



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>
Vol. 05 No. 02. April-June 2026. Page# 735-746
Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.3006-2497) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.3006-2500)
Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://openjournal.org)



Assessing the Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Awareness Among Pakistani Youth

Javeria Ahmed

Undergraduate Student, Department of media
Communication studies, Government College University, Lahore,
Punjab, Pakistan.

javeriaahmad135@gmail.com

Maleeka Fatima

Undergraduate Student, Department of media
Communication studies, Government College University, Lahore,
Punjab, Pakistan.

maleeka2425@gmail.com

Ali Bhadur

Lecturer, Department of Media and Communication Studies,
Government College University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

alibhadur@gcu.edu.pk

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of social media on the political awareness of Pakistani youth. In today's digital world, social media sites are the main places where people get political information, especially young people who spend a lot of time online. Pakistan, characterized by its swiftly expanding youth demographic and rising internet accessibility, offers a substantial framework for examining the impact of digital media on political knowledge, perceptions and engagement. The research is based on Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Cultivation Theory, which together explain how being exposed to media affects how we think and feel. A quantitative research design was utilized and data were gathered from 100 respondents aged 18 to 27 via a structured questionnaire through convenience sampling. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to look for patterns in social media use, exposure to political content, levels of engagement and feelings of trust and misinformation. The results show that a large number of people who answered the survey use social media every day and see political content often. But even though people are very aware of politics, they don't often take part in discussions or share political content. Also, worries about false information and a moderate level of trust in political content show that social media may not be the best way to learn about politics. The study finds that social media does a lot to raise political awareness among young people in Pakistan, but it doesn't do much because of problems with credibility, selective exposure and limited engagement. The results highlight the significance of fostering digital literacy and responsible media consumption to enhance informed political engagement in Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan Media Influence, Political Communication, Political Awareness, Youth, Social Media

1. Introduction

The correlation between media and political awareness has been a major topic of research in both communication and political science for a long time. People no longer see the media as a passive source of information. Instead, they see it as an active force that shapes how people understand political issues and actors by choosing, emphasizing and framing them in certain ways (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). Through these processes, media creates an information environment where people learn about politics, change their attitudes and change the way they see things. In democratic societies, the characteristics and quality of the information environment are pivotal in influencing the extent of informed political engagement among citizens. The rapid growth of social media in the last few years has changed the way political communication works in a big way. Social media platforms are different from traditional media because they give users interactive spaces where they can not only read information but also create and share it. This change has made social media the main source of political news, especially for young people, who are the most active users of digital platforms (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014). These platforms are easy to use and give users instant access to a wide range of political viewpoints and updates on current events. This has made people more politically aware. But the expanding power of social media also brings up a lot of problems. The dissemination of false information, biased content exposure and algorithmically curated information landscapes have engendered apprehensions about the trustworthiness and dependability of political information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). These problems could not only make it harder for people to understand politics, but they could also make people less aware of politics. Also, even while social media makes people more aware of political issues, it doesn't always lead to active political participation because many users are still just passive consumers of information.

Examining these dynamics in the context of Pakistan is very pertinent. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have become the main sources of political information for young people due to the high youth population and quickly rising internet usage (Khan & Shah, 2020). This change has important ramifications for democratic engagement and political consciousness. Nevertheless, despite social media's increasing significance, little empirical study has been done expressly on how Pakistani young interact with political information, particularly in terms of awareness, trust and involvement.

In order to close this gap, this study looks at how social media shapes young people's political consciousness in Pakistan. The study used a quantitative methodology to examine social media usage patterns, exposure to political content, engagement levels and perceptions of inaccuracy and trust. The study's theoretical foundations include Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Cultivation Theory, which collectively offer a thorough framework for comprehending the behavioral and cognitive impacts of media exposure.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the degree to which young people in Pakistan obtain political information from social media sites.
2. To examine the connection between young people's use of social media and political consciousness.
to determine how much young people interact with political content on social media.
3. To assess how political knowledge is affected by perceived inaccuracy and trust.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political Awareness and Social Media

In communication studies, the connection between media and political consciousness has been a major focus. Social media is now a major source of political information, especially for young

people, thanks to the rise of digital platforms. Social media, in contrast to traditional media, enables people to actively interact with content by sharing, leaving comments and taking part in conversations, which raises political consciousness. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) found a favorable correlation between increasing political knowledge and participation and the usage of social media for news consumption. In a similar vein, Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2014) characterize young people as "networked citizens" who primarily use digital platforms to participate in politics.

