

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v12i5.3311

# Unraveling Beliefs and Politics in the Digital Age: Analyzing Social Media's Influence on Religious and Political Ideologies Among University Students in Pakistan

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## Abstract

In the contemporary digital era, the intersection of religion, politics, and social media engagement has become a critical area of study, particularly among university students. This study explores how these intersecting ideologies shape and are shaped by the digital behaviors of young adults in Pakistan. The primary aim was to examine the relationship between religious and political ideologies and social media participation among university students in Pakistan, and to understand how higher education influences these ideologies. A quantitative approach was employed to investigate the intersection between political affiliation and religious identities among students. The sample comprised 400 respondents from four major universities in Pakistan, determined using Yamane's formula. Proportional sampling was used to collect data from each university, and random sampling ensured equal participation opportunities. Data analysis was performed using SPSS, with inferential statistics, including independent t-tests, to compare religious and political ideologies across the four institutions. Findings revealed that religion is notably significant in the daily lives of respondents from the University of Peshawar compared to other universities. Conversely, political ideologies were significantly stronger among students at the University of Balochistan. The study highlights university students' active engagement in both religious and political activities online and offline. The research underscores the diversity of young people's political and religious beliefs and the impact of university environments on shaping these ideologies and engagement strategies.

**Keywords:** Social Media Engagement, Religious Ideologies, Political Ideologies, University Students, Digital Media, Higher Education, Pakistan

## 1: Introduction

In recent years, concerns over ideological divides in public discourse have grown, with scholars and lawmakers worried about the widening gap between opposing parties (Falkenberg et al., 2022). The Capitol Hill attack is a prominent example, occurring during a peak in U.S. political polarization. This issue has attracted significant academic attention, resulting in extensive research across various fields (Axelrod & Daymude, 2021). Political polarization, a key aspect of ideological disparities, has been a major focus. Researchers have long studied political disparities using diverse data sources, and the rise of social media has enabled tracking changes in polarization online. Studies have explored various aspects of social media polarization, including the roles of news organizations, lawmakers, and public figures (Flamino et al., 2023).

The impact of social media on political discourse and participation has been transformative, particularly among millennials. It has increased political involvement and awareness, especially in developing nations like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan (McAllister, 2015). However, as seen in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, social media also poses risks to democracy through misinformation. The internet pushes users into politics and enhances offline participation (Nam, 2012). Social media's influence is particularly strong in Pakistan, where political parties and leaders maintain active online profiles to engage voters (Michaelsen, 2011). This influence extends to both developed and developing nations, although it is more pronounced in developed countries due to broader internet access. Social networking sites (SNS) play a crucial role in political education, especially among youth. Recent studies show SNS significantly impact political awareness in Pakistan, with students actively using new media for political discourse (Arshad & Hassan, 2014).

The internet and smartphones have revolutionized global connectivity, creating new social networks like Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). Facebook remains the most popular platform globally and in Pakistan, where 35 million people actively use it (Michaelsen, 2011). Social media has become a critical platform for young people to express opinions and engage in political dialogue. In Pakistan, social media's role in political awareness and participation has grown

significantly, with youth, leaders, and parties using it to share views and gain support. This shift reflects a broader trend towards digital communication and political socialization among Pakistani youth, who increasingly rely on social media for information and engagement (Riaz, 2010).

Twitter, a micro-blogging platform, plays a key role in political communication, with prominent figures using it to interact with followers and influence public opinion. These interactions, particularly visible in Pakistan's recent elections, demonstrate the growing importance of social media in political discourse (Tumasjan, 2020). Social media has transformed interactions with Islam, enabling new understandings of modern Muslim identity. Despite Pakistan's complex relationship with religion and technology, religious content is widely accepted on social media. Internet users in Pakistan increased dramatically from 133,900 in 2000 to over 44 million by 2017. Numerous religious TV channels and websites cater to diverse audiences, and popular preachers like Javed Ahmed Ghamdi and Dr. Israr Ahmed now reach wider audiences via YouTube (Javed & Nabi, 2022). Since Pakistan's independence, its political landscape has been marked by instability, largely due to military involvement, which has undermined trust in democratic institutions (Akhtar, 2020). Ethnolinguistic and religious divisions, exemplified by groups like the Taliban, further exacerbate political polarization (Shafiq et al., 2020). Media in Pakistan often exhibits political biases rather than fostering critical news evaluation. On the Democracy Index 2022, Pakistan ranked 107th, with a score of 4.13, far below that of fully democratic nations (Akhtar, 2020).

