IS SOCIAL MEDIA A SUITABLE PLATFORM OF POLITICAL EXPRESSION AND AWARENESS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN?

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ABSTRACT
Frequent use of social media has increased the access of youth to certain online platforms for expression, exchange, agreement, disagreement, and learning. Consulting key proposition of Dahl's (1989) theory of 'Democratic Processes', the current study aims at observing to what extent the use of social media (Facebook and Twitter) improves the university students' political expression that leads towards improvement in their political awareness in Pakistan. A survey research method is used for data collection from different universities in four provinces of Pakistan. The results of multiple regression analysis reveal that an increase in the use of Facebook and Twitter not only improves the political expression of students but also enhances their political awareness. Nevertheless, gender, discipline and province-based variations prevail.
Keywords: Social Media, Facebook Use, Twitter Use, Political Expression, Political Awareness.

INTRODUCTION
For bringing sustainable change in the political environment of any country, social media is now perceived as the most popular platform. Whether it is used for creating a favorable opinion cloud, bringing targeted change, or mobilizing people for a social or political cause, the level of 'awareness' is a key element as well as a minimum requirement to proceed further with all aspects of political engagement. Recently and in the last few years, many authors have focused on measuring the political engagement of individuals through the political use of social media. For instance, a couple of studies find a direct causal relationship between the use of social media and the political engagement of citizens in different parts of the world (Yang and DeHart, 2016; Zaheer, 2016). The present study further extends the focus and aims at analyzing mechanisms through which social media exerts varying influence on political awareness and engagement of youth. Political awareness and engagement are interlinked but distinct concepts. The scholarship asserts that the political use of social media has an indirect relationship with the political engagement of users, which is mediated by the direct association of political awareness (Boulianne, 2016; Loader et al., 2014). In this context, existing scholarship has already underlined a few mediators of political engagement, such as political knowledge and political awareness. The scholarship argues that social media can affect the political engagement of individuals through mediating factors like political awareness (Boulianne, 2016; Dimitrova et al., 2014).

Given that, the political history of Pakistan is marked by several years of dictatorship, which has limited the role of traditional media in information dissemination and promoting awareness. The non-democratic regimes have faced closure of media outlets, as newly launched private news channels were stopped to broadcast in the last non-democratic regime (Mulla, 2017). Since 2008, democracy has restored and literature cites that mainstream media/social media is more autonomous on civic and political issues in comparison to non-democratic regime (Mulla, 2017). It can influence youth's political perspectives from different dimensions. The population pyramid has more than 63 percent of youth in Pakistan (Hafeez and Fasih, 2018, UN Population Fund Report, 2017). Thus, is interesting to investigate how youth uses social media to express political viewpoints and improve their awareness level through interactive communication. We believe that not only democracy in conventional meanings - just having a label of democracy - but actual democratic values, such as liberal and independent political thoughts, autonomy in making choices, and freedom in decision-making should prevail in the political system of a country. Prevailing literature is less likely to focus on the role of social media in communicating these norms, expressions and characteristics in youth. Therefore, we argue that underlining the political

awareness level of Pakistani youth through social media and political expression is an understudied but imperative topic of research. Past literature presents several reasons behind this argument, such as it is a modern source of information, mostly used by young people, can enhance youth's role and participation in politics, and can strengthen democracy in the country (Graham, 2020). Therefore, the present study has been designed to explore a relationship between the use of social media and political expression initially, and then whether the political expression is associated with political awareness of university students in Pakistan. Hence, the study answers a key research question, i.e., *does an increase in the political use of social media among university students associate with their increased level of political awareness in Pakistan?* The study develops its conceptual framework discussing relevant literature on the use of social media, political expression and its effects on political awareness of youth.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Theoretical propositions for the study are built based on three interlinking concepts taken from different theories, i.e., enlightened understanding of civic and political issues (Dahl, 1989), political expression (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010), and political awareness (De Vibe et al., 2018; Zaller, 1992).

