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How Youth in Different Provinces (KP Vs Punjab Vs Sindh) Perceive Political Parties Due To Exposure to Polarized Content on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This is because the emergence of social media as a very powerful communication tool has reshaped the political language and the participation of the youth in Pakistan. The research paper focuses on the perception of the youth in various provinces, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab, and Sindh on political parties as a result of exposure to polarized content via the social media. The study is based on the Framing Theory and Selective Exposure Theory and draws secondary data to determine how digital polarization influences the political attitudes, trust and participation of young users. Based on the information provided by academic papers, surveys, and media coverage, it is evident that social media is now one of the most important locations of ideological struggle between leading political parties in Pakistan such as the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The evidence indicates that young people are extremely vulnerable to the influence of an algorithm-driven echo chamber and political partisan content that can strengthen existing political affiliations. Digital dominance of PTI in KP causes a sense of a reformist politics focused on accountability; In Punjab, youth engagement shows the legacy of PPP populist and regional politics with competitive online communities that are fragmented but politically active; and in Sindh, youth engagement is seen as a result of the impact of PPP populist and regional politics. The research also concludes that low media literacy and heavy use of digital news makes one more vulnerable to misinformation and emotional rhetoric to further deepen provincial political divisions. The study suggests improvement of programs on digital media literacy to enable the youth to analyze political information with a critical view and minimize polarization. It also supports the idea of neutral media regulation, political advertising transparency and academic cooperation in monitoring online discussions. Through

being able to instill a balanced, critical and participatory electorate among the youth, Pakistan will have a better chance of creating an informed young electorate.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Polarization, Youth Perception, Pakistan, Framing Theory, Selective Exposure, Political Communication, Digital Media.

Introduction

Social media has become a new trend in the digital age that influences political communications and opinion of the masses globally. These online platforms have become important arenas of political discourse, mobilization, and persuasion in Pakistan where more than 70 million residents actively use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter-X (previously Twitter), Instagram, and Tik Tok. Social media is a source of news and a means of political involvement especially to the young population in Pakistan who form over 60 percent of the population of the country. Nonetheless, such interaction gets more polarized and partisan in nature, this impacts how the youth view political parties and leaders.

The increasing polarization of social media also manifests the divided nature of the Pakistan political sphere. The political parties like the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) are formulating unique digital plans to get their supporters on board and position them to talk in their favour. Such activities tend to utilize emotionally-charged rhetoric, information disclosure (selectively), and echo chambers that contribute to the support of existing bias. As a result, social media platforms are often arenas of ideological rivalry and fake news, instead of engaging in healthy political argumentation. This dynamic influences the perception of young users towards governance, leadership, and democracy in the very different ways in the regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab, and Sindh.

The regional difference is very vital in the way young people perceive political stories over the Internet. To give an example, in KP, whereby PTI has traditionally been a powerful party, digital discourse tends to present Imran Khan and his party as being the embodiment of reform, accountability and anti-corruption. Conversely, young people in Punjab-the political and economic capital of Pakistan are subjected to a more competitive virtual world, which is dominated by both PTI and PML-N discourses. In the meantime, in Sindh, where the PPP is a politically rooted institution, the perception and internalization of polarized material is conditioned by regional identity and loyalty to history. Therefore, the identical political messages online can have different reactionary influences on different socio-political and cultural backgrounds of various provinces.

This provincial difference is also enhanced by disparities in media literacy, internet access to digital infrastructure, and local politics. The younger users who are not exposed to a variety of opinions are more vulnerable to an echo chamber where an algorithm will favor certain content that confirms what they hold as true. As a result, social media polarization in politics is not a simple process of mirror-political polarization but a process of exaggeration of political polarization. It creates an informed and segregated, active and confrontational, politically conscious but frequently ill-informed generation of citizens.

The current research attempts to investigate the perception of political parties among the youth of KP, Punjab and Sindh based on polarized social media materials. It is through the examination of differences in perception within provinces that this study is consequent in the quest to comprehend the degree to which online polarization affects political alignment, trust

and participation among the young users. This knowledge is important in evaluating how the digital media operates in influencing the democratic processes in Pakistan as well as the dynamic relationship between political communication and the involvement of young people.