Social media has gradually supplanted traditional media as the main source of political information in Pakistan. Khan and Shah (2020) discovered that young people in Pakistan regularly utilize social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to keep up with political developments. This change demonstrates the increasing significance of digital media in influencing civic and political consciousness.

2.2 Social Media Agenda-Setting

According to McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda-Setting Theory, the media shapes public opinion by emphasizing some topics over others. Trending topics, hashtags and viral material that draw attention to particular political issues are examples of this process in the context of social media. This hypothesis was further developed by McCombs et al. (2014) to incorporate second-level agenda-setting, which explains how media also affects the characteristics linked to political actors and problems.

Social media platforms significantly influence agendas in Pakistan by promoting specific political narratives. According to Muzaffar, Chodhry and Afzal (2019), social media influences young people's interests by prioritizing some political issues above others. This indicates that in modern political communication, internet channels play a significant role in setting agendas.

2.3 Political Content Framing

Framing Theory describes how information is presented in the media in ways that affect how viewers understand it. According to Entman (1993), framing entails picking out specific elements of reality and emphasizing them in order to support a specific interpretation. The way political content is presented on social media through specific language, visuals and storylines is a clear example of framing. Studies show that framing has a big impact on political beliefs. According to Güran and Özarslan (2022), media content frequently reflects particular ideological viewpoints, influencing how viewers view political figures and events. According to Jan et al. (2013), media sources in Pakistan present political parties in diverse ways, which affects public opinion. Through user-generated material and selective exposure to like-minded opinions, social media amplifies this effect.

2.4 Long-Term Exposure and Cultivation Effects

According to Gerbner and Gross's Cultivation Theory (1976), people's views of reality are shaped by prolonged exposure to media content. Continuous exposure to political content on social media can eventually affect users' attitudes and beliefs. According to Morgan et al. (2015), certain worldviews are reinforced by repeated exposure to consistent signals.

This effect is especially noticeable among young people in Pakistan who often read political content online. According to research by Ahmad and Sheikh (2023), extended use of social media leads to the formation of political viewpoints that are consistent with the material viewed. This suggests that social media influences users' long-term political viewpoints in addition to providing them with information.

2.5 Misinformation and Political Perception

One of the biggest issues with social media is the dissemination of false information. False information, according to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), spreads quickly on digital platforms and

affects political conduct and public opinion. Engaging content, which may contain false or biased information, is frequently given priority by social media algorithms. Misinformation has grown to be a major issue in political communication in Pakistan. According to Ali, Raza and Qureshi (2021), users' capacity to discern between reliable and incorrect information is impacted by fake news. This reduces educated political knowledge and causes misunderstanding, especially among young people who use social media extensively.

2.6 Engagement and Participation in Politics

Social media makes political information more accessible, but its effect on political engagement is still up for dispute. According to Boulianne's (2015) research, social media use has a modest but beneficial impact on political engagement, with many users continuing to be passive content consumers.

Similar patterns have been noted in Pakistan. According to Mahmood, Gull and Ahmed (2020), young people are quite active on social media, yet they still don't participate in important political conversations or actions. This draws attention to a disconnect between awareness and active participation.

2.7 Credibility and Trust in the Media

One important component affecting political awareness is media trust. According to Tsftati and Cappella (2003), there is a complicated relationship between exposure and belief since people may absorb media content even if they do not fully trust it. Trust is even more important in digital environments, because information sources are varied and frequently unreliable. Rehman (2014) discovered that although audiences in Pakistan frequently show mistrust toward media material, they nevertheless rely on it for political information. This suggests that although social media makes information more accessible, questions regarding its veracity may influence how that information is perceived.

2.8 Research Questions

RQ1: How often do you see social media?

RQ2: Which platform do you mostly use for political information?

RQ3: How often do you see political content on social media?

RQ4: Do you participate in political online discussion?

RQ5: Have you ever shared & posted political content?

RQ6: How much do you trust political content on social media?

RQ7: Do you think social media spreads misinformation?

3. Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Cultivation Theory are three parallel traditions in media effects research that form the theoretical basis of the current study. Together, these ideas explain how social media shapes issue salience, directs interpretation and has long-term consequences on political attitudes, all of which contribute to political awareness. The study primarily looks at how youth in Pakistan become politically conscious as a result of constant exposure to social media information. The Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs et al., 2014) is used to examine how social media platforms affect young people's perceptions of the significance of political topics. According to the hypothesis, people are told what to think about rather than what to think. The visibility of political concerns on social media is determined by trending topics, viral postings, hashtags and algorithm-driven content. In their political awareness and conversations, users who are regularly exposed to such content have a tendency to give priority to those topics.

