Hashtag Politics: The Role of Twitter (X) in Shaping Political Narratives in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Twitter (now X) has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping political narratives in Pakistan. Political leaders, parties, journalists, and citizens increasingly use hashtags to frame issues, mobilize supporters, and influence public opinion. These digital conversations often spill over into mainstream media, amplifying their reach and impact. Hashtag politics in Pakistan has become a dynamic arena where competing narratives ranging from governance performance and corruption allegations to nationalism and electoral campaigns are contested in real time. The platform enables both top-down political messaging and bottom-up grassroots activism, fostering political engagement across diverse demographics. However, it also intensifies political polarization, spreads disinformation, and reinforces echo chambers. This study examines the evolving role of Twitter in Pakistan's political landscape, highlighting how the strategic use of hashtags can both strengthen democratic participation and shape the direction of national political discourse.
Keywords: Hashtag Politics, Twitter (X), Political Narratives, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

In the present-day digital world, social media has become one of the most radical shifts in the political field that has completely remodeled the patterns through which political stories are

written, shared, and contested. Twitter (hereafter X) is arguably one of the most popular and significant forms of social media, especially as an instrument of political communication, due to its immediate and succinct nature, and its format as an interactive platform. Twitter (X) instigates dialogues in politics through its 280-character limit and a trending hashtag option to support real-time political discussions where political actors, journalists, opinion leaders as well as citizens can intersect, discuss issues, declare solidarity, and organize support. This analytical approach is of special relevance to Pakistan, which, given the high level of partisan politics as well as a broad decentralization of administration, is a setting in which Twitter (X) has played a significant role in shaping the opinion and policy priorities of the population.

The systemized use of Twitter (X) (by political elites) was associated with and followed the growth of digital penetration and rise of mobile internet in Pakistan over the last ten years. The platform is seen by politicians and parties as a cheap and direct means of communication, avoiding main stream media gatekeepers like television and print media. Senior leaders such as Imran Khan, Maryam Nawaz, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari use Twitter (X) to both express party stands and policy programs as well as position themselves and respond to criticism by managing their personal political brands. The hashtag has come to be at the center of such efforts proving to be a discursive anchor that aggregates discussions, increases visibility and builds solidarity with its partisans.

In such polarized politics of Pakistan, usually, hashtags serve as battle rooms. They can be used to promote party stories (#AbsolutelyNot, #VoteKoIzzatDo), to attack their rivals (#ImportedHukoomatNamanzoor), they can be used to react to change in crises (#JusticeForZainab, #FloodRelief). The trending hashtags carried by the algorithmically driven spread creates a false sense of broad agreement/ rallies which can materially vary with actual demographics of those participating. Such an arrangement allows grassroots activations and centrally directed campaigns often directed by digital media teams of political parties--to influence the mass perception and even media agendas.

Consequently, Twitter (X) has now become part of the agenda-setting and framing activities within Pakistan. Reporters regularly scan the site to identify emerging trends and use them to spin the news and TV talk shows often cite viral hashtags to organize a discussion. It is reflective of this mutual influence between online discourse and mainstream media coverage used to 1) drive the degree and scope of online discourse 2) to the extent that the mainstream media reproduces online narratives, Twitter (X) could be a force behind how people perceive and thus form public opinion. However these very features of speed, brevity, and viral potential that enhance participation in politics open up the space to the spread of misinformation, targeted abuse (trolling), and polarization of partisan activism.

In turn, the study of hashtag politics in Pakistan provides invaluable information on how digital sources influence democratic processes. Issues of genuine participation, moral facilitation of campaigns, and the implications of political polarization become the new key issues. This paper questions how Twitter (X) hashtags construct political discourses in Pakistan, examining the role they play in agenda-setting, shaping of the public opinion, and mobilization. Through this, it aims to add to the wider body of literature that took on the theme of digital politics in the Global South with a detailed understanding of the interaction between technology, politics, and society within Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between the social media and the political communication has gained too much academic interest and most scholar's term digital media like twitter as stimulating agents in the redesign of global political discourse. Twitter has been labeled as a modern-day version of the conceptualization of the public sphere by Habermas, which provides an open ground of political discourse, faster dissemination of information, and mobilization (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). The operational characteristics of concision, immediacy, interactivity, and the affordances of the hashtags provide users with the opportunities to frame the political and create narratives, and control mainstream agendas. Hashtags act as virtual road signs that collate geographically dispersed dialogues into searchable streams thus gaining immediacy in national discussions.

