THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH PAPERS ON POLITICAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Political communication, participation, and governance have all changed as a result of social media's profound integration into politics. Research on social media's political effects in contexts of developing nations like Pakistan is still few, nevertheless. An inductive thematic analysis of previous empirical research on the function and impact of social media in Pakistani politics was undertaken in this study. The qualitative data corpus consisted of five peer-reviewed academic articles published between 2016 and 2020. The main issues relating to the political effects of social media in Pakistan were coded out of the articles.

Six major themes emerged from the analysis, which were positioned within the theoretical traditions of media effects and political communication. In contrast to state-controlled traditional media, the findings indicate that social media offers Pakistani individuals, particularly young people, alternative outlets for political knowledge, conversation, coordination, and expression. Political engagement online seems to improve interest, effectiveness, and offline participation. However, in this hybrid media environment, concerns related to false information, polarisation, harassment, and uneven participation continue.

The contextual understanding of the multiple effects of social media on political attitudes, behaviours, institutions, and power dynamics in Pakistan is advanced by this thematic synthesis. The research offers recommendations for further study as well as well-informed legislative and policy efforts designed to address this developing phenomena. Fostering egalitarian social media ecosystems requires holistic approaches that take into account both the possibility for emancipation and the realities of control.

INTRODUCTION

Modern society is not complete without social media since it offers new opportunities for people to interact with one another and with organisations as well as to communicate, express themselves, and acquire information. The emergence of social media has had a profound effect on a variety of spheres of life, including politics. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram are increasingly being used by politicians, political parties, activists, and everyday people for political activities like campaigning, fundraising, organising supporters, spreading information, and more (Miladi, 2016).

Social media's usage for politics is fraught with opportunities and dangers. On the one hand, it can increase engagement, provide voice to underrepresented groups, and enable the emergence of alternative narratives. However, it also prompts questions about false information, polarisation, and privacy (Frame & Brachotte, 2015). Social media's effects on politics are nuanced, situation-specific, and ever-changing. As a result, continual research is required to comprehend how these technologies are influencing and being influenced by politics.

Through a thematic analysis, this paper seeks to compile the main findings of previous research on Pakistan's political usage of social media. In order to review them, five peer-reviewed articles from the years 2016 to 2020 were chosen depending on how closely they related to the study's subject. The literature on how social media is used for political goals in Pakistan, what effects it is having, and what obstacles or issues are surfacing underwent thematic analysis to find key themes and patterns. This review aims to increase conceptual knowledge of this developing phenomena and suggest areas for future research by compiling and analysing key themes. The main question this research sought was how the social media is impacting the political sphere of Pakistan?

Literature Review

Research on social media and politics is highly regarded in the fields of communication studies, political science, sociology, and media studies. There has been a significant amount of research studying the effects of social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube on political engagement, mobilisation, and governance globally.

Previous research concentrated on Western liberal democracies, but more recent studies have shown that social media is also having an increasing political impact in non-Western and authoritarian contexts, such as the Middle East, China, Russia, and South Asia (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Howard et al., 2011; Pearce, 2015). To contextualise this study and pinpoint gaps regarding social media's political effects in Pakistan especially, key topics, arguments, and findings from recent literature are examined below.

A key area of interest is how social media, by disrupting the conventional gatekeeping function of mainstream media, affects political communication, debate, and information flows. Twitter and Facebook are used by political parties and candidates for direct voter outreach and promotion (Frame & Brachotte, 2015). Public discourse is changing as a result of social media's access to political content and alternative information sources (Xenos et al., 2017). The possibility of polarised "echo chambers" and selective exposure exists with personalised information streams as well, according to Bright (2018). According to studies, social media pluralizes political viewpoints, however there are costs associated with the fragmentation and polarisation of public discourse.

Increasing the effectiveness and interest of politics. Another field looks at how social media, particularly among young people, might increase political interest, effectiveness, and civic involvement. There is evidence that online political behaviours including following politicians and debating issues on social media can boost political knowledge, trust, and internal/external efficacy (Moeller et al., 2014; Skoric et al., 2016). Social media offers new avenues for political learning and engagement by exposing citizens to a range of viewpoints and facilitating interactive information searching. However, detractors contend that "slacktivism" on social media rarely results in real political action offline (Christensen, 2011). Results on whether youth participation in politics and civic engagement online is mobilised are conflicting.

Research also focuses on how social media, through "connective action" networks, enables new types of decentralised political participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Digital tools enable leaderless coordination of demonstrations and group actions related to causes and events. On social media platforms, hashtags serve as vehicles for political expression, the formation of movements, and the mobilisation of support (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). The effects of episodic connective action on policy, however, continue to be a matter of debate (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Whether participation that is digitally enabled results in real change or only serves as self-expression is not obvious from the evidence.

