



Reconfiguring Political Participation: Youth Engagement in the Digital Era

¹Sajida Feroze & ²Asiya Saif Alvi

¹PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

²Associate Professor & Head of Department (HOD), Department of Political Science, University of Sargodha, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received: Aug 19, 2024
Revised: Sep 11, 2024
Accepted: Oct 10, 2024
Available Online: Dec 30, 2024

Keywords: Youth Participation, Digital Activism, Social Media, Affordances, Medialization, Digital Divide, Echo Chambers, Social Networks

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Digital age has radically changed the way youth interacts in politics. Youth - the term usually describes people in their late teens and 20s - have new avenues to express themselves, develop mutual action and influence the society with the help of online technologies. With social media, messaging apps, online petitions, e government portals, it makes the participation more expansive, involving more than the customary rallies and elections. This report is a review of contemporary scholarly works concerning this change, which is discovered to focus on key mechanisms (mobilization, deliberation, identity formation, networked publics, slacktivism, activism) and theoretical approaches (political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, network theory, affordances theory, medialization, digital citizenship, youth political socialization) to explain the digital youth engagement. The Pakistani examples demonstrate these trends: urban young people discuss the governance issues more openly with the help of Twitter and Facebook than those in rural areas, whereas online campaigns (e.g. #JusticeForNaqib) demonstrate that the digital mobilization can cause street action and draw not only attention but also policies. The report ends with research gaps (e.g. long-term effect of online campaigns, platform-specific research, youth involvement in policy development) and policy implications (expanding connectivity and digital literacy, protecting internet freedoms, facilitating e-participation activities).

© 2022 The Authors, Published by CISSMP. This is an Open Access article under the Creative Common Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0

Corresponding Author's Email: sajidaferoz@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61503/ciissmp.v3i4.406>

Citation: Feroze, S., & Alvi, A. S. (2024). Reconfiguring Political Participation: Youth Engagement in the Digital Era. *Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences and Management Practices*, 3(4), 439-452.

1.0 Introduction

The political participation is traditionally associated with activities (voting, campaigning, protests, petitions) involving the impact of citizens on the decisions of the population. However, in the digital age, participation can now be applied to online actions: after following political news on social media, posting views in forums, signing and petitioning, or even co-creating policy through e consultations. Youth, in this context, can be taken as a loose definition of age between 15 and 30, and youths, in general, have been raised around these technologies and become so-called digital natives. They constitute a significant population in Pakistan (e.g. almost 64 percent of the Pakistani population is below 30) and therefore a gigantic potential force. The contemporary interest of youth should be viewed in this two-fold perspective: young people, on the one hand, want to use their energy in politics (rallies, voting drives); on the other, the technology which can enhance or redefine this energy (Lu & Myrick, 2016).

1.1 Scope of the Youth Political Participation

Youth political participation now extends to both traditional and digital activities (Dimitrova et al., 2014). This may be positioned as a spectrum between online slacktivism (low-effort activities such as likes or using hashtags) and digital activism (long-term campaigns, crowdfunding, hackathons, cyber-protests). The most popular online platforms are social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok), messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram), online petition sites (Change.org, Avaaz), and e-government tools (digital public consultations or transparency portals). Each permits various expressions and structures. As an example, the message can be broadcast to a large audience through social media, messaging apps facilitate coordination with people privately, and e-government portals provide an opportunity to send feedback to the officials directly

1.2 Defining Youth Engagement

Although statistical definitions differ, we are concerned with politically active youth, those who access digital media in their interactions with civic or political matters. This report examines the way that the recent scholarship describes and explains youth digital engagement. We underline that the change is not only the addition of digital channels to the old ones; it transforms the participation. Young people have now the ability to create new types of networks across the old divisions, voice the marginalized, or even face new challenges (surveillance, disinformation). Comparative evidence comes in handy in the evaluation of this. We use examples of Pakistan and elsewhere (e.g. networked public sphere in Tunisia; youth in Cambodia under censorship; hashtag campaigns worldwide) to exemplify trends, keeping Pakistan in perspective (Ahmad et al., 2019).

