

## DIGITAL HATE AND DEMOCRATIC POLARIZATION: SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN SHAPING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN PAKISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17312216>

### Keywords

Digital Hate, Political Polarization, Democracy, Social Media, Pakistan Elections 2024, Critical Discourse Analysis

### Article History

Received: 17 August 2025

Accepted: 27 September 2025

Published: 10 October 2025

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### Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed political communication in Pakistan. During the 2024 general elections, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube became key arenas of political engagement. However, they also enabled unprecedented levels of hate speech, disinformation, and divisive rhetoric. This study investigates the impact of online hate speech on political polarization, democratic culture, and voter perceptions. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, the research demonstrates how hate speech narratives reinforced ideological divides, fueled "us vs. them" identities, and normalized antagonistic political communication. Findings reveal that online hostility undermined deliberative democracy, delegitimized opposition voices, and eroded trust in electoral institutions. By examining the interplay of social media algorithms, echo chambers, and identity politics, this study highlights the urgent need for regulatory frameworks, digital literacy programs, and ethical codes of political conduct.

### INTRODUCTION

The role of social media in contemporary democracies is paradoxical: while it enhances political participation, it also accelerates political polarization. In Pakistan's 2024 general elections, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube functioned not only as tools for mobilization but also as amplifiers of hostility and intolerance.

Hate speech is increasingly recognized as a central challenge in democratic societies (Gagliardone et al., 2015). Its consequences extend beyond online

exchanges, shaping offline political behavior, voter attitudes, and intergroup relations. The weaponization of hate narratives erodes democratic culture by delegitimizing opponents, stigmatizing minorities, and reducing tolerance for diversity (Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018).

This study is of critical importance as it seeks to illuminate the complex and far-reaching consequences of social media on individuals and society. By exploring the negative impacts of social media, this research contributes valuable insights

into a rapidly evolving digital landscape that affects billions of people worldwide. Understanding the link between social media use and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness is vital for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. This study aims to provide evidence-based findings that can inform the development of interventions, support programs, and educational campaigns aimed at reducing the mental health risks associated with social media. By highlighting these connections, the study can help in crafting targeted approaches to mitigate the adverse psychological effects, especially among vulnerable populations like adolescents and young adults. The research will shed light on how social media alters interpersonal relationships and communication patterns. By identifying the factors that contribute to the erosion of face-to-face interactions and the decline in the quality of relationships, the study offers a basis for promoting healthier communication practices. This can guide individuals and families in balancing their online and offline lives, ultimately fostering stronger, more meaningful connections in the real world. The findings from this study can be instrumental in informing policymakers and regulators about the unintended consequences of social media. As governments and institutions grapple with the challenge of regulating digital platforms, this research provides critical data on the societal impacts of social media use. This information can be used to shape policies that protect users from harmful content, ensure the responsible use of algorithms, and promote transparency and accountability among social media companies. By disseminating the results of this study, educators and public health advocates can raise awareness about the potential dangers of social media. The study can serve as a resource for developing educational materials and campaigns that teach responsible social media use, helping users particularly young people navigate the digital world in a way that minimizes harm and maximizes benefits. This study also adds to the academic and professional discussions surrounding the impact of digital technology on human behavior and society. It provides a

framework for future research, encouraging further investigation into the complex relationship between social media and various aspects of life. The insights gained can be used by scholars, psychologists, sociologists, and other professionals to explore new avenues for research and practical applications. Overall, this study is significant because it addresses a timely and pressing issue, offering practical solutions and contributing to the broader understanding of how social media shapes and sometimes harms our lives.

### Research Objectives

- To assess the impact of social media on the quality of interpersonal relationships and face-to-face communication.
- To explore the role of social media in the spread of misinformation and its effect on societal polarization.

