

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MEDIA ON YOUTH'S SOCIAL AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Digital media has become a transformative force in shaping youth perceptions and behaviors worldwide, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan. This qualitative study explores the impact of digital media platforms on the social awareness and engagement of Pakistani youth. Using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with individuals aged 18–30 from diverse backgrounds, the research investigates how digital media influences their understanding of social issues and motivates their participation in social campaigns. Thematic analysis reveals key factors driving youth engagement, such as exposure to global and local issues, emotional appeals, and peer influence. Additionally, the study identifies barriers like misinformation, online harassment, and the digital divide, which hinder meaningful participation. The findings highlight the dual role of digital media as an enabler and a challenge in fostering civic consciousness among youth. This study contributes to the discourse on media's role in social change and offers recommendations for leveraging digital platforms to enhance youth involvement in addressing societal challenges in Pakistan.

Keywords: Digital media, social awareness, youth engagement, Pakistan, qualitative study, social change.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of digital media has revolutionized communication, transforming how individuals interact with information and engage with societal issues. Globally, youth have become central participants in this digital transformation, utilizing platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to access information, share opinions, and mobilize for causes (Bennett, 2012). In Pakistan, where the youth population constitutes a significant demographic, digital media offers a unique opportunity to bridge gaps in traditional civic engagement. With increasing internet penetration—rising from 17.8% in 2017 to 36.5%

in 2022—digital platforms are now critical avenues for raising social awareness (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2022). However, despite this growth, challenges such as the digital divide, limited digital literacy, and the prevalence of misinformation hinder the effectiveness of digital media in fostering meaningful engagement (Khan et al., 2020). Furthermore, cultural norms and societal structures in Pakistan also influence how youth perceive and respond to social issues online. Understanding the interplay between these factors is essential for leveraging digital media to

enhance youth engagement and contribute to sustainable social change.

In Pakistan, the rapid growth of digital media has created unprecedented opportunities for youth to engage with social issues and contribute to civic initiatives. However, despite the increased accessibility of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, the potential of digital media to foster meaningful social awareness and engagement among Pakistani youth remains underutilized. Existing studies have primarily focused on the global implications of digital media, often overlooking the unique cultural, economic, and technological barriers faced in developing nations like Pakistan (Khan et al., 2020). Challenges such as misinformation, lack of digital literacy, and the digital divide continue to limit the effective use of digital platforms for promoting social causes (Shirky, 2011).

Moreover, the interplay between societal norms, youth behaviors, and the nature of digital content in Pakistan remains underexplored. While young individuals are increasingly exposed to global discourses on critical issues such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and education, there is limited understanding of how these interactions translate into offline engagement or behavior change (Loader et al., 2014). This gap in knowledge hinders policymakers, educators, and social organizations from leveraging digital media as a tool for fostering social change. Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate how digital media influences the social awareness and engagement of Pakistani youth, considering the unique challenges and opportunities in this context (Fayaz 2024).

Digital media has become an essential part of modern life, significantly influencing how people access information and engage with social issues. Among youth, who are often the most active users of digital platforms, these tools play a crucial role in shaping their perceptions and participation in societal matters (Bennett, 2012). In Pakistan, where over 65% of the population is under the age of 30 and internet penetration is steadily increasing, digital media is emerging as a critical avenue for raising social awareness and mobilizing civic engagement (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

The rise of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok has transformed traditional

forms of engagement, enabling youth to connect with local and global causes in unprecedented ways. Studies suggest that digital media empowers young individuals to engage with topics such as environmental sustainability, gender equality, education, and public health through sharing information, organizing campaigns, and participating in discussions (Loader et al., 2014). This shift from passive consumption to active engagement has significant implications for promoting social change, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, where youth represent a vital demographic for societal transformation. However, the relationship between digital media and youth engagement is complex. While these platforms provide opportunities for awareness and activism, they also pose challenges such as misinformation, echo chambers, and cyber harassment (Shirky, 2011). Additionally, the digital divide—inequitable access to technology—remains a significant barrier for many young people in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas (Khan et al., 2020).

This study aims to explore how digital media influences the social awareness and engagement of youth in Pakistan. By examining their experiences, motivations, and challenges, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of digital media in fostering civic consciousness. The findings will contribute to the growing body of literature on digital activism and offer insights for policymakers, educators, and social organizations looking to harness the potential of digital platforms for social change.

