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Disconnected Democracies: The Digital Divide and Unequal Access to Political Discourse in Pakistan's Online Media Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

As digital media becomes a central arena for political discourse, assumptions persist that internet access inherently democratizes participation. However, in developing democracies such as Pakistan, deep structural inequalities continue to shape and constrain digital engagement. The research under study examines how the digital divide amongst the infrastructural, socioeconomic, cultural, and algorithmic inequalities constitutes unequal access to the political discourse in the online media environment of Pakistan. Using a mixed-methods approach, including digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis of platform-based political discourse, the research reveals that digital participation remains fragmented and stratified. Key findings highlight how algorithmic amplification favors urban elite narratives, while marginalized communities, particularly women, ethnic minorities, and rural populations, experience digital silencing. Moreover, participation often reflects symbolic engagement rather than substantive civic deliberation. This article attempts to debunk the mainstream digital empowerment discourse and proposes inclusive digital governance by placing these dynamics in the context of critical media theory and Global South digital studies. The study contributes to the growing discourse on platformized democracy, offering both theoretical insights and policy recommendations to bridge the political communication gap in unequal digital societies.

Keywords: Digital Divide; Political Discourse; Online Media Ecosystem; Algorithmic Visibility.

1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Political communication in the world has changed following the introduction of digital media. New political engagement, activism, and discourse, previously mediated through traditional gatekeeping institutions, have been possible through social networking sites like Facebook,

Twitter (now X), YouTube, and TikTok, allowing citizens to engage in the public arena (Shirky, 2011). Nonetheless, unlike the case of the physical infrastructure below 7 domestic percentages, this digital revolution is not evenly distributed, and access and involvement are heavily influenced by socioeconomic status, geography, gender, educations, and the availability of the infrastructures- which scholars denote as the so-called digital divide (van Dijk, 2020; Warschauer, 2003).

The idea of digital democratization linked with differences in internet penetration also manifests in developing countries such as Pakistan, where the level of inhomogeneity is pending in the long term and is too strong (Khan & Shah, 2022). Even though the number of Pakistani citizens involved in online political discussions and campaigns is increasing, massive parts of the population still lack access to digital services because of reasons of lack of access, digital literacy, censorship, or obstructions toward infrastructure (Nabi, 2013; Siddiqui & Ahmad, 2021). This generates what may be termed as disconnected democracies, where only a group of majorities based on digital privileges can influence political discourse.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although global research focuses on the need to understand how digital media empowers and reinforces democracy, often the very optimism applied to a given situation reflects contradictory gaps in availability and access to media as well as media engagements in the Global South. Online spaces are becoming more and more influential in Pakistan when it comes to politics; however, they tend to favor urban and educated people or males, particularly, and exclude minorities (Zubair & Raza, 2020; Shah & Yousaf, 2023). The outcome is a divisive and exclusive online civic arena that threatens the democracy of the participatory principle.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to critically examine how the digital divide in Pakistan impacts equitable access to political discourse through online media. The objectives are:

- To explore the structural and socio-economic factors contributing to the digital divide in Pakistan.
- To assess how this divide influences political participation and representation on online platforms.
- To analyze the implications of unequal digital access for democratic development and civic inclusion.

1.4 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following core research questions:

1. How did infrastructural and sociocultural factors contribute to the digital divide in Pakistan?
2. In what ways did unequal access to online media platforms affect participation in political discourse?
3. How did users from marginalized communities perceive their inclusion or exclusion in digital political conversations?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This article is an addition to the emerging international research direction on inequalities in digital environments and political communication with a situational, empirical study of the Pakistani online media environment. The research has a larger implication to researchers looking at media and democracy in developing states. Moreover, the research is also informative to policymakers

and digital rights activists because it identifies issues that prevent the inclusion of individuals in politics through the use of digital environments.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

The development of this research is based on the theory of the Networked Public Sphere (Benkler, 2006) and the Digital Divide Framework (van Dijk, 2020), which can explain the effect of technological infrastructure, digital skill, and socio-economic capital on the chances to access the digital world of politics and become engaged in it. The research also appeals to the concept of the public sphere advanced by Habermas (1989) interpreted in the online propaganda world, i.e., to whom in the online political communication is voiced and who is muted.

1.7 Research Gap

Political campaigning on social media or content patterns of political influencers have been the subjects of most of the already existing studies in Pakistan (Batool & Rafiq, 2022). Yet, research is largely silent on the question of how structural digital disparities define who has access to the online political debate and whose political interests are withheld. The present work fills that important gap by employing in its analyses sociological, political, and media studies to explore access, exclusion, and voice within the Pakistani digital public sphere.