1.3 Digital Platforms and Technologies

The current youth political participation is mediated via numerous online tools. All platforms have various properties of affordances that allow certain actions. In the table below, the basic types of platforms and their political engagement affordances are summarized:

Platform/Tool	Key Affordances for Political Engagement
Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)	Mass outreach through newsfeeds; tagging/mentions; hashtag mobilization; multimedia posts (text, image, video); viral sharing; live broadcasting of events; community groups for organizing.

Video (YouTube, TikTok)	Platforms	Persuasive storytelling via video; potential for rapid virality; influencer reach; creative activism (music, short videos); algorithmic trend-boosting of engaging content.
Messaging (WhatsApp, Telegram)	Apps	Private or small-group coordination; encrypted chats for secure planning; broadcast messages to many contacts; viral sharing (chains); setup of interest-based channels; polls/voting in groups.
Online Crowdfunding	Petitions &	Easy signature collection and visibility of support counts; direct appeals to authorities; linking campaigns to mainstream media; grassroots fundraising for causes.
E-Government Platforms		Official consultation portals, e-voting, open-data websites; structured feedback channels; transparency initiatives; appointment bookings; digital skill development modules.

The social media gives the youth a platform: a youth-organized climate movement can go trending worldwide through the hashtag (#) feature of Twitter, or voter registration drives can be organized via Facebook events (Rehan et al., 2024). Video platforms involve the citizens by telling stories - a Pakistani student can post a TikTok on college fee increases, and the video reaches thousands of others immediately. Messaging applications, in turn, facilitate private networks: in WhatsApp groups, youth can organize protests or even uncensored news, but these platforms also carry the risk of echo chambers and spreading rumors (Garimella et al., 2018).

Collective voice is made easier by online petitions: a school safety petition can collect online signatures and pressure authorities. In the meantime, e-government websites in other countries such as Estonia or South Korea (and more and more Pakistan) enable the youth to e-participate in or to access government services, but several states still have very little digital engagement functionality.

In general, these technologies broaden the participation (Memon et al., 2018). They will be able to access the youth even at far-off places through mobile phones (the rate of smartphone ownership is high even in developing countries). In Pakistan, as an example, in 2025, more than 70 percent of households will have access to the internet and smartphones (however, access in rural and female is still lower). This links a young generation that is becoming more urbanized to politics over the Internet. Youth therefore complement (and even replace) newspapers, rallies, and party meetings with Twitter discussions (Rehan et al., 2024). These technologies enable quick information dissemination: a protest march that was planned via a viral tweet can attract thousands. Similarly, an overnight viral video of injustice can link the masses. Examples include the 2018 elections in Pakistan, when the political parties mobilized young voters via Facebook campaigns and WhatsApp messages, demonstrating the digitization of the campaigns as a means of reaching the target audience.

1.4 Mechanisms of Engagement

What exactly is the role of the digital media in the political participation of youths? Researchers have pointed out various ways in which online activity can be converted into political or learning activity. These include:

1.5 Mobilization

Electronic materials reduce the organizing expense. Youth can easily recruit peers by

putting calls to action on social media or sending messages in chat apps. Hashtags and social snacking (little things that are quick and easily done) may escalate to mass protests. As an example, online petitions or crowdfunding efforts demonstrate how remote followers can raise funds or signatures. The Arab spring (e.g. Tunisian youth organizing on Facebook), and more recent Pakistani context (e.g. the #JusticeForNaqib campaign on Twitter and Instagram that resulted in street sit-ins) were examples of mobilization through networks (Baumann et al., 2020).

1.6 Deliberation

Discussion spaces are established on online platforms. Young people are able to discuss policies in Facebook groups, argue on Twitter threads or comment on political blogs.(Lu & Myrick,2016) These forums enable deliberative exchange not only geographically, but also enable urban and rural youth (when linked) to compare view(Garimella et al., 2018). In reality, e.g. a Pakistani university student may go to a Reddit-style discussion board or Twitter hashtags to discuss a proposed bill and invite other people in the country to comment. These online discussions may enhance political consciousness and form arguments. Research indicates that even short-form platforms (such as WhatsApp groups) turn into a place to discuss local concerns (schools, corruption), and thus virtual town halls. Conversely, they too can be polarizing as the youth tends to flock into politically like-minded cyberspace communities that only bolster their own perceptions.(Tucker et al.,2018)

