Evaluating Social Media Credibility and Its Influence on Political Discourse in Pakistan

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Keywords	Abstract
Political Polarization, X (Formerly Twitter), Political Discourse, Elite Polarization, Mass Polarization.	*This study aims to examine the role of social media, in our case X (formerly Twitter), in the political discourse in Pakistan in terms of the major political parties and audiences responding to their tweets. The research is framed under the concept of political polarization, which is shown to be the cause of both the elite level and the mass-level polarization in the digital communication. The methodology uses convenience sample. The database consists of 1 month (1 July to 31 July) of tweets and comments by the leading political parties (PTI, PML-N, PPP, ANP).The analysis of the tweets and comments reveal new themes of national security, political accountability, international engagement and condemnation of terrorism. The findings show that the political parties have been highly dependent on the X to highlight their achievements and condemn their opponents. Conversely, the public reacts to these tweets with either vehement denunciation or outright support, and often this is done by resorting to insults in lieu of factual discourse. The research shows that the establishment is responsible for adding to mass polarization through this social media platform by intensifying the existing division. The study highlights the importance of political leaders to consider the long-term effects of the content they create on their audience, as well as the need for commenter to have a more measured approach to interacting with content online.*

INTRODUCTION

X is a platform for political parties to interact with their audiences and promote their brand (Hamza et al., 2023). On X, audiences can engage with their favorite political party in real-time through features such as commenting, liking, and retweeting posts as well as sharing posts developed by the party's digital marketing team (Hamza et al., 2023). In contrast, the traditional media only allows feedback from the audience to be directed towards for example letters to the editor, journalists or publishing houses (Masudi & Mustafa, 2022). Audiences of traditional media are the subjects of the control of both the news producers and the gatekeepers who filter the information (Mir et al., 2023).

This distinction points to one of the major advantages of social media as it can bring together huge numbers of people, regardless of geographical boundaries, in virtual environments and engage in discussions with each other and their leaders. Citizens get unfettered and real-time access to see the direction of their party and make out subtle changes of view on the basis of tweeted topics (Shahzad & Omar, 2021). Such unfiltered interaction of citizens, activists, journalists, and politicians leads to a deeper communication and understanding (Shahzad & Omar, 2021). However, there are also disadvantages to this way of communication, especially in terms of credibility. In traditional media, the responsibility for the credibility of news falls on the entity that is producing it - be it a newspaper, a professional journalist or a citizen journalist (Jamil, 2020). In digital media, however, credibility is not attached to a single or well-defined entity. While, the term "digital media" refers to social media platforms, these platforms are basically the platforms of online social gathering (Shahzad & Omar, 2021). Content that is posted on X is often based on unsubstantiated facts and misinformation, which can be spread rapidly and can blur the line between fact and fiction (Masudi & Mustafa, 2022). False or exaggerated information can change the public perceptions and sway the political loyalties and the audiences may refuse to accept the corrective information even if it is presented to them (Muzaffar et al., 2020). Some researchers note that political parties can enter even further into the business of smearing their rivals with a mixture of fact and fiction to their advantage in political campaigns. While this is potentially good in the short term, these tactics make it difficult for activists and journalists to get the truth out (Khan, 2023).

The public is constantly absorbing the information spread by political leaders. In Pakistan, X is used mostly as a digital platform by political parties to share content. These parties tend to use misinformation and embellished facts so as to increase their favorability among followers. As a result, the people interacting with this material are either subject to propaganda or are a marginalized voice of reason. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and evaluate the amount of credence of news on X and how it can affect political communication in Pakistan.

Objectives

The major objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To carry out an overview of social media content by Pakistan's major political parties: PML-N, PTI, PPP and ANP.
2. To examine the general reaction of public to tweets made by these political parties.

