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ECHO-CHAMBERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ROLE IN POLITICAL POLARIZATION

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Abstract
The number of young people becoming involved in politics through social media has skyrocketed in the past few years. The focus of this research is the development of "echo chambers," or online communities where members mostly encounter political material that supports their own opinions. It also explores how these groups deepen the partisan divide among young Pakistanis. This quantitative study is based on data collected from 400 respondents, evenly distributed across four universities in terms of gender, education level, and age group. The theoretical foundations include Social Media Influence Theory, Selective Exposure Theory, and the Uses and Gratification Theory. By prioritizing ideologically compatible information and downplaying alternative stances, social media algorithms substantially impact the political atmosphere, according to research. The results indicate that material exposure guided by algorithms impacts the formation of political ideas, lending credence to the idea that social media widens political divides. The problem of political polarization and internet echo chambers is exacerbated since young people tend to engage with material that supports their own opinions while avoiding ideas that differ from them. It became clear that education level was a major factor, as it affected not just the platforms chosen but also the openness to other political viewpoints. These findings provide more evidence that algorithmic systems combine demographic variables with aspects such as education level, age, and gender to produce highly personalized and frequently controversial political speech.

1. INTRODUCTION

By providing venues for the production and distribution of user-generated material, social media has developed into a potent tool for political involvement, particularly among younger generations. By utilizing analytics and recommendation algorithms, it actively changes people's opinions rather than only allowing them to communicate them. Members of internet forums often find themselves in "echo chambers" where they only see political stuff that confirms their own views. Confirmation bias and selective exposure amplify this impact by limiting the range of perspectives and heightening political polarization. Scholars argue that online communities are changing the way individuals traditionally engage in politics, creating new possibilities for political mobilization but also new dangers including the

dissemination of misinformation and the strengthening of ideological beliefs (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Bimber, 2014).

Social media usage in Pakistan is on the rise, with over 66 million active users by the beginning of 2025. This is especially true among the country's younger demographic. Because of this widespread use, there has been a change in how young people get involved in politics and how they establish their political beliefs. This study examines the impact of algorithms and echo chambers on people's political opinions, drawing attention to the ways in which demographic variables such as gender, age, and education level shape the audience for political discourse. Despite its potential to increase adolescent engagement, the results imply that social media promotes polarization by boosting aligned material and suppressing opposing viewpoints. Understanding the inner workings of algorithmic filtering and echo chambers is vital for promoting more democratic and inclusive online conversation in politically delicate environments like Pakistan.

1.1. Research gap

Many important questions remain unanswered despite the abundance of research on polarization and echo chambers. Our understanding of echo chambers is geographically limited due to the fact that the majority of research on the topic has focused on Western nations. Pakistan is not a Western country, hence its political culture and media consumption habits are very different from Western ones. The fact that Facebook, Twitter/X, and TikTok all have unique algorithms and dynamics has been disregarded in previous research that compared the three. Researchers in the past have mostly ignored qualitative or mixed-method approaches in favor of quantitative procedures when attempting to understand consumers' experiences and emotional engagement. Not only that, but it doesn't incorporate any new theoretical frameworks like digital media ecology or emotional polarization, thus it doesn't have any theoretical weight. Lastly, it is difficult to determine the long-term effects of echo chambers on people's political beliefs because most research only examine a portion of public opinion.

1.2. Problem Statement

Many unanswered concerns about partisanship and echo chambers persist despite the mountain of research on the subjects. Few studies have examined echo chambers in non-Western countries, such as Pakistan, where political culture and media consumption differ significantly from the West. Traditional social media studies have largely disregarded the reality that Twitter/X, Facebook, and TikTok all use unique algorithms and have unique platform dynamics. Moreover, most prior research has relied on quantitative methodology, which has restricted the availability of qualitative or mixed-method approaches that may better capture users' subjective experiences and perspectives. New theoretical frameworks, such as digital media ecology and emotional polarization, have not been sufficiently integrated into current implementations. Finally, most studies only employ cross-sectional research methodologies, so we don't know how echo chambers affect political beliefs in the long run.

