



DIGITAL MEDIA, DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT, AND CULTURAL CONTEXT:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA’S INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

¹Faryal Saleem

²Imran Naseem

³Raheela Shaheen

⁴Kamil Hussain

^{*5}Ejaz Ahmad

⁶Bilal Khan

¹Department of Pakistan Studies and International Relations, Abbottabad University of Science and Technology, Abbottabad, 22620, Pakistan.

²Department of Pakistan Studies and International Relations, Abbottabad University of Science and Technology, Abbottabad, 22620, Pakistan.

³Department of Public Policy and Administration, Hazara University, Mansehra, Pakistan.

⁴Department of Management Sciences, University of Wah, Wah Cantt, Pakistan.

^{*5}Department of Economics, The University of Haripur, Haripur Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 22620, Pakistan.

⁶Department of History and Pakistan Studies, Government Degree College Sherwan, Abbottabad, Pakistan.

faryalsaleem33@gmail.com, dr.imrannaseem@gmail.com, mehtabkhan7346@gmail.com,
kamil.hussain@uow.edu.pk, ahmad@uoh.edu.pk bkhan212003@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in shaping political engagement in Pakistan and India; focusing on how digital platforms influence political awareness, trust in political content, and active participation in civic and electoral processes. Grounded in the frameworks of electoral integrity and political culture, the study investigates the relationships between social media usage patterns, political awareness through social media, trust in political content, and political engagement, while also considering the mediating effect of public perception of politicians and the moderating influence of cultural context. A quantitative research design was employed with a purposive sample of 500 participants, including graduate and postgraduate students, faculty members, and administrative personnel from multiple universities in Pakistan and India. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics, regression analysis, correlation, factor analysis, and mediation and moderation analyses. Findings reveal that social media usage, political awareness, trust in political content, and its influence on voting behavior significantly predict political engagement. Public perception of politicians mediates the impact of social media on participation, and cultural context moderates these effects, with Indian participants showing comparatively higher responsiveness to social media-driven political mobilization. The study concludes that social media is a pivotal tool for political mobilization, but its influence depends on users’ trust, awareness, and sociocultural environment. Enhancing media literacy, ensuring transparency in online political content, and developing context-sensitive engagement strategies are essential for fostering informed and active political participation. These insights provide valuable guidance for policymakers, civil society, and digital platforms aiming to strengthen democratic engagement in the digital era.

Keywords: Social Media Influence; Political Participation; Digital Democracy; Cultural Context; Voting Behavior; Public Trust; Pakistan; India.

Article Details:

Received on 0 Nov, 2025

Accepted on 05 Dec, 2025

Published on 06 Dec 2025

Corresponding Authors*

Ejaz Ahmad

1. Introduction

Social media has reshaped political communication and public perception worldwide, becoming especially influential in democratic societies. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram now serve as key spaces for sharing, debating, and contesting political ideas, policies, and agendas (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2019). These platforms enable direct interaction between politicians and citizens, bypassing traditional media and fostering transparency, accountability, and real-time access to political information (Kruikemeier, 2016). This shift has contributed to heightened political awareness and activism, as social media has become integral to mobilizing support, organizing protests, and influencing voter behavior (Boulianne, 2015). Social media's transformative power lies in its ability to connect global audiences and provide inclusive forums for political debate (Graham & Aiden, 2015). Politicians and advocacy groups increasingly rely on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to disseminate messages, mobilize supporters, and strengthen political campaigns (Hindman, 2009). These platforms also empower citizens by offering avenues for expressing opinions, engaging in dialogue, and supporting political causes (Enli, 2016). Through targeted advertising and data analytics, political actors strategically shape public perceptions and, in some cases, influence electoral outcomes (Bennett & David, 2014). However, these benefits coexist with concerns about misinformation, manipulation, and the spread of hate speech (Saaida, 2022). Political engagement is central to democratic functioning, encompassing activities such as voting, activism, and policy discussions, all of which reflect citizens' agency in shaping governance (Yadav, 2022). Social media has amplified engagement—especially among youth—by offering accessible platforms for discourse, participation, and advocacy. It also elevates marginalized voices, fostering inclusivity within democratic processes (Iqbal & Rajan, 2020).

In Pakistan, despite ongoing socio-economic, political, and security challenges, media has become increasingly open, assertive, and critical of governance failures (Khan, 2024). It now operates as a major mechanism for scrutinizing government performance and shaping public discourse (Anwar & Jan, 2023). Similarly, in India, social media plays a vital role in enhancing political participation and community involvement (Jan, 2024). Yet, the same platforms contribute to rising political polarization by creating echo chambers and facilitating the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Saboor & Sikander, 2022; Hawkins, 2024). Effective political engagement is essential for accountability, better governance, and improved policy outcomes. While healthy participation strengthens economic development and social norms, unhealthy patterns can foster corruption and weaken institutions (Zaheer, 2021). Inclusive participation, particularly among youth, is crucial for stable and responsive democracies (Sianturi, 2024). In India, where over 65% of the population is under 35, youth engagement is vital but hindered by barriers such as dynastic politics; educational reforms and grassroots initiatives are therefore necessary (Sinha, 2022). In Pakistan, political instability and limited civic awareness constrain participation, making civic education and inclusive policies essential for strengthening democratic governance (Raheela, Bilal, & Azam, 2021).

Across South Asia, social media use has surged due to increased smartphone access, affordable internet, and a highly active youth population (Khan & Chaudhry, 2021). In both India and Pakistan, social media drives political campaigning, governance discussions, and debates on development and social justice. Yet, these platforms are also used to propagate misinformation and political bias. Social media engagement in the region is characterized by high activity levels, diverse platform preferences, and strong emphasis on video content, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and local alternatives dominating usage (Hedges, 2023). In 2022, India had approximately 470.1 million active social media users (33.4% of its

digital population), marking a 4.2% annual growth. Pakistan had 72.9 million active users (31.5% of its digital population), with a growth rate of 4.3%. In India, social media has significantly broadened political participation by facilitating direct communication between political leaders and citizens, as seen through initiatives such as BJP's digital campaigns, MyGov India, and digital town halls (Jan, 2024). Cultural values deeply shape how social media is used and interpreted in South Asian political contexts. Family norms, religious identities, and traditional values often determine which political messages resonate, how ideologies are framed, and how political actors communicate online (Sharma & Aziz, 2022). These cultural dynamics influence political engagement and determine the traction of various digital movements (Singh & Ahmed, 2021).

