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Article:	Social Media and Youth's Political Activism: Emergence of a Networked Public Sphere in Pakistan
Author(s):	Dr. Qasim Mahmood Assistant Professor, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan
	Dr. Kasim Sharif Ph.D. University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
	Zarmina Gull Lecturer, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan
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Author(s) Note:	Dr. Qasim Mahmood is serving as Assistant Professor at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan
	Dr. Kasim Sharif has done Ph.D. from University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
	Zarmina Gull is serving as Lecturer at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

Social media has become a central component of modern society and politics around the world including Pakistan. The paper attempts to examine the influence of political activism among social media-savvy youth in highlighting the political issues of Pakistan. This paper examines how Pakistani youth's political activism via social media gives rise to an emergent-networked public sphere. A survey questionnaire was distributed to 403-university students aged 18-29 to examine their social media use and political engagement. Findings of the survey show that public discourse on social media, driven by Pakistan's networked youth, is a growing force that political players and pundits must reckon with. The paper concludes that politically active youth make use of social media to discuss political issues, highlight problems besetting the country, which generates a public discourse, put pressure on government and politicians to take action that ultimately bears influence upon politics and governance in Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, Social Media, Youth Political Activism, Networked Public Sphere

1. Introduction

With the advent of information communication technologies, the social media in the last two decades has gained popularity in various parts of the world including Pakistan. The social media has been evolved as an alternative choice for masses to come to be vocal and disseminate information through new avenues of communication. The issues which were else impossible to be covered (e.g. Sialkot incident in 2010 and Sarfraz Shah's murder by Pakistan Rangers in 2011) became the part of the contents of the conventional mainstream media through new media applications. During the mass mobilization to organize offline protests, rallies, marches and sit-ins, due to the negligence of law enforcement agencies, certain other sparking events took placed while handling the protesters and activists. There are occasions e.g. Judicial Movement 2007, Model Town Tragedy or Lahore Massacre 2014 and D. Chowk marathon sit-in 2014, Tehreek-e-Labaik's sit-in at Faizabad, 2017; where clashes between the police and the protesters erupted and dozens of protesters died and a number of activists and police officers injured (Pakistan Today, 2014). Such disorder converts the situation into a police state where inevitable violence further exacerbates the political situation of the country. Therefore, the protesters get further stimulated and demand justice from political and judicial authorities. At times they chant slogans in favour of the Pakistan Army and calling upon the military to take over parliament. Political analysts and experts in such situation do not rule out military intervention in a country that has already been ruled for more than three decades by the army in four military coups (Asia News, 2014). Both the mainstream media and social media highlight this entire situation through live footages, uploading pictures, and reporting ongoing developments over social media. The protesters in this way put pressure on elected political authorities to surrender their power to protesters, fulfil their demands or bring constitutional amendments and address their un-attended and long-awaited political problems.

It seems, as the social media has become a new space of public discourse particularly among educated youth. Therefore, it is thought that they are playing a strong role in changing the political landscape of the country. By making use of the new media technologies the youth actively participate in different demonstrations, marches and protests on ground e.g. Long March 2007, Pakistan Awami Tehreek's (PAT) dharna 2013, 126-day dharna at D-Chowk (outside the parliament building) of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and a recent 2017 dharna of Tehreek-e-Labbaik (newly emerged political party) led by Moulana Khadim Rizvi in Faizabad. The young generation of the country shows involvement in the political process of the country through its online and offline presence. Keeping in view the growing usage of social media and the state of political activism in Pakistan, it seems that the social networking sites have created an online space for public discourse. The objectives of the current study are to explore the implications that social media brings upon grass roots political engagement and activism, particularly among civic-minded and politically aware educated youths, and how their participation is giving rise to a networked public sphere in Pakistan. In order to achieve these objectives; following research questions have been posed: 1) what is the frequency of politically related social media usage among Pakistani youth? 2) how does social media facilitate political activism among Pakistani youth? And 3) how does social media facilitate a networked public sphere among Pakistani youth?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Youth's Social Media Use and Political Activism

The most important factor to understand the link between social media use and political engagement is to understand the emergence of diverse new forms of citizenship (Xenos et al., 2014). The contemporary youth has started to participate in politics and public life that is distinctly different from old dutiful norms of citizen participation that were dominant in previous generations (Bennet, 2012; Dalton, Sickle, & Weldon, 2009). It has

been identified that the youth has abandoned the traditional modes of political participation in favour of personalised politics of engagement by using social media (Bennet, Wells, & Freelon, 2011). Scholars have identified the potential of the Internet as an alternative public sphere that promotes political debates among youth and helps them to launch effective political campaigns.

