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The Role of Social Media in Social Justice Movements: Views of Social Activists in Pakistan

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Abstract

The role of social media in social justice movements is gaining prominence in both scholarship and advocacy practice. Social media has served as a tool for amplifying the voices of the marginalized, enabling public discourse and the organization of movements over the last ten years. Social media has disrupted elements of traditional media, and gatekeeping institutions and has broadened the opportunities for social activism and social change in participatory democracy. In activism work in Pakistan, where a large proportion of the work is political, social, and media-state controlled and social media used is politically repressive, social media serves activists as a strategy of predominantly unoppressed channel for marginal advocacy work. This research examines the impact of social media on the construction of social justice movements in Pakistan, focusing on social activists who leverage the internet for social advocacy. The study, employing ethnographic methods, examines the ways activists' interface with social media for the purposes of awareness, support mobilization, and collective action for social transformation. The study investigates the ways activists utilize social media to organize protests, how to communicate with activists, and to respond to dominant narratives and structures that foster social injustices. The study also addresses some of the social media challenges activists face, including misinformation, cyber bullying, government censorship, and police surveillance. Using the Public Sphere theory, the study conceptualizes social media as an electronic means of public sphere, that is, a sphere of public and open discourse that mass citizens, especially the marginalized and under-represented citizens, that allows discourse and contestation for social change. The study recognizes the role of social media, and its power activism social media activism brings in social justice. It encourages and constitutes the importance for the marginalized to enter and interrupt the hegemonic discourse establish socio-political activism and transform power relations. It is the researcher attempt to provide insights for social activists, scholar activists and social change advocates, particularly in the context of digital activism and the use of social media to achieve activism goals. It intensifies the understanding of social justice activism and the role social justice activism in Pakistan. It also focuses on the role of digital technology for advocacy on behalf of the marginalized. This study advocates the use of social media including social justice in the contemporary world. This study examines social media and its power on collective action for social reasons.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Justice Movements, Activism in Pakistan, Digital Activism, Advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

Activists across the globe use social media as a primary means of disseminating information, mobilizing activism, and building coalitions (Earl et al., 2022; Uwalaka, 2024). Occupying a space in activism is also of much easier access for people in the world because the hierarchies of the old communication system have been dismantled, allowing activists of every type and oppressed group to shout, disseminate important information, and organize protests in real-time (Freelon et al., 2018). Merged

communication hierarchies mean social media users can participate in rallies and join associations, or collectives for any cause. This facilitates coordinated, transformative activism around a particular issue.

Social media has the capacity to cover a broad range of topics, persuade individuals, and spur action, which are helpful for activism purposes. Activists from the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States exemplify this. These activists coordinated a worldwide campaign addressing police brutality and racial injustice. Activists used hashtags and online educational resources to transform social media sites into platforms for public engagement (Freelon et al, 2018). In contrast, social media activism in Pakistan focuses on barriers and censorship. In contrast to the legal restrictions, social injustice activists in Pakistan are also facing constraints due to insufficient press freedom and social media censorship. Activism of this sort is necessitated by the sociopolitical conditions of the country, which are so oppressive that there is no room for 'real-world' activism (Khan & Kirmani, 2018; Pakistan Press Foundation, 2023). Therefore, social media in Pakistan is used for organizational and discursive purposes. An example of this is the protests for Aurat March.

In addition to some impacts social media has on social justice, the concrete ability to capture audience attention and promote activism across borders facilitated some limitations global activism faces. Social media activism to some extent develops networking, advocacy for some overlooked issues, and accountability of the powerful. The user-friendliness of social media platforms fosters the development of cross-border and cross-continental partnerships for movements of climate justice and globally situated refugee rights (Dossa, 2021; Uwalaka, 2024). Social media provides the ability to communicate and engage audiences in real time, which helps keep the public involved and the demand for change active (Freelon et al., 2018). The use of social media in Pakistan, for example, allows prominent activists to counter state-sponsored narratives and amplify the voices of the silenced, especially in areas of media restriction (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2023). Social media's role in global activism encompasses more than just communication; it influences the foundations of contemporary social movements and political activism (Tufekci, 2017; Poell & van Dijck, 2018). In the past ten years, the integration of social movements and social media into the same academic conversation has gained momentum; however, a large part of the publications on this topic focuses on the **quantitative aspects**, prioritizing figures, statistical analyses, and networks, while the **subjective and experiential aspects** of activism seem to be neglected (Kavada, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2018).

