



Social Media as an Agent of Radicalization in Pakistan: A Case Study of University Students

Arslan Musaddiq¹, Dr. Ashraf Iqbal²

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Government College University, Faisalabad

Email: arslan.mayo@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Government College University, Faisalabad

Email: ashrafiqbal@gcuf.edu.pk

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: July 05, 2026 Revised: July 23, 2026 Accepted: August 24, 2026 Available Online: September 05, 2026 Keywords: <i>Social media; Political radicalization; Extremist content exposure; Political attitudes; University students; Pakistan; Digital communication</i> Corresponding author: Dr. Ashraf Iqbal Email: ashrafiqbal@gcuf.edu.pk	As social media is growing to be the primary medium for political learning and social engagement these days, following study investigates the impact of social media on political radicalization tendencies of university students in Pakistan. The study used a quantitative cross-sectional design with 1,000 students and examined the usage of social media, exposure to radical content, political attitudes and tendencies of radicalization through reliability assessment, factor analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis and mediation analysis. The findings showed that there were strong relationships between all variables, and radical content exposure was found to be the most important factor for radicalization tendencies. Social media also had a significant mediating effect, indicating that the effect on the radicalization-related outcomes was not only mediated by political attitudes but also influenced by content exposure, interpretation, and engagement with the content.

Introduction

Social media has become one of the most powerful communication tools in the 21st century, changing the way people gain, understand and share political information. Unlike the traditional media systems, user becomes a consumer, producer and distributor of political contents on digital platforms simultaneously. This change has had a profound impact on political engagement, ideological discourse and the creation of collective identities. (Naeem, 2025) argue that digital platforms have opened up greater avenues for political participation among youth, but they have also led to the proliferation of misinformation, ideological polarization, and polarized information environments. Likewise, (Cinelli et al., 2021) found that social media networks can further polarize opinions as algorithmic environments enable connections between individuals who have similar ideological preferences.

University students are an important group to study concerning the association between social media and political radicalization, as young adults are among the most active social media users, and often discuss politics, social movements, and ideology online. (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020) showed that young people are increasingly turning to social media to get political information and to participate in political life, and (Theocharis et al., 2023) revealed that online political engagement is a significant way for

youth to form political consciousness and group attitudes. But these digital environments that promote engagement can also be a breeding ground for extremist stories, conspiracy theories, hate speech, and politically divisive content that plays on emotions.

The fast-growing internet connectivity and smartphone usage in Pakistan has made social media an important source of political information, especially for educated young people. Today, social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram have become a major platform to discuss politics, political action and political ideas. These platforms can also give rise to the propagation of misinformation, sectarian narratives, intolerance, and extremist messaging, however, and can be used very quickly. According to (Ghafar et al., 2024) who studied the Pakistani youth, social media platforms can influence perceptions and beliefs and TikTok can expose the students of universities to intolerant and polarizing content. Likewise, (Amit et al., 2021) found that social media can expose the young people of Bangladesh to misinformation and extreme ideological interpretations, indicating the vulnerability of the South Asian youths in digital environments.

Radicalisation is a long and complicated process of change in beliefs, identity, attitudes and readiness to accept extremist views and/or actions. Today, it has become a popular research belief that social media is the direct cause of radicalization. Instead, digital platforms are increasingly seen as environments that can intensify, accelerate and amplify social, political and psychological vulnerabilities. (Yadav, 2026) suggested that online environments should not be thought of as a cause of radicalisation, but rather as a facilitator of the radicalisation processes. Likewise, according to (Georgaki, 2022), social media in general serves as an enabling environment where extremist narratives can proliferate and not as a single driving force towards violent radicalization.

Literature Review

Recent empirical studies have also shown the multidimensionality of the relationship between digital media consumption and radicalisation tendencies. (Miconi et al., 2024) looked at the use of digital media amongst youth and revealed that there were differences in support for violent radicalization depending on the type of digital media that the young person used, such as political engagement and trust in online sources. They found that it is not only the frequency of use of digital media that makes them a radicalizing factor, but their psychological, social and political context. Likewise, (Risius et al., 2024) suggested that digital technologies impact radicalisation by a web of different mechanisms such as algorithmic recommendation systems, online communities, identity reinforcement and information filtering processes.

The algorithmic generation of content recommendations is a key issue in the current debates on online radicalization. The personalization of content on social media platforms is becoming more common depending on how users interact with content, which may lead to more reoccurrence of similar ideological messaging. (Marwick et al., 2022) showed that online networks allow extremist ideas to become normalised in the process of repeated interaction with others in ideological communities. More recently, (Wang et al., 2023) examined millions of tweets that mentioned the QAnon conspiracy networks and found several characteristic behaviors of online radicalization, such as the sharing of information in a coordinated manner and the amplification of conspiracy theories. Similarly, (Kunst et al., 2026) identified that the features of radicalizing videos, along with viewers' perceptions, and individual characteristics affect the way viewers perceive extreme content.

