

Social Media and Political Preferences in Gen Z during the 2024 General Election in
Lahore, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social media shaped political preferences of Gen Z voters aged 18 to 27 in Lahore during Pakistan's 2024 General Election. A survey of 101 respondents was conducted after the election using convenience and snowball sampling. Results show that over 85% of Gen Z use social media daily with Instagram being the most used platform. Around 73% of respondents said social media helped them form their political opinions. Speed and easy access to information were the main reasons Gen Z turned to social media over traditional sources. However more than half of first time voters reported confusion when searching for political content online. The findings support Agenda Setting and Framing theories showing that algorithmically driven content shaped political narratives more than TV or newspapers did. The study concluded that social media is now a central force in shaping not only youth's political opinion but behavior as well in Pakistan.

Keywords: Gen Z, social media, political preferences, 2024 General Election, Instagram, agenda setting, framing theory, filter bubble, Lahore, Pakistan, digital political communication, first time voters, youth politics

Introduction

The relationship between social media and politics has changed how people participate in democracy all across the world nowadays. Social media platforms originally made for communication have become key source to for sharing political information and forming opinions. This shift was apparent among Gen Z born between 1997 and 2012 who grew up using cellphones and social media. As this generation begins to vote they understood how social media influences their political beliefs, shapes opinions and serves as something critical for societies worldwide, including Pakistan.

The general elections 2024 Pakistan were held on February 8, 2024 considered as a watershed event in the country's democracy. About 127 million voters who were registered were eligible to vote, with around 57 million falling between age ranges of 18 and 35 the Gen Zs. The 2024 election was also the time many Gen Z Pakistanis voted in a national election very first time. This made it a valuable moment to study how this group forms their opinion and preferences. What made this election different was the role of social media in politics and shaping people opinions. Unlike before when TV and newspapers were most important the 2024 elections saw a shift to digital platforms. Political parties and candidates used social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and WhatsApp to share messages get support and reach people who didn't follow news. The political Parties like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party used media to get the most seats in the National Assembly. This showed that social media had become a driver of election results in Pakistan.

This shift has put Gen Z at the center of a digital political ecosystem. Research shows that young Pakistanis rely on media for political information, not family, elders or traditional media. Platforms including the Instagram and YouTube utilise videos and memes to change political opinions and voting preferences. This raises questions regarding the quality of information Gen Z learns and how it influences their opinions. Lahore Pakistan's largest city is important in this conversation. With a digitally connected youth population Lahore is a good place to study how social media influences Gen Z's political views. However research on Lahore's Gen Z voters is limited. This study fills that gap, based on a survey of 101 respondents aged 18 to 27 in Lahore it looks at how social media consumption affects preferences among Gen Z voters during the 2024 General Election. The study uses Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and the Filter Bubble framework to investigate which platforms influenced views, how social media shaped opinions and how digital content affected voting decisions among first-time Gen Z voters in Lahore. The findings add to the growing literature on political communication in developing democracies and offer insights, for political parties, media practitioners and policymakers.

Followings are the research objectives:

1. To determine the amount of time Gen Z in Lahore spends daily on social media and its active usage.
2. Which social media sites are tops for Gen Z voters and were they influenced by social media when voting in the 2024 general election.
3. To find if Gen Z voters use social media as a resource for learning about politics and which factor has the most positive/negative impact on their political decisions.
4. To find out whether Gen Z voters are skeptical of the veracity of political information and what other sources, outside social media, they turn to.

Literature Review

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda Setting theory a foundational study described a strong correlation between media coverage and what issues people considered the most important. In digital age, this function has become decentralized in users, influencers, and algorithmic systems collectively determine which issues have gained visibility. This approach was expanded to social media by Vargo et al. (2018), who contended that sites like Facebook and Twitter now serve as potent agenda-setters that may magnify fringe political themes into mainstream conversation. Social media has gradually taken over the agenda-setting role once occupied by broadcast television and print newspapers in Pakistan, where conventional media has been under pressure from the government (Akhter & Anwar, 2021).

