

Political Opinion Formation among Youth through AI-Driven Digital Media Platforms: A Case Study of the University of Chitral

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Abstract

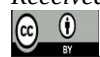
The rapid growth of AI-driven digital media has significantly transformed the ways how political communication works and how opinions are formed. Under transformation with the introduction of AI technologies, youth in Pakistan largely rely on digital media sites like Facebook, X (formerly twitter), Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and others for political information and participation purposes. While these media have created new opportunities for political information and participation, critics argue that they promote phenomena of echo chambers and selective exposure thereby rendering the societies polarized. This study is an attempt at exploring the tension between digital political mobilization and ideological polarization looking at the phenomenon from the perspectives of students of University of Chitral, a remote mountainous area in the northern regions of Pakistan. Using a qualitative exploratory design, data were collected from students of the University of Chitral through 24 semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis model. The major finding of the study reveals that AI-driven digital media usage among students of the University of Chitral acts as both sites of digital political mobilization as well as reinforcement leading to ideological polarization. The study concludes that the use of AI-driven digital media promotes awareness and increased political connectivity while at the same time reinforcing and widening political polarization among students of the University of Chitral.

Keywords: AI-driven social media, Youth, Digital political mobilization, Reinforcement, Political opinion formation, Chitral, Pakistan

Introduction

The growth of AI-driven digital media, which can be defined as those media operations where algorithmic and data driven process fundamentally power, drive, automate, personalize, distribute, moderate, analyze and generate contents and services, has significantly transformed the ways how political communication works and how opinions are formed (Feher, 2024). Today people no longer think of politics as business carried out in parliaments and cabinets, television broadcasts, or newspapers, rather they increasingly view politics as common business participating in it through access to information, expressing views, impacting political opinion formation via online platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly twitter), YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and others. This is particularly true for those who spend a significant time using these platforms for the said purposes. As of recent times, the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

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in these platforms, has significantly transformed these media platforms. Embedding AI-driven recommendation systems help the platforms analyze the user behavior, such as likes, watches, search history, comments and sharing, which help personalize the content feeds. While this transformation renders these platforms more engaging and participatory, it also fuels questions of how they shape political opinions, participation and democratic culture.

It is in this context that this study explores these dynamics in Chitral by focusing on the tension between digital mobilization (defined as increased awareness, connectivity, with a new degree of empowerment in the digital world transforming passive onlookers into active participants in politics) and echo chambers reinforcing exposure to selective contents yielding polarization (Smith, 2010; Sunstein, 2001).

Empirical literature in Pakistan highlights both the opportunities and threats associated with digital platforms in political life. Research shows that digital media platforms enhance political awareness among the youth of Pakistan. For instance, Ahmad et al. (2019) found that use of digital social media acted as strong predictor of higher levels of online and offline political participation among university youth.

Similarly, Ullah et al.'s (2024) study reveals that youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa increasingly rely on digital media thereby getting politically socialized. This enables them to connect and discuss issues of national political importance despite geographic remoteness. Moreover, Munir and Zahoor (2025) in their study came across finding about Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's social media strategy during the 2024 general elections revealing that the party's digital strategy has enabled it to reach younger voters, create interactive political communities, and mobilize supporters for political participation both online and offline (Ullah, Hussain, & Ara, 2025).

While there is a reported enhancement of digital engagement among youth in Pakistan, studies also reveal ideological reinforcement among them. Digital media users in Pakistan often engage with partisan content which intensifies their hostility towards the opposing groups. Studies also report limited cross-ideological interactions in digital spaces among youth in Pakistan rendering these spaces into echo chambers. Even religiopolitical echo chambers have been identified with increased risk of radicalization among segments of Pakistan's youth (Akram, 2025).