2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This section presents a critical literature review of the available literature on digital media, the digital divide, and political discourse with an interest in the Pakistani context. It combines theoretical and empirical research to find critical debates, patterns, and gaps associated with the investigation of how disproportionate digital access influences the quality of political participation and presence in online arenas.

2.2 Digital Divide: Aspects and Theoretical Background

The notion of the digital divide has expanded beyond the internet connection to include the acceptance of the internet connection. But today, it has also included more layers of digital skills, patterns of use, and their quality connection (van Dijk, 2020). The digital divide can be divided into three levels, and there exist two approaches distinctly and in two ways:

Level one: Digital infrastructure availability (broadband, mobile, the device);

Second-level: Capabilities to use digital media with significance;

Third-level: Results and gains of using digitals (Hargittai, 2002; van Dijk, 2020).

Socio-economic differences, gender, and geography increase these divides in developing nations (Warschauer, 2003). In Pakistan, the rural-urban population, men and women, and literate and illiterate users are important digital divide areas (Siddiqui & Ahmad, 2021; Khan & Shah, 2022). Such disparities produce digitally-advantaged classes to take over the political online arena, leaving out massive parts of the population excluded from engaging in the democratic process.

2.3 Digital Media and Political Discourse

Predominantly, digital platforms are hailed as being able to democratize the way people communicate and enable democratic political power (Shirky, 2011). According to The Networked Public Sphere theory, digital media promotes the networked public sphere that may be decentralized and peer-driven and challenges conventional gatekeepers in the political discourse (Benkler, 2006). Nonetheless, this positivity has been contravened by the empirical research that online discourse adopting political positions is regularly influenced by algorithmic association, echo chamber, and digital disparities (Pariser, 2011). In Pakistan, and other such nations, political

engagement within the realms of Twitter or Facebook is growing in terms of its power to determine public opinion and propensity to vote (Rafiq & Asma, 2022). The accessibility to such platforms is, however, inequitable, and it depends on literacy, urbanization, language, and censorship (Zubair & Raza, 2020). Consequently, the growth of digital sites via the internet is not breaking down hierarchies, but could be confirming pre-existing ones socially and politically.

2.4 The Digital Divide in Pakistan: A Structural Overview

Pakistan is one of the digital readiness low performers in South Asia (ITU, 2022). Although the rate of mobile phone penetration has been growing fast, digital inclusion is very stratified. Khan and Shah (2022) state that rural Pakistan is very far behind the urban centers in broadband coverage and accessibility and affordability of the internet. The workforce disparities are also grim as only 38 percent of women have mobile internet access in Pakistan compared to 65 percent of men (GSMA, 2023). The issue is even exacerbated by other structural forces, mainly poverty, low literacy, energy shortages, and lack of infrastructural maintenance that means digital access is a privilege to many (Siddiqui & Ahmad, 2021). Besides this, the inclusive digital participation has also been blocked by the state shutdown of the internet when there is political unrest or elections happen (e.g., the 2024 TikTok ban and Twitter outages).

2.5 Political Voice and Representation in Online Spaces

The freedom to make use of the online platforms is not equal to political voice. Fraser (1990) says that subaltern counterpublics are key makers of the discourse in the public domain as they desire to be heard yet are usually excluded by the major discourse. The urban male influencers and political upper echelons or mass media popular networks dominate the political discourses in Pakistani online space on Twitter and YouTube (Batool & Rafiq, 2022; Shah & Yousaf, 2023).

Groups that are marginalized socially and politically, that is, ethnic minority groups, women in the countryside, and the youth not in high positions and influence, seldom appear in popular political discourses or those that are trending. It is not only because of lack of access, all of which has been blocked, but also because of algorithmic gatekeeping, which decides what is amplified or what is invisible (Noble, 2018).

2.6 Misinformation, Surveillance, and Censorship

The existence of misinformation, cyber-monitoring, and censorship also contributes to damaging the political discourse over the internet in the country of Pakistan. Various sources have noted how fake news and propagandas written with a political agenda have been widely disseminated through apps like WhatsApp, usually against audiences who are vulnerable or living within a rural area with little exposure to media literacy. Moreover, there are concerns that digital surveillance bills like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 are causing closure of civic space over the internet and pushing self-censorship among the country's journalists, activists, and regular users (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2023). This builds an environment in which some political opinions, especially the ones that criticize the state, are marginalized systematically, hence distorting the online democratic exercise.