Framing Theory and Political Communication

Framing theory by Entman (1993) and expanded by scholars later, argues that the way information is presented significantly affects how audiences interpret it. On social media political frames are constructed not only by media organizations but also by political parties, individual influencers, and citizen journalists. In the context of general elections of Pakistan 2024, political framing on platforms like Instagram and YouTube was shaped heavily by emotional appeals, meme culture, and short form video content, rather than any substantive policy analysis (Hussain & Fatima, 2023). Research indicates that exposure to political content that is charged emotionally on social media increases political engagement but may also deepen polarization (Bail et al., 2018).

Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles

Filter bubble is a term that describes how the information environments created by algorithmic personalisation are ones where out of either user-explanation or just pique their curiosity pretty much only stuff that supports user's preconceived ideas. Relatedly, this notion became coupled to the idea of echo chambers through Sunstein (2017), who asserted that homophilic social networks enhance ideological conformity at the expense of diversity of views. While the size and political implications remain contested, studies in Western contexts consistently find evidence of small filter bubble effects (Guess et al., 2018). The influence of algorithmically curated Youtube feeds is especially pronounced on politically homophilic social media networks among Pakistan's Gen Z user population, who receive most of their political information through the site (Riaz et al., 2020).

Gen Z Political Socialization in Pakistan

Political socialization, the process by which individuals acquire political values, attitudes, and Political Socialization the process whereby individuals form political values, attitudes, and actions has long been studied in Western democracies (Greenstein, 1968). Yet, the literature specific to Pakistan on Gen Z socialization in politics is inconclusive. Some reference papers include Ahmed and Khan, 2022; Malik et al. According to (2023), the role of Family and community are now becoming less dominant as political socialization agents, as Pakistani youth increasingly follow their peers and influencers via social media or viral content. The 2024 election was the first time a large scale of Gen Z Pakistanis participated as voters in national

elections. This shift from passive political observers to active participants, conciliated largely by social media, makes this an important research domain that this study directly addresses.

Research Gap

Limited Lahore-Based Empirical Studies

There are a lot of researches and studies on social media and political communication in Pakistan (Akhter & Anwar, 2021; Riaz et al., 2020), but very few of them focus Lahore as specific unit of analysis. Lahore, with its unique demography is a political hub in Punjab. With its growing youth ratio, Lahore is of particular importance with respect to Generation Z's political preferences and behavior research.

Need for Post-2024 Election Analysis

The General Election 2024 introduced new political dynamics with the widespread use of social media for political mobilization and awareness in the face of restrictions on traditional media, the role of platform bans and censorship, and the participation of a younger generation of voters. These dynamics were not captured by the research that were done before to this election. This study offers a post-election data collection that represents Gen Z voters' real media consumption, opinion formation, political preferences, and election-related behavior.

Research Design

A quantitative research design was employed in this study using a survey with structured questions. As surveys allow systematic data collection from relatively a large sample and enables the measurement of specific variables such as social media, Gen Z, political preferences and digital political communication. A post election survey was used for assessments of social media use and its influence on political preferences during the 2024 General Election.

Population and Sample

For this study, individuals aged 18 to 27 residing in Lahore, Pakistan were the target population. This population uses social media and consumes political information most frequently. A total of 101 respondents completed the survey making it convenient for analysis. The sample included 54.5% female and 45.5% male respondents and all of them were required to meet the criteria of age and their first participation in election 2024.

Sampling Technique

For this study the convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used making it accessible for the participants. Survey based study was used to accesses the availability of respondents through university campuses and digital networks. It allows quick data collection from the relevant population (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data Collection Tool

The data was collected through a Google Form survey, with structured questions which were designed to capture:

- Demographic Information, including gender and area of residence
- Social Media Usage, covering active usage, daily time spent, purpose of use, and platform preference.
- Social Media and Political Preferences, including election participation experience, platform influence, political information seeking behavior, accuracy concerns, and reliance on alternative media sources.

The questions were a mix of:

- Multiple-choice
- Likert-scale items

Variables

Independent Variables:

The exposure of political content on social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, X, Whatsapp and Youtube).

Dependent variables:

- political preference formation
- Formation of Opinion
- Political Biasness

Procedure

The survey was shared through platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook groups and snapchat through a link and data collection took place over a period of 1 week. Participation was entirely voluntary. Responses were reviewed for completeness before including in the final data set.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation. Respondents were assured of complete privacy as no confidential information was collected. Participation was voluntary as the study was for only academic purpose and it did not involve any deceptive practices, and data were stored securely.

