Exploring the strategies used by political parties to build political narratives in Pakistani public: A case study of elections

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Abstract

Social media has become the most potential and influential source of narrative building and agenda setting among people as an effective tool for political communication today. The multidimensional interaction between politicians and publics have intensified the effects of social media and inculcation of popular political ideas among voters. The proposed study aim to explore consumption patterns of social media (Twitter and Facebook) among political parties and journalists who build narratives and make popular opinion in public. Drawing theoretical foundation from Agenda Setting theory the study will use qualitative research design for data collection. The sample for proposed study will be the social media managers of popular political parties of Pakistan and most followed journalists. The interviews with open ended questions will be used as research method to collect responses from the selected sample. The collected data will be interpreted and analysed in the light of qualitative data analysis techniques.

Keywords: Pakistani politics, Influencers, Strategies, Narratives, Public opinion, Social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

New media and ICT's, Information communication technologies have incredibly revolutionized the traditional style of communication, social interactions, socio-political scenarios in the world. Particularly social media has gained immense popularity among masses and this consumption of social media has become an integral part of their life. Harper (2010) claimed that social media has given people choice and freedom in terms of

consumption of news and information as well as the freedom to express and give feedback as active consumer. Social media has given ordinary consumer the rights to have dynamic communication and interaction with the influencers and opinion leaders of traditional media.

A popular notion establishing today is that the trend of setting public agenda by opinion leaders at mainstream is overpowered by social media because now these public opinion leaders are realizing that their influence would be even stronger at social media. So majority of them have active social media accounts and they share their opinions without any restriction at the SNS platforms. The social networking sites are significant source of public opinion formation because they provide direct and multidimensional interaction between voters, journalists and political leaders. Fazekas et al (2021) acclaimed that the active interaction between politicians and their public on social networking sites (Facebook and Tiwtter) have significant effects on the voting behaviours and political participation among users.

Golan (2019) acknowledged the significance of social media by stating that the upsurge in this popularity of social media has encouraged scholars and researchers from arenas of Media and communication, political sciences, sociology, national and international affairs studies to conduct numerous studies on usage of social media by influencers and consumption by people.

As Public opinion is considered to be the foundation of democratic system and contemporarily when social media have assimilated all the powers to influence public mindsets the agenda setting and narrative building have got even more interesting. Journalists rely more on social media to reflect popular opinion among public. This over reliance upon social media particularly Twitter has created Hybrid flows of information between social media managers, journalists and public as consumers (McGregor, 2019). Now people have ease of access to the top political leaders, journalists, and experts of any fields.

The trends of social media consumption is increasing each day whereas currently about 71 million Pakistani users are active consumers of social media in Pakistan. As per the statistical figures of Digital Pakistan (2022) and Statista (2022) the Facebook users were 43 million at start of January 2022 and have currently reached to 50 million. Digital Pakistan (2022) also reported more than 3 million Twitter users at the beginning of the year 2022.

Pakistani political parties, their leaders, journalists actively use Facebook and Twitter and thus have significant effects on their consumers (Ejaz, 2013).

Keeping in consideration the popularity and frequent use of social media by Pakistani political leaders, and journalists as public opinion leaders and public as consumers. The proposed study aims to explore the role of social media as agenda setting tool and mediator among people and their influencers. There are strong implications of social media on Pakistani politics (Ali, 2013). The popularity of social media among Pakistani political and media influencers as well as in public clearly demonstrate that now political scenarios are being shaped and transformed by using social media as weapon to fight digital wars in political spheres.

1.2 Background

Anderson and Auxier (2020) claimed in a study conducted under The Pew Research Center that approximately 55 percent of social media consumers have affirmed in the US that they are "worn out" by the extent of political posts on social networking sites. Due to the advancement of modern technology and upsurge in the consumption and popularity of SNS (Twitter and Facebook) the number has already been increased by almost 16 percent since the presidential election of 2016. This indicate that social media content of political influencers have significant effects on voters.

Social media have been extensively used by influencers from the domains of politics and media both to set narratives among masses. The narratives are deliberately promoted on SNS to make people believe in the political agendas of parties. Pakistani political parties and journalists have used their Twitter and Facebook platforms to stay connected with the common citizens and this hyper connected atmosphere provided users with an interactive relationship with their opinion leaders. Trends are set at Twitter and Facebook by influencers to build and strengthen their narratives in the public. The top trends set by Pakistani politicians included #Absolutely not, #Surpriseday, #NotaBot, #PakistanNeedsElection, #MarchAgainstImportedGovt, #VoteKoIzzatDo and many others which were initially set by political influencers and media professionals and later became a popular trend among Pakistani public. The influence of social media have been evident in the elections of Pakistan in 2013 as well as 2018 and is foreseen to be very important in the coming elections of 2023.

1.3 Significance of research

The study is extraordinarily significant in the present context of Pakistani politics as the current year the political scene has transformed incredibly. The PDM alliance and their efforts to dethrone Imran Khan's government, the successful no confidence and ouster of ruling party, the fluctuating situation of new government and the election debate all have made this study significant and important at this time. The fluctuating political scenarios at the time of this study are anticipating that the study will get more interesting in the coming days.

1.4 Evidence of importance of research

Anderson and (2020) Auxier claimed in a study conducted under The Pew Research Center that approximately 55 percent of social media consumers have affirmed in the US that they are "worn out" by the extent of political posts on social networking sites. Due to the advancement of modern technology and upsurge in the consumption and popularity of SNS (Twitter and Facebook) the number has already been increased by almost 16 percent since the presidential election of 2016.