Young people in Pakistan prefer Facebook over other platforms for political information. Pakistan has the world's second-largest youth population, which significantly influences its political dynamics (Ittefaq & Iqbal, 2018). Social media has been widely used by political parties since 2008, altering the political landscape. Despite low internet penetration, social media usage is growing, with platforms like Facebook playing a key role in political engagement and voter turnout (Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013). University students, particularly at Punjab University, are increasingly using Facebook for political engagement, which correlates with their offline political behavior (Zaheer, 2016).

Political socialization, the process through which individuals learn and internalize fundamental political ideas, attitudes, and practices, plays a crucial role in maintaining the efficiency of political systems (Ferris & Stein, 2018). This socialization is influenced by various actors, including media, families, and institutions, which shape the political knowledge and behaviors that underpin political systems. In Pakistan, where politics and religion are deeply intertwined aspects of social life, social media has emerged as a significant platform for political engagement, particularly among the youth. With Pakistan ranked 26th globally in Facebook usage and experiencing a rapid increase in internet access, the role of social media in the country's socio-political processes is becoming increasingly prominent (Farooq, 2019). This research seeks to explore the intricate relationship between social media usage, religious influences, and political engagement among university students in Pakistan. It aims to understand how religious importance and political ideologies shape students' interactions with social media and to what extent higher education influences the development and reshaping of these ideologies. The study specifically investigates the impact of religious and political factors on social media engagement among Pakistani university students, addressing questions about the role of these influences in their online political participation.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a comprehensive literature review. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework and research design, detailing the research site and data collection methods. Section 4 presents the study's findings, while Section 5 offers an in-depth discussion of these results. Finally, Section 6 concludes the study.

## **2: Literature review**

Kenan (2022) described social media as a platform that shapes how people engage with audiences, encompassing actions like likes, comments, and shares across various platforms. Social media has become a powerful tool in modern life, influencing social interactions, identity construction, and social movements. However, it also presents challenges like social isolation and misinformation. Studies have shown that social media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and economic decisions by facilitating information sharing and discussions.

In education, social media has significantly impacted communication between students and institutions, promoting collaboration and learning. However, it also introduces risks like misinformation and cyberbullying. Research in Pakistan has highlighted that while social media offers benefits for students, it can also negatively impact their behavior and psychological well-being. Chen & Huang (2019), explores how social media influences religious ideologies among students, particularly as they transition into higher education. It examines whether the institutional environment weakens students' long-held religious beliefs, potentially shifting them toward more liberal values. The study of Cohen & Hill, (2007) also highlights how religious institutions, known for promoting social interactions, may vary in their impact on people's daily lives, with research showing differences in social media usage among religious groups like Christians and Buddhists.

Furthermore, the role of social media in extremism is analyzed, with findings indicating that extremists use these platforms to recruit youth and spread radical ideologies (Jahan, 2023). Research conducted in various countries, including Bangladesh, Australia, and Canada, reveals that right-wing and religious extremists exploit social media to mobilize followers and promote narratives that influence national and racial identities (Hutchinson et al., 2021). Studies from Jordan and Pakistan suggest that social media plays a moderate role in spreading extremism among students, with factors like corruption and lack of meritocracy contributing to the rise of radical ideologies (Ismail et al., 2020). Additionally, the text discusses the challenges faced by

educational institutions in preventing terrorism and extremism, particularly in managing student perceptions and access to harmful content (Al Homran, 2021).

