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Social Media and Political Awareness and Participation Among Youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Implications for Democratic Governance in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the link between the youth, social media, and political awareness in Pakistan—with a focus on the politics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There is no denying that political parties, media wings, student unions, newspapers, etc., still play a role in politics, but there is a hard-to-ignore trend in politics—that is, it is becoming a social media phenomenon. This article, therefore, aims to analyze the role of social media in generating and spreading political awareness in the youths of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and its implications for democratic governance in Pakistan. Methodologically, this is a qualitative study. It is based on semi-structured interviews with twelve young people aged 18-29 (6 male and 6 female), who were selected through purposive sampling. The data collected from the interviews was then analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis technique—complemented and triangulated with content analysis of published research on the phenomenon. Some of the themes that emerged from the collected data are as follows: Social media does not supplant the hujra (a gathering place for men); rather, it complements it; its use can help create and spread political awareness; it also creates enabling conditions for women to participate in politics; and a recognizable online to offline process relies on an individual organizing the social and an institution reacting.This article recommends that responsible use of social media can be useful in generating political awareness among people, which will, in the long run, help consolidate democracy in the country.

Introduction

For democratic governance to function, citizens need to be informed, to have the ability to voice their preferences, to be able to hold elected representatives accountable. Traditionally these functions were evolved by a limited number of newspapers and state controlled TV channels, party meetings and student organizations, and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, by hujra and jirga. Smartphones equipped with mobile data and cheap in this equation. How these enable young people to receive, comment on and distribute political information quickly, often within minutes, has led scholars to question if such platforms are making a positive impact on democracy or if they are simply increasing democratic noise (Diamond, 2010; Tucker et al., 2017).

The foreign experience is mixed and instructive. Meta-analysis of 36 studies showed that the majority of coefficients relating the use of social media and civic and political involvement were positive although just approximately half of them were statistically significant, and the effect on campaign involvement is small (Boulianne, 2015). Two decades later, another study reviewing the state of research found similar results; the association would depend on the kind of use, the country and the design of the research (Boulianne, 2020). A later meta-analysis found a weak correlation, yet highlighted that engagement was more a function of the way in which individuals engage with social media than on usage alone (Skoric et al., 2016). Thus a question has also emerged: "When and on what grounds does social media matter?

That question is relevant in Pakistan as the country has huge youth population and the party's political campaign is largely digital. Pakistani research indicates that social media use is linked to efforts of political learning and a sense of political efficacy and political participation (Ahmad et al., 2019; Tariq et al., 2022); however, social media use is also found to not necessarily mean political engagement offline as political efficacy was not related to political engagement in another Pakistani study (Ahmad et al., 2019) or did not mediate the relationship between social media and political engagement in another Pakistani study (Tariq et al., 2022). Thus, the issue of awareness gap is the main theme of focus.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a unique situation. In recent years, the province has been visited by militancy, military operations, displacement and inclusion of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the province's administrative framework. It also has a politically active people, has uneven connectivity, has strong social and tribal norms and in many districts there are significant restrictions for women to take part in public life. Work in urban Punjab or in Karachi cannot be simply imported or adapted here, and what has been conducted here is mostly as small studies in Karachi conducted by students and not documented young peoples' interpretation. This paper addresses that gap. The central idea is that social media itself is not a threat to democracy nor can it fix all democracy's ills, but can be a resource for democracy if used in positive and purposeful ways — and this is what educators, parties, media, and governments need to do.

Literature Review

The Political Public Sphere. Internet message boards have been called upon to restore the public sphere by early thinkers. It is worth reflecting that the internet is capable of forming a ‘virtual sphere' that might facilitate discussion, but not necessarily form a democratic public sphere: access, skills and motives are unequal (Papacharissi, 2002). Diamond (2010) found that the social media, as well as mobile phones, can be called "liberation technology" because they enable citizens to spy and document abuses, track elections, and organise, but also because authoritarian governments use them for control. Tucker et al. (2017) subsequently noted how that initial sense of optimism that was felt early in the day had been replaced by worry about disinformation, harassment and polarisation. Social media is therefore better viewed as an arena with the potential of democracy that can be achieved through use and regulation.