1.7 Identity Formation

The digital media allow young people to be involved and create political identity. Self-representation as a particular type of citizen (e.g. activist, patriot, feminist) has been made possible by profile pages, avatars and shared content. The youths get clues to shape their beliefs by following, and interacting with cause-oriented pages. The concept of a networked public (Scholars such as Danah Boyd have coined it) implies that the social networks of youths have gone online; the networked publics are transformed into the arena of identity formation. As an example, Pakistani young people may join Facebook groups devoted to regional rights or student politics and thus, taking the discourse of such a group as their self-concept. Online identity formation can be dramatic in polarized situations: young people will post party logos or slogans on their profiles, or be able to use hashtags (such as #PTIYouth or #WeArePakistani) to indicate affiliation (Salma et al., 2023). This identity work is more engaging because when one feels like they belong to a common club, the person is likely to take action jointly (Ashraf, 2019).

1.8 Networked Publics and Peer Influence:

The youths do not necessarily participate in politics as individuals but rather through peer networks. The online networks (friends lists, followers, group memberships) enable the spread of information about civic activities by the word of mouth at the speed of digital. Such diffusion of networks can enhance ideas: a meme about climate change posted by a peer can trigger others to take interest in environmental petitions. Similarly, the opinion of young people can be influenced by celebrities or influencers on YouTube or TikTok; their support of a cause may rally fans. One example of youth activists in Pakistan is that certain of them have become micro-celebrities on social media, and they leverage their platforms to drive campaigns (such as a leading blogger

attracting attention to education finance). By doing so, networks influence what is and is not heard and how urgently, allowing viral trends (Kaylor, 2019).

1.9 Slacktivism

One such controversial process is slacktivism: the concept of clicking, liking, sharing being a low-commitment signal that can give the impression of action without actually doing anything. Critics believe that little can be done by a young person, who merely alters a profile picture filter (e.g. makes it green in support of environmental awareness) or retweets a slogan. Others respond that such low level activities can escalate to more serious activities in the long run (a 2012 study indicated that people who like a cause might become rally participants at some point). The trend of most of the youth movements is a combination: some of them just use the Internet and some transfer Internet passion to the real world. We do not consider slacktivism pejorative in our report, but as one end of a spectrum, where youth can begin with digital expressions, and then graduate to protests or volunteering. The Pakistani situation is no different and some signing of an online petition regarding library hours can be a first step, followed by a next step in a campus protest (Bokhari & Ahmed, 2020).

1.10 Digital Activism

Sustained digital campaigns are found at the active level. These include strategic application of various platforms: e.g. coordinating a twitter storm, creating viral videos, and online petitions in concert to pressure decision-makers. This is a regular practice of young climate activists around the world: they hold online strikes (with digital banners) and gather in real life. In Pakistan we are getting nascent forms; student activists have resorted to YouTube channels as well as social media campaigns in attracting attention to curriculum reforms. Digital activism tends to intersect with conventional participation(e.g., a hashtag campaign that results in a street march).

2.0 Literature Review

To make sense of these processes, scholars apply various theoretical lenses. No single theory fully captures digital youth participation, so we synthesize multiple frameworks, summarized in Table 2 below:

Theoretical Framework	Explanatory Scope / Focus
Political Opportunity Structures	Emphasizes how the wider political-institutional context shapes youth action. Youth movements are facilitated by open political systems, competitive elections or legal thresholds (repression constrained by legal thresholds). An example of an opportunity structure that directs engagement is a youth council, or a legislature seat set aside by the youth (as in certain democracies); an example of a restrictive structure is a crackdown on protests.