On the other hand, the **qualitative approaches** necessary to understand the emotions, relationships, and contexts of digital activism still seem to be the **underdeveloped** part of academic literature in this area (Milan, 2015; Hine, 2020). For this reason, this study is focused on the **lived experiences** of social activists in Pakistan and how they employ digital activism to push for social change. It aims to uncover the complexities associated with digital mobilization, especially the **strategic planning**, the measures for **assessing campaign impact**, and how activists **engage** with social media's structural and ethical issues given the political context of Pakistan (Jamal, 2020; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

Objectives of the Study

- i. To assess how social media activists in Pakistan use social media to protest social injustices
- ii. To analyze the perceived pros and cons of social media from the activists' perspective
- iii. To evaluate the tactics used by activists to handle disinformation, cyber violence, and other challenges

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways do social media activists in Pakistan respond to social injustice?

RQ2: What are activists' perceptions of the opportunities and challenges social media presents to social justice activism?

RQ3: What steps do activists take to address misinformation, cyberbullying, and other challenges regarding the online narration of their experience?

These studies illuminate digital activism through localized insights and assist activists and policymakers in streamlining their digital efforts. It also targets challenges activists face in terms of internet silencing and cyberbullying. While actionable insights are provided regarding digital activism, the net silencing and cyberbullying challenges are also noted (Auxier & McClain, 2020). The study indicates strides made but also notes qualitative research, small sample size, and resultant lack of generalizability. Additionally, the theme construction regarding the raw dataset may lead to researcher bias.

To the best of my knowledge, no research has sought to understand how social media encompasses the activism of social justice movements in Pakistan. This study adds to the literature on digital activism by attempting to capture the socio-political context of Pakistan and the challenges activists face. Every socio-political context has its specific challenges. Recognizing these challenges and opportunities is crucial in understanding the complex ways social media, in Pakistan, can be, relatively speaking, empowering, and, relatively speaking, disempowering. This research also helps to adjust the digital activism practicality and digital policy activism of digital activists in the Pakistan context. I hope this research provides a blueprint for activists addressing problems of disinformation, cyberbullying, and slow internet connectivity that substantially limit the reach and effectiveness of internet activism in Pakistan (Auxier & McClain, 2020).

However, the study also recognizes further opportunities for research. Primarily, the fully qualitative approach in this study, while leading to detailed results, is also a reason for the lack of generalizability in the research. The small sample size also means that the experiences and strategies of specifically the activists in this study

may not capture the full constellation of practices employed by activists in other geographic or campaign contexts. Thus, the findings must be seen as a reflection of the individual participants, rather than as a broader statement of generalizability. Furthermore, the abstraction of themes from source data may mask researcher bias, as qualitative data interpretation is an inherently subjective process. While subjective theme development is inevitable, the conclusions of this and similar studies may more accurately portray the researchers' interpretations than the prevailing perspectives of activists. Limitations of this nature must be recognized, as they imply a need for further research in this area, particularly research that aims to enhance the study parameter in breadth and diversity to capture a wider and more heterogeneous population of activists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The range of studies on social media activism covering the period of 2018 to 2024 academic literature includes the uses of social networking sites for social justice advocacy and the local and global campaign social justice activism. Each of the thematic areas in each section of the chapter is geared to unpack the empirical details on the subject. Public Sphere theory aids in unpacking the functionality of social media as an activism discourse space and the circulation of activism discourse in the bypassing of gatekeeping and how this enables social activists to organize and mobilize the marginal states within society (McKee, 2022).

Early Use of Social Media in Activism

Activism on social media platforms began as early as the 2000s, as Myspace, as well as early blogs, pioneered grassroots movements (Brandt & Kizer, 2019). Activists used these platforms to organize movements and rally individuals and organizations around a common focus. They were later followed by Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, all of which centered on visual first communication and changed the face of digital activism. Activists discovered the power of these platforms, especially short video reels, where they could highlight issues and advocate for movements. The visual turn democratized the activism discourse and accessibility of information as it allowed marginalized communities to spread their message in ways that were previously unavailable (McKee, 2022).

Platform-Specific Features and Hashtags for Activism

Each social networking site has its own features and flexibility and gives activist groups the opportunity to reach a varied audience and modify their tactics according to the specific social media platform. As observed during the #BlackLivesMatter protests (Freelon et al., 2018), the capacity to edit follower lists and plan protests in real time user-friendly grassroots mobilization. Facebook, for example, has been an effective tool for community building and for the cultivation of enduring relationships with fellow co-activists and supporters. Activists and social justice organizations can use Instagram as a platform that communicates justice causes through visual means and storytelling. Activists can also use TikTok by producing highly engaging short

video reels that articulate essential messages for the younger demographic. These platforms' specific features enable activists to customize their outreach strategies for diverse segments of their audience (Kim & Hastak, 2018; Law, 2021).

