IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL DECISION MAKING AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The present study examines the impact of social media use on political participation and political decision-making among young adults in Pakistan. The research was divided into three Phases. Phase 1 was executed to translate the measurement instrument and to determine their psychometric properties, whereas Phase 2 was a pilot study. Phase 3 was the main study that accounted for the testing of hypotheses. Independent samples of university students for Phase-1 (N = 200), Phase-2, pilot study (N = 200), and Phase-3, main study (N = 500) were collected by the researcher. Social Networking Usage Questionnaire (Gupta & Bashir, 2018), Political Participation Scale (Gopal & Verma, 2017), Political Decision Making Scale (Lau et al., 2018), and Urdu translated version of the Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness subscales of NEO-Five Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) were used to operationalize the constructs and collection of data through convenient sampling technique. Results elucidated social media usage overall and its components, socialization and informativeness, as positive predictors of political Participation, Whereas social media use for academic purposes negatively predicted political participation. The relationship between social media use for entertainment purposes and political participation was found to be non-significant. Moreover, social media use for academic and entertainment purposes positively predicted political decision-making. Overall, these findings emphasize the significant role of social media in political participation and decision-making among young adults. Limitations of the study and its implications have also been discussed for further exploration of this domain.

Keywords. Social Media Use, Political Participation, Political Decision Making.

INTRODUCTION

Information exchange and communication technology significantly changed the globe over ten years ago. For example, digital media alters interpersonal relationships, interaction methods, and social and political discourse.

Social Media

Social media refers to digital technologies, usually apps and websites, enabling users to share and receive digital content over social networks. Major social media websites include Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Social media facilitates relationships among users from different backgrounds, creating a strong social structure that generates vast information, providing exceptional value to users. Social media platforms provide everything from news updates, entertainment, emotional support, workplace management, and fashion trends (Greenwood & Gopal, 2015).

Social media has achieved unprecedented global reach, transforming how billions of people interact, communicate, and access information. In 2019, WhatsApp and YouTube each had over one billion subscribers, while Facebook, the largest social media network globally, had 2.4 billion members (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2023). With over 3.5 billion internet users in 2019, out of the 7.7 billion people on the planet, these numbers are astounding. It can be inferred that over two-thirds of online users use social media and that one in three people worldwide utilize these platforms.

Social media provide new learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom, helping teachers with professional and educational development and scholarly communication (Greenhow et al., 2019). Sharing research through social media allows the dissemination of fresh content. As research is fundamentally about generating new knowledge, social media presents an exciting avenue for

presenting this information to a wider audience (Rogers, 2019), besides the benefits of improved communication and learning. It also raises concerns such as identity falsification, sexting, and mental health issues among young users (Hadjipanayis et al., 2019). Still, individuals who use social media thoughtfully and deliberately tend to impact their sense of self-determined well-being positively (Gudka et al., 2023). In the stress-coping process, social media can serve three primary purposes: as resources, as coping aids, and as stressors. (Wolfers & Utz, 2022).

Social media usage as a news source is growing, posing concerns about information authenticity. Social media users' trust in news is impacted by the news outlet's credibility and the reliability of the person sharing it (Sterrett et al., 2019). Confirmation bias hinders users' ability to distinguish true from false news, with only 17% accurately identifying fake news (Moravec et al., 2018). It is necessary to evaluate the news critically to avoid misinformation on social media. The ability to critically assess news was predicted by three factors: internal motivation for seeking news, scepticism about personalized social media algorithms, and active tracking of news sources (Ku et al., 2019).

Sharing intentions on social media are driven by the emotional impact of content (evocativeness) and the perceived accuracy. Surprisingly, a strong emotional response correlated with a higher desire to share, even when the content was less accurate (Chen et al., 2023).

