

# Rising Wave Of Social Media: Empowering University Students Through Online And Offline Political Participation

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## **Abstract**

Youngsters' frequent use of facebook and twitter has facilitated their political expression and transformed the traditional ways of political participation. Combining Dahl's theory of 'Democratic Processes' and Habermas's theory of 'Public Sphere', the current study provides an extension to the theory by examining: (1) the role of social media political expression in fostering the democratic process through online and offline political participation of university students in Pakistan. Further, the study also fills the gap by analyzing the association between their achieved level of online and offline political participation in the context of Pakistan's struggling democracy. The data is collected from May 15 to July 31, 2020, through survey of 750 students, both male and female, from different universities in four provinces of Pakistan. Study reveals high-level association of social media political expression with online political participation and medium-level association with offline political participation. Male students appear more active in online and offline political activities than female students. Certain variations on the bases of performed activities and demographic characteristics prevail. Moreover, the study includes split model analysis on the bases of gender, study disciplines and province. Previous studies have focused on social media political participation but not as a democratic function. The major contribution of the study is that it develops a framework that connects the theory of democratic process with new practices of democratic participation.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Facebook Use; Twitter Use; Political Expression; Online Political Participation; Offline Political Participation.

## **1. Introduction**

Political discourse on social media has been under discussion by many researchers with special focus on political participation in changing media environment i.e. diversity and the increased utility of communication media such as digital, social, and mobile media (Vowe & Henn, 2016).

In previous years, global political communication research has also focused on the relationship between communication media and the exclusion of people from policy and decision-making processes. Citizens do not have sufficient opportunities to participate in democratic process as required by the democracy to run (Parvin, 2018). Irrespective of the medium of political communication, the democratization of political discourse is emphasized by political communication scholars for the resilience and sustainability of the democratic process (Sánchez Medero, 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, the participation of a large number of people in political discourse is good for healthier political democratic norms. Public narrative through open talks, discussion, and fora of independent debate enables plurality in political communicative discourse. Such narrative motivates independent decision-making which results in increasing political consciousness among masses (Wei & Zhao, 2017).

The speedy emergence of digital technologies is reframing the scholarly debate about the inclusion of democratic political discourse of marginalized social groups in the political process along with the democratization of the communication process through the new public sphere of social media. The use of social media has changed the patterns of participation among youngsters (Keating & Melis, 2017). Political expression of social media has the potential to motivate youngsters to participate in online political activities. Many studies signify the role of political use of social media for encouraging political participation in strengthened democracies such as in Europe and America (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Knoll et al., 2020). However, the phenomenon of political participation has been understudied in struggling democracies like Pakistan. This article expands political participation into online and offline political participation. It is noteworthy, that online political expression and online political participation can not contribute effectively in democracy, if these expressions and activities do not translate into real-life political activities (participation in offline political activities). The phenomenon of online political participation coupled with offline political activism as a consequence of online political expression is endorsed by a plethora of previous and contemporary studies (Althoff et al., 2017). The study also explores the association between online political participation and offline political participation of university students in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the core question about ‘achieved level of offline participation as a result of online expression’ in the perspective of Pakistan still needs a lot of scholarly attention. However, the current study fills the gap by investigating (1) the association between social media political expression and the participation of university students in online and offline political activities, (2) the association between online political participation and offline political participation of university students in Pakistan. The other contribution includes that the study collects data from all four provinces of Pakistan and incorporates split analysis on the bases of gender, study discipline and province to capture the variations.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The explanation of study has a theoretical foundation on the ‘Theory of democracy’ taken from the book ‘Democracy and its critics’ by Dahl (1989), and ‘Theory of Public Sphere’ by Habermas (1962). Emphasizing democracy as the rule by the people, Dahl specifies the requirements of the

democratic process: effective participation, voting equality, and enlightened understanding. However, the focus of this study is on a very important requirement of Dahl's theory of democracy, which is effective participation. He asserts that the citizens are an integral part of the decision-making process in democracy and they should have provided the equal opportunity to take part in the democratic process via the above-mentioned requirements of the democracy. And non-provision of equal participation means rejecting the principle of equality. He emphasizes that adequate opportunity and equal opportunity should be provided to the citizens for the expression and practice of their choices and even the right to question a particular agenda. Further, the study takes on the position of Habermas, who discusses the ideal notion of the public sphere as a place where private people gather to discuss public issues freely and without state pressures. According to him, public spheres should have the principle foundation of open discussion on any issue and the right to participate freely.