The primary objective of this research is to understand the impact of digital media on social awareness and engagement among Pakistani youth. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Examine the extent to which digital media platforms influence youth perceptions of local and global social issues.
2. Identify the factors that drive or deter youth participation in online and offline civic activities through digital platforms.
3. Explore the role of societal, cultural, and technological barriers in shaping digital engagement patterns among youth in Pakistan.
4. Provide recommendations for leveraging digital media as an effective tool for promoting social awareness and

meaningful engagement among young individuals.

By achieving these objectives, the research seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on digital media's role in social change and inform policymakers, educators, and social organizations on strategies to enhance digital civic engagement. This study seeks to address critical questions about the role of digital media in shaping social awareness and engagement among youth in Pakistan. The central research questions are:

1. How do digital media platforms influence the social awareness of Pakistani youth regarding critical social issues?
2. What motivates or inhibits youth engagement with social causes on digital platforms?
3. How do societal and cultural factors shape the use of digital media for civic participation in Pakistan?
4. What are the challenges and barriers faced by youth in using digital platforms to engage in social causes effectively?

These questions aim to explore both the opportunities and limitations presented by digital media and provide insights into how these platforms can be optimized to enhance civic consciousness and participation among youth.

This paper investigates the role of digital media in shaping the social awareness and engagement of youth in Pakistan. Using a qualitative research approach, the study focuses on understanding how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok expose youth to social issues, influence their perceptions, and motivate them to engage in social causes. By exploring their experiences, this research seeks to uncover the patterns, motivations, and barriers that affect how Pakistani youth utilize digital platforms for civic purposes.

To achieve this, the study will involve semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with youth aged 18–30 from diverse socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds in Pakistan. This approach will allow an in-depth understanding of their interactions with digital content, their participation in online and offline activities, and the challenges they face in engaging with social issues. Thematic analysis will be employed to analyze the data and identify key themes and insights, such as the influence of digital

media on youth perspectives, the role of emotional and societal factors in their engagement, and the barriers posed by misinformation, digital literacy gaps, and cultural constraints.

This research holds significant importance in understanding the evolving role of digital media in fostering social awareness and engagement among youth in Pakistan. As digital platforms increasingly become the primary medium for accessing information and participating in civic discussions, it is crucial to explore their impact on the younger demographic, which constitutes a substantial portion of Pakistan's population. By investigating how digital media influences youth perceptions and actions related to social issues, this study provides insights into leveraging these platforms for positive social change.

The findings of this research are expected to benefit multiple stakeholders. Policymakers can use the insights to design strategies for digital literacy and combat misinformation, ensuring that digital media becomes an effective tool for civic participation. Educators can integrate knowledge about digital engagement into curricula, preparing students for responsible use of digital platforms. Social organizations and activists can utilize the results to develop targeted campaigns that resonate with youth and address pressing social issues effectively. Additionally, this study contributes to the academic discourse by filling a gap in understanding the interplay of digital media, social awareness, and youth engagement in the unique sociocultural and technological context of Pakistan.

Literature Review

The role of digital media in shaping social awareness and engagement has been extensively studied in global contexts, with researchers highlighting its transformative potential for civic participation and social change (Bennett, 2012; Loader et al., 2014). Digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide young people with unprecedented access to information, enabling them to learn about and participate in social causes more effectively than through traditional media. In particular, these platforms foster connections between like-minded individuals and amplify voices that might otherwise go unheard, creating new opportunities

for advocacy and community building (Shirky, 2011).

Digital Media and Social Awareness

Social media has been identified as a critical tool for raising awareness about social issues by offering a platform for dialogue, education, and information dissemination. Studies have shown that young people use digital platforms to learn about topics such as climate change, gender equality, and human rights (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Through multimedia content, hashtags, and viral campaigns, social media engages users emotionally and intellectually, often leading to increased awareness and understanding of complex issues. However, while these platforms excel at capturing attention, critics argue that they often fall short in sustaining deep engagement, as users may only interact superficially with content—a phenomenon referred to as "slacktivism" (Morozov, 2011).

