Exploring the Hashtag Movements Role on Facebook in Political Activism Among Youth of Pakistan: A Digital Ethnography

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Article Information	ABSTRACT
    Corresponding Author: Asmaa Shahid shahidasmaa062@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7687-374X	This study aims to examine the youth in political activism through Facebook in Pakistan, A digital anthropology study focusing on the attitudes, motivations, and objectives that drive youth to participate in online political matters. The research explores how political mobilization is raised on Facebook through a hashtag movement. By adopting a digital anthropology approach, the study employed participant observation to collect qualitative data from purposively sampled Facebook posts, comments, and content related to political activism for the specific hashtags. The sample size of about 350 posts, 1,200 comments, and around 800 reactions and shares were analyzed. The data were analyzed thematically to identify trends and patterns in youth engagement. The findings reveal that Facebook is a significant platform for youth political activism, enabling anonymous participation that encourages freedom of expression. However, the platform is also marked by widespread abusive behaviour and hate speech. The study highlights the prevalence of hashtag movements and online mobilization as key strategies for political engagement, with youth leveraging these tools to influence public discourse and advocate for political causes. The study concludes that Facebook has transformed political activism by providing a virtual space for dialogue and mobilization but also emphasizes the need for measures to curb online abuse. It suggests promoting digital literacy and fostering constructive political engagement to enhance the positive impact of social media on political discourse. This study advances knowledge of Pakistan's complex interactions among technology, young culture, and political activity. **Keywords:** Facebook; Youth; Political Discourse; Social Networking Sites; Political Activism; Pakistan; Digital Ethnography

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a transformative innovation, reshaping global communication and establishing itself as a vital platform for political activism (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Flew & Iosifidis,

2020). Pakistan's political environment has also been shaped by users of social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter (X), Instagram, and others (Bano et al., 2021).

Khan et al. (2021) postulated that the people of Pakistan utilize digital platforms to resolve conflicts, construct an identity, and carry out some political activities. Social media has transformed the organizational culture and the conduct of political and social events (Vaccari et al., 2015). It has also enabled users to provide forums where opinions and behaviours can be demonstrated, and political discourse can be sought (Masiha et al., 2018). The popularization of social networking sites has developed digital culture, thus promoting political movements among the youth. Social media has played a pivotal role among Pakistani youth, as approximately 64 per cent of Pakistan's population comprises youth under 30 (Ali, 2023). The context offers a good chance to study youth political activism. Young people of Pakistan have remained politically disadvantaged in the country since the earliest days. However, Pakistani women have recently enhanced their political participation through social media (Shehzad et al., 2021). Women's participation can be a revolutionary factor in the country's political system. According to Shehzad et al. (2021), Pakistan has about 43 million monthly active Facebook users, comprising 78.4% male and 21.6% female users aged between 25-34 years old.

Although youth political activities on social media platforms are gradually gaining importance, limited studies have been conducted regarding the psychological insights, perspectives, and aspirations for such activity among the youths of Pakistan (Farooz, 2023). This study seeks to address that gap by establishing how the youth of Pakistan participate in the political conversation on social media, why they choose to partake, and what consequences of the practice can be seen. The study contributes to the existing literature on young persons' political participation, politics on social media, and social movements, as it provides valuable information on how young people use social media for political activities. Also, the role of such channels in cultivating youth's political identity and political dissent and conducting political organization is emphasized. Apart from enriching the topic of social media and politics within academia, this research also offers tangible suggestions for increasing positive political engagement among young Pakistanis.

The research aims to achieve three main objectives: examine youth political activism through Facebook in Pakistan. Secondly, it aims to understand the motivations, attitudes, and aspirations of youth engaging in political discussions online. Lastly, the study aims to provide recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders on effectively engaging youth in the political process. Based on objectives, the research focuses on three key questions: How do Pakistani youth engage in online political discourse and activities? How do they express their motivations, attitudes, and aspirations through these online discussions? Moreover, how do political situations influence the social identities, civic participation, and political mobilization of Pakistani youth?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Global statistics using social media reported by Kemp (2023) show that approximately 5.24 billion people use social media, representing about 63.9% of the global population. Among other social media platforms, Facebook remains the most popular platform, boasting 3.07 billion active users monthly, followed by YouTube with 2.5 billion users. Ahmad et al. (2024) reveal that there were 4.88 billion social media users worldwide, representing 60.6% of the global population. Today, in the past year alone, social media sites' usage has grown immensely; 173 million new users registered (Hamza et al., 2023).

2.1 Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

Social networking sites are interconnected platforms that allow users to develop public profiles and interact with others (Eijaz, 2013). A social networking site is also acknowledged as a social networking internet site or social website (Gomez, 2014). A social networking site is any site that has a communal or semi-public profile page containing dating sites. Undoubtedly, a social media site has outlines and connections linked with the tools to share live content. Facebook has become the most extensively used social media website and the most broadly used social networking site (Kamel, 2014).

Social networking sites (SNSs) have become instrumental platforms for collective and political mobilization (Gomez, 2014), serving diverse purposes across various groups. Activists leverage SNSs to disseminate information on protest logistics and Government actions, while political parties utilize them to broadcast their messages, build databases, and influence public engagement. Citizens, in turn, rely on these platforms for news, election information, and insights into political candidates' agendas and performances, as about 35% of young Americans aged 18-29 learn about the 2016 presidential election through SNSs (Bhatti & Tareen 2021). In Pakistan, a significant portion of the youth actively engages with social media, using it as a primary source of political awareness. The general elections of 2013, 2018, and 2024 witnessed a substantial shift, with political campaigns being orchestrated mainly through social media; hence, SM played a pivotal role in mobilizing voters, spreading political narratives, and shaping public opinion, making it an essential tool for political engagement and activism among the younger generation.