Public perception and trust in political actors further mediate the relationship between social media and political engagement. In contexts where institutional trust fluctuates, politicians' credibility online significantly affects their ability to mobilize support or retain public confidence (Verma & Sayeed, 2023). Politicians perceived as transparent and responsive tend to engage citizens more effectively, whereas perceptions of corruption or insincerity often weaken digital political participation. This study investigates how social media usage patterns, political awareness developed through social media, trust in political content, and the influence of social media on voting behavior collectively shape political engagement. It asks how these factors interact and how cultural context conditions the relationship between social media use and political involvement. Social media has become a central platform through which youth articulate opinions on national and global issues, shaping public discourse and transforming modes of political expression. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter increasingly influence public opinion, allowing individuals especially young Pakistanis to disseminate political ideas, broaden political awareness, and mobilize support (Muzaffar et al., 2019). Ordinary citizens, students, leaders, and political parties now rely on these platforms to communicate, engage, and persuade. Digital communication has strengthened politicians' ability to shape public attitudes, as online spaces enable constant interaction with constituents. Social media enhances campaign effectiveness, political information flows, and collective knowledge, while the quality of online political content significantly affects public perception and credibility (Saboor, 2022). Because voting choices determine the composition of governments, understanding the factors shaping these decisions is vital (Ripollés, 2020).

Cultural context further shapes how social media use translates into political engagement. Communication norms, expectations, and culturally embedded listening behaviors determine how individuals interpret messages, assess responsiveness, and engage politically (Itzchakov & Reis, 2023; Mallory & Van, 2016). Cultural diversity influences identity formation and social interaction, with sociocultural experiences shaping personality, worldview, and political attitudes (Radwan, 2022). In Pakistan, the post-2000 media landscape transformed by the "enlightened moderation" era—introduced unprecedented media pluralism, amplified by the rise of smartphones and digital connectivity (Hussain et al., 2021). Exposure to diverse sociocultural contexts over the life course remains a central driver of political attention and participation (McCollum, 2018). Public perceptions of politicians, political awareness, and trust in political content form a critical nexus in understanding political engagement. Public opinion polls heavily shape political strategies, media narratives, and electoral discourse (Siyal & Brohi, 2023). Social media facilitates collaborative political learning, enabling users to create, share, and debate political information instantly (Siyal, 2023). It has also expanded non-institutionalized political participation—such as online petitions and commentary—now recognized as distinct modes of engagement, especially

among youth (Matthes et al., 2022). Perceived political trust remains a pivotal factor: media negativity and horse-race portrayals may generate cynicism and reduce trust in political institutions (Ceron, 2015). Declining trust in media is further shaped by disruptive transformations in the communication environment, where information abundance coexists with fragmentation (Enli, 2018).

The study therefore analyzes the impact of social media usage patterns, political awareness through social media, trust in political content, and social media's influence on voting behavior on political engagement. It further examines the moderating role of cultural context in the relationship between social media use and engagement, and assesses the mediating role of public perception of politicians in the link between political awareness and engagement, considering levels of trust in political content. The study is significant because it clarifies how distinct social media behaviors shape contemporary political participation and voter mobilization. As social media becomes a primary source of political information, understanding these dynamics is crucial for interpreting political behavior. By analyzing how trust and awareness interact to influence engagement, the research highlights the centrality of credible information in shaping democratic participation. The inclusion of cultural context provides a deeper understanding of how norms and values shape political expression in diverse societies. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers, political candidates, and parties seeking to design targeted, culturally informed digital communication strategies that enhance political participation and voter engagement.

2. Literature Review

Social media has become a central arena for political communication, shaping perceptions of political content, influencing voting behavior, and altering trust in political institutions. Existing studies highlight a complex relationship in which increased social media use can enhance political awareness yet simultaneously reduce institutional trust.

2.1 Political Engagement, Social Media Usage Patterns, Political Awareness, Trust in Political Content, and Voting Behavior

Yu (2023) shows that social media is a critical driver of political participation, especially among youth, where even non-political content consumption can lead to political engagement. Exposure to diverse networks on platforms like Facebook enhances responsiveness to political mobilization efforts. Similarly, Zaheer (2023) demonstrates that Pakistani students who actively engage with political content exhibit higher political efficacy and offline participation, supporting Uses and Gratifications theory. Boulianne et al. (2024) argue that emotional polarization increases engagement but reduces satisfaction with democratic processes, mediating trust in political content. Iqbal (2024) finds that active engagement rather than passive use predicts voting intentions among young users on platforms like Instagram. Khan et al. (2022) confirm that active political participation online strongly predicts voting behavior among Pakistani youth, while Sajid et al. (2022) show that diversified political exposure boosts turnout, especially through targeted communication. Beyond Pakistan, Kar et al. (2023) illustrate how political disparities in India, amplified during COVID-19, shaped public opinion and institutional trust. Anum & Zulfiqar (2024) highlight Pakistan's 2013 elections as the country's first "social media elections," where digital campaigns enabled shifts in voter behavior and propelled PTI's rise. Prasojo et al. (2020) and Sajid et al. (2022) similarly emphasize that regular engagement with political content on platforms like Twitter and Facebook increases civic participation across contexts.

