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Nexus between the Social Media and Political Participation: An Assessment of the Trends in Pakistan

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Abstract

This research has endeavored to explore the nexus between the political participation and the use of social media in Pakistan. While relying onto the main notions of the theory of e-democracy, media dependency theories and the social cognitive theory of mass communication, the researcher has developed an indigenous theoretical framework and a relevant research tool e.g. for the purpose of achieving the objectives of this study. The study mainly relied on the survey research methods and it used an online survey tool (google forms) i.e. for the purpose of data collection. The study used the convenient sampling strategy and the study had a target sample of 1000 participants. The study has not only attempted to provide a viable theoretical framework to study the relevant phenomenon e.g. the "nexus" between the social media and political participation, but it has also revealed many important facts which may be helpful for both the academia and the concerned policy quarters i.e. various govt. departments, political parties and leaders in Pakistan. The results of the study indicated that the social media has become one of the most vital means for political participation in Pakistan. Moreover, the instant study has confirmed that a significant correlation is existed between the use of social media and the trends of political participation in Pakistan.

Key Words: *Social Media, Social Media Use, Political Participation, Political Culture, Political Efficacy, Political Knowledge.*

Introduction

Before going into the details about social media, it is pertinent to define the term 'social media' and then one can delve into the details that how it came to be involved in the politics. Social media can be defined as "forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)" (Merriam Webster, 2012), or it can be defined as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking" (Oxford, 2012). One can summarize the social media as the online forums which help the users to share information and collaborate online to pursue their interest oriented activities. This form of media includes Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, MySpace, Tumbler and many more other websites which are used to disseminate information and interact online.

The social media has become an integral part of the mainstream media during the last decade and it is affecting the life of a modern citizen's life in a multifaceted way, rather, it has become part of the routine life of an individual in todays' world. This modern type of media has resulted an explosion of information for the world and transforming the communication to the unprecedented levels (Davy, 2010). The cellular companies, Mobile phone manufacturers, mainstream communication media, Computer manufacturers and other technology industry; in short everyone was required to re-adjust with this information explosion resulted by social media (Kaplan, 2010). As of July 2020, more than half of all the people on Earth use social media. The latest data show that 3.96 billion people across the planet use social media today, equating to almost 51 percent of the total global population. With more than 376 million new users since July 2019 (which means almost 12 new users every second), it indicates that the social media users are growing even faster today than they were at the start of 2020 (Dataportal.com, 2020). The scholars are of the view that the social media sites are providing the most engaging places to the active internet users worldwide (Radwanick, 2011); and the social media has also resulted some phenomenal changes in the consumption patterns of the media itself (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Every person living in the modern society is well aware of the fact that social media has impacted in all walks of modern life. The impacts of social media range the family and workplace relationships, the education, health, entertainment and even the political world. During the recent past, the social media has been used for political mobilization i.e. for removing various governments in the Middle East, South America, and North African countries (Safranek, 2012). The platform of social media can be used to disseminate information to a large scale audience i.e. for securing some political or social interest. Furthermore, the social media is being used by almost all major political leaders and parties, government institutions, business, education and health sectors—both, all over the world and in Pakistan. A plethora of research has been done to assess and explore the impacts of social media on the informing and forming the public policy, political strategy, societal change and human impact (Moffett & Santos, 2014).

Significance of the Study

In the light of above given discussion, one can conclude that the social media has become an important phenomenon in modern life as it is impacting the life of individuals in variety of ways. It is pertinent to note further, that almost every political party, prominent political leader and most of the government departments in Pakistan has maintained an account on every notable social media sites, further, these accounts are properly maintained and regularly updated. It reflected the response of the power structures of Pakistan i.e. about the growing importance of social media in the political culture of Pakistan. There existed a clear evidence that social media is frequently effecting the political culture of Pakistan. Since it's a new phenomenon in the politics of Pakistan and it has not captured much attention of the academia yet. There is a dire need to explore this relatively new phenomenon that in what ways the social media is affecting the politics and political behavior of the citizen living in Pakistan. This research aimed to explore the nexus between the social media and political participation and provide a detailed assessment of the trends in Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the nexus between the social media and political participation and it attempted to provide a detailed assessment of the trends in Pakistan. The Research mainly aimed to provide an overview about the trends in the various areas of political participation through the use of social media in Pakistan by;

a. Mapping the trends and ways in which the social media is being used for political participation
b. Assessing the impact of social media use on the political participation oriented decisions taken by the social media users in Pakistan
c. Mapping the general perception of the social media users about the existence and nature of relationship between the use of social media and trends of political participation