Social media marketing is how small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) interact with their customers, enhancing brand awareness and boosting revenue. Social media provides cost-effectiveness, ease of use, and social influence, which are key to adopting social media marketing in SMEs. When businesses actively engage with their audience on social media, it fosters a sense of closeness, leading to increased commenting activity and more favourable perceptions of the company's social responsibility efforts (Lew & Stohl, 2023).

Utilizing social media for professional purposes is motivated by the need to project competence, whereas using it for personal interactions is associated with a desire for autonomy and relationships. (Wei et al., 2022).

Social media have transformed the world. The swift and extensive adoption of these technologies has altered how people search for partners, obtain news, and rally for political reforms. In this vein, social media use has also significantly impacted political participation by providing increased accessibility to political information, fostering political discussions, mobilizing citizens for activism, and facilitating user-generated content. It has empowered grassroots movements, enabled targeted political campaigns, and amplified viral political content, all encouraging active engagement in the political process.

Political Participation and Social Media

Political participation is "all practises that citizens undertake to influence the selection of leaders and the policies they pursue". These activities can take various forms, from voting and joining political parties to engaging in protest and online activism. (Van Deth's, 2016). There are five distinct political participation profiles, so it is necessary to consider multiple democratic perspectives to comprehend the effects of political engagement. Five different political participation profiles are given: 1 (Those who vote habitually) 2 (Feel obligated to vote) 3 (Exhibit low political interest) 4 (with educational attainment) 5 (age influencing political activity) (Jeroense & Spierings, 2023).

Active political Participation by Finland's students often went unnoticed by adults, sparking questions about the nature of political engagement (Suni & Mietola, 2023). Political engagement has educational benefits, influencing self-directed learning and shaping post-compulsory education choices and future career perspectives (Breeze et al., 2023). Although the relationship between education and political engagement is still complicated, the quality of civic education is a crucial factor (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022).

In different parts of the world, barriers to political participation vary. Jordanian students, for instance, face obstacles linked to demographics, low income, regional affiliation, political dissatisfaction, and gender inequality in education and employment (Alelaimat, 2023). Meanwhile, Malaysian youth's political participation is influenced by their social environment and mass media (Yaakub et al., 2023).

The role of different factors in political participation is very complex. For example, political incivility negatively predicts political trust. In contrast, its impact on political participation is practically negligible and subject to bias (Van't Riet &Van Stekelenburg, 2022). Encouraging and facilitating youth participation in various forms, addressing barriers, and fostering political engagement are vital for the sustained vitality and growth of democratic societies (Weiss, 2020). The digital age has reshaped political engagement, driven by issues like identity, social networks, and emotions. They enable novel mobilization methods, like online petitions and social media campaigns, and emphasize their potential to enhance accessibility and inclusivity in political participation, particularly for marginalized communities (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

Social media has significantly altered the landscape of political Participation by introducing new dynamics and roles for platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Traditional factors no longer fully explain these changes; a New conceptual framework is required to understand how political participation is changing in the digital age. (Theocharis et al., 2023). Marginalized youth aged 13-17 primarily rely on digital media for political information (Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2023). Exposure to political and social media content has become important in shaping individuals' political attitudes, behaviours, and engagement in modern societies. Matthes et al. (2023) found that exposure to political social media content positively affected low-effort political participation but had no significant impact on high-effort engagement. Political participation is positively associated with social media use for news, particularly in relational and expressive contexts. (Kim, 2023)

Social media enhances online political engagement among youth by encouraging political discussions and Participation (Intyaswati & Fairuzza, 2023). Social media in Pakistan positively influenced young voters' political engagement, indirectly enhancing it by affecting political interest, efficacy, expression, and partisanship, demonstrating its significant role in boosting political activity (Tariq et al., 2022). As we delve into political participation, it becomes evident that digital technologies are crucial in shaping how they engage with politics and transforming their political decision-making processes, enabling citizens to influence policy-making and governance through their active involvement and expressions on digital platforms.