Enlightened Understanding of Civic and Political Issues in different Political Regimes
In his theory of 'Democratic Processes', Dahl (1989) asserts that citizens are an integral part of decision-making processes in democracy. They should be provided equal opportunities while accessing knowledge and freedom to make rational political choices. In a democratic structure, individuals should be able to understand and judge what is best for them and their country. However, this can only happen if individuals are fully informed and can adequately understand prevailing political issues. To decide about political choices in the best interest of citizens, an enlightened understanding of civic and political issues is compulsory. Today, social media has appeared as a free, open, independent, and liberal public sphere, where users have more likely equal access to participate in discussions on national civic and political issues (Habermas, 1962). In comparison to other means of expression and awareness, social media is more effectively determining people's ability to understand civic and political issues, express their viewpoint, and improve their awareness levels in the political realm of a country.

Nevertheless, the use of social media, political expression of users, and their level of political awareness vary in democratic and authoritarian regimes. *In democratic regimes*, the use of social media may lead to non-violent protests and peaceful campaigns on political and national agendas (Breuer et al., 2012). The salient agenda items could be a deteriorating economy, inflation, poor law and order situation, educational issues, and inappropriate health conditions. The proliferation of social media content (expressions), initiated by citizens, journalists, or online activists about issues mentioned above or beyond, gradually converts into awareness campaigns (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Literature relates renowned contemporary political movements with social media campaigns, e.g., Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Protest in New York, Gezi Park Protests in Turkey (Jost et al., 2018; Mcgarty et al., 2014), and Military Coup against Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey in 2016. These movements have been fueled by the rapid exchange of information, awareness about protest activities, and quick mobilization[1]. Similarly, different case studies from different democratic regimes also endorse the relevance of social media and civic and political activism under varying conditions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Altuwayjiri, 2017; Jarrar and Hammud, 2018; Jost et al., 2018). A study from Pakistan reveals that social media has appeared as the most popular platform for Pakistani youth (during the democratic regime) that enhances their interest in politics. It further exhibits a positive relationship with their political awareness levels (Ali and Fatima, 2016).

In authoritarian regimes, the helms of affairs try to control citizens by controlling access to information through media, but it contradicts Dahl's prerequisites of democracy. According to Dahl, citizens must be given equal opportunity to understand civic and political issues through all means of information. It is because these are sources of information that offer justifications to undermine authoritarian regimes**.** Past studies have also focused on studying political awareness through political expression either online or offline in authoritarian regimes (Bond et al., 2017; Breuer et al., 2015). It has been noticed that online social networks provide adequate opportunities for the masses to express their grievances and anger, which otherwise cannot be described in authoritarian regimes (Jost et al., 2018).

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[1] Article can be accessed from How Erdogan turned to social media to help foil coup in Turkey | Financial Times (ft.com) Rachel Einwohner, Sociology Professor in Purdue University, 2018, see https://wtop.com

Moreover, fewer restrictions can be applied to social media; thus, it helps people overcome barriers that hinder freedom of expression, which is impossible otherwise in authoritarian regimes (Mcgarty et al., 2014). Breuer et al. (2015) and Jones (2017) analyze the relevance of online social networks to citizens' awareness levels in authoritarian regimes. They find that online networks reduce information flow barriers, thus trying to undermine authoritarian regimes.

The above conversation reflects that enlightened understanding of civic and political issues is more convenient in democratic than authoritarian political regimes. The use of social media with political intentions can improve users' political expression - subsequently enhancing their political awareness level in societies. Following literature and discussion highlight how social media shapes political expression and awareness in its users.

Political Expression

Political expression is a way to express political thoughts and views through different channels, e.g. face-to-face communication and machine-mediated communication (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). Political expression, both in academia and in research, is measured through two concepts; political talks and political discussions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010). Literature reveals that user-generated content of social media guides several paths through political expression and produces a visible impact on citizens' political efficacy. Being a merger of interpersonal and mass-mediated communication, social media can enhance the expected outcomes by communicating it to an unlimited number of people on the network immediately (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014;). User-generated content on social media, e.g., through informal public talks, dialogues and discussions, free speech, and freedom of expression, can generate diverse political views on a particular network. This mode brings various topics of political sensitivity into open discussion where users can express freely and agree or dissent with each other. It has been noticed that social media users are more likely to describe themselves politically than non-users (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017).

