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DIGITAL NATIVES, POLITICAL ACTIVISTS: SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON YOUTH MOBILIZATION IN PAKISTAN

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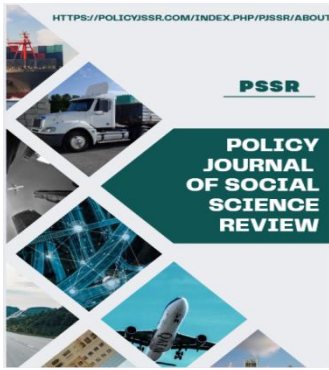
Dr. Tahira Mumtaz*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of social media in the political mobilization of youth in Pakistan, focusing on how digital platforms shape political awareness, participation, and collective action among young citizens. The research examines the opportunities and challenges social media presents for youth engagement in the country's political sphere from 2020 to 2025. This qualitative study explores how social media shapes political mobilization among Pakistani youth, a demographic often labeled as digital natives. With over 60% of Pakistan's population under 30, platforms like X, TikTok, and Facebook have become central arenas for political discourse and activism. The research investigates how young people interpret, share, and act on political content online, and how these digital practices translate into offline mobilization. Thematic analysis reveals that social media empowers youth by bypassing traditional gatekeepers, enabling rapid collective action, and fostering new forms of political identity. However, participants also highlighted challenges, including misinformation, online polarization, and fear of state surveillance. The study argues that social media has redefined youth political agency in Pakistan, turning passive observers into active participants. It calls for policy frameworks that protect digital expression while promoting critical media literacy among youth. Findings indicate that social media significantly enhances youth political awareness and lowers barriers to participation, particularly during elections and social justice campaigns. However, its impact is moderated by factors such as digital literacy, algorithmic bias, state regulation, and the prevalence of online disinformation. While social media fosters decentralized mobilization and amplifies youth voices, it also creates polarization and vulnerability to manipulation. The study concludes that social media acts as both a catalyst and a contested space for youth political engagement in Pakistan. It recommends strengthening digital literacy programs, promoting responsible platform governance, and fostering inclusive online civic spaces to sustain constructive youth participation in democracy.

Keywords: Mobilization, technology, information, digital strategies, generation

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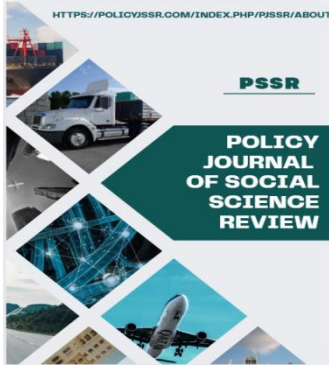
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Introduction

The experience of the intensive development of digital communication technology placed the world of political participation under admirable changes in the context of the global environment. Namely, social media proliferation changes how information is conveyed, how exchange of ideas and political participation occurs. Social media like Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok transformed just so many people who passively consumed information into actively taking part in the political life. It is possible to experience the change, particularly in the youth who were inclined to use social media as a daily routine and now use social media not only in social life, but also in civic and political activities. Still, significant in some countries like Pakistan, where traditional media is blocked by a political partisan censorship or is sometimes not available due to the absence of diversity in the views aired, social media has presented an alternative avenue through which they can exercise their political interests without any restriction. Here is where the players in politics can communicate more directly with the audiences using the unmediated filters, and the citizens, especially the youth, can access and even set debates in real time. The social media networks are decentralized communication that resulted in ordinary people becoming content makers, opinion leaders, and even political decision-makers. The change in the utilization of media and

participation in media has created extensive impacts on the political mobilization process, particularly among the youth. Pakistan is a young country in terms of demographics, with the majority of the population being below 30 years of age. Not only is this youth bulge a high percentage of the electorate, but it is also a generation that has grown permanently disenfranchised with the old-fashioned forms of politics. The advent of the internet and smartphones has made this generation connected at all times, and this generation is updated and on all the changes that take place in their nation and other countries concerning political changes. Contemporaries dissimilar to the foregoing generations are much more likely to utilize electronic devices in order to debate, critique, and market political theories. Whether it is through online discussions and internet campaigns to viral hashtags of protest and youth-based activism, social media has emerged as a vibrant platform through which political mobilization can take place quickly and on a mass scale. In Pakistan, the youth involvement in politics via social media has already affected many political trends and electioneering competitions. Parties and leaders are also venturing into digital strategies in order to attract the young generation as they tailor their messages to fit the online networks. For example, there are livestreams, sponsored posts, and viral videos in campaigns that were once conducted on the streets and door-to-door campaigns. In recent years, social media has emerged as the most



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important factor in manipulating the masses on the most critical political issues, such as elections, protests, and judicial movements. It has helped in inspiring stories as an act of elevating the new voices in politics, as well as the contradiction of political messages in the mainstream. Nevertheless, there are also major traps of this move. One can easily mislead individuals through fake news and political propaganda using social media that cannot be regulated in any way.