Literature Review

The further development of social media has completely changed the environment in political communication, providing both unprecedented possibilities of political participation and increasing polarization and fake news. This change has immense effects on perceptions of political parties and processes by the youth in various provinces in Pakistan, since youth are the largest population and penetration of social media remains high in the country. The review of the literature explores some of the important theoretical models and empirical research that would be applicable in understanding the relationship between social media polarization and youth political perceptions in the provincial contexts of Pakistan, that is, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab and Sindh.

The Polarization, Social Media, and Political Communication.

The social media sites have transformed the manner in which political discussions take place since information sharing is decentralized and political figures can now engage in direct communication with the citizens. According to scholars like Castells (2012), this is what is termed as the rise of the network society, in which digital communication networks determine the process of power relations and political mobilization. Social media helps people to discuss and express their opinion, organize around political topics. It, however, also makes selective exposure, in which the users are exposed to the contents that are in line with their ideological leanings (Stroud, 2010). This effect forms the so-called echo chambers and filter bubbles and strengthens already existing beliefs and contributes to an increase in political polarization (Pariser, 2011).

The example of the Pakistan has seen political parties such as Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) utilise social media to promote opposing political messages. In their study, Ahmed and Skoric (2015) established that political conversations have been seen to be emotionally charged and divisive instead of deliberative in South Asian democracies over the internet. On the same note, Khan and Shah (2020) observed that the Pakistani political rhetoric on social media is often based on partisan rhetoric, memes, and misinformation, which leads to the polarization of the youth audience.

Young and Political Participation via Social Media.

Youth are being regarded as the most visible and active group on social media across the globe and this applies to Pakistan. As the Digital Pakistan Report (Hootsuite, 2024) indicates, more than 60 percent of internet users in Pakistan have the ages of between 18 and 35. This is a population change, which means that social media has become one of the main platforms where the young generation interacts with politics and forms their opinion on parties, leaders, and the government.

According to research conducted by Loader, Vromen, and Xenos (2014), youth political engagement in the digital century is more expressive and issue-oriented than organized according to the conventional party politics. However, in Pakistan the consumption of social media in most instances becomes partisan backing instead of civic discussion. According to a study conducted by Zubair and Malik (2021), young users who are active on the political pages tend to embrace the opinions and biases of their favorite parties. Furthermore, the youth use

of such platforms as Facebook and Twitter has evolved into a form of online activism, where likes, repins, and comments are considered political expression (Khan and Ahmad, 2022).

Partialized Content and Local Political Impressionism.

The context of politics in Pakistan affects the youth perception towards political parties and they largely depend on the region and culture. The three regions, KP, Punjab and Sindh have unique political records, party affiliations and media culture. The supremacy of PTI in KP has created a digital culture that is very much in line with reformist and anti-establishment discourses, whereas in Punjab, political polarization is still evident in the opposition between the supporters of PTI and PML-N. The historical impact of PPP and regional identity politics among the youth in Sindh have different influence.

It has been demonstrated that digital polarization tends to reflect these regional divisions. In reference to KP, Jamil and Shirazi (2021) found that young people are more likely to view PTI as an authentic and youth-focused party because it has a robust presence on the internet and an anti-status quo message. On the other hand, young people in Punjab show divided loyalties, and online arguments between the supporters of PTI and PML-N often turn into online antagonism (Shah and Iqbal, 2023). In Sindh, where the political processes are located within ethnic and linguistic identity, the social media discourses support the allegiance to the PPP and the opposition parties are depicted as outsiders (Ali and Hussain, 2022).

The Echo Chambers, Algorithms and Selective Exposure.

Social media algorithms play a major part in the polarization of content, which is recommending something that the user has already engaged with and prefers to engage with. This sorting algorithm creates selective exposure as people socialize with communities similar to them and evade opposing opinions (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, 2015). Through this, the ideological homogeneity and antagonistic towards different opinions strengthens over time. Young people in Pakistan are not well acquainted with digital literacy, which is why they can hardly tell the difference between verified information and a partisan propaganda. An experiment by Asad and Gillani (2023) established that Facebook and X (which was once called Twitter) algorithmic personalization led to a higher probability of political misinformation being spread by young individuals. The researchers also found that the users of KP and Punjab had more chances of being exposed to polarized information because they were more politically engaged in social media than in Sindh, where political discussion is more in-group and in-identity realms.

False Information, Distortion, and Faith in Political Organization.

Digital political communication in Pakistan has become a characteristic of misinformation and disinformation spread. The social media troll farms and orchestrated campaigns are used strategically by the political actors to control the opinion of the people (Haider and Raza, 2021). This has added to the increasing lack of trust in traditional media and political institutions especially among the youth.