A number of scholars viewed political activism as a behavioural practice that is meant to influence the decisions of the actors of political institutions (Skoric et al., 2016). Such practices include contributing money to the parties and political candidates, protest activities, campaigning, promoting candidates on Facebook and boycotting. (Gil de Zúñiga, Molynuex, & Zheng, 2014). In the present digital world, social media outlets have offered new high-tech communication affordances that have allowed the users to seek and disseminate political information, discuss political issues, and participate in online political activities that supplement the traditional forms of political participation (Vitak et al., 2011). Scholars have investigated the relationship between social media use and political participation across the world, mainly from the United States' perspectives, concentrating on online and offline political movements.

Some of the studies such as those conducted by Bode (2012) and Vitak (2012) found that the general use of Facebook is predictive to proliferate online political activities. It has also been identified that the use of Twitter and blogs has optimistically increased the intensity of offline and online political engagement (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2012). Among such users, only expressive users of blog sites, like those who write blogs or comment on them, are expected to participate in online and offline political activities while consumptive users of blogs, like passive readers and commenters, are not predicted to partake in offline political activities, at least in the context of the United States (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2013). It is theorised that much of the current youth's political activism is facilitated, made

possible, and intensified by the availability of social media. Concurrently, the youth's political activism feeds into social media content. The existing literature endorses that the use of social media for political information exhibits a positive relationship among Facebook groups use (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012), social networking sites use for getting news (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), and for political activities on Facebook (Vitak et al., 2011). Different online social networks increase the exposure of the users that may ultimately improve their rationality to synthesise the news' political events. On the other hand, mobilising information received through Facebook group pages combined with improved rationality (through increased exposure to the social networks) promotes participatory behaviour among the citizens (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Through this literature, the following hypothesis can be derived regarding social media use among Pakistani youth for political purpose:

Hypothesis (1): Frequency of social media use is positively associated with facilitating political activism among Pakistani youth.

2.3 Social Media Use, Networked Public Sphere, and Public Discourse

The critical pillar of the networked public sphere is generating a public discourse among social media users regarding public matters (Cogburn & Espinoza, 2011). The users, through this public sphere, after meeting, discussing, and debating on political issues, generate a public discourse that exerts its pressure upon political domains of the society (Yinjiao, Ping & Zhang, 2016). Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), established that people who are engaged in political discussion are more likely to engage in political actions. The discussion of political matters helps social media users not only to share the information but also to take in that information. According to Schmitt-Beck (2008), social media offers a free marketplace of ideas that infuses political activism among the users by offering the means to fight with ideas, comment on the news shared through mainstream media, and help

the users to exchange highly structured arguments and generate a public discourse. Therefore, political discussion over social media enriches the level of political learning and enables the individuals to take part in social and political causes more often (Valenzuela, 2012). The expression of opinion by using social media perhaps triggers online political talk, which is considered conducive by the new media scholars for interpersonal political engagement. The rapid transfer of information and the difficulty of censorship make social media a well-organized public sphere that generates a unique public discourse for social media users to voice their concerns against political issues (Yang, 2010). The technological advancement has established an undeniable potential of online and other social media that help in converting the public sphere into a networked public sphere (Beers, 2006). The architecture of the networked public sphere is very much driven by social media. Without it, the shape of the networked public sphere would not be as it currently is. The networked public sphere, in turn with the relationship of online political activism, creates a vibrant public discourse feeding into social media, mainstream media, and society that drive the agenda of the political domain. Based on the theorization of social media use, public discourse, and networked public sphere, it is claimed that individuals who use social media are more exposed to political information and discussion online, and therefore are more likely to engage in political discussion and public debates, hence generating a public discourse that ultimately influences political institutes. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis regarding social media use and networked public sphere in Pakistan can be made:

Hypothesis (2): Frequency of social media use is positively associated with facilitating a networked public sphere in Pakistan.

The political and democratic power of social media has been examined in the academic studies of various countries. However, apart from a small number of studies mostly examining social or technological aspect of new media (Ayesha & Ayesha, 2016); and social

media as an alternative communication and resistance channel during the political crisis in Pakistan (Arif, 2014). There is a dearth of research within the field of media and communication of Pakistan regarding the Internet and social media use and its relationship with political activism and networked public sphere in the country. By testing the above mentioned hypotheses, the study addresses this gap as an academic discourse on youth political activism via social media and its implications on the networked political sphere in Pakistan.

