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Between Clicks and Convictions: Youth Political Participation on Facebook in Indonesia and Pakistan

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a pivotal arena for youth political participation, particularly within Muslim-majority societies where access to formal civic channels is often constrained. Despite growing interest in digital political engagement, comparative research remains limited in addressing how socio-cultural and political variables mediate online participation. This study investigates how Muslim youth in Indonesia and Pakistan utilize Facebook to articulate political ideologies, engage in civic discourse, and mobilize collective action. Employing a mixed-method approach, the study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data collected through an online survey administered to 30 purposively selected respondents (15 from each country), comprising Master's and PhD students active in digital political discussions. The survey incorporated both closed-ended items and open-ended questions to capture measurable patterns and nuanced perspectives. The researchers applied thematic and descriptive analyses to interpret trends and narratives emerging from the data. The findings reveal contrasting modes of engagement: Indonesian youth predominantly exhibit issue-oriented, personalized political expression, while the Pakistani youth counterparts demonstrate more ideologically aligned, affectively polarized participation linked to partisan narratives. The implication of these findings is that both policy design and theoretical models of youth political participation must account for cultural and structural specificities, as context-sensitive approaches are essential for effectively understanding and fostering civic engagement in diverse Muslim-majority societies.
Keywords: Youth; Muslim Society; Political Participation; Political Ideology; Comparative Study

Media sosial telah muncul sebagai arena penting bagi partisipasi politik kaum muda, khususnya di masyarakat mayoritas Muslim, dimana akses terhadap saluran-saluran kewargaan formal seringkali terbatas. Meskipun minat terhadap keterlibatan politik digital terus meningkat, riset komparatif masih terbatas dalam mengkaji bagaimana variabel sosial, kultural, dan politik memediasi partisipasi daring. Penelitian ini menjelaskan bagaimana pemuda Muslim di Indonesia dan Pakistan memanfaatkan Facebook untuk mengartikulasikan ideologi politik, terlibat dalam diskursus kewargaan, dan memobilisasi aksi kolektif. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan mixed-method, melalui survei daring terhadap 30 responden terpilih secara purposif (masing-masing 15 dari Indonesia dan Pakistan), yang terdiri atas mahasiswa magister dan doktoral yang aktif dalam diskusi politik digital. Survei ini mencakup pertanyaan tertutup dan pertanyaan terbuka untuk menangkap pola-pola yang terukur sekaligus perspektif yang lebih mendalam. Analisis tematik dan deskriptif digunakan untuk menafsirkan tren serta narasi dari data yang telah dihimpun. Temuan menunjukkan adanya perbedaan pola partisipasi, yakni: pemuda Indonesia cenderung mengekspresikan politik secara personal dan berbasis isu, sedangkan pemuda Pakistan lebih menunjukkan keterlibatan yang terpolarisasi secara afektif dan berorientasi pada ideologi, yang terkait dengan narasi partisan. Implikasi dari temuan ini adalah bahwa baik dalam perencanaan kebijakan maupun pengembangan teoretis partisipasi politik pemuda harus mempertimbangkan kekhasan budaya dan struktur sosial, sebab hal ini sangat penting untuk memahami dan mendorong keterlibatan kewargaan di masyarakat dengan penduduk mayoritas Muslim.

A. INTRODUCTION

Social media is a powerful source of information and communication for the youth. Facebook is a central social media platform for youth to share information and political issues (Karamat and Farooq 2022). Indonesia and Pakistan are the major countries where Facebook is widely used (Saud, Ida, and Mashud 2020). Both countries have seen significant growth, with 119,05 million (Statista 2024) Facebook users in Indonesia and 47,35 (Statista 2024) million Facebook users in Pakistan.

There may be various reasons behind this increase but it is important that Facebook allowed some internal activities like political campaigns, demonstrations, protests, and other political activities. For example, in Indonesia, the 'Aksi Bela Islam' campaign was aimed at combating blasphemy against minorities and was promoted and widely shared on Facebook (Hidayatullah 2021). This crowd-scoring effort demonstrates Facebook's ability to amplify previously unheard voices. On the other hand, Facebook in Pakistan has shown its importance as a social media platform for political activities where the youth can share their views, share news, appreciate government projects, and express different views on the administration (Zeib 2021). This debate has also led to the formation of legitimate protest organizations and groups, such as the '*Pashtun Tahafuz'* Movement, founded in 2018 for the rights of the Pashtun diaspora, and the widespread use of Facebook for fundraising, political activism, and public awareness by Pashtuns (Najeeb 2018).