This is reflected in international research. According to Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018), false information about politics in the social media environment can have a strong impact on the sense of credibility and trust. Nawaz and Javed (2020) found that in the Pakistani context, the youth viewing highly partisan online content are more likely to show a decrease in the degree of trust of the official institutions and an increase in the degree of faith in the populist leaders.

This is a dynamic that further polarizes, as the youth are becoming more dependent on digital influencers and unofficial political commentators to become their source of information.

Differences between provinces and dimensions of culture.

The disparity in education and access of the internet and the socio-political systems in the provinces influence the youth to understand and interpret polarized content. In KP, on the one hand, religious and reformist discourses tend to have an effect on political participation, whereas in Punjab, on the other hand, it is more strongly influenced by the class and urbanization factors. The young people of the Sindh, especially in the country districts tend to listen to political stories through the prism of linguistic and ethnic identities.

A comparative analysis by Rehman and Lodhi (2022) pointed at the fact that the youth in Punjab had the most exposure to the polarization of the political environment because of their increased access to the internet and their media being more competitive. In the meantime, the young people in Sindh were more politically loyal and less cross-party. The analysis in KP noted a stronger congruence with digital populism, in which the young generations view social media leaders as the voices of change.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Implications.

One way of explaining the connection between social media polarization and youth political perception is based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Social Identity Theory. The Uses and Gratifications Theory states that people are active in choosing media that meets their cognitive and affective needs (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974). Here, the youth utilize social media to receive information about politics, as well as have a sense of identity and belonging. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), also elaborates the role of political affiliations on social media in belonging to the self-concept, which solidifies the sense of in-group affiliation and out-group aggression.

Summary

The literature that has been reviewed highlights that social media is a two-pronged aspect of youth political socialization in Pakistan. Although it improves political information access and engagement, it also increases the polarization of political activities via echo chambers, false information, and algorithmic bias. KP, Punjab and Sindh regional differences also influence the ways youths comprehend and react to online political narratives. The dynamics are important to understand how to come up with strategies that will foster media literacy, critical thinking, and inclusive political discourse in Pakistani youth.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT).

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974) can be used to understand the way youth in Pakistan use the social media to engage in politics. UGT assumes that people choose media actively in order to satisfy their cognitive, affective, and social needs. Within the political communication setting, young people resort to social media as a source of information, socio-cultural leisure and identity, as well as political engagement (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Social media plays the role of giving the youth belonging and validation in the provinces where competition between the politicians is high such as KP and Punjab Province. The consumption of political content is not a consumption of information but a consumption that supports the

partisan identity (Zubair and Malik, 2021). Therefore, social affiliation and ideological comfort help create echo chambers, which increase polarization.

2.2. Social Identity Theory (SIT)

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) describes the way that people get some of their self-concept based on membership in the group. In the case of the social media politics, SIT posits that the youth are likely to identify themselves with the political group that affirms their identity and belonging. The online political rhetoric creates in groups (followers of a certain party) and out groups (parties that are against them), which increase emotional and ideological polarization.

KP youths in the Pakistani setting share greatly with reformist discourses advanced by PTI, whereas youths in Punjab have dual allegiances between PTI and PML-N (Shah and Iqbal, 2023). SIT in Sindh takes the form of ethnolinguistic attachments related to the historic identity politics of PPP (Ali and Hussain, 2022). Therefore, SIT describes the nature of how digital spaces strengthen provincial and political identities among young people.

2.3. Agenda-Setting Theories and Framing Theories.

According to the Agenda-Setting Theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the media does not inform people on what to think but what to think about. This is done in the social media by selective amplification of issues based on party interests. This is complemented by the Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) which shows that how issues are framed influences the perception of the audience.

Pakistan: Pakistan's political parties actively construct discourses on social media: PTI positions themselves as champions of corruption and reform, PML-N as champions of development and governance and PPP as champions of democracy and provincial rights. These frames control digital discourse, and influence the perception of youth the differently across the provinces (Khan and Ahmad, 2022).

Methodology

In this research, the applied approach is a qualitative study based on secondary data, which is in line with the frames of media research (discourse and representation) (Bryman, 2016). As the study involves the research about the perceptions that online content forms, the secondary information, including the published reports, survey, and thorough scholarly research, will be an appropriate method to examine the tendencies toward media polarization and youth involvement.