Literature Review

Social media has connected the world into a global village, and the new aspect of communication is social media. The present research paper examines the impact of social media on youth political activism and heightened political awareness. This has been brought about by the emergence of social media, which has transformed how individuals discuss politics. Following the politician on Facebook and Twitter, liking, publishing, commenting, and sharing political content online are all ways of getting involved in politics, which are increasingly becoming more common these days. Data are collected through convenience and purposive sampling methods, and a questionnaire is used as the research tool. The main aim of the study was to examine the use of social media by the youth to promote political mobilizations, and also to assess whether social media influences the political awareness of the youth in Pakistan or not. However, unlike the present proposal,

the present study uses the uses and gratification approach. People are media consumers because they create profiles and organize the activities related to them. Consequently many researchers have researched on these topics. Moreover, based on research results, it is clear that the usage of social media by young people in Pakistan is promoting political participation and democratization of the country (khan et al., 2022).

Pakistan is one of the nations where social media has become an essential tool of political mobilization particularly with regard to the upcoming 2024 general elections. This paper will examine the influence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tik Tok on voter behavior and political participation in parties. The paper explores the impact of social media on elections by looking at the digital activism through online political campaigns and the influence of influencers. The study employed a mixed-method research design, which incorporates surveys and content analysis to determine the extent to which social media affected voter participation, political awareness, and disinformation. The results focus on the growing reliance of political parties on online platforms to garner the necessary support, on how social media is shaping the opinion of the people, and how they impact election outcomes. The research also discusses issues, including internet disinformation and digital divisions. Comprehending these processes is essential for evaluating



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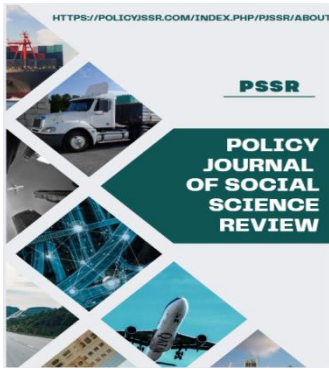
how political participation will develop in Pakistan's changing digital environment (Saeed, Hussain & Waheed, 2025).

The impact of social media on actual political engagement has been the subject of a large body of research during the past ten years. Many feel that social media increases online and offline political participation. The impact of online political activities on university students' political efficacy and in-person political engagement in rural Pakistan is examined in this study. Furthermore, this study clarifies the connection between political awareness and political activity. Males and female of getting involved in politics, which is increasingly becoming more common these days. The main aim of the study was to examine the use of social media by the youth to promote political mobilizations, and also to assess whether social media influences the political awareness of the youth in Pakistan or not. However, unlike the present proposal, the present study uses the uses and gratification approach. People are media consumers because they create profiles and organize the activities related to them. Consequently many researchers have researched on these topics. Moreover, based on research results, it is clear that the usage of social media by young people in Pakistan is promoting political participation and democratization of the country (khan et al., 2022).

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study clarifies the connection between political awareness and political activity. Male and female undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Narowly in Pakistan participated in our online survey. To gather data we sent our survey to students using Qualtrics software. The majority of students utilize social media for political awareness and knowledge according to the data. Political engagement on the internet is a major factor in political efficacy. Furthermore, social media is an essential medium for netizens to engage in actual political activity. The study's conclusions imply that political knowledge and offline political participation are highly correlated with online political activity. Young people in Pakistan's rural areas use social media extensively to engage in both online and offline political events (Ahmad, Alvi & Ittefaq, 2019).