### Research Questions

- In what ways does social media impact the quality of interpersonal relationships and face-to-face communication?
- What is the role of social media in the spread of misinformation and its effect on societal polarization?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Negative Impact has been a topic of scholarly discussion and investigation for a long time due to the possible harmful effects on democratic countries. When people have strong feelings about their political identity and group, they construct borders based on political affiliations and interpret the world regarding group membership (Aslam et al., 2022). Furthermore, adopting information and communication technology has enabled new political activity in the modern world. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and others allow more members to interact over common interests than ever before. Its use, however, has created a significant vacuum in knowing how it affects the general populace while polarising them (Kanwel et al., 2020). From the available literature, one primary factor contributes to the growing interest in this subject. To begin with, social media has the potential to

strengthen democratic deliberation. Political information is extremely popular and prominent on social media sites. Political material accounts for a large portion of daily content exposure for 25% of Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook users (Aslam et al., 2022), and the majority of social media users report to encounter political information in their news feeds on a regular basis. A study of how social media use impacts political participation and its consequences is therefore necessary.

According to one study, social media may play a big role in immersing citizens in political debate and engagement. According to specific research (Hussain, 2022), it can function as a platform for political mobilization, allowing individuals to voice their thoughts, participate in debate, and organise collective action. The simplicity with which information may be shared and the rapid transmission of messages on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have boosted the circulation of political content and made it more accessible to a wider audience (Khattak & Higdon, 2020).

Furthermore, social media has allegedly made it easier for traditionally disadvantaged groups, such as youth and minorities, to participate in politics (Rahman, 2021). It provides a space for citizens to interact with politics on their own terms, without the need for traditional gatekeepers such as political parties or the news media (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020). Democratic societies may be able to revitalise civic involvement with the aid of social media. Global research links online hate with democratic backsliding, as populist leaders exploit divisive rhetoric to mobilize supporters (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In South Asia, scholars observe that hate speech intensifies during elections, targeting minorities and opposition leaders (Hussain et al., 2024).

Pakistani elections increasingly reflect the “digitalization of politics” (Anam & Ahmed, 2024). Online campaigns mobilize youth but also weaponize hate speech, memes, and conspiracy theories. This fosters a toxic environment where political opponents are vilified as “traitors” or “foreign agents” (Rafi & Shafiq, 2024).

Polarization erodes tolerance for opposing viewpoints, replacing democratic dialogue with

antagonistic confrontation. Scholars argue that normalization of hate speech undermines trust in institutions, leading to disenchantment with democracy itself (McCoy & Somer, 2019).

#### Theoretical Framework

The study employed Fairclough’s (2018) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as dialectical reasoning, using it as a theoretical framework to examine the hateful speeches and statements made by prominent politicians. The analysis, structured around critique, explanation, and action, scrutinizes the adversarial rhetoric, derogatory vocabularies, and interdiscursive strategies used by political leaders. Data was collected from news reports and social media covering speeches made by key figures from Pakistan’s three main political parties: Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), during the period from April 2022 to June 2024. This period, marked by the no-confidence vote against then-Prime Minister Imran Khan, exemplifies the heightened political polarisation in the country. The findings reveal that politicians from all three parties engaged in the use of hateful and abusive language, significantly contributing to the already fragile state of democracy. It was also revealed that political discourse in Pakistan is heavily shaped by religious, nationalist, and populist rhetoric, which fuels hostility and further undermines democratic processes. The study advocates for constructive deliberation and a reframing of political discourse among party leaders to address and reverse the deteriorating situation.

This paper explores hate speech issues through the lens of human rights and social justice, focusing particularly on its impact on minority communities in Pakistan. It examines how hate speech undermines their human rights and leads to a denial of social justice, eroding the social fabric and perpetuating discrimination (Suleman, 2024). The paper begins with a discussion of the current global context and then delves into the socio-political landscape of Pakistan, presenting relevant background information. It highlights that Pakistan, marked by religious, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, has struggled to

fully embrace this diversity. Within this context, the article specifically studies the issue of online hate speech directed at minority communities and its detrimental effects on their well-being and societal integration. The paper concludes with comprehensive recommendations to tackle hate speech both online and offline, aiming to promote a more inclusive and just society for all, where every individual's rights are respected and protected.