The political expression on social networking sites, blogs, and microblogging services includes individual users' thoughts, opinions, and feedback on received thoughts, which are part of the routine conversation on social media. The medium of expression and exchange can be textual messages, pictures, illustrations, videos, graphics, voice, etc. The ability of social media to communicate user-generated content enhances the frequency of users' expressive attitudes (e.g., textual political discussions, favoring and criticizing political parties, sharing, commenting, criticizing and liking political posts, joining and liking political pages). Such sharing culture enables them to participate in the political processes through online platforms equally (Castells, 2012; Jose van Dijck, 2013). We presume that the restoration of democracy in the country has given more opportunities to youth to express politically more conveniently and widely.

Political Awareness

What is being politically aware? It raises many questions. For instance, how do people make political choices? How do they make preferences about policies? How do they make political decisions? How much are they informed about their social and economic issues? A broad answer could be - individuals' unique political ideologies, behaviors, political partisanship, and other preconditions that can improve their political awareness and further determine their political rationality. Nevertheless, Zaller (1992) defines it as paying attention to and understanding what an individual comes across. The work of De Vibe et al. (2018) conceptualizes political awareness in detail. Starting from the individual's pre-conditions (e.g., previous political experiences and personal choices) and psychological orientation with political objects (e.g., information, events, and policies), the measurement goes beyond various stages of 'political awareness', i.e., political attentiveness, political knowledge, and political understanding, and political discussions. Although ample literature defines 'awareness' through some generally derived terms or with some variations (De Vibe et al., 2018), there is academic consensus on three pre-conditions that conceptualize 'awareness', i.e., political information and knowledge, political discussions, political interest, (Ahmed, 2017).

Political Information and Knowledge

There is a clear distinction between political information and political knowledge. Political awareness is an outcome of exchanging political information between individuals, and political knowledge is a

subdivision of political awareness (Alami, 2017; Cantijoch et al., 2016). To acquire political information and knowledge, today, social media provides an adequate platform for open discussion on different issues, guides towards the right to participate, and ensures equality of participation. Literature manifests that repeated exposure to similar information from multiple sources coerces the users to think about it seriously and develop an opinion (Zhou et al., 2015). This argument is endorsed by Althaus (2003) that even an indirect and subtle exposure to information can change the saliency of information and alter public opinion. Online social networks communicate multiple and diversified political messages from various sources. These sources expose users to numerous aspects of information and counter-arguments that make it easier to process particular information and make cognitive decisions. Such cognitive processing leads towards improved awareness (Zaller, 1992).

Political Discussions

As a discussion forum, having multiple, diversified, and counter opinions on any issue, social networks help users process multiple dimensions of political information intellectually. However, the question *'to what extent does it enhance users' exposure to diverse information sources that can affect their political awareness level'* is yet to know. Social media's online community is a leading and persistently expanding community that can be relatively more liberal and democratic in terms of expression. Social media networks enhance interactive discussion among members, improving their awareness level through speedy knowledge transfer (Xiongfei Cao et al., 2016). Literature also reveals that social media has provided a powerful forum for young people to share, organize, and communicate their ideas. Such discussions are also in the form of political severe critiques or disrespectful satirical comments (Reilly, 2011). Overall, social media expands avenues of political discussion that improve political awareness among its users.

Political Interest

Another important indicator of political awareness is individuals' interest in important national political issues. Citizens of a particular democratic structure should have at least a minimum understanding of the prevailing political system. However, it is individuals' interest that motivates them to follow the political events (Strömbäck et al., 2013). Engaging in political discussion is a matter of prior political interest. Many scholars have regarded political interest as a precondition and mediating factors for political awareness (Maurissen, 2020). Nevertheless, citizens' interest in politics does not always translate into political participation, but it may enhance the urge to acquire political information and knowledge, which eventually translates into political awareness. A higher level of political interest in young people is more likely to produce political awareness (Khalifa, 2011).

Finally, a few case studies from different regimes find an association between the uses of social media and improvement in political expression and awareness levels of its users. For instance, a study by Jarrar and Hammud (2018) finds that social media's political use is statistically significant in developing social responsibility and political awareness in Jordanian youth. Another study of Altuwayjiri (2017) finds social media as a critical enabler for raising political awareness in women in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Reuter (2017) concludes that social networks have already been politicized by opposition elites, increasing political awareness in the masses. Moreover, Khalifa (2011) observes a positive relationship between online political news and political awareness of Egyptian and German students.

