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Facebook Consumption, Political Participation and Pakistani Youth

Abstract

The use of social media for political communication has hiked exponentially in Pakistan in recent years. For this purpose, the use of Facebook has particularly been developed as a common practice amongst Pakistani youth. This study aims at exploring the role of Facebook with regards to the political participation of youth. For the purpose, a survey (n=400) was conducted among youngsters belonging to diversified demographics (i.e. gender, age, and urban/rural region). Findings of the study reveal that Facebook consumption does have an obvious influence on political participation of youth. Thus, frequent and/or regular users of Facebook have been found to be more politically inclined and engaged as compared to infrequent Facebook consumers. Furthermore, the statistical analysis of data also indicates that gender and regional background do influence the degree to which the youth depicts political participation.

Key words: Social media, Facebook, social media consumption, online political participation, offline political participation, Pakistani mass media, and Pakistani youth

Introduction

Pakistan, regardless of being stratified as third world country, has a very vibrant media industry (International Media Support, 2009), a provocatively charged political scenario and most importantly, highly motivated, energetic and spirited youth. Insofar as traditional media of Pakistan are concerned, Pakistani media emerged as one of the most permeable, unrestricted, and blunt in comparison to the rest of the world; in other words when it comes to media freedom, Pakistani media can easily be placed in the top worldwide rankings. In Pakistan, around 1052 Dailies (ABC report, 2015) and 97 television channels (PEMRA, 2016) are functioning quite autonomously.

It is relevant to mention that "politics" has been the most favorite subject of Pakistani mass media and mostly media discourse is engrossed more on "National politics" than on any other social phenomenon (Mahsud, Chaudary, & Madni, 2013; Sabir, 2012; The Nation, 2015). Regrettably, as a consequence, many other important issues often remain unheeded as far as media discourse is concerned (Zaheer, 2016).

Social media is a relatively recent addition and extension to mass media in Pakistan. In modern world, social media is thought of as more influential as far as the public discourse and communication in the society are concerned. Particularly, the use of social media has most commonly been applied to political communication context. Some of the most vivid instances of the digital connectivity and political use of social media are the presidential election campaigns of Barrack Obama in 2008 (Hellweg, 2011; Payne, 2009; Smeltzer & Keddy, 2010) and then again in 2012 (DeHart, 2016; Hawng, 2016; Raoof et al., 2013), Arab Spring in 2011 (Wihbey, 2015), and recent reaction of Turkish Public against attempted Coup (Mackey, 2016; Srivastava, 2016). Another remarkable example of the same phenomenon can be noticed in the coverage given to the 58th presidential elections of United States.

Scholars belonging to diverse schools of thought have centered their focus on exploring the relationship of social media with its consumers. The findings of their studies suggest that social media consumption does not only influence the opinions of users (Ali, Jan, & Iqbal, 2013; Gionis, Terzi, & Tsaparas, 2013) but also affect their political participation (Biswas, Ingle, & Roy, 2014; Javaid & Elahi, 2014). Another thought-provoking observation put forth by researchers is that such a political utility of social media escalates online as well as offline political participation of users (Holt et al., 2013; Tang & Lee, 2013; Vaccari et al., 2015; Valenzuela, 2013; Zhang & Lin, 2014). Most evidently among other modes of social media, Face book (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011) and

Twitter are believed to cast impact on political participation of consumers (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). The life-affirming catalyst to the inevitable popularity and effectiveness of social media is the fact that social media provides for a two-way flow of communication which was not conveniently possible in traditional media forms as audience mostly had to remain on the receiving end only.

Scholars have pointed out unique role of social media in controlled media societies; the effect of social media increases tenfold in terms of political participation in a controlled or authoritarian media. Supporting this finding, Singapore can be regarded as an example in which restricted media-environments catalyzed public's inclination towards social media and, consequently, it mobilized online political participation of consumers (Skoric, Pan, & Poor, 2012). In the same context, the people of Malaysia also get politically motivated through the use of social media (Muhamad, 2015; Smeltzer & Kiddy, 2010).

As far as the Pakistani scenario is concerned, the last decade saw a remarkable hike in the age of communication lead by telecom – today the general masses have far more access and are far more concerned about politics than ever before, which can be noted through the recently-increased and still increasing extensive use of social media in political context. It is note-worthy that almost all political parties of the country utilize social media in order to disseminate their political ideologies, opinions and views for general masses. Political leaders instantaneously pass on their day-to-day statements, plans and news to public through social media (Abbasi, 2013). It may be claimed that diffusion of social media is as rampant and fast in Pakistan as in any other developed country of the world. Social media has attracted the participation or, at least, the interest of millions of Pakistanis over the past few years (Khan & Shahbaz, 2015). Categorically analyzing, Pakistani youth are particularly considered as the prime consumer of this new media. It is quite relieving and inspiring to observe that Pakistani youth use social media for social purposes as well. In recent past, they have been involved in fund raising activities for IDPs, sharing concerns and information about health, bringing job opportunities into public notice and disseminating religious material through various social media (Shiekh, 2011). But just like any other form of traditional media in Pakistan, social media is majorly being employed to discuss "politics and political affairs".

