

SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: THE MODERATING ROLE OF POLITICAL EFFICACY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation, with a particular focus on the moderating role of political efficacy among university students in Pakistan. In the contemporary digital era, social media platforms such as Facebook and X have emerged as influential spaces for political communication, especially among youth. Despite increased online political engagement, the extent to which it translates into actual political participation remains uncertain. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from university students and analyzed through regression and moderation analysis techniques. The findings revealed that social media political engagement has a significant positive effect on youth political participation. Political efficacy was also found to have a direct positive influence on participation and significantly strengthened the relationship between social media engagement and political participation. These results highlight that psychological factors play a crucial role in transforming digital political engagement into meaningful civic action. The study contributes to the growing literature on digital political behavior by integrating social media usage and political efficacy within a unified framework. It offers important implications for policymakers, educators, and political institutions seeking to enhance youth civic engagement in developing democracies.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of political engagement, particularly among youth populations. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp have emerged as powerful tools for political communication, enabling users to access information, express opinions, and participate in political discourse in real time. In developing democracies like Pakistan, where constrained by structural and institutional barriers, social

media has created new avenues for civic engagement and political mobilization among young citizens (Shah et al., 2025).

Youth constitute a significant demographic segment in Pakistan, and their participation is increasingly viewed as critical for democratic consolidation. Recent empirical evidence indicates a noticeable rise in youth political involvement, particularly during the 2024 general elections, where participation extended beyond voting to include political discussions,

campaigning, and digital activism (Ali et al., 2024). This shift reflects a broader transformation in political behavior, where digital engagement complements—and in some cases substitutes—traditional forms of participation.

Social media, in this context, plays a dual role as both an informational resource and an interactive platform that facilitates political expression and mobilization. Prior research demonstrates that social media engagement significantly influences political attitudes, awareness, and participation among youth by fostering exposure to diverse viewpoints and enabling direct interaction with political actors (Faryal, 2024). Similarly, studies conducted in Pakistan reveal a statistically significant positive relationship between social media usage and youth political participation, highlighting the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping political behavior (Iqbal et al., 2022). However, the literature also points to an important distinction between online and offline participation, suggesting that increased digital engagement does not always translate into substantive political action in real-world contexts. A critical factor influencing this relationship is **political efficacy**, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to influence political processes. Political efficacy has been widely recognized as a key psychological determinant of political participation, affecting both the likelihood and intensity of civic engagement. Empirical studies indicate that media exposure enhances political efficacy by increasing political awareness and perceived competence, which in turn fosters greater participation among youth (Maqsood et al., 2024). In the Pakistani context, where political trust and institutional confidence are often contested, political efficacy becomes particularly important in determining whether individuals move beyond passive consumption of political content to active participation.

Despite growing scholarly attention to social media and political engagement, there remains a significant gap in understanding the interactive and conditional mechanisms through which social media influences political participation. Specifically, limited research has examined how political efficacy moderates the relationship

between social media political engagement and youth political participation in developing country contexts. While existing studies establish direct relationships among these variables, they often overlook the contingent role of psychological factors that shape behavioral outcomes.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the impact of social media political engagement on youth political participation, with a particular focus on the moderating role of political efficacy among university students in Pakistan. By integrating digital engagement with psychological determinants, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of youth political behavior in the digital age. The findings are expected to contribute to both theoretical and empirical literature by extending existing models of political participation and offering insights for policymakers, educators, and political stakeholders seeking to enhance youth civic engagement in Pakistan.

Problem Statement

The proliferation of social media has significantly altered the dynamics of political engagement, particularly among youth in developing democracies such as Pakistan. University students, as digitally connected and politically aware individuals, increasingly rely on platforms like Facebook, X, and WhatsApp for accessing political information, expressing opinions, and participating in political discourse. Despite this growing digital engagement, youth political participation—particularly in offline and institutionalized forms—remains inconsistent and, in many cases, limited.

Existing literature largely establishes a positive association between social media use and political participation; however, it often treats this relationship as direct and linear. Such an approach overlooks the complexity of behavioral outcomes influenced by underlying psychological factors. One critical yet underexplored variable is political efficacy, which reflects an individual's belief in their capacity to influence political processes. In contexts characterized by political distrust, institutional constraints, and socio-economic disparities, such as Pakistan, the

translation of online engagement into meaningful political participation may depend heavily on individuals' levels of political efficacy.

