Use of Social Media and Political Participation among University Students

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Abstract

The relationship between the use of social media and political participation has been explored and discoursed by various researchers. Current study observes this relationship in the context of Pakistan. The research intends to explore the use of Facebook among Pakistani students and its subsequent association with their political participation. For this purpose, a survey (N= 416) has been conducted amongst university students in Pakistan in order to measure the use of Facebook along with their online and offline political activities. It has been found that online and offline political participation tends to be influenced by time spent for political purposes on Facebook. Moreover, political participation has been found to be significantly correlated with demographic factors i.e. gender and age.

Introduction

Social media's importance and role has evolved over time to become an important platform for political discourse and giving access to social networking sites (SNSs) for political information and engagement[1]. Social media users who have regular political discussions in their daily lives are presumably regular users of social media for political purposes.[2] Various research studies

indicate that consumer opinion may be influenced by the use of social media.[3]

The influence is limited not only to mere opinion but sometimes also involves political participation, particularly voting decisions[4] reason being, among other factors, that people form opinions keeping in mind political imagery of candidates when it comes to casting votes.[5] On the contrary, the view that vote intent is not entirely persuaded by the media also exists[6] and that the media is not influential enough to change consumers' political ideologies[7], political efficacy and engagement.[8]

Having said that, providing a platform to get information, express opinions and have discussions on the same is in itself the most distinguished aspect of social media. Social media brings with it a platform that fosters an element of freedom of expression. People, rather than being contingent to traditional media, come forward and express assessments, views and beliefs to civic as well as political representatives in a self-confident manner on Facebook and/or Twitter. This expression is likely to influence their participation in political activities. Generally, political participation is referred to as the engagement of citizens in activities and events that might influence the government, its officials, and/or its policies.[9] Political participation may be online or offline.

In two research studies, Bode et al.[10] and Hsieh and Li [11] observed a positive relationship between online political expression and political participation. Furthermore, Holt et al.[12] and likewise Tang and Lee[13] noted escalation of both online and offline political engagement due to the use of social media for political expression. Likewise, Vaccari et al.[14] and Zhang and Lin[15] also found that use of social media for political expression boosted the political engagement. There has been debate on the offline or traditional political participation of social media users being influenced by the use of/ exposure to social media. [16] A study conducted by Pew Centre discloses that frequent Facebook users are more probable to be politically engaged as compared to infrequent users. [17]Additionally, various researchers found

demographic factors like age [18] and gender [19], to have an influence over offline and online political participation.

Social media has developed over time to become a platform of expression, a channel that has gained importance due to its accessibility, the importance of social media and this sort of expression increases manifold in controlled media surroundings, for instance, in Singapore, the general public and activists moved towards online and offline political participation owing to the restricted traditional media environment. [20] Malaysia is another example where the absence of equitable media coverage led opposition parties to gather public support through social media [21] and evidence was found about voters having being influenced by social media. [22]

When it comes to dissemination in media, the element of credibility is of paramount importance. Since traditional media has a system that allows trained staff and proper editorial review process, it is considered to be more credible on a relative scale. [23] Correspondingly, social media users consider new media an equally credible source of political news as it gratifies their political interests and curiosity. [24] In the same context, Kang (2010) argued that credibility should be considered a key factor in order to enhance public participation and make communication more effective when it comes to social media. [25]

In today's world, political parties and candidates appreciate the value of social media in order to persuade potential voters. [26] Recent times have seen politicians being actively engaged in the use of social media as a tool for interacting with the public, exchanging views and influencing expression. [27] A global change in the use of campaign tactics has been observed whereby politicians tend to deliver their campaign information to the general public via social media, especially the youth.[28] It is thought to be a multipronged approach, allowing them to mobilize supporters along with gaining more attention of voters, other politicians and political journalists. [29] In this context, US presidential elections (2008) are considered to be the very first elections where political candidates utilized social media. US President Barack Obama's

victory is largely believed to have been a factor of the new media being used to mobilize the youth.[30] Again in the US presidential elections of 2012, social media acted as a platform for political engagement [31] and yet again President Obama mobilized the youth to energize his campaign.[32] Now that a track record has been set with sound results, most politicians plan their campaign tactics in and around the social media, replicating President Barack Obama's use of the social media, considering Facebook and Twitter as essentials in their arsenal.

