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Predicting Political Participatory Behaviour in Pakistan: A Social Media Communication Mediation Approach

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ABSTRACT

The declining trend of political participation in the young population has become a global concern. Although the profound effect of partisanship and social media on politics has been established, less is known about their role in reinforcing political participation in comparatively weak democracies. The present study explored the role of partisanship, social media use, political expression, and political efficacy in communication mediation to develop an understanding of political participation in Pakistan to address this concern. Young voters (N = 410) in Pakistan aged between 18 and 29 were recruited using snowball sampling. We used PLS-SEM (partial least squares structural equation modelling) to analyse the survey data. The results revealed that partisanship is positively correlated with social media use, whereas it also moderated the relationship between social media use and orientations of political expression and political efficacy. The study showed that social media use positively influences political expression and political efficacy and passes this positive influence, through these two variables, on online political participation and offline political participation. Based on these results, we introduced the social media communication mediation model. This paper shares some limitations and provides the study's theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Keywords: Communication mediation, Pakistan, partisanship, political efficacy, political expression, political participation, social media use

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INTRODUCTION

The consistent and rapid development of social media technologies enhanced access to information and the ability of people to communicate with the global community. Scholars suggested that social media use fosters political awareness among people and influences their participatory behaviour in political activities (Lee & Xenos, 2020). Research showed that social media venues

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employed revolutionary tools to disseminate democratic ideas that expanded political repertoires with new modes of action, such as hashtags, likes, and joining online groups (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). We tested a framework that explains the structure under which social media usage adds to the level of participation in Pakistan. Rooted in the orientation-stimuli-orientation-response (O-S-O-R) model of communication mediation, we posit a positive association of social media use with political expression and efficacy, which converts into a higher level of political participation in online and offline environments. Outcome orientations of political efficacy and political expression mediate between social media use and political participation. We also examined the moderation of partisanship between social media use and subsequent outcome orientations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We performed an online survey to collect responses from voters aged between 18 and 29, as 60% of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30. We used snowball sampling to ensure the recruitment of respondents (Babbie, 2020). WhatsApp was used to distribute the online link to the questionnaire. Individuals from the contact list were requested to share the questionnaire further among their contacts and ask them to do the same. Items to measure the study variables were adopted/adapted from the past literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To test the significance of the relationship, bootstrapping of 410 cases with 5,000 samples was conducted. Table 1 presents the results of direct and indirect relationships in structural path analysis.

This research contributed to political communication and the social media domain by exploring social media use and underlying behavioural characteristics that influence people's involvement in political activities. The theorised path model, containing moderation and mediation paths, was tested for measurement and structural model. Partisanship is revealed as the most influential element in Pakistani youth. It is also a potential driver for social media use. Under the O-S-O-R framework, the incorporation of partisanship as predisposition orientation and at the same time as moderator (McLeod et al., 2008) between social media use and political expression and between social media use and political efficacy is the strength and theoretical contribution of the present study. Our study highlights the novel role of social media in fostering political engagement among young voters, a key demographic in Pakistan. By encouraging their active participation, this research aims to address the democratic deficit and contribute to transforming from a weak to a stronger democracy. Testing communication mediation outside the developed countries of the US and Europe in an unstable democracy for political outcomes on online venues is another noteworthy contribution of this study. The positive relationship

Table 1
Direct and indirect effect hypotheses

Relationships	β-value	t-value	p-value	Confidence intervals bias corrected LL = 5%, UL = 95%	Supported
PTS ⟶ SMU	0.341	7.266	0.000***	[0.257, 0.411]	Yes
SMU ⟶ PEF	0.297	5.390	0.000***	[0.198, 0.381]	Yes
SMU ⟶ PEX	0.234	4.960	0.000***	[0.150, 0.306]	Yes
PEX ⟶ ONP	0.616	17.572	0.000***	[0.552, 0.669]	Yes
PEX ⟶ OFP	0.600	16.832	0.000***	[0.538, 0.656]	Yes
PEF ⟶ ONP	0.131	3.308	0.000***	[0.065, 0.197]	Yes
PEF ⟶ OFP	0.109	2.592	0.005*	[0.037, 0.177]	Yes
SMU*PTS ⟶ PEX	0.100	1.886	0.030**	[0.010, 0.184]	Yes
SMU*PTS ⟶ PEF	0.145	3.424	0.000***	[0.071, 0.210]	Yes
SMU ⟶ PEX ⟶ ONP	0.144	4.734	0.000***	[0.091. 0.191]	Yes
SMU ⟶ PEX ⟶ OFP	0.141	4.749	0.000***	[0.090, 0.186]	Yes
SMU ⟶ PEF ⟶ ONP	0.039	2.698	0.004**	[0.018, 0.066]	Yes
SMU ⟶ PEF ⟶ OFP	0.032	2.294	0.011**	[0.012, 0.059]	Yes

Note. β-, *t*-, and *p*-values were computed through bootstrapping with 5,000 samples; *$p = 0.05$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$; PTS = Partisanship; SMU = Social Media Use; PEF = Political Efficacy; PEX = Political Expression; ONP = Online Political Participation; OFP = Offline Political Participation

among variables in the communication mediation model clearly depicts that political identity enhances social media use's impact, indirectly increasing online and offline political participation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the O-S-O-R model, we demonstrated factors that predict youth engagement in online and offline political avenues. Our study sample is drawn from Pakistani society. Findings revealed political expression as the most significant antecedent of online and offline political participation. We also found the significant role of partisanship as a moderator between stimuli and outcome orientation. In this way, we incorporated and proved the longstanding proposal regarding moderating the role of partisanship in the communication mediation model. In light of the results, we recommended that the government of Pakistan utilise the potential of social media and partisanship to strengthen democracy by providing freedom of expression and political empowerment to young voters.

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