In Indonesia and Pakistan, young people are using Facebook to become more politically active, allowing them to participate in decision-making. Political activism among the youth is always welcome. It should be encouraged but it should be noted that any medium like Facebook, if used wisely and ethically, can be beneficial to the country's political system. However, some limitations should be considered, such as the risk of online

mobbing and concerns about the potential use of Facebook as a tool for disinformation and political manipulation (Lauer 2021).

Social media, notably Facebook, has significantly reshaped global political communication and participation among youth. Several studies have demonstrated the platform's role in increasing political awareness, activism, and engagement by providing spaces for discourse, mobilization, and collective action (Karakaya and Glazier 2019; Karamat and Farooq 2022; Theocharis et al. 2023). For instance, researchers have found a strong correlation between social media usage and enhanced political activism, noting that platforms like Facebook facilitate connections within political groups and amplify civic engagement (Heblich 2016; Javaid 2017; Yang and DeHart 2016). Specifically, in developing countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan, Facebook has been instrumental in mobilizing youth during elections, promoting civic participation, and influencing voting behaviors (Latif et al. 2021; Saud et al. 2020; Tapsell 2015). Additionally, the platform's convenience and integration with mobile technologies have further accelerated its role in youth political engagement (Ortiz-Ospina 2019). However, the reliability and authenticity of political content remain concerns, as misinformation on social media can compromise the integrity of online political discourse and adversely affect democratic participation (Akhtar et al. 2023).

Despite extensive research on social media's impact on youth political participation, significant gaps persist, particularly concerning comparative analyses between countries with distinct cultural and political contexts. Previous studies predominantly focus on single-country cases, overlooking the nuanced variations in how Facebook mediates political engagement among youth in different sociopolitical environments (Hidayatullah 2021; Muzaffar 2019; Suwana 2020). The limited comparative research, specifically between Indonesia and Pakistan, fails to adequately explain how cultural, social, and political factors uniquely shape the

relationship between social media use and youth political participation. This study seeks to address the critical gap by conducting a comparative analysis of how Muslim youth in Indonesia and Pakistan utilize Facebook to articulate political ideologies, engage in civic discourse, and mobilize collective action. This research argues that Facebook influences youth political engagement in ways that are deeply shaped by national socio-political structures, religious narratives, and access to civic space. Evidence from the study indicates that Indonesian youth tend to engage in more fluid, issue-based, and personalized forms of digital participation, whereas Pakistani youth display a stronger inclination toward ideologically driven, emotionally polarized, and party-aligned activism. By applying Castells' theory of the networked public sphere and Bayat's concept of post-Islamism, the study demonstrates that Muslim youth across different contexts use digital platforms not only to participate in politics but also to redefine its meaning through culturally embedded and structurally mediated practices.

B. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method research approach was employed in this study to comprehensively explore the relationship between Facebook usage and political engagement among youth in Indonesia and Pakistan. This approach integrates quantitative and qualitative methodologies, allowing for a deeper exploration of participant experiences and quantifiable social media engagement patterns. An online survey containing structured, close-ended questions enabled statistical analysis of usage frequency, engagement patterns, and demographic influences on political participation. Additionally, open-ended questions were included to elicit detailed narratives, personal insights, and contextual understanding of how participants utilize Facebook as a medium for political discourse (Nassaji

2020). According to Creswell (2014), open-ended survey questions produce qualitative data by capturing participants' personal views and experiences in their own words. Similarly, Fielding, Lee, and Blank (2017) emphasize that online surveys with open-text responses yield rich qualitative materials suitable for thematic and content analyses. Purposive sampling was used to select of 30 respondents—15 Master's and PhD students each from Indonesia and Pakistan—ensuring representation of a highly educated demographic actively involved in political discussions via Facebook.

The quantitative data from the closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify trends, frequencies, and correlations between Facebook usage and political activities among respondents. Meanwhile, qualitative responses from the open-ended survey items were analysed thematically, allowing for the identification and interpretation of emergent patterns and nuanced insights into participant perceptions and experiences. Before full distribution, the survey underwent a pilot test with two participants from each country to verify clarity, relevance, and reliability. After refining the questionnaire based on pilot feedback, the finalized survey was disseminated electronically to all participants on May 22, 2023. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data analyses, this mixed-method approach provided a holistic understanding of the various social, cultural, and political factors influencing young people's political engagement through Facebook in Indonesia and Pakistan, addressing methodological gaps evident in previous studies.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Manuel Castells' concept of the networked public sphere (2008) and Asef Bayat's theory of post-Islamism (2007) to examine the relationship between Facebook usage and political participation among Muslim youth in Indonesia and Pakistan. Castells

argues that digital networks redefine the public sphere, from institutional, hierarchical communication to decentralized, horizontal, and interactive platforms. Through social media like Facebook, individuals can participate directly in political discourse, mobilize collective action, and challenge established narratives and authorities. Thus, Castells' perspective provides a structural lens for understanding how digital technology transforms traditional political engagement into more personalized and network-driven activities.

