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Changing Public Opinion and Politics in the Social Media Era



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Abstract: *Public opinion and politics have seen a drastic transformation as a result of the emergence of social media platforms in the digital era. This study reveals the complex mechanisms by which social media platforms impact public opinion and drive political debate through an in-depth examination of user-generated material, qualitative research, and quantitative surveys. The results show how effective social media is at quickly conveying information, promoting political mobilization, and raising the voices of those who are neglected. However, social media also has drawbacks like the growth of feedback networks, the occurrence of filter bubbles, and the diffusion of false information. The study highlights the significance of addressing these issues while utilizing social media's potential to promote informed and inclusive democratic engagement. Understanding the causes causing these shifts will help society manage the shifting environment and work towards a social media-era republic that is more powerful and participative.*

Key Words: Social Media, Political Mobilisation, Democratic Engagement, Filter Bubbles, Policymakers

Introduction

The emergence of the social media era has significantly altered how politics and public opinion are created, and Pakistan has not been excluded from these dramatic changes. Social media platforms now play a significant role in influencing conversation and political dynamics in the nation, which has a population of over 225 million and a rising number of internet users. In this study, we analyse how social media specifically affects shifting political and public attitudes in Pakistan while also offering a detailed examination of the particular environment in which these changes are occurring (Kruikemeier, 2019). Over the past ten years, social media usage has increased in Pakistan, a nation with a dynamic political landscape and a wide range of social, cultural, and religious identities. Pakistanis now frequently use websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to express their opinions, interact with others, and conduct political conversations. A huge section of the population is now able to actively participate in influencing public opinion due to the accessibility of

social media platforms, the widespread availability of affordable cell phones, and internet connectivity (Goel et al., 2010).

Social media has significantly influenced public opinion in Pakistan by giving lacking views a forum to be heard. The nation's traditional media channels have frequently been charged with intolerance and poor coverage, which has left the public dialogue missing of a variety of viewpoints. By enabling people from all areas of life, especially those from excluded populations, to share their experiences, thoughts, and stories on social media, this status norm has been challenged. As a result, there is now a more diverse public sphere, with many different voices contributing to the national dialogue (Lelkes & Westwood, 2017). Social media has also been extremely important in Pakistan for mobilising and coordinating political movements and campaigns. Social media platforms have offered an online forum for individuals with similar views to gather together, share information, and organise actions, from student activists promoting educational changes to civil society organisations

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demonstrating for human rights. Grassroots movements that have had a noticeable influence on political discourse and decision-making processes have emerged as a result of the ability to mobilise the people, organise rallies, and quickly spread messages (Nisbet et al., [2015b](#)).

The social internet has also made it possible for Pakistani individuals to demand accountability from their elected officials. Citizens can now interact directly with politicians on sites like Twitter and Facebook, asking questions, expressing complaints, and calling for transparency. The conventional top-down communication model, in which politicians dictated the narrative, has been put to the test by this direct connection. Citizens now have the ability to express their concerns and have an impact on political decision-making thanks to social media, which has encouraged a more dynamic and participatory form of politics.

Social media's influence on Pakistani politics and public opinion, meanwhile, is not without its difficulties. The marketing of false information and the shaping of narratives through fake news have become serious issues. False information, rumours, and propaganda have been spread via social media platforms, frequently causing confusion and splitting public discourse. Additionally, the existence of echo chambers, in which users are only exposed to content that supports their prior ideas, has widened societal political divisions (Gentzkow et al., [2011](#)).

The unique socio-political background of Pakistan will be taken into consideration when we examine the special dynamics of social media's impact on public opinion and politics in that nation. We will look at how social media platforms are influencing public conversation, how political actors are using these platforms to their advantage, and how this affects democratic institutions and political stability (Guess et al., [2019](#)). Understanding the complex interactions between social media, public opinion, and politics in Pakistan allows us to generate insights and suggestions for maximising the advantages of these platforms while minimising the drawbacks (Freelon et al., [2016](#)).

Social media in Pakistan has brought in a new era of political engagement and public opinion creation. It has given voice to those who would otherwise be cut off facilitated political mobilisation, and increased public engagement. However, technology has also brought up problems like the rise of false information and the widening of political splits. This study aims to shed light on these dynamics and the deep influence social media has had on Pakistani politics and public

opinion, opening the door to informed debates and evidence-based policy solutions.

Significance of the Study

The study on how politics and public opinion have changed in the social media era is extremely important for a number of reasons: Social media has developed into a potent forum for political discourse. It transformed information sharing by enabling people to express their thoughts and participate in political discourse. Understanding the dynamics of modern political discourse necessitates an understanding of how social media influences public opinion (Dubois & Blank, [2018](#)). By expanding the distribution of information, social media has made it possible for people to join in debates and access a variety of viewpoints without relying primarily on traditional media sources. This has the ability to influence public opinion and political landscapes by generating a diversity of ideas, challenging existing narratives, and empowering marginalised groups (Enli, [2017](#)).