Social Capital, Expressive Politics, and Participation. However, Valenzuela et al. (2009) concluded that a positive, though slightly low, association existed between the intensity of student Facebook use and social capital, civic engagement and political participation. With regard to time spent, the study by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) indicated that greater engagement with social media for news (not necessarily for socializing) correlated with higher civic and political engagement, implying more civic engagement with the news had more impact than if individuals used social media for general socializing. Kahne and Bowyer (2018) identified political activity as a social media and exposure to politically relevant networks as significant variables for political voice of the youth. Most studies are cross-sectional and rely on self-reports that cannot establish causation—this is one of the reasons that it is valuable to hear from participants' own experience in a qualitative sense, as the politically interested may simply be more likely to use social media politically, as cautioned by Boulianne (2015, 2020). There is evidence that citizenship norms have been changing from duty based participation to engaged citizenship where the focus is on issues and expressing oneself (Dalton 2008), and attainments of citizens' participation on the basis of personalised content loaded on digital networks, with no need for formal organisation (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). As to the impact of social media, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) studied how social media was used during the 2011 Egyptian uprising and discovered that the presence of social media made people more likely to participate in the driving force behind the uprising, which was protests.

Pakistan: Awareness, Participation, and Gender. The majority of the research carried out in Pakistan is based on surveys and generally shows positive correlation. Ahmad and Sheikh (2013) identified that with respect to political action, there was political activists campaigns and persuading for vote among the university students through SM. The results of Ahmad et al. (2019) showed that online political activity had positive relationships with political efficacy and real-life political participation among the rural students; while Tariq et al. (2022) using O-S-R-O-R model with 410 respondents, revealed that only expression and partisanship were found to mediate the influence of the social media on political participation, noting that although there was an increase, there was also a decrease in the levels of participation. As regards awareness, Ghani (2020) connected exposure to political content in Lahore with high awareness and engagement, and Zeib (2021) provided a positive correlation between political statements in social media and student awareness, weak to moderate positive correlation between online expression and offline expression and that the female students had low proportion for offline expression and were more likely to agree with family influence on voting. The sialkot students' survey also revealed that there was an elevation in awareness but less offline involvement and find it suggested that it is necessary to introduce digital literacy (Journal of Development and Social Sciences, 2024).

Risks and Conditions for Benefit. Vosoughi et al. (2018) discovered that false news travelled further, faster and more widely than true news, particularly via human sharing. Zhuravskaya et al. (2020) found that the internet could have positive or

negative political impacts, depending on what settings they are deployed in, such as mobilisation and accountability, versus polarisation, populism and misinformation. Reflected on this, another stream of research identifies when the benefits occur: Xenos et al. (2014) reveals that, rather than exacerbating, the use of social media can lead to a decrease of engagement gap between higher and lower politically involved youth, and Kahne et al. (2012) correlates media literacy education efforts with increased civic and political engagement, suggesting that the skills for beneficial media use can be taught.

Research Gap. Three gaps follow. First, the vast majority of Pakistani studies are quantitative surveys of college students in Punjab or Sindh or Islamabad indicating the level of association but which provide little insight into what youths understand about the role of social media politically. Secondly, KP-specific work is curtailed, and security conditions, tribal-district integration and gendered norms remain under-examined. Third, there has been little research that correlates the online activity of the youth with governance outcomes including the ideas of accountability, responsiveness, or trust, or -- that asks in this study -- young men and women to describe – in their own terms -- what behaviours would support a more democratic life. The current study is an attempt to fill these lacunae.

Problem Statement

The youth make up the largest section of Pakistan's population, and this is reflected by their high presence within KP's electorate. However, there is limited knowledge around how this translates into an informed and engaged citizenry. This study will attempt to understand how social media is being used positively by young people to increase political awareness and engagement within democracy. A lack of qualitative research and studies outside KP leave us with little knowledge as to how young people interpret social media. This limits the ability of political parties, universities, media organizations and policy makers to improve democracy. This study will look at how social media is affecting political awareness and engagement in young men and women within KP, how we can improve positive use of social media and what this means for democracy.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the effects of social media on the political consciousness of the youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To investigate the influence of social media on the political participation (online and offline) of male and female youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
3. To critically examine the affect that the social media usage among youth has on democratic governance within Pakistan.
4. To determine the positive uses of social media by young men and women within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in educating themselves politically, expressing their views and taking civic action.