In the General Elections (2013) of Pakistan, the boom of social media in terms of frequent usage was at its peak. PTI especially, targeted the youth through social media and became successful in inclining urban youth towards political participation (The Express Tribune, 2012; 2013, Hassan, 2013). Following the massive visibility of PTI and considering the importance of new media, other prominent political parties also benefited from social media as an important tool for their election campaign to strengthen their vote bank (Abbasi, 2013; Atta, 2013). Even after general elections 2013, opposition and ruling parties along with their supporters seemed quite active on social media and it was often felt that political fights were being fought on the social media front.

In addition to this, if we analyze the current state of affairs, Pakistani youth have an exceptionally high rate of engagement with this platform whereby opinions, views and sentiments are expressed, exchanged and rebutted without interruption. The impact of social media is so powerful that it does impact political scenario of the country; and ultimately concerned authorities feel compelled to pay heed to the voice of masses (Ali et al., 2013). Facebook especially has turned out to be an influential tool towards influencing the political participation of youth (Zaheer, 2016). However, it is a matter of great concern that social media gives vent to increased political polarization (Yusuf & Schoemaker, 2013), prejudice, immorality and intolerance amongst Pakistani youth.

Considering the growing use of social media amongst youth in Pakistan, current study intends to examine the role of Facebook towards political participation of youth. The rationale of selecting "Facebook and youth" is that face book remains the most popular social media tool used in Pakistan and youth being the primary users. Thus the study examines the following research questions:

R1: Does any relationship exist between time spent on face book and frequency of using face book for political reasons?
R2: Does any relationship exist between time spent on face book for political reasons and political participation?
R3: Are online political participation and offline political participation related with each other?
R4: Does demographics of youth (i.e. age, gender and region) relate with their political participation?

Methodology: In order to study these research questions, a survey (n=400) was conducted employing a random sampling method. The data was collected from four different universities of Pakistan ensuring equal gender representation. Insofar as regional background is concerned, 50% respondents belonged to rural background and remaining 50% from urban areas. With the aim of

measuring the political participation, two scales were employed. Online political participation scale was derived from the Vitak et al (2011) and offline political participation scale was taken from Pizzorno (1972). These scales were made compatible according to Pakistani society before the survey.

Results

R1: In order to study whether time spent on Facebook relates with frequency of using Facebook for political reasons, a Pearson Chi-square test has been applied to data. Statistical analysis exposes that both variables (Chi square value = 87.421[a], df = 4, p < 0.001) are related with each other. In this way, the finding of the study endorses R1 and confirms that a significant relationship is found between the time spent on Facebook and frequency of using Facebook for political reasons (see Table 1).

Table 1. Relationship between times spent on Facebook and political use of Facebook

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	87.421[a]	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	90.786	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	76.340	1	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.74. N= 400

R2: The second research question of this study is intended for observing the relationship of time spent on Face book for political reasons with political participation. Since participation is divided into online and offline participation, relationship of both types of participation with time period has been examined. For the purpose, Pearson's correlation test was applied to data. It has been found that a statistically significant relationship exists between both variables. The findings show that time spent on Facebook for political reasons is correlated to both online political participation (r = .357, p < 0.01) and offline political participation (r = .287, p < 0.01). (see Table 2).

R3: Insofar as the mutual relationship of online and offline political participation is concerned, results reveal that both are related with each other. Statistical analysis shows that online political participation is correlated to offline political participation (r = .618, p < 0.01) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Pearson's correlation matrix of key variables

Variables	Pol. use of FB	Online Participation	Offline Participation
Pol. use of FB	-	-	-
Online Participation	.357**	-	-
Offline Participation	.287**	.618**	-

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 Level (2-tailed), N=400

R4: Fourth research question of the study quests the relationship of demographic factors (i.e. gender, age, region) with political participation of Pakistani youth. In order to examine this relationship, various tests have been applied according to the nature of data.

Gender: In order to examine the online and offline political participation in terms of gender, *t-test* has been applied to data. Table 3 shows results of the means, standard deviations, and independent samples *t*-test of key variables. The data expresses a statistically significant difference in online and offline political participation of male (t= 4.818, p < 0.01) and female students (t= 4.804, p<0.01). The assessment of mean score denotes that males (M= 2.2949) actively participate in online political activities as compared to females (M= 1.8987). See table 3

Also in offline political participation, a significant difference has been observed between male students (t= 6.505, p < 0.01) and female students (t= 6.750, p=0.01). Moreover, mean score points out active participation of males (M= 2.1671) in offline political activities however females (M= 1.6399) remain less active comparatively. 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 (see Table 3).