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Scholars have long come up with exploration of relationship between media and democracy. One of the prominent scholars in this connection is Jürgen Habermas whose Public Sphere is an ideal space where public affairs are discussed deliberately and rationally by citizens to influence policy decisions. The hallmarks of this space are openness, respect and rationality instead of power and emotions. In the wake of digital media, some scholars viewed them as Habermasian public sphere because they lower barriers to participation and promote inclusivity by connecting remote regions allowing ordinary citizens, including youth, to discuss and deliberate on issues of public importance (Papacharissi, 2010). Another core thinker who aided the development of mobilization theory is Manuel Castells whose Network Society Theory (2012) views contemporary societies as organized around digital communication networks bypassing the geographical barriers and institutional obstacles. In these societies, youth acting as digital natives challenge the traditional authorities by developing and organizing new forms of social movements, digital campaigns and power struggles.

Another theory that helps us explain the phenomenon of political culture amid increasing AI-driven digital media platforms usage by youth is Almond and Verba's Political Socialization Theory (1963). According to this theory, family, school, peers, and mass media served as traditional agents of political socialization impacting the political attitudes of youth. However, Loader et al. (2014) argue that digital media have emerged as the new powerful agent of socialization of youth. A continuous exposure to political content, videos, discussions, and memes not only provide youth with access to political information but also develop emotional attachments and beliefs to political actors and groups.

While digital media platforms might have increased opportunities for participation in politics online, critics argue that increased commercialization motives normalize the mobilizational potential of these media rendering such discussions emotional favoring profit generation over deliberation (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Further, despite the opportunities presented by AI-driven digital media platforms, scholars have warned us of the Echo Chamber phenomenon where people naturally tend to expose themselves to selective content confirming their long-held opinions and avoiding the challenging ones (Sunstein, 2001). Some termed these spaces as filter bubbles where invisible algorithmic walls limit exposure of users to diverse perspectives and opinions (Pariser, 2011). Consequently, the interactions in the digital spaces become identity-based conflicts rendering the users emotionally involved in their participation and hence an affective polarization occurs rather than healthy debates (Törnberg, 2022). Such content being emotionally charged get wider attention and spread faster which turns this system into what Zuboff (2019) calls surveillance capitalism - a system which despite generation of engagement renders it fit for profit than for healthy debates. According to this logic, digital platforms, thus, prioritize commercial algorithms for engagement than for democratic values.

The study employs this framework to analyze the tension between digital mobilization and ideological polarization among students of the University of Chitral primarily on political opinion formation while utilizing the AI-driven digital media platforms in their daily lives.

Thesis Statement

Whereas a significant body of literature addresses the phenomenon of echo chambers vis-à-vis digital political mobilization in Pakistan, studies often ignore the rural contexts where communities are usually socially cohesive with relatively stable processes of political socialization at work compared to the urban areas. It is in this context that this study attempts to uncover the patterns of interactions among youth in the remote rural context of Chitral while they use online platforms for political engagement purposes. The study, particularly, focuses on how the tension between echo chambers and digital political mobilization phenomena influence the political opinion formation among students of the University of Chitral while they utilize AI-driven digital media platforms, one of the core components of political socialization process.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question:

1. How do AI-driven digital media platforms shape the political opinion formation process among students of the University of Chitral?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. How do students of the University of Chitral perceive AI-driven digital media platforms for exposure to diverse political perspectives and debates?
2. How do students of University of Chitral reflect on their experiences with AI-driven digital platforms limiting their exposure to diverse political perspectives?

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore and analyze the role of AI-driven digital media platforms in shaping the political opinion formation among students of the University of Chitral.
2. To explore and analyze the perceptions of students of the University of Chitral regarding their experiences of exposure to diverse political perspectives on the AI-driven digital media platforms.
3. To explore and analyze the perceptions of students of the University of Chitral regarding their experiences of exposure to selective political content on the AI-driven digital media platforms.