One of the major developments that Twitter has contributed to political communication lies in the ability of the platform to bypass the traditional media gatekeeping concept. According to Chadwick (2013), this phenomenon should be placed in the perspective of a wider area called a hybrid media system as a result of which the cycles of interactions between digital platforms and legacy media inspire each other. This kind of set up allows the politicians and parties to communicate to the constituents, avoid the exclusivity of the use of intermediaries. Such direct access is an essential tool of resistance to the prevalent discourses and the spread of alternative opinions in few political fields that are filled with drama (Jungherr, 2016). It is through empirical investigations that it is found that political actors use hashtags to mobilize supporters, delimit events and disqualify opponents. This is further demonstrated in the model of connective action as described by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), which highlights how hashtag focused campaigns promote intimate interactions as people are able to coalesce around the hashtags that are specific to a cause and can cause a movement to be adopted in viral fashion.

Twitter in terms of Pakistan has become a centre of attraction in terms of political mobilization especially when elections are due, and when the country suffers a crisis. It is possible to argue that the use of hashtag campaigns in Pakistan has been institutionalized by the political parties internally, using their own digital media teams (Zaheer, 2020). Such twitter hashtags as #VoteKoIzzatDo, #AbsolutelyNot and #Imported HukoomatNamanzoor demonstrate how real-time political multiple narratives are shaped and disseminated. The idea behind such efforts is normally meant to go national or even international in trend thus imparting a sense of mass popularity and the effect of influencing the framing process in media. However, as Khan and Shah (2022) indicate, the Pakistani Twitter abounds with polarization because hashtags often become the tools in partisan wars but not the vehicles of inclusive discussions.

There is a need to pay precise attention to the confluence of hashtags and agenda-setting. The agenda-setting theory asserted by McCombs and Shaw (1972) argues that media do not determine what citizens think, but what citizens think about. In the Twitter age, the use of trending hashtags creates the sense of public agenda-setting that alerts citizens, as well as journalists, to their salience. Such a phenomenon is accompanied by the processes of framing (Entman, 1993), as a result of which hashtags incorporate the interpretive influence on political communication. Television talk-shows and news in Pakistan also tend to pick up viral Twitter hashtags further widening their range and developing their hold over the national agenda.

Despite these advantages, Twitter has high speed and viral potential that enable misinformation as well as malicious information flow. According to Wardle and Derakhshan

(2017), the structural characteristics of social media make it particularly vulnerable to the issue of information disorder. Even in Pakistan, fake accounts, bot networks and modified material also were used in political hashtag campaigns, so the issue of online trend authenticity can be a matter of concern (Khalid & Ali, 2021). This possibility of being manipulated undermines the democratic potential of Twitter where coordinated digital efforts can then create the illusion of consensus or dissent without the involvement of any grass roots activity. Additionally, Ahmed and Skoric (2014) noted that a lot of political activity on Twitter in Pakistan falls under the control of the elites and party team systems as opposed to individuals acting outside of the partisan system, and suggested that online activism is often the replica of real-world power structures.

The conceptual framework of the networked public sphere developed by Benkler (2006) can be used productively in the revelation of scholars of hashtag politics in Pakistan; it views the digital platforms as zones of discussion not bound by state or corporate influence. Nevertheless, Freelon, Marwick, and Kreiss (2020) warn that online space is not an exception free of the same structural inequalities, power games, and maneuvering that dominates politics in the real world. In this regard, hashtags have two functions in the context of political struggle: they can be used as an appeal to the mass audience, create awareness, and challenge the authorities to act on official propaganda, yet increase polarization, sponsoring misinformation and participating in organized efforts to slander.

Collectively, the existing literature highlights the significance of Twitter in the modern political world of communication by providing it, at the one hand, to have a democratizing force and, at the other, to constitute the realm of strategic control. Even though international research offers strong theoretical underpinnings, the very environment of a robust-polarized and media-sensitive political landscape of Pakistan creates distinctive patterns of hashtag implementation that should be explored on a dedicated basis. Examining the forces behind these campaigns to a deeper extent, their tactics, as well as their effect on political discourses, will promote our knowledge in the ever-changing input of social media into the political landscape of the nation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research explores the politics and mass media through the procedure of digital media platforms and specifically Twitter in shaping political narratives and the creation of the public opinion in the Pakistani context with the reference of theories of mass communication and political communication. The research is analytically supported by three fundamental theoretical perspectives:

3.1 Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Under this model, the media does not control the thoughts of the people; the media sets the agenda by distracting the interested audience to focus on specific concerns, events, and individuals. Hashtags on Twitter have been used as an agenda-setting tool that dictates the political issues that gain prominence. The use of hashtags by politicians and political parties is strategic and is aimed at getting the concerned topic in the top 10 trending topics, increasing visibility and making it a cover story in the mainstream media. The research examines the way that the trending hashtags dictate the priorities of users and impact the coverage in the mainstream media.

