

YOUTH DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION (2020–2024)

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Abstract

From 2020 to 2024, Pakistan's online political participation was characterized by unprecedented turmoil, including government reforms, mass mobilization, and persistent digital activism. This period of political chaos spurred debate about democratic standards, making this an ideal time to examine youth political engagement. Using social movement and digital democracy theory, this study examines how social media platforms have transformed youth political views and democratic participation in Pakistan. The digital world makes it more convenient for young people to participate in civic engagement (by supporting petitions, joining online initiatives, or promoting awareness). But there's still an ongoing debate about whether this online activity replaces real-world action (like protests, voting, or civic engagements). This study examines these arguments by using survey data from 500 participants in the Twin Cities, selected through purposive sampling to represent digitally active young people across four groups: university students, young professionals, digital activists, and community members. The survey measures political attitudes, democratic values, online engagement, and offline civic participation, with rationality and consistency. Spearman's rank correlation and chi-square tests were employed to examine hypotheses regarding the relationships among digital activism, pro-democratic orientations, offline participation, and political polarization. Findings indicate that higher levels of online political engagement are linked to stronger democratic values and greater civic involvement; however, the relationship between digital and offline participation is nuanced, suggesting that digital activism functions as a balancing act, rather than a replacement for, traditional civic engagement among youth.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Political Engagement, Democratic Participation, Social Media, Political Attitudes, Civic Participation, Political Polarization

Introduction

Pakistan has one of the world's youngest populations, with approximately 64 per cent under the age of 30.¹ This demographic reality transmits substantial implications for the country's political trajectory. Historically, youth participation in politics has been constrained, including inadequate access to party organizations, restricted media access, and economic marginalization. The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has, however, transformed this concept by introducing new ways for political and democratic engagement.²

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This study discusses the period between 2020 and 2024, which experienced an intense political disruption, making it analytically relevant, as it is known that, the exclusion of Prime Minister Imran Khan through a parliamentary vote of no confidence in April 2022, the mass mobilization of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf supporters through digital platforms, the civil unrest of 9th May 2023, and the contested general elections of February 2024 jointly portray a critical picture in shaping public narratives.³ Furthermore, during this period, the government imposed internet shutdowns to control political mobilization, registered cases, and used cybercrime legislation to weaponize against activists. Therefore, the selected time period is crucial for examining the relationship between youth digital activism and democratic engagement. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have become the primary spaces for youth to get political information, form opinions, and organize collective action. However, the link between online and democratic participation is questionable. This also debates whether online political activity results in significant offline action or simply replaces it, a situation known as “slacktivism,” where the low cost of digital participation prevents sustained mass effort mobilization.⁴

The present study provides a complete framework of the multidimensional landscape regarding youth digital and political participation in Pakistan. This section explains the complex relations that support youth political participation, identifies key aspects in activism, and explores the implications for democratic governance and social change by taking into account existing literature, theoretical framework, and empirical research. Pakistan's sociopolitical culture has been significantly shaped by historical influences, multiculturalism, and socioeconomic disparities, all of which profoundly impact youth political engagement. The country's political evolution, from the partition in 1947 to subsequent phases of military governance, social unrest, and democratic transition, has significantly influenced the political consciousness of its youth, enhancing their understanding of citizenship, democratic principles, and social justice.⁵

These historical factors elucidate the obstacles to digital participation, such as restricted access to political education through social media platforms, particularly for individuals in impoverished and rural areas. Digital platforms, while transformative in many respects, have made only marginal progress in dismantling the deeply ingrained societal norms that overwhelm women's political action and control their participation in public life. Moreover, internet access remains unequal, mostly used in urban areas, while vast rural populations are left in a state of digital scarcity. Consequently, politically engaged, urban youth use online platforms to amplify their voices, whereas their rural counterparts are systematically excluded from digital political spaces, exacerbating an already alarming democratic divide.

Therefore, rather than eliminating these disparities, digital platforms have only expanded alongside them, providing new avenues for political expression while maintaining the same social and economic divides that establish Pakistani society.⁶ Building on these arguments, the present study investigates major aspects and provides a theory-based analysis of what digital activism may and cannot achieve in a non-Western, postcolonial democracy. This raises the question of how young people's participation with political material on digital platforms influences their opinions toward democracies. What is the association between online political engagement and offline political engagement (such as voting, protests, demonstrations, and civic endeavors)? Furthermore, it also addresses a significant gap in the literature, as digital activism in Pakistan remains understudied despite widespread research in Western contexts.

