News Media Use and Political Attitudes of the University Students of Pakistan

Irem Sultana *   Ifra Iftikhar †   Farrukh Shahbaz Warraich ‡

Headings

Abstract   This study examines the relationship between university students' news media use and the perception of politics and their attitude towards political involvement. Data was gathered from an online survey from 300 students enrolled in various universities in Lahore. The survey of the university students revealed that students tend to receive their political news and information passively from Facebook and Television. They are not likely to actively engage in seeking out political information by reading newspapers, magazines or websites. Facebook seems to be the most favored source of information among students. All the students irrespective of their background and academic disciplines tend to consume media more or less in the same way. It is concluded that the involvement of young students in politics is tied to their perception which is cultivated by the media.

Key Words: Media Use, Online Media Attention, Traditional Media Attention, Democratic Attitudes, Political Engagement, Political Perception, University Students.

Introduction

Mass media has a vital role in democratization as informed citizenry is the essential for democracies(Hyden & Okigbo, 2002; Jakubowicz, 2007; Pasek, 2006). Politically engaged citizens make informed choices and help in smooth functioning of government (McQuail 1983). The responsibility of informing and cultivating democratic attitudes aliens well with the primary functions of news media. Democratic theory claims that democracy cannot thrive without political trust and which is important for effective governance(Bianco, 1994; Hetherington, 1998). There is ample evidence that although interpersonal networks are substantial source of political information, news media has a significant role in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards politics and democracy (Lippmann, 1965; Luhmann, 2000). For sustainable democratic system it is desirable that young people are aware of the political affairs concerning public interests and hold democratic attitudes. Mass media consumption contributes to increased political interest and learning and consequently to political participation (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999). However, there is evidence that suggest that media can cause political alienation by fueling skepticism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Mutz, 2005; Patterson, 2003)The influence of media varies depending upon individual characteristics (Avery, 2009; Moy & Pfau, 2000; Norris P. , 2000; Aarts & Semetko, 2003).

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Studies in Pakistan have shown that university students predominantly trust online news sources for political news and prefer them over traditional news media for political information (Iftikhar, Raja, & Khalid, 2020; Waqas, Iftikhar, & Bajwa, 2021), contrary to the considerable body of research that maintains that trust on social media is decreasing (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). Political participation is not only the most important but it is essential for developing democratic attitudes (Norris P. , 2011; Diamond, 1999). Individuals' attitudes towards political participation can help understands their attitudes towards politics and politically ideology (Oross, Róna, & Szabó, 2017).

This study aims to empiricallyexamine the preferred information sources the university students of Pakistan depend on for political news in traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and TV and their online editions or social networking sites such as Facebook, twitter, etc. Moreover, the study aims to ascertain the relationship of the exposure and attention to news on attitude toward politicsandpolitical engagement.

The concerned research questions are: what are the news media consumption patterns and preferences of Pakistani university students? How they perceive politics? What are their attitudes towards engaging in political activities? Does increased attention to political news affect perceptions of politics? Does increased attention to political news affect chances of political engagement? What is the relationship between perception of politics and attitude towards political engagement?

Methodology and Data Analysis

The data was collected randomly from 300 university students enrolled in four years undergraduate programs through a survey questionnaire delivered in person in the campus. The male female ratio was 56:44 respectively. The students were randomly selected from different disciplines ranging from natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, law, and computer science and business studies from a private university in Lahore.