In the same way, social networking sites (SNSs), particularly Twitter and Facebook, are adopted in election campaigns by an increasing number of politicians in Sweden[33], Finland[34], the UK[35], Italy[36] Norway[37], India [38] Pakistan[39] and other countries.

Social media and Politics in Pakistan: In the past decade, Pakistani social media has quickly evolved into a force to reckon with an important forum for political discourse. Along with other purposes, it is particularly used for information dissemination, public mobilization, and political communication. Furthermore, social media offers a common platform to the people to exercise their power of speech against various issues including corruption, exploitation, power crisis, injustice, and incompetent political leadership.[40] On the one hand, it provides a channel to general masses to raise their voice, on the other, tolerated authorities to hear those voices.[41] But the fact remains that due to its limited reach, social media is not a source for wide-ranging transformation and change in Pakistan.[42]

For Pakistani people, the idea of being political on social media is a relatively new phenomenon. In its recent past, with the growing awareness in the youth and the masses, political parties have discovered the need to inform and influence society, especially the youth through social media.[43] Thus, at the moment almost all significant political parties have established their own social media accounts through which they put across their achievements, policies, manifestos and moves. Nowadays one can find official political pages of almost all prominent political parties and individuals on Facebook and Twitter, allowing this online

presence to cement views and form impressions. In some instances, not only the politicians are connected to public but also public can get opportunity to connect with political leaders directly. [44]

Recently, in the time of 2013 elections, social media played a vital role and its use was at its peak during elections times. Latif (2013) observed that political parties of Pakistan, particularly Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) used social media to promote their respective political agenda and mobilize youth to vote in the 2013 elections[45].

With its rapid growth, access and ability to make waves, social media has become one of the important propaganda tools used by governments and opposition parties. Thus, federal and provincial governments in Pakistan utilize social media to highlight accomplishments of their respective government(s) and counter the propaganda of political opponents. However, the extent of influence social media has on the political opinion and political participation of Pakistani people has yet to be decided.

Keeping in view the above discourse, this study attempts to examine the relationship of social media use with online and offline political participation. Being prominent in providing knowledge [46] and a platform for political participation [47], Facebook has been selected as social media in this study. Another reason for selecting Facebook is that it is a widely used social networking site/ application in Pakistan and the youth is highly involved in using it. [48] The hypotheses for the research study are as stated below.

> H1:   There is a significant relationship between the time spent on Facebook and frequency of using Facebook for political purposes.

> H2:   Time spent for political use of Facebook has a significant relationship with online and offline political participation.

> H3:   A positive relationship exists between online

> political participation and offline political participation.

H4: Political Use of Facebook, online political participation and offline political participation have significant relationship with each other

Methodology

In order to test the above-mentioned hypotheses, survey method has been adopted. The data is collected from the young students of University of the Punjab, Lahore. Rationale for selecting youth is that younger people are more active users of Internet and new technologies.[49] Moreover, it is thought that social networking sites (SNSs) have become an important tool for youth for the purpose of socialization [50] and especially for the sake of political discourse.[51] Particularly, being well educated, university students are more likely to use social media and Internet.[52] Thus young students are considered appropriate for the data collection of this study. Furthermore, rationale of selecting University of the Punjab is that it is the oldest university of Pakistan. Students from all over the country study here, subsequently the population is mixed of different provinces and socio-economic backgrounds.

Amongst the population of approximately 40,000 registered students of University of the Punjab, a random sample of students (N=416) was obtained by employing Yamane's (1967) formula[53]. Insofar as gender distribution (females 50.6% and males, 49.4%) is concerned, the acquired data is representative of the overall population of University of the Punjab. Besides, to ensure provincial representation, Punjab University students belonged to other provinces of Pakistan, have been deliberately included to the sample. In order to ensure reliability of the questionnaire, a pretest to the constructed questionnaire was administered to a sample of 50 students.

