

Role of Mobile Communications in Promoting Political Participation and Engagement among University Students

Afsheen Masood^{1*}, Usman Saeed² and Rubab Musarrat²

¹Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

²Institute of Media Studies, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

Advent of new media technologies is continuously affecting the socio-political systems. Mobile phones are credited to most fast penetrating technology among Pakistani youth. This study highlights the relationship between use of mobile for political messages and political participation and political engagement among University students. It was hypothesized that mobile media play the significant role in promoting political participation and political engagement among the university students. Data was collected from purposively selected 120 students (41 male and 79 females) of University, through Demographic Information Sheet and political participation and engagement scales. Findings revealed that mobile communications significantly predict political participation and political engagement among University students. Majority of mobile users attend and share political messages, thorough text messages, calls and mobile apps. The findings imply that mobile media can be used effectively for gaining political objectives and strengthening democracy in Pakistan.

Keywords: Mobile communications; Political participation; Political engagement; Social media apps; Mobile internet; University students

Introduction

In recent years, mobile communications have been emerged as a most interactive tool of political communication. Mobile phones are turning societies to highly interconnected societies. In 2013, there were almost as many mobile-cellular subscriptions as people in the world. At that time, mobile-cellular penetration rates stood at 96% globally, 128% in developed countries, and 89% in developing countries [1]. Mobile phones are credited to most fast penetrating technology among Pakistanis. According to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [2] there are near to 129 million subscribers of cellular services in Pakistan. Therefore these communications are gaining much attention of political actors for viral propagation of political messages. In last general elections-2013, it was observed as a major change, that different political parties launched their political campaigns through mobile communications.

Riaz [3] noted that the political communication in the developing countries, like Pakistan has been greatly influenced by new media technology. Therefore, these countries are now striving hard for the promotion of modern technologies like internet and mobile phones etc. Similarly, Rothstein [4] cited Putnam's argument that the strength of a working democracy is determined by its population, which is engaged in different voluntary associations and social networks. In addition to, Rheingold [5] stated that in the world wide political sphere, mobile media and text messages have democratized the power of persuasion, coordination, and organizations. He supported this argument with the citation of different examples from the world about the impacts of mobile phones on politics. Therefore, in Pakistan, mobile media has become an important source for politicians to mobilize and motivate people. It provides enormous reason to study the role of mobile media in political participation and engagement among the Pakistani youth.

Youth is a major segment of Pakistan's population. Figures released by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) show that a significant proportion of 2013's electorate was made up of people under the age of 35. Nearly half of the 84 million registered voters - 47.8 per cent -were aged between 18 and 35, while 19.77 per cent, or 16.88 million voters,

were under the age of 26 [6]. Mobile phone is rapidly diffusing among the youth. Pakistani youth is continuously participating in political events and movements through mobile SMS, internet and social media apps [7]. Eijaz [8] found that mobile communications have become successful tool for political communication in Pakistan. Mobile media was effectively used by Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf for gaining political benefits. Therefore, the major target of political communication through mobile communications is the young voters. All these facts and figures provide enough reason to study the role of mobile media in promoting political participation and engagement among youth.

Literature Review

For a working democracy, political discussions and sharing are an important element. It creates a spiral of awareness among youth. New media technologies and social media are constantly changing the political sphere [9,10]. Similarly, mobile communications are also playing a crucial role in increasing the political participation among the youth [11]. Mobile media are not only helpful for citizens to engage in political participation, but also they are a source of increasing politicians linking with citizens. In this way, mobile media accelerate the political leaders e-participation [12].

Although, new media have increased the political participation among the citizens. Yet, scholars evident that it doesn't work properly some times. Carlisle and Patton [13] found that Facebook is not as effective as it is considered for increasing youth participation in political sphere. Walton and Donner [14] also criticized the role of mobile

***Corresponding author:** Afsheen Masood, Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan, Tel: 03424225572; E-mail: drafsheenmasoodmail@gmail.com

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communications in South Africa's elections-2009. They stated that the mobile communications, specifically mobile internet limited the size of one's network by linking only to like-minded people. Therefore, it could not play any significant role in Africa elections-2009. However, it is also argued that partisans are more politically engaged and motivated as compare to independents [15,16].

On the other hand, Gurevitch et al. [17] suggested that online media is taking over mainstream media. Policy makers and public relation officers are now facing new challenges. Trusted online space can address these challenges well, because it can help to rehearse citizens' aspirations, and self-articulations through quick online feedback response system at various levels of government, i.e., central level and provincial level.

