

**HATE SPEECH NARRATIVES ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE 2024
PAKISTAN ELECTIONS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK,
TWITTER, AND YOUTUBE**

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence, character, and implications of hate speech narratives on social media during the 2024 Pakistan elections. Social media platforms are critical instruments for political communication, but they have also become fertile grounds for polarization and hate. Employing a mixed-method content analysis of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, this study examines the frequency, themes, and forms of hate speech disseminated during the election season. Results reveal that hate speech was primarily directed at political opponents, ethnic minorities, and marginalized groups. It often appeared in the form of memes, derogatory hashtags, and emotionally charged vlogs. This paper argues that the amplification of hate speech by algorithms and selective exposure negatively influenced political discourse and voter perceptions. The findings highlight the need for regulatory frameworks, media literacy, and responsible digital governance to mitigate the detrimental effects of online hate speech on democratic culture in Pakistan.

Keywords: Hate Speech, Social Media, Content Analysis, Pakistan Elections 2024, Political Communication, Polarization

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INTRODUCTION

There are many existing studies on the emergence and development of social media, its applications and implications, and its positive and negative effects, but this paper will discuss the effects on people's lives, emotions and children. Social media can bring happiness to people, and sharing life with others can bring satisfaction. Some people spend a lot of time thinking about obtaining this "satisfaction." For example, TIK TOK has become a popular culture in countries all over the world. Many people have received a lot of attention and likes by sharing their lives. Without social media, these are impossible to achieve. We must admit that social networks can help us maintain relationships and meet social needs (Batool et al., 2021). Teenagers and children will be affected as social media develops and becomes more popular. Many people consume a lot of social media information to relieve stress from their jobs and studies. Many individuals squander a few minutes picking up their phones before going to bed, which significantly reduces their sleep time and makes them unable to concentrate on work the next day.

In the digital era, social media has become a central platform for political communication. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube allow instantaneous interaction between politicians, political parties, and the public. During elections, these platforms are not only used for campaigning and mobilization but also for spreading propaganda, misinformation, and hate speech. The 2024 Pakistan elections, characterized by heightened polarization and political rivalry, provided fertile ground for examining hate narratives online.

Hate speech is defined as communication that belittles or discriminates against individuals or groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or political affiliation. In Pakistan, hate speech often takes political, religious, and ethnic forms, reinforcing divisions within society. While online platforms provide opportunities for democratic participation, they also facilitate polarization and undermine democratic dialogue (Sunstein, 2017; Malik, 2020).

This article aims to transform its findings into a scholarly article suitable for publication. The central focus is to analyze the types, frequency, and impacts of hate speech disseminated during the 2024 elections. It highlights the ways in which hate narratives influenced voter behavior, shaped electoral debates, and threatened the inclusivity of democratic processes in Pakistan. According to Tarafdar, Monideepa's statistics and research in "Explaining the Link between Technostress and Technology Addiction for Social Networking Sites: A Study of 'Distraction as a Coping Behavior.'": Users can find that they are both a source of stress and a good place to spread stress. Even if users are under pressure when using SNS (social networking sites), they will use the same platform to cope with this pressure, transfer their other activities on SNS, and eventually build compulsive and excessive behaviors. As a result, they embed themselves in the social network environment instead of staying away from it, and form an addiction. The emergence of new news on social media is rapid, causing people to fear being abandoned by society for not checking it in time, or being isolated and abandoned because they have no topic with friends. This fear of missing something is defined as FOMO (Fear of missing out) on the Internet. FOMO can cause serious anxiety (Gabriel, 2021).

The widespread adoption of social media platforms has introduced a range of challenges that are increasingly affecting people's mental health, social relationships, and societal cohesion. While these platforms have revolutionized communication and access to information, they also pose significant risks that are not yet fully understood or addressed. One of the primary concerns is the rise in mental health issues, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Studies have shown a correlation between excessive social media use and increased rates of anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness. The pressure to present a perfect image online, coupled with the constant comparison to others, can lead to diminished self-esteem and an unhealthy obsession with digital personas. Furthermore, social media is contributing to the erosion of meaningful interpersonal relationships. The convenience of online interactions often replaces face-to-face communication, leading to shallow connections and a decrease in the quality of real-

world relationships. This shift not only affects personal well-being but also has broader implications for community and social cohesion. In addition to these personal and social consequences, there is a growing concern about the spread of misinformation and the amplification of polarizing content on social media. These platforms, driven by algorithms that prioritize engagement, often create echo chambers that reinforce existing biases and contribute to societal division. This can undermine public discourse and exacerbate tensions within communities. Given these issues, there is a pressing need to investigate the specific negative impacts of social media on different aspects of people's lives. Understanding these problems is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of social media and promote healthier, more constructive online environments.