Results

Demographics

gender

101 responses

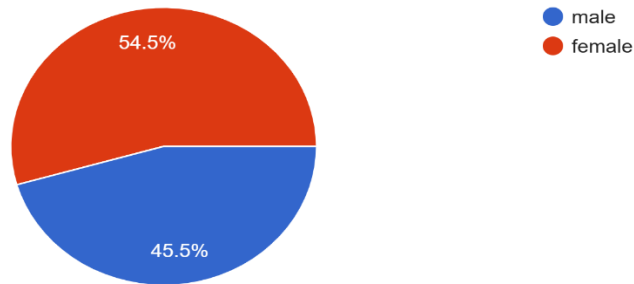


Figure:1

Figure no 1 shows the gender distribution of respondents. The data were collected from 101 participants of whom 54.5% are female and 45.5% are male. This indicates slightly higher representation of female respondents in the study.

Area of residence:

area of residence

101 responses

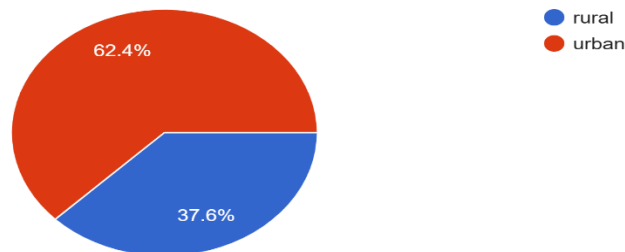


Figure:2

Figure no 2 shows the area of residence of the respondents. The data were collected from 101 participants of whom 62.4% people live in urban area and 37.6% people live in rural area.

Social media usage

Using social media actively by Gen-Z

Are you actively using social media?
 101 responses

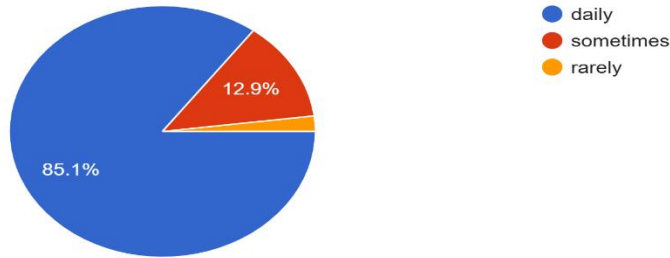


Figure:3

Figure no.3 shows that Generation-Z is highly engaged with social media platforms. Over 85.1% of participants use social media daily. However, 12.9% participants use social media sometimes and 2% use it rarely.

Time spent on social media

How much time do you spend on social media per day?
 101 responses

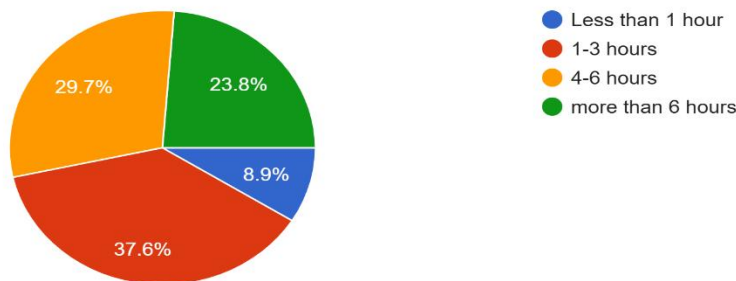
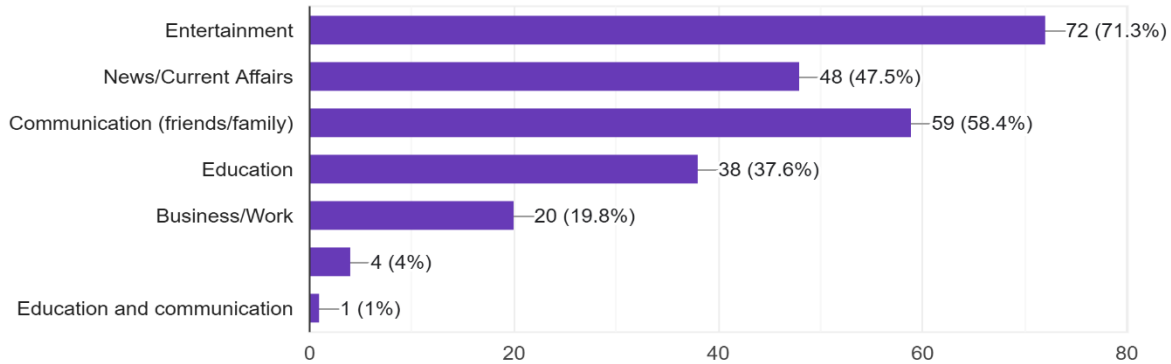