The present research explores the dynamics of political hate speech on Pakistani social media using a socio-cognitive approach. It emphasizes interplay between societal power structures, ideology and discourse. It delves into how entrenched ideologies and power relations shape both i.e., production and consumption of hate speech. It highlights role of social media as a powerful amplifier within these processes. It also reveals that hate speech on platforms like Twitter not only mirrors existing societal and political cleavages but also intensifies them thus serving as both weapon wielded by the powerful to maintain dominance and tool for opposition groups to challenge the status quo. Analyzing user-generated content it identifies a pattern where hate speech fosters an environment conducive to spread of discriminatory ideologies. These ideologies perpetuate social and political divisions. It also underlines the significant influence of digital literacy and contextual understanding of hate speech. It suggests that addressing this issue effectively requires more than just content moderation. Findings advocate for comprehensive strategies that include enhancing digital literacy and fostering inclusive political discourse. These strategies aim to mitigate the divisive impact of hate speech and promote a more inclusive and respectful political discourse in Pakistan. Socio-cognitive approach provides a nuanced understanding of how cognitive schemas and societal conditions interact to influence discourse production and reception. This perspective is crucial for policymakers, social media platforms and civil society as it highlights need for a collaborative effort to tackle underlying causes of political hate speech and safeguard democratic

discourse in digital age (Jahanzeb Jahan et al., 2024).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative content analysis research design to examine hate speech narratives. Content analysis is a systematic method used to study textual, visual, or audio content, making it suitable for understanding the nature and extent of hate speech on social media platforms.

The study focuses on posts, comments, and hashtags on platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube that were widely shared or discussed during the 2024 Pakistan elections. This approach helps uncover both the explicit and implicit hate speech narratives targeting political candidates, parties, and minority groups. Qualitative content analysis allows for in-depth examination of the underlying meanings and themes within social media texts. It helps in identifying:

- Types of hate speech (e.g., political, ethnic, religious, or gender-based).
- Frequency and intensity of hate speech during the election period.
- Narrative patterns and key actors propagating hate speech.

### Population and Sampling

The population for this study includes all publicly available posts, comments, hashtags, and videos related to the 2024 Pakistan elections on major social media platforms, including Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube.

A purposive sampling method is adopted to select relevant content for analysis. This method ensures that only content containing hate speech or related narratives is included. The selection criteria include:

1. Posts, comments, or hashtags that explicitly or implicitly promote hate speech.
2. Content shared or discussed widely during the election period (January 2024 to April 2024).
3. Posts from verified accounts, influencers, political party pages, and public groups.

To ensure representativeness, content will be collected from the following platforms:

- Twitter (X): Trending hashtags, tweets, and retweets.
- Facebook: Public posts, comments on official political pages, and public groups.
- YouTube: Videos and comments from political channels or influencers.

A sample size of approximately 500-700 posts/comments will be analyzed to ensure sufficient data coverage.

Data Collection

The data for this study is collected from social media platforms, including Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube. Data will be collected over a three-month period surrounding the 2024 elections to capture peak hate speech activities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

