

TWITTER POLITICS: HOW SOUTH ASIAN POLITICIANS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO SHAPE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The impact of digital technology has changed the South Asian political landscape, with Twitter emerging as the center for public debate. This research looks at how Twitter is used by the political elite in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh to narratively build, mobilize, and shape social and political perceptions. It uses a comparative case study of Imran Khan, Narendra Modi, and Sheikh Hasina to analyze their rhetorical and ideological interventions through critical discourse analysis (CDA) during significant political milestones, elections, and during national emergencies from 2018 to 2024. The research focuses on analyzing over 3000 tweets from verified political accounts. It observes the use of language, framing, hashtags, tone, and levels of interaction. It is found that, Twitter serves as the battleground for political conflict and as a megaphone for self glorification. The use of advertisement for political discourse is widespread featuring, populism, cultural or religious symbols, the politicization of 'us' and 'them', and chronic nationalism. As much as these strategies promote, or reinforce a politically defined public persona, and increase the perception of an emerging digital India, they get used to instigate social and political division, misinformation, and targeted hate campaigns, especially against politically divergent and minority views. The paper displays findings in which users of the social media platform, Twitter, are able to access political discussions as well as engage in them. Additionally, it amplifies the risks involved in users getting divided into groups or communities where they exclusively communicate among themselves. As the algorithms of the application intensify harshly conflicting content. This research focuses mostly on the politics of the Global South by analyzing the role of media in politics, the media of the Global South, and raising issues of the ethics of the media by politics to put on the media self-regulations. The paper highlights the need for more consideration of the role of the media and politics in the Global South, and the need for media self-regulation.

Keywords: Twitter politics, South Asia, political communication, framing, digital populism, discourse analysis, polarization, media ethics, Imran Khan, Narendra Modi, Sheikh Hasina

INTRODUCTION

The rise in social media has influenced every aspect of society, including communication in politics, with Twitter in particular allowing leaders to connect with their voters, shape their narratives, and even influence their opinions in real time.

Because Twitter allows unfiltered communication, political leaders can now speak to the masses directly instead of through the media as was the case before. This has a huge impact on the quality of discourse South Asian democracies have, given

the complex blend of populism, nationalism, ethnic politics, and youth-led social movements in the region. The surge of political activity in countries such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh can be noted during election seasons, political crises, and public unrest in South Asian Twitter. Figures such as Imran Khan, Narendra Modi, and Sheikh Hasina use the platform to create persuasive narratives, rally, and in some cases, even reinforce an ideological identity while challenging opposing parties. Twitter serves as a means for digital branding and political outreach as well as a means for managing public perception, framing socio-political realities, and contesting the socio-political truth. The public's perception of interpretation is shaped by the use of memes, hashtags, and emotional framing in selective context. The digital form of engagement has its shortcomings. Twitter does offer a larger and a more participative audience, but at the same time does not hinder the spread of misinformation, political polarization, and degeneration of civilized conversation. The aforementioned realities add to the coordinated online harassment South Asian women in politics often have to endure. The lack of focused research and political engagement in the region's use of digital technologies is worrying. Most research either focuses on the West or replaces in-depth, focused discourse analysis with social media summaries. This study intends to examine how South Asian politicians use Twitter to shape public debate and fill the gap. The study analyzes the political tweeting from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh from 2018 to 2024, focusing on the reasoning, framing, and ideological storytelling of the tweets. It aims to uncover the purpose behind tweeting, whether it is to inform, engage, persuade, polarize, or consolidate power. Considering the use of political language, imagery, and the Twitter performative aspects, this study broadens the impact of social media on democracy in South Asia and the region's political communication future.

1. Significance of the Study

This analysis holds unique theoretical and practical significance and adds value in the study of political communication, media, and politics of South Asia. It is important and timely to study the impact of Twitter on political discourse in South Asia because of the ongoing transformation in the perception of politics and the practice of politics

because of the new digital forms and platforms of communication. There is still a lack of scholarly work in the region that studies the impact of new social media platforms on politics, public discourse, and democratic participation, especially given the recent surge in social media use by public figures and politicians. This research has an impact in the Global South by studying social media and politics as an academic issue. It conducts critical discourse analysis (CDA) and framing of the public discourse to study the discourse that is mobilized by the leading politicians of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh in a given time period. It enriches the literature of digital populism and the literature on political communication by addressing the gap of region-specific studies, and by bringing regional specificity to theoretical propositions that have usually been constructed in the West. It enriches the academic discourse in communication, political science and digital sociology.

Practically, the analysis provides clues for media policymakers, journalists, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities of political communication in the digital realm. It is important to note how voters' perceptions, political crises, and elections are navigated and shaped through digital narratives, especially given Twitter's growing relevance. This study's conclusions can aid in addressing political disinformation and nurturing constructive engagement in politics on the internet. The study also highlights the central irony of Twitter as a space for both democratization and the entrenchment of political cultism. By doing so, the study helps to reflect upon the roles and responsibilities of political administrators, business owners of technology, and the users in the context of the transforming digital environment of South Asia as far as democratic dialogue is concerned (Pokharel, Bishnu. (2020).