Nevertheless, the question about the healthy contribution of the new public sphere; the social media, in engaging youngsters in political discourse on public debate fora and their participation in the political process has not been attended sufficiently in context of socio-political environment of Pakistan. Based on Dahl's argument about the inclusion of all citizens in the democratic process, the study develops a framework to investigate how well the Habermas's notion of Public sphere helps in achieving the requirement of Dahl's theory of democracy in the context of social media political participation.

### **3. Literature Review**

Internet and social media, a new public sphere, is not only facilitating but, somehow, transforming the traditional forms of political participation into more innovative forms and activities of political participation for young people worldwide (Getachew & Beshah, 2019). The research on the subject has been passing through evolutionary phases since 90's and no consensus is found on its potential impact on citizens' participation (Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Critics argue that it only facilitates barrier-free communication, and smooth flow of communication, further, freedom of sharing information influences citizens' participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Wells et al., 2017). There is still disagreement whether it develops an attitude toward politics and political participation, increases the level of political participation, or just reinforces already established political behaviors (Chu & Yeo, 2018; Pickard & Bessant, 2018).

However, many researchers highlighted the significance of political expression to motivate people to political participation (Knoll et al., 2020). A PEW survey report 2018 on social media use and civic and political participation among young Americans states that 66% of social media users have used the platforms to post their thoughts on a particular issue. Further online activities include pressing 'like', involving other friends in these activities, encouraging them to vote, posting links to news stories, following political candidates on twitter and re-tweeting other's tweets (Ohme et al., 2016; Wike & Castillo, 2018). Studies have been conducted using different social media e.g. some scholars found the relationship between political expression and participation using twitter

(Ahmed & Skoric, 2014; Vaccari et al., 2015), using Facebook (Feezell, 2018), both on Facebook and Twitter (Karamat & Farooq, 2016; Velasquez & Rojas, 2017).

Contemporary scientific literature suggests that an individual's political expressions may help in positively forming collective behaviors, which further, lead to motivate individuals for collective action (Ahuja et al., 2018). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014) establish a relationship between political talk and political action by changing a person, who is expressing or sharing thoughts, from a mere observer to a participant. In the same manner, many empirical researchers like Bakshy et al., (2015) also suggest that machine mediated political communication is more diverse than face-to face communication which opens up new and diverse avenues for both engaged and disengaged audience (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017, pp. 1–13). Knoll et al., (2020) developed a Social Media Political Participation Model (SMPPM) to assess the level of political participation. They propose that, whether the exposure is incidental or intentional, the social media's political use lead to political participation after passing through a series of processes. Online civic talk and online political expression is a positive predictor of online and offline political participation (Hsieh & Li, 2014). Moreover, the use of online news gathering seems to be more effective in influencing political expression on social media and promoting civic engagement (David et al., 2019).

The use of social media and consequently its impacts on youngsters' political participation, irrespective of other factors, are judged using three parameters in different researches. First, the relationship varies depending not only on different types of social media platforms but on their patterns of use. Heiss et al., (2019) found that social media use for political information and for self-expression are associated with political engagement through intentional exposure, whereas, through incidental exposure, the entertainment use of social media was related to online political engagement. Some have found that the news seeking uses of social media enhances their political participation (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Second, Many studies investigate the relationship between social media usage intensity and political participation. Here the intensity is defined as the time spent on social media in terms of average hours spent and average posts made on facebook or frequency of tweets or retweets on twitter per week (Wirtz et al., 2017). Less to moderate intensity of political use of facebook and twitter was a positive predictor of online political participation among social media users of US (Yang & DeHart, 2016). Third, the density of social media use, which means how deeply people are engaged in using social media, indicates the interest level of the users. The density of social media use is characterized by heterogeneous practices of users fluctuating from passive consumption to active political expression and discussion, entangling online political controversy and engaging in online conversations (Skoric & Zhu, 2016).