1.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

i. Examine the most widely used social media platforms in Pakistan to determine the presence and functioning of echo chambers.
ii. Find out how politically divided Pakistani social media users are and how echo chambers contribute to this polarization.
iii. Analyze how platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, and TikTok generate echo chamber effects that exacerbate partisan divides.
iv. To learn more about the effects of an echo chamber on human cognition, emotion, and behavior.

1.4. Research questions

RO1: How can the most widely used social media platforms in Pakistan give rise to and sustain echo chambers?

RO2: How politically prejudiced are internet users in Pakistan when it comes to online echo chambers?

RO3: How much do social media sites like Facebook, Twitter/X, and TikTok amplify existing political divisions by creating virtual "echo chambers"?

RO4: How do people's emotions and mental processes impact their decision to join an echo chamber?

2. Literature Review

New studies show that people are worried about how social media could influence democracy and public conversation. Users getting stuck in "echo chambers" that show them nothing but content that confirms their preexisting beliefs is a major cause for alarm. Terren et al. (2021) performed a meta-analysis of 55 studies on social media echo chambers and discovered that methodological changes greatly impact the results. Studies that use digital trace data consistently show that there are echo chambers, but studies that depend on self-reported data might not always do so. For better outcomes in the future, researchers should use a combination of the two methods. Jiang et al. (2021) analyzed COVID-19 interactions on Twitter and found that conservatives were more loud than average and that right-leaning individuals were more likely to become part of political echo bubbles. As a result, people were less exposed to different perspectives and became more polarized. Similarly, Cinelli et al. (2021) examined several social media platforms and found ideological segregation and homophily, particularly on Facebook. The role of platform-specific algorithms in creating echo chambers was thus brought to light. Conservatives were swayed by biased media and political figures to downplay the COVID-19 pandemic's dangers, which resulted in the spread of misinformation (Calvillo et al., 2020). Pennycook and Rand's (2020) research on the propagation of false news found that people are more likely to accept misleading statements when they lack critical thinking skills and exhibit a propensity they label "reflexive open-mindedness." This stands in stark contrast to the weak influences of familiarity and source dependability on the veracity of beliefs. Uscinski (2020) found that political identification and conspiracy thinking strongly influence believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Trump supporters, in particular, were more prone to deny the seriousness of the virus or even infer its intentional manufacture, according to his findings. Researchers have shown that after major events like the COVID-19 outbreak, algorithms on social media, user psychology, and political ideology all work together to create further divisions in society, propagate misinformation, and strengthen echo chambers.

The persistence of online echo chambers and political polarization can be understood through the included results from the following theories: UGT, Selective Exposure Theory, and Social Media Influence Theory. People would only take in data that supports their existing worldview, according to the Selective Exposure Theory (Klapper, 1960). The effect of algorithms, influencers, and network dynamics on public opinion, norms, and conduct poses a threat of ideological alienation and misinformation (Rachmad, 2023). Since UGT argues that people utilize media to relieve stress in addition to their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical requirements, this is especially true in the domain of political debate. This might lead to an increase in the popularity of political films among young people, which could be entertaining for them at the time but will only serve to further divide society (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). These examples show that media consumption has both positive and negative effects: although it brings people together, it also separates them by creating online ideological echo chambers where they never discuss topics other than their own opinion.

The purpose of this survey-based research was to look at how social media algorithms are creating echo chambers, increasing political engagement, and polarizing the younger generation. In order to draw broad conclusions, surveys were used to collect standardized data from large populations (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013; Babbie, 2020). The two groups consisted of 100 male and 100 female undergraduates from four different institutions in Pakistan. One student from each of the two groups, "Up to Graduation" and "Above Graduation," served as the analytical unit (Neuman, 2007). Since it was more practical, a method that does not depend on chance was utilized (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). A validated questionnaire of fourteen closed-ended items was used to guarantee reliability, comparability, and ease of analysis (Reinard, 2007; Bailey, 2007). The study was able to achieve its aims through the questionnaire that provided a structured environment for studying how social media influences teenage political ideas. Political polarization, echo chambers, exposure, and engagement were emphasized.