The advent of digital media has transformed the way individuals perceive and engage with social issues, creating new opportunities for raising awareness and fostering public discourse. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become integral tools for sharing information and driving collective action on issues such as climate change, gender equality, education, and human rights (Bennett, 2012). These platforms enable individuals, particularly youth, to access diverse perspectives and connect with global and local communities, significantly enhancing their awareness of social challenges (Loader et al., 2014). Digital media facilitates the dissemination of information at an unprecedented scale and speed, breaking geographical and cultural barriers (Shirky, 2011). Through interactive features such as hashtags, videos, and live discussions, social platforms allow users to actively engage with content and amplify important messages. For example, campaigns like #MeToo and #ClimateAction have demonstrated the power of digital platforms in mobilizing public opinion and sparking global movements (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Research suggests that digital media enhances cognitive engagement by exposing users to diverse viewpoints and encouraging critical thinking about societal issues (Jenkins et al., 2016). In developing countries like Pakistan, digital media plays a crucial role in addressing traditional

barriers to information access. It provides youth with a platform to learn about pressing issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, and education disparities. However, the impact of these platforms on social awareness is not uniform, as it depends on factors such as internet accessibility, digital literacy, and cultural norms (Khan et al., 2020). While digital media has the potential to democratize information and foster inclusivity, it also presents challenges. One significant issue is the prevalence of misinformation, which can distort public perceptions and hinder informed decision-making (Guess et al., 2019). Additionally, the "filter bubble" effect, where algorithms limit users' exposure to diverse viewpoints, can create echo chambers that reinforce existing biases and reduce critical engagement with social issues (Pariser, 2011). In Pakistan, the digital divide remains a major barrier, with rural and economically disadvantaged communities having limited access to digital technologies (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2022). Moreover, cultural norms often restrict the participation of certain groups, such as women and marginalized communities, in digital discourse (Haq & Hafeez, 2021). Addressing these challenges is essential for maximizing the potential of digital media in enhancing social awareness.

Digital media offers unprecedented opportunities for raising social awareness and fostering civic engagement. However, its effectiveness is influenced by various technological, social, and cultural factors. As digital media continues to evolve, further research is needed to explore strategies for overcoming challenges and leveraging these platforms for meaningful social change, particularly in contexts like Pakistan, where traditional barriers to information access persist.

Youth Engagement Through Digital Media

Youth engagement with social issues via digital media is shaped by various factors, including accessibility, motivation, and societal norms. Loader et al. (2014) argue that digital media empowers youth by providing tools for self-expression and collective action, enabling them to participate in civic initiatives that align with their values. In Pakistan, platforms like TikTok and Instagram have become popular avenues for discussing local issues, ranging from

environmental concerns to education reforms. However, challenges such as misinformation, the digital divide, and limited digital literacy often undermine the potential of these platforms for meaningful engagement (Khan et al., 2020).

The advent of digital media has significantly reshaped how youth engage with civic and social issues, providing innovative avenues for participation, self-expression, and activism. Digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook have become essential tools for youth to connect with like-minded individuals, share opinions, and advocate for causes (Loader et al., 2014). These platforms empower young people to transition from passive recipients of information to active contributors in social movements and public discourses. Digital media facilitates youth engagement by offering tools for organizing, amplifying voices, and creating movements that transcend geographical boundaries. Research highlights that online platforms serve as spaces where youth can freely express themselves, build communities, and mobilize support for social causes (Bennett, 2012). For instance, movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #FridaysForFuture have gained global traction largely due to youth-driven digital activism. These platforms not only raise awareness but also encourage participation in both online and offline civic activities (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Moreover, digital media's interactive nature allows youth to engage with content in ways that traditional media cannot. Features such as live streaming, polls, and interactive storytelling enhance youth involvement, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging (Jenkins et al., 2016). This participatory culture encourages young people to become proactive in addressing societal issues, influencing both their immediate communities and broader networks.

Despite its potential, digital media is not without challenges. Misinformation, cyberbullying, and algorithmic biases can discourage youth from engaging with digital platforms meaningfully (Guess et al., 2019). Additionally, the "digital divide" remains a critical barrier, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, where access to reliable internet and digital literacy is unevenly distributed (Khan et al., 2020). These disparities limit the participation of youth from marginalized communities, creating inequities in digital

engagement. Cultural and societal norms also play a role in shaping youth engagement. In Pakistan, for example, conservative values and generational gaps often restrict young individuals' ability to openly discuss or act on social issues through digital platforms (Haq & Hafeez, 2021). Such barriers highlight the need for targeted interventions to ensure that digital media serves as an inclusive space for youth participation (Malik 2024).