From the very beginning, social media platforms have been important in the organization of large-scale protests, mobilizing activism during authoritarian regimes, and influencing the Iranian Green Movement in 2009 and the Arab Spring in 2010. These platforms functioned as an unfiltered and uncensored means of communication for activists to share information, organize protests, and coordinate movements whereby traditional and heavily censored media channels were circumvented. Because of social media's worldwide reach, important protest-related information and calls to action were not only accessible within the activists' countries, but also available to people worldwide, thereby amplifying justice protests (Niakooee, 2020; Kim & Lim, 2019). The demonstrations attributed to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, as mentioned by Freelon et al., illustrate the empowering of and advocacy by and for marginalized populations that social media activism appears to allow the adoption of new political engagement channels.

The #SayHerName campaign, equally focusing on the violence in race and gender, unveiled the distinctive forms of police violence that are imposed on Black women, and the violence that is compounded of racism and sexism (Jackson et al., 2020). These additional and compounded forms of violence illustrate and demonstrate the potential that social media offers to justice movements the adoption of a more inclusive and intersectional lens on justice (Crenshaw, 2019).

The Importance of Influencers in Activism and Social Reforms

The contribution of social influencers of all classes to social justice advocacy should also be highlighted. Advocates with large audiences on social media platforms can activate social justice awareness and advocacy. During the 2020 Nigerian #EndSARS protests, for instance, protests awareness and support mobilization needed, and influencers were pivotal to the (Uwazuruike, 2020). Micro-influencers have smaller, more focused, and more active audiences, often communicating their own stories and perspectives which provide advocacy that is deeper and more resonant with their followers. Their advocacy is profoundly more than promotional material; they maintain movement integrity by identifying and debunking misinformation, which may otherwise be lost to the activist audience (Teixeira, 2023). In hybrid activism, these influencers deliver the intended activist communications to the appropriate audience without distortion. In that context, their activism is invaluable.

Social Media Activism in Pakistan

The role of social media in Pakistan has been invaluable for social justice activism for protest mobilization, oppression documentation, and cause advocacy. The Aurat March and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) exemplify the success of the social networking activism model (Dossa, 2021; Khan et al., 2021). For instance, the Aurat March has been the most prominent and nationally organized activism event for women and has social media for event planning and awareness building around gender

issues. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement has social media advocacy for their human rights and military oppression advocacy on the international community. Their advocacy on social media has garnered attention and support beyond the Pakistani borders. The effectiveness of these movements reflects the potential of social media technologies that enable advocacy for issues that would otherwise remain ignored.

Challenges of Counter-Activism and Digital Repression

Counter-activism and digital repression are two key challenges to social media activism. Challenges of counter-activism occur when opposing factions spread untruths, make deceptive memes, and troll to attack the activists. In Pakistan, activists are under constant scrutiny by state actors, and media is suspended and freedom controlled. In the worst scenarios, the state shuts down the internet to quell dissent. Online harassment by non-state actors poses the biggest threat to the safety of the activists. Intimidation tactics like these foster a climate of fear and make it harder to sustain movements. Activists are then required to counter these approaches to maximize the effectiveness of their movements. (Shahbaz & Funk, 2020; Sinpeng, 2020).

Psychological Effects of Social Media Activism

Social networking sites vary as to what psychological tolls they can present to activists. For example, being exposed to disturbing content such as violent pictures, abuse representation, or threats and harassments can take a psychological toll and contribute to burnout, which can also include anxiety and depression, especially in high-stress situations and for long-movement activists. In Pakistan, specifically, women activists deal with additional social complications such as stalking, defamatory threats, and unsafe threats that can easily shift psychological burden on the already engaged activists (Gorski, 2019; Dossa, 2021). On the positive side, activism also has more positive psychological implications. For instance, many online communities can also provide emotional and social support as well as constructive problem-solving guidance that can assist activists in dealing with the psychological firing stress of their activism. These emotional support networks provide coping mechanisms to deal with the psychological burden of activism and emotional exhausting activism (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020)

The Need for Qualitative Research on Digital Activism in Pakistan

Notable progress has been made in research pertaining to digital activism. Although there have been quantitative studies concerning Pakistan, there are still considerable gaps, especially regarding qualitative research focused on activists' narratives. Most scholarships have defaulted to broad apprehensions about the patterns and consequences of digital activism. This research aims to address this gap by focusing on social justice activism in Pakistan. This research focuses on understanding the interfaces, challenges, and activist social networking frameworks and the facilitation of social justice. This research will advance understanding of the multiple dimensions of digital activism, especially the implications for social scientific scholarship in the

case of Pakistan, and the use of social networking sites for social advocacy.