The importance of misinformation and conspiracy stories has also been a growing topic in the academic world. The internet can undermine trust, intensify beliefs of grievances, and develop alternative perceptions of political and social realities. (Mumma & Miller, 2025) demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are linked to an increased acceptance of extremist narratives and (Romer & Jamieson, 2025) emphasized that exposition to misinformation leads to institutional distrust and polarization of political viewpoints. These processes could be even more significant in digitally connected societies, where young users are more likely to obtain political information from online platforms.

Other mechanisms that connect the use of social media to radicalization tendencies are social identity and group belonging. Digital platforms provide avenues to seek recognition, community and ideology. As noted by (AL-KHOURY, 2021), radicalization often entails processes of identity transformation, during which people embrace narratives that offer meaning, belonging or answers as to perceived injustice. Likewise, (Haq et al., 2020) stated that ideology is not the sole cause of radicalization as it is the combination of personal grievances, social networks, ideology and group dynamics.

Although there has been a considerable amount of research on online extremism in the international arena, there is a dearth of studies which have explored the link between social media usage and a tendency towards radicalization among university students in Pakistan. Most of the research conducted on Pakistan has dealt with terrorism, religious extremism, or qualitative dimensions of online propaganda, with little quantitative evidence on how exposure to social media, political attitudes, online

engagement patterns relate to susceptibility to online radical messages among university students. This gap is even more significant given the fact that the Pakistani youth is a significant connected generation that is politically aware and socially oriented, and is moving towards a digitally mediated communication environment.

The theory of this research is based on the Media Framing Theory and Marshall McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message". Media Framing Theory is a theory that explains how communication systems shape interpretation through foregrounding some issues and downplaying others. Political narratives are constructed within social media through selective representation, emotional framing, repetition, and engagement of users. (Iacob, 2022) maintained that framing can shape the audience's framing of the problem, their understanding of causes, their assessment of solutions, and their judgements. McLuhan's theory also states that the media of communication also influences the perception and social interaction of human beings. Algorithms and recommendation systems, as well as engagement designs, shape the information users are presented with, and thus political cognition and their ideological exposure, in the digital world. These theoretical approaches constitute a whole framework to explore the link between the social media ecosystems and the tendency to radicalize among university students.

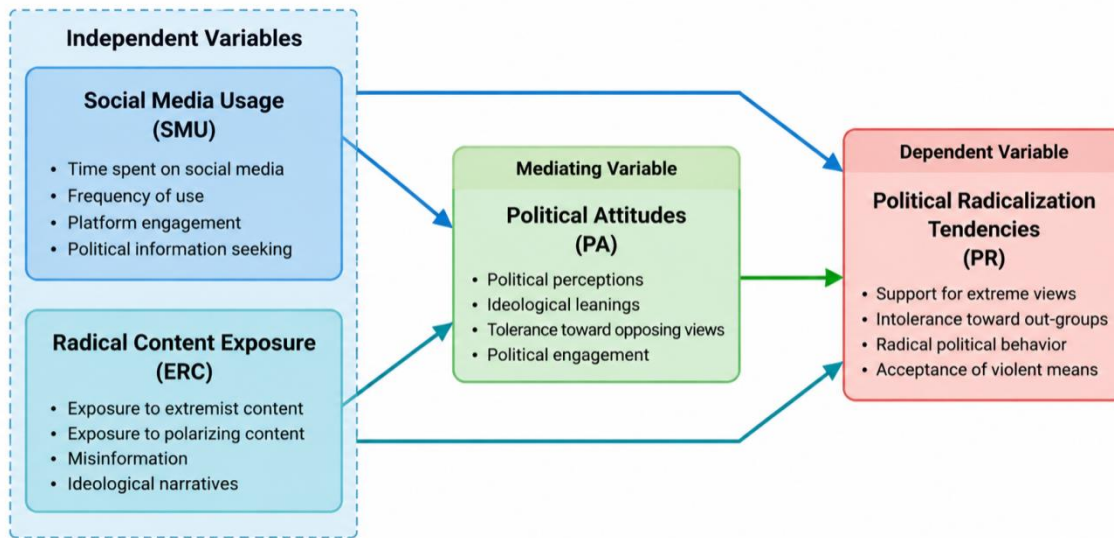


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Objectives

This study aims:

1. To examine social media as an agent of Political radicalization among university students in higher education.
2. To access impact of social media radicalization on political attitude and behavior of the university students.

Research Questions

- How does social media use influence political radicalization among university students in Pakistan?
- How does exposure to extremist content on social media shape political attitudes and radicalization among university students in Pakistan?

Methodology

This is a quantitative cross-sectional study to explore the social media as an agent of political radicalization among university students in Pakistan. The study population comprised of students in the university and the study frame work comprised of a

sample of 1000 respondents. The data were gathered using a structured questionnaire using five-point Likert scale. Four major dimensions were measured by the instrument: patterns of usage of social media, exposure to radical political information, political attitudes, and tendencies toward political radicalization. Reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression analysis, mediation analysis, independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were used for statistical analysis. The ethical issues of confidentiality, voluntary and academic use of responses were taken into account.