The concept of digital divide suggests that the new media technologies are only encouraging participation among a concentrated elite class. However, mobile media is filling this gap, and providing equal landscape for political participation [18]. In Pakistan, youth is continuously attending and sharing political messages. They are actively engage in viral propagation of political messages. This is a positive predictor for political participation of youth [19]. Similarly, Campbell and Kwak [20] stated that use of the technology for discussing politics and public affairs is positively associated with both political participation and openness. Moreover, mobile communications has also become a source of raising voice in authoritarian systems [21].

Furthermore, Campbell and Kwak [20] stated that the use of mobile media for information exchange are positive factors of participation in civic life. Individuals, who feel more comfortable with mobile media tend to be more politically and civically engaged than those who, feel uncomfortable with mobile media. Pick [22] studied the mobile communications of text messages, applications and twitter for effectiveness of political communication. He found that the mobile applications have opened enormous opportunities for political communication. Mobile phones have become a linking source between politicians and public.

Theoretical Framework

In the last two decades, concept of social capital has gained much attention by social sciences scholars from different areas of study [23]. Social capital has different definitions, approaches and measuring techniques [23-25]. However, "social capital refers to the social networks between individuals as well as the trust, shared norms and reciprocities that underpin and in turn arise from such connections" [26]. "The central idea of social capital, is that networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value. They have value for the people who are in them, and they have, at least in some instances, demonstrable externalities" [23]. Social capital, refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit [27]. Social capital deals with collective action. Therefore, it has become focus of attention for study of political participation among individuals of society.

On the other side, social capital is considered interlinked with mobile media and social networks. Putnam [28] stated that new information and communication technologies, specifically mobile and internet have opened new opportunities for renewal of political participation and engagement among Americans. Klesner [29] found the positive role of social capital and networks in promoting political participation in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Peru. However, moderated effects were found in case of Latin America. Social capital

effects for political participation and civic engagement are also evident in Britain, India, Iran, Canada, Poland, Japan and many other countries of the world [30-36]. However, these effects depend on macro-micro variables. Social context, gender, education, income factors also matter in effecting political participation [35].

Mobile media and social networks increase political exposure of individuals through political discussions. In this way, social interaction significantly accelerate political participation of individuals [37]. Social capital is the product of personal networks. It increases the chances of political participation and engagement among individuals of society [38]. However, Lim [39] argued that certain properties of networks are important to study social networks influence on political participation. Types of relationships and identities also matter in social capital rather than simple interlinking. Present study takes its roots from the argument that mobile media has increased social networking, and in turn social capital of Pakistani youth. Therefore, it can play significant role in promoting political participation and engagement among Pakistani youth.

Objectives of Study

Followings are the objectives of this research.

- To study mobile exposure among University students
- To explore the role of mobile media in promoting political participation among University students.
- To explore the role of mobile media in promoting political engagement among University students.
- To describe the gender and affiliation differences in political participation and engagement among University students.

Hypotheses

Keeping in view the previous literature studies, following hypotheses are being formulated;

H1: More the exposure to mobile communications; more will be the political participation among university students.

H2: More the exposure to mobile communications; more will be the political engagement among university students.

H3a: There would be gender differences in mobile exposure among university students.

H3b: There would be gender differences in political participation among university students.

H3c: There would be gender differences in political engagement among university students.

H4a: There would be differences among partisans and independent students' mobile exposure.

H4b: There would be differences among partisans and independent students' political participation.

H4c: There would be differences among partisans and independent students' political engagement.

Method

The present study aims to explore the role of mobile communications in promoting political participation and political engagement among university students. For this purpose, cross sectional survey design was

used. Population of the present study was university students, while the sample size was 120 students including 41 male and 79 female students. Purposive sampling strategy was used for sample selection. The criteria for sample selection was; a) the regular student of university of Gujrat, b) user of mobile phone c) user of political messages on mobile phone. All respondents were accessed personally, and data was collected through face to face administration.

Measures

For making variables operational, and measuring the relationships of different concepts, data was collected through demographic sheet, scale for mobile exposure, scale for political participation and scale for political engagement.

Demographic sheet

In this sheet, respondents were asked questions about their name, gender, age, education program, study department, political affiliation, and time since affiliation. All these questions were constructed open ended.