Social Media and Political Decision Making

 Decision-making strategies are a collection of cognitive and physical operations people use to arrive at a decision. These strategies involve gathering relevant information, evaluating it, and selecting from multiple possibilities for action (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006)

Motivated reasoning, influenced by existing beliefs, significantly influences decision-making, especially within politics, potentially fostering polarisation and bias (Bolsen & Palm 2019). Making decisions in research and development (R&D) requires combining political, intuitive, and logical thinking, depending on factors like the type of decision and company culture. They found that focusing on procedural rationality reduces political behaviour in strategic decision-making (Kolbe et al., 2020)

Social media profoundly impacts politics, influencing public opinion, attitude, and behavior by serving as a platform for candidates to communicate their beliefs to the public (Biswas et al., 2014). It's particularly important for political decision-making among younger voters (Mariano et al., 2021). However, this influence is not without challenges, as it intensifies polarisation and creates filter bubbles, yet it also offers benefits like enhanced citizen engagement and collective action coordination (Pierce, 2020). In essence, social media is transforming the landscape of political decision-making, with its effects expected to grow as more people embrace it. Social networking sites influence political attitudes and behaviour through the type of political information shared, social interaction levels, and individual user characteristics (Zhang et al., 2010).

Exposure to political misinformation on social media also significantly impacts voting decisions, particularly for less politically knowledgeable individuals and those who frequently access social networking sites for political news. It is necessary to enhance media literacy and critical thinking abilities to aid people in navigating the challenging environment of political information on social media (Mukherjee & Rentschler, 2023). Several things can affect how social media affects political decision-making, including the type of political information presented on these platforms, the level

of social interaction among users, and the individual characteristics of users. (NazimSha & Rajeswari, 2018). People's political opinions and voting patterns are greatly influenced by political activists on social media (Frimpong et al., 2020)

The study examines social media's influence on political participation and political decision-making among young adults in Pakistan. Due to the growing global use of social media, it become a crucial platform for political communication, information dissemination, and mobilization, especially among young adults. So, it is important to comprehend how social media affects people's political engagement and decision-making. Moreover, the current study wants to fill the research gap in Pakistan, where there is a lack of quantitative studies on the role of social media in political participation and political decision-making. Thus, this study will provide valuable insights into how social media usage influences political participation and political decision-making among young adults in Pakistan.

This study is poised to significantly contribute to the ongoing discourse regarding the transformation of social media, political engagement and decision-making in developing countries, exemplified by Pakistan. Through its empirical investigations, the research will illuminate the potential ways social media can enhance political participation and decision-making.

Figure 1 The Conceptual Framework of the Study
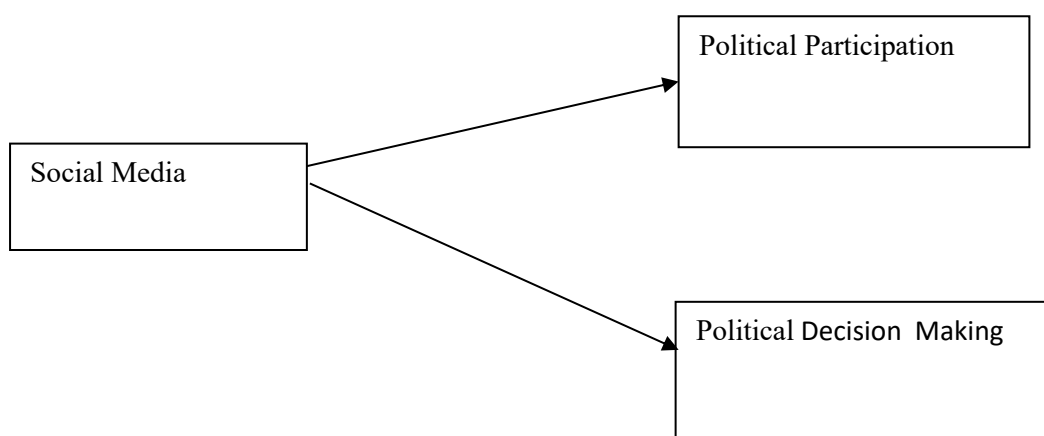
METHOD

The main objectives of the study are given below:

Social media usage will predict political participation in young adults.