Preferred Media for Political News and Information

The students were asked about their media preferences for political news and information. Facebook was found to be the most preferred source of political news and information among students, Television was the second most favored source followed by News websites and Twitter. Traditional media with the exception TV appears to be the least preferred. It can be inferred that the young students do not put much effort in seeking out political information and passively receive their news through Facebook and News channels.
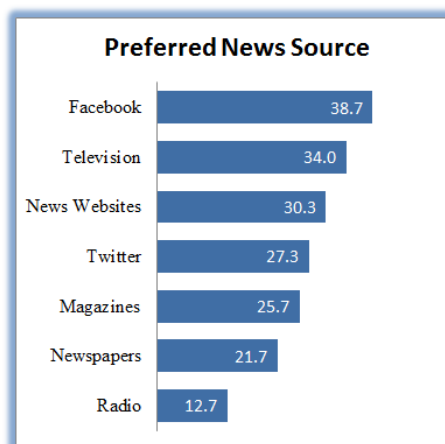

Preferred News Source

Source	Value
Facebook	38.7
Television	34.0
News Websites	30.3
Twitter	27.3
Magazines	25.7
Newspapers	21.7
Radio	12.7

Figure 1: Mean graph of Students' Media preferences

Attention Paid to Political Information

The students were asked about how much attention they pay to the political information while on traditional media and while on online respectively. They were asked to respond on a five point Likert scale; no attention at all, very little attention, fair attention, closes attention, as close attention as I can. The result turned out as attention on traditional media (N=300, M=3.17, SD=1.17) and attention on online media (N=300, M=3.15, SD= 1.04) demonstrating that the average amount of attention is paid to political information regardless of the media platform.

Opinion about Politics

To assess the attitudes held about Pakistani politics in the minds of young graduates were asked to rate the eight aspects of politics on the scale of 1-5 where 1 being the minimum. The detailed account of the responses for each of the aspects is described in the table 1.

Table 1. Students' Opinion about the Politics of Pakistan

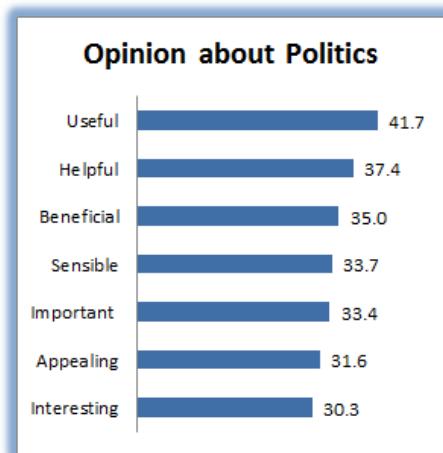| Aspects to be Rated	1	2	3	4	5
Unimportant - Important	23.3	19.7	23.0	14.7	18.7
Harmful - Beneficial	10.3	25.7	29	18.3	16.7
Boring - Interesting	17	24	28.7	16	14.3
Unappealing - Appealing	16.3	25.7	26.3	16.3	15.3
Useless - Useful	16	17.7	24.7	22	19.7
Not sensible - Sensible	18	19.3	29	19	14.7
Unhelpful - Helpful	16.3	17	29.3	23.7	13.7

Figure 2: The students' opinion about politics in Pakistan

Opinion on Political Engagement

To assess the likelihood of university students getting engaged in politics in future their opinion about getting involved in politics was gauged. They were asked to rate seven aspects of getting engaged in politics on the scale of 1-5 with 1 being minimum and 5 the maximum. The aspects of political engagement were appealing, exciting, interested, beneficial, useful, relevant, and important. The detailed account of the responses for each of the aspects is described in the table 2. The visual representation is shown in a bar graph (figure 3) reflecting the percentage of positive responses for each of the category.
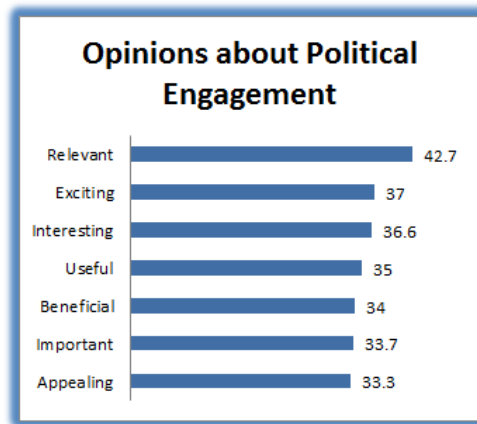
Opinions about Political Engagement