Research Questions

1. How do social media shape the political awareness of the youth of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
2. How does social media affect youth political participation (online and offline) among male and female youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
3. What are the implications of youth engaging with social media for democratic governance in Pakistan?
4. What positive uses of social media do young males and females in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa report and under what circumstances can this increase democratic participation?

Significance and Scope of the Study

The study is significant in four respects. It contributes a qualitative, province-specific account to a field dominated by cross-sectional surveys that, as Boulianne (2015, 2020) cautions, cannot resolve questions of mechanism and direction. It offers parties evidence on what young people in KP find credible, mobilising, or alienating, helping them move from broadcast messaging to engagement. It informs educators and policymakers by locating the missing link between awareness and participation in civic education, digital literacy, or institutional openness. And it gives young women's voices direct attention, documenting both the opportunities and barriers that shape their engagement.

The study is geographically limited to KP and thematically limited to social media use, political awareness, youth participation, and democratic governance. "Youth" refers to people aged 18 to 29, in line with the Pakistani youth-participation literature,

and "social media" to platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram. The study is qualitative and based on twelve participants; it aims at depth and analytic transferability, not statistical representativeness.

Methodology

Design. The study was interpretive and qualitative, given the 'how' and 'in what ways' question and the emphasis on understanding the meanings people attributed to social media and politics as well as the limitation of the survey tradition (Boulianne, 2015). Is a data mix of two sources. Primary data include semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 12 young people. Secondary data consisted of peer-reviewed articles, theses and public documents analysed using a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), a document-analysis frame (Bowen, 2009) and as ad hoc data to support, qualify and contextualise the findings of the interviews. Sources were deemed relevant, credible (with a preference for peer-reviewed), and recent and coded according to categories in which they reflect the research questions.

Interviews. The same guide for interviewing was followed with all interviewees for men's and women's accounts to be directly compared. Interviews took place for 30 to 50 minutes, in the language preferred by the participant (Pashto, Urdu or English), were audio-recorded following the participant's consent, and were transcribed. The Pashto and Urdu transcripts were translated into English and gave to bilingual reader for checking. Participants were queried about benefits and problems both so that neither benefits nor problems were presumed.

Participants. Twelve participants were selected using the method of purposive and maximum-variation sampling, meaning that purposefully these participants were selected because the circumstances they experienced varied and were relevant to the problem of the study. If the study aims to be a focused qualitative study, 12 interviews are adequate for saturation, as Guest et al. (2006) argues that saturation is likely to be reached in the first 12 interviews in reasonably homogeneous groups. The sample consisted of an equal number of six young men (MY1, MY2, MY3, MY4, MY5 and MY6) and six young women (FY1, FY2, FY3, FY4, FY5 and FY6) with variation in district, occupation and using platforms (Table 1). To be included, participants had to be KP residents between the ages of 18 and 29 and had participated in an act of political or civic engagement via social media at least once in the past year, with informed consent. The participants are anonymous.

Table 1. Profile of the twelve participants

Code	Gender	Age	Location	Education / occupation
MY1	Male	21	Urban, Peshawar	University student
MY2	Male	24	Urban, Peshawar	University student
MY3	Male	26	Urban, Mardan	Journalist
MY4	Male	25	Rural, Bannu	Unemployed graduate
MY5	Male	27	Rural, Swat	Small business owner
MY6	Male	29	Merged district	Former student activist
FY1	Female	20	Urban, Peshawar	University student
FY2	Female	23	Urban, Abbottabad	University student
FY3	Female	22	Rural, Mardan	University student
FY4	Female	25	Rural, Swabi	Teacher
FY5	Female	28	Rural, Charsadda	Ngo worker
FY6	Female	26	Merged district	Schoolteacher

Ethics. Each participant was provided with an information sheet and all written or recorded consent was obtained as well as notification that the nature of the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point. As politics is a delicate matter in KP especially for the young girls, confidentiality was maintained by coding their names, removing identifiable information, and secure archiving. Interviews with women were completed in a location acceptable to the participant and her family (either online/phone). Party membership or the naming of individuals was never inquired nor did participants reveal either of these in the interviews, which were destroyed after transcription and verification.