Variables and Scale Development: Various validated scales have been employed to measure the use of Facebook along with online and offline political participation.

Facebook Use: Insofar as Facebook use among University students is concerned, a thorough measure has been added into the survey. They have been asked to inform the approximate/estimated amount of time they usually spend in using Facebook (less than 1 to 3 hours per week 43.4%, M = 1.8193, SD = .80973). Besides, they have been asked to report the amount of time they spend for political use of Facebook (less than 1 to 3 hours per week, 71.8%, M = 1.3277, SD = .55914). Various options have been presented to respondents i.e. less than 1 to 3 hours per week, more than 3 to 7 hours per week, more than 7 hours per week.

Political Participation: Generally, political participation is categorized into two types i.e. online political participation and offline political participation. Sometimes, offline political participation is also referred as traditional political participation.

Online political participation: In this study, the typology of online political participation (i.e. Facebook political participation) has been derived from the Vitak et al.[54] and made it consistent with the situation in Pakistan. In order to measuring online (i.e. Facebook) political participation, a 14 items scale has been adopted (α= .897) and respondents have been asked to report different Facebook activities in which they took part during last 12 months. A 5- point-Likert scale has been used with the possible options of never (coded as 1), rarely (coded as 2), sometimes (coded as 3), often (coded as 4) and always (coded as 5).

Information asked about Facebook activities includes: added or deleted political information from your Facebook profile (never 40.5%, M = 2.13, SD = 1.193), added or deleted an application that deals with politics (never 42.4%, M = 2.07, SD = 1.160), became a ''fan'' of a political candidate or group (sometimes 25.8%, M = 2.31, SD = 1.252), discussed political information in a Facebook message (never 39.3%, M = 2.20, SD = 1.199), discussed political information using Facebook's instant

messaging system (never 42.9%, M = 2.15, SD = 1.228), joined or left a group about politics (never 43.6%, M = 2.13, SD = 1.216), posted a status update that mentions politics (never 42.7%, M = 2.20, SD = 1.248), posted a photo that has something to do with politics (never 36.1%, M = 2.26, SD = 1.215), posted a photo of someone at a political event (never 39.8%, M = 2.21, SD = 1.227), posted a wall comment about politics (never 38.1%, M = 2.21, SD = 1.227), posted a link about politics (never 43.1%, M = 2.19, SD = 1.278), posted a Facebook note that has something to do with politics (never 45.3%, M= 2.09, SD= 1.193), took a quiz/poll about politics (never 48%, M= 2.02, SD= 1.192) and invited to or invited by a friend to a political event (never 42.7%, M= 2.17, SD= 1.263).

Offline political participation: For the measurement of offline political participation, the scale developed by Pizzorno [55] meant for measuring offline political participation has been adopted and modified according to the situation in Pakistan.

For measurement of offline political participation, a 12-item scale/index has been adopted and respondents are asked to inform their involvement level (α= .901) in various traditional political activities during last 12 months. In order to obtain appropriate responses, a 5-point Likert-type scale has been used i.e. never (coded as 1), rarely (coded as 2), sometimes (coded as 3), often (coded as 4) and always (coded as 5).

The questions asked from respondents regarding offline participation include: hold political party office (never 76.1%, M = 1.43, SD = .898), been a candidate for office (never 69.6%, M= 1.52, SD= .950), worked for a political party or candidate (never 63.4%, M= 1.72, SD= 1.118), attended a political meeting (never 52.3%, M= 1.93, SD= 1.160), became an active member in a political party (never 60%, M= 1.84, SD= 1.192), contributed time for a political campaign (never 53.7%, M= 1.93, SD= 1.210), attended a political event or rally/Jalsa/Dharna (never 50.6%, M= 1.97, SD= 1.176), contributed money to a political party or candidate (never 65.8%, M= 1.71, SD= 1.148), contacted a public official or a political

leader (never 54.2%, M= 1.85, SD= 1.132), place a sticker or badge on the car or shoulder (never 50.1%, M= 1.99, SD=1.234), discussed political issues/events with friends and family (rarely 30.8%, M= 2.80, SD= 1.311), wrote a letter to a media organization regarding a political issue (never 63.4%, M= 1.73, SD= 1.126).