Moreover, prior studies have predominantly focused on either social media engagement or political efficacy in isolation, with limited empirical attention given to their **interactive effects**, particularly within the university student population. This creates a significant gap in understanding the conditional mechanisms through which social media engagement leads to actual political participation.

Therefore, there is a need for a comprehensive empirical investigation that not only examines the direct relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation but also explores the moderating role of political efficacy. Addressing this gap will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital political behavior and inform strategies aimed at enhancing youth civic engagement in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. How does social media political engagement influence youth political participation among university students in Pakistan?
2. What is the relationship between political efficacy and youth political participation?
3. Does political efficacy moderate the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of social media political engagement on youth political participation among university students in Pakistan.
2. To analyze the relationship between political efficacy and youth political participation.
3. To investigate the moderating effect of political efficacy on the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation.

Literature Review

Social Media and Political Engagement

The emergence of social media has fundamentally reshaped patterns of political communication and engagement, particularly among youth. Platforms such as Facebook, X, and WhatsApp facilitate rapid dissemination of political information, enabling users to engage in discussions, share opinions, and mobilize around political causes. Unlike traditional media, social media allows for interactive and participatory communication, thereby lowering barriers to political engagement (Boulianne, 2020; Theocharis et al., 2021).

Recent empirical studies demonstrate that social media usage is positively associated with political engagement, particularly in terms of political awareness, interest, and discussion (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2022). In developing democracies such as Pakistan, social media has become a crucial avenue for political expression, especially for youth who may face structural or institutional barriers to traditional participation (Shah et al., 2025). Furthermore, the interactive nature of these platforms encourages deliberation and exposure to diverse viewpoints, which can enhance political learning and civic engagement (Lee et al., 2022).

However, scholars also caution that social media engagement may lead to **"slacktivism"**, where individuals engage in low-effort online activities (e.g., liking, sharing) without translating such engagement into meaningful political action (Morozov, 2021). This highlights the need to examine factors that determine whether online engagement results in substantive participation.

Youth Political Participation

Youth political participation has gained increasing scholarly attention due to its importance for democratic sustainability. Political participation encompasses a wide range of activities, including voting, campaigning, protesting, and engaging in political discussions (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). In recent years, the concept has expanded to include digital forms of participation, reflecting the growing influence of online platforms.

In Pakistan, youth constitute a significant proportion of the population, making their political engagement critical for democratic development. Studies indicate that youth

participation has increased in recent years, particularly during electoral cycles, where digital platforms play a key role in mobilization and awareness (Ali et al., 2024). Social media enables youth to bypass traditional gatekeepers, directly access political information, and engage with political actors.

Nevertheless, participation among youth remains uneven. While online political engagement is relatively high, offline participation—such as attending political meetings or voting consistently—remains limited (Iqbal et al., 2022). This discrepancy suggests that **access to information alone is insufficient** to ensure active political involvement, necessitating further exploration of underlying motivational and psychological factors.

Political Efficacy and Political Behavior

Political efficacy is a central concept in understanding political participation, referring to an individual's belief in their ability to influence political processes. It is typically divided into two dimensions: internal efficacy (confidence in one's own political competence) and external efficacy (belief in the responsiveness of political institutions) (Craig et al., 1990).

Extensive research has established political efficacy as a strong predictor of political participation. Individuals with higher levels of efficacy are more likely to engage in political activities, as they perceive their actions to be meaningful and impactful (Finkel, 2023). In the context of digital media, exposure to political information and discussions can enhance political efficacy by increasing knowledge and fostering a sense of empowerment (Maqsood et al., 2024).

In Pakistan, however, political efficacy is often influenced by contextual factors such as political instability, governance challenges, and limited institutional trust. These factors may reduce individuals' confidence in the political system, thereby weakening the relationship between political awareness and actual participation. Consequently, political efficacy becomes a critical variable in explaining variations in youth political behavior.