Demirhan (2014) analyzed the extent of social media usage and strategic approaches by political parties and the social media strategies of political parties and political leaders of Turkey who successfully won the elections and membership of Parliament after 2011 election. There is high level of congruence in the profile of politicians, their mainstream media profile and their social media usage (Peter 2019).

This indicates that social media content of political influencers have significant effects on voters. So this study need to be conducted in Pakistani context to explore how these social media platforms are being deliberately used by opinion leaders from the field of politics and journalism. The study will be significant in the present scenario of Pakistan and it will systematically observe social media power in shaping public agenda and making political narratives popular among people of Pakistan.

1.5 Important categories and relationships

Some of the most important categories key variables for proposed research study will be Exposure to Social media as independent variable and effects on their political thoughts, participation, opinion formation, political decision making and voting behaviours. So the important categories, variables and relationship between them has been listed as below:

Independent variable: Exposure to Social media (Facebook and Twitter)

Dependent variable: Effects on public opinion, political decision making and voting behaviour.

1.6 Problem statement

Demirhan (2014) acknowledged the strong effects of social media on consumers and voters by stating that the active consumption of social media have significant effects on the political thoughts, voting behaviours and participation of people. This influential relationship inspires media researchers to study the effects of these deliberate social media influences on traditional and conventional political structure and participation of people.

Hussain (2018) studied political dynamics, media nexuses in the elections of General Elections 2013 taking youth as the potential participants of research. He reported that the popularity of PTI, (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) as party and Imran Khan as political influencer and popular leader among youth is the evidence of effective social media effects. Khan got immense popularity among youngsters and this made him a celebrity so no matter if he is in the governing position or not he remained at the top in popularity.

Jehangir (2022) discussed the power of social media narrative building and agenda setting campaigns of famous political parties, journalists and leaders by stating that this is the era of digital war where youth remained digital warriors of Imran Khan even when he was in the government setting Twitter trends like (#AbsolutelyNot) to US, (#SurpriseDay) to India's fabricated flag operation: which was again at top trend in April 2022 during PDM and Imran khan's conflict. Social media managers of PTI, Imran Khan, government and journalists kept propagating Imran khan's narratives and set public agenda in his favour. At the same time the digital warrior and social media managers of opposition kept trying their best to keep their narrative popular among masses in order to gain success in the coming elections.

The governing political party with majority of provincial and national representatives, coalition acquaints, establishment support was dethroned and ousted by PDM, Pakistan Democratic Alliance. The contemporary time frame is the most perfect time to conduct this study as the new government of PMLN (Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and PPP (Pakistan People's Party) is facing hard times due to deteriorating economic crisis and immense pressure of new elections by PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf). Since the ECP, Election Commission of Pakistan have declared that the earliest time frame required for elections are October (2022), Cookman et al 2022).

Baig (2022) reported that the power of Social media particularly Twitter and Facebook can be understood by popularity of Imran Khan as his narrative of US imposed government () has become the top trend in Pakistan with 7.3 Million Tweets at twitter (Geo, The Express Tribune 2022). Even when the mainstream media was not giving Imran khan time and space it was power of social media that kept him at the top trend both in social media as well as in the public. The popularity reached to the level where he even broke the global record of Twitter space with almost 446,000 consumers tuned to listen him at global level.

So the above mentioned arguments have clearly narrated the statement of problem that political parties and journalists use powerful potential of social media to build narratives among people which eventually set their agenda. This agenda setting later on play an important role in elections and voting behaviours of people. So in the current fiasco of political scenario in Pakistani politics there is a strong need to investigate the usage of social networking websites especially Facebook and Twitter to propagate their narratives and get popularity among masses.

1.7 Research objectives

1. To investigate the phenomenon of usage of social media by political parties for formation and manipulation of public opinion.

2. To explore and analyze the strategies used by political parties to get popularity and support from public.

3. To measure how this manipulation by political parties and popular influencers (political leaders and journalists) guide people for their political decision making in terms of voting in elections.

1.8 Research Questions

1. How do political parties use social media (Twitter and Facebook) for their agenda setting purposes?

2. What strategies are being used by political parties to influence public opinion in order to get popularity and support?

3. Do this social media agenda setting lead to bring any support for these political parties in terms of voting in elections?

1.9 Research hypothesis

H1 Political parties and influencers use social networking websites to build and strengthen their political narratives and set public agenda.

H2 More is the exposure of consumers/public to social media of political parties more is the level of popularity and success of those influencers in elections.

1.10 Alignment of Research Objectives, Research Questions, Hypothesis

Objectives	Research Questions	Hypothesis
1. To investigate the phenomenon of usage of social media by political parties for formation and manipulation of public opinion.	1. How do political parties use social media (Twitter and Facebook) for their agenda setting purposes?	H1 Political parties and influencers use social networking websites to build and strengthen their political narratives and set public agenda.
2. To explore and analyze the strategies used by political	2. What strategies are being used by political	

parties to get popularity and support from public.	parties to influence public opinion in order to get popularity and support?	
3. To measure how this manipulation by political parties and popular influencers (political leaders and journalists) guide people for their political decision making in terms of voting in elections.	3. Do this social media agenda setting lead to bring any support for these political parties in terms of voting in elections?	H2 More is the exposure of consumers/public to social media of political parties more is the level of popularity and success of those influencers in elections.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media

Mcluhan (1964) highlighted the significance of popular media used for communication between people by saying that the nature of media used for communication is even more important than the content of communication. The recent two decades have seen a dramatic upsurge in the popularity of new media. These new media outlets provided infinite platforms of social networking opportunities to general public and influencers as public opinion leaders. These SNS provided endeavours like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and many others to people. So with time these social media platforms become substantial and inseparable part of lives. Now people do not only use them for social interaction but their scope has grown to infinite motives.