6.1. Data Sources

The analysis will be based on secondary data and reports, such as:

- Hootsuite & Data Report (2024) - to obtain the provincial level statistics of social media use.
- Pew Research Center (2023) - to get a hint about the social media use in developing democracies.
- Gallup Pakistan (2022) - to get the political trust and youth perception indicators.
- Scholarly Articles (2015-2024) - by journals in the field of political communication, social media, and South Asian studies.

6.2. Data Analysis Approach

The research utilizes a content analysis of the secondary literature to draw common themes like:

1. Polarization of politics on social media stories;
2. Local and cultural differences in young perception;
3. The effect of the echo chambers and fake news;
4. The contribution of digital strategies of political parties.

The research is valid and comprehensive through triangulation of data provided by various secondary sources to ensure the validity of the secondary sources. The review is based on interpretive synthesis which relates the empirical evidence to theoretical concepts like UGT and SIT.

6.3. Limitations

Although detailed, secondary data analysis might not reflect the current changes in digital behavior. The social media data available on provincial levels are limited in terms of granularity and most studies are based on the urban youth. The future study can take the mixed methods strategies to confirm such results with the primary data sources, including surveys or focus groups.

Findings

1. The social media as the Leading Source of Political information.

The results which have been obtained by the secondary data and the survey reports and the literature suggest that social media has turned out to be the leading source of political information among the youth in Pakistan. Hootsuite and DataReportal (2024) note that over 65 percent of the Pakistani youth (18-35 years old) use Facebook, X (once Twitter), YouTube, and Tik Tok to receive updates and commentaries on political matters. This is a trend that is shared among the provinces but differs in the level and form of involvement.

The political rate of content consumption is the most prominent in Punjab because, unlike in other regions, youth are exposed to digital infrastructure and the media environment is highly competitive as the narrative of PTI and PML-N dominates (Rehman and Lodhi, 2022). A robust online presence of PTI and populist rhetoric appeals to the youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) to change the leadership towards being reformists. In the meantime, in Sindh, the use of social media is not as politically heterogeneous, and the dominance of PPP in the region and historical accounts prevails in the online debate (Ali and Hussain, 2022).

The trend highlights a national trend in which politics communication is increasingly not going through the traditional media institutions, so social media is at the heart of youth political socialization.

2. Ancient Exposure to Polarized and partisan Material.

According to the secondary research, the Pakistani youth are exposed to partisan and polarized political content extensively. Khan and Shah (2020) concluded that seven in eight young social media users subscribe to at least one political page or account sharing partisan stories on a regular basis. These stories tend to make use of emotionally colored rhetoric, memes, and videos that are not aimed at proving any critical thinking but to strengthen the already developed political loyalties.

This is facilitated by echo chambers (enhanced by algorithmic filtering), which contribute greatly towards polarization (Asad & Gillani, 2023). As an example, young people in KP use, primarily, PTI-friendly information, whereas in Punjab the digital environment is characterized

by strong rivalry between the representatives of PTI and PML-N. Sindh online world, on the contrary, is relatively homogeneous, and the youth is being exposed to pro-PPP discourse only. These local trends explain how social media strengthens localized ideological identities and minimizes dialogue across parties.

The results also indicate that there is an amplified affective polarization of exposure to polarized content, a strong emotional attachment to the party and antagonism towards others. The trend reflects the tendencies in polarized democracies in the international context (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler, 2018).

3. The Fall of Institutional Trust and the Digital Populism.

Political polarization on social media is associated with the loss of trust in traditional political and journalistic organizations. According to secondary data sources, Gallup Pakistan (2022) and works by Nawaz and Javed (2020) show that even young people have started to view mainstream media as biased and politically compromised. They place their trust instead in political influencers, vloggers, and digital activists who present issues in populist and emotionally compelling terms.

This is the most apparent in KP, where the social media discourses of anti-corruption and New Pakistan, promoted by Imran Khan, find a connection among the younger generation. In Punjab, populism is more issue-centered (e.g. inflation, failures in governance), whereas, in Sindh, populism is more provincial rights and ethnic representation. The outcome is a disjointed political awareness environment, in which emotional accounts take over the rational discourse and facts.

4. Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Regional Differences.