Between 2020 and 2024, this study looks at how youth in Rawalpindi and Islamabad relate to offline civic engagement, democratic values, and digital mobilization. Instead of relying on previously published qualitative perspectives, it generates novel quantitative data by involving four distinct youth groups: university students, young professionals, digital activists, and community members. The hypotheses are then carefully tested using chi-square tests and Spearman's rank correlation.

Research Objectives

In light of the political ferment of 2020-2024, and the increasing importance of digital platforms in shaping the public mind, this study addresses three interrelated objectives. First, it aims to explore the role of digital platforms that shape political engagement among youth. Second, it attempts to explore the relationship between youth online political activity and their broader pro-democracy attitudes, and investigate whether digital engagement translates into genuine democratic influence. Third, it investigates whether exposure to controversial online content affects real-world civic actions, such as voting, protests, or engaging with political groups.

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses guide the empirical analysis:

H₁: Higher levels of digital political activism among youth are positively associated with pro-democratic attitudes.

H₂: Youth who are more involved in online political discussions are more likely to participate in offline democratic activities, including voting, protests, and civic initiatives.

H₃: Increased exposure to extreme or polarizing political content online is related to a higher tolerance for political violence.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Approach

In different literature reviews, we have examined the relationship between digital activism and political participation. It has been 79 years, and Pakistan still struggles to maintain consistent democratic governance, from the founding era of Muhammad Ali Jinnah to today. This persistent instability provides a crucial context in which digital activism has emerged as an influential channel for political expression and civic mobilization.⁷ According to Loader, Vromen, and Xenos, young people have primarily shifted away from traditional ways of political participation, such as street mobilization and offline civic engagement, to non-traditional ways such as online media streaming, online activism, and campaigns.⁸ This shift characterizes not political disengagement but a reinvention of participation, one that aligns with peer networks and cause-specific commitment with institutions. According to Bennett and Segerberg, contemporary political mobilization has undergone a broader transition from collective to 'connective' action, in which personalized digital communication allows individuals to manage political action independently, evading traditional organizational structures such as political parties or formal civic institutions.⁹ Consequently, the rise of digital media has significantly influenced political engagement, from ordinary people to policymakers and state institutions. Digital platforms have progressively been classified according to their civic roles and mobilizing tools, each carrying diverse implications for democratic participation. It is broadly acknowledged that digital media forms political attitudes by reconstructing political certainties, influencing how citizens perceive democratic processes, involve with political discourse, and respond to calls for collective action.

The theoretical foundations of this study are grounded in two theoretical frameworks: social movement and digital democracy theory. Social movement theory, developed through the foundational contributions of Tarrow, McAdam, and Snow, provides the analytical lens for understanding how collective action emerges, sustains itself, and produces political change.¹⁰ According to prior work, insights into political attitudes, mobilization, and collective action have reconfigured digital technologies.¹¹ Digital democracy theory, by contrast, is concerned with how digital platforms reshape the broader conditions of democratic participation, negotiation, and governance. Together, these two theoretical approaches form the conceptual framework of this study, which explores trends in youth digital activism.

Most scholars agree that social movements do not occur spontaneously. Instead, they require proper organization and the right political environment to develop and grow. In other words, people need to come together, share common goals, and have the necessary resources and opportunities to turn their protests into meaningful collective

action. Since digital platforms have fundamentally altered each of these collective actions. Indeed, digital platforms have reduced the barriers to organizational coordination, allowed the rapid construction and dissemination of shared narratives, and facilitated the real-time identification and exploitation of political opportunities.¹² This theoretical shift directly enlightens Hypothesis 1 of the present study, which suggests that higher levels of digital political activism among youth are associated with pro-democratic attitudes.

In the same context, Dahlgren and Loader argue that digital platforms have created new public spheres in which citizens can engage in political deliberation, construct their shared political identities, and challenge dominant narratives.¹³ From this perspective, digital platforms are not merely tools for mobilization but constitutive elements of an emerging digital civic culture. This theoretical perspective directly supports the present study's second objective, which examines the relationship between youth online political engagement and their pro-democracy attitudes, as captured empirically through Hypothesis 1.

