

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF AI-DRIVEN SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN LAHORE

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ABSTRACT

Social Media has become an integral part of university students' daily lives in Pakistan, yet limited research explores how AI-driven content on social media influences their political behaviour. This study examines the political uses and gratifications of Facebook among university students in Lahore. The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory is applied, which emphasizes that users actively seek content to fulfil their needs, making it a relevant framework for understanding how AI-generated political content shapes student behaviour. The focus of this study was to explore: (1) the patterns of political content consumption on Facebook among university students in Lahore; (2) the needs that are gratified through engagement with AI-curated political content; (3) the role of AI in reinforcing or challenging political opinions; and (4) how this content affects students' political participation, both online and offline. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing focus group discussions to gather in-depth data from university students. The data were analysed using a constant comparative method. Preliminary findings suggest that AI-driven content on Facebook plays a crucial role in shaping political views, with students relying on the platform for up-to-date political information and social interaction. While many participants acknowledged the convenience of personalized content, concerns were raised about the creation of echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing political beliefs. Overall, this study provides insights into how AI-driven social media content influences political engagement among university students in Lahore.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Politics, Facebook, Students

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media has changed the way people interact, engage and participate with each other politically while widely impacting public opinion and political behaviour in unprecedented ways. The impact of social media in determining political discourse and action is particularly pertinent, as the reach and accessibility of these platforms have expanded exponentially. They have become an important tool through which individuals, organizations and governments can address and shape political subjects, thus opening up new

opportunities for political activities (Abd-alrazaq et al. 2020).

With these advancements, the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to social media has also added more to these impacts. Various AI-powered tools, including personalized content recommendations, automated content creation, and real-time data analysis, enhance the user experience by tailoring social media interactions to individual preferences and engagement patterns (Baig et al., 2024). Platforms such as Facebook has the potential

to change the political narrative. Facebook gives individuals, particularly university students, a platform to express political views, engage in debates, and participate in civic engagements (Molnár et al., 2020). However, AI algorithms embedded within Facebook can also contribute to “filter bubbles” that restrict exposure to diverse viewpoints, as content curation often reinforces users’ existing preferences, potentially leading to narrower perspectives on political issues (Mohamed et al., 2024). By providing tailored recommendations that support users’ pre-existing preferences, AI-driven social media content further influences global political behaviour and may create ideological “echo chambers” where users interact mostly with like-minded people. This selective information selection limits exposure to opposing ideas, emphasizing AI’s key role in polarizing political contexts via social media interaction (Flaxman et al., 2016). This global trend highlights AI’s far-reaching influence in shaping political dynamics and behaviours through the curation of user-specific political content.

University students, often recognized as “digital natives,” are adept at utilizing social media for political engagement. Their familiarity with digital platforms supports both online and offline political discussions and activism (Yelpaze, 2021). In Lahore, as in many urban centres, social media serves as a primary channel for political communication and advocacy among students, who use these platforms to coordinate, disseminate information, and rally support for social causes (Javid, 2019). The city’s academic institutions encourage a politically aware student body that, facilitated by social media, engages actively in the region’s broader political landscape. Media exposure, particularly to news and current events, has been shown to correlate strongly with political engagement among students in Lahore, underscoring the critical role of digital platforms in political socialization and awareness (Kaukab et al., 2021). Research indicates that students’ exposure to diverse political perspectives on social media shapes their political understanding and behaviour, with the digital age fostering a technologically savvy generation that views social media as both an educational resource and a catalyst for political involvement (Achour & Alghamdi, 2022).

This study examines the relationship between AI-driven social media content, specifically on platform

like Facebook, and its influence on political behaviour among university students in Lahore. The findings underscore the powerful role that social media, with AI-driven content curation, plays in guiding political engagement and contributing to the evolution of political landscapes worldwide. Through this study, Facebook’s role as an agent of political influence among youth is emphasized, illustrating its potential to shape political engagement and discourse in the years to come.