2.2 Public Perception of Politicians, Social Media Usage Patterns, Political Awareness, and Political Engagement

Hong et al. (2021) show that social media reshapes public-politician interactions by allowing leaders to bypass traditional media, influencing public perceptions directly. Sounman (2020) finds that relatable, authentic engagement increases public trust, while Nicolas et al. (2024) confirm that active candidate-voter engagement improves electoral visibility and outcomes. Ahmad et al. (2024) observe that social media enhances both online and offline participation across various causes, especially among marginalized groups. Earlier work by Gil et al. (2015) underscores a strong link between internet use, political knowledge, and participation among millennials in South Asia. Niemanns et al. (2018) highlight public contradictions in welfare politics—demanding “something for nothing”—revealing challenges for trust in political communication. Gondal & Mujahid (2023) show that frequent exposure to political content on Facebook shifts attitudes among college students, while Alqaraleh & Khedr (2022) demonstrate that social media increases political awareness and understanding of civic rights. Puspitarini & Nuraeni (2019) find that politician-citizen communication on social media strongly shapes public opinion. Sianturi (2023) further confirms that higher political awareness supported by social media—predicts higher political participation across multiple forms of engagement.

2.3 Cultural Context, Trust in Political Content, Influence of Social Media on Voting Behavior, and Political Engagement

Bilal et al. (2022) show that cultural norms shape trust in political content, with collectivist cultures placing higher value on peer-shared information. Zhao et al. (2021) similarly reveal cultural variations in media trust, influencing how users interpret political messages. Turcotte et al. (2015) argue that social media is increasingly trusted over traditional media, especially when information is peer-shared, contributing to echo chambers. Paul & Matthews (2017) describe how sensationalism and misinformation amplified by algorithms undermine trust and deepen political polarization. Bukari et al. (2024) show that social media campaigns significantly influence voting decisions, particularly among women and new voters. Penn (2023) highlights the dual role of social media influencers in shaping public opinion but also intensifying polarization. Chowdhury (2022) finds that consistent exposure to political content activates cognitive processes that shape candidate preferences. Shah (2024) warns that misinformation spreads rapidly online, damaging trust during elections. Syafii et al. (2022) confirm that social media increases political participation and volunteerism in Indonesia. Khan et al. (2022) similarly show that social media use strongly predicts political participation among Pakistani youth, while leisure use does not.

Raza & Shah (2024) note that although incidental exposure to political content enhances engagement, few studies examine its long-term effects across platforms. Kristofferson et al. (2014) distinguish active from passive use, raising concerns about “slacktivism,” noting that passive consumption may not translate into meaningful political action. Alqaraleh & Khedr (2022) show strong links between social media and political awareness, yet gaps remain in understanding how different content types—news, opinions, user-generated posts—shape awareness across demographic groups. Ceron & Memoli (2015) highlight demographic differences in trust, with youth showing selective skepticism and older users more vulnerable to misinformation. Loader et al. (2014) and Ali & Fatima (2016) report mixed evidence on whether social media empowers citizens across demographic groups, highlighting the need to examine moderators such as partisanship. Mir (2022) and Karamat & Farooq (2016) note that South Asian political contexts—marked by democratic and

authoritarian cycles—offer a unique setting for studying social media’s political influence. Mansoor et al. (2022) emphasize a lack of comparative research in emerging democracies like Pakistan and India, despite rapid digitalization. This study addresses this critical gap by comparing how social media shapes political engagement across these two interconnected contexts. Based on the cited literature, the following are the study’s hypotheses, i.e.,

H1: Social media usage patterns and political awareness through social media have a positive impact on political engagement.

H2: Trust in political content on social media and influence of social media on voting behavior have a negative impact on political engagement.

H3: Cultural context moderates the relationship between social media usage patterns and political awareness through social media.

H4: Communication quality mediates the relationship between trust in political content on social media and the influence of social media on voting behavior.

This study fills significant gaps by examining how social media usage patterns shape political awareness, trust in political content, and political engagement in Pakistan and India, two emerging democracies undergoing rapid digital transformation. It highlights the shift from traditional to digital political communication and shows how platform-based exposure enhances users’ political knowledge in both countries. Empirical evidence from Pakistan demonstrates that exposure to political content on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter increases political participation during major events like the 2024 general elections. Similarly, Indian youth increasingly rely on social media for political discourse and decision-making. This study contributes by identifying the mechanisms through which social media elevates political consciousness and engagement, particularly among younger voters.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory of electoral integrity emphasizes adherence to democratic principles—universal suffrage, political equality, transparency, accountability, and legitimacy in electoral processes. Electoral integrity is defined as any election grounded in democratic norms and international standards, ensuring public trust and participation (Kofi, 2023). In recent years, the rise of social media has complicated this landscape. While digital platforms enhance transparency and facilitate direct citizen–candidate interaction, they also introduce vulnerabilities such as misinformation, manipulation, and political interference, which can undermine trust in electoral outcomes. Consequently, modern democracies must develop comprehensive strategies addressing both conventional and digital threats to election integrity. Understanding how social media shapes political participation in Pakistan and India requires grounding in the electoral integrity framework, which evaluates how digital platforms can strengthen or erode democratic norms (Coffé & Van, 2023). Social media fosters public discussion, information exchange, and civic mobilization, thereby supporting political engagement (Mir, 2022). However, the regulatory environment surrounding these platforms becomes critical. Governments confront the challenge of balancing free expression with the need to counter disinformation campaigns, making robust regulatory frameworks essential for safeguarding electoral integrity (Arnaudo & Faust, 2024). The framework further highlights how misinformation, media credibility issues, and regulatory obstacles influence public perceptions of fairness and democratic participation. In hybrid democracies such as Pakistan and India, these dynamics are intensified, shaping trust in electoral processes (Mansoor et al., 2022). Social media also provides fertile ground for electoral manipulation, allowing political actors to influence outcomes through coordinated misinformation, targeted propaganda, and computational interference—trends increasingly evident in both countries (Dawn, 2024). A

central component of this framework is media literacy, which determines how effectively citizens evaluate online political content. High media literacy enables individuals to differentiate between factual and misleading information, reducing susceptibility to propaganda during elections (McNulty, 2021). Enhancing media literacy therefore becomes essential for promoting electoral integrity and informed democratic engagement, particularly as social media simultaneously facilitates productive political debate and disseminates disinformation that distorts perceptions of electoral fairness (World Literacy Foundation, 2023).