In light of the above theoretical propositions and cited literature, our study aims at investigating how social media (Facebook and Twitter) shapes the political expression of university students that eventually determine their political awareness level in Pakistan.
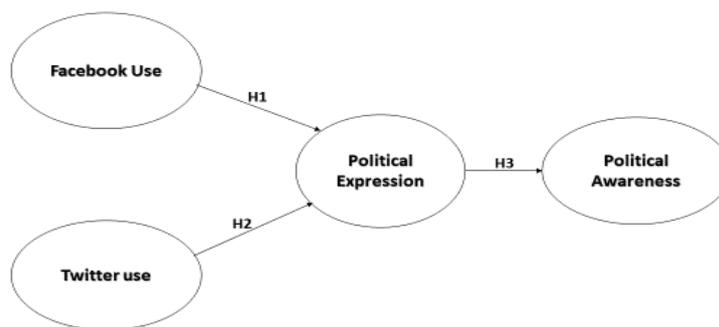
Figure-I: Conceptual Model

The following hypotheses are to be tested with empirical data in this study:

H1   Facebook's use is positively associated with the political expression of university students

H2   Twitter's use is positively related to the political expression of university students

H3   There is an association between political expression and the level of political awareness of university students

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Quantitative research methods are used to conduct this study. Data is collected through the survey research method. For this purpose, different scales are adapted or developed through operationalizing the key concepts and converting them into measurable indicators. *First*, we operationalize the use of social media as the 'use of Facebook and Twitter' – focusing on the use of both forums for political purposes (Bode, 2012; Yang and DeHart, 2016). We have introduced different questions intending to measure the intensity, frequency, and density of the use of social media (Facebook and Twitter) by university students (Skoric et al., 2016; Wirtz et al., 2017). *Second*, we have concluded the scales developed by Yang & DeHart (2016) and Valenzuela et al. (2009) and adapted their work to measure the 'political expression' among university students through the use of social media. *Third*, the measurement of political awareness includes numerous indicators. With the support of past literature, we have included the following indicators in the questionnaire to measure the concept of political awareness. Level of interest in politics, information about the electoral process, information about corruption and personal scandals, the performance of political parties, knowledge about candidates' constituencies, and engagement in political discussions. A scale is adopted by consulting the already developed scales by Ahmad et al. (2019), Barnidge et al. (2018) and Ahmed (2011). In each scale, all questions are measured on a five-point Likert scale. Moreover, the following demographic questions are also included in the main scale to analyze the relationship between independent and dependent variables, e.g., age, gender, educational level, family income, academic discipline, and province.

The cluster sampling technique is used to approach respondents (university students) in four provinces of Pakistan. Initially, each province is declared as a 'cluster' and one university from each cluster is selected randomly. The selected universities are University of the Punjab Lahore (Punjab), Government College University Faisalabad (Punjab), University of Karachi (Sindh), the University of Balochistan Quetta (Balochistan), and the University of Peshawar (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). In the second stage, six academic departments are selected from each university randomly and classified into 'physical science' and 'social science'. From physical sciences, mathematics, chemistry, and physics are selected, and from social science, mass communication, English literature, and sociology are selected. Finally, a total of 750 university students ages (18-25 years) have surveyed. A questionnaire, comprised different scales (above-mentioned), is used for data collection. Finally, given the financial and time limits of field research, it was difficult to collect data from farthermost areas of Pakistan. Hence, mediators from different departments of universities are arranged. They are guided about data collection through online training sessions.

Data is analyzed using SPSS. Initially, the internal reliability of all scales is examined. The Cronbach Alpha is 0.92, which indicates a high level of reliability. Multiple regression analysis is

computed with data to predict political expression and political awareness levels of university students with various predictors.

RESULTS
The results are presented in two formats: descriptive and inferential. Descriptive results inform about simple frequency distributions, mean values, and standard deviation, whereas inferential statistics help test the hypotheses.

Demographics
In the given study, males constitute 56 percent and females constitute 44 percent of the total sample. The students' age ranges from 18 to 25 years (Mean=21.42). The monthly income of their families (Median=70,000-89,999, SD=.902) indicates a trend of higher income brackets because 80 percent of respondents have reported more than 70,000 (Pak Rupee) and only 5.6 percent of respondents' families make less than 49,999 (Pak Rupee) per month. The educational level of respondents (Mean=5.99, SD=2.730) is further classified into two groups for analysis; junior level, comprising semester one to four, (42 percent) and senior level, comprising semester five to eight, (58 percent). Concerning their affiliation with any political party, the statistics reveal (Median = 4.00, SD=1.329) that more than 60 percent have political partisanship. Referring to their political affiliations, 30.3 percent are found to be strongly affiliated with the Pakistan Tahreek-e-Insaf, 21.5 percent with the Pakistan Muslim League (N), 5 percent with the Pakistan People's Party, and 6.6 percent have affiliations with other political parties.