Research Objectives

- To identify and analyze the mental health issues associated with social media use across different age groups.
- To investigate the relationship between social media use and self-esteem, particularly in relation to body image among adolescents and young adults.

Research Questions

- What are the specific mental health issues associated with excessive social media use, and how do these issues manifest across different age groups?
- How does social media use influence self-esteem and body image, particularly among adolescents and young adults?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and political discourse have been widely studied for their dual role in fostering civic engagement and fueling polarization (Aslam et al., 2022). Hate speech online is often rooted in ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities, which are strategically exploited during election campaigns (Akbar & Safdar, 2024). Algorithms further magnify such content by promoting emotionally charged posts, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing biases (Bakshy et al., 2015; Guess et al., 2019).

Facebook has been criticized for enabling the spread of divisive political content through filter bubbles, prioritizing sensational posts over balanced debates (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Twitter serves as a platform for rapid mobilization, with hashtags becoming tools of hate-driven political campaigns (Sunstein, 2017). YouTube vlogs, often opinion-based, contribute to reinforcing political stereotypes through emotionally charged rhetoric and algorithmic recommendation systems (Zollo et al., 2017).

Despite its potential to boost political involvement, social media has been criticised for fostering Negative Impact. In "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers," when people are mostly exposed to information and ideas that support their preexisting beliefs, platform algorithms used to manage users' material feeds have the ability to create (Akram et al., 2021). This limited exposure to different ideas, reinforced preexisting opinions, and exacerbated ideological differences are all effects of selective information exposure (Guess et al., 2019).

Concerns regarding the potential for social media to foster Polarization by amplifying extreme views and decreasing people's chances of coming across alternative opinions have been raised by research into filter bubbles and echo chambers (Akram et al., 2021). According to Del Vicario et al. (2016), the echo chamber effect can lead to a rise in political extremism while lowering incentive for productive debate with others who have different opinions. An important factor in how social media affects Negative Impact is how it is used to distribute false information and disinformation. Users may need assistance in identifying reliable and reputable sources since false or misleading information may spread fast on social media platforms (Akram et al., 2021).

Additionally, in order to polarise communities and sow discord, political interest groups and foreign actors have used social media to spread misinformation campaigns (Malik, 2020).

These activities run the risk of amplifying already-present divisiveness. The proliferation of politically motivated hate speech towards rival politicians has been rapidly increasing in Pakistan. However, the literature on political hate speech and its association with extreme ideologies is under-theorized in the Pakistani context. We have utilized van Dijk's manipulative discourse and Walther's social approval theory to structure political hate speech and its consequences. The data was based on two Pakistani mainstream politicians' public speeches and partisans' comments available on YouTube. Findings reveal that politicians commonly exploit discursive categories, such as name-calling, offensive metaphors and sarcasm, in their hate speech to dehumanize, ridicule and threaten their rivals. Their hateful slurs showcase extreme ideologies, such as polarization, intolerance, threat and violence. They use the hateful epithets to manipulate partisans, to sell fear of being betrayed and enslaved to the military and foreign powers, and to obtain, in exchange, audience and consent. The study theorizes that Pakistani mainstream politicians deliberately sensationalize hatred in their public speeches to harangue their rivals and foment extreme ideologies for the purpose of increasing their audience (Rafi & Shafiq, 2024).