However, digital structures alone cannot fully explain why political participation among youth differs across various Muslim-majority societies. Here, the socio-cultural dimension, particularly the Islamic context, becomes significant. Asef Bayat's post-Islamism theory complements Castells by providing insight into how Muslim youth negotiate their political identities within contemporary societal and religious norms. According to Bayat, post-Islamism represents a shift away from ideological, state-centered Islamic politics toward more individualized and everyday forms of political expression. Young Muslims engage politically through informal, less structured ways, combining Islamic values with contemporary social practices, resulting in new, hybrid forms of activism that often play out in digital spaces.

Integrating these two frameworks, this research conceptualizes Facebook as a crucial arena in which young Muslims express their religio-political identities in simultaneously personal, political, and religiously informed ways. For young people in both Indonesia and Pakistan, Facebook serves not just as a neutral communication platform but as a space where Islamic identity interacts dynamically with social and political issues. The networked logic described by Castells therefore shape participation on Facebook, while the content, style, and motivations for political expression reflect Bayat's notion of everyday Islamic politics. This integration explores how digital media facilitates unique expressions of Muslim political

identity in distinct yet comparable national contexts. While Castells offers a powerful tool for understanding how new technologies reshape political interaction, Bayat helps explain the culturally grounded motivations behind these interactions. This combined framework thus provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between digital technology, religion, and politics, enabling the study to identify similarities and divergences in patterns of youth political engagement via Facebook in Indonesia and Pakistan.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Social Media in Mobilizing Political Action in Indonesia and Pakistan

The statistical findings from the survey reveal notable dynamics in the role of social media in mobilizing political engagement among youth in Indonesia and Pakistan. While both groups unanimously agree that social media networks influence political dialogues and debates, variations appear in how these platforms shape political beliefs and behavior. These insights point to both convergence and divergence in how youth from the two countries perceive, internalize, and act upon online political content. This contrast offers a meaningful lens to assess the mobilizing potential of social media in Muslim-majority but socio-politically distinct societies.

Table 1.
The Impact of Social Media on Political Engagement
in Indonesia and Pakistan

Questions	Indonesia (n=15)	Pakistan (n=15)
Do you think that social media networks influence political dialogues and debates?	Yes: 100%	Yes: 100%

Questions	Indonesia (n=15)	Pakistan (n=15)
Have you used social media platforms for political objectives before?	Yes: 46.67% No: 53.33%	Yes: 46.67% No: 53.33%
Has social media influenced your political thoughts or beliefs?	Yes: 60% No: 40%	Yes: 86.67% No: 13.33%
Effect of social media platforms on political engagement	Significant: 46.67% Effect: 53.33%	Significant: 73.33% Effect: 26.67%

Regarding perception and belief formation, all respondents from Indonesia and Pakistan (100%) affirmed that social media platforms influence political dialogues and debates. However, a key divergence lies in how social media impacts political beliefs. In Pakistan, 86.67% of respondents reported that social media had influenced their political thoughts or beliefs, compared to 60% in Indonesia. This significant difference suggests that Pakistani youth may be more ideologically affected by the content they encounter online, potentially due to limited alternative civic spaces for political expression, making digital platforms more central to belief formation.

Regarding usage behavior, only 46.67% of respondents in both countries reported using social media for political purposes, suggesting that while political content is widely consumed, active political expression remains moderate. Notably, when asked about the *effect* of social media on political engagement, 73.33% of Pakistani youth reported that the impact was significant, compared to only 46.67% of Indonesian respondents. This discrepancy implies that Pakistani youth perceive social media as a more

powerful vehicle for political engagement, even though actual usage levels are similar across both countries.

These findings reflect a complex relationship between belief, behavior, and perceived impact. While Indonesian youth show higher levels of formal political opportunity and gender inclusivity, their perception of social media's political influence is comparatively more measured. In contrast, Pakistani youth—despite facing structural barriers—demonstrate a stronger cognitive and affective response to online political content, suggesting, that political mobilization in Pakistan may emerge more organically from belief-driven engagement. Meanwhile, mobilization may be more structurally supported in Indonesia and contextually embedded in broader civic life. Social media thus plays a dual role: as a belief-shaping arena in Pakistan and as an engagement-supporting tool in Indonesia.