Results

The study investigated the relationship between social media usage, radical and extremist content exposure, political attitudes and political radicalization tendencies using the 1,000 responses of university students. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. The sample was heterogeneous with respect to gender, age, educational level, academic discipline, type of university and geographical distribution, as well as background of residence. The distribution shows that the majority of the respondents were young university students, with the majority from early adulthood age groups. The sample comprised of both males and females representing variations in gender composition. In terms of academic attributes, the majority of the respondents were undergraduate students with a significant number of postgraduates. Participants were drawn from various academic fields and institutions at various universities of Pakistan, public and private, from all region of the country. This spectrum contributed to the representativeness of the sample and the general understanding of the social media use and political attitudes of the university students.

The demographic results also showed that there was a strong level of digital engagement among the respondents. A high number of the respondents indicated that they spend a number of hours on social media a day, which showed that social media is a part of the communication environment of students. WhatsApp, YouTube, Tik Tok and Facebook were the platforms that were found to be the most commonly used. While the traditional uses of social media (for entertainment and social interaction) were still prevalent, there was also a significant amount of using social media for political information, news consumption and political discussion. Moreover, many students said that they frequently or sometimes engaged with political news, which also indicates the rising impact of online services on political awareness and political discussion among young adults.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 1000)

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	548	54.8
	Female	439	43.9
	Prefer not to say	13	1.3
Age Group	18–20 years	318	31.8
	21–23 years	472	47.2
	24–26 years	168	16.8
	27 years and above	42	4.2
Educational Level	Undergraduate (BS/BA/BSc)	712	71.2
	Graduate (MA/MSc/MS/MPhil)	248	24.8
	PhD	25	2.5
	Other	15	1.5
Year of Study	1st Year	245	24.5
	2nd Year	263	26.3
	3rd Year	214	21.4
	4th Year	187	18.7
	Above 4th Year	91	9.1
Field of Study	Social Sciences	214	21.4
	Humanities	108	10.8
	Natural Sciences	156	15.6
	Engineering & Technology	172	17.2
	Medical & Health Sciences	168	16.8
	Business & Management Sciences	152	15.2
	Other	30	3.0

University Type	Public University	682	68.2
	Private University	318	31.8
Province/Region	Punjab	200	20.0
	Sindh	200	20.0
	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	200	20.0
	Balochistan	200	20.0
	Islamabad Capital Territory	200	20.0
		200	20.0
Place of Residence	Urban Area	674	67.4
	Rural Area	326	32.6
Daily Social Media Use	Less than 1 hour	76	7.6
	1–3 hours	286	28.6
	4–6 hours	398	39.8
	More than 6 hours	240	24.0
Most Frequently Used Platform	Facebook	165	16.5
	WhatsApp	286	28.6
	YouTube	212	21.2
	TikTok	181	18.1
	Instagram	112	11.2
	X (Twitter)	32	3.2
	Other	12	1.2
Primary Purpose of Social Media Use	Education/Academic Information	246	24.6
	Entertainment	264	26.4
	Social Interaction	214	21.4
	Political Information and Discussion	132	13.2
	News and Current Affairs	126	12.6
	Other	18	1.8
Engagement with Political Content	Never	106	10.6
	Rarely	238	23.8
	Sometimes	386	38.6
	Often	192	19.2
	Very Often	78	7.8
Interest in Politics	Very Low	96	9.6
	Low	214	21.4
	Moderate	398	39.8
	High	212	21.2
	Very High	80	8.0

Table 2 indicates the descriptive characteristics of the patterns of use of social media. Results show that overall, the respondents had moderate to high levels of engagement with political information via social media. The participants found social media platforms as relevant sources of political information and had a role in learning of political issues. There was also an indication by the respondents that social media had more people active during elections, political conflicts and other major events in the country, which is why digital communication and the issue of political attention are interconnected. Active political participation levels were relatively low though, which means that not all students are actively involved in the political process by commenting, sharing or discussing political content online.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Social Media Usage Patterns

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)	Mean $\pm$ SD
I regularly use social media platforms to obtain political information	72 (7.2)	168 (16.8)	214 (21.4)	384 (38.4)	162 (16.2)	3.40 $\pm$ 1.14
Social media has become an important source of information about political issues	54 (5.4)	132 (13.2)	198 (19.8)	412 (41.2)	204 (20.4)	3.58 $\pm$ 1.12

for me						
I frequently follow political pages, groups, influencers, or accounts on social media	118 (11.8)	214 (21.4)	246 (24.6)	302 (30.2)	120 (12.0)	3.09 ± 1.18
I actively engage with political content by liking, commenting, sharing, or discussing it online	126 (12.6)	236 (23.6)	242 (24.2)	286 (28.6)	110 (11.0)	3.02 ± 1.19
I spend more time on social media during elections, political conflicts, or major national events	62 (6.2)	142 (14.2)	176 (17.6)	402 (40.2)	218 (21.8)	3.57 ± 1.15
Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok influence my understanding of political issues	58 (5.8)	146 (14.6)	202 (20.2)	396 (39.6)	198 (19.8)	3.53 ± 1.13
The frequency of my social media use affects my political opinions	84 (8.4)	176 (17.6)	228 (22.8)	362 (36.2)	150 (15.0)	3.32 ± 1.16
Social media discussions influence the way I interpret political events	68 (6.8)	154 (15.4)	216 (21.6)	386 (38.6)	176 (17.6)	3.45 ± 1.13