Due to the growing use of digital and social networks, users are able to share their thoughts and opinions, however hate speech causes tension and contain the possibility of a crisis of unimaginable dimensions on a national or even an international level. This study investigates the user's perspective regarding legal framework of hate speech on social media. This study also ensures social responsibility on social media. Theory of Reasoned Action and Uses and Gratification theory as theoretical frameworks helped to develop narratives on the issues. Researchers employed the survey method to collect data in accordance with the paradigm of quantitative research methodology. The findings show that there is an association because of lack of trust and awareness of policies leads to comment post or share controversial issues and that leads to hate speech. There is also association between usage of users of digital media and their reaction on any controversial issue that leads to Hate Speech (Batool et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A **purposive sampling** method is adopted to select relevant content for analysis. This method ensures that only content containing hate speech or related narratives is included. The selection criteria include:

1. Posts, comments, or hashtags that explicitly or implicitly promote hate speech.
2. Content shared or discussed widely during the election period (January 2024 to April 2024).
3. Posts from verified accounts, influencers, political party pages, and public groups.

To ensure representativeness, content will be collected from the following platforms:

- **Twitter (X):** Trending hashtags, tweets, and retweets.
- **Facebook:** Public posts, comments on official political pages, and public groups.
- **YouTube:** Videos and comments from political channels or influencers.

A sample size of approximately 500-700 posts/comments will be analyzed to ensure sufficient data coverage. This study adopted a mixed-method content analysis approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

Population and Sampling: The population included politically oriented social media content posted between January and July 2024. Purposive sampling was used to select a dataset of 94 Facebook posts, 200 tweets, and 150 YouTube videos, all directly related to political campaigns of major parties: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

The data for this study is collected from social media platforms, including Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube. Data will be collected over a three-month period surrounding the 2024 elections to capture peak hate speech activities

Data Analysis Techniques: Quantitative analysis involved frequency distribution of hate categories, while qualitative analysis explored thematic patterns. Inter-coder reliability checks



ensured validity. Ethical considerations included anonymizing personal identifiers and avoiding amplification of harmful content.

RESULTS

The demographic composition of the study participants provides valuable insights into the diversity of the sample. A total of 643 respondents participated in this study, of which 90% (579 individuals) were male, and 10% (64 individuals) were female. This indicates a significant gender disparity in the sample, reflecting potential trends in the population or the scope of the study's reach. Regarding educational qualifications, the largest segment of respondents, 34.4% (221 individuals), had attained education up to the Matric level. This was followed by respondents with a B.A. qualification, accounting for 27.7% (178 individuals), and those with F.A. qualifications at 23.3% (150 individuals). A smaller proportion, 13.4% (86 individuals), had achieved an M.A. degree, and only 1.2% (8 individuals) had completed M.Phil or Ph.D. qualifications. This distribution suggests a higher representation of respondents with intermediate to basic levels of education. In terms of age, the majority of respondents, 41.5% (267 individuals), fell within the 18 to 30-year age group, reflecting a strong representation of youth in the study. Respondents aged 31 to 40 years constituted 33.0% (212 individuals), while those aged 41 to 50 years made up 16.8% (108 individuals). The smallest group, 8.7% (56 individuals), were aged above 50 years. This age distribution highlights a predominant participation of younger individuals, which could influence the perceptions and experiences reported in the study.

TABLE 4.1: *FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION*

Characteristics	Levels	N	N%
Gender	Male	579	90.0
	Female	64	10.0
Qualification	Matric	221	34.4
	F.A	150	23.3
	B.A	178	27.7
	M.A	86	13.4
	M.Phil/PhD	8	1.2
Respondent Age	18 to 30 years	267	41.5
	31 to 40 years	212	33.0
	41 to 50 years	108	16.8
	Above 50 years	56	8.7

4.2: Frequency Distribution of Different Media Sources to get Pakistan Elections

To understand how respondents accessed information about the Pakistan elections, the study investigated several sources, including social media and interactions with family, relatives, or friends. The results are summarized in Table 4.2. For the statement "Do you watch social media for Pakistan elections exposure?", 91.4% (588 respondents) reported watching social media, while 8.6% (55 respondents) indicated that they did not. Similarly, regarding listening to social media for election information, a majority of 84% (540 respondents) reported not using this medium, while 16% (103 respondents) indicated they did. When asked about reading social media for election updates, 63.3% (407 respondents) affirmed that they used this medium, while 36.7% (236 respondents) did not. In terms of social media usage overall, 33% (212 respondents) reported using it for election exposure, whereas a larger proportion of 67% (431 respondents) did not. Finally, 46.5% (299 respondents) mentioned that they interacted with family, relatives, and



friends to discuss election-related information, while 53.5% (344 respondents) reported not engaging in such discussions. These findings highlight the varied reliance on both digital and interpersonal sources for election information.