Usage of Social Media
Insert Table 1 here

More than 70 percent of respondents have agreed that social media is a part of their daily routine (Median=4.00, SD=1.089). Respondents have shown deep interest in almost all outlined activities, e.g., sharing routine activities, social relations, information, and politics. Facebook appears top trend among respondents followed by Google and YouTube, but only one-fourth of respondents have shown interest in using Twitter, and they are least interested in LinkedIn. One-third of respondents use social media between 1-2 hours, one-fourth tend to use it for 3-4 hours, only 13 percent use it for more than 5 hours, and the remaining have been using it for less than one hour in a day.

Use of Facebook and Twitter
Insert Table 2 here

We have measured the use of Facebook and Twitter through an index that is comprised of three indicators for each. *The first* indicator is 'the number of Facebook friends' (Median=150-200, SD=1.481) and 'the number of Twitter followers' (Median=21-30 followers, SD=1.724.) For Facebook users, statistics manifest that around 14 percent of respondents have almost 150 friends, 13 percent have more than 150 friends, and 15 percent have more than 200 friends in their Facebook lists. Only 7.1 percent of respondents have less than 100, and 3 percent have less than 50 friends in their Facebook lists, which implies that there are very few who have very limited Facebook friend's circle. Similarly, for Twitter use, 10.6 percent of users have less than 20 followers, 6.4 percent have 21-40 followers, and almost 8 percent have more than 40 followers. *The second* indicator is 'frequently of the use of FB account' (Median=5.00, SD=1.250) and 'Twitter account' (Median=4.00, SD=1.433). Statistics reveal that 71.6 percent of students use Facebook daily, whereas only 10.3 percent of students use Twitter daily. *The third* indicator is 'time spent on Facebook' (Median=3.00, SD=1.204), and 'Twitter' daily (Median=3.00. SD=1.411). Almost 25 percent of users use Facebook and 4.7 percent of users use Twitter less than one hour, 35.5 percent use Facebook and 13.7 percent use Twitter 1-2 hours, and 36 percent use Facebook and 6.6 percent use Twitter more than two hours in a day.

Gender, Province, and Department wise Variations in the Use of Social Media
Insert Table 3 here

We have calculated percentages of social media users concerning gender, the discipline of study, and provincial affiliations. *First*, data implies that there is very little difference in Facebook's use based on gender, i.e., 96.19 percent male and 93.61 percent female students use Facebook. Nevertheless, 25.2

percent females and 74.8 percent males are found using Twitter that implies a huge gender-based disparity in its use. *Second*, we do not find a significant difference in the use of Facebook among two different academic groups, i.e., Social Sciences (95.5 percent) and Physical Sciences (93.9 percent), whereas both academic groups have different patterns of Twitter's usage, i.e., 57.6 percent from Social Science, and 42.4 percent from Physical Sciences, which infers a discipline wise differences in the use of Twitter. *Third*, respondents of the province of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistanare found using Facebook (highest 96 to lowest 93 percent) and Twitter (highest 33 to lowest 18.67 percent).

Multiple Regression Analysis

Insert Table 4 here

The statistical inferences provide evidence that does not support the null hypothesis in both models. Hence, H1 and H2 are supported by statistical analysis. As predicted in hypothesis H1, Facebook use has a significant and positive association ($\beta = .816$, $p < .001$) with political expression. It indicates that if Facebook's use increases by one standard deviation, political expression among university students also increases by 0.816 standard deviations. Similarly, Twitter's use is also positively associated ($\beta = .568$, $p < .001$) with political expression. Regression analysis also supports both models as 63% and 69% of the variance (Adjusted R^2), respectively, is explained by predictors included in the analysis.