Table 3 shows the exposure to radical and extremist material via social media platforms. The results show that digitally politically sensitive and ideologically charged content is a frequent phenomenon for university students. The respondents pointed to the existence of extreme opinions, hate speech, conspiracy stories and political messages, which are emotionally framed, on social media platforms. The participants also noted that algorithmic recommendation systems repeatedly serve users with similar content, based on the previous interactions they have had online. The results show that digital platforms can provide opportunities for reinforcement of ideological narratives through repeated exposure and selective information spaces.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Exposure to Radical and Extremist Content on Social Media

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	n	Disagree (%)	n	Neutral (%)	n	Agree (%)	n	Strongly Agree (%)	n	Mean ± SD
I have encountered political or ideological content promoting extreme viewpoints	82 (8.2)		174 (17.4)		224 (22.4)		366 (36.6)		154 (15.4)		3.34 ± 1.15
Social media platforms provide easy access to content supporting radical political ideas	58 (5.8)		136 (13.6)		198 (19.8)		402 (40.2)		206 (20.6)		3.56 ± 1.12
I have observed hate speech or intolerant messages against individuals or groups	46 (4.6)		112 (11.2)		176 (17.6)		428 (42.8)		238 (23.8)		3.70 ± 1.10
Social media algorithms expose users to similar content based on previous interests	52 (5.2)		118 (11.8)		186 (18.6)		414 (41.4)		230 (23.0)		3.65 ± 1.11
Radical groups can use social media to influence university students	40 (4.0)		98 (9.8)		168 (16.8)		432 (43.2)		262 (26.2)		3.78 ± 1.07
Fake news and conspiracy theories about political issues are commonly spread through social media	36 (3.6)		92 (9.2)		146 (14.6)		436 (43.6)		290 (29.0)		3.85 ± 1.06
Emotional political messages on social media can influence students' beliefs	48 (4.8)		124 (12.4)		192 (19.2)		412 (41.2)		224 (22.4)		3.64 ± 1.10
Continuous exposure to similar political messages can gradually change views	44 (4.4)		112 (11.2)		182 (18.2)		426 (42.6)		236 (23.6)		3.70 ± 1.09

According to Table 4, social media has an influence on political attitude. The findings show that the respondents saw social media as an important influence on political awareness, interpretation of political events, and opinions of political actors and institutions. The potential of political narratives presented in a digital form is to influence public opinion and evoke an emotional response to political issues, participants said. These findings demonstrate that social media is not merely a medium of communication but it is also a field where political meanings are formed on a constant basis through repetitive exposure, interaction and interpretation.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Social Media Influence on Political Attitudes

Item	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)	Mean ± SD
Social media influences my perception of political leaders and political parties	64 (6.4)	146 (14.6)	210 (21.0)	392 (39.2)	188 (18.8)	3.49 ± 1.13
Political content on social media affects my understanding of government policies	58 (5.8)	138 (13.8)	204 (20.4)	404 (40.4)	196 (19.6)	3.54 ± 1.12
Social media shapes students' opinions about national political issues	42 (4.2)	112 (11.2)	186 (18.6)	426 (42.6)	234 (23.4)	3.69 ± 1.10
Political narratives presented on social media can influence public opinion	38 (3.8)	102 (10.2)	164 (16.4)	438 (43.8)	258 (25.8)	3.78 ± 1.07
Social media increases political awareness among university students	32 (3.2)	86 (8.6)	142 (14.2)	448 (44.8)	292 (29.2)	3.88 ± 1.03
I have reconsidered my political views after viewing political content on social media	92 (9.2)	188 (18.8)	248 (24.8)	332 (33.2)	140 (14.0)	3.24 ± 1.18
Social media content can create strong emotional reactions toward political issues	46 (4.6)	118 (11.8)	186 (18.6)	416 (41.6)	234 (23.4)	3.67 ± 1.10
Political discussions on social media influence students' trust in political institutions	76 (7.6)	154 (15.4)	228 (22.8)	364 (36.4)	178 (17.8)	3.41 ± 1.15

Table 5 indicates the tendency of the students of the university towards political radicalization. The results show that there is moderate level of agreement on the possible link between exposure to social media and radical political attitudes. The respondents acknowledged that they might become less tolerant, more politically aggressive, and ready to accept extreme views when exposed to radical content regularly, engage in political online communities, and have polarized discussions. However, the outcomes are inclinations and correlations that are observed, rather than evidence of the immediate influence of social media exposure on radicalization. The findings of the descriptive analysis show that social media has a considerable contextual influence on the domain of political information processing, ideological exposure and political attitude of university students.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Political Radicalization Tendencies Among University Students