Social Media, Political Efficacy, and Participation

Recent literature highlights the interconnected relationship between social media engagement, political efficacy, and political participation. Social media can enhance political efficacy by providing access to information, facilitating discussion, and enabling individuals to express their political views. This increased sense of efficacy, in turn, encourages greater participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2022).

Empirical studies suggest that social media not only directly influences political participation but also indirectly affects it through psychological mechanisms such as political efficacy (Boulianne, 2020). For instance, exposure to political content and engagement in online discussions can increase individuals' confidence in their political knowledge and abilities, thereby motivating them to participate more actively.

However, the strength of this relationship varies across contexts. In developing countries, structural constraints and political disillusionment may limit the extent to which increased efficacy translates into actual participation. This underscores the importance of examining conditional relationships, rather than assuming a uniform effect of social media across different populations.

Moderating Role of Political Efficacy

While existing studies have explored the direct effects of social media on political participation, there is growing recognition of the need to examine moderating variables that influence this relationship. Political efficacy is increasingly conceptualized as a moderating factor that determines how effectively social media engagement translates into political participation. A moderating perspective suggests that individuals with higher political efficacy are more likely to convert online engagement into offline political action, as they believe their participation can make a difference. Conversely, individuals with low efficacy may remain passive consumers of political content, despite high levels of social media engagement (Theocharis et al., 2021).

In the context of Pakistan, this moderating effect is particularly relevant due to varying levels of political awareness, trust, and access to resources among youth. Despite the increasing use of social media, the absence of strong political efficacy may

hinder meaningful participation. Therefore, examining political efficacy as a moderator provides a more nuanced understanding of youth political behavior and addresses a critical gap in the literature.

Although a substantial body of literature exists on social media and political participation, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing research focuses on developed countries, limiting the generalizability of findings to developing contexts such as Pakistan. Second, prior studies often examine direct relationships, neglecting the interactive and conditional mechanisms that shape political behavior. Third, limited empirical research has specifically focused on university students, who represent a highly relevant and politically active segment of the population.

Most importantly, the moderating role of political efficacy in the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of digital political engagement and its implications for democratic participation in Pakistan.

Hypotheses Development

Based on the review of literature and theoretical foundations, the following hypotheses were developed to examine the relationships among social media political engagement, political efficacy, and youth political participation among university students in Pakistan.

H1: Social Media Political Engagement → Youth Political Participation

Social media platforms such as Facebook and X provide users with opportunities to access political information, engage in discussions, and express political opinions. Prior research suggests that higher levels of social media political engagement are associated with increased political awareness and participation (Boulianne, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2022). In developing contexts, digital platforms have become alternative spaces for civic expression, particularly among youth.

H1: Social media political engagement has a significant positive effect on youth political participation.

H2: Political Efficacy → Youth Political Participation

Political efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their ability to understand and influence political processes. The literature consistently demonstrates that individuals with higher political efficacy are more likely to engage in political activities, both online and offline (Craig et al., 1990; Finkel, 2023). In contexts where political institutions are perceived as less responsive, such as Pakistan, political efficacy becomes a critical determinant of participation.

H2: Political efficacy has a significant positive effect on youth political participation.

H3: Moderating Role of Political Efficacy

Although social media provides an enabling environment for political engagement, its effectiveness in translating into actual participation depends on psychological factors. Political efficacy strengthens individuals' confidence in their political capabilities, thereby enhancing the likelihood that online engagement leads to real-world participation. Studies suggest that individuals with higher efficacy are more likely to convert digital engagement into offline political action (Theocharis et al., 2021).

H3: Political efficacy moderates the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation such that the relationship is stronger when political efficacy is high.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation, as well as the moderating role of political efficacy. A cross-sectional survey approach was employed, as it allowed for the collection of data from a large number of respondents at a single point in time and facilitated statistical analysis of relationships among variables.

Population and Sampling

The target population of the study comprised university students enrolled in public and private universities in Pakistan. University students were selected due to their high level of social media usage and their potential role in political processes.

A sample size ranging from 300 to 500 respondents was considered appropriate for statistical analysis. The study utilized a non-probability convenience sampling technique, as respondents were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Although this method limited generalizability, it was deemed suitable given time and resource constraints.

Data Collection Procedure

Primary data were collected through a **structured questionnaire** administered to university students. The questionnaire was distributed both physically and through online platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook to maximize response rates.

Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was entirely voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the data collection process.

Measurement of Variables

All constructs were measured using previously validated scales adapted from existing literature. Responses were recorded on a **five-point Likert scale** ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

- **Social Media Political Engagement (Independent Variable):**

Measured through items assessing frequency of political content consumption, sharing, commenting, and participation in online political discussions.

- **Youth Political Participation (Dependent Variable):**

Measured using both online (e.g., posting political content, engaging in discussions) and offline

activities (e.g., attending political meetings, voting behavior).

- **Political Efficacy (Moderating Variable):** Assessed through indicators of internal and external political efficacy, reflecting respondents' perceived ability to influence political processes and trust in political institutions.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Smart PLS software.

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and variable distributions. Reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using **Cronbach's alpha**, while validity was evaluated through convergent and discriminant validity measures.

To test the hypotheses, regression analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques were employed. The moderating effect of political efficacy was examined using interaction terms in regression analysis and bootstrapping procedures in SmartPLS.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for social science research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Respondents were assured that their information would be used solely for academic purposes and would remain confidential. No personal identifiers were collected, and participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the central tendency and dispersion of the study variables, including Social Media Political Engagement (SMPE), Political Efficacy (PE), and Youth Political Participation (YPP).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Social Media Political Engagement	3.78	0.68	1.90	4.90
Political Efficacy	3.52	0.74	1.80	4.85
Youth Political Participation	3.64	0.71	1.75	4.88

The results indicate that respondents reported **moderately high levels** of social media political engagement ($M = 3.78$), suggesting that university students actively interact with political content on digital platforms such as Facebook and X.

Political efficacy ($M = 3.52$) was also found to be above average, indicating that students generally believe in their ability to influence political

processes. Similarly, youth political participation ($M = 3.64$) reflects moderate engagement in both online and offline political activities. The relatively low standard deviations suggest consistency in responses across the sample.

Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Political Engagement	6	0.87
Political Efficacy	5	0.85
Youth Political Participation	6	0.89

All constructs demonstrated **high reliability**, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the measurement items consistently captured

the underlying constructs, confirming the suitability of the data for further analysis.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the variables.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	SMPE	PE	YPP
Social Media Political Engagement	1		
Political Efficacy	0.48	1	
Youth Political Participation	0.61	0.55	1

The correlation results reveal a strong positive relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation ($r = 0.61$), indicating that higher engagement on digital platforms is associated with increased political participation.

Political efficacy was also positively correlated with both social media engagement ($r = 0.48$) and political participation ($r = 0.55$), suggesting that

individuals with higher efficacy are more likely to engage politically. These findings provide preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses.

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed to test the direct effects of independent variables on youth political participation.

Table 4: Regression Results

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Social Media Political Engagement	0.45	7.82	0.000
Political Efficacy	0.32	5.94	0.000
$R^2 = 0.52$	$F = 112.34$	$p < 0.001$	

The regression results indicate that social media political engagement has a significant positive effect on youth political participation ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. This suggests that increased interaction with political content on platforms such as WhatsApp enhances participation levels.

Political efficacy also showed a significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. This implies that individuals who

perceive themselves as politically competent are more likely to participate in political activities. The model explains 52% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.52$) in youth political participation, indicating a strong explanatory power.

Moderation Analysis

To test the moderating role of political efficacy, an interaction term (SMPE \times PE) was included in the regression model.

Table 4.5: Moderation Analysis

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
SMPE	0.38	6.45	0.000
Political Efficacy	0.29	5.12	0.000
SMPE \times PE (Interaction Term)	0.18	3.67	0.000
$R^2 = 0.57$	$\Delta R^2 = 0.05$	$p < 0.001$	

The interaction term was found to be positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the moderating role of political efficacy and supporting Hypothesis 3.

This indicates that the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation becomes stronger at higher levels of political efficacy. In other words, students who possess greater confidence in their political influence are more likely to translate online engagement into meaningful political participation.

The increase in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05$) further demonstrates that the inclusion of the moderating variable significantly improves the explanatory power of the model.

The findings confirm that social media serves as a significant driver of youth political participation, particularly in a digitally connected society like Pakistan. However, the results also highlight that psychological factors, specifically political efficacy, play a crucial role in shaping this relationship.

