



Political empowerment among young voters: Social media, partisanship and the moderating role of political interest

Empoderamiento político entre jóvenes votantes:
Redes sociales, partidismo y papel moderador del interés político

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent efforts to examine the political outcomes of social media use, little is known about the reinforcement of political empowerment and moderating effect of political interest. It is vital to understand the elements that influence the level of political empowerment. Therefore, this paper used a sample of Pakistani voters ($n=410$) aged 18-29 to offer insight into how social media use alongside other political behaviors, such as partisanship, political expression, and political interest, affect political empowerment. Social Identity Theory (SIT) and rational choice theory provided the theoretical underpinning for the variables of this study. The statistical analyses were performed using Partial Least Squares (PLS) to assess the effects of four variables i.e., social media use, political partisanship, political expression, and political interest, on political empowerment. This study made a significant contribution to the research literature by combining SIT and rational choice theory in one framework. This study also expands the literature on political interest by introducing political interest as a moderator between the inconsistent relationship of political expression and political empowerment. Our results demonstrated that partisanship and social media use positively influenced political expression among young voters. Moreover, political interest positively moderated the relationship between political expression and political empowerment.

RESUMEN

A pesar de los recientes esfuerzos para examinar los resultados políticos del uso de las redes sociales, se sabe poco sobre el refuerzo del empoderamiento político. Es vital comprender los elementos que influyen en el nivel de empoderamiento político. Por lo tanto, este documento utilizó una muestra de votantes paquistaníes ($n=410$) del grupo de edad de 18 a 29 años para ofrecer información sobre cómo el uso de las redes sociales junto con otros comportamientos políticos, como el partidismo, la expresión política y el interés político, afectan al empoderamiento político. La Teoría de la Identidad Social (TIS) y la Teoría de la Elección Racional proporcionaron la base teórica para las variables de este estudio. Los análisis estadísticos se realizaron utilizando mínimos cuadrados parciales (PLS) para evaluar los efectos de cuatro variables, es decir, el uso de las redes sociales, el partidismo político, la expresión política y el interés político, en el empoderamiento político. Este estudio hizo una contribución significativa a la literatura de investigación al combinar ambas teorías en un solo marco. El trabajo también amplía la literatura sobre el interés político al introducirlo como moderador entre la relación inconsistente de la expresión política y el empoderamiento político. Los resultados demostraron que el partidismo y el uso de las redes sociales influyeron positivamente en la expresión política entre los votantes jóvenes. Además, el interés político moderó positivamente la relación entre la expresión política y el empoderamiento político.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Young voters, political empowerment, social media, partisanship, political interest, political expression.
Votantes jóvenes, empoderamiento político, redes sociales, partidismo, interés político, expresión política.



1. Introduction

The feasibility of social media's political discourse in participatory democracy, which leads to democratic political actions, has been under investigation for many years. Apart from theoretical work, many scholars have also attempted to lay out an empirical foundation of the practicability of social media as a facilitator of public democratic discourse (Boulianne, 2015). However, the position of social media political discourse is stronger in comparison to traditional media political discourse i.e., television, and its role in sustaining democratic political values in the social and political context of Pakistan. For instance, many social and political influences and pressures put barriers to the coverage of news on traditional media for fulfilling their sensitive role in sustaining democracy in Pakistan. Television channels in Pakistan are run in two different setups. Pakistan's national television is run by the state and private television channels are run under private media ownership. Being the mouthpiece of the government, Pakistan's national media, particularly, broadcast limited independent rational debate, whereas, in the case of private media, the situation is a bit different. Private media is controlled mainly by advertising, government, and cross-media ownership (Riaz, 2007).

Such mediated discourse does not serve democratic political values and does not encourage the metaphor of transparency. Moreover, several years of multiple dictatorship regimes and the limited scope of freedom of expression have pushed the country into political and economic turmoil. For the rest of the period, Pakistan faced barriers in the execution of the political process and the smooth transfer of democratic regimes from one political party to another. However, during and after the 2013 election, the transformation in the political structure of Pakistan provided ample space for all existing and emerging political parties. Pakistan's political structure was based on two-party politics (Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan People's Party) for decades. However, the emergence of a third political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, transformed the political structure in Pakistan. This transformation resulted in the expansion of not only the number of political parties, but also in the expansion within the political parties has also been witnessed. All political parties' social media cells were functional before the 2013 election, which reduced their dependency on traditional media for the coverage of their political campaigns. Political parties, their supporters, and voters are extensively using social media platforms for their political expression (Zeib, 2022). Nevertheless, the emergence of new information and communication technologies calls for a re-examination of traditional participatory culture and new spaces for public discussion to encourage democratic politics.