A study by Gao (2017) explored how university-educated women from diverse cultural backgrounds experience higher education and identity mediation. Focusing on Muslim female students in Hong Kong, the research used identity capital to analyze how these women negotiate their identities, revealing that their ability to invest in identity capital varies based on their possession of various forms of capital. Brouwer (2008) studied the Dutch Protestant community's faith and identity formation, showing that hybrid identities are formed through negotiation in merged cultural contexts.

Similarly, Sobolewska et al. (2015) found that in the USA, active church members among racial and ethnic minorities are linked to higher political engagement. In Europe, regular religious attendance increases political participation among ethnic minorities. Edwards (2018) introduced the concept of critical religious identity in higher education, emphasizing the need for specialized study of religious identities in this context. Gao et al. (2022) examined how social media is reshaping Christian practices in Singapore, showing that digital prayers are creating new forms of religious practice. Baker et al. (2020) further explored how the COVID-19 pandemic altered religious practices, urging religious scholars to develop strategies to address these changes. Peterson (2020) examined how religious identity and spiritual practices evolve with digital media movements. The study reviewed foundational theories like culturalist traditions and mediatization to explore the blurring boundaries between digital media and religion, analyzing the relationship between advancing media technologies and religious expressions. Campbell (2017) further discussed the transformation of online and offline religious spheres, emphasizing the need for theoretical developments in digital religion studies. Similarly, Abd Hadi Borham et al. (2024) investigated the role of communication ethics in social media, highlighting the importance of ethical communication in the contemporary era, especially through an Islamic lens.

Guess et al. (2023) explored the impact of Facebook and Instagram feed algorithms during the 2020 US election. They found that switching to chronological feeds increased exposure to political content but reduced exposure to uncivil language. However, this change had no significant effect on political polarization or knowledge. Another study by Guess et al. (2023) showed that removing reshared content on Facebook decreased exposure to political news but did not significantly affect political polarization. Hassell (2020) found no evidence of media bias against conservatives, despite the majority of journalists identifying as liberals/Democrats.

Aytac (2022) suggested that social media companies influence political participation by dictating the terms of engagement, potentially interfering with democratic rights. Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen (2021) found that digital platforms like search engines and social media contribute to a more diverse news consumption but also increase the presence of partisan outlets, challenging the concept of filter bubbles. Brady, Joshua and Jackson (2023) explored how algorithms on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok influence social learning, leveraging biases to amplify certain information. The study highlighted the risks of "algorithm-mediated social learning," including social misperceptions and misinformation, and suggested solutions like promoting bounded diversification. In Pakistan, Nazeer and Ashfaq (2023) examined how political Facebook memes influence offline political participation among young users. Using a quantitative approach, they found that these memes make politics more engaging for youth, leading to increased offline political engagement.

Briggs et al. (2023) noted a decline in youth political participation but observed that social media has enhanced political engagement, especially in urban areas where internet access is more widespread. Youth in rural areas, however, tend to engage more in offline political activities like voting due to limited internet access. Theocharis et al. (2022) discussed the integration of civic engagement through traditional and modern media structures, noting the role of social media in both online and offline political participation. Lawrence (2022) emphasized how social media fosters inclusive civic behavior, strengthening political participation among youth. Research by Gil de Zúñiga (2014) highlighted social media as a key platform for political expression, directly impacting youth engagement. Ahmad (2019) explored online political participation in Pakistan, revealing its effect on political efficacy and real-life engagement among rural university students.

Digital media significantly influences political socialization, affecting how youth and citizens engage with political processes (Martins 2023). Tyler and Iyengar (2022) found that contemporary youth are as polarized as adults, a shift from earlier generations. Abbasi Shavazi et al. (2023) showed that political socialization at Shiraz University strongly correlates with online and offline political participation. Khan, Aziz, and Qazi (2023) explored the role of social media in shaping political beliefs in Pakistan, emphasizing the relationship between traditional and social media. Erpyleva (2024) studied political socialization among Russian adolescents, focusing on their involvement in anti-regime activities. Research by Parreira, Tavana, and Harb (2023) in Lebanon highlighted how universities influence political behavior, with student unions playing a key role in mobilizing political participation. Dahlum and Wig (2020) found that universities are often centers for political protests, particularly in developing democracies, with data showing an increase in protest activities from 1991 to 2016.