Problem Statement

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and its integration into social media platforms have significantly transformed the way political information is disseminated and consumed. This transformation has raised several critical issues and controversies that demand scholarly attention. The primary issue addressed by this research is the influence of AI-driven social media content on the political behaviour of university students in Lahore. Recent years have seen increasing concerns about how AI algorithms curate and present political information, potentially shaping public opinion and behaviour in unforeseen ways. The controversy arises from the dual nature of AI’s impact, while it can enhance access to diverse political viewpoints and foster informed decision-making, it can also create echo chambers, spread misinformation, and manipulate user behaviour through targeted content. This dichotomy has sparked debates among academics, policymakers, and the public regarding the ethical implications and societal impact of AI in the political domain. The need for this study emerges from the growing reliance of young adults, particularly university students, on social media as a primary source of political information. In Lahore, as in many other urban centres, university students represent a critical demographic whose political behaviour can significantly influence the broader political landscape. Understanding how AI-driven content affects their political engagement, opinions, and actions is crucial for developing strategies to promote healthy political discourse and democratic participation. By investigating the nature and extent of this influence among university students in Lahore, the research aims to provide insights into the broader implications of AI in shaping political

behaviour and inform policy recommendations that ensure the ethical use of AI in social media.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the types of AI-driven social media content that are most consumed by university students in Lahore for political engagement.
2. To explore the gratifications sought by university students in Lahore from AI-driven social media content in the context of political information.
3. To assess the influence of exposure to AI-driven social media content on the political opinions and attitudes of university students in Lahore.

Research Questions

1. What types of AI-driven social media content are most consumed by university students in Lahore for political engagement?
2. What gratifications do university students in Lahore seek from AI-driven social media content in the context of political information?
3. How does exposure to AI-driven social media content influence the political opinions and attitudes of university students in Lahore?

The impact of AI-driven social media content on student political behaviour has garnered significant attention in recent research studies. The utilization of social media platforms can shape attitudes and behaviours related to science and politics, emphasizing the role of social media in moulding societal beliefs and behaviours (Hasell, 2023). Additionally, the quality of information on social media platforms has been found to positively impact reputation and trust, highlighting the significance of credible political information in shaping user perceptions and behaviours (Hamid et al., 2022). The implications of AI-driven social media content on student political behaviour extend beyond individual interactions to broader societal consequences. Concerns have been raised about the dissemination of misinformation through synthetic media on social platforms and its impact on public attitudes and voting behaviour (Calahorra-Candao & Hoyos, 2024). The relationship between political ideology

and social media echo chambers underscores the potential for these platforms to reinforce ideological divides and societal polarization (Baig et al., 2024). Moreover, emotional interactions on social media during political campaigns have been shown to influence user reactions and sentiments towards politicians and political issues, emphasizing the emotional dimensions of political engagement on digital platforms (Hsu et al., 2021). The use of AI-powered social media analytics for customer segmentation has implications for understanding consumer behaviour, shaping marketing strategies, and enhancing user experiences on social media platforms (Namazzi, 2024). Gaining insights into how AI technologies affect political engagement on these platforms deepens helps to understand evolving political discourse, the influential role of digital media in shaping public opinion, and the societal outcomes linked to AI-curated content. Furthermore, analysing the consequences of Facebook on Pakistani politics can provide insights into how politicians adapt their messaging strategies to resonate with diverse audiences on different platforms, highlighting the evolving landscape of political communication in the digital age (Sabeen, 2023). Understanding how algorithms embed societal values and influence content dissemination is crucial in addressing issues related to bias, misinformation, and political manipulation on digital platforms (Bernstein, 2023). Additionally, exploring the impact of social media on attitudes toward AI and the mediating roles of perceived fairness and threat can offer valuable insights into how social media interactions shape individuals' perceptions of emerging technologies (Li & Zheng, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) offers several strengths that make it a valuable framework for understanding media consumption behaviours, particularly in the context of social media. One of the primary strengths of UGT is its focus on the active role of users in selecting media to fulfil specific needs and desires. This user-centric approach allows researchers to explore the motivations behind media consumption, which is especially pertinent in the rapidly evolving landscape of social media where users actively curate their experiences (Whiting & Williams, 2013). The relationship between Uses and

Gratification Theory (UGT) and this study can be understood through how students utilize social media for political engagement and the gratifications they seek from this interaction. UGT posits that individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs, in the context of political behaviour, which includes information seeking, social interaction, and personal identity formation (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Studies indicate that social media serves as a significant platform for political participation, especially among younger demographics such as university students. Moreover, social media not only facilitates traditional political engagement but also transforms non-political activities into political expressions, thereby broadening the scope of political participation among students (Zhang & Lin, 2016). This transformation illustrates how students derive gratification from engaging in political discussions that emerge from social media interactions, thus reinforcing their political efficacy and collective action. Additionally, studies by T. Ahmad et al. (2019) and Jain and Pandey (2023) highlight the impact of social media on political efficacy and participation among university students, suggesting that these platforms serve as vital tools for political engagement and knowledge acquisition. The gratification derived from social media use includes not only the enjoyment of engaging with political content but also the empowerment that comes from being informed and involved in political processes. Thus, the relationship between UGT and the research is characterized by the active pursuit of gratifications such as information, social interaction, and political engagement. As students navigate these platforms, they fulfil their needs for political participation and identity formation, ultimately shaping their political behaviours and attitudes.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the influence of Facebook on political engagement among university students. The focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with students from Superior University, Lahore to facilitate in-depth and interactive exploration of participants' perspectives. This approach enables to capture insights into how students interact with political content on the platform and how such interactions influence their engagement with broader political issues.

