The Effects of Social Media on Political Participation among Youth: A Case Study of Sargodha City

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ABSTRACT

This study is initiated by the authors to investigate the contribution of the social media in political participation among the young citizens of the urban towns in Sargodha.. This research to which we now direct our attention had the objective of quantifying the degree and the type of political activity that digital sites had spawned. The scholars also had a desire to know the extent to which such spaces were an elaboration of political consciousness and mobilization. It required years before this study could occur and its authors could participate in a qualitative model that would eventually suggest the following. The effect of social media on political knowledge and involvement was significant and the intensity of involvement depends on the digital capacity and status of the student. The findings added to the continuously growing body of literature on digital with regard to digital democracy as the initial assumption by the researchers. This will definitely be tremendous since it will translate to new possibilities of evaluating the rising correlation between civic participation and technology in the scenario of Pakistan and the present emerging democracies of the day.

Keywords: Social media, political participation, youth engagement, digital activism, online expression, civic engagement, political awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has established new arenas of political discussions and social interactions. This has altered how individuals interact, share information and how they engage in their social activities. Some platforms like X (previously Twitter), Facebook, Tik Tok, and Instagram among others have essentially changed the mode of political participation and communication globally. They are good in spreading information fast, inciting the masses and influencing the political actions of the people. This is particularly evident in Pakistan, where around every two out of three people are younger than 30 (UNDP, 2018). The prevalence of digital platforms in Pakistan cannot be ignored more so in universities where students are highly dependent on digital platforms to get information, political debate, and activism (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Through these mediums, Pakistani young people are able to defy the traditional hindrances by accessing hitherto tabooed information regarding politics, the media and censorship by the capable authorities. They are able to exploit political discourses and this leads to a livelier and more interesting sphere of the public (Howard and Hussain, 2013). The effects of social media on the political life of Pakistan were best observed in the 2018 elections when the political parties and the candidates used social media to the deepest and shared their manifestos and motivated the masses, especially the new and youthful voters, to debate the issues among themselves. At the same time, the campaigns around such topics as justice reform, women rights, and educational policies have emphasized the importance of the digital participation and activism as the emergent and critical part of the Pakistani political and social culture (Khan and Jan, 2021).

Political games and the Youth:

Voting in the elections, attending demonstrations and political rallies, joining political parties, and fomenting about the public/social policy have long been the traditional activities of political participation. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) observed that the young people are often depicted as not being interested in politics. Nonetheless, engagement trends in recent past are opposite to this former assumption. Research indicates that a large number of youths are abandoning the conventional political forces and opting to adopt more flexible, eloquent, and agenda-directed activist movements. These are inclusive of those that are based on digital platforms/technologies (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon, 2009). The digital domain creates improved avenues of civic expression, which are cheap, immediate and reachful, and the youth who might otherwise be estranged or uninterested in the conventional structures of power.

Political Mobilization and Social Media:

The galvanizing and energizing capabilities of social media are largely observed across the globe. Shirky (2011) asserts that the costs of collective action are cut by online platforms as they allow quick communication and cooperation between people who are not in close contact with each other. According to Castells (2012), social media is a platform used to air disagreement and add resistance, as has been shown by the past Arab spring movements. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) developed the notion of the so-called connective action, which presents people as actively involved in politics via tailored digital information, not through the traditional institutions. These digitally triggered forms of activism are more flexible and contain fewer hierarchies. They present to the taste of young users who are more likely to embrace technology and shun party oriented politics in order to embrace issue based politics.

Nevertheless, researchers caution that there are no restrictions regarding social media participation. These platforms can supplement and enhance the masses participation and also better the democratic involvement. Nonetheless, political polarization, misinformation, and superficial or spurious engagement with no lasting impact or effect are also among the issues that it can create (Tufekci, 2017). The interpretation and translation of political behavior on the internet to effective results are still a central issue to the current research on politics.