Analysis. Interview data were analysed using the six stages of thematic analysis: (1) familiarizing with the data; (2) initial coding, coding line by line; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes, coded extracts and the whole data; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Record keeping used the criterion for trust-worthiness by Nowell et al., 2017. The credibility of the research was enhanced by triangulation male/female participants and secondary sources, by peer debriefing, and by member checking, when feasible. The coding framework of codes, themes and research questions is provided in Appendix B.

Limitations. Purposive sampling and a small sample hinders generalisability. On sensitive issues, social desirability may influence self-report results and the sample may not be representative of youth who do not use a mobile phone and/or internet access, who are likely to be the most marginalised. Politicians, journalists and academics are only represented via secondary sources and/or as the result of translation, which may resolve nuance, and/or because of the influence of the political environment on candour. Anonymity, triangulation and transparency of documentation counterbalance these limitations.

Findings and Analysis

Through thematic analysis of the 12 transcripts, the following seven themes emerged: For each the evidence is presented verbatim with extracts from young men (MY) and young women (FY) and analytic comments, briefly connecting the evidence with the research questions and literature. The extracts used are taken from the transcripts in Appendix A and the analysis is thematic, rather than per participant.

Theme 1: Social media as a gateway to political information (RQ1)

The literature suggests that perhaps purposeful reading, not scrolling, can elicit gains in awareness (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013).

“For me Facebook and YouTube are the first platforms where I see politics. When there is some event in the assembly, I see it in less than an hour via Facebook, but I don't watch everything, only two or three Facebook pages, in which I find information with sources, and then, I bring the phone to him and tell him about it—he keeps listening on the radio and talking in the hujra; I inform him with my phone and then we discuss it.” (MY2: male, 24, university student, urban Peshawar)

“Social media is where I have learned about political issues because sometimes I can't go to gatherings, I follow news pages and some women rights pages on Instagram and Twitter and read about it, and explain it to mother. In this way, the phone has become my newspaper and my teacher.” (FY3, female, 22, rural Mardan, university student).

“My role in my district is not to attend political meetings, but I can see news, hear what leaders say, listen to YouTube videos of women politicians, and that means that I can talk about politics. I didn't know this before, but know the names of my representatives and what they say they've done. (FY6: female, 26, merged district, schoolteacher)

As in the description of Ghani (2020) and Zeib (2021), both young men and young women indicate that social media is the most easily accessed and is the first political media they obtain. The key KP-specific element is how related the social media is to the traditional channels, as seen in the formulation by MY2 here ‘the phone gets the ball rolling and the hujra keeps it going’ – social media complements the hujra, and is not replacing it, and the young act as information brokers for older relative as FY3 does for her mother. For young women the gateway role becomes more significant, as it makes up for their limited mobility (FY3, FY6): Here, awareness comes from the activity of selective following and comparing (MY2), thus complementing the notion that if it doesn't happen on purpose, it won't have an impact.

Theme 2: Verifying and credibility (RQ1, RQ4)

The interviews had the participants consider how they assess the credibility of news, as false information spreads faster and farther than truth (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

“That was learned from experience, that I shared a post about a politician once, and my mates teased me, so I think before doing that — who posted it?” Is it a known page? Are there other pages that say the same? “If it's something big, I wait for a mainstream channel to break the story. I'm also following a fact checking page; it takes time but I don't want to be a fool again.” (MY1: male, 21, urban Peshawar, university student)

“I am very careful because I know many times fake news about women was found, if I see any thing about women politician I check it afterwards if it has already been published in credible news sites or not, if I find it is not true I tell my friends in our WhatsApp group not to share it, I think children should be taught about digital literacy in the schools especially girls they believe everything they see on social media.” (FY2: female, 23, university student, urban Abbasabad)