2. *Social Media, Political Ideologies, and Civic Mobilization in Indonesia and Pakistan*

The comparative data reveal that youth in Indonesia and Pakistan actively engage with social media for various purposes, including personal expression, business, and political discourse. At the same time, Indonesian youth exhibit diverse engagement levels—from passive observers to highly active users, often for personal or entrepreneurial purposes—Pakistani youth tend to be consistently active, particularly in political discussions. Both groups report using social media for political objectives such as supporting candidates, expressing opinions, or participating in petitions and campaigns. These findings suggest that social media has evolved into an accessible political arena where young people articulate their positions and participate in civic life, albeit within different national contexts and cultural constraints.

Table 2.
Comparative Analysis of Social Media Usage and Its Political Impacts
Among Youth in Indonesia and Pakistan

Question	Indonesia	Pakistan
What is your degree of participation with the various social media platforms?	Participation is diverse: from inactive to very active; Dominant for business & personal opinion.	Generally active; from medium to very involved, participating in many political discussions.
Have you used social media platforms for political objectives before? If you say yes, please give concrete instances?	Yes: petitions, opinion sharing, candidate profiles. No: focus on business or personal.	Yes: support the party/candidate, express your opinion. No: personal communication only.
What role, in your opinion, does social networking sites play in influencing political dialogues and debates?	It influences public opinion, opens up discussion space, but can trigger polarization.	Platforms for information and propaganda; positive & negative.
Can you think of any times when social media influenced your political thoughts or beliefs? If you answered yes, please describe your experience.	Some were affected by political hoaxes (for example, the case of Ratna Serumpaet).	Online debates and campaign content changed the political views of some respondents.
How do you see social media influencing political engagement in your country?	Playing an important role in post-identity politics; effective and inexpensive but triggers polarization.	It plays a big role, especially during political conflicts or protests; mobilize the public.
Are there certain social media sites that you believe have a greater impact on political engagement? If so, which ones are they and why?	Facebook & Twitter are dominant; YouTube is also mentioned, TikTok appears but is less dominant.	Twitter, Facebook, YouTube are very influential; depends on the user's demographics.
Do you think social media helps or hinders citizens' political dialogue? Please	Helps and hinders: opens up space, but also bubbles and hatred filters.	Like a double-edged sword: help participation, but

Question	Indonesia	Pakistan
provide more information.		trigger hoaxes & echo chambers.
What impact do you believe social media has had on the way election campaigns are run?	Efficient & reach young voters; prone to exploitation of disinformation.	Politicians go directly to the voters; but often manipulate opinions & propaganda.
Are there any possible drawbacks or bad outcomes to using social media platforms for political purposes? If so, please elaborate.	Hoaxes, hate speech, filter bubbles, opinion swirling.	Hoaxes, bullying, black campaigns, foreign interference.
Are there any possible drawbacks or bad outcomes to using social media platforms for political purposes? If so, please elaborate.	Sharp polarization, the emergence of political entrepreneurs.	Affective polarization, data manipulation, social division.

The role of social media in shaping political ideologies and identities emerges strongly across both cases. Respondents from Indonesia describe social networking platforms as spaces that influence public opinion and facilitate discourse, but also as potential sites of polarization, particularly in the wake of identity-based politics. For example, the case of Ratna Sarumpaet illustrates how disinformation can manipulate perceptions and reinforce ideological divisions. On the other hand, Pakistani youth highlight how online debates and campaign content can transform their political views, often reinforcing or challenging their existing political loyalties. In both contexts, social media serves as an information hub and as a site for identity construction and ideological negotiation, where young users continuously position themselves in relation to political, religious, and national narratives.

Moreover, the findings indicate that social media has played a critical role in expanding political participation and advancing the desire

for social justice. Indonesian respondents emphasize its accessibility and effectiveness in reaching broader audiences post-identity politics, even though they acknowledge polarization risks. Pakistani youth stress its importance during political conflict and protests, viewing social media as a key tool for public mobilization. Both groups identify Facebook and Twitter as dominant platforms for political engagement, while platforms like TikTok are emerging but not yet influential. These dynamics show that social media has democratized political engagement by lowering barriers to participation, particularly among youth who may feel excluded from traditional political structures.

