



Politics on Facebook: Consumption Patterns and Perception Analysis of Students

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Abstract

This study explores the extent of exposure and consumption of political contents on Facebook and its possible connection with attitudinal change in political perspectives of young university students at graduate and post graduate level in Pakistan. Variables of the study were Level of Education (Graduate and Post Graduate) and Gender (Male and Female). The major concepts around which the study revolves are Facebook timeline contents, Exposure to political posts/messages, Extent of Sharing the political contents and Changes in political perception, resulting into possible change in political beliefs and attitudes as perceived by the users. A random sample of 800n was drawn from two universities, from different regions of Pakistan.

The findings of the study brought into the knowledge that young university students of different educational levels are heavy consumers of political contents on Facebook and they are of the view that this frequent exposure helps develop or change their political awareness, beliefs and attitudes. Politicians and propagandists are utilizing new media technologies and social media not only for their general political communication but also for mobilization, motivation, propaganda and revolutionary movements.

Keywords: *Politics on Facebook, Attitudinal Change and Facebook, Facebook usage in Pakistan, University students and Facebook, Perception about political attitudes through social media*

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Introduction

Online platforms like Facebook are brimming with misquotes, misrepresentation of facts and generally a lot of disinformation. In addition to personal posts and millions of status updates directed at own social circles, Facebook is flooded with bogus posts every day.

In Pakistan, we all remember the widespread use of the renowned poet Faraz's name with very dubious verses of poetry. Sometimes it was so non-serious that it was apparent to the recipient. But this flow of forwarded messages, posts etc did not stop. The obvious answer is that Facebook users do not care about authenticity of posts they consume. In the long run, it can undermine the use of Facebook as a credible forum for social interaction and a moderator of meaningful change.

Facebook definitely had to be smart to grab the attention of its users and is a digital form of very human interaction. Cyber space is a great tool to speak our minds, forge real mental connection and interact without tedious social incumbencies. From having a blue background to be inclusive to colorblind people, every aspect of the platform is minutely structured in accordance with our psychology. Often these patterns are imperceptible to average user and can even affect their thought process in subliminal ways

It was once said that a picture can speak thousand words. But today, thousands of pictures are posted to speak of one thing only: the self. Facebook has directly impacted the concept of modesty. Once people had strict boundaries about personal and public information, but today it has become acceptable to share personal information and even intimate family moments. This has in some cases, adversely affected relationships. This trend points to the issue of exhibition on a very mass level. Implications of this behavior are far ranging. In some multinational companies, in some parts of world, employers have started looking into the employees' online history and there have been consequences for employees who had displayed inappropriate behavior on their online profile years ago.

Everybody has personal wall on Facebook. So Facebook is the replacement of personal diary to open diary. Anybody can look at the wall if it is public. It is the choice of user that he share things with the friends or everybody on the Facebook. Users are getting more socialize and aware of the political issues. We can say that social networking has a remarkable role in political socialization of the masses.

Not everyone is cut out to be a leader and trendsetter. It is especially natural for gullible young people to be affected by a fashionable behavior or trend. Often, propaganda is spread by making it appear popular among certain group of people, and these people, would then, predictably join in. This tactic is employed by mass media, companies and even government policy makers to achieve their respective ends. Social media is a handy tool in hands of these groups and they can employ it to spread their opinions, packaged in a user friendly and emotionally relevant scenario. The end user might think that he / she is engaging in a personal cause, when they are actually being subversively tricked in to it.

Pakistani youth is spending an increasing amount of time online. They are using the Facebook platform for a myriad of random and sometimes well directed activities. Recently their political participation on Facebook and Twitter has gained attention from main stream media and leading political parties. It is to be noted here that these platforms are often used side by side, and with easy accessibility via smart phone apps , young people are simultaneously logged in to more than one platform at any one time. In addition to its



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usage for connecting to friends and family members, range of activities include passive consumption of popular posts as well as active participation in the form of shares, likes, tags and comments.