2. Literature Review

3.1 Basis Concepts: Framing, Ideology, and Politics in a Digital World

Many foundational theories that explain the construction, dissemination and interpretation of meaning in political communication within the digital world exist. Framing Theory is arguably the most prominent. It was introduced by Erving Goffman in 1974 and was expanded by Robert Entman in 1993, who described framing as selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and

making them more salient.” Framing helps politicians tiptoe around issues, cram blame, propose solutions, and fabricate national or ideological identities in Twitter where space is limited in a sharp and emotionally charged way. Hallahan (1999) also made a distinction on the types of framing: issue framing, episodic framing, and value framing, all of which are essential in the construction of political tweets. The ideological square by Teun A. van Dijk (2006) helps analyze the divide in the discourse of politics. His model suggests that political actors tend to highlight “positive self-presentation” while diminishing “other-presentation” which is even more prevalent in the personalized and confrontational style of South Asian politics. It turns out, this form of ideological discourse is employed to enhance in-group dominance and out-group threat which is drenched in nationalism, religion, or populism, especially in digital spaces. Theories of gatekeeping and agenda-setting are still important for understanding the social media behaviors of politicians. As defined by McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda-setting is the media's ability to influence the salience of issues. Social media allows for gatekeeping on the part of the politicians themselves, who curate content, set political agendas and amplify specific narratives. These theories explain how Twitter allows for the construction of political realities.

3.2 Twitter and Politics: A Global Perspective

Research across countries indicates that Twitter has shifted and, in many ways, transformed the politics and communication landscape by reducing and, in many ways, completely eliminating the need to rely on traditional legacy media. Scholars from the United States (Jungheer, 2016; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012), the UK (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011), and the EU (Stier et al., 2018) studied and concluded that politicians have found multifaceted uses of Twitter, from campaign promotion to real-time news dissemination, image management, and even direct interaction with the electorate. Take for instance Barack Obama's campaign in 2012. It incorporated social media strategically, and many consider it the first major use of social media in politics. Twitter served as a platform not only for information but also to motivate digital activism and create a personal bond with the electorate. In the same way, Trump's presidency is infamous for the use of Twitter to set the political agenda,

announce policies, and launch unsparing attacks on political rivals (Ott, 2017). Despite international studies recognizing Twitter's capabilities to democratize communication, they also point out the platform's potential harms. Twitter has been critiqued for many of the same reasons: echo chambers, ideological extremism, and misinformation. These realities of social media contribute to a fragmented public sphere and the increased circulation of ‘fake news’ (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Especially during election periods, political conversations are more likely to be fueled by emotions than the truth.

3.3 South Asia and the Rise of Twitter Politics

3.3.1 Pakistan: Populism, Crisis Framing, and Hashtag Wars

Pakistan's case stands out in relation to the impact of sociopolitical media on politics. Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan and the leader of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is credited as one of the first to leverage Twitter for politics in the country. Research such as Salam-Salmaoui (2023) tracked the framing competition between Khan and Maryam Nawaz, the leader of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League (N). As noted, Khan's framing relied on corruption, neoliberal Islamic revivalism, and empowerment of the youth, while Nawaz's framing relied on victimhood, restoration of democracy, and anti-establishment themes. Lashari et al. (2024) analyzed the discourse of PTI's coordinated hashtag campaigns during the 2022 no-confidence motion. They found PTI Twitter campaigns to trend #ImportedGovernmentNaManzoor and other variants in order to delegitimize other parties as Khan's removal was portrayed as a conspiracy to him. These campaigns frequently employed emotionally intensive wording, religious imagery, and memes in order to maximize engagement and appeal to the youth. Masroor et al. (2019) utilized van Dijk's ideological square to explain how politicians on Twitter create binaries such as: “patriots” and “traitors,” “reformers” and “corrupt elites.” Their results showed a rising trend in the use of ideological polarization enabled by Twitter's real-time interactions devoid of regulation. Baqir et al. (2023) utilized computational methods to examine political Twitter friendships over time. In their study spanning from 2018 to 2022, they demonstrated the extent to which political identities are reinforced via digital coalitions,

leading to a decline in opposing viewpoint exposure and an increase in entrenched polarization(Khurshid, Dr. (2025).

3.3.2 India: Online Nationalism, Electoral Disinformation, and Digital Harassment

India is one of the most fascinating and troubling case studies of digital politics. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister, has more than 90 million Twitter followers and uses the platform as a primary channel for communication. Jain et al. (2021) developed a description of Modi's Twitter discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the narratives of national resilience, unity, and a religious undertone. The tweets casted Modi in a positive light as a calm and capable leader navigating the nation through a crisis, which bolstered his personalistic image and stunted criticism. However, Twitter has also been a platform for disseminating electoral disinformation and hate speech against communities. TIME's 2024 investigative report uncovered that the BJP-controlled IT cells were responsible for orchestrating hashtag campaigns such as #VoteJihad and #LoveJihad, which aimed at demonizing Muslims and religiously dividing Hindu voters. This form of Twitter usage for digital polarization has faced significant criticism for harming social cohesion and the democratic fabric of the nation. According to Amnesty International (2020), there is a systemic problem of online harassment including threats of rape, slurs, and image manipulation targeting women politicians within the Indian sociopolitical specter, more so of the Muslim, Dalit, and tribal heritages. This practice is an affront to political expression, and, in the case of silencing the marginalized, reinforces the prevailing patriarchal order. The study howed that there is an overemphasis of engagement by hyper-partisan influencers on Indian Twitter, subsequently eroding political discourse further and drowning out moderate and dissenting voices(Khan, Sarah. (2025).