Figure:4

Figure no.4 shows that how much time respondent spend on social media every day. It shows most of the participants use social media more than 1 hour daily. Only 8.9% participants use social media less than 1 hour, 37.6% participants use social media for 1-3 hours daily, 29.7% respondents use social media for 4-6 hours and 23.8% respondents use social media for more than 6 hours.

What do you usually use social media for?

101 responses



Purpose of social media usage

Figure:5

Figure no.5 shows that what is the purpose of social media usage of participants. 71.3% of participants said they use it for entertainment purpose, 47.5% of participants use social media to know about current affairs/ news, 58.4% of participants use it for communication, 37.6% use it for education, 19.4% of participants use it for business purposes, and only 1% of participants use it for education and communication. It shows that most of the people use social media for entertainment purposes.

Social media platform mostly used by Gen-Z:

Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?

101 responses

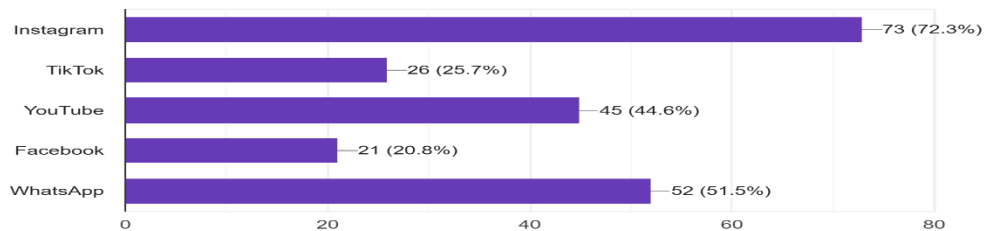


Figure:6

Figure no.6 shows which platform is most frequently used by Gen-Z. As expected, it is none other than Instagram. 72.3% of participants use Instagram mostly, 25.7% use TikTok, 44.6% of

respondents use YouTube, 20.8% of participants use Facebook and only 51.5% of participants use WhatsApp.

Social media and political preferences

Election participation experience

Is this your first time participating in an election?
 101 responses

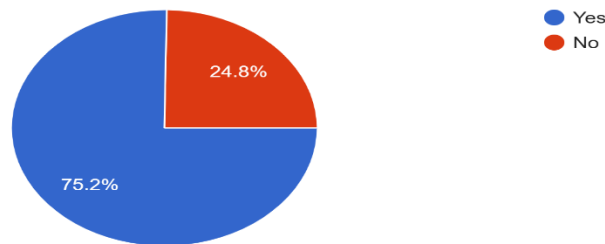


Figure:7

Figure no.7 represents the number of participants participating in the Election for the first time. 75.2% of respondents are participating in election for the first time, however, 24.8% of participants are not.

Confusion of First-Time Voters in Searching Political Information

As a first-time voter, do you feel confused when searching for political information?
 101 responses

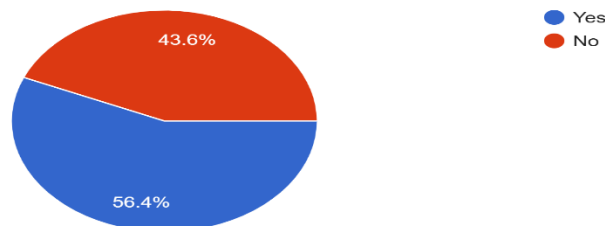


Figure:8

Figure no. 8 shows that first-time voters experience confusion when searching for political information. 56.4% of participants said they felt confused, while 43.6% said they did not feel confused.

Platform influenced political preferences

Which social media platform has most influenced your political preferences?

