

Citation: Mehran, K. A., & Iqbal, M. Z. (2023). Use of Social Media and Construction of Political Intolerance: Analyzing the Effects of Twitter (X) and Facebook. *Global Political Review*, VIII(IV), 12-21. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2023\(VIII-IV\).02](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2023(VIII-IV).02)

Vol. VIII, No. IV (Fall 2023)

Pages: 12 – 21

p- ISSN: 2521-2982

e-ISSN: 2707-4587

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Use of Social Media and Construction of Political Intolerance: Analyzing the Effects of Twitter (X) and Facebook



Abstract: *This research is aimed at getting an insight into how social media platforms particularly Facebook and Twitter (X) are being used by Pakistani users to display political intolerance. Both platforms are being actively used to put forward opinions on users' political and religious views. Employing the survey method along with quantitative and qualitative research techniques, it makes a systematic effort to explore social media usage patterns among users and how they use them to express their religious and political thoughts. The study also attempts to discuss and set the contours of political and religious intolerance with relevance to the research. The interdependence between the usage of social media platforms and the progression of intolerant behaviour is also brought into focus through this research.*

Key Words: Social Media Users, Facebook, Twitter (X), Political Intolerance, Religious Intolerance

Introduction

The modern era is identified as an information age where individuals' life is significantly impacted by various social media application platforms such as usage of Facebook and Twitter (now known as X) is very common. This indeed influences the daily life of the people. The existing literature and knowledge show that social attributes such as intolerance and individual perspectives play important roles in online social interactions and engage different age groups persons in political and religious discussions. However, the individual mindset and social background play a vital role in online social interactions specifically in relation to the display of level of tolerance or intolerance. Those people who have a higher level of tolerance usually have the capacity to engage and deal with various groups or friends, who are available to them for online discussion (Rathnayake & Winter, 2017). Forbearance and intolerance work in different streams. Forbearance may not be considered neutral and impartial and subject to the acceptance of constitutional and fundamental

rights of an individual e.g. freedom of speech or expressing thoughts on predefined political and religious paradigms which may be considered offensive and against civil liberties. This may also apply to well-recognized democracies in perceived threats or times of crisis (Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009).

Social scientists perceived *intolerance* as a complex social phenomenon. The literature indicates in most of the cases 'fear and hatred' can trigger the feeling of intolerance or can influence behavior which may lead towards intolerance. In addition to this, the research in the domain of behaviour aspects also highlights the other factors which can lead towards intolerance such as normative practices which are derived from cultural practices, the personal experiences which a person acquires throughout their life experiences and nonetheless in certain cases biological and social factors also influence behaviour towards intolerance (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). However, the most significant and important factor which leads towards intolerance is known as 'perceived threat' towards

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one's own identity. In this regard, valuable research was carried out by Esses et al. (2008) in which they highlighted how one feels threatened by others based on identity, differences and status which can also be based on negative attributes towards the group members who are not aligned with the person's own identity. The difference of opinion may lead towards intolerance of race, ethnicity, religion, identity, sexual and gender orientation, and regional and national identities. One of the interesting attributes of individual personality in relation to social interaction is that those who have exposure to social interactions or socialize with people from diverse backgrounds can have a higher level of intolerance towards other identities or people (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The possible reason behind limited social interaction with others may be grounded in the cultural reinforcement or normative practices that demand value conformity of the specific culture and may promote and form a homogenous nature of individual and group identities. Further, the phenomenon of intolerance can also revolve around the typical nature of existing stereotypes which can be towards an individual or a group identity; and can lead towards certain ethnic or racial groups; in this regard, media can play a significant role in display of such negative stereotypes (Dixon & Linz, 2000). In this sense social media platforms serve as information sources within specific networks, concurrently generating multiplier effects as individuals within these networks aim to connect with others. These cascading effects, facilitated by social media, have the potential to continue indefinitely while growing uncontrolled usage of media has the potential to produce negative stereotypes such as when an individual between the age of 8-18, on a daily basis, spending about 10.45 hours (Dahl & Newkirk, 2010).