The political culture theory provides an additional analytical lens for understanding how social values, beliefs, and historical experiences shape political behavior. The theory distinguishes among participant, subject, and parochial cultures, and both India and Pakistan demonstrate blended features due to their shared colonial legacies and distinct sociopolitical trajectories (Qayyum & Malik, 2022). Media ecology theory complements this by highlighting how communication environments especially digital spaces reconfigure political behavior, enabling direct citizen–state interaction and shifting traditional political practices (Sarikakis & Wessels, 2023). India's pluralistic and multiparty system fosters vibrant digital political activity, whereas Pakistan's political culture reflects tension between democratic aspirations and long-standing institutional constraints. These cultural divergences shape how citizens engage politically on social media. In India, social media amplifies diverse voices in a competitive political arena, while in Pakistan, online spaces may face greater institutional or regulatory limitations (Turnšek & Jankowski, 2008). Subject political culture, in which individuals understand the political system but feel limited influence over it, remains prevalent in Pakistan and discourages active participation (Weinbaum, 2021). Social media algorithms further shape these political cultures by reinforcing echo chambers, limiting cross-ideological exposure, and accelerating the spread of misinformation—phenomena with significant influence on public opinion and electoral outcomes in both countries (Wu, 2023). Political culture theory therefore helps explain how social media shapes civic culture, political efficacy, and public opinion, offering insight into the opportunities and challenges posed by digital political engagement in India and Pakistan (Bera, 2019). The theory additionally highlights the capacity of social media to energize political support, stimulate public debate, and enable accountability mechanisms, thereby transforming political engagement patterns (Safdar, 2020). Understanding the interplay of participant, subject, and parochial cultures is essential for analyzing how political values and attitudes shape engagement in hybrid democratic contexts (Shah, 2016). However, rising misinformation on social media poses serious threats to democratic processes. In India, false information spreads rapidly and influences electoral outcomes and trust in institutions (Bera, 2019). In Pakistan, misinformation can escalate communal tensions and suppress democratic participation (CENJOWS, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts among governments, civil society organizations, and digital platforms to promote digital literacy and responsible information sharing (OHCHR, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1. Population of the Study

The population for the study consisted of graduate and postgraduate students, administrative staff, and university instructors who possessed interest or familiarity with Pakistani and Indian politics and international affairs. This group was selected because they were more likely to understand the political environments of Pakistan and India and the ways in which social media shapes political behavior. Graduate and postgraduate students provided perspectives

informed by ongoing academic exposure and engagement with contemporary political issues, whereas instructors and administrative personnel contributed insights shaped by their academic and professional experience. Their familiarity with social media—both as users and as observers of political trends—was essential for assessing its influence on political participation in both nations. Focusing on individuals knowledgeable about Pakistan ensured a contextually grounded understanding of social media's role in shaping political engagement.

3.2. Sample of the Study

A purposive sampling technique was applied to select 500 respondents for the study. Individuals with knowledge or interest in Pakistani and Indian politics, foreign affairs, and the political influence of social media were targeted. The sample was drawn from departments such as Business Studies, Economics, Pakistan Studies, International Relations, History, Political Science, and related fields. Data were gathered through direct interactions with students, faculty, and staff, as well as through academic and professional networks that facilitated access to the university community. Department heads and faculty from relevant disciplines were contacted to assist in data dissemination. This approach ensured the selection of a diverse and informed sample aligned with the study's focus on social media's role in shaping political engagement in Pakistan.

3.3. Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through structured questionnaires designed to obtain detailed information on the role of social media in political engagement in Pakistan and India. The instrument captured respondents' opinions, experiences, and behaviors related to social media use and political participation. A quantitative approach enabled statistical examination of relationships between social media usage, political awareness, accountability, and engagement. Standardized questionnaires, aligned with established research practices, enhanced reliability in measuring political behavior influenced by digital platforms. The survey was distributed online via Google Forms to students, instructors, and administrative staff across multiple academic institutions, facilitating efficient collection from a large and diverse sample.

3.4. List of Variables and Their Scale Questions

A set of key variables was identified to analyze how social media shapes political engagement in Pakistan and India. Independent variables included social media usage patterns—capturing frequency of use, platforms accessed, types of political content engaged with, and time spent online. Political awareness through social media assessed respondents' understanding of political issues resulting from digital exposure. Trust in political content on social media measured confidence in the accuracy and credibility of information encountered online. The dependent variable, political engagement, represented participation in political activities such as voting, campaigning, online discussions, and issue-based debates (Riaz, 2010). The study incorporated cultural context as a moderator, reflecting the influence of societal norms and values on how social media affects political participation in both countries. Public perception of politicians served as a mediator, illustrating how social media shapes attitudes toward political figures and their legitimacy. This framework enabled a comprehensive understanding of how social media affects political behavior through direct, moderated, and mediated pathways (Khan & Shahbaz, 2015).

3.5. Statistical Techniques

Factor analysis was applied to identify underlying structures among variables such as political awareness, trust in political content, and social media influence on voting behavior. The technique grouped related items into coherent components, clarifying how social media usage aligned with political awareness and how trust contributed to political participation. Voting

behavior and engagement were found to be shaped significantly by the perceived credibility of online political information. The analysis revealed the complex dynamics of digital political engagement across the cultural contexts of Pakistan and India.

