

Disparity in Political Participation on Social Media Public Sphere among Male and Female Students

Anjum Zia & Muhammad Shahid Imran***

Abstract

Social media has become a key term in new participatory political discourse. Previous studies argued that youth is least interested in democracies and politics; hence, this study aims to explore the role of social media in increasing political participation among male and female university students. Data was collected from a sample of 340 students, chosen from equal gender proportion of five universities with purposive sampling technique to conduct quantitative survey research. The findings of study revealed a positive relationship between political participation and social media usage of students. It also confirms that majority respondents were using social media for political information but the trend is more popular among the male students as compared to females. Male participants were more involved in discussing politics and posting political content on social media, while females were more active in actionable politics like casting vote. The study concludes that social media is playing a significant role in enhancing political participation among university students and predicts a better future of democracies in social media world as new technology provides the language that young voters understand. It also realized that measures are required to attract female students towards participatory politics in Pakistan.

With immense power to provide opportunities for participatory communication, Internet has become a platform to foster democratic values into young users. A lot of political communication is taking place on internet. In Pakistan, social media is changing the scenario of public discussions by introducing a new place for public to talk about politics.¹ Therefore this study focused on political use of social media by

* Dr Anjum Zia, Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore.

** Muhammad Shahid Imran, Research Scholar, University of Central Punjab, Lahore.

¹ N.M. Abbasi, "Social Media and Politics". *Pakistan Today*, 10 February (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2013/02/10/comment/columns/social-media-and-politics-2/>.

university students to know the aspects of political discourse they participate most. Dahl² in “Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition”, also describe some empirical conditions for democracy including participation from citizens.³ With its strong mechanism of participation, social media has the potential of dialogue and power.

Democracy is direct participation by people and social media of the cyber city has provided public with new public sphere to discuss, disagree or float ideas. The town council, the agora and the ballot box gain presence through social networking sites, for instance, Facebook and Twitter.⁴ The low interest of young people in politics has been long discussed and studied against many factors including decrease in community ties, low interest level in politics and falling trust in politicians.⁵ However, results from recent studies contradict these claims as it is found that youth is now more concerned with politics.⁶

Different interviews, surveys and focus groups of young people in seven European states conclude that “youth articulates interests and preferences but some of them are more active than majority of the

² R.A. Dahl, “Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition”, *New Haven* (1971).

³ J. Grugel, & M.L. Bishop, *Democratization: a critical introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Retrieved from http://www.semesteratsea.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Bielasiak_PLCP-2500_CompPolitics3.pdf.

⁴ A.S. Fernandes, *The Intensive Programme in Media and Communication: Enlarging Europe—Enlarging Participation*, European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School, 2007. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1350&context=asc_papers

⁵ A. Mycock and J. Tonge, “The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement”. *Parliamentary Affairs* 65 (2012): 138-61; R.J. Dalton. “Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation”, *Political Studies* 56, 1 (2008): 76-98; H. Haste & A. Hogan, “Beyond Conventional Civic Participation, Beyond the Moral-Political Divide: Young People and Contemporary Debates about Citizenship”, *Journal of Moral Education* 35, 4 (2006): 473-93; G. Stoker, “Explaining Political Disenchantment: Finding Pathways to Democratic Renewal”, *The Political Quarterly* 77, 2 (2006): 184-94.

⁶ J. Sloam, “‘Voice and equality’: Young People’s Politics in the European Union”, *West European Politics* 36, 4 (2013): 836-58; A. Harris, J. Wyn & S. Younes, “Beyond Apathetic or Activist Youth ‘Ordinary’ Young People and Contemporary Forms of Participation”, *Young* 18, 1 (2010): 9-32; T. O’Toole, D. Marsh & S. Jones, “Political Literacy Cuts Both Ways: The Politics of Non-Participation among Young People”, *The Political Quarterly* 74, 3 (2003): 349-60.

adults”.⁷ Results from a US study show that after normalizing demographic variables, information seeking through Social Network Sites (SNS) is optimistic and major predictor of people's social capital, civic and political participatory behavior, online and offline”.⁸ Previously, television was blamed for decrease in political participation;⁹ however, many studies recently blamed Internet too for less participation as people spent more time on Internet than on socializing or political activities.¹⁰

This study tries to explore how traditional public sphere of street or public gatherings change into new public sphere of social media where same discussions about policies, political parties, politicians and other matters of public interest have been taking place. It also focuses on (i) how this new public sphere has been instilling more participation into university students' behaviour and (ii) whether there is difference among male and female participation.