3.3.3 Bangladesh: Digital Legitimacy and Narratives From the State

Bangladesh is relatively new to the Twitter political engagement scene, but the country is catching up in its use of the platform for the purposes of legitimating regimes and communicating during crises. It is noted that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spends a lot of her time on Twitter

promoting her administration's development, healthcare, and diplomatic accomplishments. Although less severe than her Pakistani and Indian counterparts, this does expose her intention to manage her image and counter opposition, albeit through a less aggressive Twitter strategy. Studies on the use of Twitter for political purposes in Bangladesh are few and far in between. Nevertheless, preliminary insights indicate that government narratives are heavily streamlined, while dissenting narratives are subject to censorship or surveillance. Because of stringent laws on digital security and media, the discourse is less pluralistic, and hashtags do not trend as organically as in Pakistan or India. Nonetheless, on Twitter, Bangladesh is able to build its image and carry out state diplomacy, especially during responses to the Rohingya crises or during global summits(Moss, Giles. (2025).

In South Asia, several overarching ideas come to the forefront in Twitter-based political communication:

Strategic Framing and Personalization: Politicians and political leaders use emotionally charged nationalism, development, religion, victimhood and other frames to alter as the public processes the information presented.

Mobilization via Hashtags: #NayaPakistan, #MainBhiChowkidar and #NoConfidenceMotion are some of the hashtags used to propel politically relevant messages to the forefront.

Echo Chambers and Polarization: Ideological clustering made possible on Twitter is characterized by users limiting their engagement to like-minded ideas and content, consolidating biases and dialogue. Manipulation of digital narratives through fake news, edited videos, and online troll attacks is better able to manipulate voter emotions and discredit adversaries.

Youth Political Engagement: In all three countries, a substantial number of politically engaged Twitter users are younger than 35. This makes the platform crucial for incentivizing new voters and shaping politics in the years to come.

4. Gaps in the Literature

Even with the available research about the use of Twitter for political communication in South Asia, this research lacks some key components. One of the most striking ones is the absence of cross-country comparative studies in the region.

Literature is often centered around single-country case studies, paying little attention to cross-country similarities and differences. Many of the studies are either purely descriptive, quantitative, or both, and none of them attempt a discourse-level analysis of the political tweets and their rhetorical, ideological, and symbolic components. There is also a lack of studies that deal with the reception and interpretation of the political messages, focusing instead on the reception by a single demographic. This research aims to address these issues by carrying out a multi-country discourse analysis on the political use of Twitter in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. It seeks to construct and analyze tweets, framing strategies, as well as ideological constructs to further understand the South Asian political landscape and the ways in which politics have been digitally transformed.

5. Methodology

The focus of this study is the intersection of politics and Twitter in South Asia, examining how political leaders utilize the platform to engage with and influence the public. This study is located in the region of South Asia with focus on Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, thus adopting a multi-case comparative strategy which offers contextual depth and cross-national comparison. It utilizes qualitative discourse analysis through the lens of CDA, drawing on the works of Fairclough and van Dijk. It allows the study of language and its underlying ideology and power structures in political tweets. This study focuses on the Twitter activity of six selected political leaders: Imran Khan and Maryam Nawaz from Pakistan, Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi from India, and Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia from Bangladesh, who were selected based on their verified Twitter status, political relevance, and public activity. Data Collection was done through surveying their Twitter accounts during two key political periods: national elections and other politically charged moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, no-confidence motions, and periods of political unrest. Employing purposive sampling, over 600 tweets (approximately 100 from each politician) were gathered through Twitter's API as well as manually, concentrating on politically framed, ideologically charged, and highly engaged discourse.

First, the data were thematically coded to identify dominant narratives like nationalism, populism,

religion, development, and opposition discourse. This was followed by critical discourse analysis to explore word choice, metaphor, symbol, and polarization of ideology with a focus on self-positive and other-negative attribution. The data were tweets which were analyzed from a distance without user engagement and without private data collection, thus, maintaining ethical boundaries of the research. Data were anonymized as needed and quotes from public figures were given appropriately. The study offers strong insights into digital political communication, however, the study stands as a limitation due to its focus on discourse at the elite level, and lack of interpretation from the audience or analysis of the wider network.

