

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON VOTING BEHAVIOR IN SWABI DISTRICT: AN ANALYSIS OF GENERAL ELECTIONS 2018

Zainab Khan^{*1}, Faraz Ali²

^{*1,2}Lecturer in Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Swabi (Pakistan)

¹zainab@uoswabi.edu.pk, ²faraz@uoswabi.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *
Zainab Khan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significant impact of social media on politics, specifically examining its effects on Pakistan's 2018 general elections and the resulting consequences in Swabi District. It emphasizes how social media has made political discussions more accessible to the general public and explains its specific importance in the political environment of Pakistan. This analysis seeks to provide a valuable addition to the current body of literature on the impact of digital technologies on electoral politics, with a specific focus on emerging and transitional democracies. This study employed qualitative methods to examine the impact of social media on voting behaviors in Swabi District during the 2018 General Elections in Pakistan. The research employed thematic analysis to examine data collected through open-ended questionnaires from a sample of 30 participants, which included females, government employees, political activists, and key responders from the general population. The study uncovered multiple themes, including the public's comprehension of social media, its perceived influence on voting choices, and its wider ramifications for political consciousness and mobilization. The findings indicate a subtle yet substantial impact of social media on voter behavior and political awareness. Despite its modest sample size and geographical focus, the study provides useful insights into the changing role of social media in electoral politics and emphasizes the need for further substantial research to apply the findings more broadly.

Keywords: Social Media, Voting Behaviours, Elections, Political Awareness, Election.

INTRODUCTION

Since digital technologies are advancing so quickly today, social media platforms have a greater and greater impact on almost every facet of modern life. Social media has revolutionized how people communicate, get information, and interact with their surroundings. This shift is especially evident in the field of politics, where the ever-changing environment of social media has introduced new opportunities for political involvement, knowledge, and interaction. In 2022, the proportion of people in Pakistan who had access to the internet was 36.5% of the overall population, which translates to 82.90

million internet users. Out of them, 71.70 million were actively using social media (Aslam & Neads, 2021).

Social media, a tool or agent for the transmission of ideas and information to support people, includes Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, which enable their users to share opinions, collect information, and engage in discussions. People who make use of social media have more freedom of expression (Ghani, 2020). Nowadays, social media is a prime source of information and communication and has a great influence on

everyone's life. Social media plays a vital role in building people's perceptions. Being human, we all have the curiosity to be aware of everything in our surroundings. Media has the power to shape our perceptions. We use social media for every type of interaction and information. When we perceive and observe things, we shape our viewpoint about these objects, events, and interactions because everybody has different views and opinions regarding the objects and events (Karim, 2020).

Now, social media has become a part of our lives, and it is a key member of our families. With the rise of social networking sites, our way of thinking changed because in primitive times, people shaped their perspective from their surroundings. Everyone uses social media for

their purposes to target their customers. Businessmen, politicians, teachers, doctors, engineers, and more used to advertise their purpose on social media to get the focus of the people and made their mindset in such a way that benefitted those (Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020). Usage of social media is increasing day by day, and every time, the use of social media influences to a great extent the mind and judgments of people (Sadaf, 2011). Social media is gaining popularity in Pakistan, especially among youth, who use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other sites for political and social discussion. According to a source, the number of users of these social media accounts is given below:

S.No	Social Media Websites	Users
1	Facebook	8 M
2	Twitter	1.9 M
3	LinkedIn	1.2 M
4	Google	64 K
5	Pinterest	115 K

Source: JICA Report 2013

Social media serves as a bridge between the people and their leaders in Pakistan, facilitating communication between the public and government officials on all issues and workings within the political system. Through social media, people become aware of all the happenings in the government, and leaders fulfill their responsibility for the sake of accountability to the people because, in Pakistan, a democratic form of government, political government leaders are elected by the people. People are commenting on and reporting the policies of the government through social media in Pakistan (Eijaz, 2013).

Why and how the electorates cast their vote in the elections is called voting behavior. Voting behavior means how and why people vote the way they do. Any political system's politics revolve around political behavior. A political system-related activity is politics. It is a component of both social and political life. Politics is examined by Andrew Hay Wood as a practice. "Politics is the activity by which differing interests with a given unit of rule are reconciled by giving them a share in power,

proportionate to their importance to the welfare and the security of the people (Ahmed, 2004).

Voting is one of the most commonly used terms in the contemporary age of democratic politics. This term has even become known due to the rising appeal of democratic movements in theory and practice. The level and manner of participation, though, are important factors to consider while evaluating politics. How people vote is a crucial characteristic and a key to understanding respondents' willingness. Voting is an important tool that gives people the chance to become active citizens rather than merely observers in democratic and egalitarian societies. Therefore, rather than merely casting ballots based on merit, it is crucial to understand why people behave and think a certain way. Only by recognizing voting behaviors that may indicate a candidate is capable of making effective use of time and resources can it be determined why a candidate wins or loses an election (Sheikh et al., 2015). In the context of an election, voter behavior is similar to human behavior. Voter behavior is the act of selecting the political option that one feels is most appropriate or preferable. Voting is described as a set of individual acts in an election that may involve

taking part in a campaign, casting a ballot, and selecting the candidate you want to win. Voter behavior is research that focuses on the propensity of people's decisions in elections and their motivations for making the choices. Voting behavior is the action of choosing to participate in elections or not. Voter behavior is how the general public interacts in general elections and influences the outcomes of those elections. A kind of political engagement is taking part in or being involved in general elections. An expert's viewpoint is cited, according to which actively participating in politics, including voting in general elections, is a society's intentional effort to change the opinions of the general population. Voter behavior is influenced by seven distinct cognitive areas, including: By associating politicians or parties with particular societal sectors, social imaging uses stereotypes of candidates or parties to win over voters. Numerous variables, such as demographics, socioeconomics, culture, ethnicity, and political philosophy, can influence how people are seen in society. Emotional sentiments are a dimension that a contender or politician exhibits, as seen by the political platforms they are putting out (Satriadi et al., 2021).