To maximize the potential of digital media for youth engagement, stakeholders such as educators, policymakers, and social organizations must address these challenges. Initiatives that promote digital literacy, counter misinformation, and ensure equitable access to digital tools are essential for fostering meaningful engagement (Loader et al., 2014). Additionally, platforms must prioritize inclusivity and safety, creating environments where youth feel empowered to voice their opinions without fear of discrimination or reprisal. By understanding and addressing these dynamics, digital media can become a powerful tool for fostering youth engagement, enabling young people to drive social change and contribute to global discourses on critical issues (Khan 2024).

Barriers to Effective Engagement

While digital media offers significant opportunities for youth engagement, several barriers limit its effectiveness. Misinformation and fake news on social platforms can distort public perception and hinder informed decision-making (Guess et al., 2019). Furthermore, the digital divide—marked by unequal access to the internet and technology—remains a significant issue in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2022). Cultural and societal factors, such as conservative norms and limited acceptance of youth voices in public discourse, further constrain their ability to engage effectively with social causes.

While digital media offers transformative opportunities for youth engagement in social and civic causes, several barriers hinder its effective utilization. These challenges stem from technological, social, cultural, and psychological factors, which limit the potential of digital platforms to foster meaningful participation. One of the most significant barriers to digital engagement is the digital divide, characterized by

unequal access to technology and the internet. In developing countries like Pakistan, disparities in infrastructure and socioeconomic status limit internet access for large segments of the population, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas (Khan et al., 2020). This divide restricts opportunities for marginalized communities to participate in digital dialogues and civic initiatives. Moreover, the issue of digital literacy compounds the problem, as many users lack the skills to critically assess information or engage with digital tools effectively. Without sufficient knowledge of navigating online spaces, youth may struggle to use digital media for meaningful engagement (Haq & Hafeez, 2021).

Misinformation and disinformation are pervasive challenges on digital platforms, undermining users' trust and confidence in online information. Research highlights how the spread of fake news and propaganda not only distorts public perceptions but also reduces youth's willingness to engage with social and political causes online (Guess et al., 2019). The algorithms employed by social media platforms often exacerbate this issue by promoting sensational or polarizing content, leading to echo chambers and filter bubbles that limit exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011). In many societies, including Pakistan, cultural and societal norms pose significant barriers to youth engagement. Gender norms, for example, often limit the participation of young women, who may face societal disapproval or safety concerns when expressing their views online (Haq & Hafeez, 2021). Additionally, generational gaps and conservative values may discourage open dialogue on sensitive topics, restricting the ability of youth to engage with critical social issues.

The psychological toll of engaging with digital media can also be a barrier. Constant exposure to distressing news and online debates can lead to "engagement fatigue," where individuals feel overwhelmed and disengaged (Bright et al., 2015). Furthermore, the fear of cyberbullying, harassment, or trolling deters many youth from voicing their opinions online, especially on controversial or polarizing issues. Structural limitations, such as inadequate policies and the lack of regulatory frameworks, further hinder effective digital engagement. Without robust systems to address issues like data privacy, cyberbullying, and content moderation, digital

spaces may fail to provide a safe and inclusive environment for youth (Loader et al., 2014). Addressing these barriers is crucial for realizing the full potential of digital media as a platform for youth engagement. Efforts must focus on bridging the digital divide, enhancing digital literacy, combating misinformation, and creating inclusive spaces that encourage active participation. Understanding these barriers will help stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and digital platform developers, to design strategies that foster meaningful and equitable engagement among youth.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was selected to explore the nuanced ways in which digital media influences youth's understanding of and engagement with social issues. This approach allows for the examination of subjective experiences, cultural contexts, and complex interactions between digital platforms and social behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study employs a phenomenological framework to focus on participants' experiences with digital media in fostering social awareness and engagement.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study is youth aged 18–40 years in Pakistan, actively using digital media platforms. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who are digitally active and engaged in discussions or initiatives related to social issues. The sample includes individuals from diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds to capture a broad spectrum of experiences. A sample size of 10–15 participants was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, where no new themes emerge from additional data (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured Interviews: Individual interviews were conducted to explore participants' personal experiences and perceptions of digital media's role in shaping their awareness and engagement. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to ensure consistency while allowing

flexibility for probing deeper into specific responses.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs were conducted to capture group dynamics and shared experiences among participants. Each group consisted of 3–6 participants, facilitating discussions on how digital media platforms influence collective engagement with social issues. Interviews and FGDs were conducted online via Zoom and recorded with participants' consent to accommodate geographic diversity and ensure safety during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data collected from interviews and FGDs. This method involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed these steps:

- *Familiarization:* Transcribing interviews and FGDs, followed by repeated reading of the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the content.
- *Coding:* Generating initial codes to label significant segments of text.

