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THE INFLUENCE OF FACEBOOK ON POLITICAL POLARIZATION ON THE STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITIES IN ISLAMABAD

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Abstract

This study examined how Facebook usage was related to political polarization among university students in Islamabad, Pakistan. This research was linked with Uses and Gratifications theory; the research asked whether patterns of Facebook engagement especially time spent on the platform were associated with heightened political participation and more polarized political beliefs. A mixed-methods project was undertaken, with this article reported the quantitative components. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, using a closed-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms. Data were collected through simple random sampling from students at two universities in Islamabad. The instrument captured respondents of Facebook usage habits, political participation, and respondents reported political beliefs. Descriptive statistics summarized sample characteristics, while inferential analyses tested hypothesized relationships. Chi-square tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted using statistical package for social sciences to examine associations between Facebook usage and political outcomes. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between time spent on Facebook and levels of political participation. Moreover, Facebook usage significantly predicted variation in students' political beliefs, suggesting that more intensive engagement is linked to more pronounced political affiliations. These findings imply that Facebook functions not merely as an information channel but as a social environment that can reinforce existing political identities and contributed to polarization within student populations. The study contributed empirical evidence from a non-Western, youth-heavy context to debates on social media and democratic discourse. Limitations include reliance on reported measures and a two-university sample, which constrain generalizability. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and behavioral trace data to clarify causal pathways between platform usage and polarization.

Introduction

Facebook is a very renowned platform of social media it is such a social networking site that is popular among youth in the world and also it is famous in using for different kind of activities either they are for layer or for educational personal social business many kind of different activities become source within Facebook for

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usage there are lot of users who use Facebook for political activities gaining political knowledge and even they are affected days on the Trends of the political polarization. The usage of social media applications and websites is spreading globally (Shahzad & Bilal, 2019).

While in any media either print main stream or social media politics was a major topic of discussion and definitely it affects the users of The Social Media platform who use the social media platform on which those political discussions activities and further related content was being disseminated the youth in Pakistan now a days also follow these social media platform to further gain knowledge regarding politics it was easy for them to access Facebook on their mobile device easily anywhere anytime while these platforms provide ways of social interaction (Shahzad, Hashmi, et al., 2024) and also students involve in the political activities among themselves.

Compare to other sources considered every social media platform was vitally being used nowadays for political activities and students and different universities also use these social media platform to further shape their political believes. This research has a vital significance in the field of social media and politics.

Significance of the study

This research examined the influence of Facebook on political polarization among university students in Islamabad was particularly relevant given the increasing role of social media in shaping political discourse in Pakistan. As the second-largest youth population in the world, Pakistani youth are significantly influenced by social media platforms, especially Facebook, which serves as a primary source for political information and engagement.

By focusing on university students in Islamabad, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature regarding the specific behaviors and attitudes of this demographic as they navigate political content on social media. Understanding these dynamics was essential for comprehending the broader implications of social media on political engagement and polarization in Pakistan.

This study area was supported by existing research that highlights the critical role of social media in political engagement among Pakistani youth. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the intersections of social media usage, political participation, and polarization, providing valuable insights into the unique context of Pakistan.

Study rationale

Social media platforms became central arenas for political communication, civic engagement, and identity formation among young people worldwide. In Pakistan, where youth constituted a substantial share of the population and where political socialization increasingly occurred online, Facebook remained one of the most widely used platforms for news consumption, political discussion, and community mobilization. Yet the same affordances that enabled participation algorithmic personalization, group-based interaction, and rapid information diffusion also reinforced homogeneous viewpoints, amplified partisan cues, and deepened ideological divides. Understanding how Facebook usage related to political polarization among university students was therefore both a theoretical imperative and a practical necessity for safeguarding democratic discourse in a rapidly digitizing society.

University students represented a critical cohort for examining this relationship. As they transitioned into adulthood, students refined their political identities, tested competing narratives, and negotiated their roles as citizens. In Islamabad, the capital territory hosted a dense concentration of public and private universities, making it a strategic site for studying how digital media shaped political attitudes among an educated, politically aware youth population. Despite growing attention to social media's political effects in Western contexts, empirical evidence from Pakistan remained limited, particularly regarding the mechanisms through which platform usage translated into polarized beliefs and behaviors. This study addressed that gap by investigating

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whether and how Facebook usage was associated with political polarization among university students in Islamabad.