Item	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)	Mean ± SD
Social media can encourage university students to adopt extreme political opinions	58 (5.8)	132 (13.2)	210 (21.0)	398 (39.8)	202 (20.2)	3.55 ± 1.12
Repeated exposure to radical political content can increase acceptance of extremist ideas	46 (4.6)	112 (11.2)	182 (18.2)	422 (42.2)	238 (23.8)	3.69 ± 1.09
Social media can reduce tolerance toward people with different political opinions	52 (5.2)	128 (12.8)	198 (19.8)	410 (41.0)	212 (21.2)	3.60 ± 1.11
Online political discussions sometimes encourage anger and hostility among students	64 (6.4)	142 (14.2)	218 (21.8)	382 (38.2)	194 (19.4)	3.50 ± 1.14
Political grievances shared on social media can contribute to radical thinking	48 (4.8)	116 (11.6)	188 (18.8)	420 (42.0)	228 (22.8)	3.66 ± 1.10
Social media can make radical political ideas appear acceptable or justified	76 (7.6)	154 (15.4)	232 (23.2)	354 (35.4)	184 (18.4)	3.42 ± 1.16
Online communities and groups can influence students toward radical political	50 (5.0)	120 (12.0)	194 (19.4)	416 (41.6)	220 (22.0)	3.64 ± 1.10

beliefs						
Social media can increase political polarization among university students	42 (4.2)	108 (10.8)	176 (17.6)	430 (43.0)	244 (24.4)	3.72 ± 1.08
Online radical ideas can influence students' offline political attitudes and actions	70 (7.0)	148 (14.8)	224 (22.4)	372 (37.2)	186 (18.6)	3.46 ± 1.15
Social media plays a role in the process of political radicalization among university students	38 (3.8)	98 (9.8)	162 (16.2)	442 (44.2)	260 (26.0)	3.79 ± 1.06

Following the descriptive analysis of the variables studied, reliability and construct validity analyses were performed to assess the psychometric suitability of the measurement scales. All constructs had satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values above the recommended value of 0.70 as reported in Table 6. The reliability coefficient varied from 0.84 to 0.91 for the items measuring social media usage, radical content exposure, political attitudes, and political radicalization tendencies, respectively, showing strong internal consistency of the items. The results showed that the measurement scales were reliable for further statistical analyses.

Table 6: Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Social Media Usage	8	0.86
Radical Content Exposure	8	0.88
Political Attitude	8	0.84
Political Radicalization	10	0.91