Relevant	42.7
Exciting	37
Interesting	36.6
Useful	35
Beneficial	34
Important	33.7
Appealing	33.3

Figure 3: Students' Opinion about Getting Engaged in Politics

Table 2: Involvement in Political Affairs and/or Issues

Aspects to be Rated	1	2	3	4	5
Unimportant - Important	30.7	19.3	16.3	14	19.7
Irrelevant - relevant	9.7	23	24.7	21.7	21
Useless - useful	13	21.3	30.7	19.3	15.7
Not beneficial - Beneficial	13.3	29	23.7	21	13
Uninterested Interested	14.3	22	27	23.3	13.3
Unexciting - Exciting	12	22.7	28.3	22.3	14.7
Unappealing - Appealing	20	24	22.7	16	17.3

The above two constructs were then transformed into variables by consolidating the constituting items into a single variable by using the feature of computing variables in SPSS, respectively. For this firstly a reliability analysis was performed to examine the internal consistency of the items involved in the two constructs- perception of politics and political involvement, separately. The reliability analysis revealed that the Perception of Politics formed a reliable scale with excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .824$, N=300, M= 2.97, SD= 1.02). The reliability analysis for Attitude towards Political involvement formed a reliable scale with good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .802$, N=300, M=2.97, SD=0.88).

Results of the Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant positive association between perception of politics and attitude towards political involvement, $r(300) = .72$, $p < .001$).

Table 3: Correlation between Media Attention and Attitude towards Politics

	1	2	3	4
Traditional Media attention	1			
Online Media Attention	.594 .000*	1		
Perception of Politics	.310 .000*	.234 .000*	1.	
Political Engagement	.327 .000*	.225 .000*	.754 .000*	1

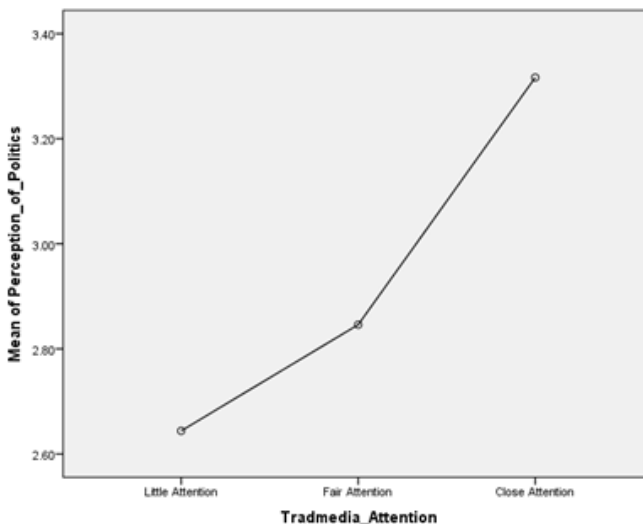*Cell entry: Correlation and Significance (2-tailed) with df = 297*

Figure 4: Mean graph between Traditional Media Attention and Perception of Politics

The mean graph (Figure 4) between the attentions given to the traditional media for political content shows that with the increase in the attention given to the relevant political news and information likely to increase the positive perception of politics. The increase appears to be more significant when attention increases.
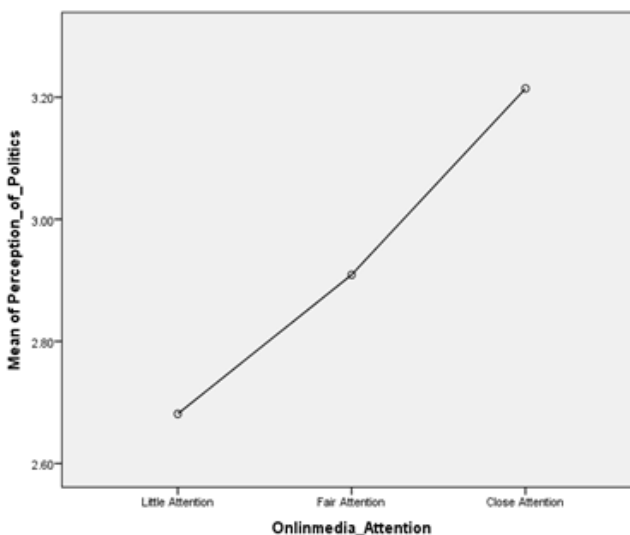