Social media usage will predict political decision-making in young adults.

Research Design

The current study was based on a quantitative research method. The research design of this study is correlational survey research design. In correlational research, variables of interest in a sample of subjects are studied once, and the relationship among variables is determined. The study's objective was to investigate the impact of social media use on political participation and political decision-making among young adults.

Sample

The sample includes university students in the Bachelor of Science (BS) and MPhil programs at the University of Sargodha. The sample was collected from four faculties: Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Management Sciences, and Arts—the selection of these faculties aimed to capture a diverse range of academic disciplines and perspectives. The sample size consisted of (N = 500) students, who were further categorized as boys (n = 300) and girls (n = 200). Participants in the present study are young adults aged between 18 to 25 years (M = 21.62, SD = 1.75).

Instruments

Social media use is measured through the "*Social Networking Usage Questionnaire*" developed by Gupta and Bashir (2018). It contained 19 statements with four subscales of academic, socialization, entertainment and informativeness social media uses. All subscale anchored on five five-point Likert

scale whose format of response ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Internal consistency reported by authors was .83.

Political participation measured through *Political Participation Scale* developed by Gopal and Verma (2017). It contained 18 statements with five five-point Likert response formats ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The alpha coefficient reported by the authors wa .78.

Political Decision-Making was measured through the *Political Decision-Making Scale* developed by Lau et al. (2018). It comprised 13 statements in a Likert response format ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Reliability coefficients for subscales across various studies varied between .46 and .72.

Procedure

Before executing the study plan, the Department of Psychology, University of Sargodha's ethical approval committee reviewed and approved this study. The data for the present study was collected through a purposive sampling technique. The scales were translated into Urdu using the back translation method recommended by Brislin (1970), and their psychometric properties were assured. After getting permission from the relevant authorities, the data was collected from different departments of the University of Sargodha. The author contacted the participants directly and provided a briefing about the study's objectives. After ensuring participants' informed consent, questionnaires were handed out with instructions on how to respond to questionnaires. All participants were assured that their personal data would be kept private and used only for research. Data was then loaded into SPSS 22, and an analysis was performed to determine the outcomes.

Results

In order to accomplish the objective of the present study, certain statistical analyses were applied to collect data. Alpha reliability accounted for psychometric soundness, Pearson correlation was computed to examine relationship patterns among variables, whereas simple linear and multiple regression analyses were used to test hypotheses.

Table 1 *Mean, Standard Deviation, Alpha Reliabilities and Range for all Study Variables.*

Variables	M	SD	α	Range
Social Networking Usage Questionnaire	64.17	11.38	.82	21-94
Academic	25.43	4.78	.67	7-35
Socialisation	10.85	3.49	.67	4-19
Entertainment	14.50	3.64	.68	4-20
Informativeness	10.38	2.56	.47	3-15
Political Participation	34.77	12.50	.89	18-81
Political decision-making scale	39.36	9.05	.77	14-63

Note. SMUQ = social-media usage questionnaire; PPS = political participation scale; PDMS = political decision-making scale.

Table 1 manifests the mean, standard deviation and alpha reliabilities of scales used in the study. Alpha reliabilities of all variables used in the current study ranged from .47 to .89. Reliabilities of all scales were satisfactory. In contrast, informativeness has the lowest reliability value, i.e., .47. Political participation has the highest reliability value, i.e., 89.

Table 2 *Pearson Correlation among Study Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.SMU	-	.67***	.83**	.65**	.72***	.22**	.28**
2.So		-	.34**	.35**	.27**	.31**	.21**
3.Ac			-	.46**	.52**	.07	.22**
4.In				-	.27**	.27**	.24**
5.En					-	.06	.17**
6.PP						-	.40**
7.PDM							-

Note. SMU = social-media usage questionnaire; So = socialization; Ac = Academic; In = Intertainment; En = Entertainment; PP = political participation scale; PDM = political decision-making scale.