### **3.1. Online Political Participation of Youth**

Diverse communication opportunities through the internet and social networking sites have made political and social activists more active than ever before. Youngsters' more extensive and frequent use of the social media has turned researchers' interest to political expression on social media and its impacts on their online and offline political participation. The phenomenon of youth's political

participation during the US Election 2012 affected by social media use is analyzed by investigated the psychological and behavioral factors which predict youngster's online political participation. Youngsters' heavy routine exposure to Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube is related to their online and offline political participation (Yang & DeHart, 2016).

About political activism of youth in Pakistan, many scholars reinforce the increasing use and heavy dependency on social media for political purposes. During election 2013 and onward, the social media has changed the political scenario of Pakistan; the reliance of political parties and political candidates on social media for mobilizing youth and youth's activism on online and offline politics of Pakistan which has not been experienced previously in Pakistani politics (Karamat & Farooq, 2016). This new political outlook, influenced and structured by social media, not only transformed the traditional forms of political activities into diverse and contemporary forms of political participation among youngsters, but it also encouraged youngsters to participate in the traditional forms of political activities i.e. voting and campaign activities (Quintelier, 2007).

Social media communicate political stuff to the younger generation, to those also who were not active politically on these websites earlier. Social media proved as a catalyst for a politically disengaged group of people e.g. a group particularly not interested in politics previously (Vaccari et al., 2015). Mustapha & Omar analyzed online and offline participatory behaviors among youth and conclude that youth's mainstream political disengagement takes over safe heaven in alternative and online political engagement which is non-hierarchical and cost-effective (2020).

Social networking sites and microblogging services are used as a prominent source of election campaigning by political parties, candidates, and their supporters. Many scholars argued the role of social media during election campaigns and confirmed its effectiveness (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Nevertheless, the political parties and the candidates are using social media to initiate their political agenda in routine also. In Pakistan, it is a matter of common observation that for political parties and candidates, not only during elections, social media is a tool for permanent campaigning throughout the tenure between two elections through the propagation of political agenda and policies and to keep engaging their supporters in a number of ways. First, politicians made aggressive use of social media platforms to convince their voters in the previous two elections held in Pakistan, in 2013 and 2018. Second, strengthening early predispositions in case of the favorite political party and helping in mind-setting of undecided or floating voters by convincing them effectively through direct contact of political candidates Lilleker & Jackson (2011). Third, Politicians, political activists, and supporters have now restructured fundraising appeals by knocking the social networks of their followers beyond offline platforms (Auter & Fine, 2018). Fourth, the political parties use social media platforms to incorporate regular updates such as about political, national and local, gatherings and the organization of those gatherings, to disseminate campaign information to voters, to contact and to issue discussion with them (Stieglitz et al., 2012). Thus, the above literature concludes that social media political expression encourages online political participation of youngsters. The study tests following hypothesis.

H1: There is an association between social media political expression and online political participation of university students.

### **3.2. Social Media Political Expression leads to Offline Political Participation**

Many other studies which are based on cross-sectional data reveal that political expression on social media also motivates to take part in real-life political activities (Althoff et al., 2017; Skoric & Zhu, 2016). Survey results reveal a positive association between political expression on social media and offline political participation for both facebook and twitter (Ham & Pap, 2018). Appeal for donating money to a political party or candidate was also found as a potential contributor to offline political activities (Kim & Chen, 2016).