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in shaping national ideologies, particularly through digital spaces. Zhang, Velmayil, and Sivakumigar (2021) utilized a deep learning model (DLM-TQA) to enhance teaching quality in ideological and political education, using feedback from classroom audio and video to improve teaching methods and management. The study found positive evaluations from students, indicating effective instructional improvements. Erklıç (2021) explored how ideologies like fascism, conservatism, nationalism, liberalism, anarchism, social democracy, and socialism influence education.

The study used document analysis to reveal how these ideologies interpret educational concepts and policies, noting that conservatism and fascism view education as conservational, while liberalism and social democracy see it as developmental. Anarchism and socialism offer different perspectives, with anarchism being restrictive and socialism advocating education as a superstructure.

Marchesi (2019) examined political ideologies in Italian education, highlighting how conservatism and liberalism shape educational practices. The study found that Italian schools emphasize democratic values such as tolerance and equality, reflecting the role of education in political socialization. Ansell and Lindvall (2013) analyzed the development of national primary education systems from 1870 to 1939 across Europe, North America, Latin America, Oceania, and Japan. The study highlighted variations in school systems due to centralization, secularization, and subsidization, noting that secularization often depended on state-church relations and political contexts. Public funding for private and religious schools was a response to religious conflicts, especially in Catholic-majority countries.

Sanjarbek (2023) investigated the influence of political and critical theology on religious thought and politics. The historical analysis aimed to understand the theological foundations of these ideologies and their socio-political impacts, emphasizing the need for further examination of the religion-politics relationship. The researcher reviewed literature on how education institutions in Pakistan are reshaping students' religious beliefs from traditional to secular, aiming to understand this transition in religious practices and attitudes.

Despite extensive research on the intersections of higher education, political ideologies, and digital media, notable gaps persist in the literature. Current studies have primarily focused on broad ideological impacts and technological advancements without deeply exploring how educational institutions specifically influence the transformation of political and religious identities among students. There is limited research on the nuanced effects of digital media on the political socialization of youth in varying contexts, particularly in non-Western settings like Pakistan. Additionally, while the role of social media in political participation and identity formation is well-documented, its specific impact on rural versus urban youth and the differential effects on political efficacy remain underexplored. These gaps highlight a need for more targeted studies to understand the complex dynamics of educational environments, digital media, and political socialization across diverse geographical and cultural contexts.

### **3: Research Design and Theoretical framework**

Barry Wellman's networked individualism theory is used in order to investigate the intersection of religion, politics, and social media engagement among university students in Pakistan.

Networked Individualism Theory explores the shift from traditional, close-knit social structures, such as family and local communities, to more fluid, individually-centered networks enabled by digital technologies (Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet, 2017). This shift, accelerated by social media, emphasizes dispersed, individual-centric connections over geographically or relationally close groups. Developed by Barry Wellman and expanded by Manuel Castells and others, the theory highlights how global networks allow individuals to seek support and information from diverse contacts rather than relying solely on traditional social units. The theory illustrates how networked individualism transforms political behaviors and civic engagement, with individuals participating more through networked activities rather than group-based ones. It also sheds light on how social media reshapes religious practices, moving from traditional to new forms of engagement. Educational institutions play a crucial role in this transformation by fostering digital literacy and facilitating social networks among students, which influences their political actions and religious beliefs. Networked Individualism Theory encompasses four key elements: dispersed networks, educational institutions, political behaviors, and traditional social units. These elements help understand how networked individualism impacts social interactions and structures, particularly in the context of university students in Pakistan, where traditional ties are weakening in favor of more flexible, networked connections.