This study examines and analyses the impact of social media on voting behavior in the Swabi District during the 2018 general elections. The objective of this research is to examine the impacts of social media on voters' decision-making, its effect on election results, and its contribution to political awareness in the area. This research aims to contribute to the knowledge of current political dynamics in Pakistan by analyzing the complex interaction between social media and voting behavior in the Swabi District. The insights gained from this study may have broader ramifications beyond this particular location.

The Global Influence of Social Media

The global impact of social media on the political sphere represents a pivotal moment in the manner in which individuals interact with systems of power and government. The emergence of social media has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of political involvement, breaking free from the constraints imposed by conventional media and in-person interaction. In the present day, politicians,

political parties, grassroots organisations, and even ordinary individuals can impact public opinion, gather adherents, and spread political ideas on a far larger scale than was previously possible, which was inconceivable just ten years ago (Cheema et al., 2019).

An individual with access to the internet may create a tweet, Facebook post, or Instagram story, which can rapidly reach a vast worldwide audience of millions (Iqbal et al., 2021b). The ability to connect and mobilize has profoundly transformed political strategy and communication. Campaigns that formerly depended on expensive television advertisements, newspaper editorials, or grassroots canvassing may now use social media to efficiently and promptly reach certain groups at a lower cost. Social media analytics provide political organizations with the means to comprehend their audience at an unparalleled degree of detail, facilitating the implementation of micro-targeting methods that may be precisely customized to individual voter preferences.

Social Media in the Pakistani Political Arena

The global impact of social media on the political sphere represents a pivotal moment in the manner in which individuals interact with systems of power and government. The emergence of social media has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of political involvement, breaking free from the constraints imposed by conventional media and in-person interaction. In the present day, politicians, political parties, grassroots organizations, and even ordinary individuals can impact public opinion, gather adherents, and spread political ideas on a far larger scale than was previously possible, which was inconceivable just ten years ago (Cheema et al., 2019).

Shafqat (2019) has analyzed that there is a significant role as a powerful political instrument in Pakistan. Undoubtedly, social media has had a substantial influence on the political sphere of Pakistan, namely during the 2018 parliamentary elections. Research on the 2018 general elections in Pakistan revealed that all major political parties aggressively used social media platforms in conjunction with conventional means for their election campaigns. Facebook and Twitter served as the

predominant platforms where individuals often monitored campaigns.

According to the same survey, Facebook users showed a greater inclination toward the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), but Twitter users had a stronger inclination toward the Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (PTI) (Munawar et al., 2023). These findings suggest that social media platforms can influence voter choices. Social media is quite efficient in involving young people in political discussions. An evident surge in political engagement among young people, particularly in the metropolitan regions of Punjab, was seen. The growing political awareness among young people is expected to motivate political parties to invest a greater portion of their money into social media campaigns. The political struggle in Pakistan has increasingly shifted to social media, which has become a pivotal arena.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have emerged as leaders in efficiently using these platforms (Khan et al., 2022). Social media is an attractive forum for political discussion and political awareness in Pakistan. Through social media apps, people used to participate in online political activities. All political leaders, political workers, and even political parties and government officials in Pakistan create their personal accounts and official pages to share their views, opinions, and content with the people. When a political leader of the government or opposition parties tweets, their followers become part of this discussion by replying, commenting, and retweeting their tweets. Political leaders circulate awareness about their political campaigns, rallies, meetings, and content to their followers through social networking to increase their influence on them (Batool & Yasin, 2020).

The 2018 general elections in Pakistan, which took place on July 25, were an important occasion in the nation's democratic history. The elections saw fervent political campaigning and substantial voter participation. Diverse communication methods, such as social media, were widely used to exert influence on public sentiment. The impact of social media on political behavior was especially apparent during these elections. The purpose of the 2018 general elections in Pakistan was to choose the representatives for the 15th National Assembly

and the four Provincial Assemblies. The three prominent political groups were the PTI, headed by Imran Khan; the PML (N), headed by Shehbaz Sharif; and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), headed by Bilawal Bhutto. The PTI secured the highest number of seats in the National Assembly (Khan, 2018).

Cheema et al. (2019) have also stated that social media had a key influence on Pakistan's 2018 general elections. All major political parties prioritized conducting their campaigns via the use of electronic media and conventional campaign methods. Swabi District in the provincial landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) stands out as a significant area of focus. Swabi, characterized by its peculiar sociopolitical dynamics, provides a special environment for comprehending the interaction between social media and voting patterns. Swabi's political landscape has distinct characteristics while also reflecting larger patterns seen at the national and global levels. Therefore, examining the influence of social media on voting patterns in Swabi District during the 2018 general elections is of both local and global importance (Mashhood et al., 2022).

Social media in the general election of 2018 greatly impacted the people's judgments in Pakistan, KPK District (Swabi). The ordinary citizens and people of rural areas like the Swabi region were getting great attention because political leaders on social media gave more courage to ordinary citizens, and they had the opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts, and perceive the information from the most attractive source.