Scale for mobile exposure

A 12-item scale was constructed to measure the mobile exposure of respondents. Questions were asked about; use of mobile phone, use of SMS, use of Phone Calls, use of mobile internet, use of social media mobile apps, importance of mobile in life, use of mobile for recreation, use of mobile for gossip, use of mobile as a hobby, mobile as leisure activity, and mobile as mean of communication with relatives, class mates. All questions were measured at five point likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Cronbach alpha reliability of scale was recorded as 0.86.

Scale for political participation

A 13 pointscale was constructed to measure the political participation of respondents. Questions were asked about the use of mobile for; taking interest in political communications, receiving political parties messages, becoming aware with political parties' activities, attending political activities, communicating about politicians, communicating problems to politicians, highlighting corruption of politicians, highlighting injustice of politicians, becoming aware of current affairs, becoming aware of political manifestos, becoming aware of parties' policies, participating in political campaigning, affiliating with political party. All questions were measured at five point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Cronbach alpha reliability of scale was recorded as 0.91.

Scale for political engagement

A 7 items scale was developed to measure the political engagement among university students. Questions were asked about the use of mobile phone for; propagating political messages to others, discussing political issues with others, motivating others for political activities, propagating public issues to others, propagating political information to others, propagating political manifestos to others, and creating awareness about democratic rights. All questions were measured at five point likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Cronbach alpha reliability of scale was recorded as 0.84.

Procedure

For data collection, formal permission was taken from research supervisor. Then formal permission letter was gained from the administration of Target University. University administration granted permission and allowed the researcher to collect data from their

institution. Respondents were firstly introduced about the topic, and they were requested to sign consent letter. In which, they were ensured about their confidentiality and anonymity. They were also granted the right of withdraw. The average time in completing the questionnaire was 7-12 minutes.

Results

Data was analyzed through SPSS version 22. Firstly, scale items responses were computed. Secondly, descriptive and inferential analysis was executed. Findings highlight that majority of youth is using mobile communications at large and their political participation and engagement were also found high (Table 1).

However, Independent sample t-test found significant gender differences in political participation and political engagement. Male students are more politically participative and engaged as compare to female students (Table 2).

Findings indicate that there is no significant difference in political engagement of partisans and non-partisans. However, it was found that partisans have more mobile exposure and political participation as compare to non-partisans (Table 3).

Findings indicate that there are significant differences in mobile usage and exposure among two groups of students. Under graduate students' mobile exposure is higher to graduate students (Table 4). However, both groups are equally participating and engaged in politics. No significant differences were observed (Table 4).

Table 5 describes a significant association between mobile exposure and political participation ($r=0.35$, $p=0.01$). Furthermore, mobile exposure also significantly correlated with political engagement ($r=0.24$, $p=0.01$). Political participation and political engagement were also found correlated ($r=0.81$, $p=0.01$).

| Scales | A | K | M | SD | Range | |
|-------------------------------|------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| | | | | | Min | Max |
| Mobile Exposure Scale | 0.86 | 120 | 41.62 | 8.28 | 21 | 59 |
| Political Participation Scale | 0.91 | 120 | 32.17 | 10.27 | 13 | 54 |
| Political Engagement Scale | 0.84 | 120 | 17.34 | 5.37 | 7 | 29 |

Note: α =Reliability coefficient, k=No. of items in scale and subscale, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation

Table 1: Scales Results Descriptive Statistics.

| Variables | Boys (N=41) | | Girls (N=79) | | t | p |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------|--------------|------|-------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Mobile exposure | 42.90 | 9.51 | 40.95 | 7.55 | 1.23 | .222 |
| Political participation | 35.93 | 11.19 | 30.22 | 9.24 | 2.81* | .006 |
| Political engagement | 19.05 | 5.21 | 16.46 | 5.27 | 2.57* | .012 |

*Gender differences are significant.

Table 2: Gender differences in mobile exposure, political participation and political engagement among university students.

| Variables | Partisans (N=57) | | Independents(N=63) | | t | p |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------|--------------------|------|------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Mobile Exposure | 43.26 | 8.44 | 40.13 | 7.91 | 2.1* | .039 |
| Political Participation | 34.21 | 10.32 | 30.32 | 9.94 | 2.1* | .038 |
| Political Engagement | 17.65 | 5.55 | 17.06 | 5.24 | .59 | .555 |

*Partisans and independents have significant differences.

Table 3: Affiliation differences in mobile exposure, political participation and political engagement among university students.

| Variables | Under Graduates (N=82) | | Graduates (N=38) | | t | p |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------|------------------|-------|-------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Mobile exposure | 43.07 | 8.57 | 38.47 | 6.71 | 3.19* | .002 |
| Political participation | 32.41 | 9.85 | 31.63 | 11.23 | .37 | .713 |
| Political engagement | 16.95 | 5.42 | 18.18 | 5.24 | -1.18 | .240 |

*Differences are significant between under graduate & graduate groups of students.