The presentation and interpretation of political content on social media are examined using the Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Güran and Özarslan, 2022). According to this theory, audiences' comprehension of political realities is influenced by the way information is presented, including language, images and narrative style. Pakistani youth's perceptions of political actors, parties and policies are shaped by the various and frequently conflicting frames of political events that they see on social media. By promoting particular and ideologically aligned points of view, user-generated material exacerbates framing effects.

The Cultivation Theory (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Morgan et al., 2015), which describes the long-term consequences of constant media exposure, provides further information for the study. According to the hypothesis, people's views of reality are gradually shaped by frequent and regular exposure to media information. Long-term exposure to political content on social media might affect young people's formation of solid political attitudes and beliefs, especially if users are regularly exposed to similar ideological narratives.

Together, these three theoretical frameworks offer a thorough explanation of how social media affects Pakistani youth's political consciousness. Understanding how social media shapes political awareness in Pakistan requires an understanding of agenda-setting, which explains problem salience, framing, which explains interpretation and nurturing, which explains long-term perception creation.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Design of Research

In appropriate to investigate the connection between Pakistani youth's use of social media and political awareness, this study uses a quantitative research design. The quantitative method is suitable since it makes it possible to gather quantifiable data and makes statistical analysis easier to find trends and correlations between variables. In order to display and analyze data using frequencies and percentages, the study mainly use descriptive research methodologies.

4.2 Study Area

The study, which focused on young people who actively use social media, was carried out in Pakistan. The study mainly focuses on respondents from educational institutions and metropolitan settings with high internet accessibility and social media usage because digital media is widely used in urban regions.

4.3 Sample and Population

Pakistani youth between the ages of 18 and 27 make up the study's demographic since they are the most frequent users of social media. For data gathering, a sample of one hundred respondents was chosen. Undergraduate and graduate students are included in the sample because they are more likely to be exposed to political content and digital media. In order to offer a fair viewpoint, the selection of responders guarantees that both male and female participants are represented.

4.4 Sampling Technique

Respondents were chosen using a convenience sampling technique based on their availability and willingness to participate. When time and budget limitations prevent the use of probability sampling procedures, this approach is frequently employed in social science research.

4.5 Data Gathering Instrument

The data was collected through a Google Form survey, having structured questions which were designed to capture:

- Social media usage
- Most used Social Media platforms
- Consumption of Political Content

- Participation in political discussion
- Belief on Political Content

The questions were a mix of:

- Multiple-choice
- Likert-scale items

A systematic questionnaire with closed-ended questions was used to gather data. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect data on social media usage habits, exposure to political content, degree of involvement, perceptions of disinformation and trust in political information.

4.6 Variables

Independent Variable

Social media usage is an independent variable **(IV)**.

Dependent Variable

While political awareness is a dependent variable **(DV)**.

4.7 Survey Method

The survey was distributed via social media sites like Instagram and WhatsApp and university students received direct messages with a link. Students were told that participation in the survey was voluntary, but they were required to give truthful responses. Within a week, the answers were finished. Online surveys were validate to gather data. Descriptive statistics were alike to analyze the responses.

5. Results

5.1 Demographic Information

The survey included one hundred respondents in total. According to the respondents' demographic profile, the majority (47%) were between the ages of 21 and 23, followed by those between the ages of 18 and 20 (43%) and 24 and 27 (10%). 36% of the respondents were men and 64% of the respondents were women. In terms of educational background, 8% of students were enrolled in graduate programs, while a sizable majority (92%) were undergraduate students.

5.2 Social media usage

The results show that respondents use social media extensively. Eighty-four percent of respondents said they used social media every day, nine percent said they used it many times a week, three percent said they used it rarely and only four percent said they never used it. These findings show that for most of the Pakistani youth in the survey, social media is an essential aspect of everyday.