Pakistan has diverse regional cultures and this diversity promotes regional differences based on socio-cultural, political, and lingual differences and these differences have potential for intolerance that can be seen at different levels. It is believed that societies can make progress when political tolerance is practised. Since it provides the basis for co-existence which is very much needed to ensure peace in societies, particularly when societies are pluralistic and multicultural. (Gerber et al., 2010; Oskarsson & Widmalm, 2016; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1993). Therefore, in the

recent past significant literature was produced dealing with *political tolerance* and conceptualized as a willingness to tolerate ideas which are opposite to others and respect expression which may or may not affect one's own way of life (Heyd, 2008; Vujčić, 1995; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1979).

Social media are the platforms having space where people freely express their socio-cultural, religious and political thoughts with friends, extended friend groups and others. In this context, there are possibilities to disrupt harmony deriving from hatred and differences (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2017). It is observable in Pakistan where supporters of various political parties propagate their respective ideologies and generate debate which may lead towards heated arguments mainly surrounding feelings of hate.

Particularly, the matter under discussion becomes a topic of interest when literature indicates 'active global social media population worldwide is 4.14 billion' of which 4.08 billion are present on mobile whereas Facebook is the most popular social network based on global audience size (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Facebook is the most popular and accessible platform among all social media sites. It has a number of active users and it is attracting new users all the time. It is noteworthy that in 2017 Facebook had 2.01 billion users. While it was claimed that by the end of 2017, Facebook would see 2.3 billion monthly active users on its network.

As per estimates, Pakistan has a total of 76.38 million internet users with 33.9% penetration by December 2020. Pakistan has 45.19 million Facebook users, however, no further stats on how many of them are active users are available. For micro-blogging service Twitter, it has updated its active user numbers to 330 million. Another website named Statista estimated that Twitter's monthly active user count decreased from an all-time high of 336 MAU in the first quarter of 2018 to an average of 330 million in the first quarter of 2019.

In the abovementioned context, where social media platforms are inevitable spaces of people interaction which significantly influence individual opinion and shape behaviour. One of the current research streams is focused on Facebook and Twitter (now known as X) and the construction of intolerance in relation to political and religious

affiliation and its propagation through using these online platforms.

Objectives of the study

1. Assess how Facebook and Twitter contribute to the construction and reinforcement of political and religious intolerance.
2. Investigate the potential interdependence between social media consumption patterns and the development of political and religious intolerance among users.
3. Provide insights and recommendations based on the findings to inform discussions on media literacy and strategies for promoting tolerance in the digital sphere.

Research Methodology

For this research survey and interview methods were used for data collection. The questionnaire was designed based on existing literature and research reports. The purpose of the research was to understand the different political and religious

attitudes of respondents on social media. The data collection tool was designed and piloted at early stages and the researcher analyzed the data carefully in the perspectives of the perceived information and construction of social knowledge. The data collection tool was further refined based on the pilot run. Since the respondents were from different age categories, a structured questionnaire was used to record the maximum responses of the respondents. The researcher has adopted a systematic random sampling approach to target respondents along with non-probability sampling techniques.

Modes of Data Collection

The researcher used systematic approaches to collect data from respondents as follows:

- Sending questionnaires via emails
- Approaching the respondents through phone/WhatsApp calls
- In-person data collection by using snowball techniques

Table 1

Total number of respondents	Number of respondents approached by emails	Number of respondents approached by phone calls /WhatsApp call	A number of respondents approached in person
600	90	150	360

Ethical Considerations

It was explained to all the respondents that data would be compiled for the research study and would be made public without names and identities. Participation in the research will be entirely voluntary and after seeking consent the data was collected from the respondents.