In this study, single item measures the credibility of social media. Respondents have been asked whether or not they consider the political content on social media more credible than traditional media (TV & Newspaper). Responses include, no (coded as 1), don't know (coded as 2) and yes (coded as 3).

Another single item has been included to ask the respondents about the factor that influences their political opinion most; responses include social media, traditional media (TV & Newspaper), family, peer group and other. In case of "other", one has to self-report the factor that influences one's opinion. Bedsides, students have also been asked to self-report their favorite political party (PTI 39.5%, M = 1.58, SD = 1.756) and whether they voted in last elections or not (yes 47%, M= 1.55, SD= .522).

Demographic variables of the study are age (M = 1.38, SD = .577) and gender (M = 1.51, SD = 0.501 and female 50.6 %). The survey period lasted for 4 weeks in January 2016, yielding a response rate of 98.8%.

Results

In order to examine the first hypothesis (H1) of the study i.e. relationship between time spent on Facebook and frequency of using Facebook for political purposes, a Pearson Chi-square test has been applied to data. Statistical analysis exposes that a significant relationship (Chi square value = 65.744, df = 4, p < 0.001) exists between both variables (see Table 1).

In this way, the finding of the study supports H1 that there is a significant relationship between the time spent on Facebook and frequency of using Facebook for political purposes.

Table 1
Relationship between time spent
on Facebook and political use of Facebook

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	65.744a	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	64.244	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	58.698	1	.000

a.1 cells (11.1%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.81.

Table 2 shows a Pearson's correlation matrix of three variables i.e. time spent for political use of Facebook, online and offline political participation. Statistically, time spent for political use of Facebook has been found correlated to online political participation (r = .479, p < 0.01) and offline political participation (r = .354, p < 0.01). Moreover, statistical analysis shows that online political participation is correlated to offline political participation (r = .609, p < 0.01).

Hence, results of the study support the hypotheses (i.e. H2 and H3) because a significant relationship is found between the time spent for political use of Facebook and online as well as offline political participation. Similarly, online political participation has been found significantly correlated to offline political participation.

Table 2
Pearson's correlation matrix of key variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Pol. use of FB	Online Participation	Offline Participation
Pol. use of FB	1.33	.56	-	-	-
Online Participation	30.39	11.21	.479**	-	-
Offline Participation	22.42	9.48	.354**	.609**	-

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 Level (2-tailed), N=415

The study also examines the online and offline political participation in terms of gender and for the purpose *t-test* has been

applied. Table 3 shows results of the means, standard deviations, and independent samples *t*-test of key variables. The data shows a significant difference in online and offline political participation across gender.

In this regard, statistically significant difference exists between online political participation of male students (t= 4.531, p < 0.01) and female students (t= 4.524, p=0.01). The evaluation of mean score also indicates that males (M= 32.85) actively participate in online political activities as compared to females (M= 27.98).

Insofar as offline political participation is concerned, a significant difference has been observed between male students (t= 7.10, p < 0.01) and female students (t= 7.519, p=0.01). Moreover, mean score also points out active participation of males (M= 25.74) in offline political activities however females (M= 19.17) remain less active comparatively (see Table 3).