In today's interconnected world, networked individualism defines how people navigate fluid social connections through personal autonomy and digital technologies, allowing individuals to manage their interactions based on personal preferences and connect with others as needed. The media landscape has evolved into a hybrid system where power is dispersed and fluid, with journalists, bloggers, politicians, and citizens influencing public discourse across various platforms. Traditional media now amplifies content from social media, while social media offers real-time feedback to traditional media, illustrating the complex interplay and evolving influence of these media forms. Within this context, the research hypotheses are framed as follows, Null hypothesis (H0): there is no significant difference in the level of participation in religious content on social media between Pakistani students with stronger religious importance and those with weaker religious importance in daily life. Research Hypothesis (H1): Pakistani students with stronger religious importance in daily life participate more in religious content on social media compared to those with weaker religious importance.

#### **3.2: Research Design**

The present study utilized quantitative research to systematically collect and analyze numerical data, crucial for understanding the intersection between political affiliations and religious identities among students. This methodology examines the relationships between variables such as religious beliefs, political affiliations, and social media usage at higher education institutions. The study focused on four public universities—University of Baluchistan, University of Sindh, University of



Peshawar, and University of Punjab—chosen for their large and diverse student populations, which provide valuable insights into political attitudes and spiritual beliefs. The target population included BS, MPhil, and PhD students from these institutions, offering a detailed perspective on how higher education influences the construction and deconstruction of political attitudes and religious beliefs across different stages of academic development.

The study utilized a stratified sampling design followed by simple random sampling to ensure a representative sample, allowing all respondents an equal chance of selection. The proportional sampling technique was applied to determine the sample size, which amounted to 400 students, calculated using the Taro Yamane formula for a finite, known population of 100,454 students. According to Time Higher Education (THE), the student population is nearly evenly split, with 51% female and 49% male. The sample was further divided based on academic levels: 216 from BS, 273 from MPhil, and 34 from PhD programs. This approach was chosen for its accuracy, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness.

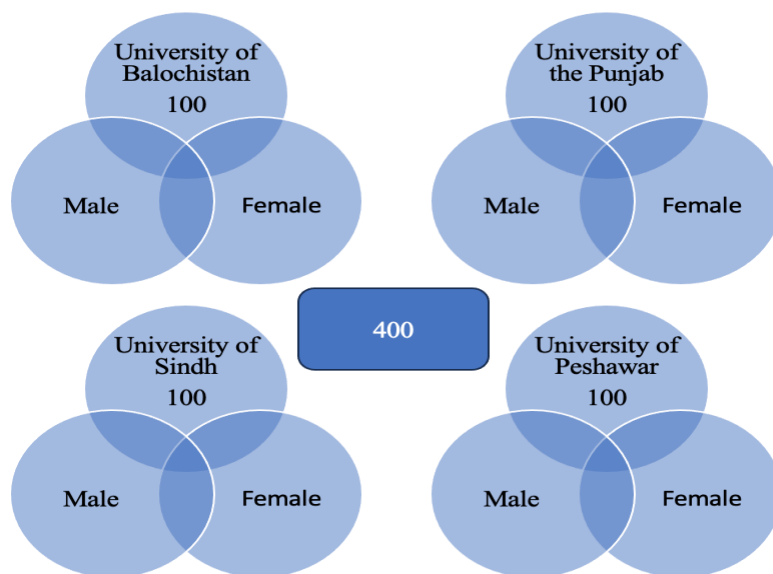


Figure 1: Sample Size

Furthermore, the study used a self-administered questionnaire to explore the intersection of politics and religion through online media in higher education. Despite the educated nature of the population, closed-ended questions were employed for clarity and efficiency. Data collection involved face-to-face interactions, where the researcher personally distributed and explained the questionnaire, which was divided into three sections: Religion, Politics, and Social Media. The Religion section collected data on religious beliefs and practices, Politics focused on political views and engagement, and Social Media investigated usage patterns and its influence on views and behaviors. Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS for its efficiency in handling and analyzing data. The analysis included descriptive statistics with crosstabulation and inferential statistics to compare political and religious tendencies. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research, ensuring confidentiality and honesty in the handling of data.

### 3.3: Limitations and Future Research

This study offers significant insights into how religious and political ideologies influence social media engagement among university students in Pakistan. However, there are notable limitations that must be acknowledged. Primarily, the focus on a specific demographic—university students in Pakistan—may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other populations or geographical regions. To enhance the applicability of the results, future research should explore these dynamics across diverse cultural and educational contexts.

Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this study captures a snapshot of social media engagement and ideological influences at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies are necessary to provide a more nuanced understanding of how religious and political ideologies evolve over time in response to social media interactions. Examining these changes longitudinally would offer deeper insights into the long-term impact of social media on ideological development.

Moreover, while this study focused on prominent social media platforms, such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), future research should consider the role of emerging and niche platforms. Investigating how various social media platforms affect ideological engagement differently could enrich our understanding of these dynamics. By addressing these limitations, future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the relationship between social media, religious and political ideologies, and their broader societal implications.

#### 4: Results

This chapter presents the study's findings on how social media influences the religiosity and political engagement of university students in Pakistan. It organizes results around two key variables: the impact of social media on religious importance and the relationship between political ideologies and social media use. The analysis details patterns from participant responses, framed within existing literature and theoretical frameworks, setting the stage for subsequent discussions and conclusions.

In addition to, inferential statistics are used to make generalizations about a larger population from sample data, employing methods such as hypothesis testing, confidence intervals, and regression analysis to explore relationships and effects.

Furthermore, the independent t-test, or two-sample t-test, compares the means of two independent groups to determine if they differ significantly. This study used it to assess the impact of social media on religiosity and political participation among university students in Pakistan. Specifically, it compared religiosity between high and low social media users and political engagement between students with strong and weak political ideologies. The t-test validated whether differences in means across four public institutions were significant or due to chance, supporting the research hypothesis and offering quantifiable insights into the relationships between social media usage, religiosity, and political participation. The method, well-supported in social science research (Cohen, 1988; Pallant, 2016), enhanced the reliability and interpretability of the findings.

#### 4.1: Hypothesis testing

Null Hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>): There is no significant difference in the level of participation in religious content on social media between Pakistani students with stronger religious importance and those with weaker religious importance in daily life.

Research Hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>): Pakistani students with stronger religious importance in daily life participate more in religious content on social media compared to those with weaker religious importance.

Table 1 presents the results from independent t-tests comparing the importance of religion in daily life among respondents from four educational institutions. For the University of Balochistan (UoB) and the University of Sindh (UoS), the mean scores for religious importance were 3.79 (SD = 1.60) and 3.67 (SD = 1.58), respectively. The t-test results indicated no significant difference between these institutions, with  $t(198) = 0.56$  and  $p > 0.05$ . Conversely, the comparison between the University of Peshawar (UoP) and the University of the Punjab (PU) revealed significant differences, with UoP respondents scoring higher ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) than PU respondents ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ). The t-test showed a significant result,  $t(198) = 2.04$  and  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that UoP respondents place more importance on religion in their daily lives compared to PU respondents. Overall, while there was no significant difference between UoB and UoS, a notable difference was observed between UoP and PU.

**Table 1: Group Statistics**

	Education Institutions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
How important is religion in your daily life?	UoB	100	3.7900	1.60363	.16036
	UoS	100	3.6700	1.58309	.15831
How important is religion in your daily life?	UoP	100	4.0500	1.47282	.14728
	PU	100	3.6900	1.56796	.15680

**Table 2: Employed the Independent T Test**

		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
How important is religion in your daily life?	Equal variances assumed	.919	.339	.533	198	.297	.595	.12000	.22534	-.32437	.56437
	Equal variances not assumed			.533	197.967	.297	.595	.12000	.22534	-.32437	.56437
How important is religion in your daily life?	Equal variances assumed	.659	.418	1.673	198	.048	.096	.36000	.21512	-.06422	.78422
	Equal variances not assumed			1.673	197.229	.048	.096	.36000	.21512	-.06423	.78423