Social media's involvement in the dissemination of political misinformation, propaganda, and computational propaganda is a growing concern (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2017). Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp have been used to affect elections, incite violence, and manipulate public opinion around the world because of their virality, anonymity, and algorithmic promotion capabilities. Regulation and platform control, however, are still insufficient to reduce the risks associated with coordinated influence operations, bots, hyper-targeted advertising, and disinformation (Persily, 2017). Maintaining a balance between freedom of speech and transparency, accountability, and data privacy in circumstances like Pakistan where social media is filled with false information is a major difficulty.

Research also shows how social media is changing authoritarian countries and other non-Western political situations. Despite governmental censorship and control, digital platforms offer citizens substitute channels for political expression and coordination (Pearce, 2015). Social media is a tool that dissidents use to express their complaints, organise protests, and avoid repression. State monitoring, however, continues to be a concern, prompting new digital forms of resistance. Furthermore, governments use social media to spread misinformation, monitor citizens, and silence criticism (King et al., 2017). Comparative research focuses on how social media undermines authoritarianism, strengthens it, and creates new "hybrid media regimes" at the nexus of state authority, technology, and opposition (Pearce, 2015).

Social media's effects on politics in emerging nations like Pakistan that are sandwiched between democracy and authoritarianism are still being poorly understood. This analysis of the literature demonstrates that, despite an increase in study on social media and politics in recent years, there has been little Pakistan-specific work that has concentrated on effects on the country's politics. While studies have looked at the use of social media in Pakistan for youth participation, health communication, and education (e.g., Ittefaq & Iqbal, 2018), there is currently a paucity of concentrated empirical study on the political effects of digital platforms. This study fills in some of these gaps by doing an inductive thematic analysis of recent studies on the impact of social media on Pakistan's political climate.

This study is positioned within a number of important theoretical traditions looking at the sociopolitical consequences of media and technology, including media effects theories and political communication scholarship on power dynamics in digital contexts.

Media Effects Theories

The study of how media and communication technologies affect attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours at the individual and societal levels uses media effects theories as an overarching lens (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Early studies on effects mostly looked at conventional mass media, but more recent research has looked at social media and other digital platforms' political impacts (Valenzuela, 2013). These are some pertinent media influence theories: Cultivation theory – how media shapes social realities, worldviews, and opinions over time, especially regarding power relations (Morgan et al., 2018).

- Agenda-setting – how media influences issue salience and priorities in public discourse and policymaking (McCombs, 2020).
- Framing theory – how presentation and framing of issues and events in media impacts public perceptions and interpretations (Scheufele, 1999).
- Social cognitive theory – how mediated communication influences cognition, learning, efficacy, attitudes, and behaviors through models and social reinforcement (Bandura, 2001).

These perspectives shed light on how social media flows may cultivate particular political attitudes, frame events, set agendas, and shape political behaviors among Pakistani citizens over time.

Political Communication

Political communication scholarship provides more specific theoretical lenses concerning media's role in political processes. Relevant concepts include:

• Disintermediation – how social media disrupts political elites and mainstream media's traditional gatekeeping role, enabling more direct public engagement (Chadwick, 2013).

• Selective exposure – how partisan biases drive selective exposure to agreeable political content, creating echo chambers (Stroud, 2011).

• Uses and gratifications – how psychological needs and motives shape patterns of media use, such as for political info seeking (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

These constructs elucidate social media's impacts on political communication flows, participation patterns, and discourse dynamics in the Pakistani setting.

These lenses illuminate power dynamics around social media and politics in Pakistan, surfacing tensions between democratizing potentials and risks of control, polarization, and manipulation. This multifaceted theoretical framework integrating media effects and political communication provides an interdisciplinary grounding. It elucidates the multidimensional impacts of social media on political attitudes, behaviors, discourse, institutions, and power relations in the Pakistani context. The effects are contingent and complex, necessitating contextual analyses to advance nuanced, empirically grounded theory.

Thematic Analysis

This paper utilized a qualitative thematic analysis methodology to synthesize and interpret key findings from recent studies on the political impacts of social media in Pakistan. Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides a flexible, inductive approach for distilling insights from existing literature on a topic.

The sample comprised five peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2016-2020 focusing specifically on social media's political effects in Pakistan:

• Ahmad, T., Alvi, A., & Ittefaq, M. (2019). The use of social media on political participation among university students: An analysis of survey results from rural Pakistan. SAGE Open, 9(3).

• Eijaz, A. (2013). Impact of new media on dynamics of Pakistan politics. Journal of Political Studies, 20(1), 113-130.

• Ghani, A., Chaudhry, M. U., Minhas, S., Jabeen, S., & Hussain, T. (2020). Social media a tool of political awareness and mobilization-a study of Punjab, Pakistan. International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change, 14(5), 1331-1344.