In a research study Delli Carpini¹¹ found that youngsters were less concerned about politics or public affairs, however, invention of social media changed many things. It emerged as a new public sphere where users interact and talk on topics related to political and social life. Therefore, there was a need to explore this public sphere and provide results of youth's participation and interest in national politics. The study also investigates social media impacts on individual's participation to national democracy. It also added new dimensions to existing literature on social media and political discourse. It provides significant recommendations to the policy makers and identifies areas for future researchers.

⁷ EACEA, *Youth Participation in Democratic Life*, [forthcoming] (Brussels: EACEA, 2013).

⁸ J.S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); N. Lin, *Social Capital: A theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital”, *Journal of Democracy* 6, 1 (1995): 65-77.

¹⁰ M. Bugeja, *Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); R. Kraut, M. Patterson, V. Lundmark, S. Kiesler, T. Mukophadhyay & W. Scherlis, “Internet Paradox: A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-being?”, *American Psychologist* 53, 9 (1998): 1017-31.

¹¹ M.X. DelliCarpini, “Gen. com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment”, *Political Communication* 17, 4 (2000): 341-49. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600050178942>.

Several theoretical and research studies attempted to conceptualize the debatable relationship between media and democracy by using different perspectives and variables.¹² All the time politics does not involve discussions or participations, therefore Habermas' concept of public sphere is applied in the study as new method of participatory politics. These days social networking sites are working as major tool of democratic values and can shift decision making to grass roots level by creating current public sphere while traditional media because of commercialization may not be helpful in promoting democracy.¹³

Habermas¹⁴ mentioned about the conversion of past liberal public sphere to today's media-dominated public sphere and called it mass democracy and welfare state capitalism. The decision making is now mainly dependant on what media presents rather than people's own political opinion. On the other hand, internet gives voice to the unvoiced people, so create a new public sphere to discuss issues in an interactive way.¹⁵ The core concept of this study was to establish that social media may create an alternative public sphere, which Downey and Fenton¹⁶ say "a counter-public sphere" where students can take part in public discourse including political discussions. So they can learn democratic values which are the final product of public sphere. Therefore public sphere is a social space, where people develop their opinion regarding political and public issues. With the passage of time, communication technologies have developed and transformed the media. Now internet

¹² C.E. Baker, *Media, Markets, and Democracy: Communication, Society, and Politics*, 2002; P. Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement*, Vol. 551 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); C.G. Christians, *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*, Vol.114 (University of Illinois Press, 2009); J. Curran. *Media and Democracy* (Taylor & Francis, 2011).

¹³ G. Berger, "Theorizing the Media—Democracy Relationship in Southern Africa", *International Communication Gazette* 64, 1 (2002): 21-45. Retrieved from http://rcirib.ir/articles/pdfs/cd1/Ingenta_Sage_Articles.../Ingenta916.pdf.

¹⁴ J. Habermas, "Concluding Comments on Empirical Approaches to Deliberative Politics", *Acta Politica* 40 (2005): 384-92.

¹⁵ J. Deane, "Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere", *Media & Global Change: Rethinking Communication for Development*, 2005: 177-92.

¹⁶ J. Downey & N. Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere", *New Media & Society* 5, 2 (2003): 185-202. DOI: 10.1177/1461444803005002003

appears as comparatively less controlled public sphere but with limited audience.¹⁷

Keeping in view the above debate, the objective of the study was to explore the relation between usage of social media and political participation of students, the study raised two main questions:

- 1- Do social media enhance political participation of university students to create a virtual public sphere?
- 2- Is there any difference between male and female political participation on social media public sphere?

Literature review

Kim states “in Asia cultural, political and economical forces has globalized the media, which provides participation, new choices and imaginations to the people”.¹⁸ Particularly social media, due to its participatory nature, has improved the collaboration of individuals, groups, and organisations that presents new ideas for democratic practices. Shirky states that social media tools are acting “as coordinating” most of the political movements in the world and even democratic states are “trying to limit public access to these tools”.¹⁹ Therefore it was important to investigate, whether Social Networking Sites (SNS) are serving democracy? Furthermore, are they able to damage public sphere where people’s voice is confined to government’s actions only.