The Pakistani Social Media:

The use of social media by social, political and civil society organizations in Pakistan has been an important way of spreading political awareness, communication and mobilization. Hassan et al. (2019) refer to the example of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which was able to exploit a dynamic social media mobilization strategy to win the goodwill of the younger generation of voters in the country. It is a winning formula that has a colossal effect on the popularity of the party, politically or otherwise.. In the same way, as expressed by Khan and Jan (2021), campaigns like the ones named as JusticeForZainab and

AuratMarch trended online and helped to attract the public attention and invite them to get involved in real life.

Pakistani youth can also use social media to face conservative discourses/ opinion and establish other platforms of argument (Saeed, 2017). Unlike in traditional media where activities are influenced by the will, and interests of the political leaders, digital media gives the youth, marginalized groups, minorities, women and other ethnic groups a free platform to air their grievances and opinions without interference or inhibition. However, there are still some obstacles, including state surveillance, cyberbullying, and lack of access to online resources, which hinder and limit fair access to these digital places.

Against this background, this contemporary research paper examines the role of social media in the political participation of young people in the urban regions of Pakistan, and specifically in Sargodha. It also decides how far these platforms spread knowledge, provoke discussion and create interaction that no longer exists online, but in social and political life in reality. The book is a timely and educative reading on the deteriorating relationship between politics and technology among one of the most dynamic Pakistani people.

Research Questions

The study relied on some tough questions that sought to investigate and analyze the relationship that existed between the use of social media and political participation among the youth in Sargodha city. It is amazing to note that it examined how youngsters use platforms to get political information such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Tik Tok, and Instagram to get the knowledge. It also evaluated how much these platforms liberate or restrict youngsters in articulating and developing view, and the abilities of the youths to have online discussion. The other point of discussion was the digital interactions to be translated in offline forms of involvement in activities such as campaigning, voting and protesting. The study also analyzed the challenges and problems which the students may face on these web sites such as being misinformed, harassed in the online world or having difficulty with surveillance. Finally, it also looked at how social media will be used to create a sense of empowerment to the youth of Sargodha in forming political identities. It is through these research questions that the complex and emerging nature of digital platforms in youth political behaviour in Pakistan was assessed and conceptualised.

Research Objectives

The primary research questions of this paper were:

- Determine how the use of social media is associated with the political participation of the youth in an urban setting in Pakistan.
- Determine the most common digital channels used by youths and what they read with regards to politics.
- Evaluate the different levels of participation based on social media as the passive activities, such as liking or commenting on posts, and the more active ones, such as commenting, campaigning, or protesting.
- Research the role of demographic factors, such as gender, education level, and socioeconomic status, in defining the trends of online political participation and the levels of engagement.

Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical systems on which the research is premised are complementary to each other. They were employed to explore the connection between the political-participation of the youth and social media. The first one is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), according to which individuals visit social media platforms with intentions to address a need or a set of requirements. These are searching

information, social relationships, and opinions (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974). UGT assists to comprehend why the young generation of Sargodha encourages the use of social media sites as a platform to gain political knowledge, learning, and discussion over conventional sources of information.

The second theory is the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) that highlights the role of resources that include talents, time, and economic resources, psychological disposition, and social networks in facilitating political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Social media, in this aspect can be utilized as a resource, and a networking tool. It offers cheap access to political knowledge, a feeling of efficiency, and the opportunities to be involved in campaigns or movements. The two (UGT and CVM) unite and expose to view social media as a provider of structural processes stimulating or deterring political involvement and individual satisfaction. Such a combination of methods gives a more subtle perspective on the role of the online activity of Sargodha to know more about politics, to be an activist, and to be empowered, as well as on the dangers of surveillance, misinformation, and online aggression.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, the correct ethical standards were taken into consideration. This was to safeguard the rights, privacy and the well being of the respondents. This is the reason why before gathering data on them, all the respondents were informed on the purpose of the study and the anticipated results. The researchers could only go ahead after getting their consent. The researchers also attempted to observe the privacy and the confidentiality of the respondents. This led to all personal information and any identification marks of them being deleted in the final transcripts. The later were also under lock and key with the researchers being the only ones to access them. The interview was held in an emphatic manner considering the needs and requirements of the respondents. They could stop or even leave the interview in case they were not comfortable or ready. Another option that the researchers used was to carry out the interviews through the language that they were most comfortable speaking. Lastly, the respondents were given an assurance that whatever they are going to respond to will not be revealed to any political party or authority.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized qualitative research design to examine the issue of how social media influences the political engagement of young people in Sargodha city. This was the best method of doing things since it enabled the researcher to understand their lived experiences, opinions and preferences more. This would have been impossible without a qualitative study, which can collect such detailed data (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The Interpretivist approach was applied in this study and focuses on how society affects and predisposes political behavior based on cultural and contextual forces.