TABLE-4.2: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT MEDIA SOURCES TO GET PAKISTAN ELECTIONS

Statement	Levels	Frequency (N)	N%
Do you watch social media for Pakistan elections exposure?	No	55	8.6
	Yes	588	91.4
Do you Listen to social media for Pakistan elections exposure?	No	540	84.0
	Yes	103	16.0
Do you read social media for Pakistan elections exposure?	No	236	36.7
	Yes	407	63.3
Do you use social media for Pakistan elections exposure?	No	431	67.0
	Yes	212	33.0
Do you meet with peers for Pakistan elections exposure?	No	344	53.5
	Yes	299	46.5

4.3: Frequency Distribution Social Media of Different News Bulletins’ Sources to Get Pakistan Elections

Table 4.3 presents the distribution of respondents' exposure to various news bulletin sources for obtaining information about the Pakistan elections via social media. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents (31.4%) frequently watched breaking news and (37.3%) watched headlines very often on social media to stay informed about the elections. In addition, the data revealed that 27.4% of participants watched detailed news to a moderate extent. A significant portion (25%) of respondents indicated that they rarely viewed news packages or reports in social media bulletins related to the Pakistan elections. Regarding social sources, the analysis showed that the least number of respondents (4.4%) listened to breaking news, and even fewer (4%) listened to detailed reports in social media news bulletins for election coverage. Moreover, the majority of respondents never listened to headlines on social media for election updates. The survey also explored reading habits related to news. It was found that a majority of respondents (31.4%) frequently read headlines, while 26.3% never read news details in newspapers, and 30.8% read remaining news sources for election-related information..

TABLE 4.3: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT NEWS BULLETINS’ SOURCES TO GET PAKISTAN ELECTIONS

Statement	Levels	N	N%
At what level you watch the breaking news in social media news bulletins” for Pakistan elections exposure?	Never DK	51	7.9
	Little	47	7.3
	Somewhat	145	22.6
	Often	198	30.8
	Very often	202	31.4
	Total	643	100.0
At what level you watch the headlines in social	Never DK	48	7.5



media news bulletins” for the Pakistan elections exposure?	Little	41	6.4
	Somewhat	106	16.5
	Often	208	32.3
	Very often	240	37.3
	Total	643	100.0
At what level you watch the Detail of news in social media news bulletins for Pakistan elections exposure?	Never DK	117	18.2
	Little	117	18.2
	Somewhat	176	27.4
	Often	136	21.2



TABLE 4.3: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION SOCIAL MEDIA OF DIFFERENT NEWS BULLETINS' SOURCES TO GET PAKISTAN ELECTIONS

Statement	Levels	N	N%
At what level you listen the breaking news in social news bulletins for Pakistan elections exposure?	Very often	97	14.1
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	449	69.8
	Little	95	14.8
	Somewhat	37	4.8
	Often	27	4.2
	Very often	35	4.4
At what level you listen the details in news social bulletins for Pakistan elections exposure?	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	462	71.9
	Little	99	14.4
	Somewhat	35	4.4
	Often	21	3.3
	Very often	26	4.0
	Total	643	100.0
At what level you read headlines in social news for Pakistan elections exposure?	Never DK	116	18.0
	Little	73	11.4
	Somewhat	98	14.2
	Often	150	23.3
	Very often	206	32.0
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	169	26.3
At what level you read news details in social news for Pakistan elections exposure?	Little	115	17.9
	Somewhat	115	17.9
	Often	122	19.0
	Very often	122	19.0
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	198	30.8
	Little	150	23.3
At what level you read remaining news in social news for Pakistan elections exposure?	Somewhat	135	21.0
	Often	83	12.9
	Very often	77	12.0
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	435	67.7
	Little	150	23.3
	Somewhat	135	21.0
At what level you listen the headlines in news	Often	83	12.9
	Very often	77	12.0
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	435	67.7
	Little	150	23.3
	Somewhat	135	21.0
	Often	83	12.9