3. Theoretical Framework

Social Media Influence Theory, UGT, and Selective Exposure Theory all shed light on why political division and online echo chambers persist. The Selective Exposure Theory put forth by Klapper (1960) states that individuals will only consider evidence that supports their preexisting beliefs. Rachmand (2023) argues that algorithms, influencers, and network dynamics can shape public opinion, actions, and expectations, which can lead to ideological estrangement and spread disinformation. According to UGT, this is particularly true in the realm of political debate, as people use media as a means of coping with the mental, emotional, social, and physical demands of society. Young people may like this in the here and now, but it could cause generations to drift apart in the future (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Though these examples demonstrate that media consumption does bring people together, it also has the potential to create ideological echo chambers in which individuals hardly talk about anything other than their personal views.

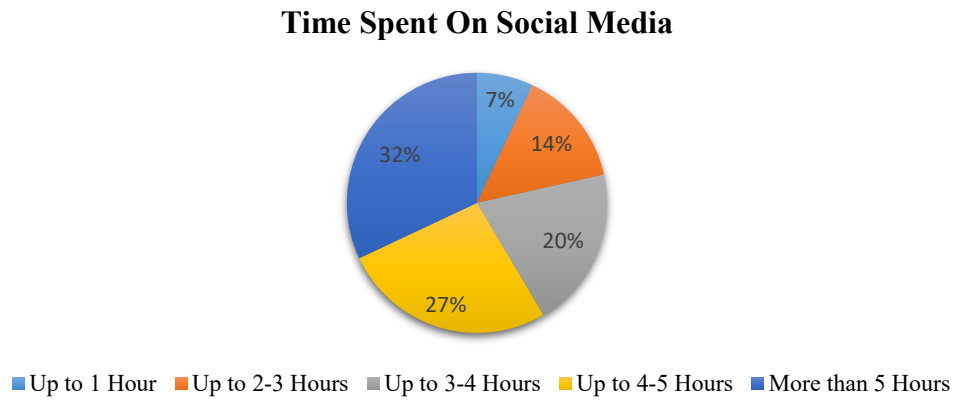
4. Methodology

This survey-based study sought out to investigate how social media algorithms are dividing today's youth, promoting political activity, and generating echo chambers. A cross-sectional survey was used to collect standardized data from various demographics in order to make general conclusions (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013; Babbie, 2020). Four hundred students from four separate schools spread across Pakistan's four provinces made up the sample, which was selected using a combination of convenience and selective selection methods. Gender, education level, and age were also not significantly differentiating factors in the sample. The study's unit of analysis was students (Neuman, 2007). A fourteen-item closed-ended questionnaire was employed by the researchers to guarantee consistency, comparability, and convenience of analysis (Reinard, 2007; Bailey, 2007). Additional weight was given in the survey to topics including political polarization, exposure, echo chambers, and involvement.

5. Results and Analysis

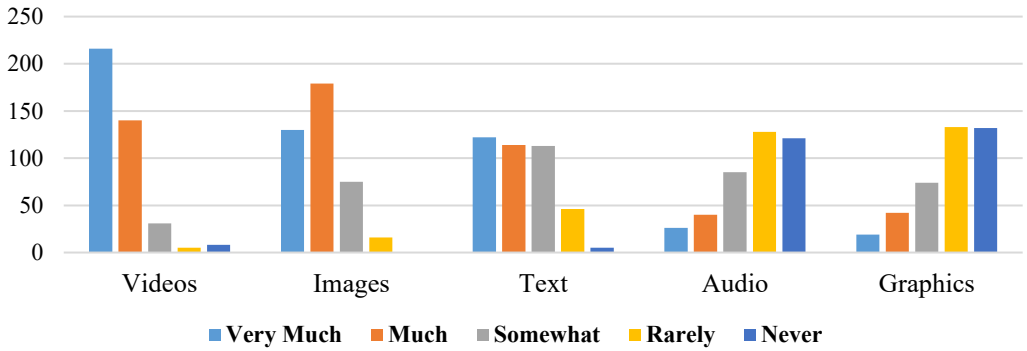
This section presents the statistical findings from a survey that was administered at four different universities in Pakistan. The universities in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh include the University of Balochistan, Khyber Medical University, and the University of Karachi, respectively. Four hundred individuals participated in the study; 200 were female and 200 were male. Respondents' educational levels ranged from high school to college and beyond. The purpose of this research is to examine the ways in which the political news consumption patterns of young people on social media contribute to the establishment of echo chambers and polarization in politics.