As it enables people to plan and coordinate mass actions like rallies, protests, and campaigns, social media has established itself as a potent tool for political mobilisation. The relationship between technology, public opinion, and political change can be better understood by looking into how social media platforms support and shape political mobilisation. A major stress is the spread of false information and misinformation on social media sites. Developing solutions to counter misinformation's damaging impacts on political processes requires a thorough understanding of how it spreads and how it affects public opinion.

Political campaigning has changed as a result of the rise of social media since politicians and parties now use these channels to connect with and engage voters. Politicians can learn from past political campaigns and become more media-sense by examining how various campaign techniques affect public opinion. Overall, understanding the modern socio-political scene, creating efficient communication strategies, fostering informed decision-making, and preserving the integrity of democratic processes depend on research on how social media affects public opinion and politics.

Situation in Pakistan

Public opinion and politics in Pakistan have seen substantial changes as a result of social media. Pakistanis now have a platform to access a wide variety of information and perspectives thanks to social media. People can now engage directly in

political discussions and debates by avoiding traditional media sources. Citizens now have more freedom to establish their own opinions and actively engage in political discourse thanks to the greater availability of information. The mobilisation of political movements and campaigns in Pakistan has been significantly aided by social media. It has proven helpful in coordinating protests, gatherings, and other types of group action. Social media channels were utilised in the Pashtun Long March of 2018 and the 2014 Azadi March to mobilise large numbers of people and increase their political voices (Dalisay & Shklovski, 2019).

In Pakistan, using social media in political campaigns has become essential. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are actively used by political parties and politicians to connect with voters, spread their views, and rally support. Because of this, political campaigns now have a different dynamic, with social media significantly influencing public opinion. The Pakistani government has tried to control social media websites. The Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules were passed by the government in 2020 with the goal of policing social media content and requiring platforms to remove offensive information. These rules, however, have drawn criticism for potentially restricting free speech and allowing authorities excessive control over internet discussion.

Overall, public opinion and politics in Pakistan have been significantly impacted by the social media era. It has facilitated political mobilisation, strengthened political voices, and changed the character of political campaigning. It has also empowered citizens. To promote a healthy and educated public dialogue, issues like division and the spread of misinformation must be addressed.

Objectives

- This Special Issue's goal is to study the processes that are changing how the public and politics interact in this emerging digital media landscape.
- Critical examination of the effects and consequences of these occurrences on political discourse, democracy, and society.
- To study how public opinion and perception changed due to the influence of social media.

Basic statistics

A median of 57% across 19 countries responded in favour of social media when asked whether it is good or bad for democracy in their nation. Almost half or

more of people worldwide agree with this statement, with Singapore having the highest percentage roughly three-quarters who believe social media is good for democracy there. Four out of 10 people agree in the Netherlands and France, though. The smallest percentage among the 19 nations polled is seen in the United States, where only about a third of people believe social media is good for democracy (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

In eight nations, people are more likely to say they use social media than those who don't think their country's political system allows them to influence politics. Age affects views as well. When compared to younger adults, older adults in 12 nations are less likely to agree that social media is favourable for democracy in their nation. The gap between the youngest and oldest age groups is at least 20 percentage points wide in Japan, France, Israel, Hungary, the UK, and Australia, and it can reach as high as 41 points in Poland, where nearly 90% (87%) of younger adults believe that social media has improved democracy there while only 46% of those over 50 believe the same (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Literature Review

Public opinion is nothing more than a collection of viewpoints, attitudes, and opinions expressed by a sizeable portion of the population on a given issue. It is the responsibility of the media to inform the public about social, economic, and political developments that are occurring in their community. The diffusion, direction, and influence of public opinion on society have undergone major transformations in the age of mass media. A new scenario in the field of public opinion work has been brought about by the "two-wheel drive" public opinion guiding and monitoring strategies (Pariser, 2011).

With a local and global reach unmatched in human history, social media are online technology platforms that emphasize synchronous and asynchronous human interactions among "socially powerful" people across time in this new social media/educational policy area, as well as their potential effects on the formulation and implementation of educational policies. Political opinions and behaviours of their online peers may be influenced by people who are very active in sharing news and political information on social media. Social media prosumers are therefore more likely to try to persuade others about politics based on how they perceive their capacity for opinion leadership (Tüfekçi, 2017).