Social media are now the most influential and popular sources of opinion formation not only for political communication only but for agenda setting particularly as well. The incredible escalation in the consumption patterns of social media specifically Facebook and

Twitter, has provided new endeavours for political narrative building and agenda setting which has eventually intensified their discernible impacts on general public as well (Lewandowsky et al., 2020, p. 2).

Laghari (2022) termed The Russia-Ukraine conflict as 'World Cyberwar I' as the conflict has demonstrated the world ubiquity and power of social media. The videos and images of war have been seen by the world that were promptly uploaded and shared by the people with the global world in real time. These images and videos disseminated their narrative to the whole world which could impossible to reach at global level otherwise. American political war also battled against enemy on Twitter space, with subscription of 220 million.

2.2 Social Media and Politics

Traditional media is believed to be the most authentic and credible source of communication even today due to its regulatory parameters which are almost not practical in social media. But still social media is given substantial importance by both content creators and consumers due to its free and multidimensional interactive nature. Research studies have demonstrated that political parties use social media more frequently to influence audiences and to set public agendas and narratives through their social media content. This information is designed as per the ideology of their political motives and target their voters during election campaigns. So twitter and Facebook provide open and dynamic interaction between the voters and political parties. The information shared on social media is more open because there is no gatekeeping mediators as in traditional media (James et al 2019).

Anstead and OLoughlin (2015) conducted a study on General Election of UK 2010 to study formation and shift in public opinion due to influence of social media. They studied social dynamics and their findings demonstrated that social media websites (Facebook and Twitter) are now being strongly associated with formation and shift in public opinion by political journalists. They used interviews for collection of information from journalists and social media researchers to analyse the relationship between social media and public opinion.

2.3 Role of social media in Pakistani politics

The popularity and power of social media is evident in Pakistan as well. Just alike in other countries worldwide, social media has powerful influence on the opinion formation and agenda setting of Pakistani consumers. The narratives build and strengthened by social media have significant influence on decision making of Pakistani voters. Kemp (2022) reported that as statistics have demonstrated that more than 43 million are Facebook and 3 Million Twitter users, while 22 million use YouTube (Digital Pakistan, 2022).

Gulzar (2018) acclaimed Imran khan as the most popular politician due to his social media power and popularity. As general elections of Pakistan 2018 approach, Imran Khan's social media popularity was once again evident. The hashtag #WazireAzamImranKhan trended among the top trends on Twitter and Facebook on June 26, (2018). The politician is often referred as "Facebook Khan" or "Twitter Wazir e Azam" by his opponents. He had over 8 Million followers at his Facebook and Twitter till the year 2018 (Gulf News, 2018).

Pakistani politicians and political parties use Twitter and Facebook as tools for agenda setting and narrative building among masses. The number of followers on the official pages of political parties are as 1.9 Million PTI, PML (N) 177K followers, 62.7 K followers of PP, 192.4k JUI, 2.1 Million followers. Maryam Nawaz 505k, Nawaz Shareef 4640 followers, ShahbazShareef 94.1k, 227k Bilawal Bhutto. As mentioned above Imran khan was considered a threat to popularity of his opponents due to his social media popularity and power as he surprised them with highest number of followers. The number of followers at his official pages have now increased up to 17 Million in the present year 2022.

2.4 Qualitative research methodology

Rev and Hartford (2019) explained Qualitative research as methodology which helps researchers to define problems, learn and record opinions, thoughts, values and beliefs of people. This methodology usually involves smaller sizes of sample as compared with quantitative research

Dominck (2013) appraised the application of qualitative research methodology for media studies. He claimed that the qualitative research methods allow researchers to view behaviour of their respondent in a natural setting and provides them with intensive details about the concerned phenomenon.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3. 1 Agenda setting theory

The theoretical framework of "Agenda setting" was first introduced by two distinguished professors, Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs in 1972. They theorized this concept as the result of their study as results of their study conducted using quantitative research methods on voters in the U.S presidential elections (1968). Their study analysed that the issues which were covered with more time and space in media eventually became the top concerns among consumers (McCombs & Shaw 1972.,&Baran& Davis, 2015., McQuail, 2010). The theory explains the phenomenon of powerful media impacts elaborating the process through which the time and space given by media to specific news events determine their importance among consumers. It proposed focus of media eventually becomes focus of public.

Agenda-setting theory in its initial times, indicated the distinctive role of the mass media in terms of effects on people by providing hierarchies of significance for news. The founders of theory highlighted magnificent array of application of agenda-setting theory in the practical fields of journalism and political communication. The theorists of agenda setting coined a term: "Object" for further explaining symbolic structures which are being promoted by stakeholders in controlling media content for their narrative building and agenda setting. That development in theoretical concept of agenda setting was added original concept of issues and agendas by formerly proposed concepts by McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1970 (Bantimaroudis 2017).

3.2 Conceptual Orientation

The conceptual orientation of Agenda setting originated from the theoretical propositions of popular concepts of Walter Lippman in 1922 and theory of Mass society and Mass Culture. Early twenties were considered to be the time of popular powerful media effects or dominant media perspective. The time when traditional close cultural societies transformed into mass societies and homogenous cultures into heterogeneous mass culture. The world saw a tremendous change as urbanization and industrialization. The use of media for propaganda in World War I clearly demonstrated the powerful effects of media (Naveed, 2015).