Thus, the t-test results reveal that males are more likely to be active participants of both online and offline political activities as compared to females who remain less active.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and *t-test* results by gender of variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Female Mean	Male Mean	*T*	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Online participation	30.3904	22.4217	27.9857	32.8537	4.531 4.524	413 409.012	.000
Offline participation	11.21321	9.47782	19.1762	25.7463	7.519 7.10		.000

SD: standard deviation.
Total N = 415. Female N = 210. Male N = 205. Independent samples t-test by gender (equal variances not assumed).
*p < .05; **p < .01; (2-tailed)

With the aim of examining the online and offline political participation in terms of age, One-way ANOVA has been performed to data. Statistical analysis shows that F= 1.015, p=

.363, which indicates insignificant difference of online political participation of the respondents with reference to their age.

Insofar as the relationship of age with offline political participation is concerned, output of ANOVA test (F= 4.033, p= .018) shows that significance level stands 0.01, which is below 0.05. It means that a significant difference exists between offline political participation of the respondents with reference to their age (see Table 4).

Table 4
Descriptive (ANOVA) analysis in terms of age

Online participation					95% Confidence Interval for Mean		ANOVA	
Age	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	F	Sig
18-22 years	277	29.9856	11.37884	.68369	28.6397	28.6397	1.015	.363
23-26 years	118	31.5847	11.32453	1.04251	29.5201	29.5201		
More than 27 years	20	28.9500	7.46553	1.66934	25.4560	25.4560		
Total	415	30.3904	11.21321	.55043	29.3084	29.3084		
Offline Participation								
18-22 years	277	21.7401	9.46605	.56876	20.6204	22.8597	4.033	.018
23-26 years	118	24.4237	9.60182	.88392	22.6732	26.1743		
More than 27 years	20	20.0500	7.09689	1.58691	16.7286	23.3714		
Total	415	22.4217	9.47782	.46525	21.5071	23.3362		

In addition, Tukey HSD multiple comparisons test has also been applied to the data. Resultantly, in case of online political participation, no significant difference has been observed amongst different age groups.

But as far as offline political participation is concerned, significant difference is found amongst certain age groups. Results reveal that two age groups (i.e. 18-22 and 23-26 years) show significant difference (p= .026) (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1
Multiple Comparisons (ANOVA) test

Multiple Comparisons Tukey HSD						
Online participation (Dependent variable)						
(I) D3 Age	(J) D3 Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
18-22 years	23-26 years	-1.59919	1.23263	.397	-4.4986	1.3002
	More than 27 years	1.03556	2.59620	.916	-5.0713	7.1424
23-26 years	18-22 years	1.59919	1.23263	.397	-1.3002	4.4986
	More than 27 years	2.63475	2.71143	.595	-3.7431	9.0126
More than 27 years	18-22 years	-1.03556	2.59620	.916	-7.1424	5.0713
	23-26 years	-2.63475	2.71143	.595	-9.0126	3.7431
Offline Participation (Dependent variable)						
18-22 years	23-26 years	-2.68366*	1.03435	.026	-5.1167	-.2506
	More than 27 years	1.69007	2.17858	.718	-3.4344	6.8145
23-26 years	18-22 years	2.68366*	1.03435	.026	.2506	5.1167
	More than 27 years	4.37373	2.27527	.134	-.9782	9.7257
More than 27 years	18-22 years	-1.69007	2.17858	.718	-6.8145	3.4344
	23-26 years	-4.37373	2.27527	.134	-9.7257	.9782
*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.						

In order to test fourth hypothesis of the study (H4), Hierarchical regression has been applied to data. In matrix of hierarchical regression, offline participation has been inserted as dependent variable and subsequently independent variables (i.e. age, gender, political use of Facebook and online participation) are included stepwise.

In first model (M1), R-square value of demographic variables (i.e. age and gender) has been recorded 12.1%. In second model (M2) wherein time spent for political use of Facebook has been entered, R-square value has been found 20.5%. Subsequently in model 3, online political participation has been added as independent variable and its R-square value is noted 42.1 %.

It has been found that time spent for political use of Facebook and online political participation, bring change in R-square value. Although insignificant change has been caused in dependent variable i.e. offline participation, however overall model depicts that time spent on political use of Facebook and online political participation bring substantial change in offline political participation.