Literature Review

Hendrick and Denton (2010) studied the election campaign of the presidential elections of 2008 in USA and assessed the role of the social media networking forums in comparison to the traditional media i.e. the electronic and print media. Their research provided that the rampant use of the new social media networking sites i.e. Twitter and Facebook had clearly left behind the traditional outlets of the mass media i.e. newspapers and news channels, in shaping the public opinion and popular views about the competing political leadership. After the elections of 2008, major political parties and their respective leadership acknowledged the political affordance of the social media and, hence, decided to integrate this new form of media into their political communication strategies (Aalberg T. and Curran J,, 2012).

Lim (2012) studied the activist movements in Egypt since 2004, which actively used social media to accomplish their objectives. His research provided a strong correlation between public activism with the online discussion over social media. This research suggests that the social media forums helped in the expansion of the chance for physical action by the negatively affected segment of society by some political policy. The research advised the political parties to be alert of public dissatisfaction over social media sites.

Kahne et al. (2014) studied the patterns of using the social networking sites among youth in the context of the expanding patterns of the politics of inclusion. Their research provided that the new form of media i.e. the social networking sites have successfully provided a viable platform even to the individual citizen for sharing their views and information with a large scale of population. Further, the research affirmed that the youth considered the social media as a viable means for political participation.

Schmiemann (2015) investigated the role of using the Social Networking Sites (SNS) on the patterns of political participation. His research concluded that usage of the SNS has a positive correlation with the patterns of political participation. This research has also found the preferably used SNS for the political participation oriented communication was Facebook.

Manika (2016) compared the patterns of political participation in context of using the alternate online and offline media channels to evaluate the difference of impact over the users. The research found that the new forms of media i.e. online media forums provided better opportunities to more freely express their political opinion and participate in the political discussion. The research provided that attitude about the real life pattern of political participation varied according to the change of choice about the type of media forums being used by a person.

Yousaf (2008) assessed the use of social media during the period of political emergency imposed by General Musharraf in Pakistan in 2007. Her research aimed to unleash that how the effective use of social media helped in bridging the gap in political communication created due to the imposition of censorship on mainstream telecommunication and print media. Further, the research explored the ways in which the social media helped in fostering the political debate to restore democracy and deposed judiciary in Pakistan. The research concluded that new media platforms i.e. social media are highly effective tool for

political organization and information sharing, even in the times of political hardships the social media can be used to disseminate sensitive political information (Yusaf, 2008).

Ali and Jan (2013) studied the role of social media, specifically, Facebook in the politics of politics of Pakistan. Their research provided that the rising use of social of media is resulting to create challenge of competition to the traditional media, and the social media has emerged as a viable means of political communication in Pakistan. Further, the research provided that the social media, especially, Facebook has emerged as an important forum to facilitate for the political discussion and a significant means to disseminate the political information among the masses. Moreover, the research concluded and predicted that the social media would play the role of the agent of change in the politics of Pakistan.

Arshad and Hassan (2014) studied the various potential reasons behind the preferred and enhanced level of using the social media networks among the youth of Pakistan. The research provided that the youth of Pakistan uses the social media forums for getting political information, to give their opinion over the emerging social and political issues and for sharing various type of information including the political information with the other community members using the social media. Further, the research also provided that the use of social media for getting political information also influenced the voting behavior of the respective social media users.

Khan and Shahbaz (2015) studied the level of impact which the use of the social media forums had over on raising the level of efficacy i.e. among the users of the various social media forums. Their research concluded that patterns and the quantity of time spent on using the social media forums had a significant impact on raising the level of political efficacy among the social media users, especially, among the youth. Zulqarnain & Hassan (2017) assessed the usage pattern of the social networking sites as a viable means for providing the political news to the users of social media. Their research provided that the social media forums were found as being treated as an authentic source of the political information by its users. Further, the study concluded that the social media forums are providing a viable opportunity and option to the stake holders, especially, to the political parties and electoral candidates for running their political campaigns.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework introduces and describes the theory which explains why the research problem under study exists. A theoretical framework consists of concepts, together with their definitions, and existing theory/theories that are used for your particular study. The theoretical framework must demonstrate an understanding of theories and concepts that are relevant to the topic of one's research project and that will relate it to the broader fields of knowledge in that particular area of research. The theoretical framework connects the researcher to existing knowledge. Guided by a relevant theory, the researcher is provided with a basis for his hypotheses and choice of research methods (Sutton and Barry, 1995). The following is an overview of the major theories and theoretical percepts which have been utilized to craft the main theoretical framework for conducting this research.