DeWitt & Smith say “to attract youth toward election cycle, digital media facilitate and engage young voters for registration, reminders, to advocate action in election events”.²⁰ Bakx states “in democracy people has freedom of choice and their choices valued by the

¹⁷ T.N. Smyth, “Social Media, Elections, and Democracy in West Africa”, 2013. Retrieved from <https://smartech.gatech.edu/bitstream/handle/1853/49042/template-export-5669002027833845917.dir-4287197715919038235.zip>

¹⁸ Y. Kim (ed.), *Media Consumption and Everyday Life in Asia* (Routledge, 2008). Retrieved from http://samples.sainsburysebooks.co.uk/9781135896447_sample_517475.pdf

¹⁹ C. Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change”, *Foreign Affairs* (2011): 28-41.

²⁰ C. DeWitt & H. Smith, “Young Voters Live Online. That’s where the Future of Politics will be”, *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2016. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/08/12/young-voters-live-online-thats-where-the-future-of-politics-will-be/?utm_term=.f54271b1f1d1

government”.²¹ People are now involved in democracy due to access and instructive feature of social media but government is not paying attention to their involvement. Social media should play a role in policy making because it can mobilize and impact the government. Kimberlee stated that youth does not have serious affiliation with political parties in comparison of others.²² Similarly the conclusion of a study by Mycock and Tonge was “political parties are reluctant to contact youth and prioritising aged voters. Conversely, the resonance of political issues linked to youngsters and their engagement in democracy has recently improved thus political parties are preparing youth to cast vote”.²³

Riley et al.²⁴ proposed that changed political landscape pushes traditional form of politics towards alienation although this transformation does not uniformly affect everyone’s political participation. Vecchione and Caprara suggested that “several factors, for instance, gender, age, and education influence levels of participation considerably. Particularly, educated males and aged people are more involved into politics as compared to others”.²⁵ The study also concluded that income level does not change political participation significantly. Some other studies also concluded that use of media for information influences individual’s political participation.²⁶ However, Gil de Zúñiga²⁷ stated that usage of social media in specific ways affect

²¹ M. Bakx, “The role of social media in crisis communication from a democratic perspective: a qualitative case study of the fire in Moerdijk and the shooting incident in Alphen aan den Rijn in 2011”. Retrieved from http://essay.utwente.nl/62391/1/MSc_M_Bakx.pdf

²² R. Kimberlee, “Why don’t Young People Vote at General Elections?”, *Journal of Youth Studies* 5, 1 (2002): 85-97.

²³ A. Mycock and J. Tonge, “The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 65 (2012): 138-61.

²⁴ S.C. Riley, C. Griffin & Y. Morey, “The Case for ‘Everyday Politics’: Evaluating Neo-tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music Culture as an Example”, *Sociology* 44, 2 (2010): 345-63.

²⁵ M. Vecchione & G.V. Caprara, “Personality Determinants of Political Participation: The Contribution of Traits and Self-efficacy Beliefs”, *Personality and Individual Differences* 46, 4 (2009): 487-92.

²⁶ J.M. McLeod, D.A. Scheufele & P. Moy, “Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation”, *Political Communication* 16, 3 (1999): 315-36.

²⁷ H. Gil de Zúñiga, E. Puig-I-Abril and H. Rojas, “Weblogs, Traditional Sources Online and Political Participation: An Assessment of How the

participation not only media itself. According to Kestilä-Kekkonen “18-30 year olds have, in fact, a higher trust in parties and in the effectiveness of elections than older age groups, despite their lower electoral participation”.²⁸ Dalton²⁹ mentioned that although social media is popular among youth but just 8 per cent of them considered debates on social media as an effective way to express political views. Whereas, Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal³⁰ advocated that online news exposure along with chat rooms’ interaction and emails affect the voting rate.

Stolle and Hooghe established “political engagement links with age, gender and education”.³¹ Verba et al.³² also found education a significant variable in one’s political participation patterns. Conway³³ mentioned that although gender gap is shrinking in political participation but still males are more active in politics than females. Shah, Kwak and Holbert³⁴ have also pointed out that exchange of online information encourages political engagement and trust among the youth. Further, group affiliation enhances trust level,³⁵ democratic values and political skills.³⁶

Internet is Changing the Political Environment”, *New Media & Society* 11, 4 (2009): 553-74.