Theoretical Framework

Jürgen Habermas (1991) a German sociologist and philosopher, described the Public Sphere theory. This theory describes the conceptual and ideal realm where people communicate upon their free will. This is important for a democracy for formulating public opinion. This is necessary for a democracy. Habermas suggests that the public sphere is necessary for discussing collective interests, vital for people's active participation and consensus in democracy.

New social media websites provide additional public access to the social media 'sphere'. They allow disenfranchised activists to 'vent their anger, rally their troops, and advocate for change' without the usual pre-publication restrictions of mainstream media. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have made the democratization of the public sphere possible for activists and social justice advocates. They allow activists to rapidly distribute messages, organize social justice events, and heighten social justice awareness. Social media also narrows the 'digital divide' by permitting people of lower socio-economic status to participate in public discourse. Social media access governs the potential for public discourse to shift the balance of social and political power in a community, a country, a region, or the world. Social media can be used to counter dominant social narratives, stereotypes, and inequities in society (Kruse et al., 2017). Social media helps crystallize activism and facilitate its growth through counter and social mainstream narratives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section describes the approach taken to study the engagement of social activists in Pakistan with social media for social justice advocacy. This research specifically examined how activists utilized social media for advocacy and the experiences they had with digital activism. Considering the personal and contextual nature of these experiences, a **qualitative research design** was constructed for the study, with the **inductive analytical approach** aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the study participants' perceptions and actions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study participants consisted of **five social media activists** from different sectors such as environmental activism, minority (Shia) rights, education, student activism, and women's empowerment. In participant selection, **purposive sampling** was employed, a non-random strategy that identifies and recruits people for research based on their knowledge and participation in digital advocacy (Palinkas et al., 2015). This strategy was purposeful, so that respondents had substantial experience with social media activism and could articulate multiple axes on social justice advocacy. While the participant selection was small, it was purposeful to ensure depth of understanding, given the sampling provided the diversity needed to capture a wide range of activist voices spanning environmental and minority issues (Guest et al., 2020).

Data collection occurred at one time and used **Google Meet** to facilitate

virtual, face-to-face interviews to accommodate participants' schedules. The length of each interview varied from thirty minutes to two hours based on the participant's willingness to elaborate on their experiences. The semi-structured format allowed for open discussion, where participants were encouraged to think and reflect on their social media advocacy activities, community building online, and challenges of dealing with misinformation, harassment, and censorship. This afforded activists the opportunity to share their experiences and techniques, revealing more on the nature of **digital activism** in the socio-political milieu of Pakistan (Tufekci, 2017; Poell & van Dijck, 2018).

The interviews were **transcribed and systemically analyzed** using a multi-step approach to familiarization, coding, and thematic identification. A **thematic analysis** approach was utilized to evaluate how activists framed social media as a tool for advocacy, engagement with audiences, and how activists dealt with online hostility and disinformation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical considerations were prominent through all phases of the study. To protect confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized, and all materials were stored safely and securely. Emotional risk and psychological discomfort were anticipated and addressed in the interview design. Participants were also afforded **informed consent** to ensure ethical standards were met, which included a description of the study's aims and the participants' rights (Orb et al., 2001; Israel & Hay, 2006).

Table 1: Participant Details

Sr. #	Activist	Activism Area	Social Media Platforms Used	No. of Respondents
1	A	Environmental activism	Twitter	1
2	B	Advocacy for the Shia community	Facebook, Twitter	1
3	C	Education activism	Facebook, Instagram	1
4	D	Student rights activism	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok	1
5	E	Women's rights and security	Instagram	1

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Thematic Analysis

This part outlines the thematic analysis performed on the interviews with social media activists in Pakistan. Understanding the data, coding, identifying potential themes, and a thorough and recursive refinement process all followed a stepwise analysis procedure. Various significant themes emerged that highlight the increasing importance and presence of social networking sites in modern activist practices in Pakistan's social and political context.

Platform Versatility and Multiplatform Advocacy

Throughout Pakistan, advocates refine their use of social media as a campaign tool in order to increase their message exposure and mitigate the adverse consequences from their campaigns. For example, Activist A leverages the expansiveness of Twitter to reach audiences quickly, track news cycles, and participate in real-time discussions.