How often do you see social media ?
100 responses

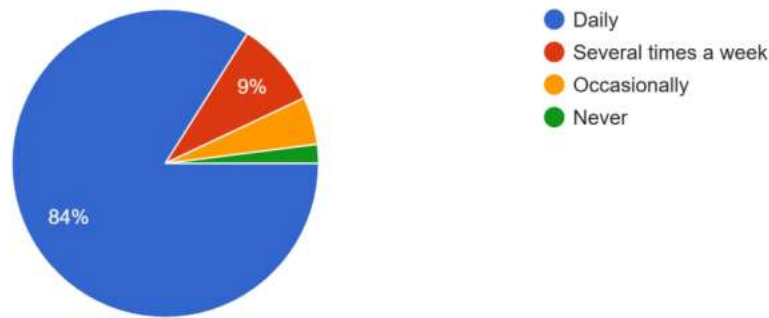


Figure 1: The Most used social media platform.

5.3 Most used Social Media platforms

51% of respondents choose Instagram as their major source, making it the most popular platform. YouTube (19%), Facebook (15%), Twitter (10%) and TikTok (5%) came next. These results imply that youth prefer visually stimulating and video-based platforms over text-based ones.

Which platform do you mostly use for political information ?
100 responses

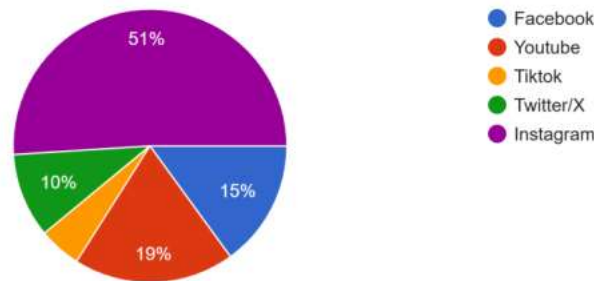


Figure2: Most used social media platforms

5.4 Consumption of Political Content

According to the research, 68% of respondents said they occasionally come across political content on social media, 23% said they do so infrequently and 9% said they never do. This suggests that while political content exists on social media, most users only sometimes see it.

How often do you see political content on social media?
100 responses

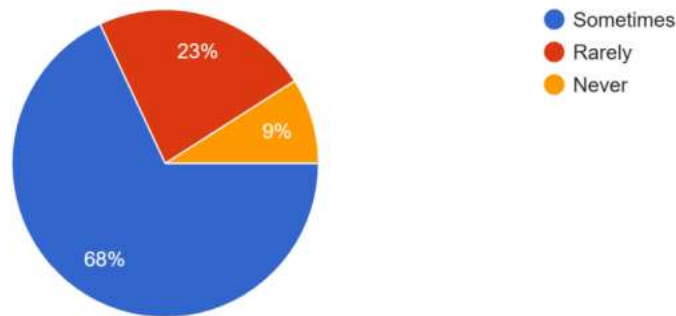


Figure3: Seeing political content on social media

5.5 Participation in political discussion

Participation in internet political discourse is still comparatively modest. 46% of the respondents said they never take part in online political debates. Furthermore, only 11% regularly participate in these conversations, compared to 21% who do so infrequently and 22% who do so occasionally. This implies that passive consumption predominates over active participation.

Do you participate in political discussions online ?
100 responses

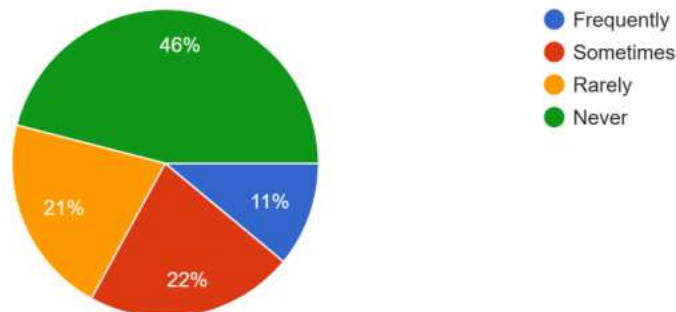


Figure4: Participation in political discussion online

5.6 Sharing Political Content

The results show that only 34% of respondents actively share political content on social media, compared to 66% who neither share nor publish such stuff. This lends more credence to the finding that young people are not very active in politics on social media.

Have you ever shared or posted political content ?
100 responses

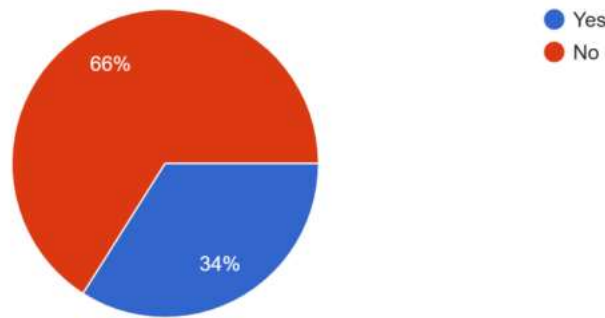


Figure5: Sharing & posting political content

4.6 Belief on Political Content

52% of respondents said they somewhat trust political content on social media, 27% said they do not trust it, 17% said they are unsure and only 4% said they have strong trust. These results show that people's faith in political information that circulates on social media platforms ranges from moderate to low.

