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New media technologies and Youth in Pakistan

Abstract

During recent years in Pakistan, the growing use of new media technologies has greatly influenced the people. Particularly, the country's youth is largely involved in using new media especially mobile and social websites. The use of new media, in one way, has cast positive impacts on the country's youth helping them become much more informed, politically active and socially involved. However on the other hand, the revolution of new media is also deemed as a source of engaging the same youth in useless activities. It is considered that instead of searching productive information at Internet, the youth look for indecent content; in the name of political participation through social media, they turn out to be intolerant and violent; and instead of being socially connected, they get isolated and seclude from their own families. As a matter of fact, new media has impacted the Pakistani youth negatively in psychological, political, and social ways. This argumentative paper presents an in-depth analysis of the use of new media and its subsequent effects on the Pakistani youth.

Key words: New media, Pakistani youth, negative effects of new media, and positive effects of new media

Introduction

In recent times, modern technologies has influenced almost all aspects of our everyday lives and altered our lifestyles. These technologies may be at variance in terms of their influences and some may have greater impacts than others (Rajani & Chandio, 2004). In this context, new media technologies have especially influenced and transformed the ways of communication and interaction. The elements of interactivity and participation distinguish new media from traditional media (USIP, 2011) and this media is considered as technologically reliant for being innovative and faster (Wordpress.com, 2011). The growing use of new media has converted the world into a global village and therefore, research scholars have shown much interest to examine its influence on consumers and society. Interestingly, more people from developing and emerging nations use social media as compared to developed economies where less number of Internet users consumes social media. It has been noted that rates of social media services are comparatively cheaper and affordable in those countries (Poushter, 2016).

It has been observed worldwide that youth are exceptionally linked with new media technologies and spend most of their time with this activity. Livingstone (2005) found that young people have more access to new media and

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resultantly consume it more as compared to elderly people (Livingstone, 2005). This miniaturization of media has enabled the youth to be plugged-in with media by benefiting from various other hand-held devices (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). In recent times, daily activities and social lives of young people revolve around the activities like operating mobile phones, consuming online content, social networking sites (SNS), instant messaging, and posting etc. (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005). The youth are very curious for new communication technologies, news channels, use of mobile phones (Michaelsen, 2011) and particularly social media. According to Lenhart et al. (2010), 73-percent of wired youth in US are consumers of social media. This relationship of youth with new media has become very influential and youth are considered to retain important role in shaping peace or conflict situations due to new media tools. In this context, Egypt's movement is an apt instance wherein youth exhibited their power of expression with the support of new media. Likewise, the activism of Sudanese youth was discussed worldwide who remained vigorously prominent during demonstrations calling for regime change (Kadoda & Hale, 2015).

New media in Pakistan

Pakistan is ranked as 6th heavily populated country of the world with around 170 million people. New media is rapidly becoming part of the lives of Pakistani people, and particularly the access to internet and revolution in cellular industry has influenced their lives to a great extent. In recent years, an unprecedented rise has been seen in Pakistan in terms of use of Internet and especially social media networking sites (Groupin.pk, 2011). People of every age group use the gadgets like mobile phones, i-pads, and tablets with Internet facility. They use new media for tri-dimensional purposes i.e. information, entertainment and especially connectivity. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, Viber and WhatsApp are largely used for the purpose of communication and connectivity.

It is relevant to mention that Pakistan has an expanded IT industry, which is considered of giving a significant boost to the economic growth of the country in years to come. In Pakistan, there are around 100 million mobile users and 29 million internet users. According to an estimate, about 14 million consumers use mobile Internet (Qadeer, 2016). The people, who have access to the Internet, are frequent users of social media. According to a survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan, a large majority (i.e. 92%) of internet users are regular consumers of social media. Since Pakistan is a male-dominated society, the number of male consumers is higher as compared to female consumers (Gallup, 2016).

