
Social Media Strategy and Political Mobilization: A Case Study of PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract

The rise of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed political communication across the world. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and Instagram enable political actors to communicate directly with citizens, bypass traditional media gatekeepers, and mobilize supporters rapidly and effectively. In Pakistan, the growing penetration of smart phones and internet access has made social media an important arena of political engagement. Among Pakistani political parties, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has been widely recognized for its strategic and systematic use of social media for political communication and mobilization. This research paper examines the social media strategy of PTI in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and analyzes how digital communication platforms contribute to political mobilization, narrative building, and voter engagement. The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on thematic analysis of interviews, digital political content, and scholarly literature on political communication. The findings suggest that PTI has effectively used social media to construct political narratives related to governance reforms, anti-corruption, and national identity. 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. The study concludes that social media has become a central instrument of contemporary political communication in Pakistan.

Keywords:

Social Media, Political Communication, PTI, Digital Campaigning, Political Mobilization, Youth Participation, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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1. Introduction

Political communication has undergone significant transformation in the digital age. Traditionally, political information was disseminated through newspapers, radio, and television, which acted as gatekeepers controlling the flow of information to the public. However, the emergence of social media platforms has disrupted this traditional communication structure by enabling direct interaction between political leaders and citizens (Chadwick, 2017). In Pakistan, increasing internet access and smartphone usage have accelerated the spread of digital communication technologies. Social media platforms now function as major arenas for political debate, opinion formation, and political mobilization (Ahmed, 2019). Political parties increasingly use digital media strategies to reach voters, promote political narratives, and respond to political developments in real time. Among political parties in Pakistan, **Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)** has been widely recognized for its effective use of social media in political communication. The party has invested significantly in online communication networks, digital volunteers, and social media campaigns aimed at shaping political discourse and mobilizing supporters. The province of **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)** provides an important case study for analyzing digital political communication. PTI has played a significant political role in the province, making it a suitable context for examining how social media strategies influence political mobilization and voter engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political Communication and Network Society

Manuel Castells' theory of the "network society" provides a relevant lens through which PTI's online engagement can be understood. According to Castells (2009), political power in the information age is increasingly exercised through media networks. PTI's strategy in KPK reflects this transformation as it has shifted traditional political messaging to a modernized way. Social media especially the Twitter and Facebook gave an opportunity to PTI to communicate directly with citizens, especially the young people (Khan, 2020).

2.2 Theorizing the Concept of Social Media Strategy of PTI in KP

The introduction of the internet has brought about a significant worldwide revolution and transformed the world into a global village. Additionally, the communication gaps between people, societies, and nations were reduced by this technological advancement. Social media's introduction has helped to close the social divide between various communities and societies. The introduction of social media has revolutionized conventional forms of political communication and campaign tactics around the world.

Within Pakistan, the PTI is a prominent political force that has successfully leveraged digital media, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), for mobilization, framing political stories, and voter engagement. The theoretical exploration of PTI's social media strategy requires drawing upon multiple frameworks within political communication, digital media studies, and networked politics. Social media's history began in the early years of the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the emergence of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in 2005 and 2006, respectively, augmented the use and appeal of social media platforms. Telegram, Instagram, and WhatsApp were introduced between 2009 and 2010. People and cultures have taken notice of the numerous social networking sites, which have mostly taken over the social media landscape. To help their users, a variety of social networking programs are also available (Njegomir, 2016; O'Morain, 2016). Even those who are illiterate may now easily use social media tools and programs, which has fundamentally changed how people communicate with one another.

2.3 Agenda-Setting Theory

The agenda-setting theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. It advocates that media shape what matters to audiences. In KPK PTI used social media for political agenda setting. Usually, PTI's social media agenda-setting includes highlighting government achievements, condemning opposition and mobilize its followers in support of its policies. Social media has been used as a tool to mobilize their voters particularly in election seasons and important political events (Ali & Nawaz, 2019).

2.4 Framing Theory

Framing theory describes how political agents emphasize influence public opinion. Social media strategy is basically associated with the framing of political narratives

(Entman, 1993). PTI social media posts covers issues like anti-corruption, good governance, and nationalism and in this way they emotionally attract their voters in KPK (Rehman & Zaheer, 2021). So, digital framing, especially use of social media as a political tool, has contributed to constructing PTI's image as a reformist and youth-centric party.

2.5 Social Media and Political Participation

Another useful theoretical framework is the concept of digital populism, where political leaders bypass institutionalized communication channels to appeal directly to "the people." Imran Khan's personal engagement on platforms like Twitter has added a populist flavor to PTI's digital strategy, allowing for a strong leader-centric model of communication. This personalization resonates deeply in KPK, where political charisma and trust play a significant role in shaping voting behavior (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018).