3.3 Core assumptions of theory

- The core proposition of this theory is that the media filters and shapes the news and events rather than just reporting and reflecting news stories to consumers. People turn towards media to get information about important issues and happenings so eventually the most discussed topics of media are considered to be the most important issues of the time by people.

- The second assumption proposed that that more the attention media gives to some specific issue or news event, more the public who are active consumers consider that particular issue to be important. Media has power to play up or play down news stories by using their power are most prominent source of agenda setting for people.

4.4 Levels of Agenda setting

The whole process of agenda setting and narrative building is an interesting form of effective and rhetoric communication. It is not a simple process of information processing but has a remarkable nature. Human minds are complex so their information processing is. So there is a whole process through which media houses and journalists or any source of communication manipulate information and disseminate it to the potential consumers to set their agenda and make or influence their opinion about any issue. There are different levels of this information processing which finally lead to agenda setting. As per the communication experts there are two levels of phenomenon of agenda setting. Sanches (2002) reported that the first level indorses the most significant issues or subjects for consumers, and the second level determines the most important parts of the issue or subject for public.

4.5 New media and Agenda setting

Gilardi et al (2022) discussed application of Agenda setting concept in terms of power and short term as well as long term impacts of social media. The digitalization and convergence of traditional media into new, technologically advanced media have over powered gatekeeping control of mainstream media. This digital shift have increased dynamic impacts of social media on consumers. The scholar studied theoretical context between dynamics of political narrative building and agenda setting by political parties through traditional media and social media as well. The study reported that the agenda setting role of

media was prominent in all kinds of media and consumption. The narrative was being set and reshape by the traditional media, the social media of parties, and the social media of politicians all were being used to influence people. These agendas were closely tied with each other in a way to have strong rhetoric and persuasive communication between political parties and consumers.

Contemporarily social media is considered to be one of the most prominent and powerful source of communication among people. Now in the present context social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and many other social networking platforms have gained power to hold agenda setting role in their control. Now these social media platforms set, shape and influence the saliences of news, events and issues. Social media is the new trend setter and dominant media of the time. Twitter and Facebook are the most popular social networking sites among content creators and consumers as well. They are the most active and powerful social networking sites of the time in the context of new media. Now people turn towards social media to keep themselves well informed and updated about everything. The top trends of twitter keep people informed and active in social scenarios (Demirsoy&KarakoCa 2016).

4.9 Relevance of theory with undertaken study

The undertaken study was aimed to investigate the usage of popular social media and social networking websites by political parties to set and shape their intended agendas and narratives among consumers for political support. It also aspire to study tactics and strategies used by influencers to set public agenda and build their narratives in their desired way and effects of those strategies and opinion building among consumers. So the theory provided the most relevant theoretical foundation for the study to analyse how social media has become the most prominent media for agenda setting among people. This theory relevantly explained the political communication as well as the interplay between the people as consumers and voters and political parties and journalists as influencer and powerful source of agenda settingand narrative building.

4.10 Rationale for selecting theory

This theory refers to the fundamental concept and phenomenon of popular opinion formation among public due to their exposure with certain media and its content. It helps to understand how the popularity of some particular issues in media determines the fact that they acquire focus of public attention. Since this theory is considered to be the best theoretical approach to study and explore the effects of media on its consumers. So as the present study aims to explore how particular agendas, narratives and doctrines are made to get popularity among public by using social media.

As this theory provide theoretical foundation to understand the complex phenomenon of information dissemination and effects on people. The selected theory of agenda setting can be used as the most accurate and perfect theoretical foundation to understand and analyse the powerful effects of digital and social media which is used as an active source of communication and interaction among political parties and voters who are active consumers.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research design

The research study was aimed to explore and understand and explain the phenomenon of rhetoric communication by political leaders and parties as well as by journalists as opinion leaders of public. It studied how they establish and play their role in narrative building and agenda setting among public and voters particularly. So the study required an in-depth understanding and interpretation. As suggested by Sargeant(2012) the Qualitative research methodologies provide the best research design to explore, understand and interpret social phenomena in depth so the researcher intends to employ qualitative research methodology in this study.

Pathak, Jena and Kalra (2013) discussed significance of qualitative research by stating that these methods emphases to understand a research study by adopting a humanistic or naturalistic approach. Although it is a fact that in some cases quantitative approach is believed to be more reliable method because it has an objective and strong foundation upon numeric methods. It can be justified due to its high valued reliability and validity but it does not make qualitative research methodology any less than quantitative. Because in-depth

studies of complex phenomena can only be possible by adopting qualitative research methods.

These methods help researchers to study and understand beliefs, attitudes, interactions, experiences, behaviours and other interfaces among people. It generates a data which is non-numerical in nature but has more depth and can be interpreted more deeply. It accumulates data in the form of text, photographs, videos, statements, and everything which can be used to study and interpret the concerned research problem. Qualitative studies provide new dimensions to studies which cannot be obtained by just measurement of variables only in quantitative studies.

Qualitative research methods were mostly used inthe field of psychologywhen researchers and psychologists tried to evaluate human behaviour. After popularity of these methods in this discipline they were adopted by the researchers and scholars of other fields as well. Qualitative research methods help scholars to analyse data extensively. It strengthens clinical trials of psychological studies by enhancing user involvement which eventually helps better understanding of phenomena under observation (Gibson et al, 2004).

4.2Research method (Intensive interviews)

Qualitative interviews are referred as intensive or in-depth interviews because they aim to collect important and comprehensive information from respondents. These interviews are considered to be semi-structured in nature because the researcher collects information regarding a particular topic from participants with open-ended questions (Esterberg, 2002.,& Blackstone 2012,. &Decarlo, 2018).