101 responses

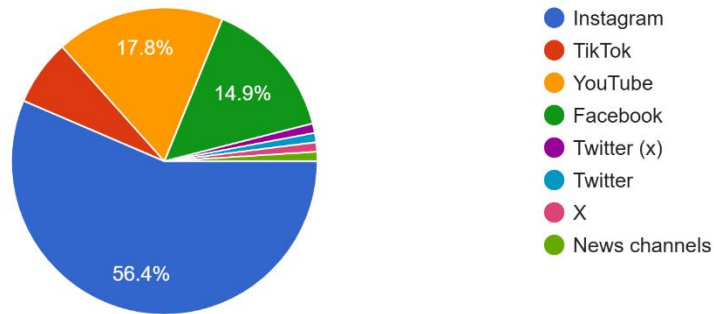
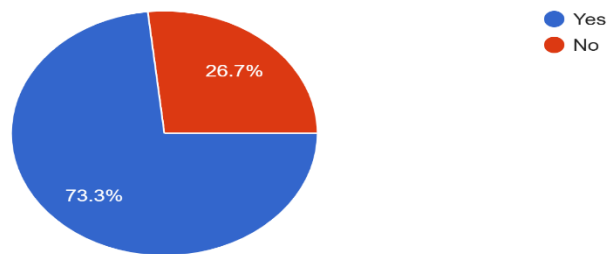


Figure:9

Figure no.9 shows that which social media platform has influenced political preferences of Gen-Z. As we know, Gen-Z use Instagram more than any other platform so 56.4% of respondents said Instagram, 6.9% said tiktok, 17.8% said Youtube, 14.9% said news channel, others said twitter. However, Instagram proves to be the best platform according to this research which influence political preference of Gen-Z.

Has social media helped you in deciding your political preferences?

101 responses



Social media’s help in deciding political preference

Figure:10

Figure no.10 shows how much social media helped participants in deciding their political preferences. 73.3% of respondents respond that yes social media helped and 26.7% of respondents respond no.

Use of social media as a political reference

Why do you use social media as a political reference?

101 responses

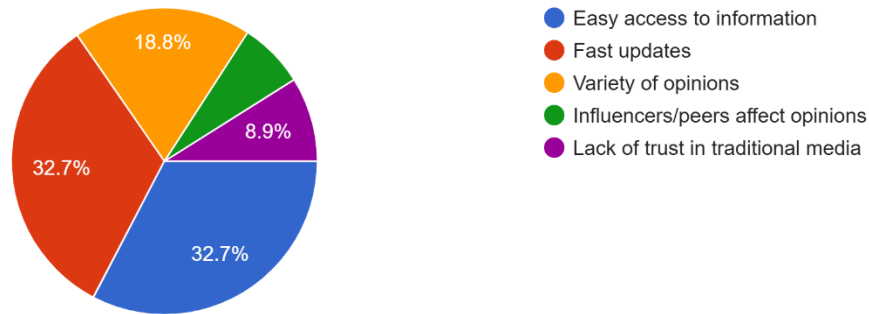


Figure:11

Figure no.11 shows why participants use social media as a political preference. 32.7% of respondents respond easy access to information, 32.7% said fast updates, 18.8% respond variety of opinions, 6.9% respond influencers/peers affect opinions, 8.9% respond lack of trust in traditional media.

Concern of political information on social media

Do you have concerns about the accuracy of political information on social media?

101 responses

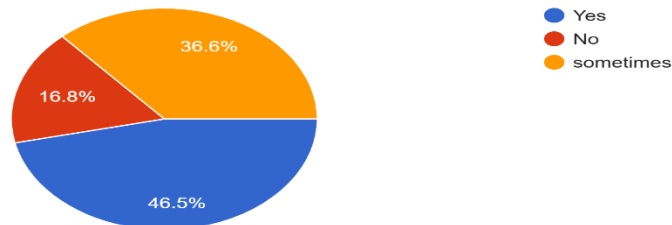


Figure:12

Figure no.12 shows that participants have concern about the accuracy of political information on social media or not. 46.5% of respondents respond yes they have, 16.8% of respondents respond no, they don't have. 36.6% of respondents respond sometimes.

Factors Influencing Political Preferences on Social Media

What is the most important factor in choosing political preferences through social media?

101 responses



Figure:13

Figure no.13 shows according to the participants the most important factor in choosing political preference thorough social media. 28.7% of respondents respond candidate’s policies, 26.7% respond public opinion/ trends, 18.8% respond party reputation, 16.8% respond candidate’s personality/image and 8.9% respond influencers/media content.