“In our area, if someone sends a message, people believe it since it comes from their close people, so I have learned, to check that if forwarded then verify by asking my cousin, who is working in health department or checking the news but sometimes it is difficult, because there is no internet to check, so at that time I have learned, not to share immediately.” (FY5: female, 28, rural Charsadda, NGO worker)

But Verification becomes a learned practice. MY1, after public embarrassment, changed their habits; MY4, started to check rumors about flood-aid in the local council office – no longer forwarding; FY2, uses a fact-checking page adopted by a university

teacher and called for digital literacy in schools – in line with the recommendation in Journal of Development and Social Sciences (2024) and with evidence that media literacy can be taught (Kahne et al., 2012). Two qualifications matter. As for female politicians, FY2 notes targeting of women by dissemination of false stories, making it a gender issue. In the case of FY5, as evidenced by his/her comment "sometimes there is no internet to check", practising verification is not always possible in areas of weak internet connectivity and is linked to information environment quality.

Theme 3: Work on expression to participation (RQ2)

The theory of connective-action suggests that it does not seem that the engagement is taking place within parties, and is a personalised and issues-based one (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Dalton, 2008), and survey results in Pakistan suggest some gap between awareness and action (Tariq et al., 2022).

“In my area, online talk does not necessarialy turn to action. There is a fear among people after the military operations in the area that many young men would not be seen at political gatherings anymore so they show their anger online and that is it. However, I got to see during the merger discussions that online campaigns helped people in general making them aware and some of them did attend the tribal jirga.” (MY6: male, 29, merged district, former student activist)

My family wanted me to vote for their party but I studied online and saw debates, and I voted accordingly. My voting is my participation; I haven't joined any gathering; my family didn't allow me to. (FY1: female, 20, urban Peshawar, university student)

“But I had emailed a petition for a school which had no boundary wall at that time and the petition spread through the women WhatsApp group, and many women signed it, and then I put it in front of the local councillor, and after months they made it. I was surprised this time, by this method; I didn't think something like that, would work online. I mean, if they're organized, our voice can reach someone.” (FY4: female, 25, rural Swabi, teacher)

But MY3 noted in a closing statement that it had organised a voter-awareness campaign on both Facebook and WhatsApp which had attracted around forty turnout, saying that the phone "can take people from the screen to the street, but only if someone takes the next step and organiser. This exemplifies the theory of Tufekci and Wilson (2012) that online networks can be transferred to offline action. MY6 -- in contrast -- only reveals how fear following the military operations contained anger on the screen, a phenomenon which does not occur within the national survey either, and which makes one rather cautious on the optimism of connective-action theory as far as Russia is concerned. As seen in FY1, voting can be an important form of participation when opportunities for women are limited — and her influence on two cousins suggests a many-times-over effect of online learning. FY4's petition is the most obvious example of expression leading to an institutional outcome. As such, there are different forms of participation (voting, petitioning, organising, persuading) and the transition from awareness to action requires security, family norms and a responsive institution.

Theme 4: Gendered access and voice (RQ2)

The theme in this research, as in Zeib (2021), pertains gender found in social media and inquires about the cloying that occurs in it, and whether social media presents a safer political space for young women.

“Social media is a safe place for me than going to a party gathering because if a girl goes to a party gathering then people ask questions about her character, college-going but on my phone I follow politics, I can comment, I can learn, nobody says anything about my character. But harassment on social media is there: If a girl posts comments on politics then the men post insults, my brother they cannot do that. There is a difference.” (FY2: female, 23, urban Abbottabad, university student)

“My family monitored my phone, my older brother sometimes got to look at what I was doing. I am careful, I don't voice my political opinions publicly, I will only read and sometimes share within a private group of women. But, I'm lucky; there are women in my area who don't even have their own phone. So it's not like there was a door for social media in the case of women, it's a window.” (FY6: female, 26, merged district, schoolteacher)

“Social media is more helpful for the girl than boys as a girl cannot go out. I think my sister follows the political views, she shared with me things that I didn't know however I also noticed that when girls post about a political issues it has different comments here, people speak about the girl instead of the matter, and that is not fair that's why I think that's not good for girls.” (MY1: male, 21, urban Peshawar, university student)

The said paired accounts uphold and expand upon Zeib's (2021) characterization of the gender conditions of participation. In the description "my private space," social media is the way for space to be valuable for women, as described by FY2. But there is a price to this space: "men reply with insults when women say something about politics, but my brother can say it to anyone

online". MY1 provides support for this, noting that women are not responded to in the context of their arguments, and MY5 confirms that not all women in rural Swat have their own smartphones, many don't have permission to use them, and data even if they did, is prohibitively costly. The finding, encapsulated in the phrase coined by FY6, a window and not a door, suggests that social media opens and expands access to the political, but it does not close and eliminate family monitoring, harassment and unequal access.