2.2 Facebook and Political Participation

Before the advent of social media, the interim in newspapers and radio and television promotion were constrained and costly; thus, youth could not voice their views or join politics during the old broadcasting (Mustapha et al., 2023). However, in modern years, there has been an improvement in political concern and involvement amongst youth (Fatkin & Lansdown, 2015), specifically with the creation of social media such as Facebook; the precedent and decisions for political involvement have significantly changed. Facebook portrays an influential character as the youth utilize the place to contribute to political issues (Theocharis & Lowe, 2016).

Youth are now progressively utilizing Facebook to power social and political transformation (Kugelman, 2012; Orfan, 2021), and it is now easing new practices of political activism among them (Tang & Lee, 2013). The arrays of political activism with youth previously have been transformed. What is it in Facebook that is affecting youth to contribute to politics? To answer these questions, some scholars have proposed assessing specific characteristics of Facebook, such as use patterns, the network formation of friends on Facebook and relations with political figures (Tang & Lee, 2013).

In Pakistan, the widespread use of Facebook enables individuals to engage in political discussions, share political content, and organize for various political causes. The platform allows users to interact with political figures, parties, and activists directly, thus facilitating a more interactive and accessible political environment. It is particularly relevant for Pakistan's youth, who comprise a significant portion of the population and increasingly use Facebook to stay informed, express their views, and advocate for political change (Ahmad et al., 2024). Social media platforms like Facebook allow for the rapid dissemination of political messages, influencing public opinion and shaping political discourse (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Moreover, Facebook provides a space for individuals to mobilize support for causes and campaigns, which has been evident in Pakistan, especially during election periods or significant political movements (Waller, 2013).

However, while Facebook offers new opportunities for political participation, it also presents challenges such as misinformation, echo chambers, and the potential manipulation of public opinion, all of which can profoundly affect political behaviour and social mobilization in Pakistan.

2.3 Political Activism and Youth Participation

According to Tang and Lee (2013), political activism involves movements such as reaching political groups, networking with politicians, polling, making appeals online, volunteering, or joining movements. Political involvement is the essential element and organization of effective democratic organizations (McManimon, 2014). Recently, with the propagation of social networking sites such as Facebook, the design and choices for political involvement have been highly altered. Facebook is now participating in a valuable position, "migration development," in which the youth employ the place to contribute to political concerns (Waller, 2013). youth are progressively employing Facebook to power social and political alteration (Vitak et al., 2011), and it is now smoothing new models of political involvement among them.

2.4 Political Activism by Youth Through Facebook

Politics is the practice and theory of influencing decisions within a group, particularly the governance of a state and the management of its internal and external affairs (Shaheen, 2008; Vong & Hok, 2018). Involvement is the path societies can take to prompt their requests and petitions and persuade the spreading of worthy means (Pempek et al., 2009). Testimony indicates cyberspace is a place for connecting in altered party-political discussion and interest classes, notably including unwanted youth in more conventional political areas. Jawed et al. (2023) studied how Pakistani youth use Facebook to develop a more collective identity. They argue that these new platforms, which they say are like Facebook, are today's practice' public spheres' that youths use to engage and struggle with power relations in real time.

The arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in May 2023 received extensive protests nationwide, showing that social media plays a crucial role in increasing politicization (Ahmad et al., 2024). Facebook was central in sharing information on the protests and publishing live speeches, indicating social media's role in political discourse and opinion. Despite these protests being high-risk and unpredictable, they also highlighted using social media as a platform to voice and organize grievances. Political disputes were solved during private relations between party officials (Orfan, 2021).

2.5 Slacktivism (Hashtag)

The activism on social media has been criticized, and it has fallen to be identified as slacktivism. It has also been named Hashtag, token, and armchair activism. Slacktivism examines online involvement needing minimal effort and dedication. In other words, it is a commitment to show complimentary assistance to a political reason on SNSs without obligating to assign important attempts to it (Shaheen, 2008). Slacktivism is a virtual activism whose charge and danger are minimal. Clicktivism is an additional term used interchangeably with slacktivism, which suggests that SNS consumers can connect "like", "share," or "comment" buttons to program their sponsor for a political root, and they suspect that they are indeed facilitating it. Hamza et al. (2023) learnt about the political applications of social networking set by youth in the US 2008 presidential primary election. They said SNSs barely influenced political information, conflict, or the contribution of youth. However, they identified them as feasible informants

of news (Jawed et al., 2023whether SNSs, particularly Facebook, had an involvement in youths' political involvement. They resolved that SNSs barely impacted the youth's political contribution (Orfan, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic approach was employed to conduct an in-depth analysis of social media interactions, focusing on participant observation and data collection from relevant online communities. The authors identified Facebook groups, pages, and communities associated with political discourse and youth engagement. Groups such as "Pakistan Politics", "The Current", and unofficial pages of political figures, including "Imran Khan", "Nawaz Sharif", and "Bilawal Bhutto", were selected for this study. Some groups were already part of the researcher's network. In contrast, others were discovered and joined specifically for this research by joining these groups on Facebook to observe the dynamics of various political opinions and how youth engage with them.

3.1 Observation & Interaction

A passive observation approach ensured that interactions were natural and unaltered. The researcher refrained from posting content or directly participating in discussions but engaged in purposeful observation, documenting user actions, comments, and recurring themes or patterns. The observation period lasted from May to August 2023, during which key political events, such as the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, triggered widespread protests across Pakistan, further energizing political conversations. These events provided critical context for understanding the dynamics of youth engagement and political activism on Facebook during this time.