A plethora of studies conclude offline activities as traditional political participation such as political campaign activities; organizing and attending political gatherings, rallies, processions and demonstrations (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010), and informal political activities such as corner meetings, contacting officials, face-to-face canvassing, spreading election campaign material, meeting politicians, attending other offline political events, signing up as a volunteer, wearing wrist bands with party symbols, pasting party flags on cycles, motorcycle, cars, dresses (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2012) and protest participation (Breuer et al., 2015). Social media has become not only, the online public sphere for political discussion but a platform that initiates political discussions on offline public spheres also. Political discussions as a result of political expression in online networks promote viewpoint diversity and argument elaboration (Kim & Chen, 2016). Researchers have acknowledged political discussions as a very important indicator of offline political participation of youngsters (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

The analysis of different studies shows that there are varied results on mobilizing effects of the political use of social media in non-democratic regimes. In non-democratic political setups, the role of social media is analyzed, presumably, to destabilize and shatter the non-democratic established political norms (Fletcher et al., 2012). Extensive use of internet-based social applications was observed in middle-eastern countries as an effective tool for mobilizing young people, even though these applications are under the control of ruling governments. The popular examples are the Arab spring movement in early 2011 and Egypt's Tahrir Square protests (Breuer et al., 2015). In 2016, when a coup attempt was made by one Turkish military section and tried to unrest the government, President Tayyab Erdogan sent a video message through social networks and then this message became viral through multiple social networks including facebook (Tanash et al., 2017). Thus, the literature concludes that online communication media has not only supplemented the effects on online political activities but also encouraged offline political activities. Many scholars analyzed the effects of online political expression separately on online and offline participatory behaviors and found a similar level of online and offline participation (Ahmad et al., 2019). Some revealed a strong correlation between online political participation and offline political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Some studies found that the effects

of social media communication on offline participation are subject to users' characteristics (Enjolras et al., 2013). Thus the study predicts

H2: There is an association between social media political expression and offline political participation of university students.

H3: Online political participation (Online PP) is positively associated with offline political participation (Offline PP) of university students.

#### **4. Methods and Materials**

The study is conducted using quantitative research method. Survey method is used to collect the data. To reach empirical findings, major concepts are operationalized using different scales, some are adapted and some are developed, and finally converted them into measurable variables. First, we operationalize political expression on social media (Facebook and Twitter). Different questions are included intending to measure the intensity, frequency, and density of political expression of university students on facebook and twitter (Hsieh & Li, 2014; Wirtz et al., 2017). Such as the discussion on any political topics on Facebook, tweeting or retweeting about any political topic and the number of facebook political pages joined and political characters followed. Scales are adapted from Yang & DeHart (2016) and Valenzuela et al. (2009) to measure the 'political expression' among university students.

Second, to measure political participation, the study incorporates the intensity of political participation and breadth of political participation. The breadth of political participation corresponds to the number of activities a person is involved and the intensity means how much a person is involved in a particular activity (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). Every respondent may have his own idiosyncratic meaning of political participation according to any specific political activity. For example, a person involved in one or two political activities very frequently and deeply may differ from another person who is involved in a number of activities but not deeply and frequently involved. However, to measure and analyze online political participation the categories formulated are sending an online invitation for political meetings, online appeal for donations, posting, sharing and commenting, sharing online political slogans, political discussions on facebook and twitter, following twitter accounts, tweeting, re-tweeting on other's tweets, making any facebook page or group for political communication, and joining facebook pages or groups of political parties or candidates. Third, to analyze offline political participation the categories formulated are related to real-life political activities such as offline canvassing, political discussions in classrooms, political discussions with family, offline campaigning, attending or delivering speeches, distributing campaign material, wearing caps, T-shirts showing political affiliation, placing campaign stickers or flags of a favorite political party, and collecting money for running a political campaign. Respondents are asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale. Moreover, the study also includes demographic questions to analyze the relationship between

independent and dependent variables, e.g., age, gender, educational level, family income, academic discipline, and province.