3. Methodology

A cross sectional survey research design has been adopted for the current study. The researchers have developed a survey questionnaire and conducted pilot study prior to collect the final data for the study. The researcher circulated the web-link of the survey questionnaire to the students of sampled departments of Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad (QUI), International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) and National University of Modern Languages Islamabad (NUML) through the class representatives (CRs) of the classes and sent the web-link of the survey questionnaire to 150 students and distributed the questionnaire to them. Due to the contingency question asking whether they use social media for political purpose or not, and lack of research culture to respond the online surveys in Pakistan, only 158 students were qualified to take part in the pilot study. The items regarding the frequency of the political usage of social media and networked public sphere were tested. The first threshold value of the scale (social media as facilitator of political activism) is .907 and the second threshold value of the scale (social media as facilitator of networked public sphere) is .920 respectively. However, the overall 0.95 threshold value is computed for the entire scale of the study. Later, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO and Bartlett's test was performed upon the data that was collected during pilot study. The 0.961 ratio of KMO test and 0.000 significance level of Bartlett's test of Sphericity assured that the scale is valid to assess the

intended construct of the study. Due to the difficulties faced in online pilot testing of the instrument, the researcher has decided to adopt self-administered survey technique and conveniently distributed the questionnaire to the students by visiting class to class, by getting permission from the chairmen of the sampled departments from the three above-mentioned universities. Through this way, the researcher was able to distribute 450 copies of the questionnaire to the youth studying in the above-mentioned universities. Due to the one contingency question given above the instrument, only 420 students in total were qualified to respond back the questionnaire. Out of which the responses of only 403 respondents were made part of final analysis as rest of the responses were incomplete or they were exceeding the age bracket of Pakistani youth (18-29). The whole data was collected during the month of October 2019.

4. Results and Findings

The results include the frequency and mean ranks of the patterns of social media use for political purpose among the respondents of the study. The results also include the correlations of social media use with political activism and networked public sphere among the participants of the study.

	Mean Rank
Facebook	6.06
YouTube	4.53
Twitter	4.05
Google+	3.54
Daily motion	3.41
Blogs	3.35
Others	3.05

Test Statistics[a]	
N	403
Chi-Square	628.862
Df	6
Asymp. Sig	.000

a. Friedman Test

Table 4.1: Mean Ranks of the Frequency of Social Media Usage for Political Purpose

Table 4.1articulate that the mean rank of Facebook is 6.06, which is higher than mean ranks of other social media websites. Whereas; YouTube is the second top priority of social media users with the mean rank of 4.53 to highlight country's political issues. The mean rank of Twitter is 4.05 that suggest that Twitter is the third widely consumed website for the sampled population. Moreover, Friedman Test statistics makes it clear that the difference among the usage of all these websites by the respondents of the study is (.000) significant.

			Frequency of Social Media Use	Facilitating Political Activism
Spearman's rho	Frequency of Social Media Use	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.247[**]
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	403	403
	Facilitating Political Activism	Correlation Coefficient	.247[**]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	403	403

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4.2: Correlation between Social Media Use and Political Activism

From the table given above, the Spearman's rho test was computed on a sample (N=403) to see the correlation between the frequency of social media use and political

activism among youth in Pakistan. The Spearman correlation of social media use and political activism is (rs=247**, p= 0.000) which is considered as significant. The significance level reported above is $p < 0.01$ (2 tailed) provides the result that there is a strong association between the frequencies of social media use with political activism among youth in Pakistan.

			Frequency of Social Media Use	Facilitating Networked Public Sphere
Spearman's rho	Frequency of Social Media Use	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.161[*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
		N	403	403
	Facilitating Networked Public Sphere	Correlation Coefficient	.161[*]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
		N	403	403

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 4.3: Correlation between Social Media Use and Networked Public Sphere

From the table given above, the Spearman's rho test was computed on a sample (N=403) to see the correlation between the frequency of social media use and political activism among youth in Pakistan. The Spearman correlation of social media use and networked public sphere is (rs=161*, p= 0.001) which is considered as significant. The significance level reported above is $p < 0.05$ (2 tailed) provides the result that there is a strong association between the frequency of social media use with facilitating networked public sphere among youth in Pakistan.