Theoretically, the research was grounded in Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, which posited that individuals actively selected media to fulfill specific needs such as information, social integration, entertainment, or identity expression. Applied to Facebook, U&G suggested that students' motivations for use (e.g., staying informed, engaging in debate, or affirming group belonging) shaped their exposure to political content and their subsequent attitudes. When algorithms prioritized congruent viewpoints and users gravitated toward like-minded networks, the result was a feedback loop that strengthened pre-existing beliefs and reduced openness to alternative perspectives. By linking U&G to polarization outcomes, this study contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how

agency and platform architecture jointly influenced political cognition.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the research had direct relevance to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4 (Quality Education) emphasized the cultivation of critical thinking, media literacy, and informed citizenship within higher education. If Facebook usage fostered polarization, universities needed to integrate digital literacy and deliberative pedagogy into curricula to equip students with skills to navigate contested information environments. Similarly, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) called for inclusive, participatory decision-making and the reduction of violence and division. Polarized youth publics risked undermining social cohesion, eroding trust in institutions, and escalating conflict. Evidence on how platform usage related to polarization informed policies that promoted healthy online discourse, protected democratic norms, and strengthened civic resilience.

Practically, the findings guided multiple stakeholders. For educators, results highlighted the need for interventions that encouraged exposure to diverse viewpoints and critical evaluation of online content. For policymakers and regulators, evidence on polarization shaped platform governance, transparency requirements, and media literacy initiatives. For civil society organizations, insights into students' Facebook behaviors informed campaigns that fostered constructive dialogue and bridged ideological divides. By focusing on Islamabad's university students, this study generated context-specific evidence that could be adapted to other Pakistani cities and comparable youth-heavy societies.

In sum, this research responded to an urgent scholarly and societal need: to clarify how Facebook usage related to political polarization among Pakistan's emerging citizenry. By integrating U&G theory with empirical analysis, and by aligning its contributions with SDG 4 and SDG 16, the study offered both conceptual clarity and actionable insights for building more informed, inclusive, and resilient democratic cultures in the digital age.

Problem Statement

The statement of the problem was very clear. While researchers have examined various aspects of Facebook's political impact, it has been observed that the large amount of information available on the platform shapes the political views of the younger generation. This overload information has led to different political opinions among the youth, which can create tension in social circles and communities. This study intends to examine the impact of Facebook on the political polarization of youth, especially among the students of Islamabad.

Research Objective

The following are the research objectives of this research:

- To find out how Pakistani youth consider usage of Facebook for political activities.
- To examine how Facebook usage affects students' political beliefs.

Research Hypotheses

The following were the research hypotheses of this research that were based on the research

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objectives and the research questions of this research.

H_0: There was no substantial link between the frequency of Facebook usage and political activity among Pakistani youth.

H_A: There was a considerable link between the frequency of Facebook usage and political activity among Pakistani youth.

H_0: Increased exposure to diverse political content on Facebook does not contribute to higher levels of political polarization among youth.

H_A: Increased exposure to diverse political content on Facebook would contribute to higher levels of political polarization among youth.

Limitation and delimitation of the study

This survey only involves university students from Islamabad. It is nearly impossible to penetrate beyond universities or among the general youth. This survey only included one social media platform, Facebook. It is currently the most popular and commonly used media in Pakistani culture. Facebook fulfills my study criteria, so the researcher did not use YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, or Twitter.

Literature Review

There was a notion of research on the topics of social media while continuously new researches are being published on the ocean to understand the relationship among variables of social media platforms and user references some of these researches have been sighted as per the requirement of this research to analyze the literature of the past and further identify gap for this research and conduct the research accordingly Facebook was presently one of the largest social networking platforms in the world, with millions of people benefiting from it. It was no longer just a social media platform but millions of people get their current affairs news from this. Facebook was not just a social network. It was a platform used by billions of people to know about current events. (Bleiberg & Darrell M, 2015).

The virtual connection was easily available via internet and the kind of social media platforms are easily accessible on laptop, tablet, or a mobile devices (Shahzad, Bhatti, et al., 2024). YouTube was significantly used by the users to upload gender related awareness content specifically gender roles. As the businesses have drastically affected in Pakistan in past years (Shahzad & Hashmi, 2023).

While this medium has made it easier to access information, it was also causing a lot of problems. Since every Facebook user becomes a journalist himself, he can post unverified news on his account as per his wish. Due to this platform, new avenues of false propaganda have emerged which are impossible to verify. Because of Facebook various political parties, religious extremist parties, nationalist regional organizations and various institutions and groups are misusing it. This was the reason why there was a lot of criticism on the Facebook administration in the western world. It's silly to say it's all the users' fault, but equally to say it's all the fault of some faceless machine-like Facebook which create a “complex" interactions between humans and technology. (clegg, 2021).