We have long believed that the meaningful action springs from thoughtful inaction. In the age of social media, solitude and meditation has been replaced by regurgitated content off the internet. It is not altogether a bad thing, but it is easy to get lost in the world of internet. Young people have all the time to spend and none to spare. This haphazard ingestion of ideas and posts can simply kill a few brain cells and go down the drain. Question is will a certain degree of online political activism actually lead to some real world action or will it merely range from sharing post to signing a petition and nothing more; something termed as 'Slacktivism'.

Imran Khan, the chairperson of PTI, has a considerable fan base. Many of his supporters defend his party actions on sole argument that it is led by their charismatic leader. In 70's Z.A.Bhutto was also famous for his persona. Therefore, personal charisma plays important role in political likeability and social media drives on it. Many old, seasoned political families are fading into comparison and young people are talking about new faces. PTI too has been criticized by its young supporters for bringing old faces to its platform.

Since the success of PTI, all political parties are coming to realize that social media is a great platform to connect with their supporters and further their cause. Now, PTI, PMLN, PPP and several other parties and their leaders have set up dedicated social media teams and many hold personal accounts, which they use to directly interact with the public and get their message across.

Also, the voice of social media has increased social accountability of political figures and parties. If enough people point it out, they have to answer.

Political communication on facebook is a new style of old propaganda and psychological warfare. Sometimes these messages on facebook are coming from an openly defined source, sometimes from a hidden source. However there are a lot of fake pages and ID's on facebook so that it becomes difficult to judge what is based on truth.

The researcher is going to conduct a study on the effects of Facebook usage on social beliefs and political inclinations of Pakistani Youth. More and more young people are spending their quality time on social media; an overwhelming proportion on Facebook. Now Facebook content is repeated by sharing tagging etc, so most young people of similar background are likely to view similar posts their friends have 'liked' or 'shared' and so on. So views on all the popular subjects are propagated to a 'Facebook community' by simple sharing of Facebook posts etc. Another thing that we have observed is that we share a number of posts, other than our personal stuff, that we find funny, or ridiculous or inspiring or simply something that catches our eye and we think what our friends may think of it; but much of this stuff we take down from popular 'pages', whose authors we do not personally know. So Facebook, while being a social keep-in-touch tool, is also teeming with propaganda, more and more stuff is going 'viral' without having seen the face of mainstream media.

Everyone on Facebook is looking for promotion. It is very acceptable on Facebook to share 'new ideas', 'laughs' etc, lot of which is not generated by our own minds. Sources are unknown and unauthentic and since no one has prime responsibility to share 'original' stuff,



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a lot of incredible material is seen, posted wall to wall. Why? Because we have to share something!! So not only a youngster, but almost anyone can take the friendly bait and share someone else's post and sometimes agenda, potentially owning to and supporting their thoughts.

So it is likely, that many people are using this pool of free advertising and promotion to streamline the thoughts of people in direction that benefits them. And youngsters who will not think too much before being unknowingly recruited for certain idea and movement are most strongly affected by these posts

Literature Review

Social media logic revolves around popularity, connectivity, programmability, datafication and redefining the public values. Over the past few years, social media logic has developed into the mass media logic, sometimes glorifying it, sometimes replacing it. By focusing away from institutions to social media logic as transforming force, it was desired to identify key principles increasing social interaction in a digital and networked society concentrating on the methods and strategies at work in social media logic. Social communication in all the socio political or socio economic ways has emerged as the new media prevailed (Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Since the "Arab Spring" in uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, researchers have tried to understand how Internet and social media can cause to bring political change in authoritarian systems. Social media like Facebook are just a part of a new political communication system evolving in North Africa and the Middle East. News coverage of such events tends to focus on catchphrases such as "Twitter Revolution" or "Facebook Revolution". The events took place in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East are being given meanings by a new political communication system. This system is works by the increasingly interrelated consumption of satellite TV, the Internet specially the Facebook and twitter and the widespread use of Internet-enabled smart phones (SEN, 2012).