Insert Table 5 here

Regression analysis also supports another model with high variance (76.1 percent for political expression through Facebook, and 76.7 percent through Twitter) when we have introduced other explanatory variables with main independent variables in the regression. Some of these control variables yield a low but significant influence on the political expression of students. The focal independent variables (Facebook' Use and Twitter' Use) remain highly significant and associated ($\beta = .803$, $p < .001$) and ($\beta = .552$, $p < .001$) respectively, with political expression of students. In both models, gender holds a negative and significant association with political expression, which elicits a traditional picture that men tend to express more politically than women do. On the other hand, variations based on provincial background embrace positive and significant relationship with political expression through Facebook ($\beta = .086$, $p < .05$) and through Twitter ($\beta = .066$, $p < .05$).

Insert Table 6 here

The statistical inferences support H3. As per prediction, political expression through social media has a significant and positive association ($\beta = .855$, $p < .001$) with the political awareness level of students. These results yield that if political expression among university students increases by one standard deviation their political awareness level also increases by 0.855 standard deviation. Regression analysis supports this model with 73% of the variance (Adjusted R^2).

Insert Table 7 here

Nevertheless, these findings also lead towards another regression model, which includes more than one explanatory variable. The model helps look into the effects of control variables along with political expression on their political awareness level. The analysis also supports this model (73.4% of variance). Some of the control variables yield a low but significant influence on their political awareness level. Nonetheless, the inferences guide that the focal independent variable (political expression through social media) remains highly significant and associate ($\beta = .852$, $p < .001$) with political awareness levels of students in comparison to control variables.

DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis answers the research question, i.e., 'is political expression through social media associated with political awareness of university students?' The inferences suggest that the use of Facebook and Twitter provides an adequate platform for university students to express their political perspectives in a democratic regime (Pakistan) that eventually improve their political awareness level.

Dahl (1989) argues that people should have equal opportunities to understand civic and political issues and concerns. For this purpose, democratic and authoritative regimes regulate different means of communication. Although states have introduced varying legislation to regulate print and social media in the interest of emerging regimes, social media is almost equally accessible to inhabitants in different forms. Facebook and Twitter are frequently used social media tools to exchange civic and political perspectives by youth across the world. Democratic regimes are less likely to impose restrictions on

political expressions through these online tools. Thus, our inferences also reveal that university students have been using both tools for political expression with varying intensities and tendencies in Pakistan. Referring to the regression results, a positive association between the use of both social media platforms and political expression has been observed. The enhanced political expression leads towards improved political awareness levels in university students. These findings do not differ from previous research (Altuwayjiri, 2017; Jarrar and Hammud, 2018; Jost et al., 2018) that inform about the positive use of social media for facilitating political expression among citizens leading to improved civic and political awareness in different democratic regimes. Statistics show that Facebook is more widely used social media platform as compared to Twitter. However, those who use Twitter tend to be keener and committed as compared to Facebook users. Concerning political expression, Facebook users' political expression more significantly correlates with their political awareness levels as compared to political expression through Twitter. On the question of political interest, Twitter users tend to exhibit more interest in politics than Facebook users. However, if we talk about political discussions and political information, Facebook users are found more engaged than Twitter users. Overall, our findings claim that university students more likely prefer Facebook to Twitter to involve in political and democratic conversations and processes. The data about Facebook and Twitter users endorsed the nationwide findings (PEW, 2015; datareportal.com, statista.com, 2020).

The analysis also predicts that those who have a greater political expression on social media are more likely to discuss political issues in both online and offline settings, which ultimately determine their level of political awareness. Past literature also confirms our results that social media has provided a new public space to students to discuss politics (Dimitrova et al., 2014), and to sustain a democratic political system. Moreover, results also imply that an overwhelming majority of students has a deep interest in politics, which helps enhance political awareness to strengthen democratic norms in the country. Nonetheless, the adequate size of the sample also shows no interest in politics. There are several socio-economic and political conditions, which desperate people from democratic processes and generate hopelessness – due to which people lose interest in politics (Solt, 2008).

Our results also manifest that use of social media tools cannot guarantee access to political information in symmetry. The findings imply that most students inform that they collect information about politics and political parties through social media tools, such as Barabas et al. (2012) do in their study. They obtain information from numerous sources, such as the official account of the candidate, online portals of political parties, or from friends' circles. However, there is a sizable number of respondents, who differ on the subject. Past literature endorses these findings too. The work of Lee and Xenos (2019) and Jost et al., (2018) inform three possible barriers that restrict information flow. The social media platforms do not cover all aspects of 'information' as other sources of news do. Social media solely serves as an echo chamber of like-minded people that allows information of their interest to be received. Social media also allows patterns of selectivity that put a barrier in the flow of information.