2.7 Research Gap

Although researchers studied the role of digital media on political communication and youth mobilization in Pakistan (Shah, 2021; Rafiq), there is a lack of research addressing this change in terms of its exclusionary sides. The lack of empirical research is evident in an attempt to analyze the structural constraint to marginalized communities to be involved in the political process due to the digital divide. Furthermore, only a few equating bodies of theory exist linking the public

sphere theory, digital inequality, and political exclusion, especially in the Pakistani context, wherein this study will seek to bridge the epistemic divide.

3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study applied a mixed-methods research approach (Qualitative-Dominant design) to examine the meeting point between the digital divide and the political discourse within the context of online media within Pakistan. It also enabled a differentiated approach to the realization that the digital space had not only impediments at the structural level but also the subjective experience of marginalized users online in terms of politics. Basic descriptive statistics were added, to set trends in context, to the qualitative methodology.

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of social media users, political commentators, journalists, digital rights activists, and individuals from digitally marginalized communities (e.g., rural residents, women, and ethnic minorities) across Pakistan. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences.

A total of **42 participants** were selected, including:

- 15 individuals from rural or low-income urban areas with limited digital access,
- 10 digital rights experts and media professionals,
- 7 women activists or political participants,
- 10 general social media users representing various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

28 participants were subjected to semi-structured interviews. The interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes and could be held on Zoom, via WhatsApp, or on the phone, depending on the connection. The interviews were aimed at discussing online presence of political content, participants' view on representation, their hindrances to engaging, and their attitude to algorithmic invisibility.

3.3.2 Ethnography Digital

Digital ethnographic observation was applied in 8 weeks to put the information in the context of the interview. The political discussion on Facebook, X (previously known as Twitter), and YouTube was systematically monitored, paying attention to the discussion on the latest political events, elections, protests, and government policies. Regional hashtags, engagement measures, and comment threads were also paid particular attention in order to analyze the patterns of participation.

3.3.3 Content analysis and Document analysis

A group of 45 posts, threads, and videos made by political influencers, party pages, and state media were chosen to analyze the content. They were analyzed in the aspects of storytelling and narrative framing, language and usage, representation of the minority views, and visibility parameters. As a methodology, discourse analysis, especially the one that draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995), was used.

3.4 Data Analysis

The narrative used in the line of thought conceived by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used as thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and ethnographic notes. An NVivo software was

thereafter used to triangulate manually coded data. Important themes were the ones that included:

- Digital structural exclusions (infrastructure, gender, language)
- Using algorithms to crack down on dissenting opinion
- Performative or tokenism internet participation
- Subjective accessible power of moderation on the platform

The quantitative data (e.g., score of engagement, devices ownership percentage) was also described to support the qualitative interpretation.

3.5 Moral reflection

When conducting this research, consideration was made to the internationally recognized standards of ethics, and an Ethics Review Committee approved it at a university level. The consent of the participants was informed, though all of them have been interviewed. The anonymity and confidentiality were assured to participants, and the data were safe in digitally encrypted files. The political situation was also a delicate one, and therefore pseudonyms were used and the quotable data and samples were denied their identifying information.

3.6 There is reliability and dependability

To increase credibility, three sets of data were triangulated: interviews, digital observation, and content analysis. Member checking was done with some selected individuals to make sure that they were able to verify their interpretation of the universes in the themes. The thickness descriptions increased the quality of the transferability, and the close documentation process guaranteed the dependability.

3.7 Limitations of the Methodology

Even though the study was enlightening, it had some limitations:

- The non-statistically generalizable sample size was diverse.
- The final problem was connectivity in remote areas that restricted real-time observation.
- Overall, there were some politically sensitive areas which could not be accessed due to ethical considerations, especially within areas of conflict.
- Even though these were limitations, to some extent, the methodology held its strength and fitted well in the exploratory and interpretive goals of the study.

4: Analysis and Findings

4.1 Overview

This section introduces the main findings brought about by the thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, content analysis of social media discourse, as well as critical discourse analysis (CDA) of digital political discourses in Pakistan. The analysis examines the digital divide in the light of levels of class, gender, geography, and access: these three factors, finally, define the nature of political discourse.