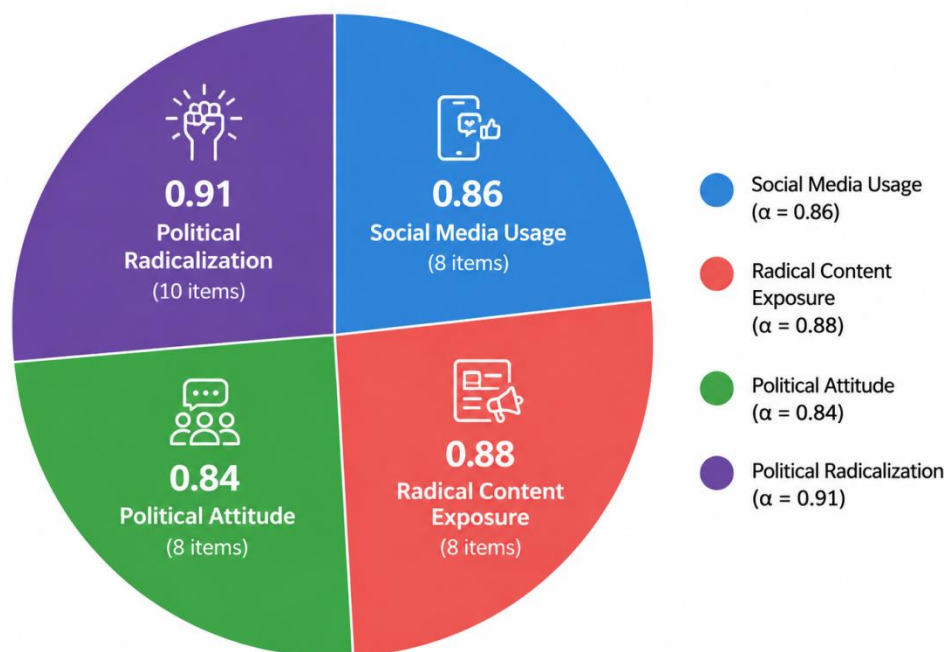


Figure 2: Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

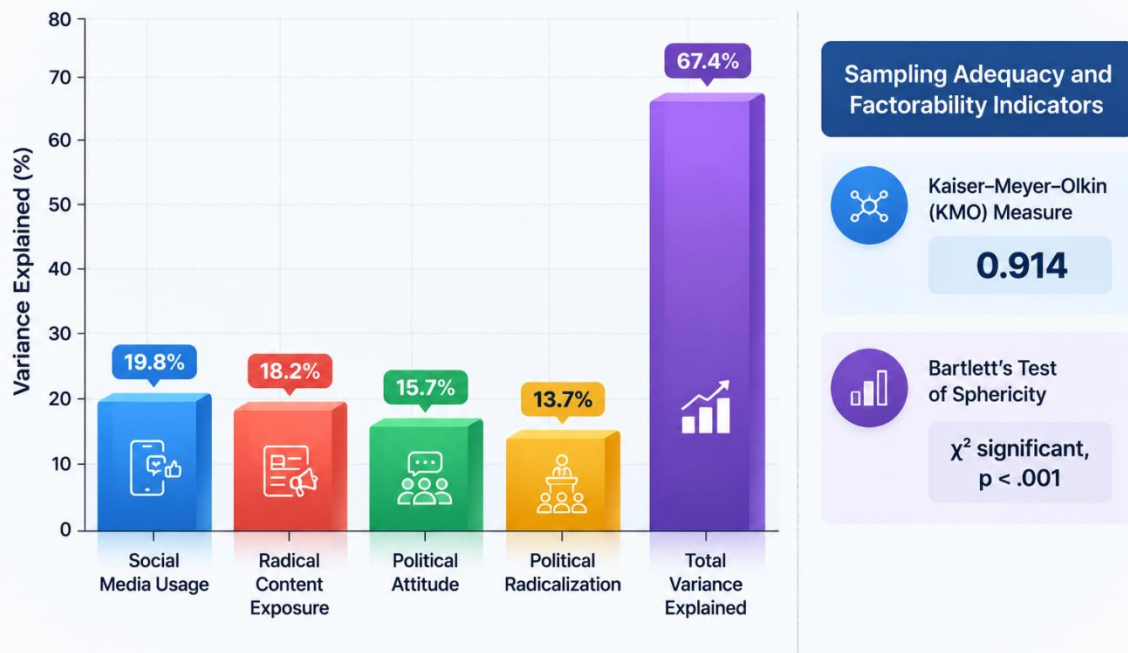
Table 7 also shows exploratory factor analysis results, which confirmed the construct validity of the measures. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value was 0.914, which was excellent sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), which confirmed the appropriateness of the correlation matrix for factoring. Four factors were found: social media use, radical content exposure, political attitudes and political radicalization tendencies. These factors collectively accounted for a significant amount of variance, which validate the proposed research model structure.

Table 7a: Exploratory Factor Analysis of Study Constructs

Factor	Variance Explained (%)
Social Media Usage	19.8
Radical Content Exposure	18.2
Political Attitude	15.7
Political Radicalization	13.7
Total Variance Explained	67.4

Table 7b: Sampling Adequacy and Factorability Indicators

Test	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure	0.914
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	χ^2 significant, $p < .001$

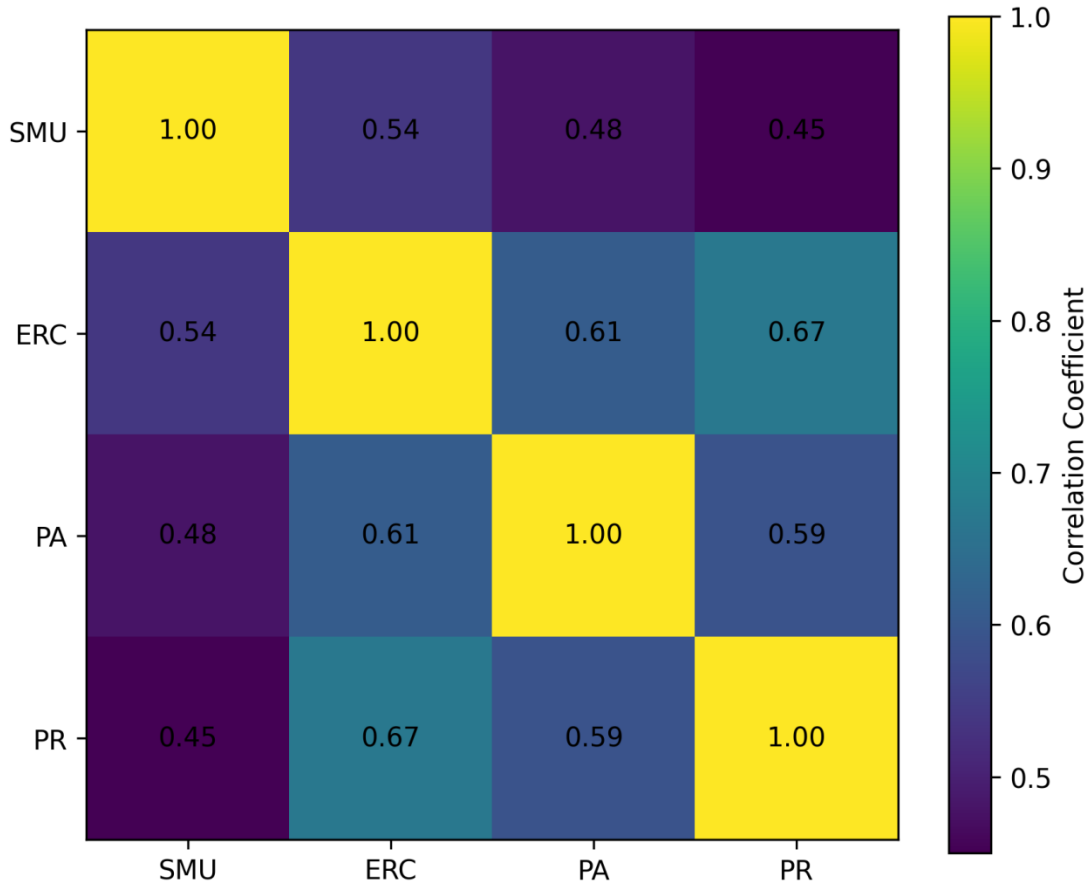
**Figure 3: Exploratory Factor Analysis of Study Constructs**

Pearson correlation was done to determine the relationship between the study variables. The findings of Table 8 showed that all main constructs are positively and significantly related. There was a strong positive correlation between social media use and exposure to radical content ($r = .54$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of social media use were associated with more exposure to ideological and politically extreme content. In the same way, the tendency to political radicalization was most strongly correlated with radical content exposure ($r = .67$, $p < .001$), which means that the exposure to extreme or highly polarizing content was an important factor that was related to radicalization-related attitudes. Political attitudes were also significantly positively correlated with tendencies of radicalization ($r = .59$, $p < .001$), indicating that digitally formed political perceptions can also be a factor in the differences in radicalization tendencies between university students.

