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Social Media, Collective Behavior, and Political Mobilization: Evidence and Dynamics from Pakistan

Muhammad Haroon Iqbal
Department of Political Science, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan
Email:*haroon.iqbal@qau.edu.pk*
Sana Fatima
School of Social Sciences & Humanities, National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan
Email: *sana.fatima@s3h.nust.edu.pk*

Abstract:

Social media has become a central infrastructure for collective behavior and political mobilization, reshaping how citizens in Pakistan acquire political information, interpret events, form group identities, and coordinate action. This article synthesizes key theoretical debates and empirical insights on digitally mediated mobilization, focusing on the interplay between online networks and offline contention. Drawing on collective action theory, networked publics, and connective action frameworks, the paper explains how social media lowers participation costs, accelerates emotional diffusion, and enables rapid agenda-setting through hashtags, influencers, and algorithmic amplification. At the same time, the Pakistani context highlights constraints such as digital divides, surveillance anxieties, disinformation, and polarization, which can undermine trust and fragment publics. The article proposes an analytical framework with five dimensions—network structure, framing dynamics, identity formation, hybrid media interaction, and state–platform governance—to guide future research and policy discussion. It concludes that political mobilization in Pakistan is increasingly "hybrid": social media does not replace conventional organizations or broadcast media but reorganizes their influence, producing new patterns of participation, counter-mobilization, and contestation over legitimacy.

Keywords:
social media, collective behavior, political mobilization, Pakistan, connective action, networked publics, disinformation, hybrid media

Introduction:

The rise of social media platforms has transformed political communication and collective behavior globally, but its effects are neither uniform nor purely emancipatory. In Pakistan—where politics is shaped by competitive party systems, vibrant television media, youth-heavy demographics, and recurring cycles of protest and counter-protest—social media has become an arena where public attention is produced, contested, and redirected. Unlike earlier models of collective action that emphasized formal organizations and resource mobilization, digital environments allow loosely connected individuals to participate through low-cost acts such as posting, sharing, commenting, donating, or signaling support, which can scale quickly into mass visibility and episodic mobilization. These shifts matter because political participation is

increasingly mediated by algorithms that privilege emotionally engaging content, compress timelines of persuasion, and enable "networked publics" to interpret events in real time.

Yet social media's relationship with mobilization is ambivalent. The same affordances that support rapid diffusion of protest frames also intensify polarization, enable disinformation, and invite heavy-handed regulation or surveillance. Moreover, Pakistan's uneven access to digital resources—by gender, region, and class—creates differentiated political voice. Understanding social media-driven political mobilization in Pakistan therefore requires a framework that connects micro-level dynamics (emotion, identity, peer influence), meso-level structures (networks, influencers, group formation), and macro-level forces (hybrid media systems, state policy, platform governance).

Social Media Affordances and Collective Behavior

Social media alters collective behavior by fundamentally reshaping how information circulates and how individuals infer collective preferences and social norms. Platform affordances such as likes, shares, comments, and follower counts function as visibility cues that signal popularity, legitimacy, and momentum. These cues generate social proof, reducing uncertainty about whether others support a political cause and thereby lowering the perceived risk of participation. When users observe high engagement with political content, they are more likely to interpret the issue as socially salient and worthy of attention, triggering bandwagon effects that can rapidly expand participation. Algorithmic ranking systems further intensify these dynamics by prioritizing content that elicits strong emotional reactions—particularly anger, outrage, hope, or fear—thereby accelerating attention cascades and reinforcing threshold effects in which individuals join collective action once perceived support crosses a critical level.

In the Pakistani context, these affordances interact with dense offline social structures rooted in family ties, kinship networks, neighborhood relations, and shared linguistic or regional identities. The overlap between online platforms and these pre-existing social bonds allows political narratives to travel swiftly across multiple communicative spaces, moving from private messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Telegram to public platforms like X (Twitter), Facebook, and television talk shows. This hybridity strengthens mobilization potential by embedding digital signals within trusted interpersonal relationships, making political messages appear more credible and urgent. However, these same mechanisms also heighten vulnerability to misinformation, rumor propagation, and moral panics, as emotionally charged or sensational content can spread faster than corrective information. As a result, collective behavior shaped by social media often exhibits volatility, characterized by sudden surges of attention and participation that may dissipate quickly in the absence of organizational structures, sustained leadership, or institutional channels for follow-through.