Methodology

Grounded in interpretivist epistemological framework, this study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design. The methodological approach adopted enables the researchers to understand the subjective experiences, interpretations, and meanings the youth attach to their interactions in the AI-driven digital media platforms while using them for political purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The target population of the study consisted of students of University of Chitral who use digital media platforms for political engagement purposes regularly. The participants were selected purposively from different departments based primarily on their regular engagement with political content, their interest in political discussions and activism in digital spaces, and regular use of the digital media platforms for political purposes. Purposive sampling is a sampling strategy where participants are recruited on the basis of their ability to provide rich and relevant information for the phenomenon being studied. Researchers make its use widely in qualitative studies for identifying those individuals who possess particular experiences or characteristics relevant to the questions of the study (Patton, 2015). Participants were recruited from different departments of the university keeping in view their regular engagement with the digital media platforms for political information, discussion or participation purposes. The criteria required the participants to be (i) an enrolled student of the university, (ii) actively using different or one of the digital media platforms, and (iii) active on digital media platforms in terms of watching political content, news, or discuss political ideas. The potential participants were identified through informal screening, some preliminary conversation with students from different departments or referrals from student networks. During this process they were asked about frequency of the digital platforms' use, and engagement with political content. Those participants who met the recruitment criteria and were willing to participate in the study were invited for interviews. Data were collected from the participants using a semi-structured interview guide. A total of 24 interviews were conducted, the sample size being based on the principle of information power wherein the adequacy of the sample was guided and determined by the (i) richness, and (ii) relevance of the data instead of statistical representativeness (Malterud et al., 2016). The process of data

collection continued until it reached a sufficient depth along with capturing the diversity of perspectives in order to address the research objectives.

Thematic Analysis of data

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was carried out following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework and Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This process involved deep engagement and familiarization with the data, initial coding, and grouping of codes into different themes. After the development of themes, they were reviewed for thematic coherence. This was followed by defining the themes and then constructing the final analytical narrative (Braun & Clarke 2006; Ullah, Rehman, & Ali, 2022).

Throughout the analytical process, reflexivity was maintained following Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. The research team brought in the analysis interdisciplinary perspectives involving their expertise in new Information & Communication Technologies and politics, political socialization and political culture from the disciplines of Political Science and Sociology. Hence the analysis was carried out where the academic orientations of the researchers informed the interpretation of participants' narratives regarding their interactions in AI-driven digital spaces and political engagement. Therefore, rather than recognizing it a limitation and eliminating it, the study acknowledges the interpretive role of the researchers while developing the themes and understanding the patterns in the data through continuous collaborative discussions and reflections.

The analysis reveals mixed perceptions. Participants' experiences show that the AI-driven digital media increase opportunities for increased political awareness, participation and connection with national level political discourse. On the other hand, these platforms expose participants to selective exposure, ideological filtering, misinformation, emotional polarization and political division. These major findings are discussed under the following four major themes:

1. Digital Mobilization: Increased Political Awareness and Geographical Bridging
2. Personalized Exposure to Political Contents
3. Emotional Polarization and Echo Chambers
4. Political Culture: Informed and yet Divided Youth

In the following section, a detailed analysis is given under the above four major themes.

Digital Mobilization: Increased Political Awareness and Geographical Bridging

Under this dominant theme, participants described the role of these AI-driven digital platforms as increasing their political awareness and bridging the geographical isolation. Almost all participants shared a perception about these platforms as positively transforming the political communication landscape enabling them to stay informed about the political events unfolding on local, national and international levels that were hitherto the domain of traditional media with limited access. Reflecting on her experiences, one of the participants explained: "the AI-driven digital platforms have increased access to information and created political awareness by giving quick access to news" (Participant 2, personal communication, April 4, 2026). In a similar vein another participant explained his experience this way: "digital media platforms have changed my knowledge because it is one of my main sources of access to information and learning about

politics” (Participant 4, personal communication, April 4, 2026).). These responses suggest that digital media platforms have become the main source of political education among students of the University of Chitral. They provided comparative statements about the digital news platforms and the role earlier sources of political information and education like elders’ discussion, television broadcasts available to privileged few, or the newspapers played in political lives of the people. Almost all of them view these platforms playing positive role with easy access to developments on local, national and global levels.

Most of the participants pointed to the geographical bridging potential of these platforms. For instance, they view themselves connected to national political discourse. One of the participants, for instance, remarked: “I was watching live elections results which kept me interested as to what was coming next” (Participant 6, personal communication, April 5, 2026).). Similarly, Participant 9 remarked: “few moments ago I was listening to DG ISPR press conference which kept me listening to it for long although I just accidentally came upon this news” (Personal communication, April 6, 2026). While these responses suggest that information regarding political events being unfolded are available to the users in real time, it also points to Manuel Castells’ (2012) Network Society Theory arguing that these digital communication networks render physical distances ineffective recognizing the changed mode of political communication through information flows. Youth, therefore, in Chitral now participate in national level political discussions through these platforms irrespective of being remote and distant from the central spaces of politics.