Moreover, gender, study discipline, and provincial association further intersect with our results, but age, study level, and family income do not. *First*, the study reveals significant differences in the political awareness level of female and male students after exchanging political expression through social media tools. Although social media improves the political awareness level of both genders, female students are less likely to report improvement in their political awareness level in comparison to male students. They have less engagement in political discussions as compared to male students and have shown a lack of interest in political topics and democratic processes as compared to male students. These findings do not differ from past literature that underlines two main barriers to female's access to political information/awareness; 1) patriarchy deprives women and empowers men to consult all possible means to acquire political information, and 2) biased gendered socialization processes that are responsible for thirty percent less political orientation of females as compared to males (Fraile and Sánchez-vítores, 2020). *Second*, the political awareness level of university students also varies with respect to the disciplines of enrollment. It has been observed that students enrolled in different subjects of social sciences are more likely to be informed on political issues in comparison to students from psychical sciences. These differences further extend to their general use of social media, political use of social media, level of interest in politics, and frequency of political discussions on Facebook and Twitter. Such variations in the use of social media, political expressions and awareness have also been highlighted by (Jarrar and Hammud, 2018) from another political regime. *Third*, variations in the use of social media

tools, political expression and awareness level are also observed based on provincial affiliations of university students. Our results reveal that students from the province of Punjab are highly informed about political issues, whereas the students from the province of Balochistan exhibit the lowest level of political awareness. We cite here past literature that shed light on possible reasons behind these variations. For instance, Samad (2014) and Aman and Akram (2018) narrate that Balochistan is suffering from socio-political unrest, such as economic deprivation, political instability, lack of political will to improve citizens' knowledge, and federal dominance. These factors may cause lack of active participation in political discourses of the students from Balochistan. The authors have also pointed out that strongly integrated tribal systems and traditions coupled with local politics are causes that limit the participation of people in provincial or national political processes in Balochistan. Moreover, our results also highlight that Balochi female students are less likely to use social media for general purposes as well as for political purpose in comparison to female students of other provinces. This reflects that gender-based inequalities and traditional stereotypes towards women's use of information and communication technologies, expressions, and awareness are more deeply prevalent in Balochistan in comparison to other provinces.

CONCLUSION

Through empirical findings, we conclude that our findings support three indicators of political awareness collectively that translate into one of Dahl's important propositions of the theory of democracy, i.e., the improved political interest of students through social media, student's involvement in political information and knowledge through social media and sharing ideas and views through online discussions. Although political awareness of university students enhances after expressing political perspectives through social media, selected socio-demographic variables underline variations. These variations intersect with age, gender, the discipline of study, familial income level, and residential province. Gender most strongly intersect between political expression through social media and the political awareness level of university students. Male students seem more politically informed, expressive, and active in provincial as well as national democratic processes than female students. In today's world, social media has appeared as a facilitator to promote democratic attitudes and practices among youth, especially in the countries like Pakistan.

Limitations

Given the limitation that it was not possible to measure the political awareness of students over a period of time for this research, I relied on measuring one time data (cross-sectional) under many control variables.

Prevailing norms of new media system in different regions are as diverse as the political structures of Middle East, Asia, and Africa. As far as, the comparison of new media implications in Pakistan's democratic and non-democratic regime is concerned, this seems to be another limitation of the study. The inferences about new media system in Pakistan's non-democratic regime were not possible to study due to restoration of democracy in 2008.

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ANNEXURES

Table 1: General Use of Social Medias

Which SM sites do you use often?		How much time do you spend on SM?	
Type of Social Media	*Percent*	*Devoted Time*	*Percent*
Facebook	95.1%	Less than 30 minutes	11,5%
Twitter	25.3%	31-59 minutes	17,2%
YouTube	64.1%	1-2 hours	33,6%
Google	75.6%	3-4 hours	24,7%
LinkedIn	6.1%	More	13,1%
SM use is part of my daily routine		**What are your major interests using SM**	
Strongly Disagree	4,4%	Entertainment	56.8%
Disagree	8,8%	Chatting	21.9%
Neutral	16,5%	Social Relations	68.4%
Agree	37,7%	Information	61.3%
Strongly Agree	32,5%	Politics	61.2%
		Sharing routine activities	71.6%