Theme 5: Accountability and responsiveness (RQ3)

When an online voice is responded to online voice becomes democratic (Diamond, 2010; Tucker et al., 2017).

“Most of the time they don't reply, you tag the deputy commissioner, you tag MNA and still you get no reply sometimes the page replies with a generic message. This is why many young people are frustrated. They see no response of their online complaint, the representatives tag themselves there, but don't listen.” (MY4: male, 25, rural Bannu, unemployed graduate)

I have seen no reaction from the representatives on anything that I have posted on-line, once I made a post about an issue in my area to ask someone for their views and my post was deleted, this made me angry, it shows they do not want to listen to criticism. (FY1: female, 20, urban Peshawar, university student)

For instance, when I addressed the petition about the school wall I mentioned, that’s when it worked, but it took months and it was the councillor and not the MNA who helped because through social media he was able to see that many women signed it and now he is responsive. I think that if they are closer to you, if you go to the level that is closer, then you might get some response. If you go to the provincial, national level, I don’t think they respond to ordinary people.” (FY4: female, 25, rural Swabi, teacher)

The stories give mixed messages. MY3 said they were "repairing the road put broken after two years in response to the Facebook complaint," adding that it wasn't necessarily that anyone complained that got the reaction from the MPA's page, but that it garnered the attention of people. In response to this, MY4 notes that it has “stopped expecting a response” and FY1's reply to an MNA's posting was deleted, indicating a lack of interest in representatives listening. These experiences can lead to disillusionment with expression, as Tariq et al. (2022) observed, where there was an increase in participation followed by a decrease. FY4's experience of local representatives' being more responsive than their provincial or national counterparts is a KP-relevant observation: more generally, systems of accountability seem to be more effective closer to the citizens.arası

Theme 6: Trust, polarisation and the quality of democracy (RQ3)

Social media can exacerbate polarisation and populism even as they boost mobilisation, international scholarship suggests (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

“Social media has made me less trusting as I see what these parties do to each other on social media, which is beyond my belief how a debatable is a battlefield. But it also made me better informed, this is wrong and that is wrong, shouldn't be less bad in a democracy, because we need to know?” (MY2: male, 24, urban Peshawar, university student)

“In my area, polarisation is bad; people are like football fans, and after the operations everyone is sensitive, and I've seen friendships destroyed because of the social media arguments. This doesn't help us become a democracy; people start to be afraid to speak and it splits communities.” (MY6: male, 29, merged district, ex-student activist)

“Many in my area believe conspiracy theories because they see them in social media; not in the government, the health department or even the election commission because of what they read on social media; this is a problem for democracy because if people don't trust them, they won't go out and vote. But some of the distrust is justified, there are real failures. So social media has both the truth and the lies and people never always know the difference.” (FY5: female, 28, rural Charsadda, NGO worker)

This cautionary message is supported by the extracts. The ambivalence, that "my trust is lower, but my awareness is higher," says MY2, understands that the same light to which they are more exposed also exposes institutional failures, and partisan hostility. MY6 states that polarization in the aftermath of a conflict may inhibit people from speaking up, and FY3 mentions that abuse, particularly towards women, demotivates her to participate in discussions. The distrust of the government and government electoral commission partly comes from the lies spread online, and partly because there are lies," says FY5, which add that “social media displays both the truth and the lies.” It is the quality of the information environment, however, rather than the amount of information, that will prove to be the determining factor.

Theme 7: Positive-use pathways (RQ4)

This theme gathers in some way what the participants were able to transport to the constructive uses they recognized as well as the essential conditions that enabled them.