Figure 5: Mean graph between Online Media Attention and Perception of Politics

The mean graph (Figure 5) between the attention given to the online media for political content shows that with the increase in the attention given to the relevant political news and information likely to increase the positive perception of politics. The increase appears to be more significant when attention increases. And overall, the relationship between the two seems more effective in case of online media.
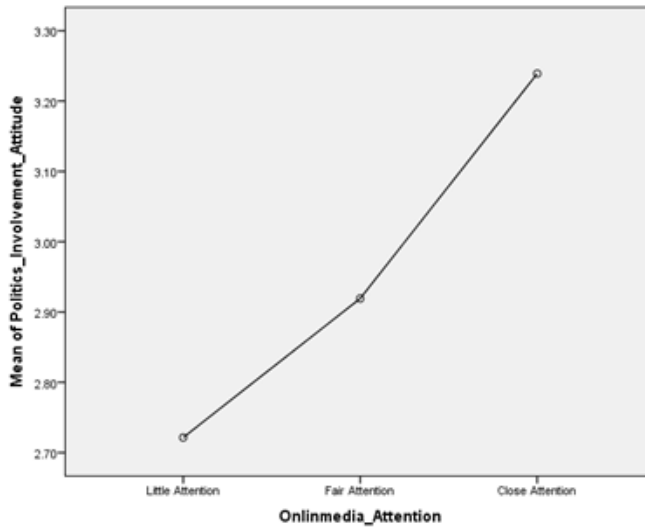
Figure 6: Mean graph between Traditional Media Attention and Attitude towards Political Involvement

The graph (Figure 6) plotted between the media attention given to the political information on traditional media and attitude towards getting involved in politics shows that the relationship is positive. It is more likely that those who pay attention to the political information on traditional media hold a positive attitude towards getting involved in politics.
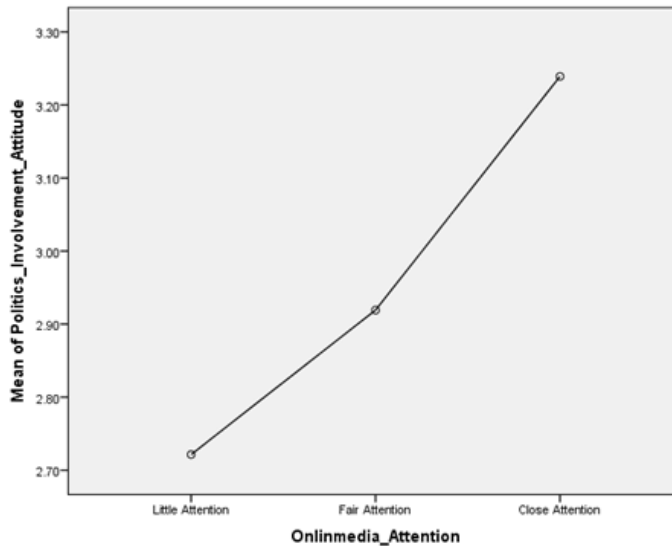

Figure 7: Mean graph between Traditional Media Attention and Attitude towards Political Involvement

The graph (Figure 7) plotted between the media attention given to the political information received through online sources and attitude towards getting involved in politics shows that the relationship is positive. It is more likely that those who pay attention to the political information on online media hold a positive attitude towards getting involved in politics.

Discussion and Conclusions

RQ1: What are the news media consumption patterns and preferences of Pakistani university students?