Theory of E-Democracy

The theory of e-democracy mainly focuses to explain the theoretical and practical concerns about the existing nature of relationship between the- internet based -new media and changing trends of political participation in the modern day democracy (Hakcer and van Dijk, 2000). Vedel (2006) provided a detailed review about the origin and main philosophical underpinnings of the e-democracy theory. While aiming to

discuss the structure and implementation of e-democracy, he discussed three dimensions or 'axis of e-democracy' by relating the sequences of democratic process (information, discussion & decision) with their respective problems (the lack of transparency, lack of access & insufficient opportunities for political participation).

The roots of the modern theory of e-democracy can be related with- at least – three normative conceptions/models of democracy i.e. the liberal, participatory and the deliberative model (Held, 2006; Kohler & Quittcat, 2013; Mackova, 2014). The synonymous terminologies which historically signified almost the same concept(s) as is described through the theory of e-democracy included "digital democracy", "virtual democracy" or "cyber democracy" (Hague and Loader, 1999; Hacker and van Dijk, 2000). Hagen (2000) discussed four dimensions of political participation e.g. in the context of exploring the foundations for the theory of e-democracy. According to his view, the first and most basic dimension of political participation is 'information seeking'; the second dimension is the active 'political discussion' e.g. with one's family, friends, colleagues etc.; the third dimension is 'voting' and the fourth dimension is 'political activity' i.e. supporting some political cause through some personal resources e.g. time, money, energy etc.

The Theories of Media Effects

For understanding the nature of relationship between the primary variables of study i.e. 'social media' and political participation'--three (basic and mutually inter-related) theories which help to explore the media effects e.g. the Uses and Gratification Theory, the Media Dependency Theory and the Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication proved really helpful.

The UGT was propounded by Blumler & Katz (1974) and it mainly helps to explore and explain the reasons for choosing and using a particular type of media. According to this theory the consumers of media use a particular type of media for satisfying their specific needs and desires (Mc Quail, 2005; Weaver Larisy, Tinkham & Sweetser, 2011; Whiting and Williams, 2013). In the context of this research, the UGT has helped to explore and explain the reasons why user feel more attracted in using the social media. Further, UGT helped to signify that whether if the social media is also being used to gratify some political type of need(s) or not.

A further extension of the UGT approach is the Media Dependency Theory which was originally introduced, in the scholarly domain of media effects and political communication, by Ball-Rokiech & DeFleur (1976). The main tenet of this theory is that consumption patterns of a particular media are directly depended upon the nature and quantum of the need(s) posed by the respective consumers of that particular media.

The Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication founded by Bandura (2001) aimed to explain the psychological mechanism(s) through which the communication media influences the thoughts and action of an individual. The social cognitive theory of mass communication mainly relies on its own original premise of 'observational learning' by explaining the psychological mechanism involved in the observational learning. According to Bandura, the mechanism governing the observational learning is sub-divided in four phases, which are: attention processes, retention processes, production processes and motivational processes (Bandura, 2006). In the context of the instant research, the social cognitive theory of mass communication has served to explain the potential influence which the use of social media could exert in molding the political behavior of its- habitual -users. Further, it provided the relevant theoretical

percepts/constructs e.g. self-efficacy, political efficacy and political knowledge i.e. to understand the "nexus" between social media and political participation in operational terms.

The above given theories of democracy and media effects helped to explain the nature of relationship between the major variables in the instant study i.e. social media and political participation. The following specific concepts derived from the above said relevant theories would help to understand and evaluate the "nexus" between 'social media' and 'political participation' e.g. in the operational and categorical terms.

Political Self-Efficacy

In order to understand the concept of political efficacy, it is pertinent to understand the concept of self-efficacy in advance. Bandura (1977) provided that the self-efficacy is the power which affects the individual's expectations about his success. It also refers to the quality or level of confidence that the individual(s) can perform some task (Bandura, 1994). Arens and Waterman (2017) defined political efficacy as "the political efficacy refers to, an individual's believe in their capabilities to actively participate in certain political activities i.e. expressing their negative or positive political opinion or actively encouraging the political candidate to whom the like\trust". Chao et al. (2017) have also defined political efficacy as "it is individuals' perception of self-ability to influence politics and their cognitions about the government or political systems".