Activist A describes the platform as highly flexible and participatory, which adds value to the conversations. Activist A, however, uses Facebook and Instagram to build social media communities, as social ties formed in those platforms are more stable and constructive. In contrast, Activist E, a designer by training, focuses primarily on Instagram and its visual content. E states, social justice work on Instagram is so powerful because so many arguments can be made through visuals. This describes how these activists thoughtfully use platform characteristics to tailor their advocacy messages to specific content and types of audiences.

Reporting and Real-Time Mobilization

An important interview theme is the real-time mobilization of activism via social media. Activist A described the ability to organize quickly as the power of social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, during times of crisis. Activists reported on and streamed social media coverage of a recent crisis, documenting the humanitarian tragedy in real time and broadcasting the portraits to the world. This ability to report and share updates offers a dimension of rapid diffusion in the organizing effort that is invaluable in times of crisis. Activists can mobilize support for urgent social protests and sustain rapid arms strikes. Activists can sustain rapid mobilizations during social emergencies, particularly to protests aimed at the climate crisis. Real-time social media reporting counters the manipulation and delay tactics of state media, highly useful in deflecting social discontent in Pakistan. Activists have reported and streamed social media coverage of a recent crisis, documenting the humanitarian tragedy in real time and broadcasting the portraits to the world.

Community Building and Global Reach

Building community from social media activism allows for local, national, and global interconnections. Activist C, for example, built a network of supporters, shareholders, and volunteers using Facebook and Instagram. These community members promote Activist C's causes and help fund education initiatives. Activist D, on the other hand, has built social media communities as an activist base for community equity, especially concerning student rights. Activist D has widened global student advocacy and support for activism on student rights. The introduction of the social media networking initiatives and consolidation of community members provides the opportunity for network expansion across international borders. Activists are able to extend their advocacy and gain support from communities located across the globe, which allows for strengthened communication of their activism and intent.

Educational Outreach and Storytelling

Within Pakistan, advocates for social change have been leaders in creatively utilizing social media for educational advocacy and outreach for purposes of storytelling. Activist A, for example, motivates and teaches her followers about social justice issues through Twitter educational outreach. By providing educational resources, Activist A seeks to promote consciousness and critical thinking. Activist C also plays a vital role in social justice advocacy; his emphasis is on storytelling, and he writes about the experiences of young girls who have fought for an education and the hurdles he describes. Such narratives are empowering and inspire others in his audience who confront equivalent challenges. Activist C's storytelling humanizes social injustices, making them personal and tangible. As Activist A describes, the power of these stories lies in the educational battles and the transformative

Cooperative Action and Hashtag Advocacy

The integration of cooperation amongst activists with hashtag advocacy has become integral to the construction of awareness and the mobilization of actions in social justice movements. Anchored by a hashtag, advocacy activities can target and expand the scope of social movements, thus enhancing the visibility of a movement and capturing the attention of the relevant audience. For instance, Activist A uses the hashtag #ClimateActionNow to streamline the actions of climate change activists and their supporters to facilitate the organization of unified mobilization. Activist D performs a parallel function with #StudentsForRights to mobilize their campaign for students' rights. This, in turn, elevates the movement's visibility and increases the mobilization potential of the movement for more people to join. Activists A and D recognize the role of hashtags to advance social justice. Activist A further argues, in some respects, the effects of advocacy are enhanced using visual elements. A is recorded saying, "If you posted something graphic to your 600,000 followers, it is worth it to make it strike enough to grab attention."

Activist E also directed the attention to the hashtag #JusticeForNoor to focus on the killing of Noor Mukadam as a pressing issue.

The achievement of the campaign, buoyed by hashtags, went viral, received

considerable attention, and solidarity focused the cause on a national dialogue. The hashtag initiatives afforded the opportunity to showcase the collaborative potential of social media, uniting disparate groups and amplifying their advocacy.

Challenges of Misinformation and Online Harassment

Issues such as harassment and misinformation remain fixated on social media advocates. Misinformation undermines credibility and disrupts activism. Activist A asserted the need to solve misinformation and distrust. Trolling was singled out as a major problem for many activists. Activist E voiced concern for the safety of women activists. He stated, "Living through these times where you have to use social networking platforms to give live updates makes it necessary for activists to be very cautious when posting their locations as they can be preyed upon, especially women." In these instances, "caution" is not a suggestion when online harassment poses the very real risk of transgressing into the real world.

Activist B, from a minority faith community, described the impact of their advocacy as "online and physically [threatening] trolling." They added, "It's just because of my religion [that] it's cruel." These threats are affecting the actual advocates, their families and, in relational terms, all the loved ones contribute, and so a complete environment of apprehension and intimidation is being created. Activist C had similar comments about the use of social media, saying "the oppressed as a gift, but when it's weaponized, it's going to [do] harm." These stories are a reminder of the risks of digital advocacy. Activists are fighting for social justice, and their tools for change are digital. In the wrong hands, these tools and the social media platforms supporting them can be dedicated to harassment and intimidation.