3.2 Sampling & Sampling Size

Purposive sampling was employed to identify relevant Facebook groups, pages, and posts for analysis. The focus was on communities where political discussions were active and youth participation was prominent. The sampling strategy also included evaluating posts directly from the official Facebook accounts of political leaders, including Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, and others. Furthermore, specific attention was given to the accounts of political activists and individuals who played a role in mobilizing youth around political causes. These activists, many affiliated with political parties, contributed to online movements, and their posts were instrumental in sparking discussions. The observation continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new patterns or insights emerged. The final sample included 350 posts, 1,200 comments, and approximately 800 reactions and shares. These data points reflected diverse political ideologies, engagement styles, and activist involvement, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of youth political activism on Facebook in Pakistan.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Online participant observation was the primary method of data collection. Authors joined Facebook-based political groups and monitored pages and accounts of political parties and figures. Data collection involved documenting posts, comments, likes, shares, and reactions to capture the dynamics of political discussions. The authors captured screenshots and maintained organized records of significant posts and comments. Field notes documented the patterns of interactions and the themes that emerged during the observation period. Various content forms, including text-based posts, images, memes, videos, and articles, were analyzed to gain insights into youth engagement in political activism.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke (2019). The six steps are familiarization, data coding, theme generation, evaluation, labelling and specification, and final write-up. Excel was used to facilitate the organization and coding of data, ensuring a systematic and comprehensive analysis process. The analysis began with an in-depth review of the collected data, including field notes, screenshots, and observations. The data were then coded using Excel, resulting in the generation of 250 initial codes. These codes were refined, and about 40 irrelevant themes were removed. The remaining 210 codes were grouped into broader and more specific categories.

Through evaluation, 15 preliminary themes emerged. These themes were carefully reviewed and refined, and six final themes were selected that best captured the key patterns and insights related to youth engagement in political activism on Facebook. Each theme was titled to reflect its essence, was supported by data excerpts, and was aligned with relevant findings from prior studies where applicable. The final themes were critically discussed and compared with empirical reviews, offering a robust and nuanced understanding of the data.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration was taken when some general issues arose in organized Facebook groups; these included privacy settings and access restrictions, as some organized groups had open membership while others wanted members to seek permission to join them. The content that was observed also included politically sensitive aspects. It means that observing and documenting such aspects was done carefully. In that regard, the researcher complied with specific ethical standards to maintain data anonymity and confine the search only to online sources.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This study identified unusual forms of political involvement by youth, such as holding office, raising money, creating proof, and other allowed and unexperienced actions that may be impacted by internet use. From the usage of digital knowledge, the internet and social media sites, the past era was revolutionary. Social media has made it the most effective political medium for internet users to engage in and participate in party politics. Internationally, there has been an increase in social media use for political performances, including election campaigns. The internet has benefited students, bloggers, vloggers, celebrities, political parties, political leaders, and followers as a middleman for digital canvases for political and nonpolitical goals. It was revealed that social media has a more significant influence on the results of elections than traditional media. Imran Khan, the former chairman of PTI, is a renowned ex-cricketer of Pakistan and has countless admirers; his political party actively uses social media on a large scale. The supporters and party leaders create numerous sites and groups, excluding the official ones. Analyzing youth engagement in political activism on Facebook revealed six (6) key themes that shape online political behaviour and discourse. Those six (6) themes are defined as;

1. **Abusive Behaviour and Hate Speech**: Online political discourse is frequently marked by derogatory language, personal attacks, and hate speech, mainly targeting political opponents.

2. **Impact of Anonymity on Online Behavior**: Social media's anonymity enables users to express extreme views and engage in negative interactions without accountability.

3. **Political Polarization and Partisanship**: Users strongly align with specific political parties or ideologies, leading to divisive and contentious discussions.

4. **Psychological and Emotional Harassment**: Political figures and activists are often subjected to targeted harassment and bullying, exacerbating tensions in political discourse.

5. **Breakdown of Trust in Political Institutions**: Youth engagement and their perception of political institutions are influenced by widespread frustration over corruption and inefficiency in governance.

6. **Political Mobilization and Hashtag Activism**: Facebook is a powerful tool for organizing protests, advocating for change, rallying support for political causes, and highlighting its role in shaping political action in Pakistan.

The highlighted themes show the growing role of political mobilization, activism, and hashtag movements on Facebook as a powerful tool for organizing protests, advocating for change, rallying support for various political causes, and demonstrating the platform's role in shaping political action in Pakistan.

4.1 Abusive Behavior and Hate Speech among Facebook Users

Figure 1 revealed the presence of abusive language and hate speech among users. Specifically, users frequently used derogatory terms and made offensive comments and posts based on their affiliation with the party. Different slang terms were used to refer to party supporters.
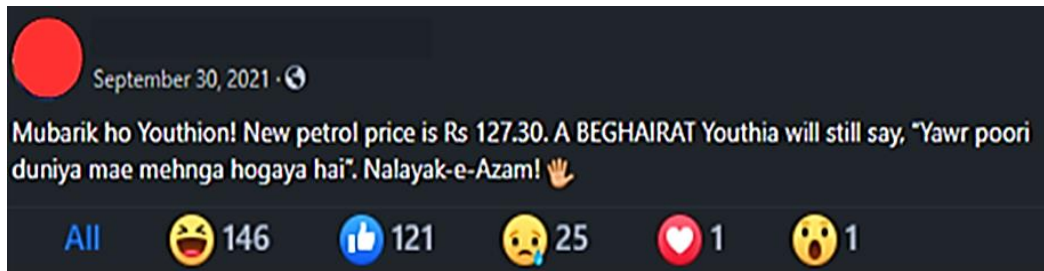

Figure 1: Facebook Post showing Abusive Language (This Picture was taken on September 30, 2021)

One of the activists is using the term "youth" for the supporters of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) supporters and using abusive terms for their picture. The post was about increased petrol prices, which erupted in a discussion among Facebook users inclined more towards abusive language and bashing each other in the comment section. Figure 1 translated and quoted: "*Congratulations, PTI supporters! The new petrol price is Rs 127.30. A shameless supporter will still say. "It has become expensive in the whole world*". Derogatory language and profanity towards the prime minister were also used. Use of such derogatory language or profanity towards any political figure, including the prime minister, is not acceptable and can contribute to a toxic political environment.