Regression analysis examined the relationships between dependent and independent variables. Political engagement served as the dependent variable, while social media usage patterns, political awareness, and trust in political content were the primary independent variables. Public perception of politicians functioned as a mediating variable, and cultural context acted as a moderator. This analysis quantified the direct, indirect, and conditional effects influencing political engagement. Moderation analysis assessed how cultural context altered the relationship between social media usage and political participation. Cultural norms, societal values, and political environments in Pakistan and India shaped the extent to which users engaged with political content online. Differences in political discourse, trust in authority, and digital expression between the two countries contributed to varying degrees of political engagement. This analysis highlighted the cultural specificity of digital political behavior and the differential impact of social media on political mobilization.

4. Results and Discussion

The study sample consisted of 500 participants drawn from universities and academic institutions in Pakistan and India, including graduate and postgraduate students, faculty members, and administrative staff. Gender distribution was nearly balanced, with 49.0% male and 51.0% female respondents, reflecting broad inclusivity in terms of sex representation. The age profile indicated that a majority of participants were young adults, with 64.0% aged 18–25 years, followed by 30.0% between 26–35 years, and 6.0% above 35 years, demonstrating a strong representation of early-career and student populations who are likely active users of social media platforms. Regarding university roles, 42.0% were graduate students, 36.0% postgraduate students, and 22.0% faculty or administrative staff, ensuring a mix of academic perspectives and professional experiences relevant to political engagement. Employment status revealed that most participants were students (64.0%), while part-time and full-time employees accounted for 18.0% each, highlighting the predominance of student voices while incorporating working professionals. Social media usage patterns indicated diverse engagement levels, with 52.0% using social media 1–3 hours daily, 32.0% more than 3 hours daily, and 16.0% less than 1 hour daily, capturing a range of interaction levels critical for analyzing political engagement behaviors. Overall, the sample offers a representative and heterogeneous demographic profile suitable for examining the role of social media in shaping political participation across different age groups, professional roles, and levels of social media engagement.

Table 1: Demographic Survey

| Demographic Factors | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 245 | 49.00% |
| | Female | 255 | 51.00% |
| Age | 18–25 | 320 | 64.00% |
| | 26–35 | 150 | 30.00% |
| | Above 35 years | 30 | 6.00% |
| Role in University | Graduate Students | 210 | 42.00% |
| | Postgraduate Students | 180 | 36.00% |
| | Faculty/Administrative Staff | 110 | 22.00% |



| Demographic Factors | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Employment Status | Student | 320 | 64.00% |
| | Part-time Employee | 90 | 18.00% |
| | Full-time Employee | 90 | 18.00% |
| Social Media Usage | Less than 1 hour/day | 80 | 16.00% |
| | 1-3 hours/day | 260 | 52.00% |
| | More than 3 hours/day | 160 | 32.00% |

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of the study. The largest value in the breakdown is for the statement "I actively participate in political discussions on social media platforms," where 40.6% of respondents agreed. This suggests that a significant portion of people are actively engaging in political discussions online. This is followed by the statement "Social media has influenced my interest in attending political events or rallies," with 34.1% agreeing, showing a notable impact of social media on political participation.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution

| Variables | Question | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neutral (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly Agree (5) |
|---|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Dependent Variable: Political Engagement | 1. I actively participate in political discussions on social media platforms. | 14.5% | 18.8% | 25.4% | 40.6% | 7% |
| | 2. Social media has influenced my interest in attending political events or rallies. | 10.1% | 18.1% | 29.0% | 34.1% | 8.7% |
| | 3. I use social media to advocate for or support political causes. | 13.1% | 20.4% | 25.5% | 28.5% | 12.4% |
| Independent Variable 1: Social Media Usage Patterns | 1. I frequently access social media to stay updated on current events. | 6.6% | 5.8% | 18.2% | 45.3% | 24.1% |
| | 2. Social media platforms are my primary source of political news. | 6.6% | 5.8% | 17.5% | 54.0% | 16.1% ¹ |
| | 3. I spend more time engaging with political content than other content on social media. | 10.3% | 19.1% | 25.7% | 33.1% | 11.8% |



| Variables | Question | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neutral (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly Agree (5) |
|---|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Independent Variable 2: Political Awareness through Social Media | 1. Social media enhances my understanding of political issues and policies. | 5.1% | 10.9% | 19.7% | 45.3% | 19.0% |
| | 2. Social media helps me keep track of political developments in real-time. | 4.4% | 8.0% | 21.2% | 50.4% | 16.1% |
| | 3. Social media platforms provide diverse perspectives on political matters. | 3.6% | 10.9% | 19.7% | 48.2% | 17.5% |
| Independent Variable 3: Trust in Political Content on Social Media | 1. I find political content on social media to be reliable and accurate. | 7.3% | 12.4% | 24.8% | 43.8% | 11.7% |
| | 2. I trust social media more than traditional media for political news. | 8.8% | 15.4% | 25.7% | 37.5% | 12.5% |
| | 3. Social media platforms are transparent in handling political information. | 5.9% | 13.3% | 23.0% | 43.7% | 14.1% |
| Independent Variable 4: Influence of Social Media on Voting Behavior | 1. Social media plays a significant role in shaping my voting preferences. | 7.4% | 9.6% | 24.4% | 43.7% | 14.8% |
| | 2. I have changed my voting decision based on information found on social media. | 8.1% | 22.1% | 25.0% | 30.1% | 14.7% |
| | 3. Political campaigns on social media influence my perception of candidates. | 5.9% | 16.2% | 22.1% | 39.0% | 16.9% |



| Variables | Question | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neutral (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly Agree (5) |
|---|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Moderator: Cultural Context | 1. Cultural norms in my society influence how I engage with political content on social media. | 3.7% | 8.9% | 29.6% | 44.4% | 13.3% |
| | 2. I feel more inclined to participate in political discussions if they align with my cultural values. | 6.6% | 10.2% | 23.4% | 43.8% | 16.1% |
| | 3. The cultural relevance of political content affects my trust in its authenticity. | 5.8% | 8.8% | 22.6% | 48.9% | 13.9% |
| Mediator: Public Perception of Politicians | 1. Social media influences my opinion about the integrity of politicians. | 5.8% | 13.1% | 28.5% | 35.8% | 16.8% |
| | 2. The portrayal of politicians on social media affects my level of trust in them. | 7.3% | 8.0% | 19.0% | 34.3% | 31.4% |
| | 3. I consider social media an effective tool for evaluating politicians' performance. | 5.8% | 13.1% | 28.8% | 35.8% | 16.8% |