This research was conducted among youths between the ages of 18-29 as a resident of Sargodha. These participants were selected since they actively used the social media platforms including X (Twitter), facebook, and Instagram. This has been achieved by applying the Purposive Sampling method by which the researchers were able to successfully pick the right respondents. These students represented a wide range of backgrounds such as students at universities, professionals and community based institutions. This was done by selecting 25 respondents.

A primary data collection method was that of Interview schedule with open-ended questions. This was considered suitable because it enabled the respondents to come out and be able to express themselves fully and freely without any complications. These interviews happened either personally, through Video call, or phone calls. In essence, the researchers have chosen to employ the approach that individual respondents were at ease with. The interviews took an average of 45-60 minutes per interview. The transcripts of both interviews were then transcribed word-to-word and analyzed by data later.

This was achieved by use of thematic analysis. This approach was applied to determine recurring themes which reflected the view and the opinion of the majority of the respondents. The interpretations of these themes were then arrived at to draw conclusions and understandings regarding the subject matter.

Pretesting is a significant step that may lead to realization of the effectiveness of the data collection tool. This is the reason why the researchers put the interview schedule through an intensive pretest process. It conducted a series of interviews on a few young people prior to starting the actual data collection to test the issue tool. Their comments were taken into account to control and streamline the tool even more and correct the flaws that it manifested.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

7.1. Theme 1: Political Consciousness and Access to Information:

The initial significant discovery of this study was that social media played a huge role in creating political awareness among the youth. According to the respondents, Facebook, X, and other related sites had been the source of political news replacing the traditional media of information like television and newspapers. Normal media was generally depicted as slow to report the news and biased. Social media in turn offers instant availability to numerous opinions and views. Young people, who took part in this study, claimed that they could observe political events more properly because they were able to have several points of view. It also empowered them to develop their own different perception of political parties, policies, and leaders.

Theme 2: Online Political Expression and Debate:

Social media platforms were also discovered in which political articulation was possible. The majority of the respondents mentioned that they shared a lot of political material, talked about topical issues and engaged in online conversations with others. These Internet communications turned out to be productive means of political action to some of the members, as most viewed them as a first step of more interactive participation in the real world. The next point that the respondents had to acknowledge was the fact that such debates tended to go into a more polarized form and even became violent and misinformation-driven. This theme demonstrates that online platforms can provide challenges and opportunities to political discourse.

Theme 3: Mobilization and Activism by Social Media

This paper also established that social media maybe a viable means of mobilization as well as discussion provocation. Most of the respondents reported attending demonstrations, student actions, and community projects since they observed them on social networks. Through these websites, there is a cheap and easy means of creating awareness, mobilizing activities and gaining support. This theme shows how social media websites can capitalize on mobilization and unification of individual views of people in groups to form political movements.

Theme 4: Perceived Risks and Surveillance

A number of respondents were correct stating that the political environment in Pakistan is highly delicate. They claimed that they were scared of engaging freely in online politics. They feared that they would be recorded and monitored. They also feared political retaliation by political groups, internet harassment and even being marginalized by members of their families who were suppressed to certain political parties. This led to them becoming very cautious to some of them not engaging in online politics altogether. This theme proves that online political involvement has its dangers and benefits. According to the respondents, they knew this in most instances and took precautions where they thought it was necessary.