5. Discussion

So far the first research question, "what is the frequency of politically related social media usage among Pakistani youth" is concerned, Facebook appears to be a widely used networking site for political activism among youth in Pakistan, followed by YouTube, Twitter, blogs and other social networking sites and applications respectively. Researchers have found that youth, who actively seek and share political information on social media, tend to also participate in the political group's activities (Park et al., 2009). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the survey results indicate that Pakistani youth relied heavily on social media to highlight Pakistan's political issues and problems.

The users also upload and share news videos lifted from the mainstream news channels. There is thus an environment of inter-media agenda-setting and recreation of news between social media and mainstream media in Pakistan. To highlight the political issues of the country, social media user post and share user-generated content comprising of photos, images and texts. As Aday et al., (2013) pointed out, user-generated content is shared crosswise through new media technologies, disinter-mediating traditional media, and reduces media's traditional role as a fundamental intermediary between the masses and the state as seen occurring in Pakistan.

Regarding the second research question "how does social media facilitate political activism among Pakistani youth?" is concerned, the findings of this study find support in existing literature that have found that people who are politically-engaged on social media are also more politically active. This certainly appears to be the case among Pakistani youth surveyed in this study. Similar individual-level studies have found that the frequency of social media use has a positive relationship with political activism (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Park et al., 2009; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). Researchers propose a number of reasons for this positive relationship. Firstly, social media

makes it possible and easy for users to develop a large number of contacts with like-minded people; therefore, aiding social movements to reach critical mass (Kristen & Saxton, 2012). Secondly, social media networks function as information centres; thereby enable users to screen their personal contacts and remain updated about recent happenings around them through notifications and news feeds (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012). Thirdly, the increased participation of social media users in online political activities develops trustworthy offline relationships with like-minded people, which promote offline protests and political behaviours among the youth in Pakistan. Fourthly, social media helps to construct and promote personal and group identity (a forerunner of political behaviour) that multiplies the force of peer pressure to accept group norms by providing continuous interpersonal feedback (Dalton et al., 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). All these reasons support the results, (as detailed in the Table 4.2), and approves the Hypothesis (1): "Frequency of social media use is positively associated with facilitating political activism among Pakistani youth".

As for as the third research question is concerned "how does social media facilitate a networked public sphere among Pakistani youth?" is concerned, (as detailed in the Table 4.3), social media users surveyed in this study agree that social media facilitates a networked public sphere among Pakistani youth. Literature highlights that the social media substantially affects the dynamic between civic and public forces in the states (Nugroho & Syarief, 2012). Abida (2013) argued that social media in Pakistan is gaining wider acceptance particularly among the youth. . This current study's findings support the notion that social media has accelerated civic political engagement with Pakistan. The shape of social media use in Pakistan is similar to the international world, where social media has been acknowledged as a networked public sphere generating debate on national and international political issues (Nida, 2013). Hence, the current study approves the Hypothesis (2): Frequency of social media use is positively associated with facilitating a networked public sphere in Pakistan.

Findings in this study differ from Kugelman's (2012) earlier findings that suggest that people of Pakistan use social media more for socialization purposes and less for getting news. On the contrary, this study's results support Abida's (2013) suggestion that social media in Pakistan is used extensively for consuming news and informational exchange. This has brought a shift in the Pakistani public sphere. As is the case in many countries, the public sphere in Pakistan was formerly centered around a selected number of commercially controlled media conglomerates. This one-way communication uni-directional public sphere is now transforming into an interactive grass-roots forum. The new user-generated networked public sphere is driven by individual public participation in creating and disseminating information across the world (Benkler, 2006).

6. Conclusion

The current study concluded that the there is an emergence of the networked public sphere in Pakistan where social media has become a central component of modern society and politics. The current study has attached an instrumental value to social media and found a relationship between the use of these technologies for political activism and creating a networked public sphere among the youth in Pakistan. The study has found an increased interaction of the social media users under this networked public sphere, where individuals construct their own identity through Facebook and other social media platforms that provide them a genial atmosphere, to take collective political actions. Afterwards, the disintermediation of social media, pushing the legacy media to some extent, as the primary agenda setter of the society, challenging the established gatekeeping hierarchy of the conventional media adds more strength in the power of this networked public sphere. All these factors are instrumental for the users and play a crucial role in this networked public sphere to generate debate and to devise strategies. These could result in collective actions to influence the politicians to fulfil their demands and to solve their political problems.

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