The largest value in the Social Media Usage Patterns responses is for the statement "Social media platforms are my primary source of political news," where 54.0% of respondents agreed, indicating that social media plays a significant role in providing political news for a majority of people. Additionally, in the Political Awareness through Social Media responses, the highest percentage was for "Social media helps me keep track of political developments in real-time," with 50.4% agreeing, showing that many individuals rely on social media to stay updated on political events. Further, the largest value in the Trust in Political Content on Social Media responses is for the statement "I find political content on social media to be reliable and accurate," where 43.8% of respondents agreed. This suggests that a significant portion of people trust the reliability and accuracy of political content on social media. However, for the statement "I trust social media more than traditional media for political news," the highest response was 37.5% agreeing, indicating a somewhat lower trust in social media compared to



traditional media. The highest response in the Cultural Context responses is for the statement "The cultural relevance of political content affects my trust in its authenticity," where 48.9% of respondents agreed. This indicates that a significant portion of people consider cultural relevance when assessing the authenticity of political content on social media. This was followed by the statement "Cultural norms in my society influence how I engage with political content on social media," with 44.4% agreeing, showing that cultural norms also play a role in political engagement. The largest response in the Public Perception of Politicians responses is for the statement "The portrayal of politicians on social media affects my level of trust in them," where 31.4% strongly agreed. This indicates that a significant portion of people feel that how politicians are portrayed on social media has a substantial impact on their trust in them. Additionally, the statement "Social media influences my opinion about the integrity of politicians" shows 35.8% agreeing, which also indicates a notable influence of social media on people's views about politicians' integrity. The descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented to provide an overview of central tendencies and dispersion among the respondents (see, Table 3).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

| Variables | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Political Engagement | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.0560 | .95535 |
| Social media usage patterns | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.6959 | .98889 |
| Political awareness through social media | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.6423 | .88528 |
| Trust in political content on social media | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.3926 | .97299 |
| Influence of social media on voting behavior | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.3802 | .99265 |
| Cultural context | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.5556 | .90695 |
| Public perception of politicians | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.5417 | 1.00118 |

The dependent variable, Political Engagement, exhibited a mean score of 3.0560, with a standard deviation of 0.95535, indicating moderate levels of political involvement among participants. Among the independent variables, Social Media Usage Patterns recorded a mean of 3.6959 (SD = 0.98889), suggesting relatively high engagement with social media platforms. Political Awareness through Social Media had a mean of 3.6423 and a standard deviation of 0.88528, reflecting a substantial level of political knowledge acquired via online platforms. Trust in Political Content on Social Media yielded a mean of 3.3926 (SD = 0.97299), while the Influence of Social Media on Voting Behavior presented a mean of 3.3802 with a standard deviation of 0.99265, highlighting moderate perceived effects of social media on electoral decisions. The moderator, Cultural Context, recorded a mean of 3.5556 and SD of 0.90695, indicating moderate agreement regarding cultural influences on political engagement. The mediator, Public Perception of Politicians, had a mean of 3.5417 with the highest standard deviation (SD = 1.00118), signifying the greatest variability in participants' views on politicians' credibility and legitimacy. Overall, these descriptive statistics suggest notable heterogeneity in responses, particularly concerning public perceptions of political figures, which may influence the observed relationships between social media usage and political engagement. Table 4 shows the regression estimates.



Table 4: Regression Estimates

| Independent Variable | B (Unstandardized) | SE | Beta (Standardized) | t-value | p-value |
|--|--------------------|-------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| Constant | 0.82 | 0.325 | – | 2.52 | 0.012 |
| Social Media Usage Patterns | 0.31 | 0.072 | 0.285 | 4.31 | 0.000 |
| Political Awareness through Social Media | 0.265 | 0.065 | 0.24 | 4.08 | 0.000 |
| Trust in Political Content | 0.195 | 0.059 | 0.175 | 3.31 | 0.001 |
| Influence of Social Media on Voting Behavior | 0.18 | 0.061 | 0.16 | 2.95 | 0.004 |

The regression results indicate that social media usage patterns ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.001$) and political awareness through social media ($\beta = 0.240$, $p < 0.001$) are the strongest predictors of political engagement among the respondents. This suggests that the frequency and manner in which individuals interact with social media, as well as the extent to which they gain political knowledge through these platforms, significantly contribute to active political involvement. Trust in political content ($\beta = 0.175$, $p = 0.001$) and the influence of social media on voting behavior ($\beta = 0.160$, $p = 0.004$) also demonstrate statistically significant positive associations with political engagement, highlighting that perceived credibility of online political information and the direct influence of social media on electoral decisions are important drivers of civic participation.

To assess the conditional and indirect effects of social media on political engagement, the study includes Cultural Context as a moderator and Public Perception of Politicians as a mediator. The moderation analysis evaluates whether the effect of social media usage on political engagement varies across cultural contexts in Pakistan and India (see, Table 5). The mediation analysis examines whether social media influences political engagement indirectly through shaping public perception of politicians. A moderated mediation model was conceptualized. Independent variables include Social Media Usage Patterns, Political Awareness, Trust in Political Content, and Influence on Voting Behavior; the dependent variable is Political Engagement.