Resource Mobilization Theory	Centers on the role of movements in using resources (networks, money, skills, digital tools) to be successful. It describes youth engagement based on whether or not there is capacity to organize. Online, this involves the presence of tech savvy organizers, good internet and social capital to disseminate a campaign. Resource theory sheds light on the successes of certain groups of youths (strong organization, diaspora funding) and failures of others (lack of resources).
Network Diffusion Theory	Treats social media as networks that facilitate diffusion of ideas and norms. The youth participation will go viral: the action of one individual can have an impact on others. That is why such phenomena as viral hashtag campaigns and thresholds on participating in protests (when a sufficient number of friends join, one will also join) exist. It is also useful in studying network structures (dense clusters or bridging ties) that accelerate (or hinder) mobilization.
Affordances Theory (Digital Media)	Concentrates on particular characteristics (affordances) of digital platforms that influence behavior. As an illustration, collective tagging of issues can be done with the hashtag (#) and the sensational content can be amplified with the help of algorithms and the controversial posts can be made possible with anonymity. Affordances explain how platform design channels youth activity e.g., the retweet button eases content spread, video filters appeal to young content creators, thus influencing how political engagement is expressed.
Medialization of Politics	Focuses on the role of media logic (seeking visibility, sensationalism, image control) in politics. Viral trends and influencers apply to youth activism in the digital age. This framework describes why online campaigns frequently center around content or personalities to share. It also draws negative implications: movements can be driven more by media demands to focus on attention-seeking antics instead of long-term organizing.
Digital Citizenship / Civic Engagement	Considers the youth as digital citizens with rights and responsibilities in the online world. Underlines the importance of digital literacy and norms towards participatory citizenship. It puts engagement as a right (to speak and organize online) and responsibility (to fight disinformation, respect diversity). This lens highlights the effectiveness of giving the youth the tools and learning to effectively and ethically utilize digital media.
Youth Political Socialization	Concentrates on the ways youth develop political identities, attitudes, and skills through time, and media are one of their socialization agents. Digital socialization theory would look at the ways in which the regularity of exposure to online content (news feeds, influencers) influences worldviews. This is one of the reasons why there are generational differences: today, the young people can be indoctrinated by the YouTube or TikTok politics, and their expectations and ways of engagement are different than those of older generations.

Both frameworks provide an insight into the youth engagement. An example of this is that opportunity structures can be used to understand why certain political contexts (free or repressive) yield more online activism. Resource mobilization highlights that even online campaigns need organization and know-how. The network theory and the affordances are especially applicable in the digital context: they describe the mechanics of activism going viral through social connections

and the specifics of the platforms (such as hashtags or live video). The medialization approach reminds us that digital activism is still influenced by what is attention-grabbing (e.g. an outrageous protest video tends to dominate a subtle policy discussion). Lastly, the digital citizenship and socialization concepts focus on the development, educating the young population on how to use the media and reviewing how their political perspective is shaped by the ever-present connection.

In practice, these theories tend to overlap. To take one such example, young netizens in Pakistan can use a political opening (POS) by mobilizing strong online networks (resource mobilization), which encourages sharing (affordance), to quickly create a mass protest (network diffusion), through mediating state media pressure (medialization) and negotiating their sense of civic responsibility (digital citizenship). We find that none of the theories alone is adequate; a combined method is required.

2.1 Barriers and Inequalities

Despite new possibilities, digital engagement also faces significant **barriers** and reproduces social inequalities. Key challenges include:

2.1.1 Digital Divide

Internet and devices accessibility are unequal. The rural young people, usually, are less connected or not connected at all, the urban places and the wealthy families are highly connected. In Pakistan, as an example, recent statistics depict that access to urban youth is much higher than rural (urban internet users =57% rural =43%). There are also gender discrepancies: women (in poor or conservative regions in particular) might be less digitally liberated or have cultural boundaries to using devices. Young people with lower income will only have entry to basic phones with limited internet. This gap implies that there is a significant number of young voices that are not online and whose voices are not represented in the digital community (Ismail et al., 2022).

2.1.2 Surveillance and Censorship

States are able to spy or censor the web. In Pakistan (as in other nations), the government has embraced the new sophisticated surveillance measures (firewalls, lawful intercept) that are capable of monitoring the messages and browsing of the citizens. Social media may be deleted: posts that are perceived to be offensive can be removed and even legislation such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) can be used to penalize dissenting posts. This surveillance is an intimidating deterrent to involvement: the youth can self-censor or become afraid of speaking politically. Activists use covert strategies (coding, group chats) to avoid being noticed in limited situations.