Network Structure, Influencers, and Mobilization Pathways

Digital political mobilization is profoundly shaped by network structure, as the topology of online communication networks influences the speed, scale, and durability of collective action. Centralized, influencer-driven networks—organized around political leaders, prominent journalists, celebrities, or highly followed activist accounts—enable rapid dissemination of messages and high levels of narrative coherence. In such networks, a small number of nodes exercise disproportionate agenda-setting power by framing events, articulating slogans, and issuing calls for participation that are quickly amplified through retweets, shares, and broadcast media. This centralization enhances coordination and visibility, particularly during moments of crisis or protest, but also creates vulnerabilities, as mobilization can stall if key influencers disengage, are censored, or lose credibility.

By contrast, decentralized peer-to-peer networks distribute communication across many interconnected nodes, reducing reliance on elite actors and increasing resilience to disruption. These networks facilitate horizontal information flows within trusted social circles and allow participants to reinterpret political messages in locally meaningful ways. In Pakistan, political communication often combines both centralized and decentralized forms: political parties, television anchors, and activist pages operate as influential hubs, while encrypted messaging applications and community-based social media groups enable lateral diffusion among families, neighborhoods, and occupational or regional communities. This produces a form of "brokered" mobilization in which influencers translate complex political events into emotionally resonant, shareable narratives, while local networks contextualize and operationalize those narratives into offline discussions, symbolic acts, or episodic participation.

At the same time, this hybrid network structure facilitates counter-mobilization and narrative contestation. Competing political actors can activate parallel networks to challenge dominant frames, circulate alternative interpretations, or discredit rival claims. Algorithmic amplification often intensifies these struggles by rewarding polarizing content that sustains engagement, thereby reinforcing echo chambers and heightening intergroup antagonism. Consequently, political mobilization in Pakistan unfolds not as a linear process driven by a single center of authority, but as a dynamic contest among overlapping networks that continuously negotiate meaning, legitimacy, and collective direction.

Framing, Emotion, and Identity Formation Online

Political mobilization depends on interpretive frames that diagnose social or political problems, attribute responsibility, and propose moral or strategic grounds for action. Social media intensifies framing processes by enabling a plurality of actors—including political parties, civil society organizations, journalists, activists, and informal content producers such as meme creators—to circulate competing narratives in real time. Unlike traditional media environments where gatekeeping constrained frame diversity, digital platforms foster rapid and simultaneous framing contests in which meanings are negotiated through visibility, repetition, and emotional resonance. Algorithmic systems privilege content that generates engagement, thereby amplifying frames that evoke strong affective responses and marginalizing more deliberative or complex interpretations. As a result, emotional framing becomes a central mechanism of mobilization rather than a peripheral rhetorical strategy.

In online political spaces, emotions function as catalysts for collective identity and action. Frames centered on injustice and grievance mobilize anger and moral outrage, dignity frames cultivate pride and collective self-worth, while threat-based frames generate fear, urgency, and defensive solidarity. In Pakistan, these emotional frames frequently intersect with entrenched identity markers such as region, language, religion, gender, and class, shaping who perceives political messages as personally relevant and who remains excluded. Social media platforms further encourage "performative" political identity, where individuals publicly signal allegiance through profile symbols, hashtags, and declarative posts. While such performances can strengthen group cohesion and enhance feelings of belonging, they also intensify polarization by rewarding conformity and discouraging ambiguity or cross-cutting dialogue. Over time, sustained exposure to emotionally charged, identity-laden frames can harden symbolic boundaries between groups, normalize antagonistic discourse, and reorient political participation away from deliberation toward affective confrontation, thereby reshaping the tone, inclusiveness, and durability of political engagement in Pakistan's digital public sphere.

Hybrid Media Systems—TV, Parties, and the Digital Public Sphere

Pakistan exemplifies a hybrid media system in which social media platforms and broadcast television are deeply interdependent, continuously shaping each other's agendas, narratives, and

modes of political engagement. Content originating on digital platforms—such as trending hashtags, viral video clips, or influencer commentary—frequently migrates to television talk shows and news bulletins, where it is recontextualized, debated, and amplified for mass audiences. Conversely, statements by political leaders or anchors on television are rapidly clipped, memefied, and recirculated across social media, generating renewed waves of attention and interpretive framing. This cyclical flow blurs traditional distinctions between "old" and "new" media and transforms the digital public sphere into a multi-platform arena of constant feedback and narrative recomposition.

