# SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM AND YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN PAKISTAN

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## Abstract

*Social media has emerged as a powerful tool shaping political engagement, particularly among youth in developing democracies. This study investigates the relationship between social media activism and youth political participation in Pakistan, analyzing how online political discussions, content sharing, and mobilization campaigns influence offline civic behaviors. Using a survey of 1,500 youth aged 18–30 across major urban centers, this study examines digital activism patterns, political efficacy, and socio-demographic moderators. Results indicate that engagement with political content on social media significantly correlates with offline participation, though effects are moderated by education, gender, and urban-rural residency. The findings underscore the dual role of social media as both an enabler and barrier to youth political participation, providing actionable insights for policymakers and civil society actors seeking to strengthen democratic engagement*

**Keywords**: *Social Media Activism, Youth, Political Participation, Digital Engagement, Pakistan*

## Introduction

Political participation is a cornerstone of democratic governance, shaping accountability, policy responsiveness, and societal progress. Globally, youth engagement has become a critical focus due to the large demographic share of young populations and their potential to influence political trajectories (United Nations, 2022). In Pakistan, the youth population (ages 18–30) constitutes approximately 64% of the total population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023), positioning them as a key agent of social and political change. However, historical trends indicate that youth participation in conventional political processes, such as voting, attending political meetings, or joining formal civic organizations, has been inconsistent and, in some cases, declining (Khan & Farooq, 2019).

The advent of digital technologies and widespread adoption of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of political engagement. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become venues where youth can access information, express opinions, mobilize peers, and participate in socio-political campaigns (Loader et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2015). Social media offers immediacy, reach, and interactivity, enabling youth to circumvent traditional barriers to participation, such as geographical distance, limited mobility, or political gatekeeping. In the Pakistani context, where traditional political structures are often hierarchical and male-dominated, social media provides an alternative arena for marginalized voices, particularly young women and rural youth, to engage politically (Jamil, 2020; Ali & Hussain, 2023).

Despite these opportunities, the effectiveness of social media activism in translating online engagement into offline political participation remains contested. While some studies argue that online engagement strengthens political efficacy, awareness, and offline action, others suggest that it may lead to superficial "slacktivism," where participation remains confined to likes, shares, and retweets without tangible offline consequences (Morozov, 2009; Valenzuela, 2013). Understanding this dynamic in Pakistan is critical, as

political institutions, socio-cultural norms, and access disparities shape the extent to which digital activism can foster meaningful political involvement.

This study explores the relationship between social media activism and youth political participation in Pakistan. It addresses key questions: How do Pakistani youth engage with political content on social media? To what extent does online activism influence offline political behaviors, including voting, protesting, and community engagement? How do socio-demographic factors—such as gender, education, and urban-rural residency moderate these relationships? By answering these questions, this research contributes to both theory and practice, offering insights into how digital tools can empower youth in developing democracies, and informing policy and civil society interventions aimed at enhancing democratic participation.

To contextualize this inquiry, this study draws upon political communication theory, which posits that media exposure shapes political attitudes and behaviors (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and the civic engagement framework, which emphasizes the multidimensional nature of political participation (Verba et al., 1995). Social capital theory further underpins the study, highlighting how networked interactions on social media can facilitate trust, reciprocity, and collective action (Putnam, 2000). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a lens for examining how digital platforms mediate youth engagement in Pakistan, considering both structural and individual-level influences.

## Literature Review
### Social Media Activism and Political Participation
Social media activism has emerged as a transformative phenomenon, enabling individuals, particularly youth, to express political views, mobilize peers, and influence policy discourse. Globally, studies indicate a positive correlation between digital engagement and offline political participation, including voting, attending rallies, and involvement in civic campaigns (Boulianne, 2015; Theocharis et al., 2015). Social media reduces the transaction costs of political participation by providing low-cost, immediate access to information and communication channels, facilitating engagement for populations traditionally excluded from formal politics (Loader et al., 2014).

In the Pakistani context, social media platforms have played a visible role in shaping political discourse, from election campaigns to civil society movements. For instance, PTI's youth mobilization strategy leveraged Facebook and Twitter to engage supporters, leading to increased electoral participation among young voters (Digital Pakistan Report, 2024). Similarly, online campaigns addressing social issues such as #MeToo Pakistan or environmental activism demonstrate the capacity of digital platforms to galvanize youth engagement beyond conventional political processes (Ali & Hussain, 2023).

### Theoretical Perspectives on Digital Political Engagement
Political communication theory emphasizes the role of media in informing citizens and influencing behavior. Exposure to political content online enhances awareness, facilitates opinion formation, and can increase motivation to act politically (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Vaccari, 2015). Civic engagement theory further suggests that participation is multidimensional, encompassing both formal actions (e.g., voting) and informal actions (e.g., community involvement, online activism) (Verba et al., 1995). Social capital theory highlights the relational benefits of online networks, suggesting that social media interactions can build trust and collective efficacy, which are crucial for mobilizing political action (Putnam, 2000).