Table 8: Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

Variable	SMU	ERC	PA	PR
Social Media Usage (SMU)	1			
Exposure to Radical Content (ERC)	0.54**	1		
Political Attitude (PA)	0.48**	0.61**	1	
Political Radicalization (PR)	0.45**	0.67**	0.59**	1

Note. $p < .001$

**Figure 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables**

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the independent predictors of political radicalization tendencies. The results in Table 9 showed that the overall regression model was statistically significant and accounted for 58% of the variance in political radicalization tendencies ($R^2 = .58$, $p < .001$). Out of all the examined predictors, radical content exposure was the strongest significant predictor ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$), followed by political attitudes ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) and social media usage ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$). The results here show that general social media use is less strongly associated with radicalization tendencies, while the ideological content and its intensity that social media users would see online is more significant.

Table 9a: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Political Radicalization

Predictor	β	p-value
Social Media Usage	0.18	< .001
Radical Content Exposure	0.46	< .001
Political Attitude	0.31	< .001

Table 9b: Model Summary

Statistic	Value
R ²	0.58
Adjusted R ²	0.57
Model significance	p < .001

Lastly, mediation analysis was performed to explore if political attitudes act as an explanatory mechanism between social media-related factors and political radicalization tendencies. The direct effect was still significant ($\beta = .19$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.26]) and the indirect effect via political attitudes was also significant ($\beta = .25$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.31]) as presented in Table 10. The mediation pathway was significant as the confidence interval did not contain the value of zero. These results indicate that the use of social media can contribute to the tendency to be radicalized, at least in part, by shaping political perceptions, interpretations, and attitudes. However, these findings are of a cross-sectional nature and thus represent statistical association and not causality.

Table 10: Mediation Analysis of the Relationship Between Social Media Factors and Political Radicalization

Effect	β	95% Confidence Interval
Direct Effect	0.19	0.12 – 0.26
Indirect Effect through Political Attitude	0.25	0.20 – 0.31
Total Effect	0.44	0.36 – 0.51

Discussion

The current study explored the correlation between social media usage, exposure to radical/extremist content, political attitudes and political radicalization tendencies of the university students in Pakistan. The results add to the growing literature on the effects of digitally mediated communication settings on political cognition and ideological development of young people. The results question the notion of social media as a direct catalyst for radicalization, and instead align with current theories that social media are complex sociotechnical environments where tendencies towards radicalization are formed through interplay between content exposure, interpersonal interaction, political perceptions, and individual interpretations. The literature has also focused on the multi-layered nature of online radicalization, which depends on technological affordances, social networks, processes of identity construction, and grievances (Ahmed, 2025a).

The demographic profile of the respondents mirrors the traits of a digitally connected university population, especially in the context of online political influence. The high proportion of youth and university students in the sample reflects earlier studies showing that young adults in general are highly active online users, who are increasingly turning to the Internet for political information and for socializing and forming their identities. (Saud et al., 2023) claimed that the youth are one of the most active in the digital political environment because social media has created accessibility for political expression and exchange of information. However, such connectivity exposes young users to other kinds of narratives, misinformation and ideology. The problem has been reiterated by (Ahmed, 2025b), that has pointed out that young users are potentially exposed to extremist messages when the emotional messages, identity appeals, and social reinforcement mechanisms coexist in the digital platforms.

The outcomes of the application of patterns of social media usage revealed that social media is a significant source of information concerning politics to the university students. This is in line with previous studies which have shown social media to have reshaped political communication, lessening reliance on traditional media structures. According to (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020) suggested that the Internet could enhance political engagement because it offers a diverse range of opinions and the ability to take part in the discourse. However, it has been warned by other scientists that the very things that motivate participation may cause selective exposure and confirmation. (Mahmoudi et al., 2024) social networks have the potential to polarize opinions, as users are more likely to be exposed to certain communities that agree with their own beliefs and seldom see different opinions.

The results regarding the correlation between the political orientations and social media activities in this paper can be applied to substantiate the idea that the digital platforms are important arenas of the political learning and interpretation. Social media does not merely convey political messages, but frames, reiterates, emotionally presents and socially validates political events. This meaning aligns with the Media Framing Theory, which assumes that communication systems influence perceptions by emphasizing a certain reality and de-emphasizing alternative understandings (Mahmoudi et al., 2024). Political messages often take the form of simplified messages, images, emotional appeals, and repeated exposure in social media contexts, potentially impacting how students make meaning about politics.

