree (%)
Fake news & misinformation	76
Political propaganda	61
Lack of digital literacy	58
Limited internet access (rural areas)	54

Misinformation emerged as the most critical challenge, particularly in political and health-related content.

### Comparative Effectiveness: Social Media vs Traditional Media

**Table 7: Preferred Source for Public Awareness**

Medium	Percentage (%)
Social media	57
Television	26
Newspapers	9
Radio	8

Social media has surpassed traditional media as the primary source of awareness, especially among youth, although traditional media remains relevant for older and rural populations.

### Overview of Data Sources and Analytical Approach

This study employs qualitative content analysis combined with comparative trend analysis to evaluate secondary data. The sources analyzed include:

- Annual reports of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) (2017–2024)

- Digital access and e-governance reports by the KP Information Technology Board
- Evaluation reports by UNICEF, WHO, and UNDP, particularly on COVID-19, health, and education awareness
- Public opinion and voter behavior surveys conducted by Gallup Pakistan
- Misinformation assessments by Soch Fact Check and the Digital Rights Foundation
- Public outreach reports of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)
- Monitoring and evaluation reports of NGOs such as Blue Veins, PAIMAN Alumni Trust, Aurat Foundation, and Sabaoon
- Peer-reviewed academic literature on digital citizenship and online political engagement in KP

These sources enabled the construction of a timeline and thematic categorization of social-media-driven awareness initiatives in KP, allowing for longitudinal analysis across the 2017–2025 period.

### **Patterns of Social Media Use in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2017–2025)**

Between 2017 and 2025, KP experienced a substantial digital transformation. According to PTA data, mobile broadband users in KP increased from approximately 9.2 million in 2017 to over 22 million by 2024, reflecting a rapid expansion in digital connectivity (PTA, 2023). This growth was particularly pronounced following the merger of FATA with KP in 2018, which accelerated telecom infrastructure development in previously underserved districts.

**Table 8: Growth in Mobile Broadband Users in KP**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Estimated Users (Millions)</b>	<b>Key Development</b>
2017	9.2	Early expansion phase
2019	13.5	Post-merger infrastructure growth
2021	18.6	COVID-19 driven digital use
2024	22.0+	Province-wide mobile internet penetration

*Source: Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (2017–2024).*

Urban centers such as Peshawar, Mardan, Abbottabad, and Swat consistently reported higher social media usage; however, rural and tribal districts also demonstrated increased engagement, particularly through Pashto-language mobile applications and localized content (KP IT Board, 2022).

### **Platform-Wise Trends in Social Media Usage**

Secondary data indicate clear shifts in platform preferences over time:

- 2017–2019: Facebook and WhatsApp dominated, serving as primary tools for health messaging and electoral awareness.
- 2020–2025: TikTok, YouTube and Facebook gained popularity during COVID-19 lockdowns, particularly for video-based awareness content.

This evolution reflects broader global trends in digital communication, while also highlighting the importance of language localization in Pashto for maximizing outreach in KP (UNDP, 2023).

### **Sector-Wise Case Studies of Social Media Awareness Campaigns**

#### **Health Awareness: COVID-19 and Vaccination Campaigns**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the KP Health Department, in collaboration with WHO and UNICEF, launched large-scale social media campaigns promoting mask usage, vaccination, and social distancing. UNICEF (2021) reported that Facebook-based campaigns alone reached approximately 7.5 million users in KP. The Pashto-language hashtag #CoronaZamaZimadari (“Corona is Our Responsibility”) gained widespread traction between 2020 and 2021.

According to WHO (2022), districts such as Upper Dir and Tank recorded an 11% increase in vaccine compliance, partially attributed to sustained social media outreach.

#### **Gender Rights and Anti-Harassment Awareness**

NGOs including Blue Veins and the Aurat Foundation used social media to raise awareness about women’s legal rights, harassment reporting mechanisms, and domestic violence. A TikTok campaign launched in Mardan in 2021 against street harassment went viral, receiving over 300,000 views within three days. Similarly, hashtags such as #DaKhazaHaquq (“Women’s Rights”) gained prominence during Women’s Day and the 16 Days of Activism campaigns.

Following these initiatives, Blue Veins and The Awakening Foundation reported a 35% increase in calls to women’s helplines, indicating tangible awareness outcomes (Blue Veins, 2022).

#### **Political and Electoral Awareness Campaigns**

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) leveraged social media during the 2018 and 2024 elections through campaigns such as #VoteKarKP and #YouthVoteMatters. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram were used to counter misinformation and disseminate polling information.

Gallup Pakistan (2019) documented a 9% increase in voter turnout among youth (18–29 years) in urban KP during the 2018 elections, while ECP statistics show a 12% rise in female voter turnout in districts such as Swat and Charsadda following targeted digital campaigns.