5.1 Descriptive Analysis



Graph 5.1.1 Distribution of Time Spent on Social Media

The time individuals spent on social media is shown in Graph 5.1.1. A little over a third of all users spent more than four hours online periodically, and over a third spent more than five hours online daily. Social media, particularly among young people nowadays, had become a powerful tool for indoctrination and ideological reinforcement.



Graph 5.1.2 Types of Political Content Consumed

Perceptions of different types of political material are shown in Graph 5.1.2. At 216, videos far outpaced images and text in terms of popularity, receiving a "Very Much" grade. Audiovisual content had a decline in viewership. There was a marked preference for visually attractive and easily understandable forms in the present global trend of digital political communication.

5.2 Demographic Analysis

The study used Pearson correlation tests to look for relationships between media exposure, content engagement, and behaviours associated to polarization. The research used cross-tabulations and frequency distributions, respectively, to evaluate the demographic implications.

Table 5.2.1. Crosstab of Gender and Perceptions of Political Polarization

Gender and Perceptions of Political Polarization	Male	Female	Total
Very Much	37	23	60
Much	102	89	191
Somewhat	43	66	109
Rarely	10	14	24
Never	8	8	16

*Figures in table show frequency

The study used a cross-tabulation to find out whether people's perceptions of political polarization on social media varied by gender. According to Table 5.2.1, 191 out of 400 male and female respondents believed that the political division was widened to a "Much" degree by young people's use of social media. Regardless of gender, the vast majority of individuals thought this way. A minority of women who responded picked "Somewhat," indicating that they were more moderate than extreme in their views on polarization. Perceptions of polarization differ little among genders, according to the research.

Table 5.2.2 Crosstab of Age and Social Media Usage Duration

Age and Social Media Usage Duration	18–24 years	25–30 years	Total
Up to 1 Hour	20	8	28
Up to 2–3 Hours	46	12	58
Up to 3–4 Hours	44	36	80

Up to 4–5 Hours	53	53	106
More than 5 Hours	59	69	128

Figures in table show frequency

The following analysis, as shown in Table 5.2.2, focused on the link between age and social media usage. In comparison to people aged 18–24, young adults (defined as those between 25 and 30 years old) reported spending more than five hours a day on social media. Specifically, 69 out of 100 respondents aged 65 and more reported this level of use, compared to just 59 out of 100 respondents aged 18–34. The results indicate that second age group were more likely to use social media, which raises concerns about the potential for echo chambers and the exposure to politically charged content.

Table 5.2.3 Crosstab of Age and Political Unfollowing Behavior

Age and Unfollowing Over Political Disagreements	18–24 years	25–30 years	Total
Very Frequently	30	22	52
Frequently	71	54	125
Occasionally	66	57	123
Rarely	45	29	74
Never	10	16	26

Figures in table show frequency

The prevalence of unfollowing persons on social media due to political disagreements was compared across age groups in Table 5.2.3. The proportion of those who unfollow political opponents on a regular or occasional basis was highest among those in the 18–24 age group. This data reveals that younger people were more proactive in managing the content they saw online and avoiding dangerous scenarios. By limiting people's exposure to different viewpoints, this sort of behaviour contributes to the formation of echo chambers. People in the 25–30 age group, in contrast, were more tolerant and less likely to unfollow others for political reasons.