2.1.3 Platform Governance and Moderation

Platform policies and algorithms influence speech even in the absence of state action. To regulate content, social media corporations rely on guidelines (to eliminate so-called misinformation or hate speech) that can, when misused, have the effect of silencing activists. Ranking algorithms based on the importance of viral content can lead to a quality bias towards sensationalism and not substantive discussion, which is what youth will view. As an example, an algorithm may display more extreme posts, which receive likes, and add to polarization. Further, global spaces might not be sensitive to local situations: culture or local concerns can be overlooked

so that key local youth concerns receive minimal coverage. Foreign social media companies are also forced to be registered in Pakistan, which is a source of concern in terms of data privacy and local compliance requirements.

2.1.4 Misinformation and Polarization

The very networks that are used to mobilize youth can also be used to provide fake information. WhatsApp rumors have caused real-life damage in South Asia. Young individuals can meet specialized propaganda or conspiracy theories in social media (Tucker et al., 2018). This may create a division among groups of youth (e.g. between the supporters of political parties) or make groups suspicious of each other. Research indicates that online debate among Pakistani young people can easily escalate into a row of heated debates about corruption or patriotism (as seen in netnography), and that opposing identities become entrenched, instead of understanding each other. (Anam and Zulfiqar, 2024)

2.1.5 Contentious and Unsupportive Offline Context

Even young people who are active online can have offline barriers. Digitally initiated physical protests or campaigns can be suppressed by the police or ignored by the masses. The norms in the society might not be encouraging the youth (particularly females) to raise their voice. Many cultures, such as in some areas of Pakistan, are at times labeled as not experienced by young voices. Online engagement, therefore, will not necessarily lead to policy change unless it is supported by institutions (Setiawati et al., 2023).

2.1.6 Resource and Skills Gaps

Young people do not have equal ability or resources to take advantage of digital spaces. Digital literacy is not the same: some young people know how to write a petition site or create specific advertisements on social media, others simply use apps to send and receive messages. The uneducated or the uninformed are likely to be bewildered by online politics, or turned away. A language barrier can be an obstacle as well: a lot of information on the Internet is written in English or urban dialect, which might not reach rural or less educated young people.

All these obstacles combined imply that there is no such a thing as a magic equalizer of digital participation. It is more likely to mirror the existing inequalities (Amzalag & Shapira, 2021).

Media literate, young, urban, networked youth may prevail in digital discourse and may affect results, leaving those marginalized on the outskirts. In Pakistan, according to one study, educated young people in the city use primarily platforms such as Twitter to debate, with less-educated people using primarily apps such as WhatsApp to have fun (Kaylor, 2019). This gap in the quality of participation highlights the danger that digital democracy can result in giving more voice to those who are already privileged.

3.0 Methodology

The research of digital youth participation raises new methodological issues. The dynamism of online life may be overlooked in traditional surveys and interviews, and pure data analytics (e.g. mining tweets) does not provide context. A lot of researchers thus employ mixed methods: netnography (immersive online observation) with interviews or focus groups, or social

network analysis with ethnography of youth groups. Key challenges include:

3.1 Data Access

Other applications (WhatsApp, Signal) are encrypted and are, therefore, difficult to study. The data is presented in the form of APIs which can be obtained in public sources like Twitter, but this is only a part of the picture. Platforms are under a state of constant flux (newer platforms are released, functionality changes) and studies are quickly becoming obsolete.

3.2 Ethics:

The problem with consent regarding underage people; privacy of online communication can be sensitive. Researchers have to steer through ethical gathering of social media material which is usually free but concerning individual citizens.

3.3 Representative Sampling

The most active users (celebrities, extreme voices) are sometimes represented in digital studies, and not the silent majority. Nevertheless, surveys can help and self-reported data about online behavior may not be credible. In the future, the research gaps are:

3.4 Platform-specific Studies

A lot of research has been on Facebook/Twitter; there is less known about new apps such as TikTok, Clubhouse or decentralized networks. Both are capable of changing the youth interaction. One instance is that the TikTok form of the short video can be more biased towards creative protesting art than text argument, which needs to be studied in the future.

3.5 Long-term Impact

We require longitudinal studies to determine whether online activism has any real-world impact or a lasting civic behavior. Will a young person who e-signs an e-petition become a long-term activist or will the interest wane? It would be illuminating to follow up cohorts over years.