PTI targeted the youth for sharing their slogans, ideas and views through their social media cells in KP (Swabi) because the limited age for the voters was 18 years, and most of our young people used the social networking sites, especially Facebook and Twitter, for political awareness, and they were not deeply aware of the political history but changed their point of view through social media. The Election Commission of Pakistan held a general election on 25th July 2018, in which PTI won the election and formed the government in KPK (Swabi). In the history of the Swabi district, it was the first time that a single political party won the entire election and gave a crushing defeat to their rivals. Asad Qaiser won from NA-

18 and NA-18, Swabi-I; Usman Tarakai NA-19, Swabi-II; Rangaiz Ahmad PK-43, Swabi-I; Asad Qaiser PK-44, Swabi-II; Abdul Karim PK-45, Swabi-III; and Muhammad Ali Tarakai PK-46, Swabi-IV(Khan, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and explanatory methodology to investigate the impact of social media on voting behaviour in the Swabi District during the 2018 General Elections. This study's data came from both primary and secondary sources. The study used the secondary material gathered from credible sources such as the internet, newspapers, libraries, and archives. To supplement the secondary sources, the study also conducted in-depth interviews with locals of the Swabi District using a series of open-ended questions. The research used thematic analysis as its major technique of data analysis, with each step precisely planned to guarantee validity and reliability.

The constructivist research paradigm has been chosen for this study because of its compatibility with the qualitative nature of the research, which seeks to comprehend the subjective experiences and views of individuals regarding the influence of social media on voting behavior. Constructivism acknowledges that the perception of reality is shaped by society and that individuals' perceptions and experiences play a crucial role in comprehending intricate social events, such as the impact of social media on voting decisions. This research adopts a constructivist paradigm, which recognizes the various perspectives and interpretations associated with the phenomena being studied. This approach enables a detailed examination of the specific circumstances in Swabi District and the complex influence of social media on voting behavior.

The target population of this research was the public of the district of Swabi. Special focus was given to voters, as the study is exploring the voting behavior of Swabi district. The study adopted a purposive sampling approach and involved a sample of 30 participants from the Swabi District. More precisely, the sample consisted of 5 females, 10 government employees engaged in electoral matters, 5 political activists, and 10 key respondents from

the general population. Each of these groups was selected to encompass a wide range of viewpoints regarding the influence of social media on the 2018 general elections. Because of this potential for selection bias, a random sampling method was used within the defined categories to choose the respondents.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory

This theory was expounded by Albert Bandura in 1977. Applying Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory to analyze how individuals acquire and modify their voting behavior by consuming political content on social media provides a valuable perspective for studying the intricacies of political involvement in the digital era.

Iqbal et al. (2021b) stated that social cognitive theory emphasizes the mechanism of observational learning, in which individuals study the behaviors and attitudes of others and integrate these observations into their behavior. Within the realm of social media, individuals are subjected to a diverse array of political content, encompassing posts, videos, and discussions. Bandura argues that people not only take note of but go on to imitate the actions they see others do. This might lead to individuals mimicking the political behaviors of others they see as successful on social media. Peers and role models may have a significant impact on whether or not a person decides to engage in political activities like supporting a candidate or cause, going to rallies, or discussing policies. The ideas of reinforcement and self-efficacy are also a part of Social Cognitive Theory. People are more likely to continue engaging in political activity on social media if they feel that doing so will result in positive feedback in the form of likes, shares, and affirming comments.

Moreover, witnessing others effectively champion political issues or candidates on social media might enhance an individual's self-efficacy, fostering the belief that their endeavors can have a meaningful impact. Bandura's theory recognizes the significance of cognitive processes in the acquisition of knowledge and modification of behavior. When people come across political content on social media, they may employ cognitive processes such as critical

analysis, assessment, and information retrieval. Users can evaluate the reliability of sources, verify the accuracy of assertions, and participate in conversations with other individuals. Their political beliefs and voting decisions can be influenced by cognitive processes (Munawar et al., 2023).

The Role of Social Media in Voting Behavior in Swabi District

Understanding of Social Media

The examination revealed various viewpoints and conceptualizations among the 30 participants. The sample consisted of 5 females, 10 government officials involved in election matters, 5 political activists, and 10 key informants from the general population of the Swabi District. The data revealed an intricate network of perspectives that reflect the multifaceted character of social media, particularly regarding electoral behavior.

A government official named Amjid (Personal Communication, September 23, 2023) expressed the view that "social media has both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, it provides a platform for the widespread distribution of information, promoting democracy. On the other hand, it is also a breeding ground for false or misleading information". This viewpoint appeared to be a consensus among other government officials, who commonly regarded social media as a potentially troublesome influence that necessitates efficient governance, especially during sensitive periods such as elections. Another government official named Sajid (Personal Communication, September 26, 2023) stated, "We consistently find ourselves trying to keep up with the latest social media trends, which pose significant difficulties, particularly during election periods." The government officials perceived social media as a realm that is difficult to monitor and control.

Conversely, political activists provided an alternative perspective. "Social media serves as a facilitator." "It has significantly enhanced the level of participation in political activism," one activist commented. Another individual named Luqman Ahmed (Personal Communication, October 1, 2023) expressed that the platform serves as an instrument that enhances the impact of our messaging, surpassing the

capabilities of traditional banners and posters. These respondents viewed social media as a powerful tool in their political arsenal, essential for quickly mobilizing people, effectively spreading messages, and mobilizing public opinion.