How much do you trust political content?
100 responses

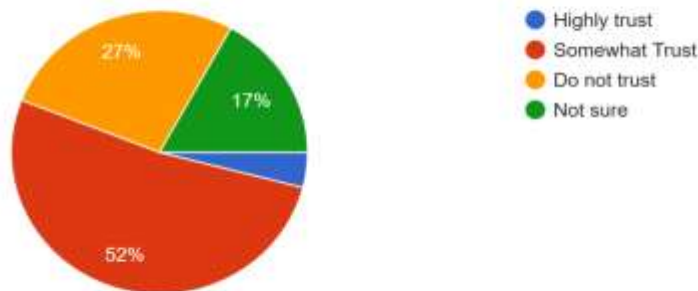


Figure6: Trusting political content

4.7 Spreading misinformation

The vast majority of respondents (66%) think that false information is disseminated on social media. Just 10% of respondents said that social media did not disseminate false information, while 24% were unsure ("maybe"). This demonstrates young people's keen awareness of the existence of false or deceptive content on the internet.

Do you think social media spreads misinformation ?

100 responses

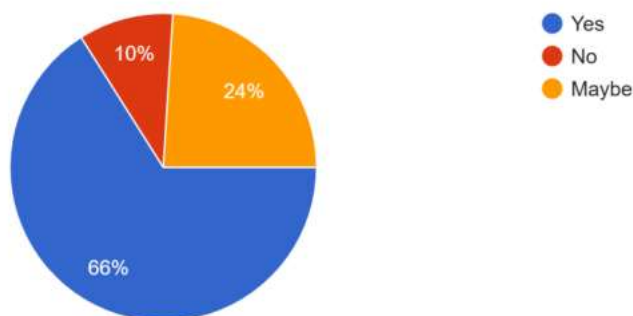


Figure7: Profound social media spreads misinformation

4.8 Synopsis of the Key findings

Overall, the findings show that young people in Pakistan utilize social media extensively, with everyday usage predominating. However, active engagement such as sharing and discussion remains low despite regular exposure to political content. Furthermore, there are issues with social media's dependability as a source of political understanding, as seen by moderate trust ratings and substantial perceptions of disinformation.

6. Discussion

The study's conclusions shed significant light on how social media influences young Pakistanis' political consciousness. The majority of respondents reported using social media on a regular basis, demonstrating how deeply ingrained it is in young people's life. This high level of participation demonstrates that social media has emerged as the main source of information, including political content. However, the study shows a glaring discrepancy between exposure and active political engagement, even in the face of continuous exposure to political material. A sizable percentage of participants stated that they distribute political content or engage in online political discussions infrequently or never. According to Boulianne (2015), who pointed out that digital media frequently results in low political engagement despite significant exposure, this implies that social media mostly promotes passive consumption rather than active participation. The results also show a substantial belief that social media disseminates false information and moderate levels of confidence in political content. This is consistent with the findings of Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), who highlighted how easily fake news may proliferate on digital platforms and skew public perception. Misinformation can make people more skeptical and less likely to participate actively in political debates.

Additionally, the inclination towards visually stimulating platforms like YouTube and Instagram suggests that political communication is becoming more streamlined and image-based. Although this makes things more accessible, it might also make politics less profound. Overall, the findings imply that social media both raises political consciousness and restricts critical participation because of false information and passive consumption habits.

7. Conclusion

According to the study's findings, social media significantly contributes to Pakistani youth's increased political awareness by giving them constant access to political content. Digital media has emerged as a major source of political information, as evidenced by the extensive use of sites

like YouTube and Instagram. The results also show that greater exposure does not always equate to active political engagement. With little participation in conversations or material sharing, the majority of respondents continue to be passive consumers of political content. Significant obstacles to social media's efficacy as a trustworthy source of political knowledge are also highlighted by worries about false information and low levels of trust. The report goes on to say that although social media raises political knowledge, problems including selective exposure, false information and poor civic engagement limit its total influence. Therefore, enhancing digital literacy and promoting critical analysis of online content are crucial for boosting Pakistani youth's informed political engagement.

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