3.2 Framing Theory (Entman, 1993).

The mode of presentation determines how an audience interprets its work, according to this framework. Hashtags disseminated through Twitter, behave, as a form of framing that reduces the complexity of political narratives into brief formats that are emotionally charged. Political actors deliberately use wording, images and repetition to produce positive frames which legitimize their agenda and undermining others. The study evaluates the impact of these hashtag-based frames on political orientation, mass attitudes, and frame use of an issue.

3.3 Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

According to this theory, people tend to withhold their opinion in circumstances where they feel that they are in a minority and they have fear of isolation. The presence of trending political hashtags could foster such perceptions, consequently stifling opinions and non-representation of other side of the coin. As such, the paper examines how the mainstream political hashtags create the atmosphere where the opposing views are sidelined or even assaulted, only to further polarize politics.

4. Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research design based on content analysis to ask how Twitter hashtags (X) can form political discourses in Pakistan. This can be done with qualitative investigation since the latter facilitates a micro-experience in regards to meaning-making processes, discursive construction, and political events framing in digital spaces (Silverman, 2020). Strongly in contrast to quantitative methods which are partial to indicators of a numerical nature, the qualitative content analysis emphasizes the interpretive scope of communication, thus, assisting with the discovery of recurrent patterns, cohesiveness of themes, and rhetorical strategies inside political hashtag campaigns.

4.1. Research Framework and Hypothesis

The question is grounded in the framing theory (Entman, 1993) and in the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). All these theoretical explanations of the increased salience on hashtags indicate that they do not only raise a certain political issue but affect how people interpret these issues. By scrutinizing tweets sharing politically significant hashtags systematically, the study aims at revealing the narrative, frame, and symbolic meaning surrounding the Pakistani political Twitter space, which is an atmosphere of intense political mobilization and partisan conflict.

4.2. Data Collection

The data collection will be based upon publicly available data streams Twitter provides itself, either via the Twitter API or via institutionally approved scraping tools. In the quest to create the richest discourse possible, the study will revolve around a three-month period that has a general election, a grand policy announcement, or a prominent political controversy. Hashtags to be chosen based on the following principles:

• Political relevance:

The hashtag should have specific direct political involvement with a political figure, party, policy, or event.

• Trending status:

The hashtag must have trended within Pakistan at a national level during the time of study.

• Engagement volume:

The hashtag should have elicited a minimum of 2,000 tweets so that the use of thematic analysis can be carried out.

A purposive sampling technique will then be used to select about 500-800 tweets under each hashtag so that it is heterogeneous in terms of political affiliation, political tone, and content, either text-only, image-based, or video-based.

4.3. Analysis Process

The process of qualitative content analysis will be carried out based on the steps identified by Mayring (2014) and Schreier (2012):

4.3.1. Preparation

Data cleaning (a process to eliminate duplicates, spam, and irrelevant content) will be done on tweets. There will be no retweets without commentary in order to focus on user-generated discussions.

4.3.2. Coding

An inductive development of themes shall also occur as a coding framework will be iteratively developed. The categories will be refined using preliminary coding of a small number of tweets. Frames can be leader glorification, opponent delegitimization, issue advocacy, nationalism, religious framing, and humor/satire.

4.3.3. Interpretation

Interpretive analysis will be used to code the data and find the predominant frames, narrative forms, and rhetoric strategies. Slogans, hashtags-within-hashtags, visual memes, emotional language that constructs audience perception will be given special attention.

4.3.4. Trustworthiness/Validity

In order to increase credibility, intercoder reliability will be achieved by having two researchers independently coding a random selection of tweets and later comparing findings. Triangulation will entail comparing what is published on Twitter and mainstream media to determine its synchrony with the televised and print discourse. The reflexivity will be maintained during the research trajectory, so the researcher would record their positioning and the possible biases that may be assigned to the interpretation.

4.3.5. Ethical Considerations

Twitter is a public platform so the study will only look at publicly available content. The reporting will involve anonymization of usernames and paraphrasing of any harmful, defamatory, or otherwise sensitive information to help prevent harm. This investigation will not violate the terms of service of Twitter of the institutional ethical guidelines.