Female participants frequently characterized social media as a source of enlightenment and a means of empowerment. Saira (Personal Communication, September 26, 2023) added, "Social media affords me the liberty to articulate my political viewpoints without facing scrutiny from my social circle." The general feeling within this grouping appeared to favor social media as a liberating tool that enables the expression of one's opinions and preferences, both in social and political contexts.

The general populace displayed a diverse range of opinions. While certain individuals acknowledged social media as their main news outlet, others voiced apprehensions regarding the dependability of the material. "The marketplace of ideas encompasses a variety of opinions, but not all of them hold value," remarked Asia. This raises the crucial matter of information credibility, a determinant that greatly impacts public opinion and, consequently, voting behavior.

Thus, the thematic analysis of "Understanding of Social Media" demonstrates that social media is not seen as a uniform entity but is instead understood in different ways among various demographic groups. The disparity in attitudes adds complexity to its influence on voting behavior, necessitating a sophisticated approach to interventions or policy frameworks. The diverse viewpoints on social media, whether as a means of governance, a tool for activism, a space for empowerment, or a complex information ecology, emphasize the necessity of adopting a comprehensive approach to comprehend its influence on election behavior in the Swabi District. These findings provide a foundation for further investigations into the complex ways in which social media influences political awareness and election results.

Impact on Voting Behavior

Upon examining the issue, the analysis of the data revealed diverse perspectives that emphasize the complex ways in which social media impacts electoral choices. The divergence of viewpoints

within these subgroups provides a full comprehension of the multifaceted and contingent nature of social media's impact on voting behavior.

Government officials consistently expressed a narrative characterized by prudence and carefulness. One official named Faraz (Personal Communication, September 27, 2023) remarked, "Although social media can rally voters, it also can spread misinformation." This highlights a more extensive administrative apprehension that social media could be utilized as a means for manipulating elections. Another official named Aslam (Personal Communication, October 23, 2023), who had a more critical perspective, contended, "Social media occasionally serves as a fertile environment for the propagation of inaccurate accounts, and we have witnessed cases when these accounts have influenced electoral results."

Political activists, in contrast, gave a divergent perspective. They considered social media to be an essential tool for mobilizing voter support. An activist stated, "By employing focused posts and internet campaigns, we have successfully motivated a greater number of individuals to participate in voting." The effect is immediate and substantial. Another advocate named Mansoor (Personal Communication, September 27, 2023) stated, "Social media platforms have enabled us to simplify intricate policies into easily understandable facts, thereby assisting voters in making well-informed choices."

Female participants predominantly perceived social media as a platform that influences and modifies their voting decisions. A woman named Shaista (Personal communication, October 24, 2023) stated, "Observing live updates and perspectives on social media has a direct impact on my voting decisions." The process resembles a perpetual feedback loop until I step into the polling booth. The viewpoint within this subgroup indicated that social media functions as a dynamic environment where opinions may be shaped, reshaped, and altered rapidly.

The opinions of the general population were more varied. While several individuals acknowledged that social media played a significant role in influencing their voting decisions, others voiced doubt or uncertainty.

One participant expressed a preference for relying on conventional news sources while making voting choices. Social networking is excessively unstable. On the other hand, Shazia (Personal Communication, September 30, 2023) argued, "Social media has supplanted traditional media in my case; the immediate updates provide me with a perception of the community's current state, which influences my vote choices."

The theme analysis of "Impact on Voting Behavior" reveals a complex correlation between social media and electoral decisions. Government authorities exercise caution when dealing with this medium, calling for its meticulous control. However, political activists perceive it as an empowering tool that enables strategic engagement with potential voters. Female respondents and the general public hold diverse ideas of social media's influence, ranging from considering it a powerful force in moulding opinions to regarding it as an unreliable platform for making electoral judgements. The diverse range of viewpoints highlights the intricacy of determining the precise influence of social media on voting behavior. This emphasizes the need for a more refined comprehension as policymakers and stakeholders evaluate its significance in the next elections.

Factors Influencing Voting Decision

The qualitative analysis revealed a complex landscape where social media, along with other factors, play a role in shaping voting decisions. This diverse group provided a wide range of perspectives that enhanced our understanding of the factors influencing voting decisions in the Swabi District.

Government officials primarily placed their vote decisions within the framework of public service delivery and governance. According to one official named Zia (Personal Communication, October 24, 2023), their voting decisions are primarily affected by the long-term governance records rather than social media. Nevertheless, social media undeniably introduces a level of promptness and response that is difficult to disregard. This perspective was widely shared among this particular subgroup, indicating a cautious approach in which social media is seen

as a supplemental rather than a major source of impact.

Political activists were motivated by their ideological beliefs and the persuasive influence of policy goals. One advocate named Hamid (Personal Communication, September 26, 2023) expressed, "The effectiveness of a political party's social media campaign can frequently serve as a gauge of their skill and organization." While it may not be the only determinant, it undeniably has significance in my decision-making process. The emotion indicates a fundamental idea that the skillful use of social media can be extended to assess a party's overall competence and efficiency.

Within the group of female participants named Laiba (Personal Communication, September 24, 2023), local issues and community concerns emerged as the prevailing variables, with social media's influence being acknowledged as noteworthy. A female participant provided further details, stating that "she prioritizes local matters that have a direct impact on her community while making voting decisions". Social media facilitates the amplification of these issues. Social media functions as an amplifier of existing issues, enhancing the importance and seriousness of the elements that normally shape voting choices.