However, the expansion of political participation through social media is not without consequences. Youth in both countries recognize the double-edged nature of these platforms. While social media opens space for political dialogue and engagement, it also introduces threats such as hoaxes, hate speech, echo chambers, and manipulation. In Indonesia and Pakistan, the consequences include affective polarization, data manipulation, and the rise of political entrepreneurs exploiting digital spaces for personal or ideological gain. Despite these drawbacks, the persistent use of social media by politically engaged youth in both countries reflects a growing desire for voice, recognition, and justice—especially in societies marked by uneven access to democratic participation.

a. Indonesia

In contemporary Indonesia, social media has become a vital space for youth political expression. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and, increasingly, TikTok are no longer confined to entertainment or personal updates; instead, they function as dynamic arenas for political discourse, civic interaction, and social critique. The widespread adoption of these platforms aligns with Manuel Castells' concept of the networked public sphere, which highlights how digital

technologies enable horizontal communication, challenge institutional hierarchies, and decentralize the flow of information. Among young Indonesians, these platforms are not merely tools but spaces of political becoming, where opinions are shaped, identities are articulated, and social change is imagined.

One of Indonesia's most striking features of political engagement through social media is its informal, non-institutional nature. Rather than affiliating themselves with political parties or ideologies, many young people participate in what Asef Bayat terms everyday politics, the subtle, routine acts of political engagement rooted in daily life. This includes sharing infographics about environmental issues, commenting on corruption cases, amplifying local petitions, or voicing concerns over gender injustice. These actions do not follow the logic of organized political movements; instead, they emerge organically through daily interactions and are often emotional, spontaneous, and tied to lived experiences. Such forms of participation are distinctly post-Islamist: they reflect ethical and moral values derived from Islam but are not aimed at establishing Islamic governance. Instead, they represent a search for justice, transparency, and social reform within a pluralistic and democratic framework.

In this context, political ideologies among Indonesian youth are fluid rather than fixed. Social media enables exposure to multiple viewpoints—from conservative Islamic scholars to feminist Muslim influencers—allowing young users to navigate, adopt, or reject ideas according to their personal convictions. This openness fosters a political culture that is not ideologically rigid, but instead defined by responsiveness to issues such as inequality, corruption, education reform, and environmental degradation. These values are not framed solely within the language of political theory or party lines but are deeply embedded in the Indonesian youth's cultural and religious consciousness. Many Muslim youth articulate their political concerns through Islamic vocabulary, calling

for *amanah* (trustworthiness), *keadilan* (justice), and *ukhuwah* (solidarity), but do so within the flexible and creative space offered by digital platforms.

However, the democratizing potential of digital media is not without its challenges. The same networked structure that allows for grassroots mobilization also facilitates the rapid spread of misinformation, hate speech, and polarization. Indonesian youth, especially during politically sensitive moments such as elections, frequently encounter viral hoaxes and manipulated narratives designed to provoke sectarian tensions or discredit political opponents. The case of Ratna Sarumpaet, where a fabricated story of physical abuse went viral and influenced public discourse, is emblematic of how disinformation can shape political beliefs and fuel polarization. These dynamics echo Castells' warning that the network society, while decentralized, is not immune to new forms of control and manipulation, especially through algorithms that prioritize emotionally charged content.

Religious and ethnic identity continue to be instrumentalized within the digital political landscape. Political actors and interest groups often exploit Islamic symbols, language, and sentiments to drive electoral outcomes or delegitimize opponents. While many youth are critical of these tactics, they remain vulnerable to their emotive appeal, particularly when popular religious figures or social media influences amplify such narratives. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which saw the mobilization of anti-minority sentiment through digital campaigns, illustrates the potency of religious identity in online political discourse. This trend underscores the ambivalence of the digital public sphere: it empowers voices but also exacerbates existing societal cleavages.

Nevertheless, social media remains a powerful tool for marginalized groups, especially young women and those from peripheral communities, to assert their presence in the political sphere. Data from the comparative survey indicate that female participation in Indonesia's digital

political conversations slightly surpasses that of males. Women are often at the forefront of social media-based activism, advocating for gender justice, environmental protection, and educational reform. Their engagement reflects both the inclusive potential of social media and the relative openness of Indonesian society to female civic agency. Unlike more conservative environments, Indonesian Muslim women are increasingly using digital tools to articulate their political views, challenge patriarchal norms, and foster communities of shared concern.