Table 4: Education differences in mobile exposure, political participation and political engagement among university students.

| | Political Participation | Political Engagement |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Mobile Exposure | .353** | .238** |
| Political Participation | | .812** |

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

Table 5: Relationships among mobile exposure, political participation and political engagement among university students (n=120).

Discussion

Working democracy largely depends on the political participation of individuals of society. Pakistan is a country, where democracy is in its early phases. In its 69 year history of independence, it has observed several long military regimes. However, from the 2002 to onward, democratically elected governments are completing their tenure according to constitution of Pakistan. This is a positive indicator for democratic development of the country. Now, Pakistan media landscape has also become much vibrant and dynamic, after getting freedom in President Musharraf regime, 2002. Moreover, modern communication and information technologies are also gaining popularity among the citizens of Pakistan. This is a positive step towards democratic development of the country.

Present study found that youth of Pakistan is enrich in mobile phone usage in their daily life for different tasks. Mobile has become the need of university students. Its penetration rate is increasing among university students. Mobile media is playing important role in increasing the personal networks of Pakistani students, similar to it argument of Putnam in American context. It is interesting to find that mobile exposure is playing an important role in promoting political participation and political engagement among Pakistani youth (Table 5) as it was noted by previous studies in Pakistan. Findings of study support the argument that mobile communications are the positive predictor of political participation and engagement. These findings are healthy indicator for working democracy in Pakistan. As Rothstein noted that democracy depends on political participation of individuals of society.

Study find out that Pakistani youth is taking part in politics actively. With the use of mobile media, they are actively engaging in political activities, and political parties. Youth is discussing and sharing political messages through mobile media including SMS, mobile internet, & social media apps. In this way, social networking and social capital has become important factor of rising political participation and political engagement among Pakistani youth, like other countries of world. Now, things are going towards betterment for democracy in Pakistan. Findings of study supports Muslim findings, that mobile media has increased political participation among Pakistani youth. It also relates with other studies on Mobile communication in Pakistan. Therefore, H1 and H2 find support from findings.

However, study found that women in Pakistan are still less politically active and engaged than men (Table 2). This is not a good indicator for socio-political development of Pakistan. Policy makers must strive hard to eliminate this gender difference in political participation. There is no significant difference in use and access of mobile communications between male and female students. However, differences exists in political participation and political engagement of youth. Although, mobile media is reducing digital divide gaps, yet in Pakistan, it is not effective for promoting gender equality in political participation and engagement. Hence, study finds support for H3b and H3c. However, H3a is not supported.

Mobile communications are considered important for democratic development, but on the other side, critics argue that it is only reinforcing existing attitudes, rather than strengthening democracy. Present study found that partisans are more inclined towards mobile phone usage and political participation (Table 3). Its support the argument that partisans are more politically participative than that of independents. However, interesting thing is that, the political engagement is almost equal among partisans and independent students. Therefore, it is argued, that mobile political participation is high among partisans, as well as, it is also encouraging political engagement among independent students. Therefore, findings of study find support for H4a and H4b. however; H4c does not find support for confirmation. This indicates that mobile communications are making democratic system of Pakistan more vibrant, diverse and plural. In Sum, mobile media is promoting and strengthening democratic culture in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Present study concludes that mobile phone has penetrated among the youth of Pakistan. Mobile communications are playing a considerable role in promoting political participation and engagement among university students of Pakistan. This is a healthy indicator for socio-political development of Pakistani society. However, mobile communications are less effective for enhancing political participation among women. Overall, mobile communications role in strengthening democracy in Pakistan cannot be under estimated. However, there is a need to formulate policy for the effective use of mobile communications for increasing citizen participation in political process of country.

Limitations

Although, study finds strong correlations among mobile exposure and political participation, and engagement among, yet it has some limitations. Firstly, data was collected from one university of Punjab. Furthermore, study cannot be generalize to non-educated youth of Pakistan. Which is the large segment of society.

Future Research

Further research should explore the relationships of mobile communications and political participation among uneducated citizens of Pakistan. Furthermore, it should also be studied in different provinces for examining more comprehensive relationship between mobile media and political participation among Pakistan youth. Future research should also examine the mobile communications effects on partisans and non-partisans.

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