The results, however, also reveal that the use of social media alone is not the most significant determinant of radicalization tendencies. This is significant as many of the initial debates about online extremism have tended to assume that the more people use the internet, the greater the risk of radicalization. The reality is more complicated, according to modern science. (Conway & Macdonald, 2020), online platforms are not necessarily the ones that create radical beliefs, but platforms that facilitate communication, networking and dissemination of radical ideas. Likewise, (Miconi et al., 2024) found that digital media exposure interacts with individual, psychological, and social factors when affecting attitudes on violent radicalization.

This study found the highest correlation to be between exposure to radical content and political radicalization tendencies. This result is consistent with earlier studies that have underscored the need to consider the content of the online experiences in addition to their frequency. The systematic review of the literature on social media radicalization by (Skiba, 2024) found that dissemination of extremist content, propaganda mechanisms, and ideological reinforcement are the three main channels that might play a role in social media radicalization. Their review also highlighted the need to shift from a general approach to measuring web use to specific content-related experiences.

The link between extremist media exposure and radicalization tendencies can be understood in a number of ways. To begin with, the exposure can be increased, and some stories may become more familiar, and some previously unknown or extreme ideas may become more acceptable. Second, online communities can offer social reinforcement, that is, link people together with other people who interpret in the same way. Third, exposure can be increased with the help of algorithmic recommendation systems which prefer content that evokes high emotional responses. (Rothut et al., 2026) also pointed out that digital platforms can influence the process of radicalization through technological characteristics such as personalization, a recommendation mechanism, and network building that can create the environment that amplifies ideological discourse.

Findings are also similar to previous research on online polarization, regarding hate speech, conspiracy stories and emotional political messages. In their analysis of massive Twitter posts about QAnon conspiracy groups. (Wang et al., 2024) demonstrated that interactional, informational and ideological reinforcement processes resulted in the formation of communities of conspiracy proponents. The discovery they have had is that radicalization processes may be observed in phases of engagement with online communities as opposed to the instant adoption of radical beliefs. Similarly, (Duindam et al., 2025) found that the existence of a conspiracy belief is associated with an increase in the extremist narrative acceptance because a conspiracy belief provides a simplified interpretation of complicated social and political issues.

Political attitudes are also closely connected to radicalisation tendencies and this further reinforces the identity based explanations of radicalisation. The significance that people attach to social events, their evaluation of political actors, and their responses to perceived threats or grievances are influenced by political attitudes. (Shafieioun & Haq, 2023) postulated that the interplay of ideological narratives, personal grievances, social networks, and identity processes is a product of radicalization. Digital platforms can indirectly influence radicalisation tendencies by changing the perceptions of politics and strengthening certain interpretations of the social reality.

The mediation results offer additional theoretical understanding as they indicate that political attitudes are an important pathway by which the social media-related factors are linked to the radicalization tendencies. All this is to the benefit of a sociocognitive approach to digital radicalization whereby radicalization is not always the result of the online exposure per se but rather a perception, interpretation and political judgment process. This perspective is non-technological deterministic and prefigures the correlation between digital space and human mind.

The results are also relevant in the context of Pakistan. Pakistan is a society with a young population that has undergone rapid digitalization while also grappling with a myriad of political, social and ideological issues. A previous study on young people in South Asia also identified issues of misinformation, intolerance and ideological manipulation via online platforms. In the context of student radicalisation in Bangladesh, (Amit et al., 2021) found that social media can help to spread extremist interpretations among young consumers, especially when the consumers are not able to differentiate between reliable information and ideological propaganda. Similarly, (Butt & Ashfaq, 2024) reported that the youth of Pakistan felt that social media was an influential platform in shaping beliefs and attitudes, especially about intolerance and politically sensitive issues.

Conclusion

The present study offers an empirical understanding of the relationship between social media use, exposure to radical/extremist content, political attitudes, and political radicalization tendencies in the context of the university students in Pakistan. The findings indicate that social media is an effective platform of political information exchange and opinion making, but the impact is

highly determined by the type of information they receive and how they process and respond to it. Political attitudes turned out to be a significant mediator between social media experiences and radicalization outcomes and exposure to radical and extremist narratives emerged as the most salient predictor of political radicalization tendencies. These findings support the current knowledge that online radicalisation is a sociotechnical process and not necessarily the outcome of digital media use. The paper highlights the significance of the social media environment awareness due to the combination of technical factors, ideological exposure, and personal mental activities. This research provides quantitative data, using the Pakistani university students as a sample, contributing to the overall body of knowledge about the impact of digital communication environment on the political perceptions and radicalization tendencies of the youth.

Future Recommendations

The longitudinal and mixed method designs should be utilized in the future research to have a better insight into the dynamics of the relationship between social media exposure and political radicalization tendency over time. Future research will focus on the impact of certain platforms, algorithmic processes, psychological variables, identity work and offline social contexts. Comparative studies between cultural and demographic groups are also suggested to gain a better insight into the processes of digital radicalization. In a pragmatic point of view, universities must strengthen the courses and programs on digital literacy and critical thinking, and the policy makers and social media owners must promote a more responsible regulation of contents and actions to prevent the spread of extreme messages without limiting the legitimate political speech.

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