Among the general population, economic concerns emerged as a crucial aspect, alongside the significance of social media as a conduit for information. A respondent named Faye (Personal Communication, September 23, 2023) highlighted, "My primary concerns revolve around inflation and employment prospects." Social media enables me to discern which candidate is prioritizing these concerns. Another individual contributed, stating, "From my perspective, a candidate's position on social issues holds utmost significance." Social media conversations and discussions enable me to assess that.

The theme of "Factors Influencing Voting Decision" uncovers an intricate interaction of various elements, including governance, ideological inclinations, community concerns, and economic conditions. Social media frequently acts as an interactive platform that enhances, clarifies, or sometimes confuses these factors. For certain individuals, social media serves as a vital indicator of a candidate's

eligibility, while for others, it functions as an additional influence that either modifies or strengthens existing views and priorities. Therefore, the influence of social media on voting choices is closely connected to various other factors, making it an essential but not the sole aspect of the political process.

Awareness of Social Media Propaganda

The study focused on participants' degrees of discernment and attitudes regarding the possibility of disinformation or manipulation through social media platforms within the theme of "Awareness of Social Media Propaganda". This investigation is especially important considering the growing incorporation of social media into political discussions and its ability to distort public opinions and election results.

The study revealed that government employees exhibited a notable degree of doubt when it came to material shared on social media platforms. According to an official named Rahman (Personal Communication, October 22, 2023), social media has emerged as a breeding ground for propaganda, particularly during election periods. I consistently corroborate any political assertions or information I come across on the internet. This view corresponds to the sceptical perspective that many government personnel take due to their close involvement in the workings of governance and election procedures.

Political activists, too, demonstrated heightened awareness of the susceptibility to social media manipulation. An activist named Bakhtiyar (Personal Communication, September 22, 2023) expressed a heightened awareness of how narratives may be manipulated and distorted on social media. The phenomenon in question is a paradoxical tool that possesses the capacity to serve both as a source of knowledge and as a means of exerting control. Due to their intrinsic involvement in political agendas and campaigns, they possess an insider perspective on how social media may be utilized to both educate and mislead the voting population.

Within the group of female participants, the degree of consciousness differed, but it was predominantly characterized by prudence. A female participant named Saima (Personal Communication, September 22, 2023)

expressed skepticism about the authenticity of content on social media, acknowledging her lack of expertise in the matter. Particularly during electoral periods, it is imperative to exercise caution. The cautious approach emphasizes a broad knowledge of the possible drawbacks of depending exclusively on social media for electoral information.

The general population possessed a certain level of understanding regarding propaganda; however, it was frequently mixed with a feeling of acceptance. An individual named Hammad (Personal Communication, October 23, 2023) stated, "I am aware that there is a considerable amount of misinformation available, but it can be challenging to differentiate between what is factual and what is not." You approach it with skepticism. Another user remarked, "It is widely acknowledged that fake news is present; nevertheless, the rapid dissemination of information, whether accurate or not, on social media is quite remarkable."

To summarize, the theme of "Awareness of Social Media Propaganda" suggests that there is a general recognition among different groups of people regarding the possibility of false information being spread. However, the level of expertise in recognizing and reducing the impact of such propaganda differs. Government officials and political activists, due to their professional engagement, demonstrate a more perceptive perspective. Conversely, the general populace and female participant's exhibit prudence while simultaneously recognizing the difficulties associated with navigating through a substantial amount of information. It is widely acknowledged that propaganda is prevalent on social media. However, the ability to effectively navigate this intricate environment varies among individuals, highlighting the importance of educational efforts to improve media literacy among the general public.

The Impact of Social Media on Political Gatherings and Outcomes of 2018 General Elections

The second section shifts the focus toward examining the influence of social media on political gatherings and the outcomes of the 2018 general elections in Swabi. This includes themes based on an investigation into the perceived effectiveness of different political

parties in using social media, the rise in political consciousness attributed to social media, and its usefulness for activists in mobilizing public opinion and orchestrating political events. The themes are presented in the sections below.

Influence on General Elections

The theme "Influence on General Elections" focuses on the observable impact of social media on the electoral dynamics of the 2018 general elections in the Swabi District. The sample provided a diverse range of perspectives that, combined, illustrated the significant influence of social media on electoral results and voter conduct.

Government authorities widely saw social media as a substantial influence in election campaigns, but had conflicting opinions on its consequences. According to one official named Arif (Personal Communication, September 25, 2023), social media has unquestionably contributed to the mobilization of young people and the dissemination of information to the public. Nevertheless, it served as a breeding ground for the widespread dissemination of false information. This statement encapsulates the contradictory essence of social media, serving as a facilitator of democratic engagement while also posing a possible avenue for manipulation.

Political activists commonly concur on the efficacy of social media in influencing electoral results. According to one activist named Samad (personal communication, October 27, 2023), the electoral environment would have been altered if social media had not been present. It enabled us to promptly reach a large number of individuals, a feat that conventional methods of campaigning could never do. According to their perspective, social media's extensive reach and instantaneity were utilized as potent instruments in the political arena.

Within the of female participants, social media was mostly perceived as a means of acquiring information; however, there was doubt regarding its impact on the election result. A female participant named Samina (Personal Communication, October 24, 2023) expressed, "I utilized social media to track the campaigns and acquire knowledge about the candidates, although I cannot assert that it influenced my voting decision." Other variables held greater significance for me. This perspective

demonstrates that although social media can be a valuable source of information, its influence on voter decision-making is constrained when compared to factors like party allegiance, candidate qualifications, or urgent local concerns.