1.1. Antecedents of political empowerment

The study is based on two arguments about the relationship of political expression and political empowerment. First, the study measures the effects of social media use and political partisanship on political expression, and second, that political expression enhances political empowerment among youth under the condition of political interest as a moderating factor. Indeed, we found strong evidence that social media political expression is a very substantial predictor of the political empowerment of the users (Loader et al., 2014). However, the question about the strength of this relationship and under what conditions it exists has great importance in a democratic structure of any country. The political system of Pakistan is potentially influenced by voters' strong political affiliations. The general voters of Pakistan continue to show their affiliations with political parties for democratic political participation, and the other side of the coin is that political parties also strengthen their party base with their party supporters and voters (Tariq et al., 2022).

There is an increasing academic interest in exploring how dynamics of political communication change when communicated by a politically interested self. Those with a higher level of political interest are likely to produce more political empowerment than those with a lower level of political interest or having no political interest at all (Maurissen, 2020). Given the above-mentioned proposition, the scholarship discussed in the study is based on an inconsistent relationship between political expression and the political empowerment of the users. Nevertheless, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the inconsistent relationship between political expression and political empowerment, which compelled the researchers to explore a political interest, possibly enhancing the efficacy of political expression for political empowerment.

Nevertheless, this ongoing study is designed to know whether social media political expression and partisan-based political expression enhance youngsters' political empowerment and further, whether increased political empowerment is subject to the moderating effects of political interest. However, we propose the following hypotheses.

- H1: Social media use has a direct positive link with the political expression of youngsters.
- H2: Partisanship has a direct positive link with the political expression of youngsters.
- H3: Political expression has a direct positive link with political empowerment of youngsters.
- H4: The relationship between political expression and political empowerment is positively moderated by political interest.

2. Theoretical underpinning

The rational choice theory posits that individual's economic and social behaviors are based on their self-interests. People select from many options and make a deliberate choice by making cost and benefit comparisons, rather than what psychologists state the unconscious or semi-rational decisions. Many sociologists adapted the rational choice theory to explain social exchanges i.e., the calculation of costs and rewards in social relationships drive social behaviors (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). Nevertheless, Harrop and Miller (1987) explain the phenomenon of rational choice in partisanship and argue that partisanship influences the voting behavior of an individual when party affiliation, which is already based on an individual's self-interest, is in accordance with the policy proposals of a political party. They put the bases of political partisanship on the rational choices of voters. They further explain that people make deliberate decisions based on rational choices, having a justification behind every decision. In this framework, we believe that in a democratic structure, political values such as liberal and independent political thoughts and independence in making choices in the decision-making (rational choices) process should also prevail in the political system of the country, which is basically argued by rational choice theorists.

Citizens' capability to evaluate the democratic quality of the political process is a determinant of political interest. On the one hand, if deliberation enhances the political empowerment of citizens, it also requires political interest in the deliberation process (Morrell, 2005). Therefore, we expect that if citizens have more political interest, they will exhibit more political empowerment by making rational choices.

The theoretical foundation of the phenomenon of partisanship is established on Henry Tajfil's Social Identity Theory (SIT) developed in 1974. The theory explains the behavioral aspects of individuals' group belonging (Tajfel, 1974). SIT explains the cognitive process of the inner self of an individual and the resulting related behavioral motivation in a group. In the democratic political structure of any country, people want to be identified with a certain political party affiliation. The desire to be attached to different social and political groups is a human instinct. Partisanship possesses a very significant place in a person's political life that continues to evolve stronger in a youngster's life (Shively, 1979). Because of party loyalties, the impact of political partisanship is very deep as it transmits from one generation to the next.

Taking up the position from the processes identified by SIT, political partisanship has the enforcement value that motivates the partisans to behave in a particular way associated with political groups. Although the members of political groups are mostly bounded by ideological associations rather than proximal attachment i.e., they share common views and interests in their group circle. On the other hand, the members, who have some ideological affiliation, try to seek people with the same traits, behaviors, and viewpoints that are found in in-group partisans and encourage the other members to update their political knowledge (Großer & Schram, 2006).