Figure 2 shows Title: Patwari is needed here Patwari means supporter of Nawaz Sharif and his party, whereas this post further says in Urdu language quote, *"We need a fresh Patwari who can bark on Imran Khan with enthusiasm, Patwari with more stamina shall be given priority govt of pubjib".* As Shaheen (2008) depicted the Balance Theory, how social media affects consumer behaviour implies that personality opinions are built on a stable opinion connection, such as disliking or liking something. Nearly all authors have accepted Shaheen's Balance Theory to investigate the influence of social media on conduct. He conveyed that agreement advances positive opinions and adverse reactions to arguments.

Figure 2: Facebook Post's Comment Section

One party supporter attacked rival politicians and their supporters while defaming their preferred political party. As seen in Figure 2, the followers harass and abuse politicians and their supporters by calling them inappropriate names and making violent remarks about them. For instance, Youthia (a slang used for the supporters of PTI) and Patwari (a recorder who keeps the land record and is frequently considered fraudulent; the supporters of PMLN are disdainfully convened with this name). In this context, figure 2, the second picture is interpreted as "In a republic where a person like Chaudhry Nisar (Former Interior Minister of Pakistan) discovers out after 35 years that what he has been seeing as a lion is really a donkey. So, think, Patwaris would require at least 100 years to grasp". Likewise, the first picture in the Figure no.2 posted by PTI's follower is an amended picture of Fazal-Ur-Rehman (Leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam), Asif Ali Zardari (Former Leader of Pakistan, PPP), and Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif (Previous Leader of Pakistan). The number of likes, comments, sharing and reactions involving laughing, love, and anger also calculates the study conclusions about people's response versus the post.

4.2 Impact of Anonymity on Online Behavior

Facebook has enhanced the path to further contribution to the web. Conversely, the commentary on the Facebook comments section changes significantly from a direct discussion with an acquaintance or other users. Study findings show that users have used anonymity, which can negatively and positively affect the content they share and comment on Facebook. It grants them a wisdom of independence and solitude, accepting them to prompt themselves more easily and willingly without worry of thoughts or reprisal.

Figure 3 shows an anonymous User's Posts and Comments (translated as: *"Leaders From PTI Are Flying Like Shoppers In A Storm"* comments translated *"The way NS flew to London, wait till elections, then see who flies, If you tell the truth, you will be left alone", Shireen Mazari was released by court, then again arrested by Islamabad police from the door of jail, when the time will come on thieves, we will not even let them fly away, shame on you!* Thieves, respectively) that posts and comments are delivered by PMLN supporters bashing Imran Khan, his supporters, and his team leaders by posting anonymously, which shows that a group member feels more comfortable and has more sense of freedom and privacy without being judged.

Figure 3: Anonymous User's Posts and Comments

On the other hand, the above posts' comment section indicated that anonymity on Facebook fosters negative behaviours such as cyberbullying, trolling, hate speech, and harassment, with many users exploiting this feature to post abusive and harassing remarks targeting political parties like Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) and PML-N, including offensive terms such as *"choro sharam kro" ("shame on you thieves").* This behaviour, prevalent across political conversations, often garners significant attention, highlighting the role of anonymity in enabling toxic discourse. The preference for anonymity may stem from fears of digital laws, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), or state surveillance mechanisms that monitor dissent (Farooz, 2023). Users may also rely on anonymity to avoid social or political repercussions, as anonymity provides a shield for expressing controversial opinions without accountability (Eijaz, 2013). Studies on the online disinhibition effect suggest that anonymity lowers behavioural inhibitions, facilitating hostile and aggressive expressions that individuals may avoid in identifiable interactions (Samya et al., 2023). While anonymity empowers free expression, it exacerbates aggression and hostility in political discourse, threatening constructive dialogue and deepening social and political divisions (Muzaffar et al., 2014).

4.3 Political Polarization and Partisanship

The presence of hate speech and group polarization on Facebook in political discussions on comments and posts by using derogatory language, insults, and other forms of abusive speech targeting individuals based on their ideology and political affiliations was found to be prevalent across a range of political discussions. This behaviour not only harms those who are targeted but also contributes to a culture of intolerance and prejudice. Politicians generally tweet about the policy opinions their political base aims to hear. However, they figure out in ethical and emotional language that may establish adverse responses from the challenging side (Ida et al., 2020). Youth participation in political activism is politically polarized. Young people with strong opinions and passion for change often engage in political discussions and align themselves with specific ideologies and parties. Figure 4, the comment section of Facebook showing politically polarized comments, shows some comments which are translated as

"*They are ready to return the power to the people. Overseas Pakistanis should stop sending remittances to Pakistan. The usage of imports should be banned. Now, the time has come to learn a lesson from these politicians. Nearly, they will increase taxes on food. Stand up Now, it is up to us to save this country".*
These corrupt politicians and the army can never do anything in our favour.