2.6 Public Sphere and Participatory Democracy

Habermas's theory of the public sphere, when transformed to digital realities, provides glimpses in to why PTI social media handles have become spaces where political debate and participation occur. Although the democratic potential of social media is arguable, the approach in PTI in KPK shows intent to create a participatory political culture, where supporters can comment on, share, and even denounce policies (Dahlberg, 2007). It increases the feel of political empowerment among the support base, and especially among youths (Yousaf, 2022).

2.7 Localized Digital Strategies

Lastly, the social media strategy of PTI in KPK also needs to be theorized against localized political culture and socio-economic dynamics. The party's online outreach in KPK is not an imitation of national-level strategies but entails region-related content, Pashto language usage, and work with local influencers. This is evidence of the phenomenon of "globalization" in digital politics where cross-border communication tools are managed within local political settings (Robertson, 1995; Iqbal & Malik, 2020).

2.8 Social Media and Political Communication

In the digital era, social media has emerged as a revolutionary power in the domain of political communication. The rapid spread of digital technologies has redefined the ways in which political actors spread information, interact with citizens, and influence public opinion. Historical methods of political communication, which had depended on media such as newspapers, TV, and radio, have come to be more and more supplemented or in certain instances, supplanted by interactive, immediate channels like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Chadwick, 2013). This evolution has not merely increased the instantaneity and scope of political communication but has also opened up access to political discourse, creating two-way flow of communication between citizens and leaders.

Digital technology has transformed the distribution of information. Social media is significantly influencing this development. The political scenario has been altogether changed in Pakistan due to the adoption of social media. Social media has offered new ways for political engagement and activism. Alongside the positive role of social media, it has also played a negative role in politics e.g. it served as a tool for digital propaganda and it also enabled authoritarian actors to influence public opinion and control the narrative. Political communication through social media offers unique advantages to political actors, especially in emerging democracies like Pakistan. Social media is a space where political parties can bypass mainstream media and engage directly with people (Loader & Mercea, 2011). PTI used this social media strategy very effectively. One of the main reasons for the rise of PTI is its close linkage with people through social media. PTI used social media as a tool for mobilizing young people, framing narrative and spreading campaign (Rehman & Zaheer, 2021).

For the last few years, internet services have been spread all over Pakistan. The use of mobile phones also penetrated and all this led to a surge of social media usage. Social media like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp and have become essential part of the daily lives of millions of Pakistanis. These digital advancements have provided great opportunity politicians to engage with the public directly (Schroeder, 2021). Currently, all politicians and political parties are actively using social media to disseminate their narratives, galvanize their fans, and confront their opposition. The PTI, under the leadership of Imran Khan, exemplifies the effective use of social media to mobilize young support and disseminate its political agenda. The PTI's effective use of

social media during the 2018 general elections significantly contributed to its electoral triumph (Lashari *et al.*, 2024).

The impact of media in contemporary Pakistan is evident, despite the nation being classified as a developing country grappling with various social, economic, political, and security challenges (Pariser, 2011). The media in Pakistan is considered more open, direct, and proactive than it was in the past. It now exposes societal injustices, poor economic governance, and political mistakes within the nation. Overtime, the Pakistani media has evolved into a powerful tool for scrutinizing the functioning of government institutions; instead of merely providing policy alternatives to the government, it increasingly develops its own policies. This study aims to clarify the significance of media in Pakistan by examining its historical context, current circumstances, major media outlets, governing bodies, and future prospects for the sector in the country.

Social media is also an effective agenda-setting tool. McCombs and Shaw (1972) say the media don't tell people what to think, but what to think about. Political leaders utilize social media to set some issues as priorities, advance hash tags, and make trends that influence public debate. PTI's digital team has been at the forefront of this agenda-setting function, effectively promoting its policy initiatives, governance achievements in KPK, and criticisms of opposition parties through coordinated campaigns across social media platforms (Iqbal & Malik, 2020).

2.9 Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Narratives

Social media are also important in shaping political narratives. It provides a platform to political parties to consolidate, disseminate, and develop their policy agendas and ideological positions. Such communication has given way to narrative-based campaigning. Political parties employ powerful narratives to emotionally connect with supporters and shape public opinion. In Pakistan, political groups like the PTI have smartly used social media to promote party messages. For this purpose, they targeted the young people especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

In modern politics, social media plays an important role in engaging political leaders with people. Imran Khan, the charismatic leader, used social media to create a distinct trajectory in Pakistan politics. He used social media to engage and organize his supporters. It is believed that Imran Khan and his party used social media tools. They used almost all prominent social media channels to enhance their reputation among people.

