

Scrolling For Votes: Exploring The Nexus Of Social Media With Voting Behavior In Chakwal, Pakistan

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This study explores the influence of social media as an emerging socio-cultural force shaping voting behavior in Chakwal District, Pakistan, where traditional networks such as family and caste intersect with expanding digital participation. A quantitative survey of 800 registered voters selected through simple random sampling was analyzed using frequencies, percentages, and chi-square tests. Results indicated that 81.4% of respondents use social media daily, primarily Facebook and Instagram, underscoring its centrality in political awareness and engagement. Significant associations were found between voter motivation and exposure to online campaigns, leaders' digital presence, and political discussions, while purely informational content had a weaker influence. The findings reveal that social media complements rather than replaces traditional sociocultural influences, functioning simultaneously as an information channel and mobilization platform. The study highlights the need for critical digital literacy and responsible engagement within Pakistan's evolving democratic culture.

Keywords: Social Media, Voting Behavior, Digital Engagement, Political Participation, Digital Presence, Democratic Culture

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Introduction

Over the past decade, social media platforms have become crucial arenas for political communication, information exchange, and collective mobilization. Scholars have documented a growing body of evidence that links social media use to various forms of political participation, from online expression to offline protest and voting, but the strength, direction and mechanisms of these effects differ across studies and contexts. A comprehensive meta-analysis of early research concludes that, overall, social media use is positively associated with political participation, although effect sizes vary and much of the observed relationship depends on users' prior interest and offline resources (Boulianne, 2015). Globally, these platforms have reshaped political discourse by narrowing the gap between citizens and political elites, allowing direct dialogue and participatory communication (Enli, 2017). In mature democracies, research has consistently shown that social media use increases political awareness and participation (Boulianne, 2019; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2020). For instance, Bond et al. (2012) demonstrated through a large-scale Facebook experiment that social cues encouraging participation can translate into higher voter turnout. Similar findings in the United Kingdom suggest that exposure to political content on social networks enhances political knowledge and motivation among youth (Gibson & McAllister, 2015).

In transitional and developing democracies, the relationship between social media and voting is influenced by existing cultural and institutional factors. Studies from Indonesia, Kenya, and India reveal that online communication not only raises awareness but often replicates existing communal or caste-based networks (Lim, 2017; Mare, 2018; Kumar, 2020). Thus, social media operates as a socio-technological space intertwined with local identities and collective norms. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Gibson and McAllister (2015) found that exposure to political content on social media platforms correlates positively with political knowledge and voting intentions among young adults. Comparable findings emerge from European contexts, where social media use increases political efficacy and strengthens the perceived importance of voting (Vaccari et al., 2015). A meta-analysis by Boulianne (2019) reviewed 132 studies and concluded that the relationship between social media use and political participation is generally positive, though modest, suggesting that social media supplements rather than replaces traditional forms of engagement. Moreover, Boulianne (2020) and Valenzuela (2021), who observed that the persuasive power of social media lies in emotional engagement rather than rational information.

In developing democracies, particularly in Asia and Africa, the relationship between social media and voting behavior is shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. For instance, research in Indonesia shows that online political discussion on Facebook and Twitter has increased youth participation in elections (Lim, 2017), while in Kenya, social media was found to facilitate both civic awareness and ethnic polarization during the 2013 elections (Mare, 2018). Likewise, in India, Kumar (2020) observed that social media campaigns significantly shaped young voters' political preferences, especially through WhatsApp and Facebook networks that replicate local caste and community groups in digital form. These examples illustrate that social media operates as both a technological and socio-cultural medium, embedded within existing networks of kinship, caste, and communal relations.

At the same time, research highlights the potential downsides of digital platforms, including polarization, misinformation, and the creation of echo chambers that reinforce

preexisting beliefs (Tucker et al., 2018; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). These complexities imply that the impact of social media on political decisions depends heavily on the type of content, user behavior, and the broader social environment.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) explains that individuals actively choose media sources that fulfill their cognitive and social needs. In this light, social media enables users to express identity, seek political information, and connect with communities that shape their political choices (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2012). The Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) further suggests that digital platforms accelerate the spread of ideas within social networks, thereby influencing public opinion and voting patterns. Contextual and cross-national research further emphasizes that the political effects of social media are contingent on local media systems, institutional settings, and the structure of social ties. For instance, studies of protest waves and electoral events in non-Western settings show mixed results: in some cases social networks lower coordination costs and increase protest or turnout, while elsewhere platforms are co-opted by elites or produce limited offline impact (Enikolopov, Makarin & Petrova, 2016). Such conditional findings imply that social media should not be treated as a homogeneous “cause” of political change; rather, its influence must be analyzed within particular socio-cultural and institutional milieus.