9

Vote for PTI and stand with Imran Khan; if PMLN workers or MNAs/MPAs are lawful, they should represent Tosha Khana's gifts and property with their families. Thus, justice will prevail based on the ban of these shameless. Still, thief Nawaz Shareef will not be elected respectively) different opinions and ideologies can be seen. Their beliefs are built on the different ideologies or motives of their leader.

Figure 3: Comment Sections of Facebook Showing Politically Polarized Comments

4.4 Psychological and Emotional Targeted Harassment and Bullying

The findings of the study uncovered the existence of persecution and harassment, focused hate speech, and comprehensive hate speech amongst Facebook users who are involved politically in such thoughts. Results present that Directed hate dialogue is very subjective, in contrast to Comprehensive hate speech. Directed hate speech cites words that propose planned action, make speeches, and employ words to delay the act of the target. Directed hate speech is further unofficial, angrier and more advanced and effective than generalized hate speech. As in figure 5 below, "Post and Comment Section Showing Generalized and Direct Hate Speech and Harassment towards PMLN", which is (*translated as: free heart treatment on health care has been stopped in Punjab. A few months ago, a princess expressed her desire to stop health care by sitting in the PM's house, and the slave Government has fulfilled her wish today*). Study findings indicate that there is a prevalence of mocking behaviour towards the PMLN Government and direct hate speech towards Maryam Nawaz Shareef in the comments section.

Figure 5 shows a post by a Pakistan-Tehreek-Insaaf (Political Party) supporter claiming the ban on complete free heart operations by Sehat card in Punjab. The discussion in the comment section mentions the abusive behaviour of PTI supporters. It makes it evident that while some social media users are well-cultured and educated, the majority are not. However, an informed individual could not have predicted their poor behaviour or verbal abuse of others. Unfortunately, because social media sites like Facebook, which offer anonymity and distance, they can serve as a breeding ground for abusive behaviours. The people in the comment section, as shown in Figure 6 above, "Direct Hate Speech and Harassment Comments," which is (translated as: (slang) "*the people will say that in elections, the army is on them, property dealers, and this is to happen to this slave nation?*" It was triggered by the PMLN's leader, Maryam Nawaz Sharif, 's desire to ban operations on the Sehat card (The Sehat card was a project initiated by Imran Khan" due to

which a wave of hatred and aggression spread among PTI supporters. Various explanations and comments come from the supporters of the ruling and opposing parties.
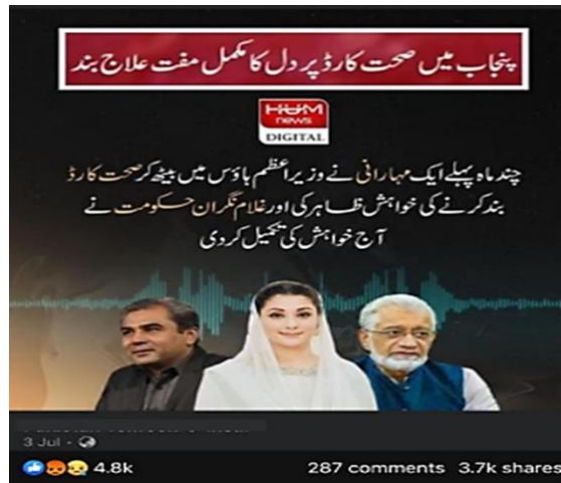

Figure 4. Post and Comment Section showing generalized and direct hate speech and harassment towards PMLN

Figure 5: Direct Hate Speech and Harassment Comments

There had been repeated use of profanity and mimicry. In Figure 6 above, the abusive language in the comment section used by supporters can easily lead to violence.

4.5 Breakdown of Trust in Political Institutions and Justice System of Pakistan

The youth of Pakistan does not trust the Pakistan justice system as well as the primary two political patties. The public's mounting lack of self-confidence in organizations entrusted with the conventional obligation of controlling the typical political and economic conditions is backing a climate of scepticism and vagueness. The Pakistan army especially plays a negative role in the country's politics. It supports the most corrupt leaders of other parties against Imran Khan, the most popular leader. Has a party won the 2013, 2018 and 2024 elections with majorities. However, several evidence show the justice system rigged the election with the full support of the Pakistan army and let the opponent parties, PMLN and PPP, win because both of them are corrupt and suit the corrupt system, especially the Pakistan Army.

Imran Khan's arrest has created massive unrest in the politics of Pakistan and as well created aggression among its supporters, which then resulted in havoc in different parts of the country; people started protests in many places and were put in jails and due to this, chaos spread among people, and people also lost faith in the judicial system of Pakistan.

The study findings reveal that people do not have trust in the political institutions and the justice system of Pakistan and reveal that there is a lack of trust among youth and the justice system of Pakistan. They express their distrust through comments criticizing the Government, political parties, and the judiciary. Figure 7 shows *"Posts and Comments Showing Mistrust in Judiciary and Political Parties," which is in Urdu (translated as: chicken boycott-fruit boycott-electricity bill's boycott- try boycotting the wrong politicians once and maybe some things will improve, we will fight justice till the last breath for our captain Imran khan. For Pakistan, we will fight till the end with our blood as well, as in Turkey and Srilanka; if the people do not drag them to the streets,* closed-room decisions will continue to be imposed). It reflects a sense of disillusionment and frustration with the current political landscape in Pakistan.