Understanding of Youth Digital Activism and Theoretical Differences

Digital activism refers to the organized use of digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, to advocate for political or social causes, mobilize supporters, and influence public discourse. It must be distinguished from the broader concept of political participation, which encompasses all citizen activity aimed at shaping political activities, including voting, party membership, street protest, and community organizing. This distinction carries significant analytical implications. Digital and offline forms of political participation do not necessarily follow parallel trajectories, nor do they operate under indistinguishable situations of engagement. This further suggests that heightened digital participation does not automatically translate into broader or deeper political involvement. On the contrary, in certain circumstances, digital engagement may function as a substitutive mechanism, relocating rather than complementing conventional forms of political action. This phenomenon, often referred to in the literature as "**slacktivism**" or "**clicktivism**," raises significant questions about the practical impact of digitally mediated participation on democratic processes and civic mobilization.¹⁴

Digital Platforms as Enablers of Democratic Participation

Scholarly debate on digital activism centers around two challenging frameworks. The one optimistic claim is that digital platforms lower participation barriers, enable rapid mobilization, and strengthen weak voices lacking traditional political access. In this view, social media democratizes political engagement by providing youth with limited resources meaningful tools for political voice and agenda-setting.

This perspective theoretically supports Hypothesis 1, which anticipates a positive link between digital activism and pro-democratic attitudes. As stated earlier, the scholarly literature is extremely diversified on the term “digital activism” as this term itself has many meanings. Benkler and Shirky stated that digital activism fundamentally redistributes the capacity for political expression, enabling new actors to contribute in ways that were inaccessible to previous generations.¹⁵ In the same way, Levy and Akiva demonstrated that online environments serve as important spaces for developing political identities and engaging with substantive democratic debate, particularly among youth who remain disengaged from formal political institutions.¹⁶

Critical Perspectives: Slacktivism and Democratic Limits

Ideally, digital activism would translate impeccably into meaningful offline political action; however, a substantial critical scholarship fundamentally challenges this assumption. Similarly, Morozov's 'slacktivism' contends that superficial online gestures such as liking, sharing, and signing petitions substitute for deeper, sustained political engagement, creating an illusion of participation whilst undermining the organizational depth necessary for democratic transformation. A central theoretical concern within the contemporary range is whether digital activism fundamentally rebuilds the changing aspects of collective action. Rather than merely expanding traditional forms of political mobilization, it may actively reform the organizational logic, participatory patterns, and strategic ranges through which collective action is conceived and executed. This shift raises critical questions regarding the extent to which digitally mediated forms transform, or ultimately undermine, the foundational mechanisms that have historically sustained social movements. This analysis directly informs Hypothesis 2, which empirically tests whether youth online political engagement translates into tangible offline democratic activities or remains anatomically decoupled from real-world participation.

Tufekci argues that the ease of digital mobilization produces organizationally brittle movements capable of assembling large numbers, but lacking the internal capacity to adapt strategically, negotiate with authorities, or sustain pressure over time, because they have not built the organizational setup that traditional actions developed through collective action.¹⁷

In the same way, the critical literature provides a framework that social media plays a key role in increasing political polarization, which directly relates to Hypothesis 3. Hence, these online platforms are designed to maximize engagement through emotional content, which limits users' exposure and extends political divisions. According to Jost, social media use during the 2016 US Presidential election increased polarization and spread disinformation, eventually threatening democratic integrity.¹⁸

Similarly, Pariser and Sunstein state that algorithmic curation, where online forums automatically display content based on past likes, generates “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” that strengthen existing beliefs and political divisions. For example, PTI supporters' feed will mostly display PTI-favorable content.¹⁹ The events of 9th May 2023, in which digitally mobilized supporters engaged in widespread civil unrest, provide a sobering empirical illustration of the relationship between online polarization and offline political violence. Hypothesis 3 of this study directly engages with this dynamic by testing whether increased exposure to extreme or polarizing political content online is associated with a higher tolerance for political violence among youth.