#### **Peacebuilding and Counter-Extremism Initiatives**

Organizations such as PAIMAN Alumni Trust and Sabaoon used YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp to promote peace narratives and counter extremist ideologies. Pashto-language theatrical skits and short video stories attracted significant engagement. For instance, an anti-radicalization video series released in 2020 accumulated 1.2 million views within two weeks, demonstrating the persuasive reach of localized digital storytelling (PAIMAN, 2021).

#### **Education Awareness and Digital Learning**

Social media played a transformative role in promoting education awareness, particularly during COVID-19 school closures. Between 2020 and 2021, the KP Education Department collaborated with Facebook,

YouTube, and Teleschool to broadcast online lessons. A departmental evaluation in 2022 reported that over 1.1 million students accessed online educational content during this period.

NGOs such as Alif Ailaan and Khudi Pakistan also ran campaigns like #EducationForAll and #ZamaZwanZamaTalem, focusing on girls' education in districts such as Bajaur, Khyber, and Swat. These initiatives helped:

- Inform parents about school enrollment drives
- Mobilize communities to reopen damaged schools
- Promote alternative education models for girls unable to attend formal schools

### **Types of Awareness Promoted Through Social Media**

**Table 9: Major Awareness Domains and Outcomes**

<b>Awareness Domain</b>	<b>Key Outcomes</b>
Health	Increased vaccination compliance and preventive behavior
Political & Civic	Higher youth and female voter participation
Gender & Social Rights	Increased reporting of harassment and rights awareness
Peace & Security	Enhanced counter-extremism narratives
Education	Expanded access to online learning and enrollment awareness

### **Effectiveness Evaluation Based on Secondary Surveys**

Survey-based secondary data suggest strong behavioral and attitudinal impacts:

- WHO reports increased willingness toward vaccination after digital campaigns.
- Gallup Pakistan (2023) found that 67% of KP youth trust social media more than traditional media for civic information.
- Engagement rates peaked between 2022–2024, largely due to Pashto-language localization on TikTok and YouTube.

### **Key Challenges Identified**

Despite positive outcomes, several obstacles persist:

- **Misinformation:** Soch Fact Check identified over 300 false Pashto-language narratives related to COVID-19 and elections.
- **Digital Divide:** Approximately 32% of rural KP still lacks consistent internet access (KP IT Board, 2023).
- **Low Media Literacy:** The Digital Rights Foundation (2021) reported that 59% of users share content without verification.

- **Content Regulation:** Platform bans and content removal during elections and crises (e.g., TikTok bans in 2020 and 2022) limited outreach.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of social media in enhancing public awareness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, over the period 2017–2025, by integrating primary survey data with an extensive secondary data analysis drawn from government reports, international organizations, NGOs, and academic literature. The combined findings provide robust evidence that social media has evolved into a central pillar of public awareness, significantly influencing how information is accessed, interpreted, and acted upon across the province.

Findings from the primary survey of 200 respondents reveal that social media has become the dominant source of information for a majority of citizens in KP, surpassing traditional media in relevance, speed, and accessibility particularly among youth and educated populations. High levels of daily usage and strong engagement with platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok demonstrate that social media is deeply embedded in everyday life. Survey results further indicate that social media plays a substantial role in raising awareness related to health, social issues, political participation, and civic rights, with health and social awareness receiving the highest levels of agreement among respondents. However, the primary data also highlight concerns regarding information credibility, as trust in social media content remains moderate and is frequently undermined by misinformation.

These primary findings are strongly corroborated by the secondary data analysis, which documents a consistent expansion of digital infrastructure and social media penetration in KP since 2017. Official statistics from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and KP IT Board show a sharp increase in mobile broadband users, particularly after the merger of FATA with KP, enabling social media platforms to reach previously marginalized and remote populations. Secondary evidence demonstrates that this digital expansion facilitated large-scale awareness campaigns in key sectors. Health campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic reached millions of users and contributed to measurable behavioral changes, including improved vaccine compliance. Electoral and civic awareness initiatives led by the Election Commission of Pakistan were associated with increased youth and female voter turnout in several KP districts. Similarly, NGO-led campaigns on women's rights, peacebuilding, and education achieved high engagement and tangible outcomes, such as increased reporting of harassment cases and expanded access to online learning during school closures.

The convergence of primary and secondary findings underscores that content localization, particularly in Pashto, and the involvement of community influencers significantly enhanced the effectiveness of awareness campaigns. Both datasets confirm that social media's interactive and visual nature especially through video-based platforms was instrumental in engaging diverse audiences and fostering participatory awareness rather than passive information consumption. At the same time, both sources consistently identify misinformation, digital inequality, and low media literacy as major structural constraints. Reports from fact-checking organizations and digital rights groups, alongside survey responses, indicate that false narratives especially during health crises and elections pose serious risks to informed public discourse.