Figure 6:Posts and Comments Showing Mistrust in Judiciary and Political Parties

4.6 Political Activism and Hashtag Movements

Facebook posts concerning Imran Khan's release generated significant engagement, evidenced by high average counts of likes, reactions, and shares per post and emotional appeals prominently featured in these posts, encompassing sentiments such as empathy, frustration, and support. Many FB users employed emotionally charged language, shared personal narratives and conveyed their belief in Khan's innocence to advocate for his release. These emotional expressions mobilized support and influenced public perceptions of his case. The strategic use of hashtags played a pivotal role in amplifying the reach of such posts, reflecting the utility of social networking sites (SNSs) in facilitating social transformation by disseminating awareness and fostering collective understanding of critical societal issues (Dadas, 2018).

These hashtags were used to support Imran Khan and call for his release. These hashtag movements served as a way for people to voice their opinions and show solidarity with the cause. As we can see in the above posts and comments of the public and supporters of Imran Khan, the emotional attachment and support led them to organize these movements on Facebook to show their support and demand his release.

These demonstrations served as a way for people to express their solidarity and voice their concerns about the situation. Such protests aimed to raise awareness and pressure the authorities to address the issue, leading them to perform offline political activism. Study findings of emotional appeals on Facebook posts advocating for Imran Khan's release shed light on this issue's emotional dimension.
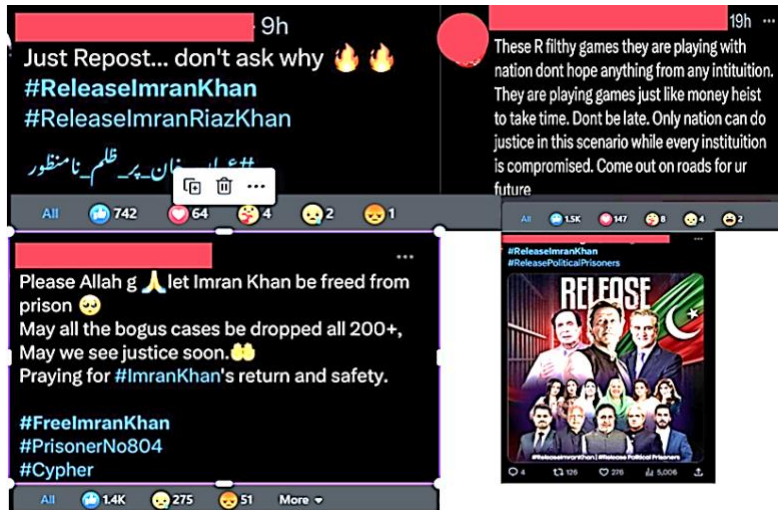

Figure 7: Post showing #freeimrankhan movement

Figure 9 shows the Aurat March movement "The Women March Movement" is said to be a feminist movement in Pakistan. People and activists use hashtags on social media platforms, especially Facebook, to make people aware of the cause and their demands and to promote their rights. The prominent and eye-catching themes within this movement on Facebook are gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment, with users sharing their personal stories, artwork, and mottos, such as one of the ladies holding a banner like *"Aoo Khana Khud Pakayein, Ghar ka Kaam, Sab Ka Kaam"* and many others challenging equality for both males and females. Also, there was a notable emphasis on reproductive rights or intriguing gender norms. The emotions conveyed in posts managing the #AuratMarch hashtag were primarily optimistic, with consumers communicating harmony, collaboration, and excitement for their movement. However, there were instances of criticism and debate, primarily surrounding the slogans that were against the moral values and norms, such as another banner, "Mera Jism Meri Marzi".

The Aurat March movement hashtag on Facebook highlighted the active engagement and support for gender equality and women's rights issues within the online community. It shows that women workers and female political and social activists on Fakebook and other social media sites initiated several hashtag movements related to the Aurat March in 2023. Such movements include hashtags such as #auratmarch2023, #mybodymychoice and #feministrevolution. These hashtags were used to promote women's rights, gender, and equality and highlight the issues women faced in Pakistan. Such movements aimed to create awareness, challenge societal norms, and advocate for inclusive and equal rights for all genders. The Aurat march has received mixed reactions from the public, as shown in Figure 9 above. It can be seen in the image, which includes the concerns about the march, slogans and signs used during the march, which some individuals find controversial or offensive. Additionally, there are debates about the march's perceived alignment with Western feminism and the tension between cultural values and progressive ideals.

The Aurat march has received mixed reactions from the public, as shown in Figure 9. The image includes concerns about the march, the number of likes and post sharing, and comments indicating the active participation of Facebook users.
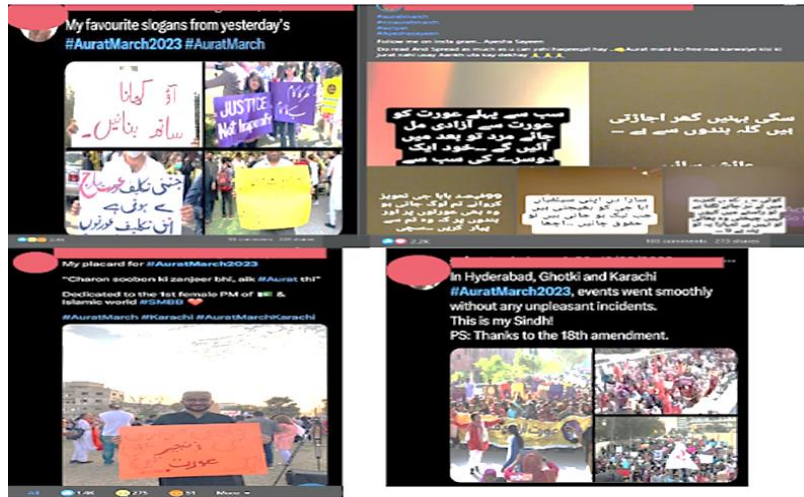