Following political candidates on social media

Do you follow political candidates on social media?

101 responses

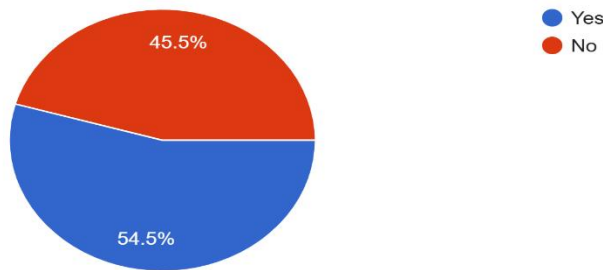


Figure:14

Figure no.14 shows respondents follow political candidates on social media or not. 45.5% respond yes, they follow and 54.5% respond no, they don’t.

Purpose of following political candidates

Why do you follow political candidates?

101 responses

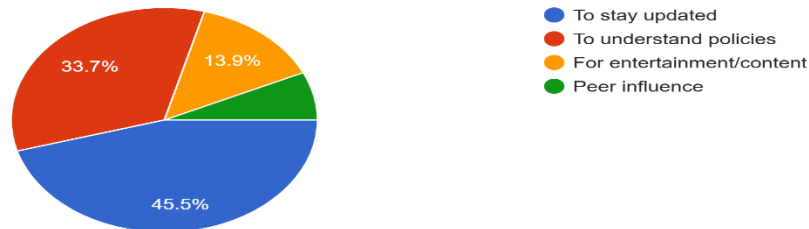


Figure:15

Figure no.15 shows why respondents follow political candidates. 45.5% respond they follow them to stay updated, 33.7% to understand policies, 13.9% for entertainment purpose, 6.9% peer influence.

Impact of political post on public opinion

Do political posts on social media influence your opinion?

101 responses

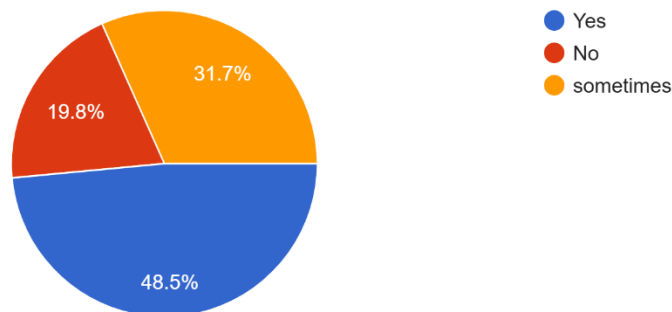


Figure:16

Figure no.16 shows does political posts on social media influence public opinion, 48.5% respondents respond yes, 19.8% respond no and 31.7% respond sometimes.

Apart from social media, source for political information

Apart from social media, which sources do you use for political information?
101 responses

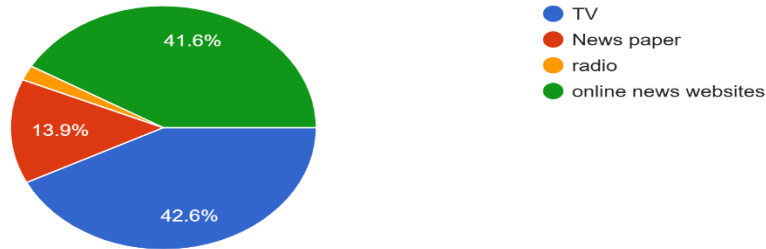


Figure:17

Figure no.17 shows apart from social media, which source participants use for political information. Pie chart shows that 42.6% of participants use TV, 41.6% of respondents use online news websites, 13.9% read newspaper and only 2% listen radio. It tells us that people not only rely on social media but they gather information from other sources as well.