Study Limitations

One of the most important challenges faced during the data collection process was reaching the respondents as the majority of the respondents were hesitant and reluctant to share information. Therefore multiple attempts were made to collect information. Although a sample of 600 individuals has been used snowball sampling techniques have been employed to reach respondents which helped

the researcher to build rapport with respondents directly for data collection.

Data Analysis

The research implied qualitative and quantitative research methods. The quantitative data was analyzed in SPSS through simple description, cross-tabulation and advanced analysis as per the objectives of the study, however, thematic descriptions and analysis were also used for data analysis.

Study Results

This table presents demographic information and social media usage patterns among a sample of 600 respondents. The data is categorized into three key demographic variables: Age, Gender, and

Education, along with information related to usage of Twitter and Facebook.

Age Categories

The results of the study show that respondents' age is varied but the majority of the respondents fall between the ages of 20 to 35, representing 73.2% of the total sample. The largest age group is 31 to 35, comprising 33.7% of respondents, followed by the 36 and above age group at 26.8%.

Gender Composition

The sample shows a gender distribution, with 68.8% being male and 31.2% female.

Educational Background

The respondents exhibit diverse educational backgrounds, with the majority having completed Graduation, MS/MPhil, or holding a Ph.D. The highest percentage is observed among those with MS/MPhil qualifications (34.7%), closely followed by respondents with Graduation degrees (34.2%).

Facebook Usage

The majority of respondents, 88.0%, reported using Facebook, while 12.0% indicated that they do not use the platform.

Twitter Usage

Twitter usage is reported by 75.5% of the respondents, while 24.5% stated that they do not use Twitter.

This table offers a comprehensive overview of the distribution of political affiliations within the surveyed sample, shedding light on the popularity and support levels of different political parties among the respondents. Specifically, in the age group 30-35, most of them, expressed their affiliation with PTI (125 out of 202). It was followed by the age group 35 and above (76 out of 161) in favour of PTI. While affiliation with PML-N stood second with 59 out of 161 for the age group 36 and above. Similarly, PTI represented most of the share and PML was second for the age group between 2030.

Table 2

Age Groups	Frequency	Percent
20 to 25	125	20.8
26 to 30	112	18.7
31 to 35	202	33.7
36 and above	161	26.8
Total	600	100.0
Gender		
Male	413	68.8
Female	187	31.2
Total	600	100.0
Education		
Intermediate	27	4.5
Graduation	205	34.2
MS/MPhil	208	34.7
Ph.D.	160	26.7
Total	600	100.0
Facebook		
Yes	528	88.0
No	72	12.0
Total	600	100.0
Twitter		
Yes	453	75.5
No	147	24.5

Total	600	100.0
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Table 3

Age Groups	The Political Party you are affiliated with							Total	Parentage
	PML-N	PTI	PPP	JUI-F	TLP	Other	None		
20 to 25	38	69	3	1	1	1	12	125	20.83
26 to 30	35	50	0	0	8	11	8	112	18.66
31 to 35	43	125	3	1	1	2	27	202	33.68
36 and above	59	76	3	1	4	6	12	161	26.83
Total	175	320	9	3	14	20	59	600	100

Usage of Facebook or Twitter for Political Discussions

The persons from the age group 30-35 had the highest proportion of usage of Facebook or Twitter for political discussions every day and it was followed by age group 35 and above. As compared to the age group 20-25, the age group

26-30 were using Facebook or Twitter for political discussion every day. However, when asked about usage of Facebook and Twitter for political discussion in relation to multiple times a week, then the age group 20-25 were more active as compared to all other age groups except 35 and above.