Youth Digital Activism in Pakistan: An overview

Scholarly engagement with the intersection of digital activism, online presence, and political participation among Pakistani youth has gained significant attention since 2015. However, the existing body of literature remains predominantly qualitative in orientation, thereby constraining the scope for broader statistical generalization and systematic cross-contextual comparison. As Ali and Naz observe, digital inequalities continue to mediate the nature and extent of youth engagement in Pakistan.²⁰ In addition, social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter/X, enable youth to engage in political debates and influence governance, as seen during the PTI mobilization of 2022–2023. Digital influencers with established credibility also play a significant role in shaping political opinions and mobilizing youth.²¹ However, existing research largely focuses on single-campus student samples, leaving a critical gap in understanding whether online engagement translates into offline civic participation. This study addresses this gap by surveying the opinions of youth across Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

Salam, Jamil, and Muzaffar conducted one of the few quantitative studies in this field, finding a positive association between social media use and political awareness among university students in Sialkot.²² However, their single-campus, student-only sample limits generalizability, and the absence of hypothesis testing on online-to-offline participation leaves a critical gap. This study addresses this gap by conducting a survey as well as applying statistical methods to test theoretically grounded hypotheses. Similarly, Ali and Naz found that urban, educated youth with strong digital skills have greater reach in online political spaces, whilst rural and disadvantaged youth remain largely marginalised.²³ These inequalities reinforce the value of this study's urban-focused analysis in the Islamabad-Rawalpindi corridor.

Gaps in the Literature

- **Limited Quantitative Research:** Most research uses qualitative methodologies, while a few use systematic quantitative methods to evaluate the impacts of online activism on political beliefs and behaviors. For example, Salam et al. used a quantitative technique to explore social media's impact on political engagement among university students in Sialkot. Yet, such research is limited, and there is a need to conduct further research in this area.²⁴
- **Underexplored Facts:** The existing literature examines how polarizing online political messages shape youth attitudes toward democracy. Iftikhar and Bajwa verified that social media platforms significantly contribute to the dissemination of argumentative narratives and hate speech; however, their precise effects on youth democratic attitudes remain empirically underdetermined.²⁵
- **Lack of Comparative Analysis:** Existing research often overlooks regional differences within Pakistan, like the disparities between urban and rural youth engagement with digital activism. According to the Civicus Monitor, urban citizens have better access to dependable internet services and technological resources, while rural youth engagement is limited.²⁶
 - **Theoretical Gaps:** Current research does not fully apply essential theories such as social movement and digital democracy theory in the Pakistani context. This limits our perception of how internet activism affects offline political impact.
 - **Policy way forward:** Empirical findings should be connected to practical objectives, such as developing digital civic literacy programs or reducing online polarization. By addressing these gaps, policymakers and civil society actors can obtain evidence-based strategies to enhance youth democratic processes while lessening the risks associated with polarization and misinformation.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, selected to systematically measure the relationship between digital activism and political attitudes. This approach extends the existing qualitative literature on youth digital activism in Pakistan by addressing key aspects through hypothesis testing.

The cross-sectional design is appropriate as the study aims to capture youth digital activism at a specific and historically significant moment, rather than tracking individual change over time.

Justification of the Study Period

The period from 2020 to 2024 was selected for three specific reasons directly linked to the study's objectives. First, this period covers the post-COVID era in which internet dissemination and social media usage among Pakistani youth increased, generating qualitatively new conditions for digital political engagement. Second, it includes the strongest period of digitally mediated political mobilization in Pakistan's recent history, the removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan in April 2022, the mass mobilization of PTI supporters coordinated through digital platforms, the civil unrest of 9th May 2023, and the contested general elections of February 2024, together constitute an exceptional period in which the relationship between digital activism and democratic participation became significant. Third, this period overlaps with a significant aspect of Pakistan's digital regulatory environment, including internet shutdowns and modifications to cybercrime that limited digital political perspectives.

Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised youth aged 18 to 35 residing in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. This age range was selected because it captures the most digitally active political participants who hold the most significant long-term stake in Pakistan's democratic trajectory. The twin cities were selected because they establish a focused hub of digitally active urban youth who engage regularly with political content online. A sample of 500 respondents was obtained through purposive sampling across four sub-groups: university and college students enrolled in public and private institutions; young professionals employed in the public or private sectors; digital influencers and activists who actively produce or disseminate political content on social media; and youth engaged in community, including NGO members and student unions. The final sample was approximately 54 per cent male and 46 per cent female, with a mean age of 24 years. In terms of educational attainment, 62 per cent held undergraduate degrees, 23 per cent postgraduate qualifications, and the remaining 15 per cent were enrolled in undergraduate programs at the time of data collection. The survey was distributed via Google Forms between January and June 2024 through enrolment channels: professional networks/workplace contacts, and social media groups associated with civic society and digital communities.