Preferred mass media source

Which mass media do you rely on the most?
101 responses

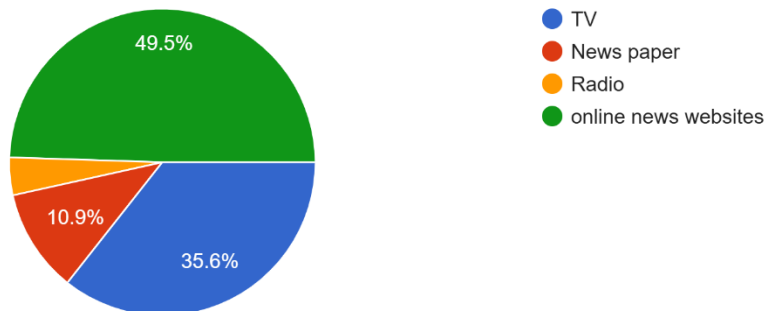


Figure:18

Figure no.18 shows participants relies on which mass media source. The results shows that most of the respondents rely on online news websites. 49.5% of the respondents respond they rely on online news websites, 35.6% of the respondents respond they rely on TV, 10.9% of the respondents respond they rely on News paper and 4% respond they rely on radio.

Factors Influencing Mass Media Choice

What factors influence your choice of mass media?

101 responses

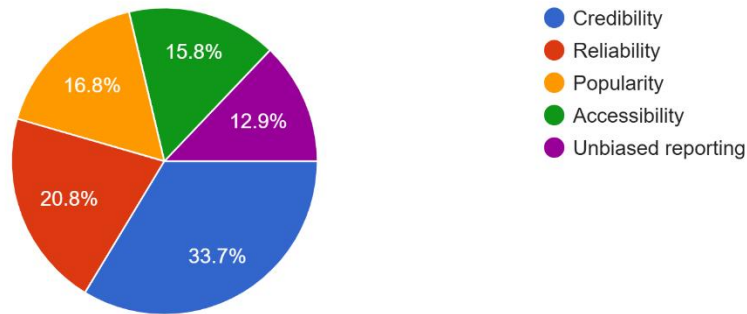


Figure:19

Figure no.19 shows the factor that influence participants choice of mass media. 33.7% of the respondents choose credibility, 20.8% of the respondents choose reliability, 16.8% of the respondents choose popularity, 15.8% of the respondents respond accessibility and 12.9% of the respondents respond unbiased reporting.

Discussion

It is apparent but when represented in data, only partly addresses the filter bubble concern. Although 46.5% of respondents stated that they are concerned about the correctness of political information available through social media, a large fraction still reported that social media played an important role in shaping their political preference. It suggests a friction of cognitive dissonance: folks understand the risks posed by misinformation but still return to their same platforms for political wisdom. This is in line with research from Guess et al. demonstrating that the filter bubble effect is real but limited not through self-segregation into ideological echo chambers of users. One key finding is that 75.2% of respondents were first-time voters and 56.4% felt confused when looking for political information. It suggests that new voters entering the political space have insubstantial literacy with respect to evaluating content about politics.

These voters are especially susceptible to emotionally framed content on social media in the absence of reliable political socialization from family or traditional media. Survey respondents were also cognizant of media beyond social channels. Television and internet news sites are still very important additional sources which suggests that social media does not have a monopoly on the information base of Gen 2 voters in Lahore.) Credibility and reliability were the number one reasons for selecting a mass media source, which demonstrates how this generation desires reliable info even if their habits prove otherwise.

Overall the study lends more credence to the argument that social media is now central in shaping of political opinions especially among Gen Z voters in Lahore, with Instagram at its centre and filter bubbles and misinformation still real but not absolute issues.

Conclusion

This research substantiated that social media played an important role in influencing Gen Z political preferences during 2024 General Election of Lahore. The social media platform with the highest awareness was Instagram, with 73.3% of respondents saying social media influenced how they voted. Speed and ease of access trumped policy depth for most Gen Z voters. New voters were in the majority, but experienced "navigational anxiety" when it came to finding political information online. The results show in favor of the Agenda-Setting and Framing theories as most influential among with the politically connected class (especially, under 40) where Algorithmically driven content influenced political narratives more strongly than that by traditional media confirming the central role of social media in contemporary Pakistani electoral politics.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Generalizability of results in Pakistan is limited by the sample of 101 respondents from Lahore. This gives rise to selection bias due to convenience and snowball sampling, as participants mostly were university students with access to the internet. Self-report bias on social desirability It is a post-election survey and thus relies on respondent recall; the accuracy of that recall may reduce the overall reliability of the poll. A cross-sectional design means that no causal conclusions can be made about social media use and political preference formation. The study also only examines the media consumption habits of those who are Gen Z aged 18 to 27, which means older voter groups those who may be demonstrating other patterns of media consumption and political behavior worth comparing are not included.

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