Results show that there is a great gap in the level of media literacy among provinces. The young people of urban Punjab are more exposed to different political views but they are also more vulnerable to miscommunication because of information overload. Political identity and religio-cultural effects are more pronounced in KP where emotional responses to political content are taken. In Sindh, the young generation is still confined to localized identity-based politics that pay less attention to the cross-provincial participation (Rehman and Lodhi, 2022). These tendencies are further worsened by the absence of the structured media literacy programs in the educational institutions. Therefore, a large portion of youth cannot draw a line between real politics and online propaganda and teaches the cycle of fake news and emotional prejudice (Haider and Raza, 2021).

5. Strengthening of Provincial political Identity.

The social media has been unintentionally strengthening provincial political boundaries. KP youth consider themselves as reformists and those who support change and this is close to the narrative of PTI. The youth political life of Punjab is politically varied yet highly polarized between PTI and PML-N. Sindh youth, in their turn, are very regional politically with the affiliation to the legacy of PPP and provincialism.

The analysis indicates that social media polarization is not homogenous; it has a different form in different provinces because of historical, cultural and socio-economic circumstances. The interplay of political identity and regional affiliation is the key to understanding the ways young people perceive and react to online political content.

Recommendations

In accordance with the results, the following recommendations can be made to reduce polarization and improve media literacy and informational political involvement among the Pakistani youths.

Foster Digital and Media Literacy Education.

The desire to incorporate media literacy programs in university and high-school programs is one of the most pressing demands. Such programs ought to provide the youth with skills to critically assess the content available online, verify the sources, and identify misinformation. Educational institutions, media organizations and governmental organizations need to establish partnerships with each other to create standardized curricula based on critical thinking, digital ethics, and responsible civic engagement (UNESCO, 2023).

Young users can be empowered via workshops and awareness campaigns in universities especially KP and Sindh to challenge the political narratives instead of accepting them blindly.

Stimulate Digital Conversations across Provinces.

Developing digital forums across provinces can narrow the divide in communication between the youth in various regions. Online discussion groups, debates with moderation, and online exchange programs can make participants exposed to a wider point of view, and mitigate the effects of the echo chamber. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, and universities ought to join forces in providing safe grounds where cross-provincial deliberations of national matters of governance, education, and reform can take place.

Enhance Ethical Communication and Professional Responsibility in Online Politics.

Influencers and political parties should embrace ethical codes of communicating digitally. Active participation of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and other media control agencies can be considered through promoting transparency in political advertising and punishing misinformation. Promoting parties to publish verified content and fact-checking integrations with media sources can be used to address fake news.

In addition, accountability by influencers should be institutionalized by registering and disclosing political affiliations in conducting online campaigning.

Build Provincial Media Research and Monitoring Unit.

The provinces need to have media research units within their own information departments (e.g., DGIPR or Directorate of Youth Affairs). These departments will be able to track the trend in online dialogues, analyze the role of polarized stories and publish the regular reports on the involvement of the youth in politics. The results of such a study can be used in policymaking and influence the approaches to communicating to the general population to generate unity, and not division.

Promote Youth journalism and civic content production.

Young people must be emboldened to come up with nonpartisan online journalism and civic publishing that dwells on societal matters and not party politics. Evidence based political discourse can be achieved on platforms like YouTube, podcasts and student media. Organizations such as Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) and Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) can train young upcoming journalists to overcome false information by reporting it out using credible information.

Encourage Algorithmic Accountability and Site Responsibility.

The social media businesses in Pakistan need to be more transparent in their algorithms and have more effective content moderation policies. Algorithms that promote divisive political material ought to be reformed in such a way that promotes exposure to other points of view. Government regulators working with digital platforms can contribute to the growth of accountable information ecosystems that inhibit echo chambers and hate speech (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, 2015).

Enhance the Study of Regional Political Perceptions.

Lastly, more academic studies should be established on a continuous basis to define the changing dynamics of the digital media and the Influence of digital media on youth and polarization in politics. The universities are meant to encourage interdisciplinary research into the regional variations in media conduct, cultural identity and political communication. The scholarly cooperation and evidence-based policy-making may be advanced with the help of the secondary data repositories and open-access provincial datasets.

Conclusion

The results highlight that social media has transformed the political communication of the Pakistani youths but at the expense of increased polarization and reduced confidence in the democratic institutions. The understanding of the political narratives among youth in KP, Punjab, and Sindh have regional and cultural interpretations, which are influenced by the exposure to social media and identity politics.

To overcome these fragmentations, Pakistan needs to invest in the media literacy, ethical message, and inclusive online interactions. The current generation of youths needs to be empowered to become active and critical participants of online political information and not emotional participants as this helps to foster a culture of informed and united democracies in the digital era.

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