Pope (1996) endorsed the significance of qualitative interviews by declaring that qualitative interviews give voice to the participants. They enable them to express their feelings, opinions and experiences in detail with open ended approach. It permits them to share their viewpoints and the information which is collected as data is not limited to numerical data only. But the information has a variety of different types, time frames and other significant collection of data. So whenever researchers intend to collect a detailed information and aspire to investigate some phenomenon in detail they select qualitative interviews.

So the study aimed to opt intensive interviews as data collection method in this study to explore, understand and interpret how new media have changed the paradigms of opinion formation for both media and its consumers. So it helped to understand how media mangers and journalists use particular strategies to get popularity, acceptance and support for their political narratives among Pakistani public which eventually help them in routine as well as in getting support in terms of voting in elections.

4.3 Data collection

Data collection is one of the most significant steps in conducting scientific studies. It is a process of collecting relevantdata and information from all the pertinent sources in order to find conclusive answers to the concerned research problem. This data is the most central part of the whole study because it is used to test the proposed hypothesis in deductive approach and to analyse the main findings and interpretations for analysis. These methods are categorized into two further types: Primary data collection, which is accumulated in the initial stages and secondary data collection which is gathered at the advanced level for extensive analysis (*Dudovskiy, 2022).*

As suggested by Wimmerand Dominick (2011) the selection of data collection method depends upon the nature and the type of research study to be undertaken. So the data will be collected for intensive interviews from participants using purposive sampling technique. The accumulated data from interviewees will be divided in subsequent themes and analysed accordingly. The rationale for taking this research methodology has been explained below.

4.5 Population of the study

The selected group to be studied is named as population of the proposed research study (Wimmer& Dominick, 2010).The population of the planned research study comprised upon all the social media managers of political parties who actively handle their twitter and Facebook accounts. They must have the idea of how top trends are being made at social media to influence public opinion. Along with the social media managers the whole fraternity of journalists will also be considered as population of the study.

4.5.1 Rationale for selection of population

The reasons for taking social media managers and journalists to conduct intensive interviews in the proposed study is that they are the most significant sources of political opinion formation in today's era of digitally advanced social media. Now people rely more on these social media managers and journalists to set their perception about political situations. The planned rhetoric communication is initiated by political parties through social media managers to build agendas and political narratives among masses. These narratives are endorsed, questioned, criticised as well as countered by journalists. So both these groups play a significant role in agenda setting and opinion formation among people. This opinion formation affects the voting behaviours and decisions of voters sooner or later. So the group of social media managers of popular political parties and moft followed and popular journalists will be considered to be the population of study.

4.6 Sampling technique of study

The scientific technique for taking the most accurate and representative segment of population for collection of datain studies is termed as the sampling technique of research study (Newman, 2011).The sampling technique needs to be decided cautiously as it ensures and strengthens the acquisition of reliability, trustworthiness and validity of research. There are different sampling techniques for both qualitative and quantitative research studies. Hence the proposed study has intended to adopt qualitative research methodology so the sampling technique will be selected from qualitative sampling techniques.

4.6.1 Purposive sampling technique

Purposive sampling, a qualitative sampling technique which is believed to be one of the most popular data collection techniques for qualitative studies have been planned to be opted for the present study. This sampling refers to collection of data from respondents or participants as per the preselected criteria relevant to the undertaken research study (Ames et al 2019.,&Lavrakas, 2008). As qualitative studies aim to collect intensive data for analysis so with the aim to target the most accurate and potential respondents it is considered to be one of the most popular and widely used sampling strategies used for qualitative studies.

4.6.2 Rationale for selection of sampling technique

Wimmer and Dominick (2011:139) stated that studies with purposive sample and intensive interviews are exceptionally useful and unique in nature.These studies generally use

small samples but ensure the provision of detailed information, background and the reasons behind the interventions and research problems. This is the true essence of a good qualitative research study.

Taking foundations from above mentioned reasons for purposive sampling technique the study will use "purposive technique" for data collection via interviews from popular journalists and social media managers of top political parties of Pakistan. As per the criterion for purposive sampling technique, only the social media managers and journalists are selected for data collection. In order to make final selection for data accumulation researcher may use convenient sampling or lottery method as well depending upon the time and other constraints at the time of data collection.The reason for taking social media managers and journalists is that they have idea how narratives and agendas are intentionally made popular among public to gain support and acquire desired benefits.

4.7 Data collection Instrument

An instrument or a tool is required to collect data from the selected sample. The instrument must be a source to collect appropriate information required for the understanding, interpretation, explanation and analysis. The data collection instrument for this study will be a questionnaire with a list of open ended questions.

4.7.1 Questionnaire

Questionnaire is an organized list of queries, questions, or items to be asked for data accumulation which is being questioned from selected sample of participants and respondents. It enquires about their feelings, emotions, experiences and opinions (Bhandari, 2021). Questionnaire is a popular instrument of data collection and is used in both quantitative and qualitative research studies.