They use these technologies to enhance their popularity, engage with others, and expand their voter bases. They use these venues to disseminate their perspectives and communicate their agendas to their followers. Members of the group said that Imran Khan and his party have lately established profiles on social media sites and are actively using them to interact with fans. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram are principal social media platforms. Khan has just emerged on TikTok and has amassed a substantial fan base there as well. In the era of digital media, it has become more essential for politicians to appear on social media platforms and interact with the people. Imran Khan reportedly utilized numerous social media platforms to interact with the public and boost his popularity. Principal platforms include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Khan and his party have a substantial following on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Individuals also seek updates from Khan and his colleagues on various social media channels. Students contended that Imran Khan and his party acquired their reputation and popularity via social media (Baloch, May 24, 2023). He engaged with individuals and garnered their trust via responses and comments on social media postings. He engaged the public using Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. These applications significantly enhanced his party's strength over time (Bilal *et al.*, 2024).

2.10 Use of Social Media for Political Purposes in Pakistan

Pakistani political parties once depended on television and print media; however, they increasingly use social media to engage with the populace. Social media has emerged as a potent instrument for disseminating their views and engaging with the public. Politicians often engage in online disputes, with their fans participating as well (Fatima, March 10, 2023). Although Pakistan lags behind other nations in using social media for democratic purposes, it is undergoing transformation. Imran Khan's party, PTI, initiated this social media revolution. During the political turmoil after Imran Khan's ousting, many resorted to social media for immediate, unmediated information. The robust social media presence of PTI significantly influenced public perceptions of Imran Khan. The effectiveness of social media platforms in sustaining the popularity of Imran Khan, a prominent political figure, and assessing their impact on his ability to garner substantial public support in the upcoming election is noteworthy (Shehzad, October 20, 2023).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** to examine the role of social media in shaping political communication and mobilization in the context of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher to explore perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of individuals regarding political communication. Furthermore, the research design follows an **interpretive approach**, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena from the perspective of participants. The interpretive framework allows the researcher to analyze how individuals perceive PTI's digital communication strategies and how these strategies influence political awareness and engagement. The research is exploratory in nature, aiming to generate insights into the evolving relationship between political leadership, digital media strategies, and citizen participation. By focusing on qualitative evidence, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which social media contributes to political mobilization and narrative formation.

3.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through both **primary and secondary sources** in order to ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis of PTI's social media communication strategies. Primary data were collected through **semi-structured interviews** with individuals who possess relevant knowledge and experience regarding political communication and social media campaigns. The participants included:

- Political analysts
- Digital media strategists
- Social media activists
- Supporters familiar with PTI's online campaigns

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow flexibility in questioning while still maintaining a structured framework. This method enables the researcher to ask predetermined questions while also allowing participants to elaborate on their responses and

provide deeper insights into the subject. Participants were selected through **purposive sampling**, which involves choosing individuals who are most likely to provide relevant and informed perspectives on the research topic. This sampling technique ensures that the collected data directly addresses the objectives of the study. In addition to primary interviews, the study also relied on **secondary data sources** to provide theoretical and contextual support for the analysis. Secondary sources included:

- Academic journal articles on political communication
- Books on digital media and political mobilization
- Reports related to social media influence in politics
- News articles and policy analyses
- Social media content such as tweets, posts, and campaign messages related to PTI

The use of multiple secondary sources helps strengthen the credibility of the research by allowing the researcher to compare different perspectives and identify patterns in existing scholarship.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using **Thematic Analysis**, a widely used qualitative research method that focuses on identifying patterns, meanings, and recurring themes within textual data.

Thematic analysis is particularly useful for analyzing interview responses and social media content because it allows the researcher to organize complex information into meaningful categories. This method helps in identifying how political messages are framed and how audiences interpret those messages.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process to ensure the integrity and credibility of the study. Participants who took part in the interviews were informed about the **purpose and objectives of the research** before the interviews were conducted. They were also assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw

from the study at any stage if they wished. In order to protect the privacy of participants, the researcher maintained strict **confidentiality** regarding their identities and responses. Personal information was not disclosed in the research report, and the data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Furthermore, the researcher ensured that the interview process was conducted in a respectful and professional manner. Participants were given sufficient time to respond to questions, and their views were recorded accurately without distortion or misrepresentation. The study also adhered to general academic standards regarding **research ethics**, including proper citation of sources and avoidance of plagiarism. All secondary materials used in the study were appropriately acknowledged in the reference section.