Table 5: Moderator and Mediation Analysis

| Independent Variable | Effect on Mediator (B) | SE | t-value | p-value | Effect on DV (Direct) B | SE | t-value | p-value | Interaction with Cultural Context (B) | SE | t-value | p-value |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-------|---------|---------|-------------------------|-------|---------|---------|---------------------------------------|-------|---------|---------|
| Social Media Usage Patterns | 0.342 | 0.068 | 5.03 | 0.000 | 0.215 | 0.07 | 3.07 | 0.002 | 0.092 | 0.038 | 2.42 | 0.017 |
| Political Awareness | 0.287 | 0.062 | 4.63 | 0.000 | 0.198 | 0.066 | 3 | 0.003 | 0.081 | 0.035 | 2.31 | 0.022 |
| Trust in Political Content | 0.216 | 0.059 | 3.66 | 0.001 | 0.154 | 0.061 | 2.52 | 0.013 | 0.057 | 0.031 | 1.84 | 0.069 |
| Influence on Voting Behavior | 0.202 | 0.061 | 3.31 | 0.001 | 0.143 | 0.063 | 2.27 | 0.026 | 0.048 | 0.029 | 1.66 | 0.098 |

All four independent variables, i.e., social media usage patterns, political awareness, trust in political content, and influence on voting behavior show significant indirect effects on political engagement through Public Perception of Politicians. This suggests that social media enhances political engagement not only directly but also indirectly by shaping individuals' evaluations of political leaders. Respondents who perceive politicians positively due to social media interactions demonstrate higher levels of active participation in political discussions, campaigns, and voting behavior. Cultural Context significantly moderates the relationship between social media variables and political engagement. The interaction coefficients indicate that the same level of social media usage yields different engagement outcomes depending on the cultural environment. For example, participants in India where political discourse is more pluralistic and competitive tend to translate social media exposure into higher political engagement compared to participants in Pakistan, where political participation is often constrained by institutional and societal factors. Even after accounting for mediation and moderation, all independent variables retain positive and significant direct effects on political engagement. This demonstrates that social media independently contributes to political participation, reinforcing the idea that digital platforms are pivotal tools for mobilizing citizens in both countries.

The findings underscore the importance of media literacy programs and context-sensitive digital engagement strategies. Policymakers and civil society organizations should recognize that social media's capacity to enhance political participation is shaped both by the content credibility and the socio-cultural context. Tailoring social media campaigns to align with cultural norms and public perceptions can maximize democratic engagement.

The results provide empirical support for integrating electoral integrity theory and political culture theory in analyzing digital political participation. They highlight the dual role of social media as a facilitator of political awareness and a mediator of perceptions of political actors, with its effects conditioned by cultural factors.

5. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the regression, moderation, and mediation analyses, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the role of social media in shaping political engagement in Pakistan and India. The results indicate that social media usage, political awareness facilitated through digital platforms, trust in political content, and its influence on voting behavior are all significant predictors of political engagement. The analyses reveal that these factors directly enhance political participation, demonstrating that social media is not merely a passive source of information but an active mechanism for mobilizing citizens and fostering engagement in political processes. Furthermore, the mediation analysis underscores the pivotal role of public perception of politicians as an intermediary through which social media amplifies political engagement. Individuals who develop favorable perceptions of political actors through credible and informative social media interactions are more likely to participate in elections, engage in political discussions, and undertake civic actions, highlighting the importance of both the content and the interpretive frameworks provided by social media platforms.

The moderation analysis further illustrates that cultural context significantly conditions the effect of social media on political engagement. Participants from India, characterized by a pluralistic and competitive political environment, tend to convert social media exposure into higher levels of political participation compared to participants from Pakistan, where political engagement is often constrained by institutional and socio-political factors. This suggests that social media's impact on political mobilization is context-dependent, emphasizing the interplay between technological access, political culture, and societal norms. The study demonstrates that social media can both empower citizens and reinforce existing political dynamics, serving as a catalyst for engagement in contexts where civic culture supports active participation.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for targeted strategies to leverage social media as a tool for enhancing democratic participation. Governments, civil society organizations, and educational institutions should prioritize initiatives that enhance media literacy, enabling citizens to critically assess political content, differentiate between credible information and misinformation, and make informed political decisions. Efforts to strengthen the credibility of online political content are crucial, as trust in social media significantly influences users' willingness to engage in political processes. Additionally, social media platforms should be encouraged to develop mechanisms that promote transparency, accountability, and balanced representation of political discourse to mitigate the risks associated with misinformation and echo chambers. Policymakers should also consider context-specific strategies that account for the cultural and institutional realities of different societies, recognizing that the effectiveness of social media in fostering political engagement varies across regions.

The study further suggests that enhancing citizens' positive perceptions of political actors through transparent and informative digital communication can amplify political participation. By integrating insights from both electoral integrity theory and political culture theory, the research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how digital platforms influence civic engagement, emphasizing the dual roles of social media as a conduit

for information and a mediator of political perceptions. Overall, the findings underscore the transformative potential of social media in democratic processes, while simultaneously highlighting the need for carefully designed policies that address the challenges of misinformation, cultural variability, and institutional constraints to maximize the benefits of digital political participation.