It is worth mentioning that Pakistan is one of the countries in the world where youth are in majority. Around 62-percent population of the country comprises youth of age ranged between 18-24 years (Awan, 2013). A large majority of youth, especially urban inhabitants, is regular consumer of social media. Mostly, the social media tools are used for the purpose of social interaction and political discourse. It is also used for e-commerce, socio-political discussions and political activism. It is believed that the advent of new media has enabled Pakistani youth to express their opinion publically on various social and political issues. Now, the youth are much more connected and expressive as

compared to past. As a matter of fact, social media use has become a trend in Pakistan and there are more than 44 million social media accounts in the country. Facebook is the most popular among social websites with 30 million users across the country (Geonews, 2017).₂

Political use of new media

Globally, social media has become a tool used for political engagement (Bronstein & Aharony, 2015) and, political discussions (Raine et al., 2012). It is such an important tool that has been found to have ability to influence political opinions (Gionis, Terzi, & Tsaparas, 2013) and even voting behaviour (Biswas, Ingle, & Roy, 2014). In recent past, political use of new media was quite less in Pakistan and in general elections of 2008, the country's political parties used their official websites and also YouTube to some extent to project their manifestos and other information (Riaz, 2010). However afterwards, political use of new media rapidly became quite frequent (Ali, Jan, & Iqbal, 2013). In 2013 elections, almost all prominent political parties utilized new media to influence young voters. Even now, the ruling party and the Opposition with the help of new media propagate their political views. Also, youth are very much active in cyber world to defend their favourite leaders and respond to the propaganda against them (Zaheer, 2016).

In Pakistan, social media has been used quite effectively for motivating and mobilizing the youth. Particularly during the times of floods 2010, the youth provided regular updates through social media about relief activities, rehabilitation and needs of the victims (Groupin, 2011). Since access to internet provides global connectivity to consumers, it has opened new vistas of employment worldwide for Pakistani youth. Youth belonging even to remote areas of Pakistan can avail the worldwide opportunities and prospects (Donnell & Afridi, 2016). Pakistani youth effectively used and benefitted from new media to respond the malicious campaigns against Islam. Some years back, when a foreigner uploaded a derogatory post about Holy Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H), the youth used social media and registered their protest worldwide. These online activities motivated and supported the offline activities and protests, which forced the Pakistani government to remove and ban such content at the Internet (Sekho, 2017). New media is also helpful with reference to the empowerment of women. As a matter of fact, Pakistan is a patriarchal society and the traditional media reflects an element of gender-bias in its contents. Now efforts are being made to inspire Pakistani youth through social media to raise voice against gender-based violence. Thus, new media is regarded important to counter the negative impact of traditional media contents (John, 2014).

Adverse effects of new media

Various research studies have examined the effects of new media and found its influence on consumers, either negatively or positively. Although new media has transformed the lives of people in a positive way, there are certain adverse effects of this new technology as well. In today's world, online communication has become more preferred and prevalent as compared to face-to-face interactions. Therefore, apprehensions have been shown in various societies that relationships through new media have diverted the people to spend time with their families and intimate relations (Bessiere et al., 2008). On one hand, new

media technologies have provided platform to develop peer culture amongst youth, however on the other end, these have weakened the family culture. In today's world, youth prefer to spend much time with their online friends. Even when they are with their families, they are accompanied with cyber friends (Kaare et al., 2007). So is the case with Pakistani youth, they prefer to be online through cyber-world accounts. It is often discoursed that excessive online interactions are taking them away from their families and real life relationships. Particularly, cell phones have introduced a new lifestyle, both in rural and urban areas, (Culture360, 2010) which has occupied the time and attention that was earlier reserved for family members and intimate relations.

In Pakistan, traditional media is often criticized for being irresponsible (Zaheer, 2016; 2016b; 2016c), working with commercialized approach, and ignoring the journalistic code of ethics (Haider, 2016). However, social media is far ahead in terms of irresponsible behaviour. Sometimes, it is felt that use of social media is alienating the youth from national, social and Islamic values as well (Baloch, 2014): reason being the misuse of social media and social networking sites. Youth have got involved in unproductive and sometimes destructive activities, which are casting harmful effects on society and its members. Although, new media has provided the youth various platforms to express their opinion, but is considered as the only source to release their frustration by talking against the things they dislike. While discoursing any issue, the feelings, sensitivities and respects of others are absolutely disregarded (Khan, 2015). Political leaders are particularly common victims of that frustration and annoyance (Chaudary, 2015). In the name of political communication and online political participation, immoral and abusive language against political leaders is adopted. Furthermore, sharing of unsophisticated posts and unethically photo-shopped pictures of politicians has become a common tendency amongst online communities.