Another aspect that this theme uncovered was increased confidence in political expressions. Participants repeatedly described their experiences of being confident at discussions through sharing their opinions confidently. One of the participants, for instance, remarked: “digital media platforms provide me with the opportunity to express my opinion confidently” (Participant 22, personal communication, April 17, 2026).). Another participant remarked: “I feel no restriction when I genuinely try to express my opinion on any of these platforms” (Participant 11, personal communication, April 10, 2026). Participants thus viewed these platforms not mere sites for access to political information, rather arenas that help them participate in political discussions and express themselves.

Overall, this theme indicates that the AI-driven digital platforms have expanded opportunities for youth in Chitral to increased awareness about political issues, and connection to the national political communication networks by populations living in the peripheral regions.

Personalized Exposure to Political Contents

This major theme covers participants awareness of how algorithmic recommendation system and the role of AI in it expose them to selective political contents online. It was reported by nearly all participants that the AI-driven platforms of Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and others continuously recommend matching contents based on their previous engagement patterns.

One of the participants, for instance, stated: “when I interact with the contents on these platforms in terms of watching, liking or commenting on them, these platforms start showing me things closely matching. For instance, when I watch a video related to PTI, I often receive videos or contents on the same topic ahead” (Participant 15, personal communication, April 11, 2026).

Reflecting on her experiences, a female participants stated: “I repeatedly experience watching matching contents after I start watching any video or content on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube” (Participant 13, personal communication, April 11, 2026).

All these responses indicate that AI-driven digital platforms trace participants’ engagement and show them matching contents. These empirical data suggest that AI-driven platforms shape political visibility according to the engagement pattern of users.

Whereas some participants viewed this kind of personalization positive playing a key role in their easier access to information matching their interests, others showed concern over the control of these platforms as to what should users see online. One of the participants expressed his concern this way: “sometimes I feel as if these platforms are controlling what I see which poses limits on exposure to different points of view” (Participant 19, personal communication, April 16, 2026).

These findings are in line with Praiser’s (2011) filter bubbles and Sunstein’s (2001) theory of selective exposure. It can be said that the AI algorithms render the neutrality of distributing political information questionable. They organize political visibility while prioritizing familiar content limiting exposure to alternative “fringe” political concerns. Similarly, these findings also resonate with Zuboff’s (2019) notion of surveillance capitalism. The AI-driven digital platforms constantly monitor user behavior optimizing engagement with the content using behavioral prediction systems. Informational diversity or democratic balance is thus overshadowed under this structured political communication where engagement maximization remains the overriding goal. While this phenomenon may have significant observed impact in other contexts, Chitral, particularly, like other remote regions, remains more vulnerable to its effects as digital media platforms function the major sources of political information among youth. The theme predominantly demonstrates that the participants’ political opinion formation happens within AI-driven digital platforms shaped by personalized content online.

Emotional Polarization and Echo Chambers

This theme focused on echo chambers and emotional polarization within online political environments. Participants repeatedly reflected on their experiences of encountering content that closely resembled or aligned with their pre-existing beliefs and thoughts with opposite voices either encountered limitedly or actively ignored. One of the participants explained it this way: “I often come across content that closely match my thoughts. It gives me a sense of protection thinking that my thoughts are valid” (Participant 22, personal communication, April 17, 2026). Another participant remarked: “I usually ignore contents that do not reflect my thoughts. I do not know why do I skip this sort of content that rarely comes my way though. Frankly speaking, I have developed this habit over the years while utilizing digital media platforms” (Participant 6, personal communication, April 5, 2026). These findings match with the notion of echo chamber by Sunstein (2001) where one’s own voice echoes in the digital spaces one engages with. The evidence goes against digital mobilization theory and supports the theory of reinforcement which helps users strengthen their pre-existing beliefs. Whereas the phenomenon of reinforcement may look ordinary at surface, deep inside the communities instills emotional polarization. One of the participants described his experiences this way: “supporters of a political party [party name censored] turns easily aggressive in online interactions with them” (Participant 16, personal com-