4.3.6. Limitations

The qualitative type of research does not support any statistical generalization on the entire Pakistani population or even the Twitter user base. Furthermore, active political hashtags will be used as a sample, and possibly some significant yet less visible discussions will be ignored. However, as Twitter has established a strong presence in elite political discourse and in the setting of agenda in Pakistan, the insights gained will be useful to present conclusions on digital political communication.

The methodology through qualitative content analysis explains the subtleties underlying how political actors, supporters, and opponents have been accruing through the use of hashtags to create, challenge, and circulate political narratives and, thus, existing denotative and connotation structures of meaning shaping the digital political space in Pakistan.

5. **Thematic Analysis Findings**

The qualitative content analysis of chosen political hashtags identified four prevailing themes that all of them in their turn can serve to conceptualize the use of Twitter (X) as a venue of constructing, contesting, and amplifying political stories in Pakistan. Such themes were Leader Image Building, Opponent Delegitimization, Nationalist and Ideological Framing, and Humor and Satire as a Political Weapons, which were recurrent across trending hashtags, but in different varieties of tone, intensity, and even engagement.

5.1. Leader Image Construction

Another big chunk of the tweets was made up by those that glorified and defended political leaders mainly through hashtags affiliated to particular parties. As an illustration there are quite numerous hashtags like #AbsolutelyNot and #VoteKoIzzatDo followed by emotionally stimulating praise of leaders as the roll models of integrity, patriotism, and the force to resist foreign pressure. Genuine entrepreneurs, historical facts, and even visual materials in the form of edited images, info graphics, and brief video clips were used by their supporters to support leader-centered narratives. Leaders were in most cases presented to reflect national aspirations and hashtags were taken as rallying cries that served to unify loyal voting populations. This is in keeping with the personalization idea within the framing theory, wherein political communication is oriented towards individual personalities instead of institutions.

5.2. Opponent Delegitimization

The second super-ordinate theme was the strategic assaults on political opponents with hashtags like #ImportedHukoomatNamanzoor and #CorruptLeague being used to delegitimize the political competence, morality, or legitimacy of opponents. Accusatory language, conspiracy framing, and allegations of foreign influence were frequently used in tweets, in this category. Commentary was often based on polar opposites such as representing his or her party as champions of democracy and opponents as enemies of national sovereignty or foreign stooges. This theme illustrated the existence of negative campaigning on twitter, the rhetoric is no longer based on policy but to delegitimise the opposition leaders and parties.

5.3. Nationalist and Ideological Framing

A frequent narrative layer was seen in nationalism in political hashtags. There were numerous tweets in which political struggles were presented in the form of survival, dignity, and independence of Pakistan, most of which refer to the issues of colonialism, or to military conflicts or foreign interventions. #hashtags and tweets with phrases such as Pakistan First or Defenders of the Nation were typical especially amid political crises involving external parties. There was the ideological beginnings, as well, with the religious overtones, as some of the tweets were referring to the political allegiance as to the moral or religious obligation. This indicates that the Twitter driven political narratives are frequently loaded with larger identity politics which go beyond the idea of the citizen as the voter and further involved in acting as a defender of the national or religious values.

5.4. Political Applications of Humor, Satire

After analyzing, humor is discovered as a popular way of engaging with politics, especially through memes, GIFs and humorous captions. Party-transcending hashtags featured satirical depictions of the opposing heads of state (satire was also utilized to mock the choice of policies, personal likes, or speech requests). It was a fun, but piercing criticism which even politicized an idea to make it easier and more fun to talk about. It naturally staved off resistance to engagement, as well as building in-group cohesivity. In most circumstances,

humor became a subliminal yet effective form of political persuasion by reinventing serious political arguments using a method of ridicule and mock-crab essentially.

Cross-Cutting Observations

In addition to these main themes, there were also a few cross cutting patterns. First, there were coordinated campaigns that could be seen in the form of same or similar sounding tweets sent through various accounts implying or hiring orchestrated digital media teams. Two, the emotional tone of tweets was polarized and there was minimal indication of neutral and cross-partisan communication. Third, visual media were the key to the formation of narratives; a tweet with an image or video has been much more probable to be retweeted, spreading impact and range further.

All in all, thematic analysis has proven that hashtag politics in Pakistan is not only a device of information sharing but also a discursive field of struggle where identity, loyalty, and ideology are in dispute. Hashtags have served as organizational tools within Internet-based communities, as well as symbols of political orientation. The results also show the connection between affect-driven content and large-scale mobilization, and in fact in the Pakistani digital space political discourse is little and much about doing emotional register and a sense of accordance of identity as much as it is about policymaking or governance or so.