Significance of Research

This research focuses on how X has been used to alter the political situation of Pakistan. Additionally, it monitors the public's interaction with the content published by political parties. A better understanding of the communication between leaders and followers is a necessity. By examining the values and beliefs espoused by political parties, it is possible to better understand their goals. Any changes in these values become visible on real-time, and hence, corresponding change in public political views and narratives can be observed. Such changes in narrative could be a further cause to polarize public opinion.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the major issues highlighted by Pakistan's major political parties on their X (formerly Twitter) accounts?

RQ2: How does the public receive (absorb) and respond (react) to what these parties are sharing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

X plays an important role in everyday political life in that it makes possible political discussions and influences the reception of political content. Scholars have researched the overall effects of social media especially X and concluded that it has greatly contributed to the polarization of the public mindset and views (Hamza et al., 2023). However, there is a qualitative difference in terms of what political parties deem as authentic information and how the public responds to it (Mir et al., 2023). Thus, the present review is aimed at exploring the effect of information disseminated by political parties on X and what engagement of the public with this information is like. As a medium, X has a lot of influence in bridging the gap between the public and both their own and opposing political parties to turn up the polarization. In traditional media the readers or the viewers cannot directly interact with the source of statement or factual claim (Masudi& Mustafa, 2022). The traditional media in Pakistan also heavily restricted and filtered (Khan et al., 2023). In contrast, social media facilitates direct public participation in political parties (Tariq et al., 2022). X offers unfiltered news for the public to consume (Khan, 2023) but this lack of filtration has surged the amount of misinformation and propaganda to take place (Riasat et al., 2025). Social media has become entrenched in the political arena of Pakistan (Haider & Mubarik, 2024). Political leaders and parties use it to promote themselves and belittle opposition rivals, often using a mixture of truth and untruth. The public absorbs and internalizes this information which creates their own political views (Farrah & Tahir, 2021). Studies indicate that the misinformation and sensationalism increases drastically during electoral campaigns (Salih et al., 2025). Digital platforms provide an effective direct channel to voters for parties (Ahmed et al., 2025). Research on popular social media applications shows that while applications such as Facebook and YouTube are mostly used for entertainment purposes, X is used for mostly political discussion in Pakistan (Butt et al., 2021). Another study appreciates the main users of X in Pakistan as young people between the ages of 19-25 years, which is consistent with the fact that Pakistan has a very young population (Khalil et al., 2024). Students go about using the digital platforms to challenge traditional ways of political communication. Those in rural areas are also involved in online political debates as digital platforms are not confined to borders and do not require physical presence (Abbasi & Shah, 2024). Taking advantage of this situation, the students from the less-developed regions have improved their political and personal communication skills (Farrah & Tahir, 2021). This literature review seeks to fill the gap in the understanding of political parties in their relations with their audiences through the content shared and the public engagement. Doing so will allow for a better understanding of how far the credibility of provided information affects the degree of political polarization.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is of the qualitative research design. A database was formed to collect relevant data. Thematic analysis was applied for identifying common themes, patterns and narratives contained in the tweets from the official accounts of four major political parties, i.e., PTI, PML-

N, PPP, and ANP. This design allows an evaluation of the credibility of the political content on X with an examination of its possible impact on political discourse in Pakistan.

Sampling

This study is based on a convenience sampling technique in order to examine the effect of the credibility of social media in Pakistan on political discourse. Data is taken from the official and verified X accounts of four important political parties:

a) Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)
b) Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)
c) Pakistan Muslim League-(Nawaz) PML-N
d) Awami National Party (ANP)

Sampling Method

A data set of tweets during a period of time (July 1, July 31, 2024) was collected. From each party, a minimum of 3 tweets were chosen, and their top 3 comments (where possible). The one month timeframe was chosen to remain in the realm of manageability without losing any relevant theme. As engagement rates differed, at least two to three replies per tweet was established.