²⁸ E. Kestilä-Kekkonen, “Anti-party Sentiment among Young Adults Evidence from Fourteen West European Countries”, *Young* 17, 2 (2009): 156.

²⁹ R.J. Dalton, “Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation”, *Political Studies* 56, 1 (2008): 76-98.

³⁰ K. Mossberger, C.J. Tolbert & R.S. McNeal, *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

³¹ D. Stolle & M. Hooghe, *Shifting Inequalities?: Patterns of Exclusion and Inclusion in Emerging Forms of Political Participation* (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2009), 1-24.

³² S. Verba, K.L. Schlozman, H.E. Brady & H.E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Vol.4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³³ M.M. Conway, “Women and Political Participation”, *Political Science & Politics* 34, 2 (2001): 231-33.

³⁴ D.V. Shah, N. Kwak & R. Holbert, “‘Connecting’ and ‘Disconnecting’ with Civic Life: Patterns of Internet Use and the Production of Social Capital”, *Communication Abstracts* 24, 6 (2001): 743-93.

³⁵ J. Brehm & W. Rahn, “Individual-level Evidence for the Causes and Consequences of Social Capital”, *American Journal of Political Science* 41, 3 (1997): 999-1023; M.K. Jennings & L. Stoker, “Social Trust and Civic Engagement across Time and Generations”, *Acta Politica* 39, 4 (2004): 342-79.

Research has established a correlation between political participation and psychological benefits because politically active people are more satisfied. Krueger says internet reduces participation divides, for instance socio-economic, as low income group can also access it.³⁷ However, Dahlberg noted that “online communication represents social inequalities” because it is dominated by few people.³⁸ Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze³⁹ relate political participation with quality of life and freedom of participation. Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick stated “internet has a positive relation with individual’s political knowledge”⁴⁰ but Bimber found “absence of a clear link between increases in information and increases in popular political action”.⁴¹ According to Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman⁴² usage of internet enhances political and civic participation, whereas, Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte, and Hampton argued “the internet supplements political activities but does not change people’s level of involvement”.⁴³ Conversely, Coleman and Hall suggest “internet as political participation tool may attract more youngsters to politics”.⁴⁴

³⁶ D.A. McFarland & R.J. Thomas, “Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation”, *American Sociological Review* 71, 3 (2006): 401-25.

³⁷ B.S. Krueger, “Assessing the Potential of Internet Political Participation in the United States: A Resource Approach”, *American Politics Research* 30, 5 (2002): 476-98.

³⁸ L. Dahlberg, “The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere”. *Information, Communication & Society* 4, 4 (2001): 615-33.

³⁹ R.L. Basu, “The Eco-ethical Views of Tagore and Amartya Sen”, *Culture Mandala* 8, 2 (2009), 5889.

⁴⁰ J. Horrigan, K. Garrett & P. Resnick, *The Internet and Democratic Debate*, Pew Internet and American Life Project and the University of Michigan School of Information, 2004. Retrieved on 6 May 2005, from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Political_Info_Report.pdf

⁴¹ B. Bimber, “The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism”, *Polity* (1998): 3.

⁴² L.M. Weber, A. Loumakis & J. Bergman, “Who Participates and Why? An Analysis of Citizens on the Internet and the Mass Public”, *Social Science Computer Review* 21, 1 (2003): 26-42.

⁴³ A. Quan-Haase, B. Wellman, J.C. Witte & K.N. Hampton, “Capitalizing on the Net: Social Contact, Civic Engagement and Sense of Community”, in *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Waldon: Blackwell, 2002), 312.

⁴⁴ Stephen Coleman & Nicola Hall, “Spinning on the Web: ECampaigning and Beyond”, in *Cyber Space Odyssey: The Internet in the UK Election*, ed. S. Coleman (London: Hansard Society, 2001), 8-25.