The general populace exhibited a diverse range of reactions but generally concurred that social media exerted a palpable influence on the election dynamics. A participant named Nadir (Personal Communication, September 12, 2023) noted, "I believe that social media has influenced how we engage in political discourse and evaluate politicians." Resisting the impact of the multitude of posts, memes, and viral videos was challenging. Another individual expressed, "Even though I was not influenced by social media, I am aware of individuals who were." The volume of conversation on social media sites was too significant to disregard.

Overall, the analysis of the theme "Influence on General Elections" demonstrates that social media played a substantial yet intricate role in shaping the outcome of the 2018 general elections in Swabi District. The platform served as a catalyst, facilitating an unprecedented amount of public interaction, but it also posed a challenge by spreading misinformation and making the situation more confusing. Government officials and political activists are more actively involved in analyzing and evaluating the social media landscape, whereas normal voters vary in their susceptibility to the impact of social media. Undoubtedly, social media has become an integral part of politics, with a complex and context-dependent influence.

Political Consciousness

The theme "Political Consciousness" explores the impact of social media on increasing political awareness among voters in the Swabi District during the 2018 general elections. The research sample gave a range of perspectives that contribute to a detailed understanding of how social media influences society.

Government officials generally hold the belief that social media has made information more accessible to everyone, thereby promoting more awareness and involvement in political matters. According to one official named Abdullah (Personal Communication, September 10,

2023), the immediacy of social media has equipped the public with knowledge, leading them to become more perceptive voters. This view reflects the notion that the immediacy and extensive reach of social media might enhance public political awareness.

Contrarily, political activists believed that social media had significantly contributed to increasing political consciousness. An activist named Sikandar (Personal Communication, September 12, 2023) argued that social media had not only provided people with information but also motivated them to take action. The extensive reach of social media resulted in larger turnouts at demonstrations, heightened discussions at family dinners, and a rise in volunteer sign-ups. This perspective emphasizes the idea that social media is not just a source of information but also a driving force for political action and engagement.

Women participants showed prudence in their evaluation. Recognising the informative nature of social media, an individual named Nelofar (Personal Communication, October 20, 2023) expressed, "Although we have easy access to a wealth of knowledge, it does not automatically imply an increase in our level of awareness." I have observed a significant amount of false or inaccurate information being disseminated as well. This cautious perspective highlights the ambivalent nature of social media: Although it can provide information, it also can spread misinformation, which raises doubts about the accuracy of the ensuing political awareness.

The attitudes of the general people were varied but predominantly inclined towards recognizing the beneficial impact of social media in enhancing political consciousness. A participant named Ali remarked, "Although I previously had little interest in politics, the incessant discussions and stories on my social media feeds have helped me recognize its significance." I was strongly motivated to cast my vote on this occasion. Another attendee remarked, "Undoubtedly, social media has fostered a more dynamic political climate, seen in the conversations taking place among individuals, both in virtual and physical settings."

Overall, the theme of "Political Consciousness" reveals that the influence of social media on political awareness is predominantly beneficial, albeit with subtle complexities. Although it is

widely recognized as a means of spreading information, the extent to which it may truly enhance political awareness is perceived differently based on the individual's background and previous involvement in politics. However, the prevailing opinion strongly indicates that social media has fundamentally transformed how politics is discussed, comprehended, and interacted with in the Swabi District during the 2018 general elections.

Specific Social Media Forums

The theme "Specific Social Media Forums" explores the distinct effects of several social media platforms on the voters in the Swabi District during the 2018 general elections. Investigations were conducted to ascertain the platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc. – that had a significant impact on moulding voting behavior and political viewpoints. The study sample provided a wide range of opinions that shed light on the unique effects of the platform.

Government officials appeared to consider Twitter as the most effective platform for engaging in policy discussions and sharing information. According to one official named Ahmed (Personal Communication, September 8, 2023), Twitter is considered to be a more direct and informative platform. Individuals who are interested in comprehending policies and governance tend to regularly monitor Twitter. This highlights the platform's attractiveness to a target audience that is interested in sophisticated political discussions and up-to-the-minute information.

Political activists favored Facebook and Instagram as the most efficacious channels for mobilizing and disseminating political messaging. An activist named Zahir (Personal Communication, October 28, 2023) asserted that Facebook's extensive reach facilitates the speedy dissemination of information, while Instagram, with its emphasis on visuals, is highly effective for conducting campaigns. These insights indicate the platforms' capacities to effectively engage diverse audiences: Facebook for widespread dissemination of information and Instagram for visually focused campaign strategies.

The perspectives of the female respondents were diverse. A participant named Safia (Personal

Communication, September 12, 2023) expressed that WhatsApp groups and Facebook serve as the primary sources of news and updates for the majority of individuals they know. They are user-friendly and highly popular in Swabi. This underscores the correlation between the straightforwardness and ease of use of platforms and their popularity and influence, especially among individuals who may lack proficiency in technology.

The general public exhibited a diverse range of preferences but predominantly favoured Facebook as a source of news and Twitter as a platform for engaging in disputes. A person named Sadiq (Personal Communication, October 28, 2023) stated that while Facebook provides news, Twitter is the platform where genuine debates take place. YouTube is highly proficient in providing comprehensive analysis, but lacks interactivity. This exemplifies the diverse utilization of platforms, with each serving a unique function in political involvement, ranging from consuming news to engaging in participatory debates.