Data Collection Tool

The analysis was done by manual investigation of the documents by meticulous reading and interpretation without the aid of software-based coding or automatic tools. The process was organized in 4 parts:

Column 1: Formatted tweet content.
Column 2: Identified theme tweet
Column 3: Comments made on the tweet
Column 4: Analytical description based on both the content of the tweet and comments attached to it.

RESULTS

This chapter is the result of the analysis of posts on Twitter and comments made by users. The comparison considers the four main Pakistani political parties, namely PPP, PTI, PML-N, and ANP, in a period of one month (July 2024). It analyzes how parties frame their messages and identifies the essence of any message they pass across to their audiences.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Party

Governance and Infrastructure Development: PML-N keeps on reiterating that it is committed to large-scale infrastructure projects, a constant reference to the development of highways, hospitals and universities. Although such projects are considered the state functions, the party message positions it as the demonstration of its interest in the national development and the modern future, a message that was created to attract voters.

Governance and Public Welfare: The tweets reflect the concern of PML-N with the operational governance and good citizenry. The party is seen as reformist and boasts of having established state institutions and infrastructure, and often mentions its history of effective governance.

Youth Empowerment and Education: PML-N is positioning itself as the supporter of the youth in Pakistan, referring to the measures like youth empowerment programs, the construction of the IT Park, the distribution of laptops, and the free scholarship programs of underprivileged students.

Governance and Leadership: The party interconnects good governance to effective leadership, and the party leader, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, stabilized the economy and the developmental milestones were under the supervision of the Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz. The tweets propagate the image of direct interaction with the population and viable economic policies towards national stability and growth.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

Violation of Human Rights and Political Persecution: The PTI tweets have revolved mostly around the accounts of political victimization against its founder, Imran Khan, and his alleged cornering and arrest. This puts the party in the position of being systematically targeted.

Enforced Disappearances and Intimidation Tactics: The alleged unfair treatment of PTI supporters and leaders, such as the alleged enforced disappearance as a state instrument of political repression, both at home and overseas towards its opponents, is a recurring theme. The party draws itself as a voice that is oppressed by the state.

Leadership Endurance and Popular Support Assertion: PTI often depicts Imran Khan as an icon of resilience and determination implying that his ability to stand the heat means that his popular support is strong and increasing. This story makes the party stronger in its leadership.

Economic Crisis and Political Instability: The tweets of the party are always related to the economic instability of Pakistan as the result of political mismanagement, incompetence of the elite and corruption. According to them, the economic crisis is caused by bad governance.

Awami National Party (ANP)

Political Criticism and Accountability: ANP positions itself as a voice of criticism, tweeting on the failures in systems that weaken the rule of law and citizen security. It requires an increased focus on the institutional inabilities and requires a clear system of accountability.

National Security and Political Accountability: One of the main priorities is the national security, especially instability in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. ANP demands sound governance to counter the militant groups, disparages the lack of strong counterterrorism policies, and insists on open national discussion to cut the ties with terrorism.

State Violence and Political Oppression: The party condemns government incompetence and violence sponsored by the state in cracking down on terrorism. It represents itself as a vocal opposition to military activities, which according to them; destabilize the peace in the region.

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)

Economic Governance and Institutional Performance: PPP Tweets have shifted their focus to institutional changes and economic governance, beyond its original slogan (roti, kapra, makaan food, clothes, shelter). Some of the successes realized are mentioned including empowerment of Balochistan Revenue Board (BRB).

Sympathy and Solidarity with the Party: The party emphasizes its emphasis on empowering the farmers and strategic role of agriculture to the development of Pakistan. It continues to project the image of grassroots connectivity, where its leaders such as Asif Ali Zardari have made agriculture a patriotic and economic need.

International involvement and Diplomatic Outreach: International relations and diplomatic skills are often mentioned in PPP, and party leaders have been boasting of their political contacts and international accomplishments as improving the international reputation of the country.

Criticizing Terrorism and Praising the Courage of the Security Forces: The party takes this occasion to show its support to the victims of natural calamities and militancy and applaud the courage of the security forces. It tries to find a balance by denouncing bad policies, denouncing extremism and portrays itself as a peace-maker and a stabilizer.