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	2.1384	.826114	1.8987	2.2949	4.818	398	.000
					4.804	332.551	
Offline participation	1.9589	.83232	1.6399	2.1671	6.505		.000
					6.750		

SD: standard deviation. Total N = 400. Female N = 158. Male N = 242. Independent samples t-test by gender (equal variances not assumed). *p < .05; **p < .01; (2-tailed)

Age: With the intention of examining the online and offline political participation in terms of age, One-way ANOVA has been applied to data. Statistical analysis shows an insignificant relationship (F= 2.358, p= 0.96) between age and online political participation. In addition, Tukey HSD multiple comparisons test also shows that, in case of online political participation, no significant difference is found amongst different age groups (see Table 4.1).

Contrarily, in case of offline political participation, output of ANOVA test (F= 3.344, p= .03) shows that significance level stands 0.03, which is below 0.05. Statistical analysis indicates that a significant difference exists between offline political participation and age (see Table 4). Moreover, Tukey HSD multiple comparisons test indicates a significant difference amongst two age groups (i.e. 18-22 and 23-26 years) and reveal a significant difference (p= .027) (see Table 4.1).

Table 4. Descriptive (ANOVA) analysis in terms of age

Online participation				F	Sig
18-22 years	278	2.0899	.84500	2.358	.096
23-26 years	104	2.2103	.79959		
More than 27 years	18	2.4722	.56808		
Total	400	2.1384	.82614		
Offline participation					
18-22 years	278	1.8933	.84979	3.344	.036
23-26 years	104	2.1389	.80179		
More than 27 years	18	1.9321	.57311		
Total	400	1.9589	.83232		

Table 4.1. Multiple Comparisons (ANOVA) test

(I) D3 Age	(J) D3 Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Online participation (Dependent variable)			
18-22 years	23-26 years	-.12041	.412
	More than 27 years	-.38229	.137
23-26 years	18-22 years	.12041	.412
	More than 27 years	-.26189	.427
More than 27 years	18-22 years	.38229	.137
	23-26 years	-.12041	.412
Online participation (Dependent variable)			
18-22 years	23-26 years	.26189	.427
	More than 27 years	-.24560*	.027
23-26 years	18-22 years	-.03881	.980
	More than 27 years	.24560*	.027
More than 27 years	18-22 years	.20679	.591
	23-26 years	.03881	.980

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Region: t-test has been applied to data to observe the political participation in terms of urban and rural classification. The data indicates a significant difference in online and offline political participation of youth across region (i.e. urban and rural).

Thus, a statistically significant difference (t= -2.536, p < 0.01) exists between online political participation of urban and rural youth. The evaluation of mean score also indicates that rural youth (M= 2.425) actively participate in online political activities as compared to urban (M= 2.0344) youth.

Similarly in offline political participation, a significant difference has been observed between urban and rural youth (t= -4.069, p < 0.01). Moreover, mean score also points out active participation of rural youth (M= 2.1250) in offline political activities, however, urban youth (M= 1.7928) remain less active comparatively (see Table 5).

In a nutshell, the results of t-test results reveal that rural students are more likely to be active participants of both online and offline political activities as compared to urban students who remain less active.

Table 5. Means, Standard Deviations, and *t-test* results by Urban and Rural classification of variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Urban Mean	Rural Mean	*T*	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Online participation	2.1384	.826114	2.0344	2.2425	-2.536	398 332.551	.012
Offline participation	1.9589	.83232	1.7928	2.1250	-4.069		.000

SD: standard deviation.

Total N = 400. Urban N = 200. Rural N = 200. Independent samples t-test by urban and rural (equal variances not assumed). *p < .05; **p < .01; (2-tailed)

Conclusion

This study aims at exploring the role of Facebook in political participation of youth in Pakistan. For the purpose, the relationship of Facebook consumption with online and offline political participation was analyzed. Considering the results of the study, it is reasoned that Facebook does have a pivotal role in promoting and enhancing political participation amongst Pakistani youth. The statistical results led to the inference that a significant relationship exists between Facebook consumption and political participation. Another noteworthy conclusion drawn from the current study is that Face book exerts an inevitable influence on the online as well as offline political activities of youth.

The findings from the study further indicate that the more time youth would invest into Facebook, the more would be their inclination or tendency towards political use of Face book. Furthermore, the youth involved in using Facebook with political motives will be more active from political point of view. It has been explored that online political participation does influence the offline participation of youth. Youngsters who choose to be more active or vigilant in Facebook political engagements would ultimately be more prone to indulge in active participations towards offline or traditional political activities.

As far as gender-wise dynamics of Pakistani youth's political activities on Facebook are concerned, the study indicates female respondents as less active participants in online as well as offline political activities in comparison to their male counterparts. However, intervening variables like 'cultural reasons' should not be ignored in this regard as Pakistan is still considered as more or less a patriarchal society where men seem to be more mobilized and active comparatively in unconventional activities. In Pakistan, politics is largely thought to be a male-oriented domain and therefore, the results of this study might be indicative of this situation. On the other hand, quite surprisingly, urbanite youth have been found as lesser active participants of online as well as offline political activities as compared to rural youth. However, the general impression or assumption is that urban youth are heavily frequent consumers of social media and they are thought of as comparatively more involved in traditional political activities, however, the results of this study contradicted this general impression.

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