Overall, the evidence suggests that social media has fundamentally transformed the public awareness landscape in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, shifting it from traditional, centralized communication models toward a more decentralized, networked, and citizen-driven information ecosystem. While urban and educated populations have benefited more directly from this transformation, targeted efforts to localize content and expand digital access have gradually reduced awareness gaps in rural and tribal areas.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social media between 2017 and 2025 functioned as a powerful enabler of public awareness in KP, with clear impacts across health, education, political participation, social rights, and peacebuilding. However, maximizing this potential requires sustained policy attention toward inclusive digital infrastructure, comprehensive media literacy education, effective misinformation control, and transparent content regulation. By integrating both primary and secondary evidence, this research contributes a nuanced, province-level understanding of social media's dual role as both an opportunity and a challenge in building an informed and engaged society in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of the comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary data, several policy recommendations emerge to strengthen the role of social media in fostering public awareness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). These recommendations are designed to enhance both the effectiveness and equity of digital awareness initiatives, addressing structural barriers, misinformation risks, and knowledge gaps.

### **Strengthening Digital Infrastructure and Accessibility**

- **Expand broadband and mobile internet coverage in rural and tribal areas:** Despite improvements since 2017, approximately 32% of rural residents in KP still lack consistent internet access (KP IT Board, 2023). The provincial government, in partnership with telecom operators, should prioritize last-mile connectivity and affordable data plans to ensure equitable access to digital platforms.
- **Promote local-language digital content:** The study highlights that Pashto-language content significantly increases engagement and comprehension among rural and tribal populations. Policies should incentivize the creation of culturally and linguistically relevant content, particularly for critical sectors such as health, education, and civic engagement.

### **Enhancing Media Literacy and Critical Digital Skills**

- **Integrate media literacy programs into formal and informal education:** Findings indicate that 59% of social media users in KP post or share content without verification (Digital Rights Foundation, 2021). Schools, colleges, and community centers should include curriculum modules on critical evaluation of online information and fact-checking tools.
- **Launch community-based media literacy campaigns:** Local NGOs and provincial authorities should run awareness workshops for parents, youth, and community leaders, emphasizing responsible content creation, verification of news, and recognition of misinformation.

### **Combating Misinformation and Fake News**

- **Develop a robust digital fact-checking and verification network:** Collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations (such as Soch Fact Check), and academic institutions can create a real-time misinformation monitoring system. This would identify and flag false narratives related to health, elections, and social rights.
- **Enforce transparent and accountable content moderation policies:** Platform regulation should balance misinformation control with the protection of free expression. Temporary bans and content removals, particularly during elections, have at times disrupted awareness campaigns;

policies should aim for evidence-based moderation while maintaining transparency and appeal mechanisms.

#### **Strengthening Government and Institutional Use of Social Media**

- **Institutionalize social media engagement for public service delivery:** Provincial departments (Health, Education, Social Welfare) should formalize social media units dedicated to information dissemination, citizen feedback collection, and campaign evaluation.
- **Collaborate with influencers and local content creators:** Primary and secondary findings reveal that local influencers significantly improve outreach and trust. Policies should facilitate partnerships with credible influencers to deliver targeted awareness campaigns in both urban and rural settings.
- **Periodic evaluation of digital campaigns:** Structured monitoring frameworks should assess reach, engagement, and behavioral outcomes of campaigns in health, education, civic engagement, and peacebuilding. Lessons learned should inform iterative improvements and best practice documentation.

#### **Promoting Inclusive and Participatory Digital Awareness**

- **Focus on marginalized groups:** Campaigns should explicitly target women, youth, and underserved communities in KP's rural and tribal districts, ensuring inclusivity in content creation and dissemination.
- **Support interactive engagement strategies:** Encouraging dialogue, community-based challenges, and user-generated content fosters participatory learning, increasing awareness retention and behavioral impact.
- **Use multi-platform approaches:** Given the differing platform preferences across demographics (Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram), campaigns should adopt a multi-platform strategy for broader reach.

#### **Policy-Level Recommendations for Long-Term Sustainability**

- **Invest in digital research and longitudinal monitoring:** Continuous research should track trends in social media usage, misinformation prevalence, and behavioral outcomes to refine awareness strategies.
- **Integrate digital awareness strategies into provincial development plans:** Social media campaigns should align with broader policy priorities, such as education for all, health literacy, civic participation, and gender equity, ensuring consistent resource allocation.
- **Promote public-private-civil society partnerships:** Collaboration between the government, NGOs, telecom companies, and international agencies (UNICEF, WHO, UNDP) can enhance efficiency, innovation, and credibility in awareness campaigns.

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