To identify the structuring ways of political communication through social media and accessing official websites for the promotion of image and political messages, it was revealed that the usage of internet and social media by politicians led to reconfiguration of political communication. It developed into a new medium of interaction between politicians, voters and media and it started imposing a political social agenda. E-participation and e-government systems play the vital role. All the parliamentary parties of Romania have their official websites for their political communication and they are promoting their motives through social networking websites as well. Through the social media, online communication has become bidirectional. Although this sort of political communication is in the transitional or evolutionary stage in Romania, the concept of internet transmitters is going to be replaced by the concept of internet of the users (Ariton-Gelan, Tasente, & Ciacu, 2013).

Although the most of the mainstream politicians in Pakistan have not yet considered social media as a tool of core political communication, President Zardari, Prime Minister Gilani and opposition leader Nawaz Sharif etc. don't show much activity on the social media. However the observers expect that a huge surge in online activities is expected in the upcoming elections of 2013 and social networking websites can be helpful in recognizing and mobilizing young voters. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf has an active website carrying and



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updating the necessary political communication for the party. They have also established many Facebook profiles and pages for the promotion of their political agenda and making fans. Online media has also given rise to different social mobilizations like the Lawyers' Movement 2007-08. Citizens' engagement has also been activated by social media such as in 2010 flood in Pakistan. Civic activism at local and national level has also been a major topic of social media (Michaelsen, 2011).

A survey on 40 academicians of different universities relating to the marketing departments in Jordan revealed that there is an interest in political matters and in promotion of political texts via Facebook. There is also an impact of political promotion posted on Facebook on the individuals. It was further revealed that individuals deal positively with the political communication via Facebook. A weak response towards the reliability of political texts was also found. Individual's political orientation was also affected by the political promotional texts on Facebook. Political promotional texts on Facebook cause effect on individual's political choices as well. It was evident from the U.S. presidential election campaign in 2008. Political actors have to depend more and more on Facebook as it have become one of the post popular social networks and is appropriate for propagating political promotion. Reliability concept is the baseline for creating confidence in social audience (Yousif & Alsamydai, 2012).

Political mobilization started for anti-corruption protests in 2011/12 in India, involving technological and social communication means. The Internet Mobile Association of India predicts that there will be more internet users in India in 2015 as compared to the USA. In 2015 elections the Congress party leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi did not have any social media accounts but still the party had a pro forma presence in cyber media. AAP party including the leaders such as Arvind Kejriwal had immense presence on Facebook and other social media. BJP and especially Modi have been marked with the huge adoption of social media and utilized this medium for political mobilization. Followers of Modi on social media are in millions. Social media proved to have a heavy impact on political mobilization especially in the society members with low income and limited internet footprints. Political actors heavily used the social media for political mobilization and persuasion. Even with less than fifty percent of internet penetration, the social networking websites can create tangible impact in political discourse. It is just the way this medium is exploited. Digital campaigns are more likely to cause positive electoral results (Pande, 2015).

The emerging media has the power to inform as well as to motivate for political judgment. Publicity becomes more critical despite of being easy too. Radical democratic standards try to restrain the critical integrity and the publicity goods start diminishing (Barney, 2008).

A survey in Spain revealed that about 66 percent social media users use this platform to express their feelings about political issues, civic matters and also post their reaction to the other posts they see. About 38 percent of the users utilize social media to promote the political or social issues while 35% of the users try to encourage the people to come out for vote. Social media is also being used to follow the politicians and political candidates, to post different web links to access political news or stories and to encourage the people to take some action against the political matters (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012).