Sampling

The Focus Group Discussions are based upon open-ended structured questions, along with a few unstructured follow-up questions for detailed insight. For the data collection process a multi-stage sampling technique was used, beginning with a random survey from Superior University, Lahore via Google Forms to identify qualifying respondents. Following this, a purposive sampling technique was utilized to ensure that participants possess relevant experience and engagement with AI-driven social media content on Facebook. The discussions were conducted online via Zoom, with 6 students divided into 2 groups, each consisting of 3 participants.

Data Analysis

For analysing the data, Thematic Analysis is used. This method involved coding the transcripts from the focus group discussions to identify key themes related to the influence of AI-driven social media content on political behaviour. The process included familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, grouping them into themes, and refining these themes for clear interpretation.

Theme	Operational Definition
Social Interaction	Use of social media to engage, communicate, and maintain relationships, participating in conversations and enhancing social bonds.
Pass Time	Engagement with social media to alleviate boredom and fill free time, using it as a diversionary activity.
Entertainment	Seeking enjoyment, amusement, or fun through various forms of engaging content, such as videos, memes, or interactive activities.
Relaxation	Using social media to relieve stress, unwind, and escape from the pressures of daily life.

Communicative Tool	Utilizing social media platforms for messaging and staying connected with friends, family, or networks, emphasizing social media as a primary communication tool.
Convenience Utility	Accessing social media for practical and utilitarian purposes, such as tools that simplify tasks or features that add convenience to daily routines.
Information Seeking	Using social media to gain knowledge, stay updated on various topics, or fulfil specific informational needs relevant to the user.
Seeking Current News	Using social media platforms to access the latest news and developments quickly, keeping informed about global and local events as they happen.
Updating Oneself with Current Affairs	Actively following updates on the political, economic, or social state of affairs to remain informed and aware of changes in the world.
Raising Voices Against Injustice	Leveraging social media to advocate for social change, highlight societal issues, and express concerns about injustices affecting communities or individuals.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The findings of the study suggest that Facebook has emerged as a multifunctional platform that plays an integral role in the lives of university students, offering avenues for social interaction, information consumption, and entertainment. While initially designed as a tool for personal connections, its utility has expanded to include diverse functionalities that cater to the evolving needs of its users. Students frequently rely on Facebook not only to stay connected with friends and family but also to engage with content ranging from academic updates to entertainment. The platform's dynamic nature allows users to explore and consume a wide variety of content, including news, memes, and videos, making it an essential part of their daily routines. This transition from a purely social network to a comprehensive digital ecosystem aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which emphasizes that individuals actively choose media platforms to fulfil their informational, social, and personal needs.

AI-Driven Content and the Echo Chamber Effect

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into Facebook's operations has further enhanced its role as a personalized digital experience. AI-driven algorithms tailor content to individual users' preferences by analysing their interactions, likes, and engagement patterns. While this personalization fosters deeper engagement, it also introduces the phenomenon of the "echo chamber effect," where users are repeatedly exposed to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs and preferences.

This selective exposure may inadvertently limit users' access to diverse perspectives, creating ideological silos that constrain critical discourse. Such findings are consistent with research highlighting the impact of algorithmic curation on social media, where personalization enhances user satisfaction but raises concerns about political polarization and diminished exposure to dissenting views.