Political parties and allied actors strategically exploit this hybridity by staging events and crafting messages designed for cross-platform circulation. Press conferences, rallies, and televised interviews are increasingly orchestrated with an awareness of their afterlives on social media, where short clips, slogans, and emotionally resonant moments can be selectively extracted and redistributed to mobilize supporters or provoke opponents. This transformation alters agenda-setting processes: rather than a linear flow from broadcasters to passive audiences, political salience emerges from iterative interactions among journalists, party communicators, online activists, rival groups, and "attention entrepreneurs" who compete to frame issues and capture visibility. Algorithmic incentives further intensify these dynamics by rewarding content that sustains engagement, often privileging outrage, confrontation, and personalization over substantive policy debate. Consequently, political mobilization within Pakistan's hybrid media system increasingly prioritizes attention maintenance, symbolic signaling, and group loyalty, while persuasion and deliberation risk being subordinated to performative conflict and strategic polarization.

Risks, Governance, and Democratic Implications in Pakistan

Digitally mediated political mobilization raises complex governance challenges related to civil liberties, public safety, and democratic stability. The rapid circulation of disinformation, manipulated images, and selectively edited video content can distort public understanding of political events and undermine informed participation. In highly polarized environments, such content often reinforces pre-existing beliefs rather than encouraging critical evaluation, contributing to epistemic fragmentation within the public sphere. Online harassment—particularly gendered harassment targeting women journalists, activists, and political candidates—further constrains participation by imposing social and psychological costs on political expression, effectively narrowing the range of voices visible in digital debates. These dynamics pose significant risks to inclusivity and pluralism, core principles of democratic practice.

Concerns over surveillance, content moderation, and legal uncertainty also shape how citizens engage in digital politics in Pakistan. Periodic political crises and contested interpretations of speech regulation have heightened anxieties about monitoring and punitive action, prompting many users to shift political discussion into private or encrypted channels. While such spaces may offer relative safety, they also reduce transparency, complicate accountability, and limit opportunities for cross-cutting dialogue across ideological lines. At the institutional level, debates over platform responsibility, content takedowns, and regulatory authority reflect broader tensions between state control, corporate governance, and fundamental rights. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced governance approach that strengthens digital literacy, enhances transparency around political advertising and coordinated inauthentic behavior, and supports civic norms that protect disagreement without dehumanization. In the long term, the democratic implications are ambivalent: social media can expand opportunities for participation and mobilization, but without institutional safeguards and civic resilience, political engagement risks

becoming episodic, emotionally volatile, and vulnerable to erosion of trust and deliberative capacity.

Digital Inequality and Uneven Political Voice

Digital political mobilization is profoundly shaped by structural inequalities in access to internet connectivity, digital devices, and the skills required to navigate online platforms effectively. In Pakistan, disparities across gender, rural–urban location, income, education, and linguistic background create uneven conditions of political visibility and participation. Urban, educated, and economically advantaged users are more likely to possess reliable internet access, smartphones, and the digital literacy necessary to produce and circulate content that gains algorithmic traction. By contrast, marginalized groups—particularly rural populations, women, and low-income users—often experience intermittent connectivity, limited access to devices, and lower levels of digital confidence, constraining their capacity to engage meaningfully in online political discourse. These inequalities shape not only who participates, but also whose narratives and grievances become publicly legible within digital spaces.

As a result, social media platforms may reproduce or even intensify existing power asymmetries rather than serve as neutral tools of democratization. Political agendas and frames circulating online are frequently shaped by elite actors and urban-centered concerns, while issues affecting peripheral regions or disadvantaged communities receive limited attention unless mediated by influential intermediaries. Moreover, algorithmic systems tend to reward content produced in dominant languages, polished visual formats, and high-frequency posting patterns, further marginalizing voices that lack the resources or skills to conform to these norms. Understanding digital inequality is therefore essential for evaluating the democratic implications of online mobilization in Pakistan, as it highlights the gap between formal access to platforms and substantive political voice. Without targeted interventions in digital inclusion, literacy, and infrastructural equity, the expansion of online political participation risks reinforcing stratified citizenship rather than enabling more inclusive and representative public engagement.

Youth, Digital Citizenship, and Political Socialization

Youth constitute a substantial proportion of Pakistan's social media users, positioning digital platforms as a central arena for political socialization and the formation of civic identity. For many young people, social media represents the primary source of political information and discussion, often preceding direct engagement with formal institutions such as political parties, student unions, or electoral processes. Through exposure to political content, debates, and peer interactions online, youth develop early understandings of political norms, power relations, and acceptable forms of participation. These processes shape how young citizens interpret their roles within the political system and influence their sense of political efficacy, belonging, and responsibility.