- *Theme Development:* Grouping related codes into overarching themes that address the research objectives.
- *Reviewing and Refining:* Refining themes to ensure coherence and alignment with the research questions.
- *Interpretation:* Interpreting the themes in the context of the study to derive meaningful insights.

Qualitative data was organized and analyzed with the use of NVivo software. To guarantee accuracy and data richness, all interview and focus group discussion audio recordings were verbatim transcribed. To ensure confidentiality, transcripts were reviewed for mistakes and anonymised by substituting pseudonyms for participant names. In order to obtain a comprehensive grasp of the participants' responses, the researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading the transcripts numerous times. During this stage, notes were made to document first impressions and recurrent concepts. In order to methodically identify important words and sentences that were pertinent to the study's goals, initial codes were created both manually and with the use of NVivo software.

Theme Identification



Figure 1: Themes identification in Digital Media and Youth Engagement

Theme 1: Digital Media as a Knowledge Gateway (encompassing codes related to information access and exposure to diverse perspectives).

Theme 2: Challenges in Engagement (covering barriers such as misinformation, digital literacy, and cyberbullying).

Theme 3: Collective Action and Community Building (highlighting how youth use digital platforms to mobilize and collaborate).

Themes were reviewed to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Overlapping or redundant themes were merged, while distinct themes were clearly delineated. The refined themes were interpreted in the context of the research questions, existing literature, and the sociocultural setting of Pakistan. The analysis highlighted how digital media fosters social awareness among youth, as well as the systemic barriers that limit effective engagement.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings of the study in light of the research objectives and existing literature, emphasizing the implications of digital media's impact on youth's social awareness and engagement in Pakistan. The findings reveal a nuanced interplay between the opportunities and barriers that digital media presents for fostering youth engagement with social issues.

Digital Media as a Catalyst for Social Awareness

The findings confirm that digital media serves as a powerful tool for enhancing social awareness among youth. Participants highlighted how platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter expose them to global and local issues, ranging from climate change to social justice movements. This aligns with previous studies, such as Bennett (2012), which emphasized digital media's role in transforming passive consumers into active participants in social discourses. In Pakistan, where traditional media often operates under constraints, digital platforms provide a relatively unfiltered avenue for accessing diverse perspectives and voices.

Barriers to Effective Engagement

Despite the benefits, several barriers were identified that hinder effective youth engagement. The prevalence of misinformation, as highlighted in the study, resonates with findings by Guess et al. (2019), who documented the detrimental effects of fake news on civic participation. In Pakistan, where digital literacy remains uneven, misinformation can misguide or discourage youth from engaging meaningfully with social issues. Additionally, cultural and societal norms emerged as significant barriers. Female participants particularly noted challenges in expressing themselves freely online

due to societal scrutiny and safety concerns, reflecting findings by Haq and Hafeez (2021) on gendered constraints in digital participation. Such barriers highlight the intersection of technology with broader social structures, underscoring the need for inclusive digital engagement strategies.

Youth Empowerment and Activism

The study reveals that digital media empowers youth by offering tools for self-expression, storytelling, and activism. Participants reported using social media to organize events, share personal stories, and advocate for causes. This supports Loader et al.'s (2014) assertion that digital platforms enable collective action and community building. However, the study also found that sustained engagement is contingent on creating safer online spaces and addressing the psychological toll of digital activism, such as engagement fatigue and cyberbullying.

Policy and Practical Implications

The findings have significant implications for policymakers, educators, and digital platform designers. Efforts to improve digital literacy, particularly in rural and underserved areas, are critical for bridging the digital divide (Khan et al., 2020). Policies aimed at combating misinformation, enhancing online safety, and promoting gender inclusivity are essential for fostering equitable and meaningful digital engagement. Moreover, social media platforms must prioritize algorithmic transparency and create tools that encourage constructive interactions while mitigating the risks of harassment and polarization.

Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital media and youth engagement by providing a context-specific perspective from Pakistan. While much of the existing research is based on Western contexts, this study sheds light on how cultural, societal, and infrastructural factors shape the relationship between digital media and youth engagement in a developing country.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the qualitative approach allowed for a deep exploration of participants' experiences, the findings may not be generalizable to all youth in

Pakistan. Future research could adopt mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative insights with quantitative surveys to capture broader trends. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how youth engagement evolves over time in response to changes in digital media and societal contexts.

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