3.6 Intersectional Analysis

Numerous studies consider youth to be homogenous. Further studies are required on the differences in digital engagement based on gender, ethnicity, or rural/urban among the youth. To illustrate, how do young rural women in Punjab perceive e-participation as compared to urban male students?

3.7 Comparative Contexts

Further cross country comparisons can provide insights into the interaction between the national context with youth behavior. The combination of democratic and authoritarian characteristics in Pakistan is unique; the comparison to the neighboring countries such as India or Bangladesh or to such countries as Tunisia or Brazil may seclude the local and global trends.

3.8 Emerging Technologies

The future of AI and big data could include studies of how the process of algorithmic curation or AI-powered bots influences the participation of young people (e.g. do bots silence young people on important matters?). Other emerging areas are virtual reality or games-based civic education.

The methodological innovation is required as well: we need participatory action research with youth as co-researchers, as it might provide more profound knowledge. Similarly,

collaborations with tech companies (for anonymized data) might overcome some access barriers (Lee et al., 2024).

4.0 Findings and Results

What does youth digital engagement achieve? Research finds a range of outcomes:

Policy Influence and Agenda Setting: Online youth campaigns in certain instances bring issues to the forefront. A viral social media campaign has the ability to make politicians act or the press report on the issue. As an illustration, youth-led hashtags on climatic issues or education have led to legislative debates in some countries. In Pakistan, flash protests or digital petitions have occasionally prompted the government to respond (e.g., in response to a tragic bus crash, the social media outcry resulted in a governmental investigation). Digital platforms can therefore become an accelerator of policy, but their effectiveness tends to be determined by the listening to the offline political system (Rizvi & Jamil, 2019).

Offline Protests and Activism: The mobilization through the internet often transgresses into street activism (e.g., aurat march). Reports on networked youth movements indicate that actual rallies, sit-ins or boycotts were organized through social media announcements and group conversations. The interconnectedness of young people can help ease tensions: it takes fewer organizers to move hundreds to a demonstration. In Pakistan and elsewhere, young activists have mobilized crowds quickly around causes such as student rights or anti-corruption (with less party machine), by organizing crowds on Facebook or through WhatsApp invitations. In addition, through online publicity, local protest can gain international support in terms of its impact (Baumann et al., 2020).

Electoral Participation: Online campaigning has the potential to increase youth votes and candidacy. Social media has become a target platform by political parties who are excited to attract first-time voters. Young people who are otherwise indifferent can be attracted to the process through interactive elements (voter registration notifications through applications, online question-and-answer session with candidates). Even micro-targeting (ads on Instagram, Telegram polls) assists parties in mobilizing the young demographics. This has been observed in the world (e.g., 2016 US elections, Indian elections). In Pakistan, some parties such as the PTI have long been boasting of their digital connectivity with the youth. Although it is difficult to measure, it is thought that a critical number of youth using the internet can turn out or change a vote margin in close contests (Memon et al., 2018).

Civic Skills and Empowerment: Participation online can develop skills and confidence, independently of immediate results. Activists in their youth are taught to conduct research (e.g. through open data), speak publicly, and connect with mentors. These are portable civic skills. To illustrate, a student volunteer, who organizes a local awareness campaign on Instagram, can learn to analyze information and speak before an audience, which is useful in the future when it comes to community involvement. Marginalized youth can also be empowered through the digital spaces because they have a voice. Some Pakistani women groups, such as those, rely on closed social media groups to encourage each other in politics, gaining confidence to take action in real life.

Polarization and Fragmentation: An important impact is risk of polarized perspectives

being entrenched online in youth interaction (Rizvi & Jamil, 2019). Filter bubbles are formed by algorithms, and content that is politically charged takes over feeds. The issue is that, as scholars warn, excessive talk or disagreement on social media can lead to making activists Twitter warriors and viewing politics as a means of online confrontation. It turned out that in the case of Pakistan, civic discourse among young people tends to turn cut-throat either in relation to corruption or ideology (Bilal et al., 2019). This can be an engagement sign, yet it is that social media can be a place of partisan silos, rather than consensus-building. Furthermore, slacktivism can lead some of the youth to assume that action is equivalent to web action and can cause cynicism when web actions yield no results (Sorensen et al., 2012).