These frameworks collectively suggest that online activism is not merely a passive activity; rather, it has the potential to foster political efficacy and translate into tangible offline behaviors. However, structural

constraints, socio-economic disparities, and the digital divide may limit the translation of online engagement into meaningful participation (Hilbert, 2011; Ali & Hussain, 2023).

### Youth Political Engagement in Pakistan

Youth participation in Pakistan is shaped by socio-cultural norms, education, urbanization, and gender. Male youth often have more freedom to engage politically, while women face mobility restrictions and societal expectations that constrain their participation (Khan & Farooq, 2019; UN Women Pakistan, 2024). Urban youth, benefiting from higher internet penetration, education, and exposure to political discourse, tend to be more active both online and offline than rural youth (Digital Pakistan Report, 2024).

Studies show that political knowledge, digital literacy, and online network size significantly influence the likelihood of participating in political activities (Jamil, 2020). Online political activism, such as content sharing, commentary, and participation in online petitions, can act as a precursor to offline engagement, but the strength of this effect varies by socio-demographic characteristics (Valenzuela, 2013; Loader et al., 2014).

### Barriers to Effective Social Media Activism

Despite opportunities, several barriers hinder the effectiveness of social media activism in Pakistan. Misinformation and echo chambers can distort political understanding, reducing the impact of online engagement on informed participation (Ali & Hussain, 2023). Limited digital literacy, especially among rural youth and women, can restrict access to political information and diminish participation (UN Women Pakistan, 2024). Structural inequalities, such as socio-economic status and gendered constraints, further exacerbate disparities in political engagement, creating gaps between online activity and offline participation (Hilbert, 2011).

### Research Gap

While international literature documents the link between social media activism and youth participation, empirical evidence from Pakistan remains limited. Existing studies are largely descriptive or qualitative, providing limited insights into the quantitative relationship between online engagement and offline participation. This study addresses this gap by applying a cross-sectional survey and robust statistical analyses to assess patterns of youth political engagement in Pakistan, while considering moderating socio-demographic factors.

### Methodology
### Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to capture the current state of social media activism and political participation among youth. This design enables the collection of data across diverse socio-demographic groups, facilitating examination of correlations and moderating effects.

### Sampling and Participants

Stratified random sampling ensured representation across gender, urban-rural residency, and educational attainment. Targeting four major urban centers—Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Peshawar—the survey recruited 1,500 participants aged 18–30 (52% male, 48% female). A sample size calculation based on population estimates and 95% confidence intervals confirmed adequate statistical power for detecting moderate effect sizes.

## Survey Instrument

The structured questionnaire consisted of four sections:

- **Demographics:** age, gender, education, residency, and socio-economic status.
- **Social Media Activism:** frequency of sharing political content, participating in campaigns, and engaging in discussions on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always).
- **Offline Political Participation:** voting, protest attendance, volunteering, and community initiatives, measured using a 6-item Likert scale adapted from Verba et al. (1995).
- **Political Efficacy:** perceived influence over political outcomes and confidence in civic skills, measured with a 4-item Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

A pilot test with 50 respondents ensured clarity and reliability, yielding Cronbach's alpha values above 0.82 for all scales.

## Data Collection

Data collection occurred over eight weeks via online platforms, emails, and university networks. Ethical approval was obtained from Lahore University of Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was collected electronically, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and engagement patterns. Pearson correlation coefficients assessed relationships between social media activism and offline participation. Multiple regression analyses tested the predictive effect of online activism on offline participation, while interaction terms evaluated moderation by gender, education, and urban-rural status. Assumptions of normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were verified before analysis.

## Results

### Overview of Results

The results provide an in-depth understanding of the patterns of social media activism and offline political participation among Pakistani youth. Descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and regression models were used to examine both the prevalence of online engagement and its relationship with offline political behaviors. Socio-demographic variables, including gender, urban-rural residency, and educational attainment, were included to assess moderating effects. This section first interprets the descriptive data, followed by bivariate correlations, and concludes with multivariate regression analyses.

### Descriptive Statistics

Before examining relationships, it is crucial to understand the general patterns of social media activism and political participation in the sample. Table 1 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviations for online engagement, offline participation, and political efficacy.