munication, April 12, 2026). Reflecting on his experiences in the online environment another participant reported: “often it happened that supporters of a political party [party name censored] abused me while disagreeing with them” (Participant 19, personal communication, April 16, 2026). These findings suggest that ideological polarization within the AI-driven digital media platforms happens, a phenomenon what Törnberg (2022) termed as affective polarization where political identities of the users become socially charged identities rendering the democratic potential of these platforms less effective. Participants also reported a loosing confidence in these media content. One of the primary reasons for this increasing lack of confidence is misinformation and deepfake, contents specifically generated through AI against opposing political groups/parties. One of the participants remarked about it this way: “It is increasingly becoming difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. Many a times it happens that fake videos are made with AI causing suspicion about the content in these media platforms” (Participant 17, personal communication, April 15, 2026). While these findings suggest that the AI-driven digital platforms render themselves into sites of epistemic instability, it also creates political fragmentation turning these spaces into emotionally charged digital communities than into shared spaces for democratic discussions. Similarly, this finding aligns with Khan et al. (2021) where they argue, “such echo chambers act as reinforcement of their existing ideologies and beliefs. Further studies show that both Political Polarization of youth and “Selective Exposure” concept have a link as social media users actively engage in seeking out information that are compatible with their beliefs and ideologies. Further, this finding matches the one obtained by Ullah et al. (2024) while studying the relationship between social media usage and political socialization among youth in KP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) where they argue, “despite its benefits in fostering political awareness and enabling civic participation, challenges such as misinformation and echo chambers remain intact.”

Political Culture: Informed and yet Divided Youth

The final theme concerns the broader transformation of political culture among students of the University of Chitral. Participants consistently described social media as fundamentally changing how politics is experienced, discussed, and understood within everyday life.

This theme concerns the broader transformation in political culture among students of the University of Chitral. Almost all participants pointed to the role AI-driven digital platforms are playing in changing the ways how politics is discussed, understood, and experienced in their daily lives. Several of them pointed to the positive role of these platforms in enhancing awareness about political issues, a privilege that the elder generations did not possess. For instance, one of the participants remarked: “the AI-driven digital media platforms have drastically changed the knowledge of the youth in Chitral regarding politics. I myself feel privileged compared to our elders who did not have access to bulks of political information the way I have” (Participant 2, personal communication, April 4, 2026). Another participant stated: “we are more familiar with the facts and figures of politics than our previous generations. We see issues highlighted ranging from local to international level easily” (Participant 5, personal communication, April 4, 2026). While pointing to the benefits these platforms extend, several participants also pointed to the divisions induced with the use of these platforms by youth. One participant remarked: “in the past political discussions were restrained, localized and socially moderated while discussions in the online environments are faster, with less restraints and hence confrontational” (Participant 24, personal communication, April 18, 2026). One of the participants reflected on his thoughts this

way: “digital media is lethal for youth. It has created meaningful division in the society distancing close relatives from one another” (Participant 7, personal communication, April 6, 2026).

Overall, the theme demonstrates that the AI-driven digital media platforms have created opportunities for youth to engage with politics on local and national level in novel ways and enhanced their awareness, it has concurrently instilled deep divisions and fragmentation within the society on emotional lines.

Conclusion

The findings under the above themes, overall, concludes that AI-driven digital media platforms have extended opportunities for engagement with politics for youth, and connected them to the national political discourses. However, they have also been impacting the society with misinformation, echo chambers, emotional polarization rendering the democratic potential less effective. Students of the University of Chitral are, therefore, becoming more politically informed and engaged while at the same time more politically divided. The findings also point to the growing importance of media literacy, a critical digital engagement, and awareness about the impact of algorithmic influence. These findings also extend existing scholarship on Pakistan arguing that these effects are not only felt in urban areas but also in the remote peripheral regions like Chitral where alternative media sources are limited.

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