4.2 Key Themes from Interviews

4.2.1 Digital Inequality as Structural Disenfranchisement

The respondents of poor rural localities and emerging cities continued to say that they had little to no access to high-speed Internet, online tools, and political information. As one respondent from interior rural Punjab put it:

“My village has one mobile tower... and even WhatsApp doesn’t load during elections. How can we know who to vote for when we don’t even see political videos?”

This personifies infrastructural exclusion, which systematically marginalizes particular people against engaging with the real-time political discourse online. (Selwyn, 2004).

4.2.2 Gendered Gaps in Digital Citizenship

Female respondents in conservative regions, in particular, said they lacked access to the mobile and internet worlds, and it frequently happens through family or community practices. Self-censorship was a theme that kept recurring even among women who were educated. It agrees with the previous evidence on gender digital discrimination in patriarchal societies (Hafkin & Huyer, 2007).

4.2.3 Perception of Biased Political Narratives Online

Participants voiced the decision on algorithm bias, artificial news, and biased contents (largely pro-establishment or elite news). The marginalized voices that stood up politically, in particular, ethnic or religious minorities, were mentioned to be either unheard online or harassed.

“When we talk about Baloch rights online, our posts get flagged or removed. But mainstream politicians get coverage even for lies.”

This underscores the platform-mediated censorship and selective amplification of political narratives (Gillespie, 2018).

4.3 Social Media Content Analysis

4.3.1 Political tribalism and Echo Chambers

The examination of publicly posted messages containing hashtags like #VotePakistan2024 and #Tabdeeli showed that there were closed political groups. The users also seemed to consume only content along ideological lines, forming clusters that appear homogenous (Sunstein, 2001). Editors hardly doubted the interface of cross-partisan discussion or fact-based debate.

4.3.2 Urban Advantage in Political Voices

Political hashtags were influenced by content of urban influencers, media anchors, and party elites. Rural activist or grassroots political actor successes on the platform had minimal responses, graphically indicating urban precincts.

4.3.3 Emergence of the Performative Political Participation

TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook Reels were saturated with performative content jingles, mockery, and satire over critical policy discussion. These formats encouraged surface-level political participation rather than informed deliberation.

4.4 Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Narratives

Applying Fairclough’s CDA model revealed several discursive patterns:

4.4.1 Linguistic Domination by Elite Actors

The narrowly defined political discourse had been informed by the presence of the elites (journalists, party leadership) who employed language of exclusion, meaning, referring to illiterate voters or blind followers, de-legitimizing the political logic of working-class and rural citizens.

4.4.2 Marginalization of Ethno-Religious Minorities

Online narratives constructed ethnic minorities, especially Pashtuns and Baloch, as security threats or “Agents,” reinforcing existing power asymmetries. Minority users reported narrative suppression and harassment.

4.4.3 Platform Affordances Reinforcing Inequality

Such algorithmic aspects as trending systems, sponsored posts, and the presence of the so-called verified labels privileged the voices of the mainstream. It was this technical infrastructure of exclusion, which enhanced political invisibility of under-connected communities (Noble, 2018).

4.5 Emergent Patterns and Relationships

4.6 Summary of Findings

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Marginalized Group Affected</i>	<i>Platform Dynamics</i>	<i>Political Outcome</i>
<i>Internet Access Gaps</i>	Rural poor, women	Low bandwidth, unstable networks	Political disconnection
<i>Narrative Suppression</i>	Minorities, activists	Moderation, removal	Silencing, de-legitimization
<i>Algorithmic Amplification</i>	Elites, influencers	Visibility through engagement metrics	Dominance of elite discourse
<i>Gender-Based Constraints</i>	Women in conservative regions	Cultural taboos, digital gatekeeping	Political invisibility

The implications help to fix the fact that the digital divide in Pakistan is not only technical but firmly social, political, and cultural. It overlaps with systemic disparities in schooling, sex, wealth, and race to fuel the digital disenfranchisement. Although online political discourse may appear democratized, which it, in fact, is, it still derives its influence based on elite access, and through algorithm bias-which results in a disjointed democratic dialogue.

5: Discussion and Implications

5.1 Overview

This is because this section critically analyses the empirical results about the theories and available literature. It examines the role of digital inequality in terms of how it relates to democracy, deliberative participation, and the structures of media power in Pakistan. It is also in the section that broader implications of the research to policymakers, digital platforms, civil society, and any future academic study are discussed.