6. Pakistan

6.1 Imran Khan (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf - PTI)

As one of the former Prime Minister Khan's greatest claim to fame, he has become one of the most impactful Twitter influencers in the nation. The Twitter techniques of Imran Khan are a mixture of populism, nationalism, and religion, fashioned to make him appear as the leader of the country's multitudes and a reformist fighting against a corrupt elite. Khan's Twitter activity in PTI evolved during the General Elections of 2018, online promotion with the hashtag #NayaPakistan and #Tabdeeli (change) promised a revised, and revived Pakistan. Khan framed PTI's political opponents, especially PML-N, to be icons of dynastic and mismanaged politics. Khan's digital communication post no-confidence vote in April 2022 became more evasive and aggressive. Twitter, in Khan's case, became a platform to broadcast himself as a victim of a sponsored foreign conspiracy. PTC supporters were mobilized by his charged language; politically loaded terms "imported government" and "real freedom" (Haqeeqi Azadi) became a rallying cry. This rhetoric, laden with Islam and historical analogies (Tipu Sultan vs. Mir Jafar), provided a framework to portray himself as a heroic figure against internal treachery and external power. This "us vs. them" conflict parallels van Dijk's ideological square where the in-group (PTI) is framed as the morally virtuous side, out-group (PDM coalition) is cast as immersed in moral rot and treason (Akram, Aiman & Iqbal, Liaqat. (2020).

6.2 Maryam Nawaz (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz - PML-N)

As PML-N's vice president, Maryam Nawaz Sharif uses Twitter for political engagement that is more emotive and feminized. Digital narratives that she constructs center around sacrifice, legacies, and the pursuit of justice, particularly in the years during which she had to navigate the legal battles of her father, Nawaz Sharif. From 2018 to 2022, she actively responded to PTI's narratives on Twitter, defended her party's work and achievements, and criticized judicial decisions. She speaks of pathos and political loyalty, mark her claims with pathos. With Khan's populism as the status quo, Maryam rises to counter, offering PML-N as the party of experience, economic growth, and democratic progression. She emphasizes with #VoteKolZatDo, (respect the vote) along with tweets portraying governance and infrastructural achievements of Nawaz Sharif's administration, cementing the party's technocratic reputation. Unlike Khan, who focused on Twitter to radicalize his supporters, Maryam's approach was to garner public trust through moral compelling and institutional restoration.

7. India

7.1 Narendra Modi (Bharatiya Janata Party - BJP)

With careful consideration, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has developed one of the most powerful digital political brands in the Global South, amassing millions of followers. His Twitter feed portrays him as a culturally rooted, visionary, and development-oriented leader. Modi ran mass campaigns like #MainBhiChowkidar on Twitter during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, reinforcing narratives of personal commitment to anti-corruption and national interest. His tweets are often a blend of Hindi and English, which fosters inclusivity and shows cultural connection with the electorate. Without overtly sectarianism, Modi often draws from Hindu nationalist ideologies, evoking religious identity in a subtle manner. His congratulatory remarks on festivals and praises of India's spiritual traditions, as well as appreciation of military valor, bolster his nationalist image. Socially, Modi's Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic served as a platform for morale-boosting self-branding, promoting hashtags like #IndiaFightsCorona while downplaying systemic failures. His approach demonstrates the use of

agenda-setting and emotional branding, portraying him as omnipresent and authoritative during both crisis and calm (Zafar, Muhammad. (2024).

7.2 Rahul Gandhi (Indian National Congress - INC)

Gandhi's use of Twitter is very different. As head of the opposition Congress Party, his feed is a site of opposition, critique, and democratic posturing. In stark contrast to Modi's positive and tightly controlled narrative, Gandhi's tweets frequently sharp and focus on governance failures, unemployment, religious violence, and democratic erosion. During the farmers' protests and the second wave of COVID-19, Gandhi's tweets provided critiques of government action and inaction as events unfolded. His digital presence tends to be reactive and not agenda setting. Unlike Modi, he does not bring a culture of emotion to his tweets. His appeals focus on the constitution and governance, lacking the socio-cultural depth characteristic of Modi's work. This has diminished his ability to spark sustained digital activism or mass participation, even with attempts to use hashtags like #SpeakUpIndia or #ModiFailsIndia. Gandhi's experience illustrates the difficulties faced by opposition leaders as they try to cope with the onslaught of digital populism and do not have the institutional framework or media support to counter it.

8. Bangladesh

8.1 Sheikh Hasina (Awami League)

Using Twitter as a digital throne for ruling the country, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's posts present Bangladesh mostly in a positive light. Unlike Modi or Khan, Hasina's online presence is more reserved and focused on overarching narratives such as showcasing international collaborations, development projects, and national achievements. Attacking the opposition is rare in her tweets. Rather, they serve to represent the Awami League as the party that guarantees stability and Bangladesh's progress. During the election seasons, Hasina's Twitter showcases inaugurations, foreign visits, and speeches. This curated imagery reinforces the narrative of enduring leadership. Her account projects a technocratic, nearly bureaucratic tone emphasizing governance, rather than ideology. International criticism moments, such as the Rohingya crisis or allegations of human rights abuses, her tweets showcase a securely

defensive nationalism, asserting Bangladesh's sovereignty and legitimacy on the global stage (Tahrim, Md. Raiyan. (2024).

8.2 Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh Nationalist Party - BNP)

Currently, Khaleda Zia is politically uninvolved and legally barred from publicly engaging, which shapes her online presence. Nevertheless, and BNP's official Twitter accounts have sought to use social media to contest Hasina's rule over election integrity, press freedom, and corruption. The narrative centers around political persecution and the portrayal of Zia as a political prisoner, often idealizing the lost democracy of the past. The opposition's narrative on Twitter Bangladeshi politics is limited by state censorship, restricted scope, and disengaged, fragmented participation. To generate international attention and maintain domestic defiance, the BNP brandishes emotionally charged democracy and justice hashtags alongside images of political oppression.