To summarize, the theme "Specific Social Media Forums" demonstrates that the impact of different platforms on political involvement and different demographic groups differs considerably. Twitter has evolved as a forum for in-depth political discussions and immediate updates, whereas Facebook and Instagram mostly focus on sharing general information and engaging in campaign-related activities. WhatsApp and YouTube also carved out their specialized areas, namely in the dissemination of news and the provision of comprehensive analysis. This subject effectively illustrates that no individual platform holds a monopoly on political influence. Instead, each platform has established its distinct role in moulding the political environment and voting patterns in the Swabi District during the 2018 general elections.

Efficient Use by Political Parties

The theme "Efficient Use by Political Parties" explores the viewpoints of participants regarding the political organizations that utilized social media most strategically and effectively during the 2018 general elections in the Swabi District. The sample allowed for a comprehensive investigation of this aspect of electoral politics.

Government officials typically believed that established political parties were more adept at utilizing social media due to their superior resources and extensive track record of political involvement. According to one participant named Mohtasim (Personal Communication, September 12, 2023), "Established political parties possess a highly structured approach to social media; they possess the knowledge to effectively engage with voters and shape public sentiment." This observation suggests that both money and experience can greatly enhance one's proficiency in using social media for political campaigns.

Conversely, political activists presented an alternative perspective, positing that newer or smaller political parties exhibited greater innovation and efficacy in their use of social media. "Emerging political parties must exhibit greater resourcefulness and ingenuity, utilizing social media platforms to compensate for their lack of established political influence," remarked Qasim (Personal Communication, Sep 14, 2023). This highlights how varying amounts of resources and distinct imperatives can influence the efficacy of social media initiatives employed by political parties.

Female participants predominantly believed that political parties that prioritized women's problems showed greater efficacy on social media platforms. A female participant named Shabana (Personal Communication, October 23, 2023) expressed that she finds parties that openly and honestly discuss women's issues to be more relatable on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This view reflects the notion that social media campaigns focused on specific issues can have a stronger impact on particular demographic groups.

Within the general population, there was a division in opinion. Opinions varied regarding the effectiveness of larger parties, with some acknowledging their superior resources, while others commended the smaller parties for their genuineness and direct engagement at the grassroots level. "Large social gatherings may seem more refined over the internet, but at times, they might lack a genuine sense of authenticity." "The smaller parties exhibit a greater level of true engagement," stated a respondent from the general public.

To summarize, the theme "Efficient Use by Political Parties" offers a sophisticated comprehension of the effectiveness of political parties' social media tactics during the 2018 Swabi District elections. There was no consensus on which party was universally regarded as the most effective among all demographic categories. Well-established political parties, equipped with substantial resources, received acclaim for their well-coordinated and extensive social media efforts, while smaller or recently formed parties were lauded for their inventive and genuine interaction. Moreover, the efficacy of issue-orientated campaigning, specifically about women's issues, surfaced as a pertinent aspect. Hence, the proficient utilization of social media in political campaigns seems to be a complex occurrence influenced by several aspects, such as party magnitude, resource accessibility, and the particular audience they seek to involve.

Usefulness for Activists

The theme "Usefulness for Activists" explores the perspectives on the role and effectiveness of social media platforms for political activists, specifically in terms of increasing political consciousness and coordinating events in the Swabi District. The study's sample consisted of 5 women, 10 government officials, 5 political activists, and 10 individuals from the general public, providing a broad range of perspectives.

The majority of political activists in the sample strongly believe that social media is an essential instrument for grassroots movements. Twitter and Facebook were essential forums for them to engage in debate, mobilize, and share information. An activist named Ejaz (Personal Communication, October 23, 2023) said, "Social media equalizes the opportunities and advantages for all participants." While we may lack the same level of resources as large political parties, we nonetheless possess the ability to contact thousands of individuals. This comment implies that the democratizing influence of social media allows activists to amplify their voice and influence, regardless of their limited resources.

Government officials responded in a more cautious and calculated manner. While recognizing the capacity of social media to magnify activist movements, some individuals

expressed concerns regarding the platform's tendency to spread false information. An official named Taj (Personal Communication, October 27, 2023) stated that social media has both advantages and disadvantages, serving as a tool for mobilization but also posing risks. Disinformation can propagate with the same speed as accurate information. This perspective emphasizes the necessity for prudence and accountability when utilizing social media for political activism.

Female participants stated that social media can serve as an empowering tool, especially for women activists who encounter obstacles in conventional political domains. "Social media platforms provide a safe space for women, such as myself, to participate in political discussions without the worry of being judged or intimidated," expressed a female respondent named Habiba (Personal Communication, September 12, 2023). This statement emphasizes the role of social media in creating an inclusive environment that goes beyond traditional societal limitations, therefore expanding the range of political activism.

The majority of the population believes that social media is most impactful for activism when it is centered on specific issues rather than on individual personalities. A participant expressed, "When activists priorities addressing issues rather than engaging in personal assaults or partisan politics, their social media campaigns become significantly more convincing." This sentiment suggests that the general public is more inclined to participate in activist efforts on social media when those initiatives focus on relevant societal matters rather than engaging in political attacks.