INTERPRETATION OF INTERVIEWS

Social Media and Political Agenda Setting

1. **Do you think contemporarily social media have reduced gatekeeping power of traditional media and now people rely more on social media for political information?**

"The major shift from traditional media to social media has shattered traditional media's restrictions. The information, which was earlier restricted to traditional media, is now available on social media. So undoubtedly yes, social media has reduced the gatekeeping of traditional media as it offers a wider range of information and richer content, whereas conventional media is restricted from doing so due to various constraints like PEMRA rules and other dominating factors. However, despite these limitations, social media's emergence has compelled traditional media to change gradually. Social media has supplanted traditional media over the past few decades; however, as it differs in different cases, it is challenging to determine whether people more or less rely on social media for political information. Individuals who are social media savvy do not rely solely on social media for political information, or if they do, they use traditional media outlets that are accessible on social media, such as the Ary/Geo News YouTube channel, to seek out accurate information. On the other hand, older people or those who are unaware of the social media curse or the dark side of social media are more likely to rely on it" (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Yes social media has gained more significance than mainstream media. But still there are some factors which influence this flow of information among masses. The demographic and psychographic factors such as age, class, access to internet, familiarity with the usage and others. As per my opinion Television consumption is still prevalent in areas where there is no internet or smart phones" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Social media has great power, unhindered, unchecked. It may be far less credible, but far more effective to propagate and influence the masses. It is unregulated, not governed under any laws or set of rules, which gives it destructive power at times. However, the traditional media operates under specific checks to make sure that credible and reliable news and views are published or broadcasted. The traditional media can also be managed by the powerful establishment to restrain flow of certain news or information, which has become the real challenge now. If fails to break these shackles, it is bound to lose its power" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"I think different political politicians and parties have hired specialized people to manage their social media pages. They use their persuasive communication skills to frame their narratives and to target masses. Also there is no doubt that the potential power of

mainstream media has been taken over by social media" (Khan. M, Personal communication, December, 2022).

2. **Do you think social media (Twitter) play any significant role in setting/influencing political agenda/ narrative among people of Pakistan?**

"Absolutely yes, social media particularly Twitter has a crucial effect in shaping perceptions of Pakistanis; history is replete with examples where social media, particularly Twitter, played a noteworthy role in setting agendas. The two narrative-building case studies —the Pulwama incident and France's Islamophobia—are the real examples that have pushed the world to speak for the cause, particularly after the social media hype. In 2019, when cross border attacks escalated in the Indo-Pak conflict, Pakistan successfully outmanoeuvred India in the field of propaganda warfare. The social media hash tag "No to war" became a top global trend. People from both India and Pakistan came on board with the hashtags "Anti-Hate Challenge" and "No to War," which started trending alongside "Pulwama Revenge" and other violence-seeking hashtags. The perception and propaganda warfare that was developing across social media domains played a significant role in shaping the narrative and public opinion. Pakistan's well-organized and enticing media briefings, particularly its social media campaigns, drew widespread support both domestically and internationally. Subsequently, social media campaigns and hashtags such as "boycott French products" and "Macron Apologize to Muslims" trended on social media as a response to the "anti-Islam". Citizens in multiple Muslim countries called on the world to boycott French products, which trended on social media across various countries. Since Muslims have such a large global following on social media, there has been a major push to unite Muslim communities against Islamophobia and to boycott French products. This led to the declaration of March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. In the context of PTI, its social media, particularly Twitter, is highly active, aiming to shape the narrative, and it definitely succeeded in influencing people through its social media campaigns on social media, particularly Twitter, by hosting Twitter spaces and using various hashtags. PTI's hashtag which, popularity worldwide gained" ر منظمانوکحتمانوظظنم اویمرڈ" ultimately boosted the party's narrative worldwide" (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Demographically social media consumption varies so does its influence. Youngsters are influenced more by social media more than mainstream media. However adults still like to

watch political content through television talk shows" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Social media, especially twitter and YouTube have become agenda setting tools for the political parties. We have seen how PTI used the social media to establish it's narrative of regime regime using videos and tweets to influence the minds through bombardment of the same rhetoric through various platforms. The computer algorithms used in the style of Cambridge Analytical created a real political challenge for the establishment and all the parties which joined hands for the vote of no confidence" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"It does but to certain extent only, I would not say that social media's power is the only or the most powerful factor behind the agenda setting and narrative building of Pakistani voters. But yet it is true that a significant chunk of voters and general public are now influenced by power of social media (Khan. M, Personal communication, December, 2022).

Social media strategies

3. **What kind of strategies are being used by influencers (Politicians, social media managers, journalists) to influence public opinion?**

"In today's technologically advanced society, where knowledge and awareness are readily available, it is becoming increasingly complicated to influence people. The most crucial point is the connection with the public; most influencers create an eye-catching effect for their audience by being honest with them, moreover, they try to deliver authentic information while telling their source. PTI succeeded in influencing people by using such strategies, and the party's chairman's integrity and honesty are well-known facts that have directly or indirectly compelled people to get influenced by any of the party's individuals. Aside from that, Khan was somehow able to transfer his traits to the senior leadership, which is why this party's member has more power to influence (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Every political party and influencer have their own particular strategy for social media. It is determined keeping in consideration the target audience of their political narratives. The traditional supporters of Pakistan people's party are progressive, subjects like

democracy women empowerment age gender are taken into consideration (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022)."