“The most positive thing I did was using social media for voter education: before the elections I made short videos in Pashto informing my viewers that they should check their names on the voters' lists instead of going to the polling centre, and where to vote. I did thousands of views, people expressed that they didn't know beforehand and thanking me for the information is positive use because I didn't make it complicated, I was simple and in our language and people trusted me being a local journalist.” (MY3: male, 26, urban Mardan, journalist)

“Most positive experience was school wall petition, because we were organized through WhatsApp, we signed it together and sent to the councillor…otherwise if it was not organized it would have been just a post.” (FY4: female, age: 25, rural, Swabi, teacher)

“If it's in our language and it doesn't cast aspersions on our culture, then families aren't saying, "Oh, don't do that " . . . I use YouTube to teach about women's rights, and about how to talk in public. . . . I share these videos with my students.” (FY6, female, 26, merged district, schoolteacher)

Five conditions recur. First, when citizens use news for purposeful purposes, such as voter education by MY3, budget explainers by MY1, candidate research by FY1, or rights education by FY6, it does have a democratic pay-off: news use, but not general socialising is associated with engagement. Second, organisation can connect online and offline action: MY1's neighbourhood clean-up, MY3's voter drive and FY4's petition each required a group (and perhaps someone) organizing it to be a reality, thereby ratifying the connective-action claim (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and demonstrating that organisation still counts in KP. Third, institutional responsiveness makes voice into outcome as FY4's councillor is living evidence. Fourth, local language/content (in Pashto as with MY3 or in a way which is acceptable and respectful to families as with FY6). Fifth, education is a precondition: FY1 says, if a girl is "not good at reading" she "cannot check information".

Discussion

The positive-use pathway

The secondary evidence and the themes from the interviews collectively deconstruct this process, marching through five stages that positive social media use can shape democratic life (Table 2). The pathway is not automatic, one must strive to achieve it. As mentioned in the literature, the expected benefits are restricted depending on the nature of the use, the country and the research design (Boulianne, 2020, 2015), and the interviews with the KP prove it: each fear (MY6), each body of a representative who does not listen (MY4), each family check (FY6) have the ability to break the chain at different points.

Table-2: Positive-use practices, democratic benefits, supporting literature, and KP interview evidence

Positive-use practice	Democratic benefit	Literature	KP evidence
Purposeful information seeking	Better-informed citizens; higher awareness	Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012); Ghani (2020); Zeib (2021)	MY2; FY3; FY6
Verification and media literacy	Resistance to misinformation; more trustworthy debate	Kahne et al. (2012); Vosoughi et al. (2018)	MY1; MY4; FY2
Constructive expression and dialogue	Low-cost political voice, especially for women	Valenzuela et al. (2009); Kahne & Bowyer (2018); Xenos et al. (2014)	FY2; FY6; MY1
Linking online networks to offline action	Participation that reaches institutions and communities	Tufekci & Wilson (2012); Bennett & Segerberg (2012); Ahmad et al. (2019)	MY3; FY1; FY4
Holding representatives to account	Responsiveness, accountability, trust	Diamond (2010); Tucker et al. (2017)	MY3; FY4 (success); MY4; FY1 (limits)

Implications for a democratic form of government (RQ3.9)

Three implications follow. Cost reduction: The larger access to social media reduces the cost of political information and expression, an important factor in places with limited mobility due to security practices and also important for women because social norms often restrict mobility (FY3, FY6). However, expression without visibly listening representatives can lead to

disillusionment and being more of a substitute for participation at lower costs (MY4; FY1; Tariq et al., 2022). Second, the information environment is a prerequisite for democratic value. In an environment where “Fake Content” spreads rapidly (Vosoughi et al., 2018) and in the presence of organised digital campaigns carried out by the various actors, awareness can be thwarted, as FY5's account of “conspiracy theories” demonstrates. Digital literacies and locally trustworthy news is a requisite, therefore, for democracy (Tucker et al., 2017). Third, questions of legitimacy arise: Inclusion results in less participation by women, rural youth, and those with little access (FY2, FY6, and MY5) and social media can replicate voice differentiations, as paper and Zeib (2021) note.