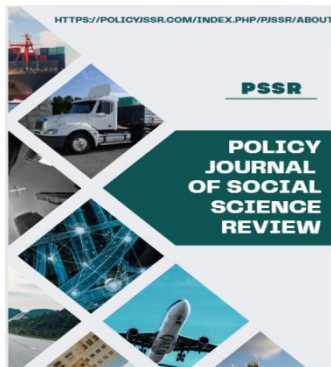
Historical Background

Between 2015 and 2025, social media emerged not only as a digital communication tool but as a vibrant space where youth constructed political identities, expressed dissent and formed collective action. Qualitative studies across this period reveal how young people have used platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to articulate grievances and organize around issues of social justice, climate change, police reform, and democratic governance. A study by Theohari & van Depth (2018) found that youth described social media as an empowering space that allowed them to bypass traditional

political structures they viewed as exclusionary.

Respondents in focus groups emphasized how hashtags and viral content gave them a sense of visibility and solidarity that was previously hard to achieve through offline channels. Activist youth groups tend to refer to the emotional appeal and urgency of social media as central factors to its organizing capabilities. According to interviews that were conducted during the Endears protests in Nigeria (Iwilade, 2021), young people believed that they could assume control of the narrative and build a counter-public using social media against the state-controlled narratives. By analogy, the study of the Fridays within the Future movement conducted by de Moor et al. (2021) revealed that young activists employed Instagram both to spread the news of the protest and to personalize Fridays within the Future by telling personal stories through videos and emotional appeals. These stories also provided the feeling of urgency and moral duty that would motivate other people to contribute even in non-material ways like commenting or sharing.

The low-risk aspect was detailed by many respondents who mentioned that digital activism has opened the doors to political life especially to socially excluded groups like youth. This is also what researchers also found in another study which anecdotally heard the same message restated by young Moroccan activists who said they had been politically awakened by their efforts on Twitter even though



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they were not physically involved in a demonstration. No matter how optimistic it is, there are also problems of the complex tensions and boundaries that are discovered outside qualitative studies.

Youth activists interviewed in various case studies have indicated that although social media can become a starting point and cause mobilization, the maintenance of momentum may involve offline frameworks and leaders that most movements did not have (Tufekci, 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2018). There were also concerns about the issue of surveillance harassment and burnout by activists. Respondents in several studies reported emotion overload of being flooded with both political news and information particularly when a crisis arose due to such events as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2020 George Floyd protests.

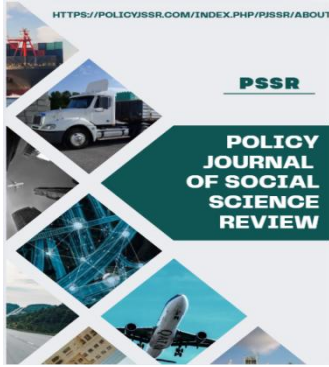
Impact on Political Mobilization

Social media means have drastically transformed the communication world through dynamic transformations in the digital era. The great impact on the political mobilization is one of the most important results of this change. The hegemonic presence of social media has predetermined how individuals prefer to tackle the issue of politics, despite the traditionally defined border, and enables a level of involvement and activism never before witnessed. Cyberspace has facilitated the fast dissemination of information that has spawned communication that has inspired social

movements and the implementation of political discourse on the part of the citizens in a more enduring manner than ever before. Nonetheless, this transformative power lacks any complexities as such because related to this definition of social media and political mobilization are the dilemmas of accuracy of information, echo chambers, and opinion fluidity, which is eroding the mass opinion. In that regard, the diverse effects and role of social media in political mobilization make it necessary to understand that trend in order to properly orient and integrate in the current transformations that surround the field of action of civic engagement and democratic participation (Iwilade, 2021).

Political Awareness

Historical engagement with politics usually demanded much funding and capacity. The barriers are reduced due to the influence of social media, as even the marginalized groups are able to engage in political discussions as individuals. Social media facilitates the quick mobilization of people based on one particular issue or event. (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) Online campaigns such as hashtags are very rapidly mobilizing and culminating in offline protest activities. Young adults are the most engaged demographic on social media, with over 5.24 billion users globally as of 2025. University students now engage in politics in new ways as a result of the fundamental shift in communication brought about by social media platforms. Social media platforms



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have evolved into dynamic spaces where students spark movements, ranging from local protests around the world to global movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. But does this online activity actually increase political participation, before the digital era, traditional media outlets like radio, television, and newspapers were used to build political consciousness. These platforms had a significant impact, but because they were one-way, they restricted public input and the flow of ideas. Users of social media gain from an interactive platform for political content that enables them to interact with leaders and share information while spreading their views among large audiences. Through the use of live streaming features and content posting, X (Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube allow people to start discussions and ask questions of public authorities as well as comment on policy decisions. The rise of social media platforms made it possible for college students to engage in discussions and better access political information, all while encouraging political activity. Digital polarization, misleading content, and dubious political activity are only a few of the negative effects of this rapid information flow through digital platforms (Galston, 2001).