A mixed-methods sampling is used to collect responses from the universities of four provinces of Pakistan. Considering each province as a cluster and one university from each cluster is selected randomly. Selected universities are from province of Punjab (University of the Punjab, Lahore and Government College University, Faisalabad), province of Sindh (University of Karachi), province of Balochistan (University of Balochistan, Quetta), and province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (University of Peshawar). Further, six academic departments are selected through random sampling from each university and grouped into two disciplines i.e. 'physical science' and 'social science' for analysis. Finally, responses from 750 university students (male and female) of ages (18-25 years) have been collected through structured questionnaire (open-ended) with a cover letter representing their consent to participate in the study. The data was collected between May 15 to July 31, 2020. Given the financial and time limits, mediators from different universities are arranged to collect data from farthest areas of Pakistan. They are guided about data collection procedure through online training sessions.

The Cronbach Alpha, calculated using SPSS, is 0.90, which indicates a high level of reliability for all scales. Multiple regression analysis is used to predict social media political expression and change in traditional voting behavior of university students with various predictors.

## 5. Results

The statistical inferences provide evidence that support both H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>. As predicted in hypothesis H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>, social media political expression has a significant and positive association with online political participation ( $\beta = .769, p < .001$ ) and offline political participation ( $\beta = .540, p < .001$ ). It indicates that if social media political expression among university students is increased by one standard deviation, online and offline political participation among university students is increased by 0.769 and .540 standard deviations respectively. Regression analysis also supported these models as 63.2% and 54 % of variance (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>) in online and off political participation, respectively, was explained by variables included in the model.

Regression Table 1 Prediction of Online/Offline Political Participation

Variable	Standardized Coefficients <sup>a</sup> ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	t	Durbin-Watson
<b>Online Political Participation</b>				
Constant		.348	15.997	
Social Media Political Expression	.769*	.023	32.906	2.007
<b>Offline Political Participation</b>				
Constant		.378	20.753	
Social Media Political Expression	.540*	.025	17.565	1.789



a. Dependent Variable: Online Political Participation (Adjusted  $R^2=.632$ ), Offline Political Participation (Adjusted  $R^2=.422$ ), Model Summary: Sample size=750. Correlation is significant at \*  $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .05$

Regression analysis also supported this model when including other explanatory variables with variance 63.7% and 41.5% for online and offline political participation respectively. Some of these control variables yielded a low but significant influence on the online political participation of university students in Pakistan. For the prediction of online political participation, gender ( $\beta = -.012$ ,  $p < .05$ ), study level ( $\beta = -.034$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and study discipline ( $\beta = -.079$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were statistically significant. For the prediction of offline political participation, gender ( $\beta = -.081$ ,  $p < .01$ ), study discipline ( $\beta = -.063$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and province ( $\beta = -.057$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were statistically significant. It indicates that if the gender is increased by one standard deviation, the online political participation is decreased by 0.012 standard deviations and offline political participation is decreased by 0.081 standard deviations among university students. In addition, this is true only if the effects of other explanatory variables (social media political expression, age, study level, study department, province, and family income level) are kept constant.

The statistical inferences pointed out that the focal independent variable (social media political expression), still, remained highly significant and associated ( $\beta = .794$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with online political participation and ( $\beta = .618$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with offline political participation of the university students, when the effects of other control variables were also measured. The overall model including demographic variables gives a good explanation of online and offline political participation.

Regression Table 2 Prediction of Online/ Offline Political Participation with Control Variables

Independent Variables	Online Political Participation			Offline Political Participation		
	Standardized Coefficients <sup>a</sup> ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	t	Standardized Coefficients <sup>a</sup> ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	T
Constant		1.968	4.122		1.985	4.372
Social Media Political Expression	.794*	.023	35.176	.618*	.023	21.557
Student Age	.020	.068	.872	.028	.068	.967
Gender of the Student	-.012***	.255	-1.047	-.081**	.257	-2.796
Study Level of student	-.034***	.096	-1.477	-.014	.117	-.461
Study Discipline	-.079*	.107	-3.550	-.063***	.249	-2.233
Family Income	-.009	.000	-.402	-.022	.000	-.765
Province of student	-.006	.106	-.267	-.057***	.107	-2.027

a. Dependent Variable: Online Political Participation, Offline Political Participation

Model Summary: Sample size=750. Adjusted  $R^2=.637$  and Durbin Watson=2.007 (Online Political Participation), Adjusted  $R^2=.415$  and Durbin Watson=1.630 (Offline Political Participation), Correlation is significant at \*  $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .05$ .