In every step of model, significance value remains constant (p < 0.001) which indicates that the model is appropriate to measure the relationship among variables and it has accurately measured that online political participation causes change in offline political participation.

Individual beta scores reveal that time spent for political use of Facebook (β = 902, p > 0.001) and age (β = .174, p > .001) are not significant predictors of offline political participation. On the other hand, online political participation of Facebook (β = .453, p < 0.001) and gender (β = -6.540, p < 0.001) are significant predictors of offline political participation (see Table 5).

Concisely, the model shows that time spent for political use of Facebook and age are not significant predictors of offline political participation, although both variables are significantly related to offline political participation. However, gender and online political participation are significant predictors of offline

participation, which means that gender and online political participation does affect offline political participation.

Hence, results of the study partially support H4 for the reason that online political participation is a significant predictor of offline political participation, however, time spent on Facebook for political purposes does not significantly predicts offline political participation.

Table 5
Hierarchal regression analysis

	Model	B	*T*	Sig.	R square	F	Sig
	(Constant)	32.031	17.086	.000		28.229	.000[b]
	Age	.174	.227	.821			
	Gender	-6.540	-7.391	.000	.121		
	(Constant)	24.396	11.485	.000		35.398	.000[c]
	Age	-.287	-.391	.696			
	Gender	-5.507	-6.430	.000			
	Political use of FB	5.058	6.623	.000	.205		
	(Constant)	13.576	6.738	.000		74.587	.000[d]
	Age	.105	.168	.867			
	Gender	-4.151	-5.609	.000			
	Political use of FB	.902	1.229	.220			
	Online Participation	.453	12.365	.000	.421		

a. Predictors: (Constant), Gender, Age
b. Predictors: (Constant), Gender, Age, political exposure of Facebook
c. Predictors: (Constant), Gender, Age, political exposure of Facebook, online participation

The results of the survey also show that most of the respondents (41.0%) consider political contents on social media more credible than traditional media (i.e. TV and newspapers). However, 34% respondents consider traditional media contents more credible than that of social media. Survey results illustrate that a considerable number of respondents (25.1%) don't have any opinions about the credibility of any media.

As far as factors that influence the political opinions are concerned, respondents (40.7 %) found traditional media more influential. Subsequently, social media (34.2 %) has been found influential. Small number of respondents considers that family (14.9 %) and peer group(s) (5.5 %) influences their political opinion most.

Moreover, PTI has been found as most favorite political party amongst respondents (39.5 %, M = 1.58, SD = 1.756), followed by Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (26.3 %, M = 1.58, SD = 1.756). However, a considerable number of students (23 %, M = 1.58, SD = 1.756) report that they don't assume any political party as favorite.

Conclusion

The study is aimed at examining the use of social media (i.e. Facebook) amongst the youth/ students and its subsequent influence on the level of their political participation. It has been concluded that a positive relationship lies between political activity and the length of time spent on the use of Facebook. In other words, the students who spend more time on Facebook are more involved to use it for political purposes. Similarly, the students who frequently use Facebook for political purposes are more active participants of online and offline political activities. Hence it may be presumed that those students who devote less time in political use of Facebook are less active politically, both online and offline, which further leads to the conclusion that online political participation is highly likely to shape an individual's offline political participation. Thus the more time a student spends being politically active on Facebook, the more active he will be in pursuing traditional political activities.

As far as political participation with respect to age is concerned, it has been ascertained that there is a direct correlation between offline/ traditional political participation and especially students aged between 18-22 and 23-26 years, have been found more active in traditional political endeavors. However, age does not determine/ encompass online political participation in its

entirety. Similarly, another factor that has been found to correlate with political participation amongst Facebook users is gender. In this study, males have been found to be more active in both offline and online participation. Contrarily, the level of political participation among females has been observed to be less active on a relative scale.

Conclusively, the study has determined that content credibility on Facebook is higher as compared to traditional media content. However, at the same time, traditional media is considered more forceful in terms of political opinion influence as compared to social media.

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