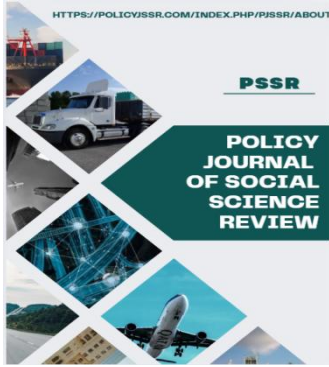
Impact of Social Media on Political Activism

The existence of the digital age in the life of political activism was largely changed under the pretext of the opening and availability of social media omnipresent. As per the effects on the political

activism field that social media has brought, it has been groundbreaking in the way individuals engage in political issues, articulate their opinions and the mobilization of change. The platforms have transcended the traditional borders, in the meaning, that the platforms have created a platform through which information sharing can be done on dialogue, organizations, and distribution globally. Social media has also helped in making political activism more swift and extensive in scope in addition to serving to give voice to the most marginalized voices. (Tufekci, 2017). There is, however the dark side of the digital revolution in which misinformation is spread and there is the probability of the existence of the echo chambers. Here, the detailed interaction that exists between social media and the implementation of political activism in society in the realization of the dynamics of contemporary civic activities, is noteworthy.

Amplification of Marginalized Voices

These formerly disenfranchised populations now have a choice to have their voices heard through alternative ways on social media by bypassing the traditional gatekeepers. This has assisted in the unveiling of the underrepresented problems and opinions. Providing individuals and their communities, who have long been marginalized due to attributes such as gender, ethnicity, disability or socioeconomic status, with a platform to create awareness and take advantage of technological means such as



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digital technology will enable them to contribute to social and economic progress through their unique opinions and perspectives.

Misinformation and Political Polarization

The dissemination of such falsehoods on social media can go viral extremely quickly and may disrupt the verisimilitude of the political debate, and may cause even greater polarization. Echo chambers and filter bubbles contribute to the aggravation of this problem. In Pakistan, misinformation has been demonstrated to spread quickly on social media sites like YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp, particularly during important events like the COVID-19 outbreak. Misinformation is more prevalent in low-literate and low-income groups (Haroon et al. 2021). False statements are frequently covered up by emotional appeals, conspiracy theories, or by imitating reliable sources. They found that public WhatsApp groups were especially susceptible to disseminating content that combined false information on politics, religion, and health, which occasionally spread to other social media sites. Misinformation is causing polarization to increase, partly due to algorithmic bias and selective exposure to content that aligns with one's beliefs.

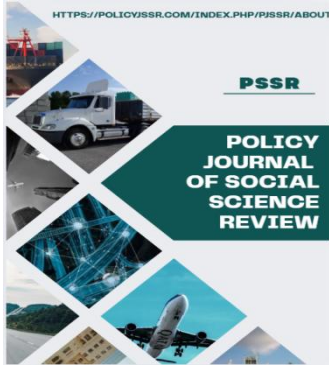
Challenges of Social Media

As the world keeps evolving more than ever before due to the technology taking over major aspects of life and practice, coupled with a shifting value system in society, as well as interconnections

among various countries on new levels a plethora of challenges and fears have cropped up in the limelight. These compound issues cut across the majority of spheres such as economic, environmental, political and social spheres. The age of IT is the age of complexity and we are entering the 21ST century with the logic of climate change with the morality of new technology and the possibility of fair socio economic development in the wake of new ideological territories, as alternative ideological landscapes appear. These issues and problems are not independent of each other; on the contrary, they are closely and deeply-knit, demanding novel creative solutions and inventive collaboration across the lines. It is in this era of an age of limitless possibilities that we should be prolific and encompassing on these simmering issues in order to build a sustainable and encompassing future for all individuals (Tufekci, 2017).

Causes of Social Change and Its Implications on Democracy

Theoretical associations of democracy and social transformation are highly dramatic with a booming connotation on societies and generations. The capability to introduce new changes to the political horizons and social principles is where the coherent nature of the two functions is the epicenter of the specified dynamic correlation. The idea of inclusive participation and representation under democracy as a social change will result in the provision of avenues through which the marginalized will be



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represented and even preference on issues of policy. At the same time, social change of either type of grassroots movements or as the new cultural paradigms exposes the democratic systems to pressure to change and adapt to the new needs and demands of the people. It is the most interesting aspect of the dynamic process of governance since this delicate interplay of democracy and social change overlaps and whereby they define each other to one day determine the course of action of the countries and the development.