Participation was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained electronically. A total of 537 responses were received, of which 37 were omitted due to inadequate responses or failure to meet the requirements.

Survey Instrument and Analytical Approach

The questionnaire consisted of 20 indicators divided into five sections: demographics, digital media use, political awareness and attitudes, offline political participation, and digital activism and tolerance for political violence, with responses measured on a five-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using Jamovi statistical software. Spearman's rank correlation was used to test H₁ and H₃, given the ordinal nature of Likert-scale data. In contrast, a Chi-square test of independence was used to test H₂ after recoding the variables into categorical groups of high, medium, and low digital engagement and frequency of offline participation.

Table 1: Daily Social Media Use for Political Updates (Indicator 1)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
1	I use social media daily to stay updated on political events.	Strongly Agree	120	24%
		Agree	160	32%
		Neutral	120	24%
		Disagree	60	12%
		Strongly Disagree	40	8%

A majority of respondents stated daily social media use for political updates, indicating high levels of digital political exposure.

Table 2: Sharing Political Content on Social Media (Indicator 2)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
2	I share political content on my social media accounts.	Strongly Agree	90	18%
		Agree	150	30%
		Neutral	130	26%
		Disagree	80	16%
		Strongly Disagree	50	10%

Content sharing 48% was particularly lower than (56%), revealing a clear gap between digital exposure and active political participation.

Table 3: Commenting on Political Posts (Indicator 3)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
3	I comment on political posts to express my views.	Strongly Agree	70	14%
		Agree	140	28%
		Neutral	140	28%
		Disagree	100	20%
		Strongly Disagree	50	10%

The political posts were reported by 42% of respondents, with a significant number of respondents remaining silent.

Table 4: Confidence in Discussing Political Issues Online (Indicator 4)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
4	I feel confident discussing political issues online.	Strongly Agree	80	16%
		Agree	150	30%
		Neutral	140	28%
		Disagree	90	18%
		Strongly Disagree	40	8%

Only 46% expressed confidence in discussing political issues online.

Table 5: Social Media Improves Political Understanding (Indicator 5)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
5	Social media helps me understand political issues better.	Strongly Agree	110	22%
		Agree	170	34%
		Neutral	110	22%
		Disagree	70	14%
		Strongly Disagree	40	8%

A majority 56% agreed that social media improves political understanding and issues.

Table 6: Following Political Figures Online (Indicator 6)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
6	I follow political parties, politicians, or youth activists online.	Yes, multiple	180	36%
		Yes, a few	170	34%
		Rarely	100	20%
		Never	50	10%

A substantial 70% of respondents follow political figures, i.e., their parties, pages, and channels online.

Table 7: Frequency of Engaging with Political Content Online (Indicator 7)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
7	I engage with political content (liking/sharing/commenting) online.	Very Frequently	90	18%
		Frequently	160	32%
		Occasionally	170	34%
		Rarely/Never	80	16%

Half of the respondents 50% engage frequently with political content online, confirming the study's digitally active sample and establishing a strong empirical reference point.

Table 8: Exposure to Online Debates Improving Perspective (Indicator 8)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
8	Exposure to online debates has improved my understanding of multiple perspectives.	Strongly Agree	100	20%
		Agree	160	32%
		Neutral	130	26%
		Disagree	70	14%
		Strongly Disagree	40	8%

Nearly, (52%) reported that online debates broadened their perspectives, offering incomplete counterevidence.

Table 9: Influence of Political Leaders' Online Presence (Indicator 9)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
9	Political leaders' online presence influences my opinions about politics.	Strongly Agree	60	12%
		Agree	150	30%
		Neutral	150	30%
		Disagree	90	18%
		Strongly Disagree	50	10%

While 42% acknowledged that political leaders' online presence influences their opinions, the large neutral category 30% proposes extensive skepticism toward digital political messaging.

Table 10: Importance of Democracy for Pakistan's Development (Indicator 10)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
10	Democracy is important for Pakistan's development.	Strongly Agree	180	36%
		Agree	180	36%
		Neutral	80	16%
		Disagree	40	8%
		Strongly Disagree	20	4%

72% stated democracy's importance for Pakistan's development, representing the strongest normative democratic commitment.