Educational background also shapes the texture of youth engagement online. The survey shows that Indonesian youth with higher educational attainment, particularly Master's and PhD students, are more likely to engage in political discussions on social media. These users often bring a more critical and reflexive perspective to public issues, blending academic discourse with popular digital formats. For example, university students may share research summaries or create explainer threads on Twitter to educate peers about electoral processes or legal reforms. This form of engagement represents a hybrid mode of political participation: intellectually grounded, digitally fluent, and culturally contextualized.

Community networks, both online and offline, provide essential support structures for youth political expression. These micro-publics allow for sustained dialogue and mobilization around shared values, from university discussion groups to local WhatsApp forums. They offer safe spaces for critical reflection, often blending religious ethics with civic concerns. Humour, satire, and meme culture frequently serve as entry points into serious political conversations, especially on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. For Muslim youth in particular, political expression often operates through a moral and affective register, less about policy detail and more about what feels right, just, or Islamic in a given situation.

Castells' framework helps us understand how these interactions operate within a decentralized digital structure. Social media enables

Indonesian youth to bypass traditional gatekeepers, political parties, religious elites, state institutions, and construct alternative narratives from below. The flow of information is non-linear, participatory, and highly responsive to emerging events. However, Castells also cautions that this freedom is shaped by the architecture of the network itself: algorithms, virality, and platform logic mediate visibility and influence. In Indonesia, youth voices can rise to prominence, but also be drowned out or distorted depending on how platforms prioritize content.

Bayat's theory offers a complementary lens, highlighting the cultural specificity of how Indonesian Muslim youth engage in politics. Their expressions are not rooted in grand ideological visions but moral sentiments, communal ethics, and lived experiences. This form of *everyday politics* thrives in the digital space because it does not require institutional validation or formal structures. Instead, it is deeply personal, often symbolic, and intimately tied to faith, culture, and community. Indonesian youth do not merely consume political content — they reinterpret, remix, and reframe it in ways that resonate with their daily realities.

Therefore, the political participation of Indonesian Muslim youth through social media is best understood as a synthesis of Castells' networked logic and Bayat's culturally grounded agency. Their digital activism reflects both structural shifts in how political discourse is produced and consumed, and the complexity of negotiating faith, identity, and civic responsibility. It is political without being partisan, Islamic without being ideological, and transformative without always being visible. As digital platforms continue to shape the future of political life, the experiences of Indonesian youth provide a powerful example of how everyday citizens are reshaping democracy from the ground up — one post, comment, and hashtag at a time.

b. Pakistan

In Pakistan, social media has become a critical arena for political discourse, particularly among the country's youth. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube now serve as powerful spaces where young Pakistanis actively debate political issues, express support for parties or leaders, and participate in highly polarized discussions. These patterns reflect Manuel Castells' theory of the networked public sphere, which positions digital networks as alternative arenas of power and participation outside institutional control. In Pakistan's increasingly contentious political landscape, these digital spaces often carry more weight and immediacy than traditional forums such as parliamentary debates or civic forums.

Survey findings confirm this shift: 86.67% of Pakistani respondents reported that social media had influenced their political beliefs. This points to the centrality of digital platforms not only as communication tools but as formative environments for political identity and ideological alignment. Through constant exposure to curated political content—whether in the form of memes, campaign videos, hashtags, or live debates—youth construct and reinforce their ideological worldviews. In many cases, political opinions are shaped more by the dynamics of online discourse than by formal civic education or direct political participation.

Despite this strong ideological engagement, most youths operate outside formal political institutions. While they might not be registered party members or active in structured movements, they participate enthusiastically in political hashtag campaigns, meme wars, and online support networks. These forms of action are emblematic of what Castells identifies as horizontal, network-driven engagement—enabled by digital architecture that flattens hierarchies and accelerates discourse. At the same time, these dynamics also align with Asef Bayat's notion of *post-Islamist* political engagement, where young Muslims do not necessarily aim to re-

establish Islamic governance but instead articulate their concerns in personal, socially embedded, and digitally mediated ways.

The character of Pakistan's digital political landscape is heavily shaped by affective polarization, a form of ideological division driven by emotion and identity rather than policy or principle. Youth often form intense attachments to their in-group, whether political party, sectarian identity, or nationalist bloc, while harboring hostility or distrust toward perceived opponents. This binary logic is fueled by the algorithmic nature of social media platforms, which amplify emotionally charged content, and by organized efforts to discredit dissenting views through trolling, digital harassment, and misinformation. Black propaganda campaigns are common, especially during election seasons or political crises, where youth audiences are targeted with emotionally manipulative and divisive content.