Table 2 describes the inter-correlation between all study variables among young adults. It suggested that social media use significantly correlates with all its subscales, socialization, academics, Informativeness and Entertainment. Social media use also positively correlates with political participation and decision-making. Socialization positively correlates with academics, Informativeness and Entertainment, political participation, and political decision-making. Academics positively correlate with Informativeness, Entertainment, and political decision-making. Informativeness positively correlates with entertainment, political participation, and political decision-making. Entertainment shows a positive correlation with political decision-making. Political participation shows a positive correlation with political decision-making.

Table 3 *Regression Coefficients of Social-Media Usage Predicting Political Participation among Young Adults (N = 500)*

Variables	B	SE	t	p	95%CI
			Political Participation		
Social-Media Use	.25***	.05	5.14	.000	[.15, .34]
R^2	.05				
			Political decision making		
Social Media Use	.23***	.03	6.65	.000	[.16, .29]
R^2	.08				

***$p < .001$.

Table 3 suggested that predictor variables of social media usage explained 5% of the variance in political participation. Overall, the model was significant {$F (1, 498) = 26.47$, $p < .001$} and the predictor social media use ($\beta = .25$, p < .01) were a significant positive predictor of political participation. And 8% of the variance in political decision-making is explained by a predictor of social media usage. Overall, the model was significant {$F (1, 498) = 44.26$, $p < .001$} and the predictor social media use ($\beta = .23$, p < .01) were a significant positive predictor of political participation.

Table 4

Regression Coefficients of Social-Media Usage for socialization, academic, informativeness and entertainment purposes predicting Political Participation among Young Adults. (N = 500)

Variables	B	SE	t	p	95%CI
Constant	20.89***	3.08	6.77	.000	[14.84, 26.96]
Socialisation	.97***	.16	5.88	.000	[.64, 1.29]
Academic	-.29*	.14	-2.09	.038	[-.57, -.02]
Informativeness	1.12***	.24	4.75	.000	[.66, 1.59]
Entertainment	-.06	.17	-.35	.726	[-.39, .27]

*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 4 suggests the impact of socialization, academics, Informativeness and Entertainment on political participation among young adults. the r^2 value of .14 revealed that the predictors explained 14% variance with {$F (4, 495) = 19.52$, $p < .001$}. The findings revealed that socialization positively predicted political participation ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), and entertainment has a non-significant effect on political participation ($\beta = -.01$, $p < .001$). Academic negetively predicted political participation ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). Informativeness positively predicted political participation ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$).

Table 5

Regression Coefficients of Social-Media Usage for socialization, academic, informativeness and entertainment purposes predicting Political decision making among Young Adults. (N = 500)

Variables	B	SE	t	p	95%CI
Constant	24.55***	2.28	10.75	.000	[14.84, 26.96]
Socialisation	.31*	.12	2.54	.011	[.64, 1.29]
Academic	.17	.10	1.69	.092	[-.57, -.02]
Informativeness	.49**	.17	2.80	.005	[.66, 1.59]
Entertainment	.13	.12	1.03	.300	[-.39, .27]

*p < .05. ***p < .001.*

Table 5 shows the impact of socialization, academics, informativeness, and entertainment on political participation among young adults. The r^2 value of .09 revealed that the predictors explained 9% variance with {$F_{(4, 495)}$ = 12.18, $p < .001$}. The findings revealed that socialization ($β$ = .12, $p < .05$) and informativeness ($β$ = .14, $p < .005$) positively predicted political decision-making. Academic ($β$ = .09, $p > .05$) and Entertainment ($β$ = .05, $p > .05$) has non-significant effect on political decision-making.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the impact of social media use on political participation and decision-making among young adults. There is a significant positive relationship between social media use and political participation. Social media plays a crucial role in political information and mobilization in Pakistan. This aligns with the findings of previous researchers (Ahmad et al., 2019; Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020), who also emphasized the role of social media use in political engagement among youth.