6. Table: Thematic Analysis Findings

Theme	Description	Key Observations from Data	Representative Hashtags/Examples
1. Political Mobilization and Campaigning	Twitter (X) was actively used by political parties and leaders to rally supporters, share campaign promises, and mobilize public opinion.	- Hashtags were strategically launched before rallies or major speeches. - Content included slogans, posters, and short video clips. - Heavy engagement during election cycles.	#VoteForChange, #PMLN, #ImranKhan, #PPP
2. Narrative Framing and Counter-Narratives	Competing political groups used Twitter to frame issues in ways favorable to their agenda, while countering opposing narratives.	- Political actors redefined events using emotionally charged language. - Counter-hashtags emerged quickly to neutralize trends started by rivals. - Memes and satirical content amplified messages.	#ImportedHakoomatNaManzoor, #VoteKoIzzatDo
3. Hashtag Wars and Trend Manipulation	Coordinated campaigns sought to push certain hashtags into trending lists to control visibility and public perception.	- Evidence of bot accounts amplifying hashtags. - Paid trend promotion used by some parties. - Artificial spikes in hashtag usage during political crises.	#JusticeForPTI, #MaryamNawaz, #ShahbazSharif
4. Public Opinion Shaping and Polarization	Twitter played a significant role in shaping opinions, often leading to increased political polarization.	- Users engaged in heated debates, reinforcing ideological divides. - Political discourse often shifted toward personal attacks rather than policy issues. - Trending hashtags became echo chambers for like-minded individuals.	#CorruptionMafia, #PakistanZindabad
5. Crisis Communication and Damage Control	Political leaders and parties used Twitter for rapid response during controversies or crises.	- Official accounts issued clarifications, rebuttals, or apologies. - Coordinated campaigns to change the narrative during scandals. - Shift in hashtag use immediately after a damaging news break.	#TruthPrevails, #FakeNews, #JusticeForAll

7. Findings

The qualitative content analysis of selected political hashtags in Pakistan revealed several patterns and themes:

Theme	Description	Example Hashtags	Key Insights
1. Political Agenda Promotion	Political parties used hashtags strategically to push their own narratives, achievements, and political promises into public discussion.	#ImranKhan, #PMLNforPakistan, #PPPManifesto	Parties dominate the Twitter space to dictate discussion points and divert attention from opposing narratives.
2. Image Building & Personality Politics	Hashtags centered on political leaders rather than policies, portraying them as national saviors or visionary leaders.	#Kaptaan, #MaryamNawaz, #BilawalBhutto	Political discourse is leader-centric, often overshadowing substantive policy debates.
3. Delegitimization of Opponents	Hashtags were used to attack, ridicule, and discredit rival parties or leaders.	#ImportedHukoomat, #Looters, #CorruptMafia	Political polarization is intensified through constant negative labeling.
4. Public Mobilization & Protest Calls	Twitter served as a digital rallying point to mobilize protests and gather public support.	#LongMarch, #HaqeeqiAzadi, #GoGovernmentGo	Hashtags became catalysts for offline political activism.
5. Emotional & Nationalistic Framing	Hashtags invoked patriotism, religion, and moral duty to frame political issues.	#PakistanZindabad, #JusticeForKhan, #StandWithArmy	Appeals to emotions often overshadowed rational policy discussions.
6. Silencing Dissent (Spiral of Silence)	Dominant hashtags created a perception of majority opinion, discouraging opposing views.	—	Users critical of trending narratives faced online harassment or trolling.

8. Conclusions

1. The political arena in Pakistan uses Twitter as a strong agenda setting product. Hashtags are like digital billboards and make the country discuss what to talk about.

2. Policy oriented politics has been overtaken by leadership-oriented politics indicating a culture of personality politics.

3. It increases polarization as parties use hashtags not only to advance their own narrative, but to attack the opponents as well, leaving a poisoned online atmosphere.

4. Hashtags have turned out to be a cross road between online and offline struggles, used as rally points in demonstrations and political mobilization.

5. Appeal to emotions and symbols nationalism, religion, morality have more traction than factual speak.

6. This is the spiral of silence at work, with dominant narratives quashing alternative interpretations resulting in a one-sided political discourse.

7. On the whole, Twitter as used in Pakistan is both a political platform and an arena of conflict, where the dominance of certain hashtags in the trends sections translates into domination of attention and opinion.

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