While social media has facilitated global connectivity, it has also contributed to divisiveness, enabling the polarization of communication to the extent that individuals often disregard factual information. Users frequently support arguments, opinions, or political satire directed against leaders without critical examination. Facebook, which has rapidly gained millions of users worldwide, exemplifies this phenomenon. However, its limited regulatory framework has allowed issues such as fake news, cyber-bullying, extremism, and terrorism to proliferate. The interactions of influencers with social media users have further polarized political and social circles, resulting in the formation of online echo chambers. This tactic, employed by politicians to encourage users to express their opinions, reinforces specific narratives, regardless of their veracity. Such echo chambers create an environment where users are predominantly exposed to content that aligns with their preferences, while dissenting views on various social, economic, religious, cultural, or policy issues are systematically marginalized. Consequently, echo

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chambers tend to amplify one-sided perspectives, suppressing contrary viewpoints and distorting the public discourse (Malik, 2021).

In response to these challenges, Facebook's management has consistently defended its platform. Mark Zuckerberg has stated, "I think the responsibility lies with those who acted to break the law and to rebel, and secondly with the people who spread that material" (April 1, 2021). The company's efforts to enhance transparency and user control come at a time when the prospect of new internet regulations was becoming increasingly relevant.

Unlike Facebook that motivates students (Shahzad, 2017b) other platforms for instance YouTube also provide detailed content related to the politics but this research was based on Facebook and political polarization (Shahzad & Rizvi, 2025) that can be further studied. In Pakistan, Facebook was the most widely used platform for political information among young people, outpacing other social networks. Recent research indicates that Pakistan possesses the second-largest youth population globally, significantly impacting the political landscape of the country (Itfaq and Iqbal, 2018). Furthermore, Facebook has emerged as the primary source of news consumption, particularly among millennials, who frequently turn to it for information about government and politics (PEW, 2015).

The social media platforms have also added their contribution to the different issues of life and political polarization can be easily spread via social media uses too. Facebook and YouTube are a widely known social media platforms that provides vital source videos to the users to view or upload them per their choice. The trends of virtual machines was increasing globally for wide spread of these kind of content (Shahzad et al., 2020).

As social media continues to serve as a major information source, concerns are growing regarding the exposure of individuals to pro-attitudinal information news that aligns with their existing beliefs which can exacerbate polarization (Sunstein, 2017).

This issue warrants discussion among students, who should be educated at the school, college, or university level to promote positive and constructive engagement with this digital medium. Educational institutions must take proactive measures to raise awareness and encourage fair usage of social media, ensuring that diverse opinions and arguments are represented rather than allowing one-sided narratives to dominate. Such initiatives can enhance the constructive role of social media in society (A. Rehman, 2021).

The gap in the literature was found that there have been a wash majority of research was based on the Facebook as a social media platform but still there was white space for research on the use of Facebook for political polarization as less research was our conducted on this topic that was why this research was conducted for the reduction of the gap for the review of literature globally and nationally for the readers.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework was necessary in the quantitative research where the study was based on the theory of past researches and Katz and Blumler renowned uses and gratification theory was a major theory in the gratification of needs of the users

The Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) was "an approach to understanding why and how people find particular media to satisfy specific needs" (Turow, 2003). The basic question of UGT is: Why do people use media and what do they use it for? "UGT states that consumers intentionally select media that meet their needs and allow for knowledge enhancement, relaxation, social interactions, friendship, entertainment, or escape" (Turow, 2003).

The only difference now was that the audience does not have to go to different media sources to fulfill all their needs. The Internet has created a digital library, "giving individuals access to all content from a variety of major media sources".

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Immersion in the Social Networking Environment: "Facebook Groups, Use and Gratification, and Social Consequences". In 2007 a study was conducted to examine the "gratification" of users of Facebook groups. This study finally provided results through principal components factor analysis. The results showed that there were four needs for using Facebook groups social relations, entertainment, self-status search, and information.

Method

Research type

In this research the researchers further collect the data directly from the University students of Islamic International University Islamabad and Riphah international university Islamabad so this research was Primary research.

Research design

When the research shows basis of the previous theory it becomes significant to use quantitative Research Design in the study so that appropriate measures can be obtained to further investigate the research for the results and findings of the research Quantitative method was used in this study.

Type of Data

Primary data was the kind of data used for this research. The type of data that was collected from the respondents in this research was purely primary data because the individual universities students responded to the Google forms and provided their own responses from the survey based on the closed ended questionnaire

Target Population

The number of the students of Islamic International University Islamabad were 17,000 and Riphah international university Islamabad were 13,000, so the population size was be 30,000.