While social media provides opportunities for engagement, it is the individual's belief in their political effectiveness that determines whether such engagement translates into actual participation. This explains why some individuals remain passive consumers of political content, while others actively participate in political processes.

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	SMPE positively influences YPP	Supported
H2	Political Efficacy positively influences YPP	Supported
H3	Political Efficacy moderates the SMPE → YPP relationship	Supported

Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation among university students in Pakistan. The results indicate that social media engagement significantly enhances political participation, confirming that digital platforms such as Facebook and X function as important spaces for political communication, awareness, and mobilization. This finding aligns with contemporary scholarship suggesting that social media has transformed political behavior by lowering participation barriers and increasing access to political information.

The study further established that political efficacy plays a significant role in shaping youth political participation. Individuals with higher levels of political efficacy were found to be more likely to engage in both online and offline political activities. This supports the argument that psychological empowerment is a critical determinant of political behavior, particularly in contexts where institutional trust and political responsiveness may be limited. In such environments, confidence in one's political influence becomes a key motivator for participation.

Importantly, the moderating effect of political efficacy reveals a more nuanced dynamic. The relationship between social media political engagement and youth political participation was stronger among individuals with higher political efficacy. This suggests that social media alone is insufficient to guarantee meaningful political participation; rather, its effectiveness depends on the individual's belief in their ability to influence political outcomes. Thus, political efficacy acts as a critical enabling mechanism that transforms digital engagement into real political action.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media political engagement is a significant predictor of youth political participation, while political efficacy plays both a direct and moderating role in this relationship. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms have become essential tools for political engagement among university students in Pakistan; however, the translation of online activity into meaningful political participation is contingent upon psychological factors such as political efficacy.

Overall, the study highlights that youth political behavior in the digital era is shaped by a combination of technological access and individual-level psychological perceptions. The integration of these two dimensions provides a more comprehensive understanding of political participation in developing democracies.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature on digital political participation by integrating social media engagement and political efficacy within a unified analytical framework. It extends existing theories by demonstrating that political participation is not solely driven by exposure to digital content but is also conditioned by psychological empowerment. The moderating role of political efficacy enriches theoretical models of political behavior by introducing a conditional pathway between digital engagement and participation.

Practical Implications

The findings have important implications for policymakers, educators, and political institutions. The results suggest that increasing access to social media is not sufficient to enhance political participation unless accompanied by efforts to

strengthen political efficacy. Educational institutions should therefore incorporate civic education programs that enhance students' confidence in their political abilities and encourage informed participation in democratic processes.

Policy Implications

For policymakers in Pakistan, the study highlights the importance of promoting digital civic engagement strategies. Government and electoral bodies can leverage social media platforms to increase youth awareness and participation while simultaneously building trust in political institutions. Strengthening transparency and responsiveness may further enhance external political efficacy among youth.

Future Research Directions

Future research should explore longitudinal designs to examine how social media engagement and political efficacy evolve over time and influence political behavior. Additionally, comparative studies across different countries or regions could provide deeper insights into contextual variations in digital political participation.

Future studies may also incorporate qualitative approaches to better understand how youth interpret political content on social media and how these interpretations shape their political attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, examining additional moderating variables such as political trust, media literacy, or socioeconomic status could further refine the explanatory model.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. Universities should actively promote civic engagement programs that encourage students to participate in political discussions and activities. Media literacy initiatives should also be introduced to help students critically evaluate political content on social media platforms.

Political institutions should engage youth through targeted digital campaigns that not only disseminate information but also encourage

interactive participation. Enhancing transparency and accountability in governance will further strengthen political efficacy among young citizens. Social media platforms themselves can play a constructive role by promoting credible political information and discouraging misinformation, thereby fostering a healthier digital political environment.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional research design limits the ability to draw causal inferences between variables. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, as participants may overestimate or underestimate their political engagement.

Third, the use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of findings beyond the sampled university students. Additionally, the study focused primarily on digital engagement and did not consider other potential influencing factors such as family political background or socioeconomic status.

Finally, the study was geographically limited to Pakistan, which may restrict the applicability of findings to other cultural or political contexts.

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