To summarize, the theme "Usefulness for Activists" demonstrated that social media is commonly perceived as a potent instrument for political action in the Swabi District, but certain limitations exist. Activists praised its effectiveness in reaching out to people and mobilizing them, while government authorities expressed caution and emphasized the dangers of spreading false information. Women perceived it as an empowering medium that bypasses conventional obstacles to political engagement, and the wider public showed the most openness towards social media campaigns that focus on specific issues. The effectiveness of

social media for activism is determined by several aspects, such as the content of the messages, the intended audience, and the wider sociopolitical environment in which it functions.

Discussion

This study conducted an in-depth theme analysis to examine the various effects of social media on the electoral politics of the Swabi District. Every theme identified in the analysis sheds light on certain aspects of social media's impact on voting behavior and political participation, validating and expanding upon the conclusions of prior research on this topic.

Participants from diverse demographics recognized the influential role of social media platforms in affecting public opinion under the theme of "Understanding of Social Media". This discovery is consistent with prior studies that highlight the all-encompassing influence of social media in modern politics (Johnson, 2018; Smith, 2016). Our research adds to the existing body of knowledge by emphasizing the intricate comprehension that various demographic groups, including government officials, possess of the possible exploitation of social media for military purposes. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Harris (2020) and Fisher (2019), which indicates that a comprehensive comprehension of the capabilities and constraints of social media is crucial for its ethical and efficient utilization in the realm of politics.

The theme of "Impact on Voting Behavior" reveals that social media has a significant impact, especially among younger participants and political activists. This finding aligns with research such as Thompson (2017), which emphasize the changing patterns in political mobilization and voter influence due to digital platforms. However, the degree of this influence differed, offering a more nuanced comprehension that supports Jenkins et al.'s (2018) assertion that the impact of social media is not uniform but depends on factors such as age, political involvement, and other socio-cultural variables. This study on "Factors Influencing Voting Decision" confirms the previous research conducted by Klein (2015) and Reynolds (2019) by reaffirming that conventional factors such as party affiliation,

candidate credentials, and local issues still play a significant role in influencing voting behavior. Thus, social media works in collaboration with these conventional elements, questioning the notion of its pervasive influence as suggested by certain academics (Martinez, 2018).

The theme "Awareness of Social Media Propaganda" was quite enlightening. The majority of our participants had a significant degree of digital literacy, indicating their utilization of critical thinking skills while analyzing political messaging on the internet. This discovery is especially significant within the framework of several studies, such as Tuchman (2020), which caution about the tendency for misinformation and fake news to disseminate through these platforms. Consequently, our study demonstrates a positive perspective, indicating that people are becoming more selective in their consumption of online content. This study discovered that social media has a significant impact on general elections, acting as a potent tool for amplifying political messages. This aligns with the views of scholars such as Anderson (2016), who contend that social media platforms have transformed political campaigns by enabling direct communication between politicians and voters without any mediators. However, this amplification has drawbacks, as emphasised in our theme analysis and supported by recent research that cautions against the possibility of disinformation operations (Hobbs, 2020).

"Political Consciousness" contributes to existing studies, such as that of Wallace (2017), by highlighting the positive effects of social media in fostering an educated voting population, especially among younger individuals. Nevertheless, our research also adds to the discourse surrounding the potential dangers of algorithmic polarisation, aligning with Pariser's (2011) notion of the 'filter bubble. The theme "Specific Social Media Forums" demonstrates that various platforms include distinct electoral and activist functionalities. This nuanced comprehension enhances the complexity of prior study talks on the impact of social media on politics, which tend to be unduly generic (Rogers, 2018).

The theme of our study, "Efficient Use by Political Parties", lacks a clear consensus among participants regarding which party utilises social

media most effectively. This finding contradicts existing literature, such as Tucker et al. (2017), which attempts to establish a correlation between social media efficiency and electoral success. Nevertheless, it confirms the notion that the effectiveness of social media as a political instrument relies more on its utilization than the technology itself, a perspective endorsed by Marwick and Lewis (2017). The theme "Usefulness for Activists" affirms the democratizing capacity of social media, in line with Tufekci's (2017) research on how social media may strengthen grassroots movements. Nevertheless, our study provides a detailed comprehension of this phenomenon in a specific location, thereby adding a subtle aspect to the current body of literature.

To summarize, this study supports, questions, and expands upon numerous discoveries from previous research, offering a detailed and comprehensive examination of the intricate connection between social media and electoral politics in the particular setting of Swabi District during the 2018 general elections. This demonstrates that although the platform has a significant influence, it operates in conjunction with various other elements. This study serves as both a validation and a new addition to the existing literature on this important subject.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated the impact of social media on voting behavior in the Swabi District during the 2018 general elections, employing qualitative research and thematic analysis. Findings suggest that social media significantly influenced political awareness, voter engagement, and election-related discussions. However, traditional factors like party loyalty and candidate appeal continued to play a crucial role in voter decision-making. The study also highlighted that while social media facilitated political activism, it did not singularly determine electoral outcomes. Participants demonstrated awareness of social media propaganda, challenging the perception of passive information consumption. Different platforms played varying roles, with some being more effective for activism and others for information dissemination. However, the study could not definitively determine which political party utilized social media most effectively. The

research contributes to the understanding of digital political engagement in Pakistan but acknowledges its limitations, such as a small sample size and a specific timeframe. It underscores the growing role of social media in shaping electoral behavior while emphasizing the need for further research to explore its long-term effects on democratic participation. Future studies should expand on these findings by incorporating larger samples and diverse political contexts to better understand the evolving impact of digital platforms on voter behavior.

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