In general, the ratio of impact is relative. Digital youth activism can push policy and develop civic capacity in open societies with responsive institutions. It can be just another form of echo-chamber, with little power in closed or unequal situations. Although it might not result in significant policy victories, the mere existence of the debate can be socially resourceful, as internet sociologists observe: the youth get to know about the issues and each other. Whether online activism produces enduring effects in governance or social norms, as is the actual long-term effect, is a major question to research.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, digital age has revolutionized youth political participation. Social movement theory, media study theories, and citizenship theoretical perspectives shed light on various aspects of this change. We learn that digital technologies provide youth with new locations to plan, talk, act identity; yet these locations are shaped by offline forces of power. The picture in Pakistan and other nations is that of the potential and threat: youth have never been so visible and active but are also exposed to generations of divisions and control mechanisms.

Although quite a lot has been stated regarding the topic of youth and social media, there are gaps. We need more evidence on outcomes: e.g. serious research to relate measures of online campaigns to real policy changes or voting changes. The gender dimension is not well-developed: what is the impact of online platforms on political standpoints of young women and LGBTQ youths? The other critical frontier is the impact of misinformation and algorithm construction on the youth attitude. In addition, the dynamics of virtual activism to sustain the momentum in the long term will also be significant as the world continues to change and evolve in the face of such global challenges as pandemics or climate changes.

5.1 Policy implications

The governments and civil society should note that the Internet is a significant part of the youthful democracy. This may include policy interventions such as: ensuring that there are affordable broadband and smart devices that are accessible to rural and poor areas, in a bid to ensure that internet access is indeed universal. Educational activities to teach people about digital literacy and civil capabilities (including critical media literacy to spot fake news, or e-government services courses) should take place. Freedom and safety on the Internet should be compromised by the law: as the practice of Pakistan has shown, uncontrollable surveillance and vagueness of censorship laws can be very dangerous (an independent data protection law could help in this).

The other form that governments can use to involve the youth is through formal digital

youth participation (youth e-councils, online legislative petitions, or crowdsourced policymaking sites). Local governments might have virtual town halls or allow e-signing community projects, e.g. Youth tech skills can be redirected to civic good by encouraging civic tech (apps that allow youth to monitor budgets, report problems, etc.).

In the meantime, the platform companies and regulators must take into account the youth-specific needs: to make algorithms more transparent, to fight disinformation that is oriented on young users, and to defend their privacy. Its civil society organizations are able to collaborate with young people to create secure online spaces (such as mentorship networks, moderated forums) to learn politics.

Finally, political parties and leaders should be able to reach the youth online, through more than propaganda, but through them discussing their problems and developing policies together. When the youths are made aware that there is an online voice, which can convert to a real conversation, then they may have more confidence in the politics.

To conclude, political participation in the digital era is a continuing process that needs reconfiguring. Trends discovered here indicate hybrid futures: a form of protest on the street and ballots being used in conjunction with tweets, TikTok, and e-petitions. The trick here is to ensure that this evolution is an inclusive one that is strategic and is geared towards actual empowerment. In the case of Pakistan, whose democracy is still young, and whose population is very young, the skillful use of this digital shift might help to form a more participatory and responsive future. The same applies to the rest of the world: with the young generation shaking the digital world, both scholars and policymakers need to keep abreast with the comprehension and management of these transformations.

Contribution

Sajida Feroze: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Asiya Saif Alvi: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and publication.

References

Ahmad, T., Alvi, A., & Ittefaq, M. (2019). The Use of Social Media on Political Participation Among University Students: An Analysis of Survey Results From Rural Pakistan. *SAGE Open*, 9(3), 2158244019864484. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019864484>

Amzalag, M., & Shapira, N. (2021). Improving intergroup relations through online contact. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 22(1), 111-134.

Anum, I., & Zulfiqar, A. (2024). Influence of social cleavage and media usage on political behavior: a case of Pakistan [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1405634>

Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. F., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(37), 9216-9221.

Baldassarri, D., & Bearman, P. (2007). Dynamics of political polarization. *American sociological review*, 72(5), 784-811.