DISCUSSION

Like in other international social media platforms, X enables a highly disturbing polarization of Pakistani political parties. The type of communication that is observed comprises of promotional agendas and disruptive narratives that polarize the audiences result in chaotic exchanges. Political polarization describes the process of amplifying elite-initiated discourses (elite polarization) to deteriorate the situation at the mass population level (mass polarization). The story by PML-N with its attention on infrastructure and development projects makes people praise it, and this participation of the readers and followers through comments and retweeting. Similarly study by Tareen and Adnan (2021) have examined a significant relationship between political communication and social media. Nevertheless, a different group of people rejects these assertions as regionalist or short-termist. This interaction shows how elite advertising of certain positions are held through the various political views of the masses to an extent that no agreement can be reached on how national development should be done. The rhetoric of PTI is based on the theme of political victimization, repression, and incarceration of its leader, Imran Khan. The imagery in the form of custody photos helps people establish an emotional bond with the supporters, as PTI is presented as a victim of state oppression and human rights and freedom of speech defender. The fans tend to make comparisons between Khan and freedom fighters in history. On the other hand, the opponents see this as a political gimmick to make some electoral sympathy; the results are in line with the studies by Sultana et al. (2024), Hanif et al. (2024), and Saboor et al. (2022). Such a dichotomy has established a fragile mood in which the defense of PTI is synonymous with defending human rights and the negative characterization of opposition

puts the positions of constructive political debate in a tight angle and polarizes the masses even harder (Rehan et al., 2024). The tweets of PPP are focused on social justice and welfare with references to underprivileged programs and its famous slogan. Those who support it are able to relate to this narrative positively, and those who are against it disregard it as an alternative version of repackaged, old promises. This once again segregates the audience on existing political ideologies. ANP uses the platform to promote democratic conservation and rights of the Pashtun people with frequent references to the losses incurred by terrorism. At the same time that its foundation echoes this story, ANP is criticized by other observers as a regional, but not a national party. To conclude, X is used by such parties as PML-N, PTI, PPP, and ANP to sell slogans, appeal to sympathies, and gain the backing of voters on the basis of their accomplishments. The visibility of this content to the population, however, is determined by personal ideologies and political positions. As a result, elite polarization that is observed in party messages is a direct source of mass polarization on the platform.

CONCLUSION

Verified X accounts are used by major political parties in Pakistan to communicate directly with the citizens. Nevertheless, the general opinion is polarized: people interact depending on their existing perceptions, applauding those texts that support their ideology and condemn the counter-storytelling. This would help in translating elite polarization into mass polarization on the platform. The attention to development by PML-N, to the narrative of victimization by PTI, the interest in welfare and diplomacy by PPP, and ethnic rights and regional peace by ANP position the audience into separate often conflicting camps. As a result, the popular space gets defined by inter-group struggle among the citizens, and the main goal of a welfare-state is frequently obscured by the partisan agendas.

Recommendations and Future Research Suggestions

Based on the study's results it is recommended that the Political parties must focus on the kinds of communication that can tackle the substantive concerns of the population more than the forms of communication that can increase mass polarization. The state ought to explore setting up an autonomous, open-minded system, which may utilize AI-supported systems, to recognize and signify provably fake content disseminated on the internet. The campaigns done on digital literacy in the community should be strengthened in order to sensitize citizens on how to critically consume political information in the social media. The interactive character of X is usually divisive; however, it has a possibility to develop constructive communication between the state and citizens and, thus, feed democratic discourse. Future research may use the longitudinal research to study the impact of the protracted exposure to political content on X in shaping political thinking and speech in Pakistan. Studies might examine the regional differences in the influence of and the acceptance of political content on social media. Cross-country studies could be done to gain a more insight into the dynamics of political polarization enabled by social media sites.

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