Study area

The universe of this study were the University student of Islamabad and population compromised of the age group of 18 to 30 years and Researcher collected the data from the students of International Islamic university Islamabad and Riphah International University, Islamabad.

Sampling Design:

The researcher further used simple random technique for sampling. Simple random sampling enables the researcher to remain away from the basis and allow the research to be effective and worthwhile according to the requirements of the quality of the research

Sample size

The sample was of 781 students were randomly selected through the simple random sampling procedures the exact sample size that came out collectively from both of the universities was based on 781 respondents and both universities named International Islamic university Islamabad and Riphah International University, Islamabad had a specific calculated number of sample size for the data collection that was based on this research

Data Collection Method

There are different methods of data collection in the research for example paper and pencil via mail via email via courier via on call survey et cetera. In this research online latest technology Google forms were used for the collection of data that enable the researcher to remain away from the basis and also it enable the respondent to easily fill the survey questionnaire based on their time requirements when they are easily available to fill.

Survey Questionnaire Tools

A structured questionnaire was further designed to collect information regarding Facebook influence on political polarization of youth. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections. First section was of about the demographic data of the respondents, second section further dealt with political behavior and third section was about the use of Facebook to measure the influence of Facebook on political polarization of youth.

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Data analysis tools

The statistical analysis was used in the research as data analysis tools. It advocated those statistical expectations, for instance, in the chi-square test and one-way analysis of variance test (Hair et al., 2009.). In this study the researcher used inferential analysis to analyze the data. To further carry out the calculations for the inferential and statistical analysis of the data the researcher used Statistical Package for Social Sciences in order to cover the required finding from the collected data.

Results Findings and Analysis

The finding indicated after processing the analysis from the collected data by utilizing chi-square test for finding relationship between time spent on Facebook and political participation and further one way analysis of variance was conducted to see that the amount of Facebook usage either cause any differences in the political affiliations of the universities students or not and to further understand the insights of the research the demographical analysis were also carried out to further elaborate and explain the diverse characteristics of the respondents carried out in this research the results showed further mention in the tables.

Table 1
Chi-Square tests for relationship between times spent on Facebook and political participation

Analysis	Value	df	Significance (2-sided)
Chi-Square	64.591[a]	3	.000
Ratio	55.325	3	.000
Association	62.218	1	.000
Valid Cases	781		

Note. The person chi-square table shows statistically significant relationship between time spent on Facebook and political participation as $p \leq 0.05$. This analysis was conducted using statistical package for social sciences.

Table 2
One-way analysis of variance based on Facebook usage and political beliefs.

Groups	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
B.G.	263.282	3	87.761	5.944	.001
W.G.	11472.206	777	14.765		
Total	11735.488	780			

Note. a one way analysis of variance between groups was conducted to see whether the time student spend on Facebook does have effect on the political polarization or not and the findings indicated that there was a statistically significant difference among the those who were using Facebook for political related needs and it affected the political polarization of the students of universities of N=781, F(3, 777) = 5.94, p = .001 (n^2=0.02) eta squared.

Demographical analysis of the respondents

The following are the tables that show frequencies and percentage of the participant age of the respondents, gender of the respondents, level of education of the respondents, name of the universities of the respondents, political identity of the

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respondents, medium preferences of the respondents and frequencies of usage of the Facebook platform of the respondents:

Table 3
Frequencies and percentages of participant age of the respondent

Age	N	%
18-23	695	89.0%
24-29	66	8.5%
Above 29	20	2.6%

Note. The sample consisted of age ranges 18-23; 89.0%, 24-29; 8.5%, and above 29; 2.6%. A total of 781 participants completed the survey.

Table 4
Frequencies and percentages of participant gender of the respondent

Gender	N	%
Other Not specified	4	0.5%
Male	543	69.5%
Female	234	30.0%

Note. A total of 781 participants completed the survey. The sample consisted of other Not specified 0.5%, Male 69.5% and Female 30.0%.

Table 5
Frequencies and percentages of participant Level of Education

Level of Education	N	%
Undergraduate	695	89.0%
Graduate	86	11.0%

Note. The sample consisted of undergraduate 89.0%, and graduate 11.0%. A total of 781 participants completed the survey.

Table 6
Frequencies and percentages of participant University of the respondent

University of the respondent	N	%
International Islamic University Islamabad	394	50.4%
Riphah International University Islamabad	387	49.6%

Note. A total of 781 participants completed the survey. The sample consisted of International Islamic University Islamabad 50.4%, and Riphah International University Islamabad 49.6%.