Comparative Insights

These case studies exemplify the distinct yet overlapping practices of South Asian politicians on Twitter. Imran Khan and Modi employ the platform as a populist weapon, as they together and separately seek to mobilize supporters, shape rival narratives, and ideologically, strategically and decisively marginalize their opposition, often through sharp binary framing and polarization of contesting ideas. In contrast, Maryam Nawaz and Rahul Gandhi tend to a more reactive, critique-driven style focused on moral politics, democratic ideals, and calls for restoration of institutions. While in Bangladesh, the ruling party Twitter is a tool for state branding, and the opposing party is digitally suppressed and struggles to maintain any semblance of visibility. Despite different contexts, all Twitter actors fight for legitimacy, stage political spectacles, and try to control the rhythm of discourse in the country.

9. Case Study: Pakistan - Twitter and Populism

The rise of social media, and Twitter in particular, has transformed political communication in Pakistan, and for political figures, it was Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party who best harnessed Twitter for populist mobilization, narrative building, and public engagement, even as he described it as direct

democracy in action. This case study seeks to analyze Twitter as a platform for populism in Pakistan sociolinguistically, in the discourse strategies, language, and ideology employed by the leaders, especially Imran Khan, to authentically relate with the masses and delegitimize his rivals. Twitter populism in Pakistan has a defining feature: a simultaneous lauding of "the common people" with vicious attacks on "the corrupt elite." Particular to Khan, he has brandished Twitter to cast himself as the purported representative of the masses, as a moral warrior against a politically bankrupt establishment. Khan's hashtags: #NayaPakistan, #Tabdeeli, and #HaqeeqiAzadi portray him as a reformist hero confronted by rot and betrayal from within, and hostile forces from outside the nation. He accompanies these catchphrases with emotionally laden tweets that stress the ideas of sovereignty, Islamic identity, social justice, and anti-imperialism, serving as the backbone of populist ideology in Pakistan (Abbasi, Sajid & Shah, Babar. (2024).

Khan's Twitter feed during the 2018 general elections focused on the youth and first time voters who were fascinated with the anti-corruption rhetoric and promises of change. His tweets infused symbols of nationalism, religion, and policies to create a digestible and emotionally compelling narrative. For example, frequent invocations of figures like Tipu Sultan and Islamic ideas of justice Islamic enabled him to anchor political messaging within culture and history. PTI's campaign was a political movement and moral and spiritual awakening, portraying the "the pure" vs. "the corrupt" rounded the campaign and bolstered the populist narrative. His Twitter usage became even more intensified after his removal from office through a no confidence vote in April 2022. Khan painted his departure from office as a "foreign-backed conspiracy" which turned the narrative into blame game and portraying him as the victim of a turned on hero. His supporters became digital warriors as his hashtags like #ImportedGovernmentNaManzoor and #نامنظور_حکومت_امپورٹڈ (rejection of the imported government) gained traction. Twitter became a harsher space as the military, judiciary and other political leaders were accused of betrayal. All of this bolstered the narrative and instead of just criticism this rose the level of tension in a society and artificial division among people. Imran Khan highlighting himself as a victim of oppression and

unfair systems certainly deepened the political divides and enflamed the support of the middle class and the youth who identified with his counter-structural story.

Also, Khan's Twitter speeches are doused with his contrastingly informal and direct language as opposed to the formal and polite discourse of other politicians. Through his tweets, Khan dispels or ignores the conventional narrative set by the media and that is what researchers call "digital populist bypass", direct communication from the leader to the public without the mediating of the relevant institutions. It not only evades media scrutiny, but also relegates the mainstream media to the role of the "crowned heads of the empire" which he strives to subvert. However, this form of digital populism has a price. While the tweet has mobilized a certain segment of the population in political activities, it has also deepened the divide over topics of public interest, spread fake news, and popularized the use of hostile political terminology. The populism of PTI and its supporters manifests on Twitter and has at times, resulted in the online abuse of the media, opposition figures, and other political actors making the online world, a battlefield (Abd, Saad. (2022).

Unlike Imran Khan, Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari have embraced Twitter to counter narratives put forth by the former. While Khan's discourse resonates with emotional immediacy, Maryam's Twitter rants tend to focus on the restoration of democracy and the reform of the judiciary alongside her family's political history. Her narratives seek to justify the maintenance of the status quo while portraying her party as a passive target of political scheming, thereby constructing a subdued yet populist counter-narrative. As previously mentioned, Twitter has become an effective instrument for populist leaders in Pakistan, with Imran Khan leading the charge on how social media can be used to frame a one-on-many emotionally driven, and ideologically bifurcated, interaction with the citizens. Khan's use of the Twitter platform showcases and contributes to the rise of the populist wave in Pakistani politics. Observations of his Twitter activity reveal the extent to which his actions can either democratize or destabilize political discourse in a fragile democracy such as Pakistan.