We are says “social media supports political participation which enhances group dialogue”.⁴⁵ Wellman et al. concluded “internet users may already be active in politics”.⁴⁶ Wilhelm stated “internet can be a mean of democratic deliberation but can’t guarantee equal involvement”.⁴⁷ Further, identity on internet is not constant but fluid, therefore, it is not an ideal tool to enhance participation. “The face-to-face communication creates trust which is not possible in virtual communication of internet”.⁴⁸

Research studies generally “relate political participation with voting and campaigning for political parties”⁴⁹ but, participation is beyond this and include political engagements also, for instance, doing community work and attending protests, etc.⁵⁰ A behavior to solve community issues is civic engagement;⁵¹ whereas, political participation online/offline is to influence government policies and actions.⁵² “Political participation means practical involvement in politics such as taking part in a campaign or convincing others how to vote”. A study by Rosenstone & Hansen established “a relationship between participation and demographic variables like age, education and socio-economic status”.⁵³ Studies have also proved that social media enhances individuals’ political participation but it is not the only variable affecting

⁴⁵ C. Weare, “The Internet and Democracy: The Causal Links between Technology and Politics”, *International Journal of Public Administration* 25, 5 (2002): 659-91.

⁴⁶ B. Wellman, A.Q. Haase, J. Witte & K. Hampton, “Does the Internet Increase, Decrease, or Supplement Social Capital? Social Networks, Participation, and Community Commitment”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 45, 3 (2001): 436-55.

⁴⁷ A.G. Wilhelm, “Virtual Sounding Boards: How Deliberative is on-line Political Discussion?”, *Information Communication & Society* 1, 3 (1998): 313-38; A.G. Wilhelm, *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁴⁸ M. Poster, “Cyber Democracy: Internet and the Public Sphere”, *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁹ M.M. Conway, *Political Participation in the United States* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1985).

⁵⁰ S. Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*.

⁵¹ C. Zukin, S. Keeter, M. Andolina, K. Jenkins & M.X.D. Carpini, *A New Engagement?: Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵² S. Verba., et al., *Voice and Equality*.

⁵³ S.J. Rosenstone & J.M. Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

their civic engagements. The social status, age, socializing patterns and family's political activism also affect their political participation.

The literature review found that few studies emphasized that internet is mostly used to socialize and not to increase rather threaten the political participation, whereas, some other studies also provide evidences that there is a positive relation between social media and political knowledge and participation of individuals. But there is a lack of scientific evidence related to participation of Pakistani university students in political discussions on social media public sphere, which is rapidly expanding as is evident from some studies, which gives strong justification to investigate this in indigenous prospective. Therefore following hypotheses were formed:

H1: More the use of social media more the political participation of university students.

H2: Male students may participate more in politics on social media than female.

This study gives an overlook about changing trends in Pakistan about political discourse through social media. This will help understand how social media could be useful in bringing positive political attitude to our university students.

Methodology

This research was conducted by using cross sectional survey design. According to Olsen & George⁵⁴ cross sectional survey administered at a specific time to compare many different variables at the same time. Variables including gender, age and qualification were measured and assumptions were based on literature reviewed and replaced with actual data on specific variable 'gender' in this study. Purposive sampling technique was applied. The participants were selected on the basis of pre-determined characteristics i.e. user of social media, male and female, aged between 16-30 and students of universities including University of the Punjab, Lahore College for Women University and the Government College University, University of Central Punjab, Leads University.

The sample size comprised 300 students (approximately equal quota of gender) from five selected universities of Lahore. The questionnaire was used as a tool of data collection after pre testing. Also different scales were separated for each variable like political tolerance, voting knowledge, freedom of expression, campaigning for political

⁵⁴ C. Olsen & D.M.M. St George, "Cross-sectional Study Design and Data Analysis", *College Entrance Examination Board*, 2004.

parties and political participation. The Cronbach Alpha was applied to check the reliability of scale, its recorded value was 0.949.

Findings and interpretations

Cross tabulation and correlation, were used to analyze the data. the results were as follows:

Table 1: Demography of the respondents

Sr.#	Demographic characteristics	Description of characteristics	F	%
1.	Age (years)	16- 20	102	34
		21-25	138	46
		26-30	60	20
	Total		300	100.0
2.	Education	Graduation	249	82.9
		M.Phil	42	14
		P.hD	9	3
	Total		300	100.0

Table 1 shows that majority respondents were aged between 21 to 25 years i.e. 46 per cent and only one fifth respondents in the age bracket of 26 to 30 years. Table 1 also shows that most of respondents (82.9 per cent) were students of graduation program and 14.3 per cent enrolled in M.Phil while 3 per cent were enrolled in Ph.D.