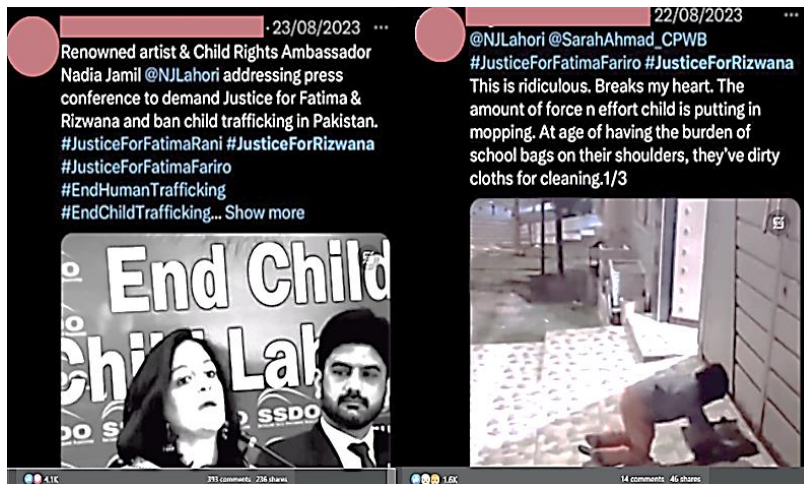**Figure 8: Posts showing the Aurat March Movement, a "women's movement"**

Figure 9: Post showing justice for Rizwana and to end child trafficking

The hashtag #EndChildLabor was found, and these posts collectively received several likes, shares, and comments, indicating a significant level of engagement. Figure 10 shows the prominent themes within the #EndChildLabor and justice for Rizwana hashtag movement on Facebook. These themes included child rights advocacy, awareness campaigns, and stories of child labour survivors, with users sharing compelling narratives and striking visuals. The feelings shown in such posts using hashtags like #EndChildLabor and justice for Rizwana hashtag were tremendously encouraging, with users determining deep support for endeavours to end child labour worldwide. The conversations are frequently directed through the stress of interest and the stress of joint action, improving collaboration among advocates. Numerous influential organizations working for child rights and supporters appeared as key symbols in the #EndChildLabor hashtag association. Remarkably, Nadia Jamil was among the most active providers, with their support often getting high levels of engagement on social media and offline.

The Justice for Rizwana hashtag movement aimed to attract interest in her case and petition for legal action against the perpetrators. Such movements can assist in compelling agencies to examine and influence the preparator responsible.

4.7 Summary of Themes

Table 1 summarizes the hashtags the Pakistani youth used in political and social movements on Facebook.

Table 1: Overview of Hashtags Used in Political Activism and Social Movements on Facebook

Hashtag	Purpose/Theme	Reason for Inclusion
#Aurat March	Gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment	To highlight and promote awareness about gender equality and women's rights issues
#MyBody My Choice	Promotion of reproductive rights and challenge to gender norms	To challenge societal norms, advocate for reproductive rights, and support women's autonomy
#Feminist Revolution	Feminist activism and gender equality	To engage in feminist activism, support gender equality, and challenge patriarchal structures
#End Child labour	Advocacy against child labour, child rights awareness	To raise awareness about child labour, advocate for child rights, and mobilize for change
#JusticeForRizwana	Justice for child labour survivors, legal action for perpetrators	To demand justice for child labour survivors and ensure legal accountability for perpetrators

The study conducted a thematic analysis, which brought up several key themes focused on political discourse and one concerning youth engagement on Facebook in Pakistan. It was rife with abusive behaviour and hate speech, with users commonly adopting derogatory terms and offensive language to berate political figures and their supporters, especially among polarized groups. The opposite side was denigrated. PTI supporters were called "youthi", PML-N supporters were called "Patwari", and the political environment became very poisonous. Anonymity also significantly impacted online behaviour as users would often be less thoughtful and express themselves more freely and aggressively behind the cloak of anonymity; for instance, to a greater degree in politicized discussions, anonymity is tied to an increase in cyberbullying, trolling, and hate speech. Maintaining anonymity also urged users to be without responsibility for the hurtful comments that often fostered hostility and polarization. Many, unafraid to express their political affiliation, had been polarized by politics and partisanship; they debated one another on Facebook until citizens' ideas were reinforced, and there was a refusal to recognize opposing views. As a consequence, the atmosphere became one of entrenched political ideology and brutal critical dialogue. According to another theme, psychological and emotional targeted harassment and bullying were spreading in the form of emotional attacks on political figures, activists and political parties, deepening divisions and creating hatred.

The study also highlighted a breakdown of trust in political institutions and the justice system in Pakistan, as users expressed their disillusionment with the Government and judiciary, particularly in the wake of significant political events such as the arrest of Imran Khan. It led to widespread protests and distrust in the political system, as seen in online comments. Finally, political mobilization, activism, and hashtag movements were crucial in shaping political engagement on Facebook. Hashtags like #AuratMarch, #EndChildLabor, and #JusticeForRizwana were used to organize and promote causes, particularly women's rights, child labour, and justice. These movements harnessed the emotional power of social media to advocate for change, mobilize support, and create awareness, demonstrating Facebook's potential as a tool for political activism.

However, despite its capacity for activism, Facebook also acted as a space where toxicity, harassment, and political fragmentation thrived, limiting its effectiveness in fostering productive political dialogue.