Social media has also played a defining role in moments of political instability. When civic space becomes constrained due to censorship, surveillance, or repression, digital platforms substitute for public squares. During the 2014 PTI dharna (sit-in protest), the 2018 elections, and more recent anti-government protests, social media functioned as both an organizing tool and a battleground. Youth were central actors—livestreaming events, launching hashtags, documenting police actions, and debating political narratives in real-time. These episodes underscore Castells' assertion that the digital public sphere not only reflects political sentiment but can actively shape political outcomes through viral visibility and decentralized coordination.

Importantly, social media in Pakistan offers a rare avenue of political participation for groups traditionally excluded from mainstream discourse. Young women, religious minorities, and ethnic outgroups often find in digital media a platform for self-representation and resistance. Despite Pakistan's deeply patriarchal and often conservative political culture, female digital activists have emerged as powerful voices—

blogging, tweeting, and vlogging about gender equity, harassment, educational access, and political reform. These interventions challenge the norms of silence and marginalization and represent a grassroots push for democratic inclusion, even without institutional reform.

Castells' framework helps contextualize these dynamics. In environments where trust in formal institutions is low and access to political power is uneven, digital networks create alternative civic infrastructures. These structures enable the bypassing of gatekeepers and empower youth to curate their own narratives. However, as Castells warns, the architecture of digital platforms also introduces new hierarchies—those based on visibility, virality, and algorithmic control. In Pakistan, this means that while some youth voices rise and influence discourse, others are drowned out, censored, or co-opted by more dominant ideological groups.

Asef Bayat's theory of post-Islamism provides a more textured interpretation of how religious identity interacts with digital political expression in Pakistan. While Islam remains a dominant force in public life, young Pakistanis are increasingly reinterpreting Islamic ethics through the lens of democracy, accountability, and rights-based discourse. Many invoke Islamic principles such as *adl* (justice), *sidq* (truth), and *amanah* (trust) not to advocate for theocratic rule, but to critique political corruption, hypocrisy, and authoritarianism. Their expressions of religiosity are integrated with democratic aspirations, nationalist pride, and a desire for socio-economic justice, reflecting a hybrid political consciousness that is not easily categorized.

Unlike Indonesia's more issue-driven, pluralistic, political engagement in Pakistan often centers on ideological loyalty and oppositional identity. The dominance of party politics, the entrenchment of sectarian divides, and the weaponization of ethnic identity make digital discourse more combative. Supporters of rival parties frequently clash in online spaces, often mirroring the hostility displayed in offline political

arenas. This makes Pakistan's digital sphere a more volatile, yet also more ideologically energized, environment. The intensity of political affiliation is often mirrored in affective investment, making social media not just a site of debate but also a terrain of emotional allegiance and symbolic conflict.

Despite these challenges, digital political engagement in Pakistan reflects a growing democratic consciousness. Youth are increasingly aware of their political rights, frustrated by elite capture, and eager to shape the country's future. Their online activities—whether posting critiques, launching petitions, or questioning officials—illustrate a shift in political subjectivity. Even without of electoral participation or formal mobilization, they are actively constructing themselves as political agents. Their activism is shaped by digital access, and a complex interplay of religious identity, class experience, and nationalist narratives.

Therefore, the digital public sphere in Pakistan functions as both a space of empowerment and contention. On the one hand, it offers young people, especially those marginalized by class, gender, or geography, a platform to speak, organize, and influence. On the other hand, it reflects and reproduces the country's deep-seated ideological divisions and political fragilities. Castells enables us to see how the architecture of digital communication reshapes participation, while Bayat helps us understand the cultural and religious textures of that participation in a Muslim society negotiating modernity and political transition. Together, their theories provide a compelling framework to interpret how Pakistani youth are navigating and transforming the meanings of politics in the digital age.

3. *From Polarization to Mobilization: Youth Political Engagement, Platform Power, and Disinformation in the Networked Muslim Public Sphere*

Survey results reveal that the digital public sphere, as theorized by Manuel Castells, has become a critical arena for shaping political dialogue

and mobilizing youth political engagement in Indonesia and Pakistan. Castells' concept of the networked public sphere illustrates how social media decentralizes communication, enabling horizontal interactions, mass mobilization, and broader political participation. In Indonesia, youth use platforms such as Facebook and Twitter across a range of engagement levels from casual users to those participating in petitions, candidate profiling, and political commentary. In Pakistan, the data show more consistently high levels of political discussion, suggesting that social media plays a more central role in shaping public discourse, particularly during moments of political conflict or protest. However, consistent with Castells' warnings, this digital openness also brings risks: disinformation, polarization, and ideological manipulation are recurring themes across both countries.