Table 5.2.4 Crosstab of Education and Political Information Sources

Social Media Platforms	Education of Respondents		
Facebook	**Up to Graduation**	**Above the Graduation**	**Total**
Very Much	84	101	185
Much	63	65	128
Somewhat	25	26	51
Rarely	17	6	23
Never	11	2	13
Instagram			
Very Much	42	53	95
Much	95	79	174
Somewhat	40	34	74
Rarely	15	25	40
Never	8	9	17
X (Twitter)			
Very Much	45	61	106
Much	37	41	78

Somewhat	68	53	121
Rarely	29	22	51
Never	21	23	44
YouTube			
Very Much	58	74	132
Much	54	73	127
Somewhat	28	15	43
Rarely	43	38	81
Never	17	0	17
TikTok			
Very Much	55	46	101
Much	52	58	110
Somewhat	27	51	78
Rarely	51	29	80
Never	15	16	31
WhatsApp			
Very Much	44	27	71
Much	45	44	89
Somewhat	51	76	127
Rarely	40	40	80
Never	19	13	32

**Figures in table show frequency*

The research found that platform selections were examined according to degree of education (Table 5.2.4). Undergraduates were more prone to utilize TikTok for political news, while graduate students depended more on Facebook and YouTube, according to the data. Postgraduates' rising usage of Twitter/X was indicative of their expanding involvement with discourse-driven and text-based platforms. The usage of Instagram was all over the map, while WhatsApp was popular with both sexes (though college students said they used it more often). These results suggest that the kind of political information received and the platform chosen were both influenced by the degree of education.

Table 5.2.5 Crosstab of Education and Openness to Change Political Opinion

Education and Openness to Change Opinion	Up to Graduation	Above Graduation	Total
Strongly Agree	19	12	31
Agree	79	69	148
Neutral	63	68	131
Disagree	30	41	71
Strongly Disagree	9	10	19

**Figures in table show frequency*

The present study observed the correlation between education level and the eagerness to change the political stance in Table 5.1.5. Undergraduates were more likely to indicate a readiness to consider alternative viewpoints when given fresh information, according to the data. On the flip side, graduates were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree, which might mean that people were less open to different perspectives and more committed to their own political views after finishing college.

5.3 Statistical Analysis

Table 5.3.1 Correlation between Social Media Platforms and Political Content Formats

Political Content on Social Media

			Videos	Images	Text	Audio	Graphics
Use of Social Media Platforms for getting Political Information	Facebook	Pearson Correlation	.198**	.103*	.134**	-.016	.027
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.040	.007	.750	.595
		N	400	400	400	400	400
	Instagram	Pearson Correlation	.189**	.033	.139**	.057	-.021
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.516	.005	.259	.678
		N	400	400	400	400	400
	Twitter.(X)	Pearson Correlation	.165**	.265**	.353**	-.247**	-.168**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.000	.000	.001
		N	400	400	400	400	400
	YouTube	Pearson Correlation	.110*	.343**	.400**	-.169**	-.248**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.028	.000	.000	.001	.000
		N	400	400	400	400	400
	TikTok	Pearson Correlation	.061	.123*	.133**	.004	-.069
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.227	.014	.008	.943	.168
		N	400	400	400	400	400
	WhatsApp	Pearson Correlation	-.017	.133**	.019	.045	.021
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.739	.008	.703	.372	.675
		N	400	400	400	400	400
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).							
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).							

In Table 5.3.1, the study shows how different social media sites are linked to different news outlets when it comes to politics. A positive correlation between Facebook use and all three types of media shows that the platform was flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of content types. Instagram also had several notable, albeit weaker, linkages to text and videos. The medium that relied so much on discussion, Twitter/X, naturally, exhibited the strongest correlation with text-based political content. It was found that most of the videos on YouTube were heavily reliant on text and pictures. While WhatsApp was primarily a sharing medium, TikTok was more about rapid consumption than content production, as seen by the low correlations on the former.