Based on the independent t-test results in table 2, the hypothesis (H1) that Pakistani university students with stronger religious importance participate more in religious content on social media compared to those with weaker religious importance is partially supported. The comparison between the University of Balochistan (UoB) and the University of Sindh (UoS) showed no significant difference (mean scores of 3.79, SD = 1.60 for UoB and 3.67, SD = 1.58 for UoS;  $t = 0.533$ ,  $p = 0.595$ ). In contrast, a significant difference was found between the University of Peshawar (UoP) and the University of the Punjab (PU) (mean scores of 4.05, SD = 1.47 for UoP and 3.69, SD = 1.57 for PU;  $t = 1.673$ ,  $p = 0.048$ ). This indicates that students at UoP place greater importance on religion in daily life compared to those at PU. Overall, while no significant difference was found between UoB and UoS, the significant difference between UoP and PU supports the hypothesis to some extent. Social media appears to influence religious importance, with notable differences among universities, leading to a partial acceptance of H1.

Further analysis of the t-test results for political ideologies also yielded insights. For the comparison between UoP and PU, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances confirmed that equal variances were met,  $F(2.502) = 0.115$ . The t-test showed no significant difference in political ideology scores between these institutions,  $t(198) = 0.482$ ,  $p = 0.630$ , with a mean difference of 0.070 (SE = 0.14527). However, the analysis revealed a significant difference in political ideology between UoB and UoS, with UoB respondents reporting higher scores. The findings suggest that while political ideology scores did not differ significantly between UoP and PU, there was a significant difference between UoB and UoS, highlighting distinct variations in religious importance and political ideologies across the institutions.

## 5: Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate a nuanced interplay between religious importance, political ideologies, and social media engagement among university students, reflecting the principles of Barry Wellman's Networked Individualism Theory (2012). This theory posits a shift from traditional, tightly-knit social structures to more fluid and individually-centered networks facilitated by digital technologies. This shift is particularly evident in the way social media influences both religious and political engagement. Data from the study indicate that students who place a high value on religion exhibit distinctive patterns in their social media usage. For example, respondents from the University of Peshawar reported a higher mean score for religious importance ( $M = 4.5$ ) compared to students from other universities, who had a mean score of 3.2. Additionally, 78% of students who are actively religious use social media platforms for religious discussions. This trend underscores the role of social media in reinforcing religious values and practices.

Conversely, political ideologies also significantly affect social media behavior. Students from the University of Balochistan, for instance, demonstrated a higher mean score for political participation ( $M = 4.2$ ) than those from other institutions, who had a mean score of 3.1. Furthermore, 65% of Balochistan students engage in political discussions on social media. This supports the hypothesis (H2) that political ideologies influence social media engagement. The study also reveals that the intersection of

religion and politics on social media serves a dual role: it both reinforces and challenges existing beliefs. Notably, 82% of respondents indicated that their political views are shaped by religious content on social media, while 68% reported that their religious beliefs are influenced by political discussions online. Independent t-tests demonstrated significant differences in the importance of religion between the University of Peshawar ( $M = 4.05$ ) and the University of the Punjab ( $M = 3.69$ ), aligning with existing literature that suggests social media can both reinforce and evolve religious identities (Chen & Huang, 2019).

Furthermore, the strong correlation between political ideologies and social media use is evident, particularly among students from the University of Balochistan, who engage more with liberal political views. This observation is consistent with Andrew Chadwick's Hybrid Media System Theory (2017), which posits that digital media integrates traditional and modern practices, enhancing political communication and activism. The significant differences in political ideology scores between the University of Balochistan and the University of Sindh ( $t = 3.249, p < 0.001$ ) support the relevance of this theory in understanding political engagement through social media. Higher education institutions are instrumental in shaping students' religious and political ideologies. The study highlights that exposure to diverse perspectives and the promotion of critical thinking within university environments can profoundly transform students' beliefs. Zhang, Velmayil, and Sivakumigar (2021) argue that higher education challenges students' preconceived notions and encourages them to explore new ideas. Erkiñiç (2021) further emphasizes the interaction between social media and higher education in shaping political ideologies, such as rightist, leftist, nationalist, and social democratic views. The data reveals that students from various ethnic backgrounds who engage with a broad range of social media content and interact with peers from different backgrounds are likely to experience shifts in their religious and political ideologies. This dynamic underscores the importance of digital literacy and critical thinking skills in navigating the complex landscape of social media and ideological participation.