People, especially young adults, use social media for socialization, and the study found that social media use for socialization enhances young adults' political participation. These platforms (Facebook, Instagram & twitter, etc) act as online communities because people with mutual interests develop connections and engage in conversations that align with their interests. People with political interests engage in political conversation, attracting others to political debates, leading to increased political participation. These findings are consistent with previous research (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Orehek & Human, 2017).

One of the key functions which social media serves is information dissemination. The present study finds that social media use for informativeness enhances political participation. People use social media networks to keep themselves updated. Social media not only provide information about current trends but also impact their awareness and understanding of politics. Young adults access diverse political information, different sources and emerging perspectives. These activities enhance their political insight and motivate them to participate in political activities or join different political organizations. This conclusion is supported by earlier research by Gilardi et al. (2022)

Although social media use for academic purposes negatively impacts political participation. This counterintuitive finding suggests that when young adults focus extensively on academic content on social media, they may limit their exposure to diverse political perspectives and discussions, thus reducing their political engagement.

However, social media usage for entertainment negatively predicts the study does not support political participation. Social media platforms are primarily designed for entertainment, aligning with the inherent purpose of these platforms.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complicated link between social media use and their impact on political participation among young adults. It also emphasized the specific nature of social media, which shapes political engagement, and how these platforms can facilitate and hinder political participation depending on usage patterns. The underlying mechanisms and contextual elements that affect these relationships require more detailed research.

This comprehensive study explored the intricate relationship between social media usage and the political decision-making processes of young adults, revealing significant insights. Active engagement with social media platforms emerges as a crucial factor that profoundly influences political decision-making, aligning with prior research like Power and Phillips-Wren (2011), emphasizing the indispensable role of social media in fostering political discussions and facilitating information exchange among young adults.

The finding suggested that utilizing social media for informativeness positively predicts political decision-making. Young adults who follow reputable sources on social media gain a comprehensive understanding of political matters and become discerning information consumers, as exemplified by Ushigome et al. (2019). Engaging with social media platforms for socializing can also have a beneficial impact on the political decision-making abilities of young individuals. Social media platforms allow young adults to connect with individuals from various backgrounds, including diverse political beliefs. Engaging in socialization on social media exposes young adults to different political viewpoints, allowing them to gain a broader understanding of political issues. Kahne et al. (2012) conclude that social media usage provides diverse exposure opportunities. This exposure to diverse perspectives promotes critical thinking and encourages individuals to evaluate various arguments and evidence, ultimately enhancing their political decision-making abilities.

Interestingly, the study uncovers non-significant relationships between academic and entertainment purposes, social media use and political decision-making. This suggests that individuals who employ social media for academic pursuits or entertainment may experience no distinct influence on political decision-making.

The non-significant correlation between academic purpose social media use and political decision-making could be attributed to the potential influence of algorithms and echo chambers used in social media, potentially limiting exposure to diverse political information on these platforms, similar to findings related to political participation.

In summary, this study underscores social media's pivotal and multifaceted role in shaping the political decision-making process among young adults. It serves as a platform for encountering diverse perspectives and nurturing critical thinking.

Implications

This research has important applications for many stakeholders. It emphasizes how important it is for political parties and other governmental organizations to create focused and successful social media strategies to engage and inspire their political stalwarts, particularly the platform's capacity to influence their political engagement and decision-making. The study shows how important it is for educational institutions to encourage students to utilize social media in a balanced way. Individuals, particularly young adults, may enhance their political engagement by socializing and learning via social media. Making informed political decisions might result from interacting with various viewpoints and trustworthy information sources on social media. In conclusion, the research highlights the importance of strategic social media use in fostering political engagement and informed decision-making among young adults in Pakistan. It offers useful insights for educators, policymakers, and individuals.

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