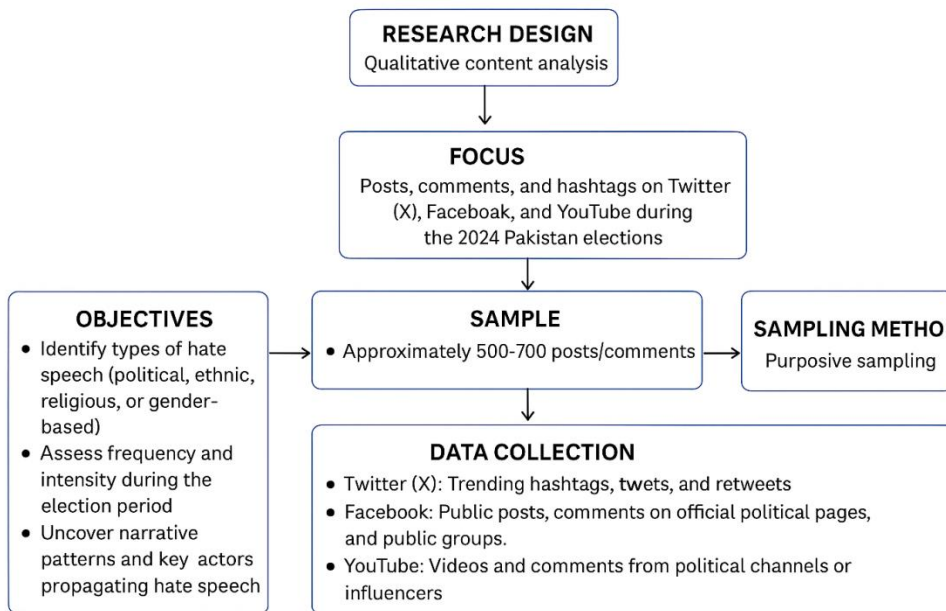


Figure 1. Flowchart of the research methodology used to analyze hate speech narratives during the 2024 Pakistan elections.

Results & Discussions

The role of algorithms in amplifying hate speech cannot be overstated. Platforms such as Twitter (X) and Facebook prioritize engagement, often showcasing emotionally charged content. This prioritization exacerbates the spread of hate speech by creating echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to ideologically similar views, reinforcing biases and fostering animosity towards opposing groups. As Pariser (2011) described in the context of filter bubbles, these algorithmic mechanisms further polarize political discourse, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and deepening societal divides. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing loop, where

political actors and their audiences become entrenched in their positions, escalating tensions and minimizing the prospects for meaningful dialogue. Additionally, the viral nature of polarizing content ensures that even small-scale incidents of hate speech gain disproportionate visibility, influencing the broader public discourse and shaping societal attitudes.

Political actors, including parties and their supporters, were key propagators of hate speech during the elections. The findings demonstrated that hate speech was not limited to fringe elements but was also perpetuated by mainstream political figures. For instance, derogatory remarks and inflammatory statements by prominent leaders

were widely shared on social media, normalizing hate-filled rhetoric. These practices align with findings from Anam and Ahmed (2024), who observed the pervasive use of adversarial rhetoric and derogatory language in Pakistani political discourse.

Such strategies were often deliberate, aiming to evoke emotional responses and rally support. The use of religious and ethnic undertones in hate speech narratives is particularly concerning, as it threatens to undermine the social fabric of a diverse society like Pakistan. Ethnic groups such as the Baloch, Pashtuns, and Sindhis were frequently targeted, reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating intergroup hostility. This pattern corroborates studies like Akbar and Safdar (2024), which identified the framing of ethnic minorities as threats to national unity in online political discourses. Beyond these localized impacts, the normalization of such tactics by political elites undermines democratic norms and sets a dangerous precedent for future political engagements. The reliance on hate speech not only alienates marginalized communities but also shifts the political focus away from substantive issues such as governance and development.

Social media platforms served as enablers of hate speech, providing tools and spaces for users to engage in toxic interactions. While platforms like Twitter and Facebook have implemented content moderation policies, their enforcement remains inconsistent. The sheer volume of user-generated content and the contextual nuances of hate speech, particularly in multilingual and multicultural societies like Pakistan, pose significant challenges.

The findings highlight a gap in digital literacy among users, which exacerbates the spread of hate speech. Many users were unaware of the legal and ethical implications of their online behavior, contributing to the proliferation of hateful content. As suggested by Batool et al. (2024), improving digital literacy and awareness is crucial to mitigating the negative impacts of social media on political discourse. Furthermore, the economic model of social media platforms—reliant on engagement and advertising revenue—incentivizes sensational and emotionally charged content,

often at the expense of ethical considerations. Addressing these systemic issues requires a fundamental reevaluation of platform governance, emphasizing accountability and transparency in content regulation. The challenge lies in balancing freedom of expression with the need to curtail harmful speech, a task that requires collaboration between platforms, governments, and civil society. The proliferation of hate speech during the elections has profound implications for democratic processes. Hate speech undermines the quality of public discourse by stifling meaningful debate and fostering an environment of hostility and fear. When political campaigns are dominated by hate-filled rhetoric, voters are less likely to make informed decisions, which weakens the democratic process.