Political Engagement and Activism

Within the context of political engagement, Facebook has become an indispensable tool for fostering activism and facilitating participation in civic discourse. University students, in particular, leverage the platform to engage with political issues, join advocacy groups, and participate in events. The ease of connectivity and accessibility provided by Facebook reduces traditional barriers to political involvement, enabling students to become active contributors to political movements and discussions. By offering a space for digital activism, Facebook has transformed the way political mobilization occurs, encouraging students to express their views and collaborate on causes that resonate with their values. The platform's ability to connect users with like-minded individuals and organizations underscores its importance in amplifying voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

Impact of Facebook on Political Opinions

In addition to facilitating political participation, Facebook plays a significant role in shaping students'

political opinions. Exposure to political content on the platform often prompts users to reflect on and reassess their views. Through interactions with diverse arguments and perspectives, students develop a more nuanced understanding of political issues, which can influence their stances on specific candidates or policies. This dynamic illustrates the bidirectional nature of social media, where users are not only consumers of information but also active participants in shaping the discourse. Research on political opinion formation supports this finding, emphasizing the role of social influence and peer effects in shaping individual perspectives within digital networks.

Entertainment and Political Content

Entertainment also emerges as a critical component of political content consumption on Facebook. Students are particularly drawn to content that presents political issues in engaging formats, such as memes and satirical posts. By blending humour with information, these formats make political discourse more accessible and relatable, encouraging greater interaction and sharing among users. While this approach enhances engagement, it also raises questions about the potential oversimplification of complex political issues. Nonetheless, the use of entertainment as a vehicle for political messaging underscores the platform's ability to adapt to the preferences of its audience, ensuring that important issues are communicated in ways that resonate with users.

Emotional Impact of Political Content

Despite its benefits, Facebook's political content can evoke mixed emotional responses among students. On one hand, the platform provides a sense of empowerment by fostering awareness and encouraging participation in discussions. On the other hand, the prevalence of misinformation, polarizing debates, and negative interactions can lead to feelings of stress and frustration. The intensity of political content, combined with the potential for unproductive or confrontational exchanges, contributes to what scholars have termed "political stress." This duality reflects the broader challenges of navigating political discourse in the digital age, where the accessibility of information is

accompanied by the emotional toll of constant exposure to divisive issues.

Trust in Political Information and its Influence on Behaviour

Trust in the political information encountered on Facebook remains a critical factor influencing students' engagement with the platform. While content from reputable sources is generally viewed as credible, user-generated posts and algorithm-promoted material are often met with scepticism. This critical awareness highlights students' recognition of the potential for misinformation and their efforts to verify the authenticity of content before sharing it. Despite these challenges, Facebook continues to be a pivotal resource for political information, shaping students' behaviours and decisions. Its influence extends beyond simple consumption, positioning the platform as a powerful agent in the formation of political opinions and the facilitation of civic engagement.

The findings from this study illustrate the multifaceted role of Facebook serving as a space for connection, information, entertainment, and activism. The platform has embedded itself in the broader landscape of digital political engagement and the interplay of AI-driven personalization, entertainment-focused content, and the emotional and cognitive dimensions of political discourse underscores Facebook's complex influence on students' political behaviours and perceptions. This evolving dynamic reflects the transformative potential of social media in shaping the political consciousness of the young, digitally active population.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This research explored the role of Facebook in shaping the political behaviour of university students in Lahore, with a particular focus on the influence of AI-driven content recommendations. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the findings illuminate the platform's multifaceted role in fulfilling the informational, social, and political needs of its users. Insights from focus group discussions revealed how Facebook operates as both a dynamic space for social interaction and a vital tool for political engagement, activism, and opinion formation. One of the study's central findings was

Facebook's multi-functionality, which has evolved from a platform primarily for social connection to one that serves a hybrid role. For university students, Facebook is not only a medium to maintain personal relationships but also a resource for staying informed about current events and engaging with academic and political content. This duality reflects broader trends in social media usage, where platforms adapt to meet diverse user needs. The adaptability of Facebook, as evidenced by students' reliance on it for both personal and political purposes, highlights its unique position in bridging the gap between social connectivity and political engagement.

AI-driven content curation emerged as a critical factor in shaping users' experiences on Facebook. By tailoring content to users' interests and prior interactions, Facebook's algorithms create highly personalized feeds. While this enhances engagement and satisfaction, it also fosters the "echo chamber effect," where users are exposed predominantly to content that aligns with their existing views. This narrowing of perspectives limits opportunities for encountering diverse or opposing political opinions, raising concerns about the platform's role in reinforcing ideological silos. These findings align with critiques of algorithmic personalization, emphasizing its potential to exacerbate political polarization by restricting exposure to alternative viewpoints. Beyond personalized content, Facebook serves as a significant catalyst for political engagement and digital activism among students. The platform provides accessible tools for participating in political causes, joining advocacy groups, and organizing events. This democratization of political participation lowers traditional barriers to activism, enabling students to engage in political movements with greater ease. However, the findings also highlighted the complexities of online political discourse, where debates often become polarized or confrontational. This dual role of Facebook—as both a facilitator of political activism and a site for divisive interactions—reflects the nuanced nature of digital activism in the contemporary social media landscape.