The studies explaining the individual's attitudes and capabilities towards the government and politics has further divided the concept of political efficacy into two dimensions: internal political efficacy and external political efficacy (Caprara et al., 2009; Craig, Neimi & Silver, 1990). The Internal political efficacy is related with the internal feelings and thoughts of an individual, in this context internal efficacy is a micro level concept. Internal political efficacy (would be referred as 'internal efficacy' onwards) means a person possesses both the competence to understand and confidence to effectively participate in politics (Craig, Neimi & Silver, 1990). The external efficacy refers to "the believes about the responsiveness of the government authorities and institutions towards the citizens' demands". The individuals who believe and express that the government is responsible to meet their expectations; reasonable demands and suggestions, are assumed to be possessing higher level of external efficacy (Niemi et al. 1990: 1407). The scholars also attempted to examine the correlation between political knowledge and political efficacy.

Political Knowledge

The scholars claim that the political knowledge is one of the most important variables, to be studied in political science and it plays an important role in the individual's choices about his political decisions by expanding his mental horizons in the political realm (Green & Shahchar,2000; Shiratuddin et al, 2017). The most popular and simple definition of political knowledge was provided by Delli Caprini and Keeter who defined political knowledge as "the series of actual political information stored in the individual's long-term memory" (Delli Caprini and Keeter, 1996). The political knowledge can be defined as 'the quantum of information related to the politics, in someone's mind" (Delli, Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Educational qualification has a significant relationship with the political knowledge and self-efficacy (Nie, Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). Further, the time spent over media consumption, political discussion with mates and level of income are the important predictors of political knowledge and efficacy (Schuefele & Nisbet, 2002; Delli, Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Political knowledge becomes transformed into the internal political efficacy and the internal political efficacy affects the people's intention to participate in the conventional political activities i.e. voting, participation in some political demonstration etc. (Reichert, 2016). For the

purpose of this study the term 'political knowledge' would mean that "any type of (the reliable) political information which is voluntarily shared\received through using the social media e.g. related to the political personalities\parties\institution or government laws or policies; and such information mainly aimed to affect the political choices of a citizen".

Political Participation

Political participation is another widely studied area in the realm of politics. According to Kenski & Stroud (2006) the term political participation encompasses a range of activities aiming to involve in the political process, for example, paying attention to some political activity, giving opinion about some political activity or government policy, provide funding for some political cause, voting in the election and many more such activities can be categorized as political participation (Valenzuela et al., 2012). For the purpose of this study the term 'political participation' would mean that "those online activities by social media users that either aim to influence the policies of government or indicate their support\opposition for some popular political issue e.g. through using the popular social media forums".

Political Communication

Political communication is a vital predictor of political participation (McNair, 2018). Scholars define the term 'communication' as …. "an exercise in coordinating the meaning between a person and an audience" (Melvin, 1970). For the purpose of this study the term 'political communication' would mean that "voluntary sharing\receiving any type of the political information via using the social media with an explicit motive to potentially affect the political choices or opinions of the respective social media users e.g. related to the political personalities\parties\institution or government laws or policies …".

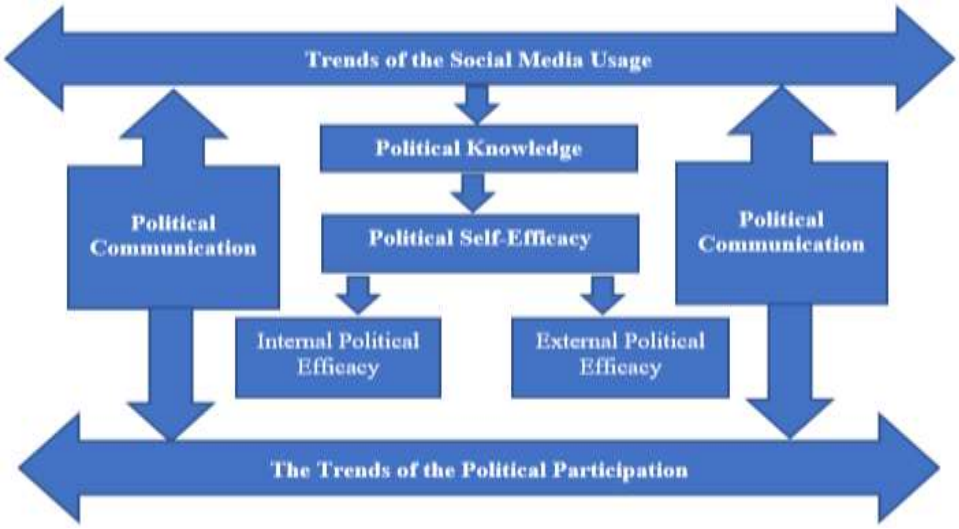

Figure. 1: Theoretical Framework of the study- originally created by the researcher