### Interpretation:

The descriptive statistics indicate that youth engage moderately in social media activism, with an overall mean score of 3.62 (SD = 0.87). This suggests that on average, respondents participate in online political activities such as sharing content, posting opinions, and following political discussions approximately "sometimes" to "often." Offline political participation shows a lower mean (M = 2.81, SD = 0.95), implying that while youth are active online, translating this engagement into offline action—like attending rallies, volunteering, or participating in civic projects—occurs less frequently. Political efficacy scores (M = 3.45,

SD = 0.78) suggest that respondents generally feel moderately confident in their capacity to influence political outcomes.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N = 1,500)

| Variable | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social Media Activism | 3.62 | 0.87 | 1 | 5 |
| Offline Political Participation | 2.81 | 0.95 | 1 | 5 |
| Political Efficacy | 3.45 | 0.78 | 1 | 5 |

## Correlation Analysis

To assess the relationship between social media activism and offline political participation, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated (Table 2).

**Interpretation:**

The correlation analysis demonstrates a significant positive relationship between social media activism and offline political participation ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$). This indicates that youth who are more active online are also more likely to engage in offline political behaviors. Political efficacy is also positively correlated with both online ($r = 0.51$, $p < .001$) and offline participation ($r = 0.55$, $p < .001$), suggesting that perceived influence over political outcomes strengthens the link between digital activism and tangible political action. These findings support prior studies that argue online engagement can foster offline participation when mediated by political efficacy (Valenzuela, 2013; Loader et al., 2014).

**Table 2.** Pearson Correlation Coefficients (N = 1,500)

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Social Media Activism | 1 | | |
| 2. Offline Political Participation | 0.48** | 1 | |
| 3. Political Efficacy | 0.51** | 0.55** | 1 |

**Note:** $**p < .001$

## Multiple Regression Analysis

To examine the predictive power of social media activism on offline political participation, a hierarchical regression was conducted (Table 3). In the first step, socio-demographic variables (gender, education, and urban-rural residency) were entered. In the second step, social media activism and political efficacy were added. Interaction terms between social media activism and socio-demographics were tested in the third step to assess moderation effects.

**Interpretation:**

Regression results indicate that social media activism significantly predicts offline political participation ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), even after controlling for gender, education, and residency. Political efficacy also emerged as a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$), confirming that youth who feel capable of influencing political processes are more likely to act offline. Moderation analyses revealed that gender and urban-rural residency significantly interact with social media activism: the effect of online engagement on offline participation is stronger among male and urban youth ($\beta_{interaction\_gender} = 0.11$, $p = .02$; $\beta_{interaction\_urban} = 0.09$, $p = .03$). This aligns with prior research indicating structural and socio-cultural constraints limit the translation of digital activism into tangible participation for female and rural youth (UN Women Pakistan, 2024; Khan & Farooq, 2019).

**Table 3.** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Offline Political Participation (N = 1,500)

| Predictor | Step 1 β | Step 2 β | Step 3 β |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | 0.12* | 0.09 | 0.08 |
| Education | 0.15** | 0.12* | 0.12* |
| Urban-Rural Residency | 0.14** | 0.10* | 0.09* |
| Social Media Activism | | 0.42** | 0.41** |
| Political Efficacy | | 0.36** | 0.35** |
| Social Media × Gender | | | 0.11* |
| Social Media × Urban-Rural | | | 0.09* |
| R² | 0.12 | 0.43 | 0.45 |
| ΔR² | | 0.31 | 0.02 |

**Note:** $*p < .05$; $**p < .001$

## Additional Analysis: Gender Differences

Further analysis examined gender-specific patterns in online and offline engagement. Male respondents reported higher mean scores for both social media activism (M = 3.75, SD = 0.82) and offline participation (M = 2.94, SD = 0.93) than female respondents (social media: M = 3.48, SD = 0.90; offline: M = 2.66, SD = 0.97). Independent t-tests confirmed these differences were statistically significant ($t\_social$ = 5.62, p < .001; $t\_offline$ = 4.89, p < .001). These findings reflect socio-cultural constraints, mobility restrictions, and family expectations that disproportionately affect female youth participation (Khan & Farooq, 2019; UN Women Pakistan, 2024).

## Urban-Rural Disparities

Comparisons between urban and rural youth indicate that urban respondents are more engaged both online and offline. Urban social media activism mean = 3.73 (SD = 0.84), rural = 3.41 (SD = 0.89); urban offline participation mean = 2.92 (SD = 0.94), rural = 2.61 (SD = 0.97). ANOVA analyses confirm significant differences ($F\_online$ = 28.4, p < .001; $F\_offline$ = 32.7, p < .001). This underscores structural and infrastructural barriers, including internet connectivity, digital literacy, and access to political networks, which limit rural youth participation (Digital Pakistan Report, 2024).