Table 11: Likelihood of Offline Participation after Online Engagement (Indicator 11)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
11	After engaging online, I am likely to participate in offline political events.	Very Likely	70	14%
		Likely	140	28%
		Neutral	150	30%
		Unlikely	90	18%
		Very Unlikely	50	10%

The 42% expressed prospect of offline participation following online engagement, alongside a large neutral category 30% reflects the unresolved tension between digital engagement and offline action.

Table 12: Participation in Offline Political Activities (Indicator 12)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
12	I have participated in offline political activity in the last 2 years.	Yes, frequently	60	12%
		Occasionally	170	34%
		Rarely	140	28%
		Never	130	26%

Nearly 56% reported the usage of social media political posts, 54% participated rarely in offline political activities.

Table 13: Online Discussions Motivating Contact with Policymakers (Indicator 13)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
13	Online discussions motivate me to contact policymakers/politicians/civic organizations.	Yes	180	36%
		Maybe	190	38%
		No	130	26%

74% confirmed that online discussions motivate them to keep themselves in contact with policymakers and politically related organizations.

Table 14: Effectiveness of Social Media for Political Change (Indicator 14)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
14	Using social media to promote political change is effective.	Strongly Agree	90	18%
		Agree	170	34%
		Neutral	130	26%
		Disagree	70	14%
		Strongly Disagree	40	8%

52% believe social media is effective for political change, reflecting the live experience of digital mobilization.

Table 15: Polarizing Content and Tolerance for Political Violence (Indicator 15)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
15	Exposure to polarizing content online makes me more tolerant of political violence.	Strongly Agree	30	6%
		Agree	80	16%
		Neutral	140	28%
		Disagree	140	28%
		Strongly	110	22%

While 50% rejected the proposition that polarizing content increases tolerance for political violence, the 22% agreed, and 28% remained neutral.

Table 16: Youth Influence through Online Activism (Indicator 16)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
16	Young people can influence government policies through online activism.	Strongly Agree	120	24%
		Agree	170	34%
		Neutral	110	22%
		Disagree	60	12%
		Strongly Disagree	40	8%

58% agreed that youth can influence government policy through online activism.

Table 17: Verifying Political Information before Sharing (Indicator 17)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
17	I verify political information before sharing it.	Always	100	20%
		Often	140	28%
		Sometimes	150	30%
		Rarely	70	14%
		Never	40	8%

48% constantly verify political information before sharing, suggesting that misinformation.

Table 18: WhatsApp/Telegram as Primary Platform for Political Purposes (Indicator 18)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
18	My primary platform for political/civic purposes is WhatsApp/Telegram.	Strongly Agree	80	16%
		Agree	140	28%
		Neutral	130	26%
		Disagree	90	18%
		Strongly Disagree	60	12%

44% respondents agreed that platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter are their primary political communication channels, reflecting a preference for closed networks.

Table 19: Changing Voting Intention Due to Online Content (Indicator 19)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
19	I have changed my voting intention due to content seen online.	Strongly Agree	40	8%
		Agree	90	18%
		Neutral	170	34%
		Disagree	120	24%
		Strongly Disagree	80	16%

Only 26% reported changing their voting intention due to online content.

Table 20: Online Activism Bridging Youth and Formal Institutions (Indicator 20)

Item	Statement	Response	F	%
20	Online activism bridges the gap between youth and formal political institutions.	Strongly Agree	90	18%
		Agree	160	32%
		Neutral	140	28%
		Disagree	70	14%
		Strongly Disagree	40	8%

50% agreed that online activism bridges the gap between youth and formal institutions.

Inferential Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

To test H₁, Spearman's rank correlation was calculated between digital political activism (Indicator 1–8) and pro-democratic attitudes (Indicator 10 and 16), revealing a statistically substantial positive correlation ($\rho = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that urban Pakistani youth who engage more actively online with political content have a tendency to hold stronger democratic values and better thoughts to influence political outcomes, thereby supporting H₁. To test H₂, a Chi-square test was applied between levels of online political engagement and reported offline participation (Indicator 11–12), yielding a statistically significant association ($\chi^2 = 32.1$, $p < 0.05$). This finding supports H₂, representing that active youth are more dynamic in real life. This shows that online and offline participation of youth in social media platforms balance each other rather than substitute one another.