Asef Bayat's theory of post-Islamism complements this structural view by emphasizing how Muslim youth negotiate political expression in informal and personalized ways. According to Bayat, post-Islamist politics is less about formal ideological movements and more about how everyday individuals integrate Islamic values into their socio-political engagement. In Indonesia, youth often use social media to share personal opinions or advocate for social issues without necessarily aligning with political parties or movements. This suggests a preference for decentralized, expressive modes of engagement—what Bayat would call 'everyday politics'. In contrast, Pakistani youth appear more willing to express explicit political alignment online, often supporting candidates or parties. However, even in this more ideologically engaged context, their expressions remain rooted in informal, digitally mediated interactions rather than formal institutional participation.

A comparison between the two countries highlights distinct patterns in how social media influences political ideologies and mobilization. In Pakistan, 86.67% of respondents reported that social media had influenced their political beliefs, compared to 60% in Indonesia. This

suggests that digital content may resonate more deeply with Pakistani youth, perhaps because of fewer alternative avenues for civic expression. Castells' theory helps explain this dynamic, as the digital sphere fills the gap left by limited offline political engagement, becoming a primary site of ideological negotiation. Meanwhile, Indonesian youth, though digitally active, seem less ideologically swayed by online content. Their engagement appears more issue-driven and less polarized, though still vulnerable to disinformation and identity-based tensions.

Both groups recognize the dual nature of social media in political life. Indonesian respondents often describe the digital sphere as empowering yet polarizing—an efficient tool for outreach that simultaneously reinforces echo chambers and identity-based divisions. Pakistani youth echo this ambivalence, citing hoaxes, political propaganda, and affective polarization as key drawbacks. These challenges align with Castells' caution about the fragmentation of discourse in digital spaces, and with Bayat's concern that informal political expressions can be co-opted or manipulated. Despite these risks, youth in both countries continue to use social media as a platform for visibility, recognition, and justice. While Indonesian youth tend to express individual concerns within a pluralistic context, Pakistani youth often express political identity and grievance in more collective, ideologically aligned ways. Together, the frameworks of Castells and Bayat offer a nuanced lens for understanding how Muslim youth across different socio-political landscapes use digital media not only to participate in politics but to redefine it.

D. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that social media, particularly Facebook, plays a significant but contextually distinct role in shaping youth political participation in Indonesia and Pakistan. In Indonesia, youth

engagement tends to be more fluid, issue-based, and expressive, often manifesting through personalized acts of everyday politics that reflect moral and civic concerns without direct ideological affiliation. In contrast, Pakistani youth exhibit a more ideologically charged form of digital participation, marked by affective polarization, explicit party alignment, and heightened susceptibility to political manipulation. These findings highlight the importance of socio-political context in mediating how digital platforms are used for civic engagement, and underscore the value of integrating Castells' theory of the networked public sphere with Bayat's post-Islamism to understand the interplay between digital infrastructures, identity, and political behavior in Muslim-majority societies.

These findings reflect the contextual nature of digital political engagement among Muslim youth, shaped not only by technological access but also by deeper socio-cultural and institutional dynamics. The divergence between Indonesia's issue-based and pluralistic participation and Pakistan's ideologically driven and emotionally charged activism illustrates how historical trajectories, religious discourses, and political structures influence the meanings youth attach to civic action in digital spaces. Rather than indicating a uniform path to empowerment, the use of social media among young Muslims reveals distinct strategies for negotiating political identity, legitimacy, and agency within specific environments. This highlights the importance of moving beyond technology-centered perspectives and approaching digital participation as a culturally situated practice, one that is continuously reinterpreted through daily lived experiences, collective values, and the complex realities of democratic life.

The implications of this research are both practical and theoretical. Practically, it urges policymakers, civil society actors, and platform designers to consider cultural and structural specificities when leveraging social media for democratic engagement. Interventions that work in one

setting may not translate effectively to another. Theoretically, this study extends existing models of political participation by synthesizing media-centered and culturally embedded approaches. However, the study has several limitations, including its small sample size and reliance on self-reported perceptions rather than longitudinal behavioral data. Future research should broaden the sample scope, include more diverse regions and religious minorities, and explore cross-platform dynamics beyond Facebook. Comparative studies across other Muslim-majority countries would further enrich our understanding of how youth use digital platforms to participate in politics under varying socio-political conditions.

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