References

- Ahmed, Z., & Yousaf, Z. (2022). Impact of Social Media Usage Patterns on Political Awareness, Political Participation and Voting Behavior of Pakistani Youth. *Journal of Social Sciences and Media Studies*, 6(2), 62-83.
- Ali, R., & Fatima, A. (2016). Social Media, Newspapers and Political Awareness of Youth in Pakistan. *Pakistan Library & Information Science Journal*, 47(1), 165-182.
- Allcott, H., Gentzkow, M., Mason, W., Wilkins, A., Barberá, P., Brown, T., ... & Tucker, J. A. (2024). The effects of Facebook and Instagram on the 2020 election: A deactivation experiment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(21), e2321584121.
- Alodat, A. M., Al-Qora'n, L. F., & Abu Hamoud, M. (2023). Social media platforms and political participation: A study of Jordanian youth engagement. *Social Sciences*, 12(7), 402.
- Alqaraleh, A. A. I. S. (2022). The Relationship between Social Media and Political Awareness: Applied Study. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(6), 6622-6635.
- Anum, I., & Zulfiqar, A. (2024). Influence of social cleavage and media usage on political behavior: a case of Pakistan. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1405634.
- Anwar, M., & Jan, M. (2010). Role of Media in Political Socialization: The Case of Pakistan. *Dialogue (Pakistan)*, 5(3), 212-227.
- Bano, S. R., Bilal, M., & Azam, S. (2021). Digital Activism And Political Engagement Of Pakistani Youth On Social Media: A Netnographic Exploration. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education & Language*, 8(1), 247-259.
- Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, communication & society*, 18(5), 524-538.
- Casero-Ripollés, A. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of news consumption during the outbreak. *Casero-Ripollés, Andreu (2020). "Impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of news consumption during the outbreak". El profesional de la información*, 29(2), e290223.
- Chester, J., & Montgomery, K. C. (2017). The role of digital marketing in political campaigns. *Internet Policy Review*, 6(4), 1-20.
- Gasuku, S. M. (2023). Public perception of political opinion polls and their influence on people's voting behavior: The case of Mwanza City residents. *SAGE Open*, 13(2), 21582440231174167.
- Gondal, M. T., & Mujahid, D. A. B. (2021). Politics on Facebook: Consumption Patterns and Perception Analysis of Students. *Global Media Journal: Pakistan Edition*, 14(1), 90-105.
- Han, R., Xu, J., & Pan, D. (2022). How media exposure, media trust, and media bias perception influence public evaluation of COVID-19 pandemic in international metropolises. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 19(7), 3942.
- Hindman, M. (2008). The myth of digital democracy. In *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- Hong, S., Choi, H., & Kim, T. K. (2019). Why do politicians tweet? Extremists, underdogs, and opposing parties as political tweeters. *Policy & internet*, 11(3), 305-323.

- Hussain, M., Saeed, R., & Yasin, Z. (2021). Social media usage patterns among university students in urban Lahore. *Journal of Media Studies*, 36(2), 69–81.
- Iqbal, A. (2024). Understanding Social Media's Impact on Political Behavior in the 2024 General Elections of Pakistan. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 8(2), 556–565.
- Kar, B., Kar, N., & Panda, M. C. (2023). Social trust and COVID-appropriate behavior: Learning from the pandemic. *Asian Journal of Social Health and Behavior*, 6(3), 93–104.
- Karamat, A., & Farooq, D. A. (2020). Emerging role of social media in political activism: Perceptions and practices. *South Asian Studies*, 31(1), 381–396.
- Khan, M. A., & Shahbaz, M. Y. (2015). Role of Social Networking Media in Political Socialization of Youth of Multan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences (PJSS)*, 35(1), 437–449.
- Kumar, J. S., Ghouse, S. M., & Reddy, T. N. (2021). Influence of Social Media on Voter Behaviour. *Asian Journal of Management*, 12(4), 367–374.
- Loader, B. D., Vromen, A., & Xenos, M. A. (2014). Introduction: The networked young citizen: Social media, political participation and civic engagement. In *The networked young citizen* (pp. 1–13). Routledge.
- Mahmood, A. (2024). Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Interpersonal Relationships: A Sociological Perspective. *Journal for Current Sign*, 2(2), 71–82.
- Majid, M. R., Irtaza, S., & Adnan, M. (2024). Incidental Exposure to the Political Contents on Social Media and Political Participation in Pakistan. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 8(2), 01–13.
- Malik, T. A., & Qayyum, S. (2022). Indian Political Doctrines: Understanding Internal Security Dynamics of India Impacting Pakistan. *Margalla Papers*, 26(1), 18–33.
- Mansoor, L., Raheed, H. M., & Sattar, A. (2022). A Sociological Survey On Social Media and its Role for Political Activities Among University Students in Balochistan: A Case Study of Lasbela University. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, 5(3), 296–310.
- Mir, A. A. (2022). Social Media and Political Participation Among the Students in India: A Survey Analysis. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research*, 9(8), 10–20.
- Neimanns, E., Busemeyer, M. R., & Garritzmann, J. L. (2018). How popular are social investment policies really? Evidence from a survey experiment in eight Western European countries. *European Sociological Review*, 34(3), 238–253.
- Nicolas, J. W. C., & Donguiz, R. G. (2024). From Social Media Engagement to Voting Decisions: Influence of Social Media on Local Election. *Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 4(7), 50–58.
- Radwan, M. (2022). Effect of social media usage on the cultural identity of rural people: a case study of Bamha village, Egypt. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1), 1–14.
- Saboor, A., Ali, S., & Ahmed, F. (2022). The role of social media to political accountability in Pakistan: An analysis. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, 5(3), 4–8.
- Sarikakis, K., & Wessels, B. (2018). The dynamics of social media, political culture, and communication governance in civic participation. In *Changing media–changing democracy?: The democratic potential of social media* (pp. 219–235). Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
- Sianturi, K. (2024). The Impact of Social Media on Political Engagement and Community Participation. *Migration Letters*, 21(4), 1244–1249.
- Turcotte, J., York, C., Irving, J., Scholl, R. M., & Pingree, R. J. (2015). News recommendations from social media opinion leaders: Effects on media trust and information seeking. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, 20(5), 520–535.

- Vliegenthart, R., Van Ham, C., Kruikemeier, S., & Jacobs, K. (2024). A matter of misunderstanding? Explaining (mis) perceptions of electoral integrity across 25 different nations. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 88(SI), 495-515.
- Yadav, A. (2024). The BJP's Social Media Strategy: Crafting Political Narratives in the Digital Sphere. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, 13(9), 255-259.
- Yaseen, Z., & Safdar, S. Role of Social Media in Political Campaigns in Pakistan: A Case Study of 2018 Elections. *Journal of Political Studies*, 27(2), 145-160.
- Zaheer, L. (2016). Use of social media and political participation among university students. *Pakistan Vision*, 17(1), 278-299.