In traditional agenda-setting models, the media

shapes public opinion about specific topics by drawing attention to them and elevating their perceived importance. A conceptual framework for comprehending the kind of large-scale, individually organized collective action that is frequently facilitated by digital media. An era of individualized politics has emerged as a result of social disintegration and a fall in collective loyalty. Democratic electorates have always found it difficult to control their elected officials' foreign policy decisions. They claimed that foreign policy produces knowledge asymmetries that disfavour citizens and benefit rulers. The sociopolitical environment in which public opinion researchers work is changing as a result of the growth of new technology like mobile devices and social media platforms (Sunstein, [2017](#)).

Materials and Methods

Locale

My locale of study is Mirpur Azad Kashmir the specific reason is that Mirpur Azad Kashmir, being a specific locale, can have a notable impact on changing public opinion and politics in the social media era.

Justification of Locale

Azad Kashmir's Mirpur has a distinct political environment. Local government, development initiatives, infrastructure, and cross-border interactions are just a few of the topics that can be discussed in this area on social media. Residents are able to participate in topics that directly impact their daily lives in this localised environment, fostering more meaningful dialogues and maybe influencing public opinion. Social media tools can help Mirpur, and Azad Kashmir, organise rallies, protests, and campaigns centred on regional political problems. improved public participation, improved understanding, and potential shifts in public opinion on issues important to the area can all result from the ability to quickly spread information and mobilise supporters. Mirpur, Azad Kashmir, in particular, can have a huge impact on how politics and public opinion change in the social media age. Social media platforms in the region have a role in influencing public opinion and political discourse because of the region's distinct political climate, the amplifying of local voices, the mobilisation for local causes, involvement with the diaspora, cross-border exchanges, and community solidarity (Bond et al., [2012](#)).

Sample

The sample size of 26 social media users was chosen for in-depth interviews. The justification is that for a pilot or preliminary study intending to collect initial data and insights to guide future research or to improve research methodologies, a sample size of 26 users may be suitable. Before carrying out more extensive studies, it might assist researchers in identifying potential patterns, study gaps, or methodological problems. It's essential to recognise, still that a limited sample size might restrict the generalizability of results and raise the danger of sampling bias. The study's context and goals should be carefully taken into account, and the researchers' research report should make apparent any limitations related to the sample size. To improve the validity and reliability of the results, efforts should be made to increase the sample size in future investigations (King et al., [2017](#)).

Methodology

The methodology of the study is exploratory. Exploratory research methodology can be a valuable approach for studying changing public opinion and politics in the social media era. Research questions or hypotheses that can be explored in future studies can be developed as a result of exploratory research. By examining several facets of the subject, researchers can discover potential connections, mechanisms, or factors that can be examined further using more exacting techniques like quantitative surveys or experiments. Exploratory methods frequently use qualitative data collection methods including focus groups, ethnographic observations, and interviews. These techniques offer detailed and deep insights into people's experiences, opinions, and political and social media-related actions. These qualitative data can add context and subtlety to support quantitative investigations and help us grasp the subject more thoroughly.

When examining how social media affects shifting public opinion and politics, an exploratory approach is justified due to the complexity of the phenomena, the paucity of previous literature, the requirement for flexibility, the ability to construct hypotheses, and the importance of qualitative findings. Researchers can better comprehend this dynamic and developing field of study by using exploratory methods.

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Demographic information of the Respondents (n=26)

Respondent	Age	Gender	Social Media Usage (hours/weeks)	Level of Education of Respondents	Influence on public opinion
1	22	Male	12	Intermediate	Moderate
2	28	Female	20	Bachelors	High
3	32	Female	8	Intermediate	Low
4	23	Female	5	Metric	Moderate
5	38	Female	15	Intermediate	High
6	30	Female	2	Intermediate	Low
7	26	Male	10	Metric	Moderate
8	23	Female	18	Bachelors	High
9	39	Male	6	Intermediate	Low
10	41	Male	14	Metric	High
11	24	Female	9	Metric	Moderate
12	26	Female	7	Intermediate	Low
13	32	Male	13	Intermediate	High
14	36	Male	4	Metric	Low
15	29	Female	16	Bachelors	High
16	32	Male	11	Intermediate	Moderate
17	24	Female	3	Metric	Low
18	28	Female	19	Bachelors	High
19	36	Female	5	Intermediate	Low
20	30	Female	10	Intermediate	Moderate
21	25	Female	17	Intermediate	High
22	47	Male	1	Metric	Low
23	41	Male	8	Metric	Moderate
24	28	Female	6	Intermediate	Low
25	25	Female	12	Bachelors	Moderate
26	29	Female	9	Intermediate	Moderate

This table includes demographic data for 26 respondents, such as age, gender, social media usage (weekly hours), education level and perceived public opinion influence. It's crucial to remember that this is a small sample size and the information is simply meant to be descriptive. Social media's emergence has completely changed how individuals interact, communicate, and consume information. Social media platforms are now powerful tools for influencing public opinion and changing political environments due to their extensive use. The extensive spread of false information and fake news on social media is frequently brought up by respondents. They reveal how inaccurate data polarize society, influence public opinion, and threaten the democratic system.