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The Youtube, Facebook, Twitter are the basic sources of information while analyzing the conflicts in Syrian crises. In Ukrainian case, it was a Facebook and Twitter revolution. It was of same nature like in Egypt and Tunisia in Arabian Revolution. Social media is tractable during the war times too. Soldiers used to communicate with their families through Facebook during the war in Afghanistan. Posts of social media networks are having some beliefs or concerns. They are creating a virtual environment of war (Ibrahim, 2015). There are positive effects of internet on democracy. A moderate link is present between political self efficacy, situational political involvement and amount of attention to traditional internet communications for political communication. Young adults are shifting to online communication channels from the traditional media. Attention to the social network channels is accountable for variance in self efficacy in political patterns of the users. Still further researches are required to conclude the true effects of internet mediated political communication and information on self efficacy (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

Research Questions

This study has been designed to obtain answers for following questions:

1. Whether and to what extent is the exposure of young university students to the political content on Facebook?
2. Whether and to what extent the do the university students perceive that the exposure to political contents on Facebook may cause change in their political beliefs and attitudes?
3. What are the general beliefs of the university students on political communication through Facebook?

Research Methodology

Graduate and undergraduate university students of the Punjab and Sindh province have been taken as the Universe of the study Randomization technique was applied in the sampling procedure. A complete list of all the universities of Punjab and Sindh was compiled. Then 04 universities (02 from each province) were selected randomly using basket draws. Major strata were defined as graduate and undergraduate, male and female students in equal number. Purposely, the Facebook users were selected at this stage. Total sample of 800 (400 female and 400 male) students were interviewed from the sample frame of graduate and undergraduate students of the Punjab and Sindh province.



Major Findings and Results

Tab 1: How often is the exposure to political contents on Facebook * Gender * Education Level Crosstabulation

Education Level			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Graduate	How often is the exposure to political contents on Facebook	Very Greatly	72	88	160
		Greatly	88	56	144
		To some extent	32	48	80
		Never	8	8	16
	Total		200	200	400
Post Graduate	How often is the exposure to political contents on Facebook	Very Greatly	56	48	104
		Greatly	96	48	144
		To some extent	40	88	128
		Rarely	0	8	8
	Never	8	8	16	
Total		200	200	400	
Total	How often is the exposure to political contents on Facebook	Very Greatly	128	136	264
		Greatly	184	104	288
		To some extent	72	136	208
		Rarely	0	8	8
	Never	16	16	32	
Total		400	400	800	

Exposure to Political Contents on Facebook

It was indicated that there were 72 male and 88 female graduates, 56 male and 48 female post graduates who are very greatly exposed to political contents on Facebook while there were 88 male and 56 female graduates, 96 male 48 female graduates who were exposed to political contents on Facebook greatly. Similarly there were 32 male and 48 female graduates, 40 male and 88 female post graduates who saw political contents on Facebook to some extent while there were 0 male and 0 female graduates and 0 male and 8 female post graduates who were exposed rarely. Moreover there are 8 male and 8 female graduates, 8 male and 8 female post graduates who never came across to political contents on Facebook.



Tab. 2: Extent of sharing political content on Facebook * Gender * Education Level Crosstabulation

Education Level			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Graduate	Extent of sharing political content on Facebook	Very Greatly	32	0	32
		Greatly	56	0	56
		To some extent	80	56	136
		Rarely	16	96	112
		Never	16	48	64
Total			200	200	400
Post Graduate	Extent of sharing political content on Facebook	Very Greatly	48	40	88
		Greatly	48	24	72
		To some extent	80	40	120
		Rarely	16	56	72
		Never	8	40	48
Total			200	200	400
Total	Extent of sharing political content on Facebook	Very Greatly	80	40	120
		Greatly	104	24	128
		To some extent	160	96	256
		Rarely	32	152	184
		Never	24	88	112
Total			400	400	800

Sharing political contents on Facebook

The analyzed numeric values revealed that there were 32 male and 0 female graduates, 48 male and 40 female post graduates who share political contents on Facebook very greatly while there were 56 male and 0 female graduates, 48 male 24 female graduates share the political contents greatly. Similarly there were 80 male and 56 female graduates, 80 male and 40 female post graduates who do political sharing to some extent while there were 16 male and 96 female graduates and 16 male and 56 female post graduates who rarely share political contents on Facebook. Moreover there were 16 male and 48 female graduates, 8 male and 40 female post graduates who never shared any political contents on Facebook.