The study also investigates online and offline political participation on the bases of gender, study discipline and province differences. The standardized regression coefficients of online political participation of male ( $\beta = .708$ ,  $p < .001$ ), female ( $\beta = .665$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and offline political participation of male ( $\beta = .631$ ,  $p < .001$ ), female ( $\beta = .439$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were noted. It indicates that if the social media political expression is increased by one standard deviation, the level of online political participation is increased by 0.708 standard deviations among male, .665 standard deviations among female and the level of offline political participation is increased by 0.631 standard deviations among male and .439 standard deviations among female university students. The value of Durbin-Watson was very well within the range (1.5 - 2.5). The statistics show that male respondents exhibited a higher level of, both, online and offline political participation than female respondents. Similarly, table 3 also represents the standardized regression coefficients of online political participation (social science  $\beta = .788$ ,  $p < .001$ ), (physical science  $\beta = .654$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and offline political participation (social science  $\beta = .636$ ,  $p < .001$ ), (physical science  $\beta = .507$ ,  $p < .001$ ) of the students from different disciplines. It can be inferred that social science students exhibited a higher level of, both, online and offline political participation than physical science students. In addition, the table 3 also represents the standardized regression coefficients of online and offline political participation of the students from different provinces The values of Adjusted  $R^2$  give the overall explanation of the models with respect to each category of the variables and the results can be well generalized on the population. The detailed statistics are given in the table.

Regression Table 3 Prediction of Online Political Participation comparing Gender, Study Discipline, and Province

Variable	Response Categories	Online Political Participation			Offline Political Participation		
		Adjusted $R^2$	Standardized Coefficients <sup>a b</sup> ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	Adjusted $R^2$	Standardized Coefficients <sup>a b</sup> ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error
1-Gender	Male	.652*	.708*	.029	.399*	.631*	.034
	Female	.583*	.665*	.039	.254*	.439*	.037
2-Study Discipline	Social Science	.702*	.788*	.030	.403*	.636*	.035
	Physical Science	.568*	.654*	.034	.332*	.507*	.042
3-Province	Punjab	.567*	.708*	.042	.371*	.613*	.059
	Sindh	.617*	.787*	.043	.410*	.644*	.067

Khyber	.602*	.703*	.040	.346*	.590*	.042
Pakhtunkha						
Balochistan	.529*	.682*	.041	.294*	.447*	.049

a. Dependent Variable: Online Political Participation, Offline Political Participation

b. Predictor: Social Media Political Expression, Gender, Study Discipline, Province

Model Summary: Sample size=750. Correlation is significant at \*  $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .05$

The statistical inferences provide evidence that also support the hypothesis H3. As predicted in hypothesis H3, online political participation has a significant and positive association ( $\beta = .412$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with offline political participation. It indicates that if online political participation is increased by one standard deviation, offline political participation is increased by .412 standard deviation. The value of adjusted  $R^2$  gives good explanation of the model.

Gender ( $\beta = -.361$ ,  $p < .001$ ), study level ( $\beta = .069$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and province ( $\beta = -.118$ ,  $p < .001$ ), appeared to have significant influence on offline political participation of university students in Pakistan. It indicates that if the gender is increased by one standard deviation, the offline political participation among university students is decreased by 0.361 standard deviations and this is true only if the effects of other explanatory variables are kept constant. The detailed statistics are given in the table.