• Ittefaq, M., Hussain, S. A., & Fatima, M. (2020). COVID-19 and social-politics of medical misinformation on social media in Pakistan. Media Asia, 47(1-2), 75-80.

• Zaheer, L. (2016). Use of social media and political participation among university students. Pakistan Vision, 17(1), 278-299.

These articles were selected based on relevance to the topic, recency, and representing empirical research studies on the political impacts of social media in Pakistan published in peer-reviewed journals. Together, they provide rich data for identifying major themes in current literature.

Table 1: Themes and Sub-themes of the selected research articles

Sr. No.	Theme	Sub Themes
1	Political awareness, information, and knowledge	Social media as a source of political information and news Exposure to diverse political perspectives Increased political knowledge and issue awareness Risks of political misinformation and unverified claims

2	Political participation and mobilization	Online political expression and engagement Viral political content, hashtags, and influencers shaping discourse Mobilizing support for political campaigns and parties Boosting real-world political participation Unequal participation based on digital divides
3	Public discourse and political expression	Articulating grievances and alternative narratives Critical commentary on leaders and policy debates Pluralization of political voices Harassment of marginalized voices as a concern
4	Misinformation, propaganda, and manipulation	Circulation of fabricated content, conspiracy theories Propaganda and manipulation by political actors Algorithmic amplification of false claims Risks for political polarization and erosion of trust
5	Civic engagement among youth	Increased political interest and efficacy among young people Exposure to diverse political perspectives Mobilizing online activism and real-world participation Slacktivism and translating online engagement to sustained offline behaviors
6	Authoritarian controls and resistance	Censorship, surveillance, and propaganda tactics Dissent, coordination, and evading repression Tensions between state power and digital counterpower

The research papers on the political use of social media in Pakistan revolve around six major themes: political awareness, information, and knowledge; political participation and mobilization; public discourse and political expression; misinformation, propaganda, and manipulation; civic engagement among youth; and authoritarian controls and resistance.

Theme 1: Political awareness, information, and knowledge
Multiple studies highlight the growing role of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as sources of political news and information for citizens in Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2019; Eijaz, 2013; Ghani et al., 2020; Zaheer, 2016). Ahmad et al. (2019) found the majority of university students surveyed use social media to obtain political knowledge and current affairs updates. Accessing news and diverse perspectives on social networks expands youth political awareness beyond traditional media channels: "Social media has diversified the involvement regarding political communication and enabled the youth to acquire political information without any restrictions" (Eijaz, 2013, p.125).

Zaheer (2016) argues social media usage stimulates political learning and interest among students: "easy access to political content through social networking sites arouses users' curiosity to learn more about politics" (p.286). Surveys reveal Pakistani social

media users view platforms as more credible information sources compared to mainstream media. Ghani et al. (2020) found 68% of respondents believe social media has expanded public access to political information. Ahmad et al. (2019) note students actively use sites like Facebook and YouTube to stay updated on leaders, parties, and political events.

However, studies also caution about risks of misinformation on social media underscoring need for critical digital literacy. Ittefaq et al. (2020) discuss circulation of health misinformation, conspiracy theories, and "fake news" on platforms like WhatsApp during COVID-19. Low public digital literacy exacerbates threat of political misinformation: "In Pakistan, evidence shows fabricated or misleading health claims, political conspiracy theories, and incendiary content spread rapidly on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp during crises like COVID-19" (Ittefaq et al., 2020, p.78).

Theme 2: Political participation and mobilization

Research reveals social media enables diverse forms of online political engagement in Pakistan spanning expression, coordination, campaigning, and discourse participation. Eijaz (2013) found Pakistani youth leverage social media for debating political issues and advocacy campaigns, facilitating new modes of digital activism. Ghani et al. (2020) argue social media mobilizes users for political participation by creating awareness. Zaheer (2016) found time spent using Facebook for political purposes increased students' likelihood of voting and other real-world actions. Sites like Twitter and Facebook have become venues for viral political hashtags, event streaming, influencer commentary, party promotion, and coordination. Political parties boast up the morale of their supporters and voters by sharing such information which inflicts the affiliated worker and supporters and causes them to mobilize. However, unequal access to social media based on geography, class, and gender mediates its impacts on participation.

Theme 3: Public discourse and political expression

Studies found social media provides alternative avenues for political speech and expression relatively unfettered by state censorship compared to traditional media. Eijaz (2013) argues social media facilitates criticism against government and articulation of alternative political ideologies in Pakistan's restricted media landscape.