Recent comparative studies suggest that social media is increasingly functioning as a socio-cultural factor influencing electoral behavior, particularly among youth. Azer (2018) found that in Egypt’s post-Arab Spring context, social media served as a tool for political socialization, where online discussions fostered civic identity formation and mobilization. Likewise, Loader, Vromen, and Xenos (2016) highlighted that social media platforms are “cultural spaces” for young citizens to construct political meanings and identities through shared experiences and symbols. In other words, social media does not merely transmit information but also constitutes a digital culture that shapes the norms and values underlying political participation.

In Pakistan, political behavior has long been influenced by socio-cultural institutions such as family, biradari (caste), and religious affiliations (Shafqat, 1998; Waseem, 2006). However, with over 130 million internet users and 70 million social media users (PTA, 2024), digital engagement has introduced a new dimension to electoral politics. Political parties, most notably PTI, have successfully utilized online platforms to mobilize youth and shape political discourse (Mahmud & Amin, 2020). Studies suggest that while social media enhances political awareness, its effect on actual voting choices remains mediated by traditional loyalties (Khalid & Noreen, 2022; Iqbal, 2023; Ahmed & Jafri, 2024).

Studies in South Asian contexts reveal that while social media fosters awareness and engagement, its impact is mediated by existing social structures. For example, Iqbal (2023) reported that in Punjab’s semi-urban areas, voters often rely on both online cues and traditional family or caste influences when making voting decisions. Similarly, Ahmed and Jafri (2024) noted that in Pakistani electoral culture, social media operates within pre-existing social networks such as family WhatsApp groups or local Facebook pages, thereby reinforcing rather than replacing socio-cultural influences. This suggests that social media should be conceptualized as an emerging socio-cultural variable, rather than an external or purely technological determinant.

This study seeks to analyze how social media interacts with established socio-cultural structures to shape voting behavior in Chakwal District. The district’s mixture of traditional patronage networks and rising digital activity makes it an ideal case for

understanding whether online political engagement transforms or merely reinforces traditional patterns. The findings contribute to broader discussions on the hybridization of political influence—where digital and traditional forces coexist—and provide insights for policymakers, educators, and civic organizations on promoting informed and responsible political participation.

Research Methodology

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the influence of social media as a socio-cultural factor affecting voting behavior in Chakwal District. A structured questionnaire was employed to gather numerical data suitable for statistical analysis. The target population comprised registered voters of Chakwal District. A sample of 800 respondents was selected using the simple random sampling technique to ensure equal representation and minimize bias. The sample included participants of varied age, gender, and educational backgrounds.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of closed-ended and Likert-scale items. The instrument measured the frequency of social media use, exposure to political content, and its perceived impact on voting decisions. Expert review and a pilot test were conducted to ensure validity and reliability. Questionnaires were personally distributed among voters in various areas of Chakwal. Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Frequencies and percentages described respondents’ profiles and usage patterns, while the Chi-square test examined associations between social media use and voting behavior. Ethical standards were maintained through informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of responses.

Findings Of The Study

The findings summarize the patterns of social media use, preferred platforms, and respondents’ perceptions of its influence on political engagement and voting behavior. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe social media usage trends, while chi-square tests identified significant associations between online engagement and voter motivation. The following tables provide a detailed overview of respondents’ usage patterns and their views on the political role of social media.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Social Media Usage

Social Media Usage	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	652	81.4%
Weekly	101	12.6%
Monthly	27	3.4%
Never	20	2.6%
Total	800	100.0%

The data revealed that social media use is an integral part of individuals’ daily lives. A large majority (81.4%) of respondents reported using social media daily, while 12.6% used it weekly and only 2.6% never used it. This confirms that social media has become a deeply integrated part of daily routines and information practices.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Social Media Platform

Platform	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	421	52.6%
Instagram	310	38.8%
Twitter	48	6.0%
None	21	2.6%
Total	800	100.0%

Facebook emerged as the most frequently used platform (52.6%), followed by Instagram (38.8%) and Twitter (6%). The preference for visually engaging and interactive platforms reflects younger users’ inclination toward accessible and socially oriented spaces for political information (Azer, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga, 2020).