Regression Table 4 Online Political Participation predicts Offline Political Participation

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients <sup>a</sup> ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	t
Constant		2.298	3.620
Online Political Participation	.412*	.026	13.896
Gender of the Student	-.361*	.294	-12.042
Study Level of the student	.069***	.135	2.229
Province of the student	-.118*	.124	-3.969

a. Dependent Variable: Offline Political Participation.

Model Summary: Sample size=750. Adjusted  $R^2=.368$ . Durbin Watson=1.701

Correlation is significant at \*  $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .05$ .

In table 5, the difference in the levels of respondents' online and offline participation was measured with respect to their mean difference. On average participants were engage in online political participation ( $M= 17.23$ ,  $SD= 5.570$ ,  $SE= 0.20$ ), than the participants who were engage in offline political participation ( $M= 13.62$ ,  $SD= 4.880$ ,  $SE= 0.18$ ). Inferences can be made from the findings presented in table 5, that a statistically significant difference exists between online political participation and offline political participation of the respondents. The respondent's level of

participation in online activities is more than the level of participation in offline activities. The difference between the means of online political participation and offline participation was sufficiently large to explain it as a true mean difference ( $17.23 - 13.62 = 3.612$ ) and not a possible chance result. Table 5 also presents paired sample correlations ( $0.469$ ,  $p < .001$ ), along with bootstrap for correlations ( $0.400-0.530$ ,  $SE = .032$ ) of online political participation and offline political participation. It inferred that online political participation is correlated with offline political participation (46.9%) with significance  $p < .001$ .

Table 5 Paired Samples Statistics

	Statistics		Bias	Boot strap <sup>a</sup>		
				SE	Lower	Upper
Online Political Participation	Mean	17.23	-.01	.20	16.83	17.65
	SD	5.570	-.016	.138	5.296	5.833
	SE Mean	.203				
Offline Political Participation	Mean	13.62	-.02	.18	13.26	13.94
	SD	4.880	-.019	.136	4.601	5.127
	SE Mean	.178				
Online PP & Offline PP	Correlation	.469	-.001	.032	.400	.530

a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples. 95% Confidence Interval (CI)

SD= Standard Deviation, SE=Standard Error, N=750

## 6. Discussion

The study examines the relationship between university student's political use of social media and the level of their online political participation. The formulated hypothesis was "Political expression on social media is associated with online and offline political participation of university students in Pakistan". Further, analysis aimed at measuring the role of intervening variables, such as gender, age, study level, study discipline, family income, and province. Depending upon the cultural values of the society, social circumstances, and the political environment of the Pakistan, the most relevant political activities were selected for the analysis. The study aimed at analyzing the causes of variation in political participation among different students by investigating multiple items of online political participation. Additionally, the study also aimed at investigating the participation levels among different students and patterns of using different online political activities.

The results from hypothesis testing revealed that there is a direct, positive, and strong association between social media political expression and online political participation of the university students in Pakistan. The overall model suggests a high correlation of social media political expression with online political participation and medium level correlation with offline political participation. The models of social media political expression with or without other explanatory variables demonstrated high significance explaining (63.7% and 63.2% for online political participation) and (41.5% and 42.2% for offline political participation) of variance respectively.

Additionally, the demographic differences i.e. gender, study discipline and province were also noted for the models of online and offline political participation. These considerations proved very substantial for the study. The study revealed significant differences in online and offline political participation of male and female students i.e. male students were more likely to engage in, both, online and offline political activities as compared to female students. Female students participated comparatively less in online and offline activities, which are also supported by the previous literature (Zaheer, 2016).

However, study revealed that the difference in the level of participation in some online political activities was much higher among male students than the female students, whereas, in others, the participation level was almost the same. For example, among all activities the participation of male and female students was almost the same while appealing for donations and posting texts, pictures, and videos of political parties. Moreover, the level of participation, individually, in all offline political activities was higher among male students than female students. However, the difference in participation level of male and female students was not high in appealing to vote for any political party as female students also participated actively in this activity. Findings also revealed that male and female participation difference in real-life discussions, such as in the classroom with friends, was not high.