Research Methodology

This study was mainly based on survey research—which aimed to explore the nexus between social media and the trends of political participation in Pakistan. For, the purpose of this research 'social media' referred to the most popular online forums of social interaction which primarily included Facebook,

Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube etc. The study used an online survey tool (google forms) for conducting an online survey from the social media users i.e. to meet the objectives of study. The research tool (the questionnaire) was comprised of 19 close ended question (including 05 multi-grid questions and excluding the 07 questions about the basic user profile of the respondents). The questionnaire was circulated Online resources i.e. through the use of various social media forums i.e. Facebook, WhatsApp etc. The study used the convenient sampling strategy and the study had a target sample of 1000 participants from all over Pakistan. The study faced no issue of response collection deficiency as it used the convenient sampling strategy, so the data collection was stopped when the bench mark of 1000 respondents got achieved.

The participants of study were categorized according to multiple criteria. Gender wise distribution of the respondents included both male and female respondents. Age wise the respondents were categorized into five different age groups ranging from 18 years to above 55years; the educational qualification wise the respondents varied from the primary to post-graduate level of education; Monthly Income wise the respondents were categorized into five different income groups ranging from 10,000 to above 1 Lac Rs. Domicile wise the respondents the respondents were categorized into six different domicile groups i.e. to indicate the domicile province\region of the respondents. Residential area type wise the respondents belonged to both of the rural and urban areas.

For achieving the purposes of analysis, the statistical software SPSS was used, and the tables and bar charts were devised by using the related tools available in the MS Word. The questionnaire data was properly tabulated in the SPSS as per the standard requirements of the software. The SPSS was used to get descriptive statistics (Frequencies, Mean, Variance, Standard Deviation) and the special tests (Chi Square and One-way ANOVA) were applied on the data set to achieve the purposes of the analysis. Further, the results were acquired after the aforesaid operations of the SPSS and the summary discussion on the aforesaid results is provided in easy simple (English) language.

Discussion / Summary of the Survey Results

The participants of study were categorized according to multiple criteria. Gender wise distribution of the respondents indicated that the average participation of male was marginally higher than that of females. Age wise the respondents belonged to the all age groups ranging from 18 years to above 55years, majority of the respondents belonged to 18-35 years. The educational qualification wise the respondents varied from the primary to post-graduate level of education, most of the respondents belonged to the intermediate or graduate level of education. Monthly Income wise most of the respondents belonged to the income level of 10,000-50,000 Rs. Domicile wise the respondents belonged to all of the provinces\regions of Pakistan, majority of the respondents belonged to the Punjab province of Pakistan. Residential area type wise the respondents belonged to both of the rural and urban areas, majority of the respondents belonged to the Urban areas.

The results of the study revealed that most of the social media users in Pakistan fall in the “High Use” category. Further, the results also revealed that most of the social media users in Pakistan use the social media for “Multiple hours”. So far as the most frequently used forum of social media was concerned, the results indicated that most of the social media users in Pakistan use either “WhatsApp” or “Facebook” for the purpose of their online social activities. Further, the “WhatsApp” was found as the most commonly used social media forum in Pakistan.

Table No 1: Description of the all demographic variables involved in the study

Sr.	Demographic Variables	Sub-categories	*N*	Percentage
1.	Gender	Male	592	59.2
		Female	408	40.8
2.	Residential Area Type	Rural	453	45.3
		Urban	547	54.7
3.	Age	18-25 years	717	71.7
		26-35 years	151	15.1
		36-45 years	73	7.3
		46-55 years	36	3.6
		above 55 years	23	2.3
4.	Education	Primary Level	29	2.9
		Intermediate Level	196	19.6
		Graduate Level	563	56.3
		Post-graduate Level	158	15.8
		Others	54	5.4
5.	Profession	Student	657	65.7
		Govt. Employee	91	9.1
		Private Employee	75	7.5
		Own Business\self-employed	88	8.8
		Unemployed	36	3.6
		Others	53	5.3
6.	Monthly Income	Below 10,000 Rs.	444	44.4
		10,000- 25,000 Rs	163	16.3
		25,000- 50,000 Rs	179	17.9
		50,000- 1 Lac Rs	125	12.5
		Above 1 Lac Rs.	89	8.9
7.	Region\Province	Islamabad (ICT)	63	6.3
		Punjab	467	46.7
		Balochistan	115	11.5
		KPK	151	15.1
		Sindh	204	20.4
		Total (in each category)	1000	100