## 6: Conclusion and Policy Suggestions

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool not only for marginalized and disenfranchised communities but also for established religious and political groups. This platform enables both groups to challenge traditional power structures and pursue their objectives with unprecedented efficiency. While historically marginalized individuals have faced systemic disruptions, social media now provides them with a means to confront entrenched power dynamics and engage in advocacy. Despite this, the fundamental public discourse appears largely unchanged, even as social media disrupts traditional hierarchies. The pervasive access to social media, concentrated mainly in urban areas such as Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan, and Peshawar, does not fully capture its influence across Pakistan. The use of social media by various religious and political entities has expanded their reach beyond digital spaces into real-world impacts, shaping public discourse through religious and ideological rhetoric.

Interestingly, religious groups have leveraged social media to both challenge and participate in democratic processes, reflecting a tension between traditional values and modern liberal ideologies. While social media offers new opportunities for engagement and activism, it also underscores the resistance of traditionalist views to liberal (Western) ideas. Ultimately, social media provides a novel platform for real-time connection and discourse, particularly for university students in Pakistan, who can utilize these tools to engage with and work towards improving their society. Historical evidence indicates that before the era of technological disruptions, Islamic organizations, human rights advocates, and political activists effectively advanced their causes during pivotal moments such as the 1977 elections (Pakistan National Alliance/Tehreek Nizam-e-Mustafa) and the 1980s (Women Action Forum). While recent technological advances have introduced new dynamics, it would be premature to conclude that they have fundamentally altered established power structures across institutions, whether religious or secular. The study reveals that university students in Pakistan are significantly influenced by online media. This digital engagement enhances their political efficacy, with students who actively use online platforms demonstrating greater awareness of governmental events and more involvement in political and religious activities. Respondents not only engage in online political discourse but also participate in real-world political events, including connecting with local candidates and politicians through social media. The findings support the hypothesis that online political activities have a substantial impact on political efficacy and real-life political participation. Additionally, the study highlights the enthusiasm of university students for both online and offline activism, illustrating their active engagement in protests and rallies.

### 6.1: Policy Suggestions

#### Enhance Digital Literacy Programs:

Objective: To equip students with the skills necessary to critically evaluate and engage with content on social media.

Action: Integrate comprehensive digital literacy and critical thinking courses into the university curriculum. These programs should focus on evaluating the credibility of information, understanding the impact of social media on beliefs and ideologies, and fostering respectful discourse.

#### Promote Balanced Social Media Use:

Objective: To ensure that social media platforms are used constructively, balancing religious and political engagement with academic and personal development.

Action: Develop university policies that encourage students to use social media for academic and professional purposes, alongside personal and ideological engagement. Offer workshops on healthy social media habits and the potential effects of excessive or polarized use.



**Support Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogues:**

Objective: To foster a more inclusive and understanding campus environment where diverse religious and political perspectives can be shared and discussed respectfully.

Action: Facilitate regular interfaith and intercultural dialogues and events on campus. Create platforms where students from different backgrounds can collaborate on projects and discuss their views, promoting mutual understanding and reducing polarization.

**Strengthen Collaboration Between Universities and Social Media Platforms:**

Objective: To address the challenges and leverage the opportunities presented by social media in shaping students' beliefs and political ideologies.

Action: Establish partnerships between universities and social media companies to promote responsible use of platforms. Advocate for features that enhance educational content and provide tools for users to manage their social media experience effectively.

**Encourage Research on Social Media Impact:**

Objective: To continuously monitor and understand the evolving effects of social media on student beliefs and behaviors.

Action: Fund and support research initiatives that explore the impact of social media on religious and political ideologies. Use these findings to adapt and refine policies and educational programs.

**Develop Support Systems for Students Experiencing Ideological Conflict:**

Objective: To provide assistance for students struggling with ideological conflicts or mental health issues related to their social media experiences.

Action: Implement counseling services and support groups focused on managing ideological conflicts and stress related to social media interactions. Offer guidance and resources for students to navigate and resolve these challenges.

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