Theme 5: Crossing the Online and Offline participation

This theme proved that online and offline political participation had a high level of correlation. A large number of them reported feeling revitalized to take part in offline politics following their boosted online engagement. They claimed that they had gotten into voting, demonstrations, campaigns, and political volunteering using social media sites and their political content. Therefore, social media platform will act as both an antidote and bridge between desire and action. They facilitate the transformation of the online presence into the presence in reality.

Theme 6: Generational Identity and Empowerment

This was the last theme and it centered on the effect of the social media on the empowerment and the generational identity. The primary way in which social media sites were described by the respondents was the place where they could address elite political people and have their voices heard in Pakistan political system. Through social media, the youth are allowed to express themselves and have the confidence to share their views. They need not depend on the past modes of political expression which are controlled by the political elites. This makes them feel achievement and empowerment. This will certainly affect future political environment of the country.

CONCLUSION

This research established that social media websites have made their mark on the political front among the youth. They act as a source of interaction as well as a source of information. Here they are able to argue, organize, and politically act. It was a common explanation among the respondents that Facebook, X, WhatsApp, and other social media sites offered them real-time political updates. They could educate themselves with varying political points of view and argue. This was the thing that the traditional media sources lacked. Moreover, such sites enable the youths to air their political opinions. It also helps them to develop a uniqueness in a political system dominated by elites.

The other result of this study was that social media sites and tools were threatening as well as its advantages in political participation. Respondents in one way or another indicated that they were likely to fall victim to online harassment and ridicule and even outright castigation. They claimed that they could freely express themselves and still they never felt that they were not being pursued. They had no choice but to be wary of the social media platforms where they would be blocked or overly antagonized. Those who were present in attendance reacted by going offline as an effective measure. The others, however, remained on the online platform to have a fear of receiving some negative feedback. This is to show that as much as online sites may provide platform of political participation, political expression, this does not translate into viable and meaningful democracy participation.

Another point that is raised in this paper is that the digital sites have resulted in the emergence of generational empowerment and identity. Respondents claimed that the social media helped them to censure and confront the political elites. These outlets were seen as a way of empowering themselves by them and they could participate in larger political discussion. It is a larger phenomenon in the world where the social media is being utilized by the youths as a means of challenging the elite and the people in power.

To conclude it is possible to say that the role of the social media in the lives of the young people in Sargodha is rather great. It is the living and the empowerment and it provides these youths with the opportunity to be more active in political conversation. It has promoted their awareness, capacity and willingness to pursue political knowledge, issues and efforts. There are positive and negative sides of the outlets. What needs to be improved is the skill and capacity of young people of Sargodha to make use of these tools in a bid to exploit their political capabilities.

SUGGESTIONS

The first suggestion is the implementation of digital awareness and digital critical thinking courses in the universities and community organizations. This way the respondents will be informed on how to distinguish between correct and incorrect information. This is achievable by conducting workshops and training to make them use these media sites in a more credible and effective manner. This will make sure that they are not brainwashed and they can be more responsible and competent.

Second, the on-line space needs to be secured and harassment and surveillance, eliminated. The youths are supposed to have the capacity to get involved in healthy political discussions over the internet. This can just be guaranteed when there are the required measures to guard these online spaces. The companies and authorities involved in social media should do so in this respect.

These platforms should not be used by the political parties to campaign. They ought to employ them to spread their manifestos, pass information about their mission, and invite youths willing to participate. This will promote their popularity among the youth. It will also generate good political awareness among the youths and will produce future leaders among the citizens.

The learning institutions should encourage the application of civic education and digital applications. This shall be one good way of taking the internet activity in life. The youth will begin to realize their political desires in the real-life politics and campaign. This will not only politically enlighten them and potential, it will also help the politics of Pakistan in the long term.

Finally, the NGOs and civil societies should establish leadership and mentorship programs that focus on the young. These programs should be a combination of basic programs and internet advocacy. This will assist the youth to positively utilize their energies over the internet. This will definitely result in positive social and political change in the country. It will also provide voice to the young ones with a view of ensuring that the voice is properly heard by those in power. This will be beneficial to them since they will be able to reformulate their policies and strategies to satisfy such a vital group of individuals in the country.

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