Table 2: Time spent by students on different social media sites

n=300

Statements Respondents		Never used	15 to 30 min	1 to 2 hours	3 to 4 hours	More than 4 hours
Time spent on Facebook daily	Female	1.7	14.7	14.7	8.0	11.0
	Male	1.3	14.0	15.7	9.0	10.0
	Total	3.0	28.7	30.3	17.0	21.0
Time spent on Twitter daily	Female	24.3	13.0	6.3	2.0	4.3
	Male	18.7	16.3	7.0	3.3	4.7
	Total	43.0	29.3	13.3	5.3	9.0
Time spent on Instagram daily	Female	20.0	14.7	5.7	4.0	5.7
	Male	20.7	15.0	8.0	3.7	2.7
	Total	40.7	29.7	13.7	7.7	8.3

Note: values are presented in percentage

Table 2 shows that maximum respondents are using face book and just 3 per cent respondents were not non users. The findings also revealed that there is a slight difference between male and female respondents, who never use Facebook, i.e. 1.7 per cent female and 1.3 per cent male. Duration of Facebook usage also varies from 15 minutes to more than 4 hours. Majority (30 per cent) respondents were spending 1 to 2 hours daily on Facebook and most of them were males whereas majority female students (out of 21 per cent respondents) were spending more than 4 hours. This shows that Facebook is the most used and favorite cite of social media among both the gender. Table 2 also exposed, about half of the respondents (43 per cent) were not using twitter and most of them were women. However, the majority among users (29.3 per cent) spends 15-30 minutes daily on twitter and only 9 per cent students spend more than 4 hours. The data also convey that twitter is more popular among the male respondents as compared to the female. Similarly 40.7 per cent respondents including equal number of female and male never use Instagram daily; however, majority among users (29.7 per cent) use it from 15 to 30 minutes, followed by (13.7 per cent) using for 1 to 2 hours a day. The findings also show that almost one tenth of respondents including 2.7 per cent male students and 5.7 per cent female students using it for more than 4 hours a day (Mean value=2.13).

Table 3: Social media usage for political purpose

n=300

Statement	Respondents	Disagree	Not Confirmed	Agree
Use social media sites daily	Female Male Total	106 12.3 22.9	10.3 7.0 17.3	29.0 30.7 59.7
Use social media to get news updates	Female Male Total	9.6 7.0 16.6	9.3 10.7 19.7	31.0 32.3 63.3
Use social media for getting political information	Female Male Total	16.3 10.3 26.6	13.0 13.7 26.7	20.7 25.4 46.1
Discuss politics on social media	Female Male Total	20.0 15.0 35.0	17.0 14.7 31.7	13.0 20.3 33.3
Like to read about politics on social media	Female Male Total	14.3 15.4 29.7	14.0 10.0 24.0	21.7 24.7 46.4
Use to post political content on social media	Female Male Total	23.4 17.3 40.7	12.7 14.0 26.7	14.0 18.7 32.7

Note: values are presented in percentage

Table 3 throws light on usage of social media for information and political purposes among university students. It is clear from the table that only one fifth of the respondents (22 per cent, almost equal number of females and males) were disagreed that they use social media sites daily. Whereas majority (59.7 per cent, almost equal male and female) responded that they are visiting social media sites daily. The data also revealed that majority's purpose of visiting social networking sites is to get news update and most of them (46.1 per cent respondents) acquire political information. Although majority likes to obtain political information from the sites but not used to post political content. The data also reveals that only one third (33.3 per cent) respondents, majority among them is male, admitted that they discuss politics and also post political content on social media. This confirms that although students are using social media to obtain political information but only one third is practically involved in political activities and male students are more active in this regard.