The study discipline-wise split model revealed that the social science students exhibited a higher level of, both, online and offline political participation as compared to physical science students. Moreover, social science students appeared more active in some online activities such as inviting for political meetings and processions of political candidates and political parties, posting political slogans, texts, pictures, and videos related to political content. However, physical science students were more active in sharing the received post related to political content. For offline political activities, social science students appeared more active in attending political meetings and processions of political candidates and political parties and wearing shirts and caps of political parties. Physical science students showed more participation in putting flags and stickers of political parties and inviting others to vote for any political party. For province wise split model, the students from the province of Sindh tend to participate in, both, online and offline political activities more actively as a result of their social media political expression than the students from other provinces. The students from the province of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa exhibited almost the same level of online and offline political participation. The students from the province of Balochistan exhibited the lowest participation level in both online and offline political activities. Investigations suggested that students appealed for donating money for a political party or political candidate very infrequently in comparison to all other online and offline political activities, which was contrary to many other studies (Boulianne, 2015; Kim & Chen, 2016). Which was possibly because of many social and economic reasons; in the political tradition of Pakistan, the local political candidates are responsible for executing and bearing the expenses of their individual election campaigns and they try to recover when they get into the power (Yousaf, 2016). The rest of the monetary contributions are limited to party workers, supporters, or the people who are very closely and strongly associated with a political party or political candidates, says Chaudhry M.

Saeed, chairman of local union council<sup>1</sup> (Eleazar, 2018, Dawn.com). Secondly, the economic condition of a common man in Pakistan is not good enough to contribute to a political campaign of a political party or political candidate. Third, the study's population was limited to university students and donating money for a political party or political candidate is beyond the spending limits of the students as most of the students are dependent on their parents for living and educational expenses. Further, the highest level of online participation among university students was found in political activities of posting the text, pictures, videos, and slogans of any political party. Supporters of political parties in their friend's networks further share these posts.

For offline political participation, the most practiced activity was to discuss the political issues in real-life settings such as classroom, college, university, or in other group gatherings. One of the traits of group discussions is that not even all group members are speaking on the issue, still, considerably all group members are the participants. Resultantly, every member is considered as a participant in the discussions. Nevertheless, participation in political discussions is an obvious first step in youngsters' political participation. In general, students from all demographic variations appeared less interested in attending political meetings among all real-life political activities. There were very few students, who never appealed to vote for a political party, more than 90% of students made offline appeals to vote for a political party regardless of its frequency. These findings are very substantial for democratic political norms. Democratic political norms can not prevail in a country unless there is a vast majority of people who express their choice to vote for a political candidates. The data from national election 2013 and 2018 held in Pakistan also support these findings. Generally, students are found more active in online political activities than offline political activities. Moreover, their online participatory behaviors predict their offline participatory behaviors. Difference in online and offline political participation appeared more in demographic variations. Mean difference of online and offline participation among female students was more than male students.

## **6.1. Conclusion**

The study is articulated to investigate the framework of social media political participation that how the political use of social media foster engagement in different types of online and offline political activities. Generally, the findings confirm that political use of social media enables university students to participate actively and effectively in online and offline political activities. The framework was based on theory of democracy (effective participation in political process) and public sphere (freedom of political expression). The study concludes that social media as a new public sphere provides an ample space to youngsters to express their political views openly and freely, and enables them to participate meaningfully in democratic process through online and offline participation. The discrepancy in online and offline political participation recommends that

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<sup>1</sup> *Cost of Running an Election Campaign*, Article can be accessed from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1416780>

there is, still, a dire need to encourage youngsters' participation for real-life activities to achieve maximum consequences of democratic participation.

## 6.2. Recommendations

The study was based on cross-sectional data and there is a need to analyze the implications of panel data in future. Future researches should also address the effects of bubble filters and eco-chamber of like-minded people in reference to social media use.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The author has no known competing financial interests or personal relationship that could influence this work.

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