4. Findings

4.1 Social Media as a Source of Political Information

The findings of the study reveal that social media has become one of the most significant sources of political information for supporters of PTI. Many respondents indicated that they rely more heavily on digital platforms than traditional media outlets such as television and newspapers when seeking political news and updates. Participants emphasized that social media platforms provide **instant access to political information**, allowing users to follow speeches, policy announcements, and political debates in real time. This immediacy creates a more dynamic and interactive political environment compared to traditional media channels. Moreover, respondents highlighted that social media platforms allow individuals to access a diverse range of perspectives and viewpoints. Unlike traditional media, which is often perceived as being controlled by specific political or corporate interests, social media provides a space where individuals can share alternative narratives and challenge mainstream political discourse. As a result, PTI supporters view social media as a **more accessible and participatory form of political communication**, where they can not only receive information but also actively engage in discussions and debates.

4.2 Narrative Construction

Another major finding of the study is the importance of **narrative construction** in PTI's social media communication strategy. The party actively uses digital platforms to construct and promote political narratives that resonate with its supporters. One of the most prominent themes

in PTI's messaging is the emphasis on **anti-corruption and political reform**. Through speeches, videos, and social media posts, the party consistently portrays itself as a movement committed to accountability, transparency, and institutional reform. In addition, PTI's digital communication frequently highlights themes related to **national identity, sovereignty, and economic development**. These narratives are strategically designed to appeal to a broad audience, particularly young voters who are seeking political change. The study found that visual storytelling plays an important role in narrative construction. Short video clips, infographics, and images are often used to simplify complex political messages and make them more engaging for online audiences. By combining emotional appeals with political messaging, PTI's social media strategy effectively strengthens its ideological narrative and reinforces the loyalty of its supporters.

4.3 Role of Digital Volunteers

The research findings also highlight the significant role played by **digital volunteers** in expanding the reach of PTI's political communication. Digital volunteers are supporters who actively participate in online political activities such as sharing posts, creating political memes, and engaging in discussions on social media platforms. These individuals function as informal political communicators who help disseminate the party's messages across digital networks. Many interview participants noted that digital volunteers operate as part of a **decentralized communication network**. Unlike traditional political campaigns that rely on centralized messaging, PTI's online activism involves thousands of supporters who independently promote political content within their social networks. This decentralized structure allows political messages to spread rapidly across multiple platforms, significantly increasing their visibility and impact. Furthermore, digital volunteers often respond quickly to political controversies or criticisms by defending the party's position and presenting counter-arguments. This active participation helps maintain a continuous online presence and strengthens the party's digital influence.

4.4 Youth Political Mobilization The study also demonstrates that social media has played a crucial role in **mobilizing young voters**. Young people are among the most active users of digital platforms, making social media an effective tool for engaging this demographic group. Respondents reported that many young supporters first became interested in politics through exposure to political content on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These platforms provide a space where young people can discuss political issues, share opinions, and

participate in online campaigns. Social media also facilitates the organization of **political events, protests, and awareness campaigns**, which further encourages youth participation in political activities. Online campaigns often translate into offline political engagement, including attending rallies and participating in political discussions within communities. The research findings suggest that PTI's ability to connect with young voters through digital communication has been a key factor in expanding its political support base.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate the transformative role of social media in political communication in Pakistan. Digital platforms allow political actors to communicate directly with citizens and bypass traditional media gatekeepers. PTI's experience shows how effective digital communication strategies can enhance political mobilization. Through narrative framing, visual storytelling, and interactive engagement, the party has developed a strong online political community. However, the increasing reliance on social media also raises challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and emotional political debates (Shirky, 2011). Despite these challenges, social media remains a powerful tool for political engagement and democratic participation.

6. Conclusions

The research concludes that PTI used a well-structured, dynamic, and emotive social media campaign to mobilize its KPK followers. The digital communication of the party served not only as an information-delivery tool but also as a forceful political mobilization and public influence mechanism. Social media enabled PTI supporters in KPK to be more politically active, expressive, and aware, especially among young people. Respondents emphasized that social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were the main sources of political information and updates from party leadership, bringing a sense of digital proximity between voters and representatives. PTI's approach to supporting its narrative in KPK was grounded in ideological consistency, emotional appeal, and personalized content. The party skilfully framed itself as a reformist, anti-status quo movement by showcasing governance achievements in KPK. Visual storytelling and charismatic leadership portrayal helped PTI cultivate an image of a people-centered party. These initiatives added to narrative creation that highly appealed to its target population and set the party apart from conventional political organizations. Politically, in terms of mobilization, the strategy of PTI mixed central

messaging with community involvement. It dispatched directives and messages from headquarters and incentivized local leaders, online volunteers, and influencers to spread its word. Social media was utilized for mobilizing support ranging from rallies, protests, or online mobilizations and politicizing political action, thereby rendering political

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