The development of filter bubbles, in which users are mainly exposed to content that is consistent with their preexisting beliefs and values, is a key effect of social media. Social media companies' mechanisms frequently expose users to content that confirms their preexisting biases, restricting exposure to different points of view. This phenomenon can increase

already-existing political tensions and further polarize public opinion (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011).

The power of social media to unite people and enhance their voices has made political engagement easier. Some of the 5 respondents say how controversial discussions, toxic arguments, and the emergence of online trolls have affected positive political debate. Misinformation and fake news have been circulated as a result of how simple it is to share information on social media. Spreading false information has the potential to reduce public confidence in traditional media sources and degrade public opinion. Social media can bring people together and encourage conversation, but it has also been linked to increased polarisation and fragmentation of public thought. Constructive political dialogue can be limited by filter bubbles and echo chambers, which can strengthen preexisting opinions and limit exposure to other viewpoints. This polarization may increase social tensions and make it more difficult to find common ground (Boulianne, 2015).

Political campaigns have been transformed by social media because it has given candidates new ways to communicate with people. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have emerged as crucial arenas for the mobilization of supporters, funding, and campaign messaging. However, worries about the use of targeted advertising, the privacy of personal information, and the possibility of foreign meddling have surfaced, sparking discussions about regulation and transparency. Concerns regarding privacy and the exploitation of user data on social media sites are frequently expressed by responders. They talk about how the gathering and use of personal data for targeted political messaging and advertising might affect public opinion without having the approval of the persons involved (Ceron et al., 2017).

The huge amount of content produced on social media platforms presents serious difficulties for control and moderation. The line between free expression from dangerous information can be difficult to draw, and platforms frequently come under fire for inconsistently enforcing their content restrictions. The distribution of false information and hate speech must be stopped while supporting the right to free speech, and policymakers and social media corporations are struggling to develop practical answers. A few respondents point out examples where social media campaigns changed public opinion on key political problems and resulted in actual political changes.

The findings and conversations highlighted draw attention to social media's multiple impacts on shifting political and popular opinion. Social media platforms have made it possible to engage in politics, distribute knowledge, and mobilise political action, but they have also created problems like polarisation, filter bubbles, and disinformation. Promoting vulnerability, digital literacy, and ethical online behaviour is vital if we want to fully realise the great potential of social media.

Conclusion

The democratization of knowledge is one of the major effects that social media has had on Pakistani public opinion. The narrative used to be dominated by traditional media sources, who frequently had to deal with controls and limitations on their right to free speech. Social media has created an alternate forum for citizens to discuss politics, share news, and voice their opinions. This has made it possible for a wider variety of viewpoints to be heard, undermining the hegemony of traditional media and encouraging a more diverse public conversation. In Pakistan, political activism and movement mobilisation have

been greatly helped by social media. As a result of the platform it has given residents to organise and express their grievances, a number of grassroots movements and protests have gained momentum. Social networking has also transformed Pakistani political campaigns. Social media's influence on Pakistani politics and public opinion, meanwhile, is not without its difficulties. The increasing number of false information and fake news has become a serious problem. Inaccurate information and conspiracy theories have on occasion caused tensions, protests, and even violence in Pakistan as they quickly propagate on social media. Some users are more vulnerable to manipulation and propaganda because they lack knowledge of technology and critical thinking abilities, which lowers the standard of public dialogue.

Social media has additionally been used in Pakistan to spread extremist ideology, engage in online harassment, and engage in hate speech. In other circumstances, social media platforms have developed into refuges for intolerance towards politics, religion, and races. The distribution of harmful material has the potential to deepen societal fractures and endanger social peace and stability. There are a number of steps that need to be taken in Pakistan in order to navigate the shifting public opinion and political landscape in the social media era. First, it's important to give media literacy and digital literacy programmes a top priority in order to give citizens the ability to evaluate information critically and tell facts from fiction. The transmission of false information can be halted and the standard of public discourse can be improved by promoting media literacy. Second, in order to address concerns like hate speech, harassment, and the circulation of extremist content, there is a need for strict control and oversight of social media platforms. Government, public society, and social media corporations can work together to create policies and procedures that ensure responsible use of these platforms while upholding freedom of expression. Finally, it is critical to promote a climate of friendly and productive discussion on social media. A more lively and fruitful online environment can be achieved by encouraging healthy and educated debate, encouraging tolerance and diversity, and preventing hate speech and personal attacks. In last, social media has had a big impact on Pakistani politics and public opinion. It has democratised information access, given people more freedom to participate in political debate, and changed the way political campaigns are run. However, issues like the dissemination of false information and hate speech demand concerted efforts from people, platforms, and organisations.

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