As far as the frequency of social media for getting the political information was concerned, the results indicated that most of the social media users in Pakistan commonly shared\received the political content through using the social media. Further the results indicated that most of the social media users in Pakistan used 'Facebook', 'Twitter', 'WhatsApp' 'Instagram' for getting\sharing the political information i.e. through the use social media.

As far as the type of the political content was concerned, the results indicated that most of the social media users in Pakistan shared\received "Funny pictures about political parties and personalities"; "News about political parties and personalities"; "News about political activities and events"; "News about parliamentary affairs"; "News about govt. policies and laws" as a common type of political content i.e. shared through the use of social media.

The study revealed that most of the social media users in Pakistan affirmed that “the political content being shared over the social media was helpful in shaping a person's political opinion (i.e. about the political parties\personalities or government agencies)”. The results indicated that most of the social media users in Pakistan shared\discussed the political content they received on the social media, offline too i.e. with their family, friends, collogues.

The study revealed that most of the social media users in Pakistan visited\followed the social media pages created by political personalities\personalities and govt. departments i.e. on the social media. The results indicated that the ‘Facebook’ and ‘Twitter’ were the most frequently used social media forums for following the various political personalities, parties and govt. departments. Further, the results of the study indicated that majority of the social media users in Pakistan preferred to give (some kind of) feedback over the information shared by various political personalities, parties and govt. departments. Most of the users preferred to “Just see” in comparison to ‘Like\react some way’ or ‘Pass on the Information’, whereas, a considerable proportion of users preferred to ‘Post\reply a comment’. It can be fairly said in the light of the results of this study that the social media is playing a key role in the creation of direct relationship between the social media users and the political leadership being followed on social media. Moreover, the results of the study indicated that most of the social media users in Pakistan were just moderately satisfied about the information shared over the social media forums by various political leaders, parties and govt. departments.

The results of the study provided that most of the social media users in Pakistan perceive a positive role of social media in facilitating them for the provision of better opportunities for political participation. Most of the social media users in Pakistan perceived that a definite role is played by the political information received which they received through social media while they took some practical decisions about political participation i.e. voting, supporting or reacting someway to a political party\personality.

The study revealed that most of the social media users in Pakistan were of the view that “a kind of relationship has been developed between the ''use of social media'' and ''political participation”. Further, most of the social media users were of the view that there existed a “positive” relationship the use of social media and political participation. Moreover, the results of the study concluded that most of the social media users in Pakistan affirmed that the use of social media is positively affecting the overall trends of political participation in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Although, there has been a plenty of research at international level which explored the role of social media into politics of various countries, but, the research explaining the role of social media in the political culture of Pakistan was scanty. This research has attempted to a bridge the gap but still there is a lot of roam in this area of research. As for as the scope for the future research in this area is concerned, the future research may focus some other specific sub-areas of political participation i.e. evaluation of the social media strategy of various political parties, role of social media in the voter mobilization, role of social media in creating political awareness…are among the few from a long list of the possible avenues for new research in this area. Further, the social media itself may also be used as a viable tool for further research in this area.

The results of the study have revealed that most of the social media users in Pakistan perceive a positive role of social media in facilitating them for the provision of better opportunities for political participation. Most of the social media users in Pakistan perceived that a definite role is played by the political

information received which they received through social media while they took some practical decisions about political participation i.e. voting, supporting or reacting someway to a political party\personality. The study results have also revealed that most of the social media users in Pakistan affirmed that they found “a kind of relationship is developing between the ''use of social media'' and ''political participation”. Further, most of the social media users were of the view that there existed a “positive” relationship between the use of social media and political participation. The results of the study concluded that most of the social media users in Pakistan has positively affirmed that the use of social media is affecting the overall trends of political participation i.e. in Pakistan.

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