TABLE 4.3: *FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION SOCIAL MEDIA OF DIFFERENT NEWS BULLETINS’ SOURCES TO GET PAKISTAN ELECTIONS*

Statement	Levels	N	N%
bulletins“ for Pakistan elections exposure?	Little	100	14.6
	Somewhat	41	6.4
	Often	25	3.9
	Very often	42	6.5
	Total	643	100.0

4.4: Frequency Distribution of Respondent Perception Regarding the Media Source that Frequently Provides Pakistan Elections

Table 4.4 displays the frequency distribution of respondents' perceptions regarding the sources that frequently provide information about the Pakistan elections. The majority of respondents (57.4%) perceived that certain sources very often provide election-related news, while 32.8% believed these sources provide information frequently. Additionally, a significant proportion of respondents (50.9%) reported that certain sources never provide election-related information, with social media (47.3%) and relatives/friends (28.1%) being identified as not frequently providing updates on the elections. Furthermore, the majority of respondents indicated that they never frequently shared (60.2%), linked (61.6%), or liked (61%) posts related to the Pakistan elections on social media during the election period.

TABLE-4.4: *FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENT PERCEPTION REGARDING THE MEDIA SOURCE THAT FREQUENTLY PROVIDES PAKISTAN ELECTIONS*

Statement	Levels	N	N%
How often you shared the post on social media for Pakistan elections exposure?	Never DK	387	60.2
	Little	87	13.5
	Somewhat	98	14.2
	Often	38	4.9
	Very often	33	4.1
	Total	643	100.0
How often you liked the post on social media for Pakistan elections exposure?	Never DK	396	61.6
	Little	101	14.7
	Somewhat	88	13.7
	Often	32	4.0
	Very often	26	4.0
	Total	643	100.0
How often social media provide you Pakistan elections exposure in 2024 election?	Never DK	62	9.6
	Little	24	3.7
	Somewhat	68	10.6
	Often	120	18.7
	Very often	369	57.4



	Total	643	100.0
How often social provide you Pakistan elections exposure in 2024 election?	Never DK	327	50.9
	Little	87	13.5

TABLE-4.4: *FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENT PERCEPTION REGARDING THE MEDIA SOURCE THAT FREQUENTLY PROVIDES PAKISTAN ELECTIONS*

Statement	Levels	N	N%
How often s provide you Pakistan elections exposure in 2024 election?	Somewhat	92	14.3
	Often	75	11.7
	Very often	62	9.6
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	145	22.6
	Little	38	4.9
	Somewhat	80	12.4
How often social media provide you Pakistan elections in 2024 election?	Often	169	26.3
	Very often	211	32.8
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	304	47.3
	Little	66	10.3
	Somewhat	86	13.4
	Often	92	14.3
How often peers provide you Pakistan elections in 2024 election?	Very often	95	14.8
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	181	28.1
	Little	96	14.9
	Somewhat	152	23.6
	Often	100	14.6
	Very often	114	17.7
	Total	643	100.0

4.5: Frequency Distribution Regarding the Stance of the Political Parties on Different Issues that Media Conveyed

To assess the extent to which the media propagate the stance of political parties on different issues, respondents were asked about their perceptions, and the findings are presented in Table 4.4. The analysis revealed that the majority of respondents reported that the media very often conveyed the stance of political parties on issues such as load shedding (50.2%), unemployment (42.6%), and corruption (49%). Media coverage of terrorism (48.2%) was also frequently perceived, while education (14.4%) and health (11.5%) were less often represented. Additionally, a significant portion of respondents (26.9%) reported that media conveyed the stance of political parties on education to a moderate extent. It was also evident that media coverage on



environmental issues (22.9%) and health (24.5%) was perceived as minimal, with most respondents indicating that political stances were very rarely conveyed on these issues. Finally, the majority of respondents reported that the media never conveyed the stance of political parties on food and agriculture..