Strengthening Civic Engagement

Growth in civic engagement is also much associated with the lack of trust in the prevailing political structures and the interpretation of social problems by society within the framework of social justice. Civic engagement is moving beyond the historic model of political involvement in community-based projects, participatory budgeting, and local lobbying work, since people are now confident that they can shape change outside of the formal realm. This movement has been especially said to be led by the young people who, in most instances, use digital resources to mobilize themselves, spread information, and fight structural injustices (Zukin et al., 2006). The move is an indicator of a more problematic and participatory involvement that empowers the culture of democracy and provides the voiceless people with better publicity and impact. However, in order to sustain such a momentum, more investments in civic

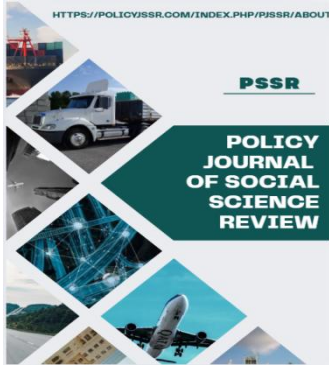
education and programs that will lead to inclusive engagement are required in the future.

Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization of Youth in Pakistan

Pakistan boasts one of the world's greatest youth populations, with over 64% of the population under 30 and 29% in the 15–29 age range. There is a lot of political potential in this youth bulge. Young voters between the ages of 18 and 35 accounted for about 57 million individuals or roughly 45% of the registered electorate, as of the general elections in 2024. Youth participation in official political processes has always been limited despite their numerical strength. (Iqbal, Hussain, & Iqbal, 2022) There was a persistent 13 percentage point difference in youth electoral engagement between 2016 and 2018, with the average youth voter turnout being only 31%, much lower than the national average of 44%. But recent elections have shown a good trend with youth turnout rising to 37% in 2018 and predicted to reach roughly 48% in 2024.

Traditional vs Digital Political Engagement

Political involvement in Pakistan underwent a dramatic change with a slow transition from conventional to digital approaches. Earlier in the decade, politics was more conventional. Newspaper ads, political canvassing, and TV talk shows continued to be the most common. With little public involvement outside of rallies and election days, the mainstream media dominated the political debate. But



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starting in 2018, the emergence of social media fundamentally altered the situation. An important turning point was the PTI's successful digital campaign during the 2018 general elections, which showed how social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter could be used for popular mobilization. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled political parties and movements to change their online outreach tactics, which led to an increase in digital political engagement by 2020. Between 2020 and 2025, hashtag movements dominated political discourse, and online activism grew more organized. By 2025, over 54% of Pakistanis had internet access up from 22% in 2015, and over 75 million people used social media digital platforms, providing smaller or under-represented political actors more visibility in addition to facilitating real-time communication and mobilization. Although conventional media continues to have sway, particularly among older and rural populations, Pakistan's urban millennials now prefer and engage in politics more dynamically through digital interaction, which is changing the way politics is structured, disseminated, and contested.

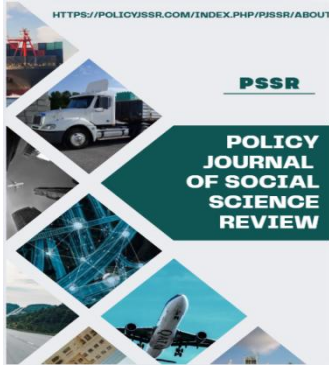
Conclusion

The emergence of social media as a potent instrument of mobilization and engagement of the youth has turned out to be a significant political aspect in Pakistan. The Internet has become an important part in formulating political discourses that have orchestrated protests that have influenced the electoral process

and found alternative platforms to discuss politics, no longer within the precincts of the mainstream media, this focal point of the newer democratization process in Pakistan. The new social media has provided Pakistani youth with a platform for printing protest and activism, besides providing access to information. The youth factor in the political dynamics is essential in a country where the number of youths under 30 years is approximately 64 percent.

The increased penetration of mobile internet and the stable growth of youth digital literacy that empowered the young people to express themselves politically caused a significant increase in political awareness and the active voice of youth in this period of time. Because of the ongoing domination of conventional channels by the state or corporations, social media entered to serve as the leading chorus of the voices of youth demanding accountability, transparency, and reform.