Table 4

Age Groups	How frequently do you use Facebook or Twitter for Political Discussions?					Total	Percentage
	Every day	Multiple times a week	Once a week	Rarely	Never		
20 to 25	59	24	9	14	19	125	20.83
26 to 30	72	2	9	17	12	112	18.66
31 to 35	110	24	3	38	27	202	33.68
36 and above	87	25	8	23	18	161	26.83
Total	328	75	29	92	76	600	100

Usage of Facebook or Twitter for Religious Discussions

The trends for the age 36 and above who were having daily religious discussion on Twitter or Facebook were reported highest and it was followed by the age group 26-30. When inquired about usage of Facebook or Twitter multiple times

a week for the religious discussion, the age group 20-25 had having highest proportion and it was followed by 36 and above. While it was followed by the age group 26-30. Interestingly when it was asked if some of the respondents never used Twitter or Facebook for religious discussion, then a significant share came from the age group 31-35.

Table 5

Age Groups	How often do you use Facebook or Twitter for Religious Discussions?					Total	Parentage
	Everyday	Multiple Times a Week	Once a Week	Rarely	Never		
20 to 25	42	36	14	19	14	125	20.83
26 to 30	35	20	19	29	9	112	18.66
31 to 35	66	29	15	45	47	202	33.68
36 and above	66	32	8	23	32	161	26.83

Age Groups	How often do you use Facebook or Twitter for Religious Discussions?					Total	Parentage
	Everyday	Multiple Times a Week	Once a Week	Rarely	Never		
Total	209	117	56	116	102	600	100

Political Attitude and Most Disliked Political Party: Vote and Speech

The age group 31-35 expressed acceptability of the political differences among their close friends and considered that their friends always can vote for a party which they desire. Respondents from the age group 36 and above appeared most intolerant

towards political association and affiliation since most of them will never allow their close friends to vote for the political party which they disliked. Almost similar trends were observed for the age group 20-24 and 35 above, sometimes they will give space to their friends to cast votes for the political party which respondents dislike.

Table 6

Age Groups	Are you willing to permit your closest friend to vote for the political party that you have the least preference for?			Total	Percentage
	Never allow	Sometime allow	Yes, always allow		
20 to 25	26	33	66	125	20.83
26 to 30	21	24	67	112	18.66
31 to 35	54	19	129	202	33.68
36 and above	37	46	78	161	26.83
Total	138	122	340	600	100

Interestingly, the same age group is 30-35 who expressed acceptability for the vote of their close friend may cast a vote to their preferred political party (as shown in the previous table), however, most of the respondents from the same age group would never allow their friends or family member to do a political campaign in the respondents street

to which they dislike. It was followed by the age group of 20-25. While most of the respondents from the age group 26-30 were of the opinion that they would allow their family members and friends to gather for the political campaign even respondents dislike that specific political party.

Table 7

Age Groups	Are you comfortable with your friends, relatives, and fellow citizens organizing a political campaign in support of the political party you least favour on your street?			Total	Percentage
	Never allow	Sometime allow	Yes, always allow		
20 to 25	50	36	39	125	20.83
26 to 30	43	19	50	112	18.66
31 to 35	103	40	59	202	33.68
36 and above	64	45	52	161	26.83
Total	260	140	200	600	100

The question “If a political leader of the party you dislike most is being brutally beaten because of his political point of view, what will you do?”

Specifically phrased to understand the transformation of the perspective option into the action specifically in relation to when somebody is

being brutally beaten based on political differences. In this regard, most of the respondents from the age group 31-35 were of the opinion that they would call the police to save the person and it was followed by age group 36 and above. Most of the

respondents from the age group 26-30 were of the opinion that they would do nothing and leave the person alone because the person is being beaten up for his wrong political point of view. This is something alarming attitude among the youth.

Table 8

Age Groups	In the event that a political leader from the party you least support is subjected to brutal violence due to their political stance, what course of action would you take?			Total	Percentage
	I would personally intervene to ensure their safety.	I would refrain from intervening and leave the individual alone, as their assault is perceived to be a consequence of their differing political perspective.	I would contact the authorities (police) to intervene and assist him.		
20 to 25	37	27	61	125	20.83
26 to 30	19	27	66	112	18.66
31 to 35	49	38	115	202	33.68
36 and above	43	45	73	161	26.83
Total	148	137	315	600	100

Discussion

Usage of Facebook or Twitter for Political Discussions

It is evident from the literature that social media are turning into platforms which are widely used for political, religious and social issues discussion resulting in shaping users' perspectives and opinions about society (Yang et al., 2016). Similarly, social media are used to bring people together and, to run campaigns against social issues. Broadly, this study affirms the abovementioned literature through data presented in this study. In this regard the presented data indicates that a significant portion of respondents actively engage in political discussions on social media platforms and a significant number of respondents shared their political affiliation with PTI which is followed by PML-N.