TABLE 4.5: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION REGARDING THE STANCE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES ON DIFFERENT ISSUES THAT MEDIA CONVEYED

Statement	Levels	N	N%
At what level news media conveyed the stance of the political parties on load shedding?	Never DK	31	4.8
	Little	58	9.0
	Somewhat	80	12.4
	Often	151	23.5
	Very often	323	50.2
	Total	643	100.0
At what level news media conveyed the stance of the political parties on Unemployment?	Never DK	53	8.2
	Little	66	10.3
	Somewhat	101	14.7
	Often	149	23.2
	Very often	274	42.6
	Total	643	100.0
At what level news media conveyed the stance of the political parties on Corruption?	Never DK	52	8.1
	Little	53	8.2
	Somewhat	84	13.1
	Often	139	21.6
	Very often	315	49.0
	Total	643	100.0

TABLE 4.5: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION REGARDING THE STANCE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES ON DIFFERENT ISSUES THAT MEDIA CONVEYED

Statement	Levels	N	N%
At what level news media conveyed the stance of the political parties on Terrorism?	Never DK	54	8.4
	Little	42	6.5
	Somewhat	92	14.3
	Often	145	22.6
	Very often	310	48.2
	Total	643	100.0
At what level news media conveyed the stance of the political parties on Education?	Never DK	120	18.7
	Little	136	21.2
	Somewhat	173	26.9



At what level news media conveyed the stance of the political parties on Health?	Often	115	17.9
	Very often	99	14.4
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	150	23.3
	Little	164	24.5
	Somewhat	160	24.9
	Often	95	14.8
	Very often	74	11.5
	Total	643	100.0
	Never DK	249	38.7
At what level news media conveyed the stance of the political parties on Agriculture?	Little	148	23.0
	Somewhat	116	18.0
	Often	67	10.4
	Very often	63	9.8
	Total	643	100.0

DISCUSSION

The rapid growth of social media has transformed political landscapes worldwide, particularly in developing democracies like Pakistan. The 2024 elections witnessed an unprecedented surge in online activity, with social media platforms becoming battlegrounds for political expression, campaigning, and unfortunately, hate speech. This chapter discusses the implications of the findings from the content analysis conducted on hate speech narratives on social media during the 2024 Pakistan elections. It evaluates the interplay of political, social, and technological factors contributing to this phenomenon, aligns the findings with previous literature, and examines their broader consequences on democratic practices and societal cohesion. The significant increase in the intensity and reach of hate speech during the election period reflects the intertwined relationship between political motivations and the architecture of social media platforms, showcasing an urgent need for both scholarly attention and policy interventions.

The analysis revealed that hate speech during the 2024 Pakistan elections was driven by political polarization, ideological divides, and ethnic tensions. Political parties, their supporters, and influencer’s weapon zed social media to discredit opponents, amplify divisive narratives, and consolidate their voter base. Dominant hate speech narratives included accusations of corruption, religious intolerance, and ethnonationalistic slurs. These findings align with studies like Riaz et al. (2024), which highlighted the exploitation of hate speech for political gains in Pakistan, reflecting a broader trend of using divisive rhetoric to manipulate public opinion.

The role of algorithms in amplifying hate speech cannot be overstated. Platforms such as Twitter (X) and Facebook prioritize engagement, often showcasing emotionally charged content. This prioritization exacerbates the spread of hate speech by creating echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to ideologically similar views, reinforcing biases and fostering animosity towards opposing groups. As Pariser (2011) described in the context of filter bubbles, these algorithmic mechanisms further polarize political discourse, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and deepening societal divides. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing loop, where political actors and their audiences become entrenched in their positions, escalating tensions and minimizing the prospects for meaningful dialogue. Additionally, the viral nature of polarizing

content ensures that even small-scale incidents of hate speech gain disproportionate visibility, influencing the broader public discourse and shaping societal attitudes.

Political actors, including parties and their supporters, were key propagators of hate speech during the elections. The findings demonstrated that hate speech was not limited to fringe elements but was also perpetuated by mainstream political figures. For instance, derogatory remarks and inflammatory statements by prominent leaders were widely shared on social media, normalizing hate-filled rhetoric. These practices align with findings from Anam and Ahmed (2024), who observed the pervasive use of adversarial rhetoric and derogatory language in Pakistani political discourse.