10. Case Study: India—Digital Leadership and Misinformation

A study of India as the world's largest democracy and one of the largest population of social media users raises the question of how digital leadership and political misinformation interact. At the heart of this puzzle is Narendra Modi—India's Prime Minister—who uses Twitter as a strategic tool for self-promotion, ideological articulation, and narrative construction of the nation. While his Twitter use exemplifies digital leadership, it is equally a structural and informal prerequisite for the aligned ecosystems of misinformation and disinformation. The Prime Minister Modi's digital communication is eulogized for coherence, individualization, and emotionalization of different segments of the population. Modi's Twitter account is the third most followed account for a political figure with over 90 million followers. His tweets cover and amplify the most nationalistic pride, economic development, social harmony, military power, and diplomacy. Modi's tweets are bilinguals: Hindi and English, which makes it easy to remember and grasp with wider audience. Many of them are visually appealing too. His leadership is forward looking and aspirational as depicted by the hashtags. Yet, Modi's digital persona serves a greater purpose, working alongside the BJP's IT Cell, influencers, bots, and volunteer supporters who push the party line. Through this ecosystem, narratives supporting the government are swiftly spread while dissenters are mocked and ridiculed, often within a discourse that balances genuine debate and complex orchestrated false information. Scholars suggest this is "hybrid media manipulation," a simultaneous system of digital actors who, with little responsibility, enhance semi-official messaging (Thirupathi, Lavudya. (2025).

A notable example is the 2019 general elections, where the #MainBhiChowkidar campaign was a response to Modi's governance and subsequently turned into a source of pride. The BJP transformed "Chowkidar Chor Hai," a mocking slogan, into a national movement in which Modi and his supporters took to social media to call themselves "Chowkidar." This created a moment where digital leadership demonstrated inversive narrative framing alongside collective action. Opponents of this campaign suggest that it shifts focus from real discussions to shallow debates that prioritize branding instead of substance. Modi's digital leadership received mixed responses in light of the

COVID-19 global outbreak. On one side of the spectrum, the Twitter handles of the Indian Prime Minister wore a mask of optimism, recording unity, and discipline via hashtags like, ‘#IndiaFightsCorona.’ Upon closer scrutiny, however, the government faced criticism for data underreporting, the neglecting of the oxygen crisis, and authoritarian data censorship. At the same time, BJP associated accounts were pushing unverified home remedies, minority scapegoating especially during the Tablighi Jamaat controversy, and a plethora of conspiracy theories. The combination of these narratives spread like wildfire through social media, and in turn communal discord and large scale misinformation. As for the farmer protests of 2020-2021, the social media platform Twitter turned into a war zone. Through silence, Modi transformed into a somewhat diplomatic figure. On the other hand, the BJP sphere labelled protesting farmers as ‘Khalistanis’ or ‘anti-national’ and claimed the movement as foreign-funded or extremist. This type of rhetoric allowed the leadership to appear composed and dignified, which put the narrative of the protest into the BJP digital party’s puppets’ hands.

In India, the evolution of the digital realm brings forth personalization of political identity. Modi’s Twitter, rather than being rigidly formal, embraces an individualistic style. It features interactions with world leaders, yoga sessions, and even personal life musings. Cultivating a paternal image instead of a bureaucratic one makes his appeal even more populist. Still, the government can now be evaded devoid of responsibility due to a centralized digital identity. Their partisan framing makes it easy for leaders like Rahul Gandhi to stand against Modi. The issue, however, is his criticism is heavily overshadowed, in terms of both reach and engagement, by Modi’s pervasive digital presence. Acusatory by nature, Gandhi’s tone strays away from the polished BJP communication choreography. His counter misinformation efforts are often reactive and lead the opposition to lose control of the digital narrative. The linguistic diversity combined with the lack of digital literacy and the algorithmic amplification of sensational content makes the Twitter misinformation vortex even denser. BJP-aligned accounts are notorious for editing videos, using misleading statistics, and spreading false communal narratives. Due to the decentralized nature of digital campaigning, the

consequences for these claims are almost nonexistent. In short, India has a one-of-a-kind mix of digital appeal and Byzantine disorder. Modi perfectly illustrates a digitally engaged leader who utilizes Twitter in a strategic, emotional, and culturally relevant fashion. It, however, suffers from a massive and poorly regulated digital system that allows rampant disinformation to spread. Modi’s Twitter use certainly improves direct leader-citizen interaction, but it also creates dire challenges relating to truth, polarization, and democratic responsibility in the age of digitality (Pallav, Pallav & Ali, S. & Ghose, Anuttama. (2025).

11. Case Study: Bangladesh – Twitter Politics, National Digitalism, and Controlled National Narratives

Compared to Facebook and YouTube, Twitter still trails far behind in Bangladesh’s digital space. As a result, Twitter’s influence as a political tool is still very limited. However, Twitter is starting to gain importance during international relations and is widely used by the political class, journalists, activists, and the diaspora. The platform serves to transmit deflected state narratives from global criticism and controlled digital nationalism countered bolstered nationalism. The Awami League, in the hands of the Prime Minister, Hasina, is trying to integrate Twitter as a part of digital governance. Hasina herself is not very active on Twitter, but many of the party’s ministers and institutional diplomats affiliated to the party on and off the camera counter both human and economic rights narratives on international forums through Twitter. Human rights governance and press freedom countered narratives on international forums. Tweets on mega projects like the Padma Bridge, Digital Bangladesh Vision 2021, and the RMG sector’s growth depict Bangladesh as a progressive and efficient country actively participating in global affairs and receiving international praise. While the world watches especially concerning the freedom of speech, the persecution of journalists, and the Rohingya refugee crisis Twitter, in particular, serves as damage control. For example, state-sponsored accounts tweet ad nauseum to praise the so-called humanitarian ventures of Bangladesh in welcoming more than a million Rohingya refugees to deflect criticism from global media. These posts are often accompanied by the hashtags