Interestingly when data was analyzed with respect to the various age groups then the emerging trends indicated that a significant number of respondents from the age group of 30-35 were using Facebook or Twitter (X) for political discussion on a daily basis and it was followed by age group 36 and above. (Noonari & Ahmedani,

2021). However, in this research majority of the respondents using Facebook were found to be intolerant whereas only 32% of users of Facebook were tolerant which reflects the strong relationship between Facebook and intolerance. The study highlighted how Facebook, as a popular social media platform, facilitates the rapid dissemination of information without proper validation, thus amplifying the chances of hate speech. Its widespread reach, ease of access, and interactive features may enable online communities and extremist groups to spread divisive ideologies (Brown, et al., 2018). Moreover, the absence of strict regulations and reliable fact-checking mechanisms on Facebook exacerbates the unrestricted circulation of misinformation, fostering heightened polarization and a decline in tolerance (Lee, 2023).

The study revealed that individuals aged 31-35 tend to accept political differences among their close friends, allowing them to vote for any party they prefer. However, those aged 36 and above show less tolerance towards political associations, often preventing their friends from voting for a disliked party. Similar trends were observed among individuals aged 20-24 and those aged 35 and

above, with occasional acceptance of friends' political choices despite personal dislikes. Individuals aged 30-35 accept their friends' voting preferences but are unwilling to allow them to conduct political campaigns in disliked areas, a trend also observed in the 20-25 age groups. Conversely, those aged 26-30 are more inclined to allow friends and family to campaign, despite personal political preferences. In addition to this, when asked about intervening if a disliked political leader was being brutally beaten, most respondents aged 31-35 indicated they would call the police, followed by those aged 36 and above. However, a concerning attitude was observed among respondents aged 26-30, with many stating they would do nothing, attributing the beating to the victim's political views. In relation to the findings presented above, the literature shows during the last decade, a multitude of prominent controversies worldwide has sparked renewed discussions among both the general public and scholars regarding the nature, potential escalation, and perceived dangers associated with political polarization (Lelkes, [2016](#); van Aelst et al., [2017](#)).

There is a direct link between political polarization and the usage of social media. The platform appeared as a significant place for political conversation which also developed researchers' interest in getting the answer to the questions of how political polarization is evolving and leading towards societal fragmentation which influences public spaces, and this is a common phenomenon globally. (Settle, [2018](#); Stroud, [2010](#)).

Nevertheless, there remains a clear lack of comparative research on how different social media platforms contribute to various polarization patterns (Bode & Vraga, [2018](#)), as well as investigations into the temporal aspects of polarized conversations that can be directly observed within social media environments.

Conclusion

The data suggests a considerable daily engagement in political discussions, while discussions also occur frequently, indicating the platforms' significant role in facilitating discussions on both topics within the surveyed population. The data collectively portrays a diverse range of perspectives and responses among respondents in various political and social scenarios. It underscores the intricate dynamics of individuals' attitudes towards political discussions, affiliations, and actions in the face of sensitive situations. The findings suggest that people engage actively in political and religious discussions on social media, and their reactions to real-world political events and protests are multifaceted, involving considerations of personal involvement and law enforcement intervention. The data reflects diverse attitudes and approaches to situations involving violence against a disliked political leader and protests against one's affiliated political party. These responses highlight the complexity and ethical considerations individuals may have when faced with politically charged and potentially volatile situations.

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