While digital platforms can enhance political awareness and lower barriers to entry for civic engagement, they also shape political learning in ambivalent ways. Algorithmic curation often prioritizes emotionally charged or sensational content, which may encourage episodic engagement over sustained deliberation. Practices such as liking, sharing, and hashtag activism can foster a sense of participation without requiring deeper reflection or institutional involvement, contributing to forms of performative activism. At the same time, exposure to polarized networks and ideologically homogeneous content can facilitate radicalization or reinforce exclusionary worldviews. These dynamics have important implications for long-term democratic citizenship in Pakistan, as early political socialization increasingly occurs within fragmented digital environments that reward visibility and affect over dialogue, critical reasoning, and compromise. Understanding how youth navigate these spaces is therefore crucial

for assessing whether digitally mediated political learning strengthens democratic capacities or entrenches shallow and polarized modes of participation.

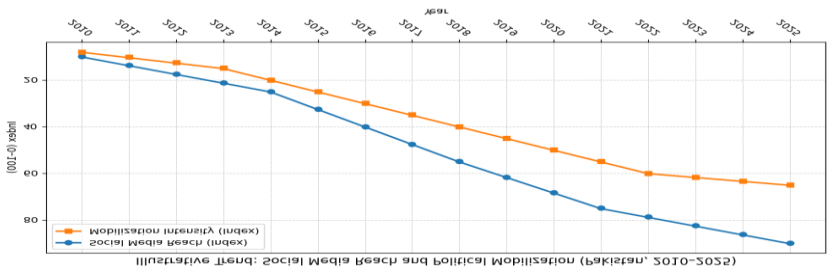
Gender, Visibility, and Online Political Participation

Social media platforms have opened new avenues for women in Pakistan to engage in political discourse, articulate claims, and build networks that extend beyond traditional social and institutional constraints. Digital spaces can reduce barriers associated with physical mobility, gatekeeping, and exclusion from male-dominated political arenas, enabling women to participate in debates, advocate for rights, and mobilize support around social and political issues. For some participants, online visibility offers opportunities to challenge dominant narratives, assert political agency, and connect with like-minded communities across regional and class boundaries.

However, increased visibility also exposes women to disproportionate risks that significantly shape patterns of participation. Female users engaged in political expression frequently encounter gendered harassment, moral policing, and threats that target not only their opinions but also their personal identities, appearance, and perceived respectability. Such hostile environments impose emotional and psychological costs, encouraging self-censorship, strategic anonymity, or complete withdrawal from public debate. These dynamics undermine the inclusiveness and representativeness of digital political spaces by filtering out voices that cannot or choose not to absorb sustained abuse. In the Pakistani context, where gender norms and social scrutiny remain powerful, the unequal distribution of online risk reinforces broader patterns of political marginalization. Consequently, while social media holds emancipatory potential, gendered vulnerabilities continue to shape whose political participation is visible, sustained, and influential within networked publics.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad is a public sector professional and researcher with extensive expertise in governance, public service delivery, and the integration of emerging technologies into institutional processes. He currently serves as the Director General (DG) of the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority (PSBA), Lahore, Pakistan. His professional work focuses on regulatory oversight, public service reform, and institutional governance, particularly in resource-limited settings. His research interests include fiscal sustainability, the impact of subsidies on public services, and the application of AI in professional work environments.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad actively contributes to academic research on public governance, human–AI collaboration, and sustainable service delivery models. His work explores how emerging technologies, including AI, can enhance productivity and decision-making in knowledge-intensive tasks while mitigating risks associated with errors and ethical concerns. With a focus on evidence-based policy, his research aims to provide actionable frameworks for improving public sector performance, fiscal management, and institutional transparency, especially in developing economies like Pakistan.



Summary:
Social media has restructured political mobilization in Pakistan by lowering participation costs, enabling rapid diffusion of frames, and amplifying network effects through influencers and algorithmic visibility. Mobilization is increasingly "connective" and personalized, relying less on formal membership and more on shareable symbols, identity cues, and emotionally resonant narratives. However, digital mobilization is constrained by unequal access, surveillance anxieties, polarization, and disinformation, producing unstable attention cycles and intensifying contestation over legitimacy. The article's five-part framework—affordances, network structure, framing and identity, hybrid media feedback, and governance—explains why social media can simultaneously widen participation and weaken deliberation. Future research in Pakistan should focus on how online mobilization translates into sustained organizational capacity, how misinformation ecosystems shape political trust, and which policy tools can protect free expression while reducing harm.

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