4.8 Discussion

The findings of this study highlight several key themes surrounding the role of Facebook in political engagement and activism in Pakistan. The presence of abusive behaviour and hate speech among users was notably prominent, with derogatory terms and offensive comments frequently directed at political figures and their supporters. This online aggression, driven by partisan politics, often involved the use of youthlike "youth" for PTI supporters and "patwari" for PML-N supporters, underscoring the deep-rooted political divisions in the country. These interactions reflect personal animosities and contribute to a toxic online environment where political discourse becomes increasingly hostile and less productive. Such hate speech, which frequently targets individuals based on political affiliation, exacerbates the already existing political polarization and creates barriers to constructive dialogue.

Meanwhile, the study also showed how anonymity influenced online behaviour since users who used Facebook felt emboldened by this sense of privacy and were more prone to engage in behaviour such as cyberbullying, trolling and hate speech. Compared to the human version of manners, anonymity nullified social inhibitions, the most aggressive and offensive comments without fear of direct consequences. It did not only exacerbate political divisions but emboldened acts in a harmful way under the motivation of anonymity. These findings imply that as a platform, Facebook is turning into a place for negativity and aggression, where meaningful and respectful engagement is seemingly on the verge of annihilating. The apparent political polarization and partisanship within youth made the atmosphere even worse, with users tending to side with a particular political ideology and spending hours arguing with each other on entirely shallow issues. This polarization between the comments and posts on Facebook increased partisan identity and made it nearly impossible for users to view opposing points of view objectively. Political polarization in Pakistan indicates a more significant phenomenon: party loyalties are more important than reasoned debate, and a "US versus ME" perspective exists. Such forms of division inhibit political dialogue and widen the chasm between people across various socioeconomic spectra.

A further disquieting finding of the study was that there was widespread psychological and emotional harassment and bullying. Especially in the comments section of posts related to politically sensitive issues, such as Imran Khan's arrest, was the type of harassment due to which Instagram was quite sought by her followers. The abusive language was often used in the harassment of political leaders and their supporters, with derogatory comments about opponents intended to attack the legitimacy of the hold they had on the country. Such targeted harassment has a high emotional cost at a time when participation in political discourse must be encouraged and when the potential for further alienation from the political process must be minimized. The study also found an evident breakdown of the trust of Pakistani youth in Pakistan's political and military institutions and the justice system. In the past, there have been times when the country's political system provoked much dissatisfaction among its users, possibly boosted by high-profile events like Imran Khan's arrest, which sparked protests nationwide. Users expressed their disillusionment with the political elite and judiciary, angry at perceiving them as corrupt and inefficient, and commented accordingly. This distrust in systems of political institutions is a severe problem because not only will it erode the legitimacy of the Government, but in some cases, it might lead people to avoid participation in the democratic process altogether.

Despite the negative aspects of political engagement on Facebook, the study also revealed the potential for political mobilization, activism, and hashtag movements. Platforms like Facebook have become instrumental in organizing protests, raising awareness about critical issues, and rallying support for political causes. Hashtags such as #ReleaseImranKhan and #AuratMarch exemplify the power of social media in mobilizing people around common causes. These movements, driven by emotional appeals and solidarity, have effectively generated support and influenced public opinion. They serve as a tool for individuals to express their political beliefs and demand change, demonstrating that Facebook can be a powerful tool for social and political transformation when used strategically.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Facebook users contribute significantly to advancing political involvement by expressing their thoughts and commentaries on political issues. The ideas and supporting comments demonstrate that youth grasp a political issue and are more inclined towards political involvement. Thus, the research examined the correlation between expressing political views on Facebook in diverse formats and their impacts on motivating youth engagement in Pakistan politics. In conclusion, youth in Pakistan are utilizing social media extensively, but it cannot be assumed that all kinds of news posted are accurate on Facebook. However, it serves as an effective instrument for communication. Social media covers most stories that traditional or old media platforms ignore or choose not to cover because of their media strategy or authoritarian regimes. Social media pages exist for news networks; youth also find them to be the foundation of knowledge and a social media network. Social media creates voices for everyone. Further, people use social media to voice their demands and political discourse to everyone. It does not always influence youth political participation. Everything depends on the verdict that calling disagreement is dispersing. The claims made by this research strongly refute the notion that social media is a key position in political engagement and that social media has proven to be incredibly effective in politics. Most of the observations from political discourse and the analysis of youth political activity on Facebook showed a favourable attitude towards political activism. However, the study achieves a positive attitude among the youth by using social media to play a role.

1. Encourage political leaders, activists, and respected public figures on social media networking sites to be positive role models for youth.

2. Collaborate with social media platforms to create features that reward positive online behaviour within political discussions.

3. A political campaign to resonate with youth interests, values, and concerns. Engage youth in campaign planning and messaging to ensure their voices are represented.

4. Facilitate opportunities for youth to transition from online engagement to offline civic participation.

5. Create platforms and events that encourage intergenerational dialogue.

6. Advocate for policies and initiatives that combat online harassment, hate speech, and the spread of misinformation.

7. Involve youth in formulating policies that directly affect their lives and futures.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study has several limitations, including a small sample size (350 posts, 1,200 comments, 800 reactions/shares), a three-month research period, and a sole focus on Facebook, excluding platforms like Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), and YouTube. It also examined a limited set of themes and analyzed posts from only two political parties—PTI and PML-N—excluding other significant parties like PPP and JUI-F. Additionally, only male youth were actively engaged in political discussions, limiting insights into female participation. Future research should expand by incorporating diverse political parties and a broader range of themes, including youth perceptions of Pakistan's key institutions such as the military, judiciary, election commission, and even the cricket board. Examining multiple social media platforms can provide comparative insights into political engagement across different demographics. Further studies should also analyze how social media algorithms shape content visibility and activism and the link between online discourse and real-world political outcomes, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of social media's influence on political participation.

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