The emotional and cognitive impacts of political content were another key theme that emerged from the discussions. While students often found political posts to be motivating, especially when aligned with social justice causes, many also reported feelings of

stress and frustration stemming from exposure to divisive or aggressive content. This phenomenon, often described as political stress, underscores the challenges of maintaining long-term engagement with political content in the digital sphere. The emotional toll of navigating polarized debates raises critical questions about the sustainability of digital activism and its implications for mental well-being. Concerns regarding the reliability of political information on Facebook also surfaced during the discussions. While students trusted content from credible sources, scepticism toward user-generated content and algorithmically recommended posts was prevalent. This reflects an awareness of the platform's susceptibility to misinformation and underscores the importance of media literacy in fostering informed political engagement. The ability to critically evaluate the credibility of content is essential in mitigating the risks associated with misinformation and ensuring that users engage with reliable and balanced information. Additionally, the study revealed an intersection between entertainment and political content consumption. Students frequently engaged with political memes, satirical posts, and videos, finding them to be accessible and engaging formats for discussing complex issues. While such content effectively captures attention and fosters discussion, it also raises questions about the depth of political engagement it encourages. The blending of politics with entertainment suggests a shift in how political information is communicated and consumed, with implications for both the accessibility and the substantive quality of political discourse.

In conclusion, Facebook occupies a complex and influential role in shaping the political behaviour of university students. As a platform that fulfils social, informational, and political needs, it has become a pivotal tool for engagement and activism. However, its AI-driven personalization, coupled with the emotional and cognitive challenges of political discourse, highlights both the opportunities and the risks associated with its use. These findings underscore the importance of fostering critical media literacy skills to navigate the complexities of social media, ensuring that users can engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives and reliable information. The interplay of personalization, entertainment, and political content on Facebook reflects broader shifts

in how young adults interact with politics in the digital age, offering valuable insights for understanding the evolving dynamics of social media and political behaviour.

Limitations of the Study

The study faced several limitations, which may affect the generalizability and depth of its findings. The research was conducted with a limited sample of university students in Lahore, which may not adequately represent the political behaviours and social media interactions of the broader youth population in Pakistan. This narrower demographic scope limits the applicability of findings across varied geographic or demographic segments. Additionally, the research focused exclusively on Facebook as a social media platform, omitting insights from other popular platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), and TikTok, which are widely used among students. This single-platform focus narrows the scope of the findings, potentially missing out on trends in AI-driven political influence present on other digital channels. Moreover, the influence of real-world socio-political factors—such as family, cultural norms, and political events—is not fully accounted for in this study, which focused primarily on AI-driven content as an influencing factor. Consequently, isolating the impact of AI-driven political content from these broader, real-world influences. These limitations collectively suggest a need for further research, potentially incorporating a broader demographic, and cross-platform analysis to deepen understanding of AI-driven content's impact on political behaviours.

Suggestions and Recommendations for Future Studies

This research highlights the complex role of Facebook in shaping the political behaviour of university students in Lahore. The platform serves as a multifaceted space where students engage in social interaction, consume political content, and participate in digital activism. However, the findings also reveal significant concerns regarding the influence of AI-driven content curation, the emotional impact of political engagement, and the reliability of political information on the platform. Facebook's AI algorithms contribute to the creation

of echo chambers, where users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. This limits the diversity of political perspectives and reinforces ideological silos, which can contribute to political polarization. At the same time, Facebook provides an accessible platform for political activism, allowing students to engage in causes they care about and participate in political movements. The emotional impact of political content on Facebook presents both opportunities and challenges for political engagement. While some students find political content motivating and inspiring, others experience stress and frustration, particularly when navigating divisive or confrontational debates. This emotional toll raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of political engagement on social media. Overall, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on social media and political behaviour by providing insights into how university students in Lahore use Facebook for political engagement. The findings highlight the need for further investigation into the ethical and societal implications of AI-driven content curation, the emotional impact of digital activism, and the role of media literacy in navigating political information on social media. As Facebook and other social media platforms continue to evolve, understanding their influence on political behaviour will be crucial for shaping future digital policies and practices.

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