"The strategy used be PTI was probably more scientific and based on computer algorithms to build the image of Imran Khan as Mr. Clean, labelling everyone else as the Chore and Daku. The clever approach was strengthened by synchronising efforts at the central level spearheaded by Imran Khan himself to establish brand Imran Khan. The result was outstanding, as all their failures were camouflaged by giving a bad names to their opponents. No other political party has used the power of social media so professionally in Pakistan" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Politicians and political parties now hire social media managing experts and professional journalists for agenda setting purposes. They use social media and persuasive strategies for praising politicians and parties, serving as their spokesperson, promotion of their projects. So there are journalists in Pakistan who have become marketing companies for some politicians. Though it is a professional dishonesty as journalists are not supposed to act like a marketing company for any enterprise but they ought to be a vigilant professional serving the watchdog purpose of media and pointing good and bad in the society and political system"

Social media and electoral process

4. **Do you think Pakistani social media plays significant role in electoral process, government's setup or regime change?**

"Social media is a constructive tool that can be moulded in accordance with the agenda. Various issues and political narratives are blown up and down on social media; Islamophobia is a huge example where, in Muslim countries, this is usually played up whereas, in non-Muslim countries, it is generally played down" (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Social media is certainly an important factor which influences the political scenarios and the politicians and their followers have strong communication due to its influence. This influence eventually plays a significant role in governmental changes and affairs" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"The example of 'Absolutely Not' narrative is best suited here. Imran made this statement in an interview. There was no formal requested from the US for military basis, but PTI was able to sell it as Imran has refused to bow against the American pressures in the greater national interest. The second example is initially selling the narrative of Same Page with the Establishment and then branding them as Mir Jaffar/Traitors" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"I observe very high level of agenda setting among influencers and journalists of Pakistan through their social media as well as mainstream media influence. They set public agenda by conducting interviews of their favourite leaders. They try to endorse them by supporting whatever their leaders say without critical not analysis of the content. A journalist should use professional journalistic skills for decoding the news and information but unfortunately these journalists have become influencers rather than a professional journalist"

Social media and electoral process

5. **Do you think Pakistani social media plays significant role in electoral process, government's setup or regime change?**

"Though there is no doubt about it, social media is creating a significant difference in every aspect. However, if we look at the paths it has taken, we can see that every political party is active in narrative building, so social media has power, but it does not have the power to change government as opposing parties and the public are smart enough. The most recent example is the Punjab by-elections, in which the PTI's social media cell played a significant role in developing trends, top trends of election demand have created pressure and fear in the government (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Popular leaders rely more on social media. Imran Khan, Trump and Modi, the three of them have got immense popularity through their social media. Traditional political parties and leaders rely more on physical political grounds. Highest priority of popular leaders is social media narrative building" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Pakistani social media is yet to take the lead role during the electioneering, like what we saw in the United States during the Trump campaign against the Hillary Clinton or Biden" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"May be to a greater and significant extent it play a significant role but it cannot be inferred as the most powerful factor. Sometimes this social media influence is overvalued, it is a powerful factor and a significant source but not the ultimate one there are other factors as well"

6. **Publicity and advertising campaigns of social media are more significant for popularity among public in elections?**

"The shift to social media has altered the mode of campaigns; social media campaigns cost less and have a greater impact in this era. Though such campaigns are powerful enough to strengthen their popularity level, to figure out whether they are more significant or not, awareness and literacy matter a lot here. Individuals who know about the candidate's background or credibility, despite big campaigns leading to popularity, will never prefer to vote. On the contrary, an unaware candidate will definitely rely on such campaigns. Henceforth, social media campaigns are not enough to win the election. Both groundwork and social media campaigns can make a difference" (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"If we observe the social media management of popular leaders it is evident that contemporarily popularity among people and in elections highly depend on social media management of politicians and political parties" Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Publicity campaigns on social media had limited impact during the elections in countries like Pakistan, where large part of the populations resides in the rural areas, where internet connectivity is relatively of poor quality. But there is recent surge in YouTube viewership, which may have good influence going forward. The twitter is largely an urban phenomenon, largely influencing the better educated urban youth" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"social media campaigns target audiences and play a significant role in setting agendas but yet it is not the only as well as the most significant factor. The battles are hard at political grounds as well they cannot be only won by having victorious role at social media only"

Social media and voting behaviour

7. Do social media play significant role in influencing voting behaviour of Pakistani public?

"Yeah contemporarily there is no doubt about the power of social media it definitely plays the most significant role in influencing voting behaviour of Pakistani public (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Social media is one of the most important factors in electoral campaign. Ground governance issues are significant. Particularly after 2018 elections it has been a proven fact that social media management plays influential role in shaping political narratives and voting behaviours of voters" Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"No. voting behaviours so far has many component, political loyalties, the system of Bradri/community level approach, traditional politics of rural areas, money, the role of establishment etc. Social media had limited effect" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Yes to some extent it does due to the fact that the trend of social media consumption have increased among Pakistani public so it can be inferred that their voting behaviours and political preferences are being shaped and influenced by social media but there real life situations are dominant on this social media influence"

8. Do you think social media played significant role in the elections of 2013 and 2018?

"Social media is a useful instrument for elections; it was used in the 2013 and 2018 elections, and it is one of the factors that led to the PTI's emergence. Although, in 2013, social media's influence was not yet as well-established as it is today or was in 2018; In 2018, PTI's social media and its supporters were more active. The other parties, on the other hand, have not yet been brought up to speed, as it seems that they feel more at ease using conventional methods than technical or smart ones" (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Certainly, there is no doubt about this fact that social media management plays influential role in shaping political narratives and voting behaviours of voters" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"No. Social media had some role in 2018, as the Panama Papers and corruption scandals helped PTI to give a bad name to the Sharifs during the last elections. the establishment and the superior courts played the lead role in agenda setting" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Influence of social media was comparatively less in the elections of 2013 but yes it was prominent and powerful in the elections of 2018"