Table 5.3.2 Correlation between Aligned Content Exposure and Content Sharing

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Significance
Aligned Content & Sharing	.116*	p = .021

Table 5.3.2 shows that seeing politically aligned material increased the likelihood that you would share it, albeit the correlation is modest and not statistically significant. This proves that ideological reinforcement did more than only encourage people to consume more material; it also encouraged them to actively participate by sharing it with others.

Table 5.3.3 Correlation between Exposure to Opposing Views and Avoidance Behavior

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Significance

Exposure to Opposing Views & Avoidance	-.004	p = .930

There was no statistically significant correlation between hearing dissenting opinions and avoiding them, as shown in Table 5.3.3. This suggests that circumstances or own prejudices may play a larger role than exposure itself in explaining why people avoid hearing other points of view.

Table 5.3.4 Correlation between Following Political Content and Strengthening Opinions

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Significance
Following Aligned Content & Strengthening Opinions	.157**	p = .002

Table 5.3.4 shows that following political news that was in line with the people' ideals is significantly associated with more favourable political sentiments. Because of this, the scientific evidence supporting the reinforcement hypothesis—which claims that people became more ideologically dogmatic after being exposed to particular information—is growing.

Table 5.3.5 Correlation between Algorithmic Echo Chambers and Strengthening Opinions

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Significance
Algorithmic Echo Chambers & Strengthening Opinions	.169**	p = .001

Table 5.3.5 demonstrates that the people' impression of algorithmic echo chambers is significantly related to people's political ideology development. Those who believed that algorithms selectively display content to reinforce current ideas also had a more negative view of social media in terms of politics.

6. Conclusion

This Pakistani study explains the complex interplay between demographics, the manner in which young people interact with political content on social media, and these platforms. Factors such as chronological age and educational attainment significantly influence one's political beliefs and online conduct. Echo chambers can arise for a variety of reasons, including automatic content curation and user-driven activities like unfollowing and selective sharing or likes. The rise of video and image-based content is indicative of broader digital shifts, and seeing politically aligned information has the effect of reinforcing one's own views. When we look at the big picture, our findings reveal that digital media ecosystems make political polarization and discourse fragmentation even worse. In order to have a better grasp of how echo chambers contribute to the increasing political polarization among Pakistan's youth, this study polled 400 undergraduates from four separate universities. The 18–24 age bracket devotes a disproportionate amount of time to political news, but the 25–30 age bracket spends about equal time on social media. Compared to their graduate school colleagues, undergraduates were more open to hearing out opposing arguments. Selection of platforms differed by degree level, further highlighting the influence of algorithms on content exposure. Undergraduates favoured TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp, but postgraduates depended on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter/X. According to the study, echo chambers happen when people's beliefs are reinforced by sharing and watching similar political content. Young people seek for political content to reinforce their ideas while also fulfilling their cognitive and social demands, according to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) and Ravchmad (2023). There were clear disparities in the level of political activity between the sexes, despite the fact that both believed that social media caused political turmoil. Social Media Influence Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory both lend credence to these findings. In addition, the findings are in line with the Selective Exposure Theory, put out by

Klapper (1960), which states that young people only absorb and communicate information that supports their existing worldviews. A combination of factors such as algorithmic curation, gender, age, and educational inequality leads to the formation of political echo chambers, which in turn further divides the younger generation of Pakistanis, according to the study.

7. Future Recommendations

Quantitative research methods were used for this investigation. Qualitative research and methodologies can be employed to delve even farther into the subject. In a similar vein, the current study may have benefited from a larger sample size (400 respondents) chosen using probability sampling techniques in order to draw broader conclusions. In order to get more useful data and outcomes, you might also think about using a mixed-method approach. Additional research might improve studies that compare different age groups to youngsters. Scientific investigations into the ways in which social media sites are transforming their users into virtual echo chambers can benefit from these suggestions.

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