Social Movements and Social Media

Social media has made it possible to increase the visibility of a variety of social issues that in the past went largely ignored and to expand small, localized activities into larger, national phenomena. Activist E described how, in the case of the Aurat March, a small, localized event gained traction and visibility as a larger social media movement, stating, "I saw the Aurat March through social media only, and it has turned into this big movement now." This visibility contributed to gender equality and women's rights issues movement mainstream acceptance. Activist B remarked on this phenomenon, stating that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, has made "Our community's issues... visible today because of social platforms, and we have some impact on policymaking as well." The above are just two examples, on the social media phenomenon, of the case studies used in this thesis, that illustrate how such tools enable previously silenced communities to participate in the social and political discourse on issues that are important to them.

Safety Measures and Vigilance

The privacy and safety of advocates engaging in activism on social media is a major issue, and the participants in this study pointed out the need to be vigilant and

cautious. Activists B and E pointed out that new activists need to be mindful of the risk's activism entails. Activist B stated, "New activists should always prioritize their safety and be aware of their surroundings. Concerns about threats remain real over time. The threats are constant. For those participating in sensitive topics or online activism, there are threats involving severe harassment, stalking, and even possible bodily harm.

For safety purposes, Activist C illustrated the importance of durable and dependable relational work. The participant "E" was even more elaborate describing geotagged content in real time compromises physical safety. "If you are taking a picture or two and then posting about a protest or any public area where you are showing your activism, people can locate where you are," they described in horror. The possible risk of social activism in drawing real world attention to oneself is high and needs a properly tuned sense and heightened awareness of where, when and what is being posted in the digital world. Activism involves real attention and activism.

DISCUSSION

This section addresses the emerged themes of the data. It aims to answer the research questions and provide insights into the use of social media for social justice activism in Pakistan through the lens of Public Sphere Theory.

RQ1: How are activists highlighting social injustice in Pakistan using social media?

Activists in Pakistan exhibit remarkable resourcefulness in using different social media sites to promote advocacy. There is demonstrable advocacy across different sites. Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok) allows activists to choose different platforms in one's advocacy according to their strengths. Activist A, for example, finds the immediacy in communication and subject matter of Twitter useful in real-time updates and interactive discussions where rally support is generated. E, an artist activist, finds the visual advocacy on Instagram helpful in communicating intricate social justice issues by using infographics and videos, as well as emotionally through visual narratives. social issues. Instagram enables Activists E and others to use visual advocacy for integrated storytelling, and emotionally for complex social justice issues. Instagram is particularly powerful to convey intricate social justice issues.

The broad functionality of these platforms enables activists to identify their audiences, establish networks of supporters, and promote their initiatives. Facilitating immediate reporting and mobilization is yet another important function of social media. Activist A characterizes Twitter to show how activists can arrange demonstrations and make spontaneous leaps to handle a situation. This is important in Pakistan, where the politics and society are unstable and unpredictable. Activists can handle social media to organize supporters around an issue and to get people to pay attention. Activist C, for instance, was able to reach international communities when she funded global educational initiatives. Activists can raise awareness around local issues and mobilize the global community to provide funds and political support.

RQ2: What are their perceived advantages and disadvantages of social media within the context of social justice activism?

This research data chapter examines the social media activism advantages and disadvantages phenomena. They perceive social media networking tools predominantly as means of gaining visibility and access to public forums to voice their messages. However, they are awarded online abuse. For activists, the risks of combat misinformation are high as they put their credibility and sacrifice their time and resources to raise issues. Activist A highlighted that the circulation of false narratives about their activist efforts and campaigns tends to confuse the public audience and ultimately destructive their activists' reputations.

A related challenge is online abuse directed towards women and people from other marginalized communities disproportionately. Activists, especially women, have described threats to their safety and security, and emotionally and physically distresses. For instance, Activist E stressed the particular social media vulnerabilities women should consider when posting and give caution to location-based content. "Living through these times where you have to use social networking platforms to give live updates makes it necessary for activists to be very cautious when posting their locations as they can be preyed upon, especially women," they said. This is a severe manifestation of the problem the activists are describing. The online platforms, meant to enable their activism, expose them to extraordinary amounts of danger.