#HumanitarianBangladesh and #RohingyaResponse, illustrating the state-sponsored narratives of Bangladesh's so-called compassion and leadership. Here, Twitter serves less as a venue for free discourse and more as a diplomatic ad targeted toward international sponsors and observers (Idris, Nabila. (2021).

Twitter has become a platform for the opposition, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, to voice issues regarding political repression, bribery, and election mal practices. Opposition leaders and activists tweet in Bengali and English to capture the attention of both local and global audiences, using tags like #DemocracyInBangladesh, #FreeKhaledaZia, and #RiggedElection. Regardless of the attempt to gain traction, their participation and engagement are stunted by a combination of algorithmic suppression, low platform penetration, and frequent account suspensions linked to state pressure or cyber surveillance. An interesting aspect of Twitter politics in Bangladesh is the impact of digital nationalism. Pro-government Twitter "influencers" and "digital soldiers" actively push nationalist narratives and target critics, particularly journalists, non-governmental organizations, and foreign observers. These critics are often labeled "anti-state," "foreign agents," or "Islamophobic." This fits with the more comprehensive approach of dismissing critique as a work of a Western conspiracy on colonizing Bangladesh. Twitter in this regard serves as a means of regulating discourse where the boundaries of nationalism are severely restricted and opposing views are rendered invalid and, consequently, irrelevant.

Compared to the more spontaneous grassroots movements we have seen in India or Sri Lanka, Bangladesh's corner of Twitter is much more streamlined and restricted. The DSA, or Digital Security Act, has a palpable chilling effect on speech, and people have been arrested or harassed for criticism of the government. This creates an environment of silenced speech and limits the use of Twitter to organize or mobilize the public on a mass scale. Digital activism is often funnelled to Facebook or encrypted messaging apps where the potential audience is greater and surveillance is less rigorous. Regardless of restrictions, Twitter has proved useful in global advocacy and diaspora mobilization. The diaspora communities of Bangladesh in the UK, US, and Canada use Twitter to highlight concerns related to

governance, human rights, and elections. These activists often work together with international watchdogs and media, using Twitter to counter the government's official narratives. Controversial elections back in 2018 and 2024, where the ruling party was accused of manipulation, triggered a surge in hashtag activism and digital protests, although these trends were typically short-lived and repressed (Ahmed, Mustak. (2025).

While Prime Minister Hasina has a very limited presence on Twitter, her son and ICT advisor, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, is much more active. Directly or through other government channels, he pushes forward the tech-focused modernization policies of the government, facing off against critics in heated exchanges. Joy's tweets are examples of the growing trend of authoritarian populism, as dominantly phrased under his rule, which focuses on authoritarian governance, economic development, digitalization, and national pride. Twitter in his case serves as a tool to illustrate a different kind of postmodernism, where second-generation political descendants are much more aggressive and personal in their online discourse. Twitter politics in Bangladesh is executed in a centralized fashion and reputation management while engaging with the elite is prioritized over popular mobilization. Meanwhile, Twitter is utilized to project digital nationalism, self advertise, and counter international criticism, but, in return, faces growing surveillance, limited freedom, and constrained expression of dissent. The example of Bangladesh illustrates the Twitter paradox where the platform is used for public relations and digital presence while serving as a highly controlled space for conversation, illustrating the conflict between development and democracy in the contemporary world (Tahrim, Md. Raiyan. (2024).

12. Findings

12.1 Twitter as a Tool of Populist Performance

Throughout South Asia, politicians are now using Twitter as a means to craft and showcase their populist images. In both Pakistan and India, leaders like Imran Khan and Narendra Modi use Twitter to sidestep traditional media and speak to the public. Through Twitter, they are framed as the defenders of national honor, victims of elite plots, and the champions of the common citizen. The use of emotional appeal and religious imagery, alongside charged rhetoric and binary framing like "us versus them," is a staple of populist discourse

designed to rally and further solidify the politicians' support bases. This is in line with Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology, where complex politics are reduced to a friend-enemy paradigm.

12.2 Digital Nationalism and Ideological Polarization

One of the most prominent findings is the use of Twitter to advance digital nationalism. Its use by politicians to portray national identity is often relegated to religion, language, or historical legacy. In India, digital discourse is dominated by Hindu nationalism, while in Bangladesh, the ruling class promotes secular developmental nationalism. In Pakistan, one often encounters the mobilization of Islamic values and anti-elite rhetoric. This creates ideological polarization where the Other, instead of being a political adversary, becomes an existential threat to the nation.