Convergence and Divergence

The four comparisons were investigated. Gender: women may use social media as a space to gain their voice (FY2, FY3, FY6) but social media still brings harassment and surveillance on which men aren't subjected to (FY2, MY1) converging with Zeib (2021), and privacy is the solution. Location: For urban participants (MY1, MY2, MY3, FY1, FY2) verification and organisation are achievable, whereas connecting to mobile, cost, security and family monitoring are highlighted by rural and merged-district participants (MY4, MY5, MY6, FY3, FY4, FY5 & FY6), meaning the digital divide in KP influences conditions for positive use. Secondary evidence: accounts reflect largely the literature on awareness gains (Ghani, 2020 and Zeib, 2021), the awareness - action gap (Tariq et al., 2022), offline mobilisation (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), misinformation and polarisation (Vosoughi et al., 2018 and Zhuravskaya et al., 2020), but differ in that security-related fear is a barrier to offline mobilisation, and institutional unresponsiveness is stronger than suggested by the survey literature, both of which could plausibly be province-specific. Positive versus negative experience: participants with a positive experience had the enabling conditions as verification skills (MY1, FY2), organisation (MY3, FY4), responsive institutions (MY3, FY4), local-language content (MY3, FY6), and family support or privacy (FY1, FY2). Individuals reporting primarily frustration (MY4; FY1 in part) most commonly were missing the aspect of institutional responsiveness. Positive use, therefore, is a result of situations that can deliberately be put in place.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This paper explored the influence of social media on political consciousness and engagement of the youth in KP, and the implications thereupon for democratic governance. The answer to RQ1 is that using SM is a gateway to political information, which depends on skills of verification and connectivity. As for RQ2, it facilitates expression, voting, petition and organisation, but the need to go offline for action demands organisation, security and family acceptance with women experiencing social media as a private yet surveilled space. In response to RQ3, its governance impacts are dual – both raising awareness and reducing the costs of voice, but increasing exposure to institutional failure and partisan abuse reducing trust and accountability by drawing on responsiveness which is greatest at local level. R4: Constructive use is real and identifiable - and requires purposeful use, organisation, institutional response, local language content and education.

The bottom line is that social media cannot by itself be a problem or a solution for democracy.The overarching message is that social media is not a problem or solution to democracy; rather, its usefulness is contingent on the enabling conditions of credible information, responsive institutions, and inclusive participation. The results are not just cautionary: Since many of these issues are influenced by education, institutional change and inclusive design, the results can be encouraging. The study's limitations (small purposive sample, self-reported data and lack of institutional voices) suggest further research as follows.

Recommendations

1. Integrate digital and civic literacy into education. Evaluation of political information, recognition of misinformation and understanding of democratic institutions (MY1, MY4, FY2) should be taught in the universities and colleges of KP.

2. Promote positive and constructive use. University, youth department and civil society should organize youth-led training and campaigns on verified sourcing, fact check, petitions, voter-information drive models like MY3's Pashto videos teaching voters and FY4's petition mechanism on fact check.

3. Make parties and representatives responsive, not only vocal. Social media platforms should be a two-way street in order for youth' feedback to be heard and decision-makers' feedback to be published (MY4, FY1).

4. Support credible local journalism and local-language fact-checking. Social media organizations and provincial institutions need to improve their verification and train young citizen journalists (MY4, FY5).

5. Create gender-inclusive digital political spaces. Moderated fora for women led by parties, universities or civil society should be established and online harassment should be tackled through reporting mechanisms (FY2, FY6).

6. Narrow the digital divide. Areas currently marked as provincial border should be designated as FY5 and MY5 (rural/merged district), with a specific focus on giving them access and affordable, reliable connectivity.

7. Link online engagement to offline channels. Student councils, local government and youth parliaments should be used as stepping stones from online interest to organised involvement, where the local government holds the greatest potential (FY4).

8. Protect digital rights while countering abuse. A balance needs to be struck between controlling harmful content and upholding freedom of political expression.

9. Expand research. It is suggested for studies should to focus on to include politicians, journalists, and academicians, cover other districts including the merged districts, and use longitudinal designs to address causal questions that cross-sectional surveys cannot resolve.

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