*SM: Social Media; **SD: Standard Deviation

Table 2: Use of Facebook and Twitter

Response Categories	Frequency	Response Categories	Frequency
Number of Friends in the Facebook List		**Number of Followers at Twitter**	
1- 50	2.9%	1-10	4.5%
51-100	7.1%	11-20	6.1%
101-150	13.9%	21-30	3.7%
150-200	13.3%	31-40	2.7%
More than 200	15.7%	More than 40	8.0%
Frequency for the Use of Facebook		**Frequency for the Use of Twitter**	
Two days a week	1.7%	Two days a week	.4%
Three days a week	6.9%	Three days a week	4.4%
Four days a week	6.1%	Four days a week	4.5%
Five days a week	10.7%	Five days a week	5.5%
Daily	71.6%	Daily	10.3%
Do not use	2.9%	Do not use	74.9%
Spending Time on Facebook (daily)		**Spending Time on Twitter (daily)**	
None	3.2%	None	.1%
less than 59 min	25.3%	less than 59 min	4.7%
1-2 hours	35.5%	1-2 hours	13.7%
2-3 hours	18.8%	2-3 hours	5.5%
More	17.2%	More	1.1%

Table 3: Gender, Province, and Discipline wise Comparison of the Use of Social Media

Indicators	Facebook		Twitter	
	Count	*Percentage*	*Count*	*Percentage*
Gender				
Male	405	96.19%	144	34.21%
Female	308	93.61%	47	14.28%
Province				
Punjab	290	96.67%	100	33.33%
Sindh	140	93.33%	27	18%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	143	95.33%	36	24%
Balochistan	140	93.33%	28	18.67%
Discipline				
Social Science	362	95.5%	110	29.3%
Physical Science	351	93.9%	81	21.6%

Table 4: Prediction of Political Expression

Variable	Standardized Coefficients[a] (β)	Std. Error	t	Durbin-Watson
Constant		.219	16.016	
Facebook Use	.816*	.014	41.891	1.529
Constant		.189	15.021	
Twitter Use	.568*	.015	38.983	1.588

a. Dependent Variable: Political Expression. The table presents the regression model of 'Facebook use' and 'Twitter Use'. N=750. Correlation is significant at * $p < .001$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .05$.

Table 5: Prediction of Political Expression with Control Variables

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients[a] (β)	Std. Error	t
Facebook Use	.803*	.015	40.901
Age	.029	.053	1.930
Gender	-.068***	.063	-3.764
Study Level	.039	.083	1.061
Study Department	.063	.052	2.941
Family Income	-.022	.001	-1.147
Province	.086***	.071	2.891
Twitter Use	.552*	.018	42.901
Age	.020	.048	1.030
Gender	-.108***	.113	-2.016
Study Level	.087	.183	1.231
Study Department	.051	.042	2.470
Family Income	.120	.006	1.267
Province	.066***	.071	1.899

a. Dependent Variable: Political Expression, N=750. Adjusted R^2=.761(Facebook Use) and .767 (Twitter Use)

Correlation is significant at * $p < .001$; **$p <. .01$; ***$p < .05$. Durbin Watson=1.658

Table 6: Prediction of Political Awareness through Political Expression

Variable	Standardized Coefficients^a (β)	Std. Error	T	Durbin-Watson
Constant		.249	19.026	
Political Expression	.855*	.016	44.991	1.719

a. Dependent Variable: Political Awareness. The table presents the regression model of Political Expression and Political Awareness, N=750. Adjusted R^2=.730. Durbin Watson=1.719
Correlation is significant at * p < .001; **p <. .01; ***p < .05.

Table 7: Prediction of Political Awareness with Control Variables

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients^a (β)	Std. Error	t
Constant		1.402	5.046
Political Expression	.852*	.017	43.971
Age	.020	.048	1.030
Gender	.001	.183	.066
Study Level	.039***	.083	1.931
Study Discipline	.055**	.052	2.871
Family Income	-.020	.000	-1.067
Province	.036***	.076	1.898

b. Dependent Variable: Political Awareness.
N=750. Adjusted R^2=.734. Durbin Watson=1.748, Correlation is significant at * p < .001;
**p <. .01; ***p < .05.