Comparison between social media usage of PTI PML and PPP

9. Have social media being the most potential reason behind popularity of PTI and Imran Khan?

"Imran Khan is a born star who, even before social media existed, was well-known not just nationally but even internationally. Keeping in view of the current political scenario and PTI's effective social media cell, yes, it has given a boost to the PTI and Khan's popularity, but that is not the only factor behind their popularity" (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Yes Imran khan's social media management has been a strong factor behind his success. As popular leaders focus more on narrative building, conspiracy theories and propaganda. Just as in the case of Imran Khan, his social media narratives are popular. The engage their followers through social media. Manufactured popularity of Imran khan is result of his social media network" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Yes. PTI used the power of the social media to their advantage, engaging better educated youth in their social media team, not relying on Gullu Butts" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"A major contribution in Imran khan and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf'spopularity is social media. They have used power of social media impressively. Social media is used by such influencers for fake hype. Fake accounts are being made, fake news are being propagated for narrative building. PTI and Imran khan have used it with extraordinary

command. Each leader of PTI hasproper active Facebook accounts and they maintain a continuous flow of communication with public to engage them"

10. **Who among the PTI, PMLN, PPP and TLP used Twitter most effectively till now in Pakistani political scenario?**

"So far, the PTI has used social media actively and effectively, as the party's chairman Imran Khan is fully aware of its power; thus, the PTI has used it that way, and the credit goes to the social media cell and party head. Contrary to this, other parties still rely on traditional methods" (Virk. S, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"As far as comparison of parties are concerned it can be determined on the basis of criterion of affectivity. Again people who rely more on propaganda consider social media more but for those who use social media for progressive purposes they measure its affectivity according to it" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"PTI is probably the leading beneficiary of the social media influence. It helped them win the support of overseas Pakistanis. Religious parties or extremist groups also use the social media to spread a false narrative. Religious parties or extremist groups also use the social media to spread the false narratives of the religion to spread religious extremism and hate speech in the society" (Malik. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"As far as the comparison of effective social media strategies is concerned. As per my opinion Pakistan Muslim League (N) has no systematic mechanism for effective social media strategies.Although Maryam Nawaz is active on social media but she is not that sensible in her social media usage and rhetoric communication. PPP's social media face is Bilawal Bhutto, who try to be active and use social media for agenda setting but I think PTI is 5-10 years ahead in their social media usage, agenda setting and their strategies are highly persuasive and impressive"

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The research study was aimed to investigate the strategies used by political parties and politicians to build political narratives among Pakistani public. The study used qualitative methodology as research design and interviews as method for data collection. The interviews were conducted from social media influencers for analysing the phenomenon. As per the

interpretations of study it has been analysed that social media has become one of the most potential, influential and strong means of communication and agenda setting not only among public and politicians but in journalists as well.

The interpretations of interviews have analysed that social media has incredibly overthrown gatekeeping power of mainstream media. It has become an indispensable part of life among politicians, journalists and public. Influencers, be it journalists, politicians or social media managers use social media and its power to target their audiences and set, frame, shape and propagate their political agendas. Consumers particularly youngsters are the active consumers of social media and they are being influenced by social media by their favourite politicians and journalists who have become their opinion leaders and influencers.

Social media strategies are planned, designed and deliberately framed using persuasive communication techniques to target the audience. They can be real as well as fake to achieve set targets for political gains. PTI used systematic techniques to target youngsters and they have got immense popularity among youth due to their effective strategies and got success in building a heroic image of Imran khan.

Social media is flexible and is moulded by influencers in accordance with the agenda. Issues and political narratives are played up and down. One of the most significant examples are narratives of Islamophobia, Absolutely not and traitors. The institutions and individuals are being presented as heroes as well as traitors by power of social media. The prominent example is PTI's social media agenda setting in their regime change narrative.

 "Popular leaders rely more on social media. Imran Khan, Trump and Modi, the three of them have got immense popularity through their social media. Traditional political parties and leaders rely more on physical political grounds. Highest priority of popular leaders is social media narrative building" (Gohar. N, Personal communication, December, 2022).

"Pakistani social media has got immense popularity and power in the last decade but yet it has time to take the most prominent and influential role in electoral process. But the fact is now political agenda setting is being driven by social media campaigns of popular leaders. The fact is being proven by the social media usage of Modi, Trump and Imran Khan. All three of them used social media for narrative building and focused more on social media than on real life political grounds and engaged national as well as international audiences.

The extraordinary active consumption of social media has altered traditional mode of political campaigns. Now social media campaigns cost less and have greater affectivity and stronger impacts. But still the real world facts and figures cannot be negated. People who are well aware and know credibility of politicians do not vote just on the basis of social media campaigns.

Henceforth, it can be analysed that social media campaigns solitarily are not enough to win the elections. Both groundwork and social media campaigns together can make a difference. People may rely on social media for political information but the realities hit them for their voting and political decision making as well. Social media campaigns played a major role in the elections of 2018 and success of Imran khan as popular politician of Pakistan.

Comparatively, in Pakistani political scenario PTI and Imran Khan have used the power of social media most affectively. PML (N) and PPP's social media faces, Maryam and Bhutto have been botched by the social media success of PTI and Imran khan. Their social media narrative building is five to ten years ahead than all other politicians and political parties. They have a systematic mechanism for their social media campaigns and their rhetoric gets immense popularity among youngsters due to their effective and impressive social media management strategies.

Conclusion

Social media has become a powerful source of political narrative building and agenda setting in Pakistani scenario. But still it needs time to take a leading role in moulding political decision making and voting behaviours of Pakistani public. PTI and Imran khan have won political battles on the basis of their effective social media narrative building. Imran khan got successful in getting immense popularity among public due to his social media. Social media campaigns cost less and impart strong effects on public yet these social media campaigns can be successful only by effective political groundwork.

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