Nonetheless, the development of movements and the growing prominence of causes on social media offer clear benefits. Research has shown that even initially small-scale activities, like Aurat March, could attract worldwide focus because of social media. Activist E noted how, because of social media attention, the Aurat March transformed from a small meeting to a significant national movement. This change shows how social media can extend movements, spotlight issues, and drive changes around policies by raising matters directly to the attention of the relevant authorities and the public.

RQ3: How do activists deal with misinformation, cyber harassment, and challenges to the narrative?

To respond to cyber harassment, misinformation, as well as the concrete problem of safety, activists design and implement special initiatives, including cooperative networks, threads, and safety protocols. The activists' networks around coalition campaigning as well as cooperative hashtag usage shows the spirit of collaboration and intent to amplify the sponsorship of the advocacy range. The hashtag activism campaign which builds support around #StopShiaGenocide, for instance, directs energies to the mobilization of people for the action and enhances the social unity and rallying spirit around the protest. Activists understand the collective power of dismantling harmful narratives. Activist D. stated, "Strategic and

connected campaigns bring people together to address a particular issue and gain global support.”

In the sphere of cyber activism, there are steps that one must take to ensure one's safety. There are stalkers and other malicious individuals, so one should avoid sharing personal information. Activist E warned individuals about the dangers of live detailing and geotagging. The ability to track someone should be of great concern and extreme caution should be taken. This study shows the high surveillance potential for women and minority activists. Activist B is an example, as she is part of a minority religious group and has been advocating for the issues that group faces. Activist B, presenting a tough case of abuse, shared, “... My family and I have been trolled and threatened online as well as offline because of my religious beliefs.”

In addition to this, the ability of an activist to build and sustain strategic alliances with other organizations is another source of obtaining safety. Such collaboration can provide emotional support for the activist's cause during a crisis and even physical protection. For digital activists, the importance of such networks is invaluable, especially in hostile situations. The very foundation of digital activism relies on such collaborations.

Theoretical Implications: Public Sphere Theory and Activism on Social Media

Considering Public Sphere Theory, this research showcases the growing significance of social media in the formation of a new, digital public sphere in Pakistan. For Habermas, the public sphere is a space in which citizens engage in rational deliberation and discourse, the formation of public opinion, and the challenge of power relations in a society (Habermas, 1991). Given the constraining and controlling socio-political milieu in the Pakistan case, especially in its geo-political borders, the state's control over the traditional media, and the social media frameworks which will always persist and function. These social media frameworks allow weaker social actors the ability to devise and rationally discourse. Social media activism permits individuals to unreservedly confront dominant narratives, organize, and expedite social movement formation and activism in their spheres.

Social networks have proven useful in rapid mobilization, community building, and global advocacy, as anticipated by Habermas and his deliberations concerning the public sphere. Most significantly, discussions and actions transcend certain boundaries, including geographical and geopolitical ones. Conversely, the problems of disinformation and online bullying illustrate some challenges associated with these platforms. There is a degree of social media activism, and this is what this research analyzes. There is no question that social media has become a social justice tool, and this is something most activists contend with in the current study.

Table 2: Key Findings

Activist	Activism Area	Key Challenges Faced	Strategies Employed
A	Environmental activism	Misinformation	Real-time mobilization
B	Advocacy for the Shia community	Online harassment, censorship	Hashtag campaigns
C	Education activism	Lack of resources, misinformation	Storytelling, community building
D	Student rights activism	Online harassment	Educational outreach
E	Women's rights and security	Online harassment, safety risks	Visual advocacy, safety measures

Table 3: Themes Identified

Sr#	Theme	Detail
1	Platform Versatility	Activists leverage multiple social media platforms to maximize reach and impact.
2	Real-Time Reporting and Mobilization	Social media enables rapid updates and community mobilization during crises.
3	Community Building and Global Reach	Social media helps build strong support networks and reach a global audience.
4	Educational Outreach and Storytelling	Activists use social media to educate the public and share compelling personal stories.
5	Challenges of Misinformation & Online Harassment	Activists face significant challenges in combating misinformation and dealing with online harassment.
6	Collaborative Efforts and Hashtag Campaigns	Collaboration with other activists and influencers and effective hashtag campaigns amplify messages and broaden reach.
7	Evolution of Movements and Increased Visibility	Social media transforms small events into significant movements and increases the visibility of various causes.
8	Safety Measures and Vigilance	Online safety and privacy are critical concerns for activists, requiring precautionary measures and vigilance.

The tables focus on the themes and results of the study, demonstrating the strategies, problems, and social media significance of activists involved in activism in Pakistan. The focus on the advantages of social media—such as outreach and mobilization—highlights the challenges of harassment and information distortion.