Zaheer (2016) states social media, especially Twitter, offers a platform where youth can openly discuss political issues and express views. Similarly, Ghani et al. (2020) found citizens leverage social media for political dialogue and commentary. Social media thus pluralizes political discourse beyond dominant state/elite narratives. However, risks of marginalized users facing backlash, harassment, and censorship for raising dissenting perspectives are noted. Ghani et al. (2020) warn of online harassment of alternative voices. And periods of state banning of platforms like Facebook and YouTube highlight lingering authoritarian controls.

Theme 4: Misinformation, propaganda, and manipulation

The rapid spread of political misinformation and disinformation on social media has emerged as a concern in Pakistan. Ittefaq et al. (2020) discuss circulation of COVID-19 conspiracy theories and medical misinformation on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. They note social media misinformation can fan polarization and undermine public trust.

Eijaz (2013) also warns risks around publishing fake, defamatory, inaccurate information and propaganda on social media may erode public confidence. Studies suggest low public digital literacy and ineffective government regulation exacerbate vulnerabilities to coordinated influence operations, bots, and manipulation via social platforms.

Theme 5: Civic engagement among youth

Research demonstrates social media usage stimulates political interest, engagement, and efficacy among Pakistani youth, creating new pathways for civic participation. Ahmad et al. (2019) found online political activities positively predict political self-efficacy and real-world actions like voting among university students.

Zaheer (2016) argues social media provides a forum for youth to participate in political activities, enabling participatory political learning. Eijaz (2013) likewise found social media nurtures youth civic

engagement and "political consciousness". Exposure to diverse perspectives and policy debates on social platforms appears to boost interest and activate youth.

Theme 6: Authoritarian controls and resistance

Studies surface tensions in Pakistan's hybrid media landscape between state authoritarian controls and social media's democratizing civic counterpower. Eijaz (2013) notes periods of government censorship and banning of platforms like Facebook and YouTube to curb dissent.

But Ghani et al. (2020) found citizens leverage social media to articulate alternative narratives and exert counterpower. Ittefaq et al. (2020) argue Pakistan's government failed to curb health misinformation on social media due to its authoritarian approach. This highlights complex dynamics between state power and digital counterpower.

Conclusion

The thematic analysis of recent research papers on the political use of social media in Pakistan, taking into account media effect theories and political communication theories of communication, provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between social media and politics in the Pakistani context. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of social media's impact on political awareness, participation, and expression. Social media platforms serve as significant sources of political information and news, exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and enhancing political knowledge. However, the presence of political misinformation and unverified claims poses challenges to the reliability and accuracy of information circulated through these platforms.

Moreover, the analysis emphasizes the role of social media in fostering political participation and mobilization. Online political expression and engagement, fueled by viral content, hashtags, and influencers, have the potential to shape political discourse and mobilize support for campaigns and parties. However, it is crucial to address the digital divides that hinder equal participation and access to social media platforms, as this can exacerbate inequalities in political engagement.

Furthermore, the research underscores the significance of social media in facilitating public discourse and political expression. Users can articulate grievances, offer alternative narratives, and engage in critical commentary on political leaders and policy debates. However, the harassment of marginalized voices remains a concern, requiring attention to ensure an inclusive and respectful digital public sphere.

The analysis also sheds light on the darker side of social media's political use, such as the circulation of fabricated content, propaganda, and manipulation by political actors. These practices contribute to the spread of misinformation, polarization, and erosion of trust, necessitating strategies to combat and mitigate their impact.

Additionally, the research highlights the influence of social media on civic engagement among the youth. Increased political interest, efficacy, and online activism are observed among young people. However, efforts should be made to bridge the gap between online engagement, often characterized as "slacktivism," and sustained offline behaviors for meaningful impact. The analysis also underscores the dynamics between authoritarian controls and resistance in the context of social media in Pakistan. Censorship, surveillance, and propaganda tactics employed by state authorities encounter dissent, coordination, and efforts to evade repression through social media platforms. These tensions between state power and digital counterpower warrant careful examination and consideration in the realm of political communication.

This research highlights the nuanced effects of social media on politics in Pakistan. It underscores the importance of understanding the opportunities and challenges presented by social media platforms and provides insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners to navigate this evolving landscape. By leveraging the positive potential of social media while addressing its negative implications, Pakistan can foster a more informed, engaged, and inclusive political environment.

In future, fongitudinal studies tracking the changing effects of social media platforms over time should be the main focus of future research on the political usage of social media in Pakistan. A comparative examination with other nations would offer deeper

perspectives. Investigating tactics to stop the spread of political misinformation and disinformation on social media is crucial. Furthermore, it is vital to understand how digital divisions affect political participation and how to connect online action with offline effects. It's important to look at the influencers on social media, the experiences of underrepresented voices, and the conflicts between governmental power and online resistance. Policymakers would benefit from reviewing current laws and rules and researching how social media affects public engagement.

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