Baumann, F., Lorenz-Spreen, P., Sokolov, I. M., & Starnini, M. (2020). Modeling Echo Chambers and Polarization Dynamics in Social Networks. *Physical Review Letters*, 124(4). <https://doi.org/10.1103/physrevlett.124.048301>

Bilal, M. Z., Ali, A., & Ullah, S. (2019). Effects of media exposure on the political polarization patterns of students in Pakistan. *Global Social Sciences Review*, 4(3), 292-298.

Bliuc, A.-M., Bouguettaya, A., & Felise, K. D. (2021). Online intergroup polarization across political fault lines: An integrative review. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 641215.

Bokhari, F., & Ahmed, Z. S. (2020). Challenges and Opportunities for Peace Educators: Lessons From a Youth-led Effort in Pakistan. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 38(1-2), 73-86. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21284>

Castro, L., & Hopmann, D. N. (2017). The Virtue of Moderation: A Cross-National Analysis of Exposure to Cross-Cutting Information and Turnout. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 30(4), 518-539. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edx015>

Craig, S. C., Niemi, R. G., & Silver, G. E. (1990). Political efficacy and trust: A report on the NES pilot study items. *Political Behavior*, 12(3), 289-314. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992337>

Dimitrova, D. V., Shehata, A., Strömbäck, J., & Nord, L. W. (2014). The Effects of Digital Media on Political Knowledge and Participation in Election Campaigns: Evidence From Panel Data. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 95-118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650211426004>

Garimella, K., Morales, G. D. F., Gionis, A., & Mathioudakis, M. (2018). *Political Discourse on Social Media: Echo Chambers, Gatekeepers, and the Price of Bipartisanship* Proceedings of the 2018 World Wide Web Conference, Lyon, France. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3178876.3186139>

Ghafouri, V., Alatawi, F., Karami, M., Such, J., & Suarez-Tangil, G. (2024). Transformer-Based Quantification of the Echo Chamber Effect in Online Communities. *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, 8(CSCW2), Article 467. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3687006>

Ismail, M., Shah, A. A., Saleem, K., & Khan, A. (2022). Why educated youth inclined toward extremism: A case of higher education institutes of Pakistan. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 7(3), 419-434.

Kaukab, F., Pasha, S., & Ali, S. (2021). Role of News and Current Affairs Channels in Creating Political Awareness.

Kaylor, B. T. (2019). Likes, Retweets, and Polarization. *Review & Expositor*, 116(2), 183-192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637319851508>

Khan, A., Qasim, M., Ullah, I., Shah, I., Khan, I. U., & Bilal, M. (2023). Exploring the influence of social media on the radicalization of youth towards violent extremism. *Russian Law Journal*, 11(3), 3117-3125.

Lu, Y., & Myrick, J. G. (2016). Cross-Cutting Exposure on Facebook and Political Participation. *Journal of Media Psychology Theories Methods and Applications*, 28(3), 100-110. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000203>

Maqsood, M., Gillani, S. F., & Bokhari, S. F. (2024). Analyzing the Cultivating Impact of Political Awareness on the Political Participation and Efficacy of Pakistani Youth. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 586-595. [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024\(5-II\)54](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024(5-II)54)

Memon, S., Ishak, M. S., & Abdul Hamid, N. (2018). Influence of political socialization agents on Pakistani youth's political participation: The mediating role of media and interpersonal communication. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 34(2), 121-136.

Rehan, M., Aamir, A. A., & Khan, S. (2024). Examining the Role of Twitter in Shaping Political Polarization and Political Efficacy. *Journal of Asian Development Studies*, 13(3), 639-648.

Rizvi, S. Z. A., & Jamil, S. (2019). Extremism in Pakistani Youth: A Social Policy Failure. *Society and Culture in the Muslim World*, 1(1), 19-44.

Salma, M., Ahmed, U., & Warraich, S. K. (2023). Navigating the Digital Battlefield: Exploring the Intersection of Digital Media and Fifth-Generation Warfare in Pakistan. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 774-784.

Setiawati, T., Tiara, A., & Mustika, S. (2023). Social Media as a Negative Source of Political News in a Polarized Society? Indonesian and Filipino Students' Perception. *Jurnal Komunikasi*, 17(2), 243-256. <https://doi.org/10.20885/komunikasi.vol17.iss2.art7>

Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature. *Political polarization, and political disinformation: a review of the scientific literature (March 19, 2018)*