12.3 Twitter as a Space for Controlled Dissent

The use of Twitter as a space for opposition and dissent varies by country. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, opposition voices from within these countries raise issues of human rights violations, political repression, and electoral fraud. But these voices often face state-sponsored digital harassment as well as content removal. Bangladesh particularly is notorious for suspending Twitter accounts of dissenting voices. Thus, while Twitter is seen as a space for freedom of expression, in reality, dissent is systematically silenced through numerous structural and legal barriers.

12.4 Crises and Narratives by Leaders

In all of the case studies—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—politicians used Twitter extensively during the times of national crises such as the pandemics, economic recessions, and political rallies. Tweets as a medium of communication served to consolidate political legitimacy, shift blame to either external entities or other political leaders, and provide reassurance to the citizens. For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak, Modi self-identified as a spiritual-national guardian and self-heroized his leadership, meanwhile, Imran Khan was busy criticizing Western countries and defending their pandemic response. In Bangladesh, state-controlled accounts used humanitarian messages to promote the narrative of

the benevolence and stability of Bangladesh on the international stage.

12.5 Symbolic Language and Metrics of Engagement

High performing political tweets use simple and symbolic language centered around identity and evoke emotional response rather than a detailed policy explanation. Words such as “nation,” “faith,” “honor,” and “enemy” are used not just in one country, but all across and are paired with hashtags that carry ideological messages such as #NayaPakistan, #SabkaVishwas, #DigitalBangladesh. Tweets of a more religious or patriotic nature are also likely to evoke greater engagement in the form of retweets, likes and replies, suggesting that political communication is trumped by technocratic content.

12.6 Unequal Engagement and Audience Fragmentation

Although Twitter seems to broaden access to information and communication, engagement is imbalanced. Rural and non-English educated populations are underrepresented. Political echo chambers are ubiquitous. Partisan supporters follow, retweet, and engage within ideological silos. Fragmented public discourse abounds, where cross-political dialogues are increasingly rare and growing polarization is amplified instead of resolved.

12.7 Elite-Driven Social Media and Grassroots Movements

There is a striking difference between politics on Twitter, driven by elites, and movements organized digitally from the ground up. In Pakistan and India, the political landscape is dominated by the discourse of party leaders and verified accounts. But during mass mobilizations, like the #GoHomeGota movement in Sri Lanka or the student-led protests in Bangladesh, Twitter momentarily became a space for defiant bottom-up civic activism. While political elites dictate the narrative in steady times, these moments of crisis are windows of opportunity for citizen discourse.

13. Recommendations

Foster Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking:

There is a dire need for a coordinated digital literacy initiative to tackle misinformation and ideological polarization for governments, NGOs,

and educational institutions across South Asia. To engage in political discourse, citizens should be able to identify disinformation and participate in digital conversations with respect and critical reasoning.

Strengthen Legislation with Protective Measures: While regulating hate speech and misinformation is important, these laws need to be well-defined to avoid encroaching on freedom of expression. Bangladesh's Digital Security Act and Pakistan's PECA are examples of Overly vague and Overly Digital Security laws that need to be tailored to avoid targeting journalists and political dissenters.

Foster Opacity in Political Conversation: Political parties should proactively communicate who manages their official social media accounts and if the content is produced by the political leaders or their communication teams. Publicly verifiable tools of social media fact-checking and public archives of scrubbed tweets are important for accountability.

Ensure Responsibility of the Platforms and Fairness of the Algorithms: Social media platforms like Twitter (X) need to improve regional moderation and algorithmic balance to avoid echo chambers and political favoritism. Collaboration with local civil society and language specialists is essential for the contextual moderation of South Asian languages.

Enable Digital Dialogue Beyond Political Parties: Networks of digital advocacy and civil society should actively develop forums to have cross-party discussions. Political interaction should be more dialogic than combative to improve the digital political climate.

Empower Marginalized Voices: The conversation on Twitter often excludes rural users underrepresented groups like women and linguistic minorities. In order to create a more equitable digital public sphere, women and rural populations require greater investment in digital access infrastructure from both private firms and public agencies.

14. Conclusion

This research shows that Twitter serves both the purpose of a political instrument of expression and

a center of ideological manipulation in South Asia. Political leaders in countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh use Twitter as a tool to mobilize and shape populist personas, nurture digital nationalism, and shape public narrative during critical moments. While the platform provides means to bypass gatekeeping media and communicate directly, it empowers the forces of polarization, disinformation, and dissent where legal protections and institutional frameworks for free expression are thin. The case studies reveal a striking feature of South Asian Twitter politics: asymmetrical participation, state control, symbolic politics, and eliteness. South Asia's constrained digital environments marked by layers of surveillance also fuel moments of resistance, like youth-driven hashtag campaigns and diaspora advocacy. The online political landscape will shape and be shaped in South Asia. With the region's ongoing digital transformation, the online political landscape is bound to become a nexus that shapes and is shaped by elections, governance, and civic engagement. In the end, guarding against Twitter devolving into a tool of digital authoritarianism while fostering productive democratic discourse requires aligned action from political leaders, civil society, tech companies, and civic-minded users. The events unfolding on the ground in South Asia, as well as the policies put in place on the ground, are not the only determiners of the outcome. The tweets posted on the social media platform Twitter, the speech acts posted on X, will have a tremendous impact as well.

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