Moreover, the normalization of hate speech erodes trust in democratic institutions. When political actors resort to divisive tactics, it signals a lack of commitment to democratic values, further alienating citizens. The findings resonate with the work of Suleman (2024), who emphasized the role of hate speech in undermining human rights and perpetuating social injustice. In this context, the role of electoral bodies and watchdog organizations becomes critical. Ensuring a fair and unbiased election process requires proactive measures to monitor and address hate speech. Without such interventions, the democratic ideals of inclusivity and equality risk being overshadowed by divisive rhetoric. The erosion of democratic norms also has international implications, potentially affecting Pakistan's diplomatic relations and its standing in the global community as a pluralistic democracy.

The psychological toll of hate speech on individuals and communities was evident in the findings. Victims of online harassment reported feelings of anxiety, stress, and alienation. The targeted nature of hate speech, often aimed at marginalized groups, exacerbates existing inequalities and fosters a culture of exclusion.

At the societal level, hate speech contributes to social fragmentation by deepening existing divides and creating new fault lines. The analysis showed that hate speech narratives often framed political and ideological opponents as “others,”

dehumanizing them and justifying hostility. This aligns with Jahanzeb et al. (2024), who highlighted the role of hate speech in intensifying societal cleavages. The broader societal consequences include the erosion of social trust and the weakening of communal bonds. When hate speech becomes pervasive, it fosters an environment of fear and suspicion, discouraging cooperation and mutual understanding. Over time, this can lead to increased polarization, with communities retreating into insular groups defined by shared grievances rather than shared goals. The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a fractured society, less resilient to external challenges and more prone to internal conflict.

Addressing the issue of hate speech on social media requires a multi-faceted approach involving policymakers, social media companies, civil society, and individuals. Key strategies include:

**Strengthening Content Moderation:** Social media platforms must invest in robust content moderation mechanisms that account for linguistic and cultural contexts. Collaboration with local experts can enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of moderation efforts. These efforts should also extend to real-time monitoring during critical periods, such as elections, to prevent the escalation of harmful narratives.

**Promoting Digital Literacy:** Educational initiatives aimed at improving digital literacy can empower users to critically evaluate online content and avoid engaging in or spreading hate speech. Integrating digital literacy into school curricula and community programs can foster a more informed and responsible online culture.

**Regulatory Frameworks:** Governments should establish clear legal frameworks to address hate speech while safeguarding freedom of expression. Transparent and fair enforcement of these laws is essential to prevent misuse. Additionally, collaboration between nations can help establish international standards for regulating online hate speech.

**Encouraging Ethical Political Discourse:** Political leaders must be held accountable for their rhetoric. Encouraging constructive and inclusive dialogue can help reduce the prevalence of hate speech in political campaigns. This can be

achieved through media training for politicians and stricter penalties for violations of ethical standards.

**Community Engagement:** Civil society organizations can play a vital role in promoting tolerance and countering hate speech through grassroots initiatives and awareness campaigns. These initiatives can include workshops, public dialogues, and online campaigns aimed at fostering empathy and understanding across diverse groups.

While this study provides valuable insights into hate speech narratives during the 2024 Pakistan elections, further research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of such rhetoric on political participation and societal cohesion. Comparative studies examining hate speech in different cultural and political contexts can also enhance our understanding of its dynamics and inform global strategies for mitigation. Additionally, interdisciplinary research involving psychology, sociology, and data science can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving hate speech and its impacts. Exploring the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, in combating hate speech offers another promising avenue for research. These technologies can help create more transparent and accountable systems for content moderation, while also empowering users to take a more active role in shaping the digital environment.

The findings of this study underscore the pervasive and damaging nature of hate speech on social media during the 2024 Pakistan elections. By amplifying divisions and undermining democratic values, hate speech poses a significant challenge to societal harmony and political stability. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders to create a more inclusive and respectful digital environment. Through informed strategies and collaborative action, it is possible to mitigate the negative impacts of hate speech and foster healthier political and social discourse. However, the challenge remains multifaceted, requiring sustained commitment and innovative solutions to counter the evolving

tactics of those who exploit digital platforms for divisive ends.