Such strategies were often deliberate, aiming to evoke emotional responses and rally support. The use of religious and ethnic undertones in hate speech narratives is particularly concerning, as it threatens to undermine the social fabric of a diverse society like Pakistan. Ethnic groups such as the Baloch, Pashtuns, and Sindhis were frequently targeted, reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating intergroup hostility. This pattern corroborates studies like Akbar and Safdar (2024), which identified the framing of ethnic minorities as threats to national unity in online political discourses. Beyond these localized impacts, the normalization of such tactics by political elites undermines democratic norms and sets a dangerous precedent for future political engagements. The reliance on hate speech not only alienates marginalized communities but also shifts the political focus away from substantive issues such as governance and development.

Social media platforms served as enablers of hate speech, providing tools and spaces for users to engage in toxic interactions. While platforms like Twitter and Facebook have implemented content moderation policies, their enforcement remains inconsistent. The sheer volume of user-generated content and the contextual nuances of hate speech, particularly in multilingual and multicultural societies like Pakistan, pose significant challenges.

The findings highlight a gap in digital literacy among users, which exacerbates the spread of hate speech. Many users were unaware of the legal and ethical implications of their online behavior, contributing to the proliferation of hateful content. As suggested by Batool et al. (2024), improving digital literacy and awareness is crucial to mitigating the negative impacts of social media on political discourse. Furthermore, the economic model of social media platforms—reliant on engagement and advertising revenue—incentivizes sensational and emotionally charged content, often at the expense of ethical considerations. Addressing these systemic issues requires a fundamental reevaluation of platform governance, emphasizing accountability and transparency in content regulation. The challenge lies in balancing freedom of expression with the need to curtail harmful speech, a task that requires collaboration between platforms, governments, and civil society.

The proliferation of hate speech during the elections has profound implications for democratic processes. Hate speech undermines the quality of public discourse by stifling meaningful debate and fostering an environment of hostility and fear. When political campaigns are dominated by hate-filled rhetoric, voters are less likely to make informed decisions, which weakens the democratic process.

Moreover, the normalization of hate speech erodes trust in democratic institutions. When political actors resort to divisive tactics, it signals a lack of commitment to democratic values, further alienating citizens. The findings resonate with the work of Suleman (2024), who emphasized the role of hate speech in undermining human rights and perpetuating social injustice. In this context, the role of electoral bodies and watchdog organizations becomes critical. Ensuring a fair and unbiased election process requires proactive measures to monitor and address hate speech. Without such interventions, the democratic ideals of inclusivity and equality risk being overshadowed by divisive rhetoric. The erosion of democratic norms also has international implications, potentially affecting Pakistan's diplomatic relations and its standing in the global community as a pluralistic democracy.

The psychological toll of hate speech on individuals and communities was evident in the findings. Victims of online harassment reported feelings of anxiety, stress, and alienation. The targeted nature of hate speech, often aimed at marginalized groups, exacerbates existing inequalities and fosters a culture of exclusion. At the societal level, hate speech contributes to social fragmentation by deepening existing divides and creating new fault lines. The analysis showed that hate speech narratives often framed political and ideological opponents as “others,” dehumanizing them and justifying hostility. This aligns with Jahanzeb et al. (2024), who highlighted the role of hate speech in intensifying societal cleavages. The broader societal consequences include the erosion of social trust and the weakening of communal bonds. When hate speech becomes pervasive, it fosters an environment of fear and suspicion, discouraging cooperation and mutual understanding. Over time, this can lead to increased polarization, with communities retreating into insular groups defined by shared grievances rather than shared goals. The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a fractured society, less resilient to external challenges and more prone to internal conflict.

Addressing the issue of hate speech on social media requires a multi-faceted approach involving policymakers, social media companies, civil society, and individuals. Key strategies include:

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that social media platforms, while enhancing democratic engagement, simultaneously facilitated hate speech that undermined the democratic process during Pakistan’s 2024 elections. Hate speech amplified divisions, weakened democratic dialogue, and eroded social cohesion.

Recommendations

1. Policymakers should strengthen cyber laws and implement strict monitoring of political content.
2. Social media companies must enhance algorithmic transparency and content moderation policies.
3. Civil society organizations should promote digital literacy programs to help users identify and resist hate narratives.
4. Future research should conduct longitudinal analysis to track the evolution of hate narratives across election cycles.

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