Table 4: Social media and political participation of students N=300

Statement	Respondents	Disagree	Not confirmed	Agree
I participate in political debates on social media	Female	25.4	16.7	8.0
	Male	21.6	14.0	14.4
	Total	47.0	30.7	22.4
I will vote in next elections	Female	7.0	11.7	31.3
	Male	10.3	12.7	27.0
	Total	17.4	24.3	58.3
I work voluntarily for a political party during election day	Female	26.7	11.7	11.7
	Male	17.6	15.7	16.7
	Total	44.3	27.3	28.3
I usually attend political gatherings	Female	21.7	15.4	12.7
	Male	18.4	15.4	16.4
	Total	40.1	30.8	29.1
After using social media I feel more connected with politics	Female	13.6	13.7	22.7
	Male	10.0	14.0	26.0
	Total	23.6	27.7	48.7

Note: values are presented in percentage

Table 4 shows that majority (47 per cent) students including almost half of the females disagreed that they participate in political debates on social media. More than one fourth of the respondents were not confirmed about the statement whereas one fourth of them including 14.4 per cent male and 8 per cent of female were taking part in political debate on social media. When the respondents were asked whether they will cast vote in the next elections, majority (58.3 per cent) answered yes they will. The interesting finding regarding vote casting is that most of female respondents were ready to cast vote instead of male (who are considered more active in political process in Pakistan). Similarly one fifth of the respondents answered that they were not willing to cast vote and majority among them were male. This table also shows that majority (44.3 per cent) students including 26.7 per cent female disagreed that they attend political gatherings and work voluntarily for a political party during election days, while one fourth of the students including 11.7 per cent female and 16.3 per cent male agreed on the statement. The data also shows that one fourth of students including 13.6 per cent female and only 10 per cent male disagreed that social media connects them with politics, while majority (48 per cent) students including half of the female agreed that social media links them with politics. Therefore it can be said that social media is enhancing the political participation among the students.

Table 5: Social media usage and political participation of university students — correlation and descriptive statistics (N=300)

		Political participation
Usage of social media	Pearson Correlation	.377**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	300

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5 shows the result of correlation between social media usage and political participation, which is statistically significant at 0.01 level ($r=0.377$, $P<.001$). It confirms that social media usage is positively related to students' political participation.

Analysis and discussions

The findings revealed participation of students in political discussions on social media usage. The hypothetical statement that social media is enhancing political participation of the university students has been approved in this research. The results also expressed that students have

freedom to convey and discuss politics through social media. The survey has also established a correlation between usage of social media and political participation of university students, which confirms that social media has played an important role in enhancing political participation among university students.

In fact, the study has approved the hypothesis that “more the usage of social media greater is the political participation of students” but the data shows disparity in political participation on social media public sphere among male and female students. Majority of the female students avoid taking part in social media political debates. Almost half of the respondents including most of female students admitted that they avoid participating in political debates but 32.6 per cent of respondents including most of male students agreed that they post political content on social media. This result corresponds with the conclusion of a research study by Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman conducted in 2003 which says that “internet usage causes an increase in political and civic participation”.⁵⁵ Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte, and Hampton argued same statement that “internet supplements political activities but do not change involvement level”.⁵⁶ Lower level of female participation “is due to lower level of political knowledge as women with more political knowledge tend to participate more in politics”.⁵⁷

Interesting to note that majority users of social media admitted that in upcoming elections they will vote. This result corresponds with the findings of Harris, Wyn and Younes,⁵⁸ O'Toole, Marsh and Jones and Sloam that claimed “youngsters are concerned with politics and voting which is a clear transition from a traditional media generation to internet based communication”.⁵⁹ However, this is the only political aspect where

⁵⁵ L.M. Weber, A. Loumakis & J. Bergman, “Who Participates and Why? An Analysis of Citizens on the Internet and the Mass Public”, *Social Science Computer Review* 21, 1 (2003): 26-42.

⁵⁶ A. Quan-Haase, B. Wellman, J.C. Witte & K.N. Hampton, “Capitalizing on the Net: Social Contact, Civic Engagement and Sense of Community”, *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Waldon: Blackwell, 2002), 291-324.

⁵⁷ S.J. Carroll, “Voting Choices: Meet you at the Gender Gap”, *Gender and Elections in America: Shaping the Future of American Politics*, 2006.

⁵⁸ A. Harris, J. Wyn & S. Younes, “Beyond Apathetic or Activist Youth ‘Ordinary’ Young People and Contemporary Forms of Participation”, *Young* 18, 1 (2010): 9-32.