Pakistan is an Islamic country with certain religious and social values. Advent of new media is thought to have endangered these social norms and also morality of youth. Being a conventional society, open friendships or relationships with opposite gender are not permissible. However, new media notion has changed the principles of socialization and resultantly the youth belonging to different social classes are getting involved to interact and indulge in friendships with opposite gender. Various unpleasant incidents like suicides and murders have also been reported in media linked with the aftermath of social media friendships. The use of new media tools is like an addiction and students use these for hours, which is a wastage of time that otherwise could be spent in constructive and productive activities, like studying and learning skills (Karadkar, 2015). Research studies have found that new media obsession affects interpersonal relationships of people (Suhail & Bargees, 2006) and the addicted Internet users remain weak rather poor academically (Nalwa & Anand, 2003). It is happening in Pakistan where youth are losing their attention towards studies due to technology gadgets. Instead of gaining in-depth knowledge, the students are focussed on acquiring superficial news. They have particularly been found to be cautious about their looks and status. A competition of show-off seems rampant. The excessive use of Internet has

negatively affected mental health of students (Ahmed & Qazi, 2011), gaming and exercise habits of students in Pakistan (Hussain & Pervez, 2012).

Another unfortunate aspect of new media technology is the quest for sexual contents. Regrettably, Pakistan is ranked at top amongst eight Muslim states followed by Egypt, in searching porn content. Social media groups and forums of various schools, colleges and universities indicate sexual conversation amongst youth (Pak parenting, 2016). In order to restrict unethical traffic, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) had to block around 64,000 websites having pornographic, blasphemous and other immoral content (Khan, 2015). Even then, youth look for sexual contents in form of videos and most of times fake identities and social media accounts are used to upload inappropriate, porn or adult contents (Tariq et al., 2012). This behaviour has become a big problem for online safety of women and the complaints about online women harassment (Awan, 2013) and blackmailing are received frequently (Shah, 2015). Considering the situation, the Government of Pakistan has recently passed the 'Cyber Crime law' to restrict misapplication of new media technologies. Despite these efforts, the cyber-related crimes and the issues of women harassment have not been eliminated. In the name of adventure, youth are also involved in hacking various websites and accounts. Sometimes, important State websites are hacked by youngsters. Unfortunately, new media tools are even used to generate and disseminate such materials, posts and/or images that are detrimental to the national dignity and foreign relationship with the other countries (Sekho, 2017). Pakistan is a victim of terrorism since many decades. Extremism and radicalism are thought to be the core reasons behind the menace of terrorism. Social media is heavily used for the purpose of dispersion of hate speech (Awan, 2013) and propaganda, which disturbs the efforts to curb extremism and terrorism. Pakistan army's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) retains official social media accounts to inform and update the general public about the military-related news. However sometimes through fake accounts, false news material is spread in the name of ISPR. Recently after a suicide attack in the country, several bogus warnings, threat alerts, and emergency numbers were circulated attributing these with ISPR. These fake threats and warnings spread panic in the country (Pakistan today, 2017). Higher authorities of Interior Ministry often opine that the "negative role" of social media in shape of rumour mongering even regarding armed forces affect the "war on terror" and bring down the morale of security forces (Pakistan today, 2016).

Conclusion

It may be concluded that social media in Pakistan has been used as a modern tool for dissemination of personal and collective opinions (Mashhadi, 2014). It is believed that positive use of social media may educate Pakistani youth and develop their knowledge, information and skills in academic terms. It can be used for socio-political awareness, enhance language proficiency and scholarly debates. The element of connectivity does help to develop inter-cultural relationships in cyber community (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, the misuse of new media technologies has become a big problem, imparting harmful effects on society and youth in particular. It is suggested that without restricting the digital rights and freedom of expression, efforts should be made to restrict the negative use of new media technologies.

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