Table 7
Frequencies and percentages of participant Political identity of the respondent

Political identity of the respondent	N	%
No answer	20	2.6%
No affiliation	587	75.2%
Political Party Follower	94	12.0%
Political Family Affiliation	55	7.0%
Political Party Member	25	3.2%

Note. The sample consisted of no answer 2.6%, no affiliation 75.2%, Political Party Follower 12.0%, Political Family Affiliation 7.0%, Political Party Member 3.2% .A total of 781 participants completed the survey.

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Table 8
Frequencies and percentages of participant Medium preference of the respondent

Medium preference of the respondent	N	%
Newspaper	78	10.0%
Television	75	9.6%
Digital Media	628	80.4%

Note. A total of 781 participants completed the survey. The sample consisted of Newspaper 10.0%, Television 9.6%, and Digital Media 80.4%,

Table 9
Frequencies and percentages of participant response to how often do you use Facebook?

How often do you use Facebook?	N	%
Never	190	24.3%
Rarely	196	25.1%
Once a week	78	10.0%
Several times a week	75	9.6%
Once a day	131	16.8%
Several times a day	111	14.2%

Note. The sample consisted of Never 24.3%, Rarely 25.1%, Once a week 10.0%, Several times a week 9.6%, Once a day 16.8%, Several times a day 14.2%. A total of 781 participants completed the survey.

Discussion

This research was conducted based on 781 students of the universities of Islamabad out of which 394 students were from one university named Islamic International University Islamabad and 387 students were from another University named Riphah international university Islamabad. While the data was collected using Google forms and the demographics are readily available but as per the need and the demand of the objective research question and the high processes it was also necessary to add the demographics with them, directly chi-square and one way analysis of variance statistical tests were conducted to find either there were any differences in the political believes of the universities students while using Facebook and as per table 1 and table 2 it stated that there was significant relationship between time spent on Facebook and political participation, the Facebook usage does affect the political polarization and the political believes of the respondents

Conclusion

This study set out to determine how Facebook use relates to political engagement and political polarization among university students in Islamabad, Pakistan. The first objective examined whether Pakistani youth considered Facebook a venue for political activities and whether frequency of use was associated with participation. Statistical analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between Facebook usage and political activity on the platform, indicating that students who spent more time on Facebook were more likely to engage in political behaviors such as sharing political content, commenting on political posts, and participating in online discussions. This finding supported the alternative hypothesis that a considerable link existed between the frequency of Facebook use and political activity among Pakistani youth, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis of no association.

The second objective focused on how Facebook usage influenced students' political beliefs and the mechanisms through which this influence occurred. Results showed that Facebook use significantly affected students' political beliefs, with male students in particular reporting higher levels of interaction with diverse political content and actors on the platform. Through exposure to debates, opinion leaders,

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politicians, and governmental representatives, students encountered a wide range of political narratives that shaped their perceptions of the political landscape. This exposure enabled them to update their political understandings, become more aware of national and global political dynamics, and, in many cases, adopt more pronounced political affiliations. The findings thus supported the alternative hypothesis that increased exposure to diverse political content on Facebook contributed to higher levels of political polarization among youth, while the null hypothesis of no such contribution was rejected.

Taken together, these results underscored Facebook's dual role as both a catalyst for political participation and a driver of ideological differentiation among university students. The study affirmed that Facebook was not merely a passive information channel but an active social environment that reinforced existing identities and amplified partisan cues. For Pakistan, a country navigating complex political transitions and a rapidly digitizing media ecosystem, these insights carried important implications for educators, policymakers, and civil society actors seeking to foster informed, inclusive, and resilient democratic cultures. Future research should extend this work through longitudinal designs, behavioral trace data, and cross-city comparisons to further clarify causal pathways between platform use and polarization.

Future Recommendations

It is in the characteristics of a human to keep searching for new ways (Shahzad, 2017a) to improve the quality (Shahzad, 2019). The researcher further recommends to other researcher to investigate on how the technology has shaped in this world the virtual political campaign system based on social media platforms that has enabled the political activists to involve in political activities by further shaping the political polarization in the Global world.

Insights and Suggestions

The insights for further researcher is to use online tool that enables easiness of the data collection by using forms on different platforms and further disseminating them to the respondents that enable the researcher to gain the responses of the respondents very easily It becomes difficult for the students to afford their time with education for their political activities. Many students in Pakistan are using these platforms for activities (Shahzad, 2020).

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Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest related to this research.

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