Table 3: Respondents’ Perceptions of Social Media’s Political Role

Statement	Yes (%)	Uncertain (%)	No (%)
Election ads on social media are effective in convincing undecided voters	81.4%	6.1%	12.5%
Social media has become the central instrument in influencing voting behavior	86.6%	7.2%	6.2%
Political figures frequently use social media to influence voters	85.4%	8.6%	6.0%
Social media helps increase participation in the electoral process	73.4%	13.3%	13.3%
Political discussions and live streams influence political decisions	75.2%	6.0%	18.8%
Social media educates voters to make informed choices	63.4%	16.0%	20.6%
Coverage of political activities on social media leads to more voter participation	60.0%	20.7%	19.3%

The respondents viewed social media as a major influence on political engagement. About 86.6% considered it central to shaping voting behavior, and 81.4% found online political advertisements persuasive. Likewise, 85.4% believed that political figures actively use social media to influence voters. Around three-fourths agreed that discussions and live streams shape political decisions, while roughly two-thirds considered it educational for making informed choices.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test Results for Social Media Influence

Relationship Tested	χ^2 Value	df	Sig. (p)	Interpretation
Election ads vs. voter motivation	34.854	8	0.018	Significant
Social media influence vs. voter motivation	30.456	8	0.041	Significant
Political figures' online activity vs. voter motivation	65.352	8	0.000	Highly Significant
Social media as determinant of participation	9.042	8	0.612	Not Significant
Political debates/discussions vs. voter decisions	48.208	8	0.001	Significant
Social media education vs. voter motivation	23.640	8	0.124	Not Significant
Coverage of online political events vs. voter motivation	18.126	8	0.285	Not Significant

The chi-square analysis confirmed that political figures' social media activity and online election campaigns significantly influence individuals' motivation to participate politically. Conversely, educational content and coverage of political events were not statistically significant, implying that entertainment-driven or personality-based content exerts more impact than informational posts. These results mirror findings by Boulianne (2020) and Valenzuela (2021), who observed that the persuasive power of social media lies in emotional engagement rather than rational information. Thus, social media primarily shapes political behavior through exposure, connectivity, and influencer appeal.

Disussion

The findings of the study showed that social media has become a dominant and indispensable part of individuals' daily lives, shaping not only how they interact but also how they form political opinions and participate in civic matters. The results revealed that 81.4% of respondents use social media every day, indicating how deeply digital communication has become integrated into modern routines. Social media is no longer just a leisure activity, it has evolved into a central source of information, expression, and awareness. This finding aligns with Azer (2018) and Gil de Zúñiga (2020), who argue

that social media provides new spaces for individuals to learn about public issues and engage in political discussions more easily than through traditional channels.

The preference pattern among respondents further illustrated how platform choice influences political communication, decisions, and voting behavior. Facebook was the most popular network (52.6%), followed by Instagram (38.8%), while only 6% reported using Twitter. This distribution suggests that individuals prefer platforms that combine entertainment, visuals, and interactivity, which makes political information more accessible and relatable. Such environments encourage users to encounter political content in informal and social contexts through shared posts, short videos, and discussions, thus expanding their exposure to public affairs in everyday online activity.

Perception data also underlined the powerful role social media plays in shaping political behavior. A vast majority of respondents (86.6%) viewed social media as a central tool of influence, while 81.4% believed that online campaigns effectively convince undecided individuals. Similarly, 85.4% noted that political figures actively use these platforms to reach voters. These results reflected how political leaders and institutions have adopted digital tools to connect directly with audiences, reducing their reliance on traditional media filters. Boulianne (2020) found that such online engagement increases citizens' sense of political efficacy and connection to public life, which may explain the high levels of agreement observed in this study.

Furthermore, most respondents acknowledged that social media encourages civic participation and political dialogue. About 73.4% agreed that it helps increase participation in political processes, while 75.2% said that discussions and live streams influence decision-making. These results suggest that social media has become a virtual meeting ground where individuals exchange opinions, debate issues, and develop interest in civic matters. For many young people, participating online is now an extension of their political identity. As Valenzuela (2021) noted, digital interaction fosters everyday political talk that strengthens users' engagement with public affairs.