One of the most prominent trends during this period is the phenomenon of the youth-led internet movements. Social media also provided young people with a direct way of influencing the national conversation without passing through the institutions of the gatekeepers by way of campaigns on platforms like #JusticeForZainab, #StudentsSolidarityMarch, and support of mainstream political parties like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), along with demonstrations on issues related to



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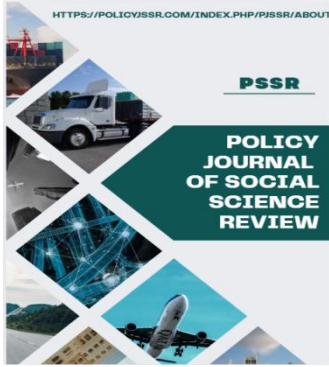
student rights and education policies which students were able to take up through the help of social media. The movements demonstrated the effectiveness of internet networks in organizing group activities to create support and to hold people in leadership positions in society accountable.

Recommendations

- The government will have to invest in digital literacy initiatives aimed at young people, with the guarantee that they will be empowered to detect misinformation, be aware of the algorithm biases, and practice critical consumption of political information on social media. Such programs can be implemented at the educational level in schools and colleges to establish a politically conscious and socially responsible generation.
- There should be attempts to fight the proliferation of fake news without infringing upon the freedom of expression. Fact-checking organizations that are independent of other political parties should be promoted, and their presence increased. The social media platforms will be encouraged to apply higher verification processes, particularly to political content, after the election time and other political undertakings.
- Both the political parties and the civil society should encourage constructive and issue-based political discourse. Instead of basing their efforts on the personality-based or divisive materials submitted online, online political participation should aim at

building a discussion about the policies and governance, and what issues this country faces. There is a need to project responsible behavior by political actors on the internet so as to provide a good example to young followers.

- Purposeful measures that ensure the involvement of the youth in political party digital communication strategies have to be undertaken. Social media should also be used to engage young people to create the content, discuss policies, and plan campaigns, which should be a target of online campaigns. Youth involvement in this will make youth-centered political messages more legitimate and relevant.
- The civic education may be held via social media platforms. NGOs video based and interactive content creators should generate awareness about the process of democracy, the right to vote and the functions. It is one of the possibilities that can help bridge the gap between online activism and actual civic participation.
- One reason why youths, especially women and minority groups, cannot voice themselves online is hate speech and harassment in the form of trolling. The digital ethics and platform rules must be strengthened in order to ensure that the political debate is conducted keeping in mind the etiquette. There should be a focus on anti-bullying and online security.
- The social media companies should collaborate to improve freedom of political content and advertising. These



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platforms should provide visible data regarding sponsored political advertisements, and, in addition, the users should be aware of who is funding whatever they watch. The second technological solution would be a change in the algorithm that will reduce the number of echo chambers and expose the user to political diversity.

- The younger political activists are supposed to be oriented on a superior method of applying the social media tools, message techniques, and community mobilization methods. These programs can be introduced by universities, NGOs themselves, or even youth wings of the parties, and must also be grounded on the legal framework, as well as the boundaries of moral values of digital activism.

- It is necessary to monitor the role of social media in influencing political behavior, and academic research institutes and think tanks should serve this purpose. This type of analysis of the effectiveness or failure of the changing digital campaign patterns of misinformation and voter turnout of younger voters would be useful in shaping action plans and policy responses in the future. Such information in the hands of the masses can increase transparency to the masses.

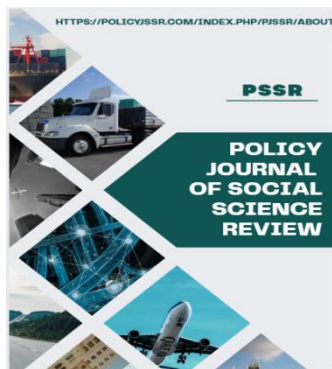
- The political players who are smart in the digital environment are advised to transform their governance so that makes the action of maintaining transparency in the allegations they have to avoid polarization and to get involved

in factual debates. The online political environment will be healthier by promoting the ethical norms of the content creators.

- The political engagement should also be evident in the different social media apps in order to reach different categories of the audience. Local languages and the contents, which are relevant to the local places, can be more accessible and can enable more inclusion of the rural and marginal groups in the political discourse. This kind of approach can address the Urban-rural differences in electoral cognition.

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