These challenges highlight the need for collaboration and proactive digital advocacy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section of the research, the empirical results, and their implications, are discussed with one activist, one activist, one policy person, and one future research. Advocates face a two-sided social justice problem when using social media in places like Pakistan. Here, the research aims to understand the nature of Pakistan activism, especially injustice, strategies people take, and the main challenges people face. One of the most impactful results is the ability of the digital activism platforms to change the scope of contemporary activism. Organizing, mobilizing, and advocating activism are possible to a level that was previously impossible. However, activists can face challenges like harassment and misinformation that are more prominent in digital activism and require more complex and strategic abstraction to solve the problem (Digital Advocacy).

This research had three objectives: to understand how social movements are using social media, to weigh the pros and cons of social media activism, and to identify possible solutions to misinformation and online harassment (McCombs, 2004). The use of Public Sphere theory helped in contextualizing the analysis of digital activism in the Pakistani context (Stromback, 2014). Here, social media offers the public sphere functions of exposing and expanding channels of communication, celebrating marginalized people, and providing a forum in which citizens can claim their rights (Van Leuven et al., 2009). The Pakistani public sphere has its peculiarities. It has a unique form of state regulation of the traditional media which often caps the information flow, silences the voices of activism, and thus, creates a bottom-line environment for digital activism (Smith, 2005).

Practical Implications

Activists and policymakers receive actionable directions in this study. Activists work in situations where local media is lacking or censored, and in such situations, activists could be empowered to use social media in focused and innovative ways (Lotan et al., 2011). In situations where the problem of misinformation is simply not addressed, the study suggests that activists use reliance on fact-checking, work with NGOs, and be more strategic about the flow of highly sensitive material (Sun, 2014). These strategies may alleviate the risk of misinformation, which is ubiquitous, from crippling efforts at signification (Papacharissi, 2008).

Contribution to Existing Knowledge

As noted by Van Leuven, et. al. (2009), this research adds descriptive, qualitative work addressing gaps in scholarship pertaining to social change activists' perceptions and experiences in Pakistan. In addition to the literature that primarily adopts quantitative research approaches, this research also sought to understand activists' challenges in relation to the social media and social media activism ecosystems, as well as the problem landscape social media activism helps to address (Fuchs, 2015). The research

documents the use social networking technologies activism in Pakistan, and more specifically the literature-ignored, and under examined, the literature on media activism in the digital and social media continuum, (Foster and Regina, 2008).

Limitations and Future Directions

Each study has its limits, and this one is no different. One of the biggest limitations has to do with the **sample being relatively small and purposively selected**, which in turn affects the **generalizability** of the study (Foster & Regina, 2008). The insights gained in terms of the social justice movements were very rich and provided in-depth accounts, but purposive sampling still limits the ability to extrapolate findings to the wider activist community within Pakistan. Additionally, a common characteristic of **qualitative studies** is the **subjective claims** of the participants and the researcher, which the community of practice has provided to the extent of being constructive, yet bias still creeps in (McCombs, 2004).

Therefore, **future studies** may want to broaden the sample size and the **demographic parameters** describing a constituent such as age, gender, social capital, and geography to create a more nuanced understanding of digital activism in Pakistan (Brooks, 2013). The use of **mixed-methods or quantitative approaches** could strengthen the findings further by allowing statistical measures of online engagement, the extent of mobilization, and the effectiveness of the action campaigns. This would further consolidate the literature on digital activism and allow findings to move beyond general claims.

In addition, researching online activism **longitudinally** is important in studying **temporal shifts** in online activism strategies, framing, and outcomes over time. In addition, this would unfold toward a more nuanced understanding of activism in response to a diverse political, technological, and social milieu. Finally, there is a burning need for **comparative studies** focusing on digital activism in different political and cultural settings, as these studies would help to understand how socio-political settings shape activism as well as reveal significant socio-political patterns and gaps around the world in digital activism (Fuchs, 2015).

The findings of this study indicate the **binary effect of social media** on activism, which includes social change and obstacles to social change, such as misinformation, surveillance, and harassment (Foster & Regina, 2008). Based on **Public Sphere theory**, this research supports the view that social media still functions as an alternative public sphere where the marginalized can voice dissent and organize for change (Smith, 2005). Yet, on the other hand, the nature of activism will change in the future as it will rely more on **stronger protective cybersecurity**, **ethical frameworks for digital engagement**, and **communication strategies** that minimize risk while maximizing advocacy (Papacharissi, 2008).

To conclude, the future of research focused on social media-driven activism within and beyond Pakistan would benefit from increasing methodological diversity, incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, and tackling issues of digital security.

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