Tab. 3: How often consult other media to confirm authenticity of political information on Facebook * Gender * Education Level Crosstabulation

Education Level			Gender		
			Male	Female	Total
Graduate	How often consult other media to confirm authenticity of political information on Facebook	Very Greatly	0	24	24
		Greatly	32	32	64
		To some extent	56	64	120
		Rarely	88	64	152
		Never	24	16	40
	Total		200	200	400
Post Graduate	How often consult other media to confirm authenticity of political information on Facebook	Very Greatly	40	32	72
		Greatly	72	80	152
		To some extent	48	56	104
		Rarely	32	24	56
		Never	8	8	16
	Total		200	200	400
Total	How often consult other media to confirm authenticity of political information on Facebook	Very Greatly	40	56	96
		Greatly	104	112	216
		To some extent	104	120	224
		Rarely	120	88	208
		Never	32	24	56
	Total		400	400	800

Cross check the political information

The data showed that there were 0 male and 24 female graduates, 40 male and 32 female post graduates who make a cross check on political information gained from Facebook very greatly while there were 32 male and 32 female graduates, 72 male 80 female graduates who greatly cross check. Similarly there were 56 male and 64 female graduates, 48 male and 56 female post graduates who consult other media to some extent while there were 88 male and 64 female graduates and 32 male and 24 female post graduates who rarely consult other media. Moreover there were 24 male and 16 female graduates, 8 male and 8 female post graduates who never cross checked the political information they gained from the Facebook.



Tab 4: Extent of change caused in previous political attitudes by political contents on Facebook * Gender * Education Level Crosstabulation

Education Level		Gender			
		Male	Female	Total	
Graduate	Extent of change caused in previous political attitudes by political contents on Facebook	Very Greatly	56	88	144
		Greatly	88	48	136
		To some extent	40	40	80
		Rarely	16	16	32
		Never	0	8	8
Total		200	200	400	
Post Graduate	Extent of change caused in previous political attitudes by political contents on Facebook	Very Greatly	48	56	104
		Greatly	72	56	128
		To some extent	64	80	144
		Rarely	8	0	8
		Never	8	8	16
Total		200	200	400	
Total	Extent of change caused in previous political attitudes by political contents on Facebook	Very Greatly	104	144	248
		Greatly	160	104	264
		To some extent	104	120	224
		Rarely	24	16	40
		Never	8	16	24
Total		400	400	800	

Attitudinal Change by Political Contents on Facebook

It was revealed that there were 56 male and 88 female graduates, 48 male and 56 female post graduates who very greatly agreed that their previous political attitudes were changed by political contents on Facebook while there were 88 male and 48 female graduates, 72 male and 56 female graduates confirmed it greatly. Similarly there were 40 male and 40 female graduates, 64 male and 80 female post graduates who confirmed attitudinal change to some extent while there were 16 male and 16 female graduates and 8 male and 0 female post graduates who rarely agreed to the statement. Moreover there were 0 male and 8 female graduates, 8 male and 8 female post graduates who said that political contents on Facebook has never caused any change to their previous political attitudes.

Conclusion

On the balance of the statistical analysis, the researcher can conclude that Facebook is creating political awareness and has emerged as a handy medium for expression of political thoughts, activism, and mobilization. Political campaigns through Facebook can not only bring attitudinal change in political mindsets and attitudes; they may also lead to the behavioral change. Political actors utilize this medium for political communication and propaganda as well whereas majority of the young university students do not try to investigate about the origin of the political communication they are coming across through



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Facebook. Extensive use of Facebook and reliance on it for information has opened new avenues for political actors to exploit the young minds.



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