To test H₃, Spearman's correlation between exposure to polarizing online content and tolerance for political violence (Indicator 15) discovered a small but statistically significant positive relationship ($\rho = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$), providing fractional support for H₃. Although most respondents rejected the idea of political violence, and 28% neutral responses, suggesting that polarizing content poses an expressive democratic risk. Overall, digital activism in Pakistan displays positive democratic effects, but polarization risks still prevent it from being fully effective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the aspects of youth political engagement in Pakistan. It scrutinizes the relationship between digital activism, democratic attitudes, and offline civic participation among youth from 2020 to 2024. To provide a clear picture of social movement and digital democracy theory, survey data were collected from 500 respondents across Islamabad and Rawalpindi, and hypotheses were tested using Spearman's rank correlation and chi-square analysis. The findings show that digital platforms shape youth political engagement in a democratic environment marked by active political mobilization, state authoritarianism, and an increasingly divisive digital information framework.

The analysis reveals three significant findings. First, a moderate positive association between digital political activism and pro-democratic attitudes ($\rho = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) supports H₁, indicating that youth who engage actively with online content tend to hold

stronger democratic values and greater conviction in their capacity to influence political outcomes. Second, a statistically significant positive association between online political engagement and offline civic participation ($\chi^2 = 32.1$, $p < 0.05$) supports H2, directly challenging the slacktivism thesis and confirming that digitally active youth are more, rather than less, likely to participate in real-life political activities. Third, a small but significant positive association between polarizing content and tolerance for political violence ($\rho = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$) partially supports H3.

Theoretically, these findings contribute original quantitative evidence to a field dominated by qualitative research, demonstrating that within the specific context of youth, digital and offline participation are more complementary than substitutive. In a nutshell, digital platforms initially facilitated protest activities; however, they were later controlled by the state through the imposition of internet shutdowns and the implementation of cybercrime legislation. From a policy perspective, expanding meaningful digital civic participation through internet access, targeted digital literacy programs, and the protection of online political expression is likely to support democratic values among youth in Pakistan. On the other hand, state interventions such as internet shutdowns and the criminalization of online political speech risk declining the very forms of digital engagement. Furthermore, it is important to note that social media companies operating in Pakistan should enhance algorithmic safeguards to reduce the spread of polarizing content, while the government's duty should be to introduce media literacy initiatives that report empirically observed, rather than theoretical, risks to democratic development.

This study has some limitations, as it surveyed only digitally active urban youth, so the findings may not generalize to rural areas of Pakistan. Future research should track the same group of people over time and expand to rural areas to get a more complete picture. In a nutshell, Pakistan's youth are a significant group whose relationship with democracy can outline the country's future. This means that digital activism is associated with stronger democratic principles and civic engagement. However, the government should enable free online expression, encourage civic education, and allow young people to freely voice their political views rather than suppressing them if digital platforms are to truly enhance democratization.

Future Implications & Limitations

This study has certain boundaries that must be acknowledged in defining the scope of this research. Isolating and measuring individual elements is inherently challenging, as no single factor can fully capture the complexity of digital activism and democratic

participation in Pakistan. The study is confined to urban areas because assessing digital activism in rural communities is difficult using the same survey approach, given low internet and smartphone connectivity. However, when analyzing the results, several difficulties must be addressed. The study's urban focus limits its applicability to rural communities due to cultural and political differences. Moreover, the focus on quantitative survey data obscures more nuanced aspects of youth engagement, such as personal motives and political experiences.

The study's timeframe, spanning 2020 to 2024, further shapes the nature of its findings. This was a period marked by considerable political turbulence in Pakistan, and conclusions drawn from such a volatile backdrop may not hold under more stable conditions. To fill these gaps in future research, it will need to move into rural settings, track participants longitudinally, and use qualitative methods such as interviews in addition to surveys to create a more textured understanding of the subject. Despite its limitations, this study provides important lessons for policymakers. It demonstrates how digital media influences young people's attitudes toward politics and civic life, emphasizing the importance of supporting free online expression and civic education. This study also contributes to a better understanding of how young people engage with politics online. Most importantly, Pakistan's young people have the power to shape the country's future. Their involvement in democratic life will play a major role in determining where Pakistan is headed. The government should protect freedom of speech online, invest meaningfully in civic education, and ensure that young people can voice their political perspectives without fear of repression or marginalization.

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