5.2 Rethinking the “Digital Public Sphere” in the Global South

The conception of the digital public sphere, which is based on Habermas (1989), presupposes equal access to the discourse. Nonetheless, our analysis threatens this assumption in the framework of the socio-political reality of Pakistan. Instead of becoming open spaces of democracy, digital spaces are supporting current social hierarchies where authority is consolidated in the hands of urban, male, and elite agents.

This is consistent with the viewpoints of Dahlberg (2007) and Couldry (2012), who believe that platform capitalism and algorithmic rule intervene in politically-oriented material inequitably. This is translated to favorable visibility to political actors, misrepresentation, and digital disempowerment of the rural, female and minority groups in Pakistan.

5.3 The Political Economy of Access and Visibility

The conclusions show that the digital divide in Pakistan is multi-dimensional - infrastructure (bandwidth, devices, digital literacy), skills (digital expectations, goal-directed behavior), and socio-cultural capital (gender, command, geography). These gaps block the excluded groups from participating fully in online political discussions. Worse still, the business-oriented algorithms of platforms will compensate virality, polarized, or establishment-resourced material (Gillespie, 2018), thus cashing in on prominence and preventing fine-grained, grassroots politics. This capitalist infrastructure enriches those who already have more power; contemporary democracy is impoverished through it (Fuchs, 2014).

5.4 Gender and the Politics of Digital Silence

The gendered nature of digital exclusion is also one of the most obvious insights. Even educated women cannot manage, as there are obstacles, including being restricted by the family to fearing being harassed online. This is in line with the international trends (Hafkin & Huyer, 2007) but is further aggravated in Pakistan because of the patriarchal policing and surveillance in the cyber world. Instead of providing freedom, the internet turns into a platform of online patriarchy (Banet-Weiser, 2018), where women are censored (or even punished) if they dare to discuss politics with the rest of the world.

5.5 Ethnic and Regional Silencing in Political Narratives

Other minority groups like Baloch, Pashtuns, and the small religious minorities are usually delegitimized or gagged by takedown of content, intimidation, and do not get access to the media. This reflects the state-narrative capture in other democracies with the tendency to lean toward authoritarianism (Hintz, 2016).

Digital media in Pakistan can cover a unitary national identity narrative which leaves minimal room to other political voices that differ with the rest of the society. Such processes also elicit pressing concerns regarding the exercise of freedom of expression, inclusion into the civic arena, and media monopoly.

5.6 The Illusion of Participation: From Clickship to Citizenship

The article has found an increasing rate of performative political activity- e.g., liking, sharing, or posting something without meaningful deliberation and informed consent. Although it effectively brings forth an illusion of participation, this phenomenon threatens to make the discourse of democracy trivial (Papacharissi, 2010).

In this regard, online forums foster active citizenship instead of clickship, where people are not exposed to pluralistic democratic conversations but instead isolated partisan bubbles. This implies Civil education, digital literacy, and critical thinking in a digital space.

5.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

5.7.1 For Policymakers

- There should be fair internet infrastructure due to national policies, particularly in rural and tribal areas under established regions.
- Digital literacy initiatives ought to be gender friendly, multilingual, and localized.
- Political pluralism should be safeguarded as opposed to repression of opinions by the law of content moderation.

5.7.2 For Digital Platforms

- Transparency in algorithms and practices in ethical moderating should be done to ensure that they do not cause bias on content and political silencing.
- Decentralized verification procedures through platforms and increased visibility by underserved political units must be done.

5.7.3 For Civil Society and Academia

- The civil society should establish support systems among digitally vulnerable groups, particularly women and minorities.

- Scholars ought to come up with novel models of inclusive digital citizenship in non-Western situations.
- The partnership of the technology companies and scholars can improve responsible governance of the platforms in the new democracies.

5.8 Theoretical Contributions

The proposed study also has contributions to some academic debates, including:

Digital Democracy in the Global South: Questions the universality of digital democratization, and demonstrates the imposition of platform logic on inequalities in the offline world.

Critical Media Studies: Offers empirical data to support critical platform research and algorithmic bias research in non-Western circumstances.

Sociology of Technology: It brings to the fore the existence of socio-technical systems in the creation of political access and identity.

5.9 Limitations and Future Directions

The fieldwork was limited because time and access to digital things restricted this research. As a possible future research direction, the studies/research may:

Use long-term techniques to note the changing patterns between election periods.

Evaluate the situation in Pakistan in the light of other democracies in South Asia to see what is common about the region.