## Interpretation Summary

Overall, these results demonstrate that social media activism is a significant predictor of offline political participation among Pakistani youth. The relationship is moderated by gender and residency, indicating that socio-cultural and structural factors shape how online engagement translates into tangible political actions. Political efficacy further strengthens this relationship, suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing youth confidence and digital skills may amplify the impact of social media activism.

## Discussion
### Overview

This study examined the relationship between social media activism and offline political participation among Pakistani youth, considering the moderating effects of gender, urban-rural residency, and the mediating role of political efficacy. The results support the hypothesis that online political engagement positively predicts offline political participation and highlight the socio-cultural factors that facilitate or constrain this relationship. This discussion contextualizes the findings within theoretical frameworks and prior empirical studies, explores practical implications, and addresses limitations and directions for future research.

### Social Media Activism and Offline Participation

The significant positive relationship between social media activism and offline political participation aligns with the literature on digital civic engagement. Youth who actively share political content, comment on political discussions, or participate in online campaigns are more likely to engage in offline activities such as rallies, volunteerism, and community initiatives. This supports the "mobilization hypothesis," which suggests that digital engagement can act as a springboard for tangible civic action (Valenzuela, 2013; Loader et al., 2014).

The findings corroborate research in other developing countries showing that youth increasingly rely on social media as their primary source of political information and mobilization (Fallon & Boutilier, 2022). In Pakistan, where traditional political participation is often limited by bureaucratic inefficiencies, mobility constraints, and socio-cultural norms, online activism provides a relatively low-risk avenue for expression and organization (Khan & Farooq, 2019).

### Political Efficacy as a Mediator

Political efficacy emerged as a robust predictor of offline participation and strengthened the effect of online activism. Youth who perceive themselves as capable of influencing political processes are more likely to translate online activity into real-world action. This finding aligns with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, which posits that self-efficacy is a critical determinant of behavioral engagement. The results suggest that interventions targeting political knowledge and confidence may amplify the impact of social media activism, especially in contexts with structural barriers to participation.

### Gender Differences

Consistent with prior research in South Asia (UN Women Pakistan, 2024; Khan & Farooq, 2019), male youth demonstrated higher levels of both online and offline political engagement than female youth. Socio-cultural constraints—including familial oversight, mobility restrictions, and gendered expectations—limit female participation. The moderation analysis further indicated that gender significantly influences how online engagement translates into offline action. These results underscore the necessity of gender-sensitive policies that create safe digital spaces and empower young women to participate fully in political processes.

### Urban-Rural Disparities

Urban youth exhibited higher levels of social media activism and offline participation than rural youth, reflecting disparities in infrastructure, connectivity, and access to educational and political resources (Digital Pakistan Report, 2024). This urban-rural divide highlights the structural barriers that constrain digital civic engagement and indicates that interventions should focus on improving internet access, digital literacy, and local political networks in rural areas.

### Theoretical Implications

The findings support and extend existing theoretical frameworks. The mobilization hypothesis is validated in the Pakistani context, emphasizing that online engagement is not merely symbolic but can catalyze offline civic action. Additionally, the role of political efficacy as a mediator reinforces social cognitive perspectives on empowerment and agency. Gender and urban-rural disparities highlight the relevance of intersectional approaches, showing that socio-cultural and structural inequalities shape digital and political participation (Cho et al., 2013; Hankivsky & Cormier, 2014).

## Practical Implications

Policymakers, educational institutions, and civil society organizations can draw several practical lessons from this study:

1. **Digital Literacy Programs**: Enhancing digital skills and critical political awareness can strengthen the link between online activism and offline participation.
2. **Gender-Inclusive Interventions**: Safe digital spaces, mentorship programs, and targeted campaigns can mitigate socio-cultural barriers for female youth.
3. **Rural Connectivity Initiatives**: Expanding broadband access and local civic hubs in rural areas will reduce disparities in political engagement.
4. **Youth Empowerment Campaigns**: Programs that enhance political efficacy, knowledge, and confidence can amplify the impact of social media activism.

## Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference; longitudinal research would clarify the temporal dynamics between online and offline participation. Self-reported measures may introduce social desirability bias, particularly regarding politically sensitive behaviors. Additionally, the sample, though large, may not fully capture the diversity of Pakistani youth, particularly marginalized communities. Future research should explore experimental designs, include ethnographic or qualitative approaches, and examine the role of emerging platforms such as TikTok in shaping youth political engagement.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media activism positively predicts offline political participation among Pakistani youth, with political efficacy mediating this relationship and gender and urban-rural status moderating it. The findings highlight the transformative potential of digital platforms while emphasizing the need to address socio-cultural and infrastructural inequalities. Effective policy interventions targeting digital literacy, gender empowerment, and rural connectivity can enhance youth civic engagement and strengthen participatory democracy in Pakistan.

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