However, while the majority expressed positive views, some uncertainty was evident about social media's educational role. About 63.4% agreed that it helps voters make more informed choices, while 60% felt that online coverage of political events promotes participation. Yet nearly one-fifth of respondents remained uncertain or disagreed. This indicates that although social media serves as a major source of information, not all users perceive it as trustworthy or educational. Gil de Zúñiga (2020) observed similar concerns, emphasizing that the abundance of content online can lead to information overload and confusion, making it difficult for users to distinguish credible sources from misinformation.

The chi-square test results provided further insight into these relationships. Significant associations were found between exposure to online political content and motivation to participate ($\chi^2 = 34.854$, $p = 0.018$), between political figures' online presence and voter motivation ($\chi^2 = 65.352$, $p = 0.000$), and between online debates and decision-making ($\chi^2 = 48.208$, $p = 0.001$). These findings confirmed that interactive and leadership-driven content has a strong impact on users' political engagement. In contrast, variables related to social media's educational aspect ($\chi^2 = 23.640$, $p = 0.124$) and event coverage ($\chi^2 = 18.126$, $p = 0.285$) were not statistically significant. This suggests that simply providing information does not necessarily inspire users to act, engagement is more effectively driven by interaction, dialogue, and emotional connection.

Taken together, these findings portrayed social media as both a source of information and a platform for mobilization. It informs, connects, and activates users, transforming political participation from a formal act into a more continuous and informal process. For individuals, social media offers an open environment to express opinions, follow leaders, and engage in discussions that influence their political thinking. However, its influence depends heavily on the quality and authenticity of content and on users' ability to critically evaluate what they encounter online.

The implications of these results are practical and significant. For political communicators, the findings highlight the importance of maintaining an active and genuine digital presence that encourages dialogue rather than one-way promotion. For educators, they emphasize the need to promote digital literacy, helping young citizens evaluate online information critically. For policymakers, the results point to the importance of supporting transparent and responsible digital spaces that encourage participation while reducing misinformation and manipulation.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that social media plays a transformative role in shaping modern political behavior. It connects young citizens to issues, leaders, and debates in ways that traditional media cannot. While challenges of credibility remain, its potential to enhance awareness, interaction, and participation is undeniable. When used thoughtfully and responsibly, social media can serve as a powerful tool for democratic engagement and civic learning among the individuals.

Conclusion

The study concluded that social media has become a central force in shaping political behavior and engagement among individuals. With 81.4% of respondents using it daily, social media now serves not only as a means of communication but also as a major platform for information, dialogue, and political participation. The findings showed that people widely view social media as influential in forming political opinions and decisions, motivating participation, and connecting leaders with citizens. Facebook and Instagram were found to be the most preferred platforms, reflecting individuals' attraction to interactive and visually engaging spaces. However, some respondents expressed doubts about the credibility of online information, highlighting the need for critical evaluation and media literacy. The chi-square analysis confirmed that interactive and personality-driven content such as leaders' online presence and digital debates has a stronger impact on political participation than purely informational posts. Overall, the study examined that social media functions as both an informational platform and a mobilizing space for political involvement. It empowers citizens by making political content more accessible, relatable, and interactive, but it also demands responsible use and critical awareness. For educators, this underscored the importance of strengthening digital and media literacy to ensure that online engagement contributes to informed citizenship. For political communicators, the results highlighted the need for genuine, two-way interaction that builds trust and connection. In essence, social media holds great potential to enhance democratic participation and shaping voting behavior when used ethically and critically. As digital platforms continue to evolve, their role in shaping political culture will likely deepen, making it essential for both individuals and institutions to use them consciously and constructively for the benefit of society.

Recommendations

The findings of the study point to the need for comprehensive digital literacy initiatives that equip citizens with the skills to critically evaluate online political content and recognize misinformation. Political actors and institutions should prioritize ethical and transparent use of social media, fostering constructive dialogue and informed engagement rather than emotional or divisive communication. Given the central role of youth in digital spaces, civic programs should channel their participation toward meaningful and responsible political involvement. Furthermore, future research should examine variations in social media's influence across demographic and regional contexts to provide a more nuanced understanding of its role in shaping democratic behavior in Pakistan.

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