It was observed that media usage patterns among the rural and urban students did not differ significantly and were almost the same. Similarly, little variation was found between various academic disciplines. However, the students of Computer Science, Business Studies and Law appeared to have greater media usage. When the media preferences for political news were examined Facebook was found to be the most preferred source of political news and information among students, Television was the second most favored source followed by News websites and Twitter. Traditional media with the exception TV appears to be the least preferred. It can be inferred that the young students do not put much effort in seeking out political information and passively receive their news through Facebook and News channels.

RQ2: What is the perception of politics among the university students of Pakistan?

Perception of politics among the students was assessed and measured through eight factors including importance, beneficence, interest, appeal, usefulness, being sensible and helpful or otherwise. Almost half of the students had a neutral stance about the politics happening in Pakistan. These students comprised 46-53 percent of the sample. Slightly more than one third seems to believe that politics is unhelpful, not sensible, harmful, and useless. Moreover, they rated politics as unappealing, boring and unimportant. But at the same time the other group smaller than the other two groups was of the view that politics in Pakistan is useful, helpful, sensible, and important. They also seem to find politics beneficial, appealing and interesting. This means that the overall students are not very much interested in politics and have neutral to negative perception of it, only around one third view politics positively. This disinterest is a global phenomenon and not specific to Pakistan only. Therefore, it can be inferred that perception of politics varies with other factors which can be personal or circumstantial and a blanket statement cannot be made for all students.

RQ3: What is the attitude of the university students of Pakistan towards getting involved in politics?

The attitude of the students towards getting involved in political issues and affairs was measured in terms of seven factors including importance, relevance, usefulness, beneficence, interest, excitement and appeal. The opinion of the students based on their perception was displaying three kinds of attitudes. Almost half of the students had a neutral stance about the politics happening in Pakistan. These students comprised 44-50 percent of the sample. They can be interpreted as either uninterested or disenchanted by the Pakistani politics and see no use of getting involved in it. Half of the students rated politics as unimportant. They find it unappealing and not beneficial. Those having positive views about political involvement seem to believe that it is relevant. But useful, beneficial, and appealing did not have much rating. This shows that a large segment of students are either not interested in getting engaged in politics. They either see it as not worthwhile as they do not find it useful, exciting, or appealing. Or they simply see it as unimportant and not beneficial.

RQ4: Does attention given to the political information affects the perception of politics of university students in Pakistan?

The attention given to media information received through traditional media positively influences the perception of politics. The statistical test shows that though the relationship between the two is weak but the likelihood of increase in media attention increasing the positive perception of politics is significantly strong. Same is the case for online sources where the increase in attention too increases the positive perception of politics.

RQ5: Does attention to the political information affects the attitude towards involvement in politics of university students in Pakistan?

The relationship between the attentions given to the political information received through media on attitude towards involvement in politics is such the increase in attention paid to political media increases positive attitude towards involvement in politics among students. It can be inferred that the students who are attentive to political news and information tend to think that getting involved in politics is important and worthwhile. The influence of online sources is slightly greater than traditional media sources.

RQ6: What is the relationship between perception of politics and attitude towards involvement in politics?

There is a significant positive association between the two variables. This shows that the perception of politics cultivated by the media has a profound effect on the attitudes of the students regarding their engagement and involvement in politics. Positive perception leads to greater involvement in politics which is ultimately beneficial for the democratic system.

Conclusions

The survey of the university students revealed that students tend to receive their political news and information passively from Facebook and Television. They are not likely to actively engage in seeking out political information by reading newspapers, magazines or websites. Facebook seems to be the most favored source of information among students. All the students irrespective of their background and academic disciplines tend to consume media more or less in the same way. Overall, the students seem to hold neutral or negative views about politics and are not motivated to get involved in politics. They do not find it important and beneficial. However, it is found that the more attentive the students are to political news and information the more likely they are to hold a positive perception of politics and view involvement in politics more positively. It is concluded that the involvement of young students in politics is tied to their perception which is cultivated by the media.

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