## Conclusion

The 2024 Pakistan elections provided a stark reminder of the dual-edged nature of social media. While digital platforms have democratized access to information and amplified diverse voices, they have also become conduits for toxic narratives, particularly hate speech. This study delves into the prevalence and impacts of hate speech during this pivotal period, unearthing critical insights that hold implications not only for Pakistan but for democracies worldwide.

The research revealed that hate speech during the elections was fueled by a confluence of political, technological, and societal factors. Political actors, including parties and influential individuals, employed divisive rhetoric to galvanize support, often at the expense of national cohesion. Social media algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, inadvertently amplified such content, fostering echo chambers and intensifying polarization. Ethnic, religious, and gender-based slurs dominated the online discourse, reflecting deep-seated societal divisions.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the psychological toll on individuals targeted by hate speech, as well as its broader societal impact. Victims reported heightened stress, anxiety, and alienation, while communities became increasingly fragmented. Hate speech narratives framed opponents as “others,” perpetuating dehumanization and justifying hostility. These dynamics align with global trends, underscoring the universal challenge of navigating hate speech in the digital age.

Hate speech poses a direct threat to democratic values by eroding the quality of public discourse and undermining trust in institutions. During the 2024 elections, this was evident in the way hate-filled rhetoric overshadowed substantive debates on governance, policies, and development. As voters were inundated with emotionally charged and polarizing content, the democratic process—predicated on informed decision-making—suffered.

Moreover, the normalization of hate speech has long-term implications for political stability. When political actors prioritize divisive tactics, they set a precedent that undermines democratic norms. This fosters a culture where public engagement is driven by fear and hostility rather than constructive dialogue. Such an environment not only alienates citizens but also diminishes the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Social media platforms were instrumental in shaping the dynamics of hate speech during the elections. Despite their potential to foster connectivity and inclusivity, these platforms often prioritized engagement over ethical considerations. Algorithms designed to boost user activity inadvertently amplified sensational and divisive content, creating fertile ground for hate speech to thrive.

The findings underscore the urgent need for platforms to take greater responsibility in moderating content. Current moderation mechanisms, while useful, are insufficient in addressing the scale and complexity of hate speech in multilingual and culturally diverse contexts like Pakistan. Enhanced content moderation—informed by local expertise—is essential to curtailing the spread of harmful narratives.

The study highlights the role of hate speech in exacerbating societal divisions. By framing opponents through the lens of “us versus them,” hate speech deepens pre-existing fractures within society. Ethnic and religious minorities were disproportionately targeted, reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating systemic discrimination.

This societal fragmentation has far-reaching consequences. It weakens communal bonds, fosters mistrust, and creates an environment ripe for conflict. Over time, these dynamics can erode the social fabric, making it increasingly difficult for communities to collaborate on shared goals.

## Recommendations

Addressing the issue of hate speech requires a multi-pronged approach involving policymakers, social media platforms, civil society, and individuals. The following recommendations emerge from this study:

- **Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks:** Governments must establish clear and enforceable laws to address hate speech while safeguarding freedom of expression. Transparent enforcement mechanisms are critical to ensuring fairness and accountability.
- **Enhancing Content Moderation:** Social media platforms must invest in more robust moderation tools and processes, including real-time monitoring during critical periods like elections. Collaborating with local experts can improve the cultural and linguistic sensitivity of these mechanisms.
- **Promoting Digital Literacy:** Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives can empower users to critically evaluate online content and recognize the consequences of spreading hate speech. Digital literacy should be integrated into school curricula and community programs.
- **Encouraging Ethical Political Discourse:** Political leaders must be held accountable for their rhetoric. Encouraging constructive and inclusive dialogue can help shift the focus from divisive narratives to substantive issues.
- **Fostering Community Resilience:** Civil society organizations should lead initiatives to promote tolerance and counter hate speech. Grassroots programs that encourage intergroup dialogue and collaboration can help rebuild trust and strengthen communal bonds.

This study demonstrates that digital hate speech during the 2024 Pakistan elections not only polarized voters but also weakened democratic discourse. Social media amplified hostility, created echo chambers, and normalized intolerance in political communication.

The erosion of democratic dialogue in Pakistan illustrates the broader risks posed by unregulated digital spaces in fragile democracies.

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