⁵⁹ T. O'Toole, D. Marsh & S. Jones, “Political Literacy Cuts Both Ways: The Politics of Non-Participation among Young People”, *The Political Quarterly* 74, 3 (2003): 349-60; J. Sloam, “‘Voice and equality’: Young

female left their male counterparts behind as 31.3 per cent female and 27 per cent male students among whole population agreed to vote in next elections. Previous study by Putnam,⁶⁰ found that television decreases interpersonal trust level, civic participation and voters' turnout in US. Later studies by Bugeja;⁶¹ Kraut *et al.*;⁶² stated that internet led to less political participation as people spent more time on internet than on socializing or political activities. However, this study suggests that social media is a tool that enhances political participation among students. The findings also show that usually students avoid political gatherings or voluntarily working for political parties.

The result also exposed that majority male respondents were agreed that they feel more connected with politics after social media usage. DeWitt & Smith presented similar results in an article that "anyone who is interested to lure youth to election cycle, digital media and new technology provide a language young voters understand".⁶³ This research also faced the problem of blank questionnaires mostly of female students, this was also consistently discussed by many research studies that women tend to give fewer correct answers due to lack of political knowledge.

The study tried to investigate the role of social media in encouraging political participation among university students and explore relationship with demographic variable i.e. gender. However, there were many limitations which were considered while conducting this research but the sample for this study was taken from five universities which helped to increase external validity. However, results can not be generalized to all university students of Pakistan, or students in general, due to small sample size. Other mediums like TV, newspapers, magazines and SMS alerts etc. which can affect the gender

People's Politics in the European Union", *West European Politics* 36, 4 (2013): 836-58.

⁶⁰ Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", *Journal of Democracy* 6, 1 (1995): 65-77.

⁶¹ M. Bugeja, *Interpersonal Divide*....

⁶² R. Kraut, M. Patterson, V. Lundmark, S. Kiesler, T. Mukophadhyay & W. Scherlis, "Internet Paradox: A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-being?", *American Psychologist* 53, 9 (1998): 1017-31.

⁶³ C. DeWitt & H. Smith, "Young Voters Live Online. That's where the Future of Politics will be", *The Washington Post*. 12 August 2016. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/08/12/young-voters-live-online-thats-where-the-future-of-politics-will-be/?utm_term=.f54271b1f1d1

behavior were also not included in the study. Questions about political tolerance etc. cannot be surveyed with greater accuracy due to social desirability bias. Also majority of questions were answered neutral as the respondents generally avoid disclosing their political orientations. Future studies should consider these limitations to focus on large sample size and include other mediums. Future studies can also include other variables and test data from more universities. Tool can be formed in a way that could minimize social desirability bias; to minimize bias, even survey can be replaced with other research methodologies.

Conclusion

The purposed argument of the study that use of social media can instil political participation among the university students is verified. A significant correlation is found between usage of social media and political participation. The study is important in a new scenario where socio-political discourse has been changed from public sphere of streets and cafes' gatherings to a virtual/online public sphere. The study confirms that earlier public sphere is gradually shifting to online public sphere due to the interactive functions of social media.

The study further concludes that male students are more active on social media in discussing politics and reading political posts as compared to female students who may be equally active in using the medium but slow in participation. Majority respondents post political content on social media but the trend is more popular among male students. They (male students) relay more on social media for political information and feel more concerned about politics as compared to female. But interestingly, female students are more active in actionable politics like casting vote, showing their trust on electing system. As public sphere is a place where public opinion is generated; social media is, therefore, the latest and emerging public sphere for political discussions and learning democratic values. Policy makers and governments could also consider social media as a tool for democratic change to create a more diverse and tolerant society. Results are also helpful in identifying dimensions where social media can help in building diverse opinions in a democratic society.

The study concludes that social media or new media is changing political scenario in Pakistan by enhancing the participation of university students in politics. Therefore, result of the study is significant not only for the discipline of media studies but it also provides basis for research in the discipline of Political Science. Findings are also significant for the society due to the availability of new public sphere. The government, policy makers, political parties, politicians, etc. are required to change

their political strategies. They should incorporate social media as one of the tool to enhance political participation of the public.

On the basis of the analysis it can be concluded that students are freely participating in political discussions through social media. The result of survey also established a correlation between usage of social media and political participation of university students. The usage of social media as a source of enhancing political participation among the university students, a fact which this research establishes is also supported by available literature on the subject matter. Conclusion of the research also predicts a better future of democracies in social media world as new technology provides the language young voters understand. It also helps to realize that some measures are required to attract female students towards participatory politics in Pakistan.