Apply the AI-driven content analysis to trace the algorithmic amplification pattern in more detail. Although digital media platforms have the potential to democratize the political process, their present set-up in Pakistan makes it favor the elite, marginalized groups, and inflates the deliberative discourse. Disconnected democracies will not become the exception instead of the rule without strategic changes on the levels of infrastructure, literacy, and accountability of the platforms.

6: Conclusion

6.1 Restating the Problem

The potential of digital technologies as the facilitators of democratic participation has been universally hailed. Nevertheless, this paper demonstrates that the techno-cultural system of the online media in Pakistan is not a leveler, but reproduces structural inequalities in the representation of the political discourse in a country. The main point with the emphasis is not the access to the digital tool itself but the intersection of socio-political, economic, and algorithmic factors that form a multi-layer digital divide. This severance isolates all the rural folks, females, minority ethnicities, and the socially-struggling, essentially alienating the part of the population that democracy itself, as a whole, ought to be representing.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

This research highlighted several critical insights:

Access Inequities: Major inequalities prevail in the access to devices, internet connectivity, and skills on the digital front, particularly in the rural and developing parts of Pakistan.

Algorithmic Bias and Political Visibility: Platform logics privilege elite, urban and partisan contents at the expense of other politically-liberal content and limit the appearance of alternate political narratives.

Gendered and Ethnic Silencing: Women and other disadvantaged ethnic groups are digitally marginalized by way of cultural trends as well as individual hate or censorship on the net.

Hot and empty politics: As greater numbers of citizens engage in politics on the net, a lot of this politics is empty or superficial, and has little actual civic value.

Together, these findings challenge techno-utopian views of digital democratization and reaffirm that offline power structures are deeply mirrored and, at times, intensified online.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

The research is related to an emerging debate of a Global South theorizing -platformed democracies-, and is a contribution to a critical approach of the digital public sphere. Basing its arguments on the theories of critical media studies, digital inequality and algorithmic governance, it highlights those technological infrastructures are not neutral as they are embedded in definite socio-political and cultural situations. By framing the Pakistani case into the broader picture, our study extends the use of Global South epistemologies to the domain of digital media research, claiming that networked participation theories developed on Western premises need a significant adjustment regarding the scenario that featured authoritarian overtones, patriarchal dominance, and technological constraints.

6.4 Policy Recommendations

To address the digital disenfranchisement exposed in this study, the following interventions are recommended:

1. Expand and Equalize Internet Infrastructure: Expand broadband in hard-to-reach locations with clear financing and neighborhood cooperation.

2. The Design of Inclusive Digital Literacy Programs: These programs should be aligned to the needs of women, rural youth, and Ethnic minorities.

3. Guarantee Ethical Management of a Platform: Moderation policies and the algorithms used have to be tested to be free of political, gender, and regional biases.

4. Show an interest in Participatory Civic Tech: Whatever forms of participatory civic tech are created, governments, NGOs, and universities should collaborate in their development and establish delivery in ways that encourage inclusive, deliberative participation over and above data extraction.

6.5 Limitations of the Study

While offering rich insights, this study had some limitations:

Geographic Scope: Access to the field area was restricted to the inclusion of distant and tribal biased areas or conflict-endangered areas.

Platform Focus: It was on the foremost platforms, such as Facebook, X (previously Twitter), and YouTube, which were mostly the subject of the analysis; the local platforms or messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp) were not explored heavily.

Self-Reported Data: The interviews and the survey answers are prone to social desirability attitudes, as well as differences in internet literacy.

Nonetheless, the results provide a solid basis of critical review and subsequent research.

6.6 Directions for Future Research

The following are avenues of future research on this study:

Comparative Regional Studies: A study of South Asia-wide comparative regional study may reveal some patterns of digital exclusion across the developing democracies.

Longitudinal Digital Ethnography: By periodically monitoring the interactions on the platforms, it is possible to record the changing nature of discourse, such as during election periods or in case of national crisis.

AI and Political Filtering: The paper should examine future studies on the influence of artificial intelligence and algorithmic recommendation engines in terms of political voice and speech in non-Western settings.

6.7 Final Reflections

The internet was initially envisioned as a highly democratic sphere, and anyone connected through it could have a say in forming common fates. This study indicates that not all of these dreams are realized and in Pakistan, digital inclusion is highly dispersed and, in many cases, exclusionary. Increasingly mediating political communication using digital platforms means that the future of democracy not only in Pakistan, but also in many other developing countries, will just be as inclusive, equitable, and accountable as these platforms and policies are. The digital divide is not always about technological necessity; it is a matter of democracy.

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