3. Literature review

The relationship of social media political expression with political efficacy attained considerable research attention from communication scholars throughout the world. More recent scholarship is focusing on the political discourse of social media for youngsters' political awareness and empowerment, news seeking, political campaigning, and online and offline political activities (Ahmad et al., 2020), some of them using cross-sectional and some using panel data.

However, during the process of a systematic review of relevant literature, we pondered on the previous and recent research trends in media, communication, and political science studies. The scholarship on this topic is supported by a plethora of studies based on three theoretical assumptions. The first assumption deals with the relationship of social media and partisan-based political expression with political empowerment. The second is about the causal but inconsistent relationship between political expression and political empowerment, and the third, is about the moderating variables in the relationship of political expression and political empowerment.

3.1. Social media use encourages political expression

Social media use refers to the purposive and frequent social media use to get political information (Zolkepli et al., 2018). We connected this with political information to develop an understanding of political issues. Popular social media websites have started a new arena of discussions, talks, and other forms of expression. The political expression refers to expressing personal emotions and feelings about politics through a variety of social media tools (Chen & Chan, 2017). The ability of social media to enhance the predictable outcomes of individual expression by communicating it to an unlimited network of members immediately has established its unique place in communication research (Gil-de-Zúñiga et al., 2014). In addition, the younger generation tend to use social media more consistently for active participation and social integration (Colás-Bravo et al., 2013). The fast-growing technological changes in digital media have opened opportunities of political expression for youngsters in Pakistan as well. Almost all political parties and political candidates have social media accounts, sharing several posts and tweets in a day. Moreover, young voters are making substantial use of social media in seeking political information and discussing and sharing political views (Ali & Fatima, 2016). Skoric et al., (2016) initiated an empirical investigation on the role of social media use in encouraging the political expression of users in Confucian Asia. They found that social media use encourages users to share their political selves and to express their views on social media.

3.2. Political partisanship encourages political expression

Research depicts that those having strong partisanship or politically extreme ideological views tend to express themselves politically more via various online and offline platforms than those with a low level of partisanship or with non-partisanship (Moffett & Rice, 2018). Partisanship refers to the sense of closeness and attachment of an individual towards a particular political party (Huddy et al., 2010). To be identified with a political party shows a strong sense of psychological attachment to that political party. Furthermore, such expressions associated with party identifications are positively related to an increase in individuals' political empowerment and motivation to participate in political activities (Dancey & Goren, 2010). However, weak or moderate partisans were less likely to express their minority views on Facebook because of the difference of opinion with those who are in the majority (Kim, 2018). Given the moderation effects of higher agreement among cohorts and higher reliance on political parties, strong political partisanship also enhances cognitive and behavioral engagement in political discussions and various forms of online expression (Chan, 2018).

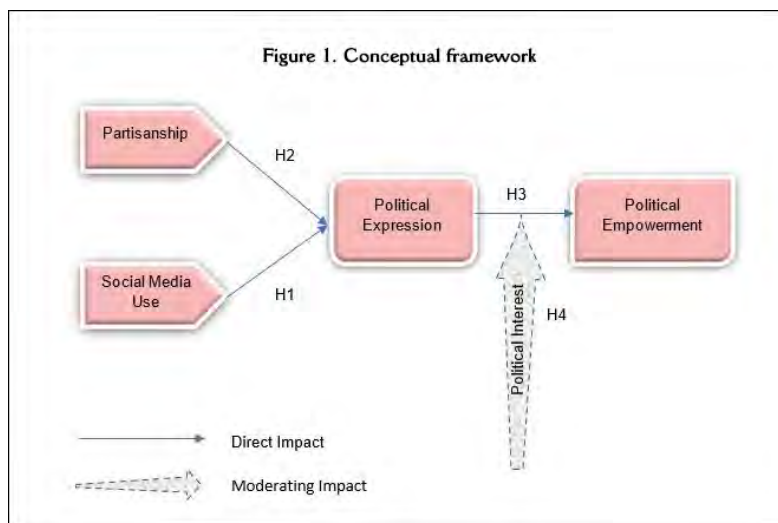
3.3. Inconsistent relationship between political expression and political empowerment

So far, the academic literature is fluctuating between an overly optimized view of social media's political effects and a critical evaluation of the use of these platforms. There is a sizeable body of research that provides evidence that the effects of social media use on political empowerment are uneven and hardly symmetrical, and that the effects vary depending on the context, intervening factors, demographics, etc. Political empowerment is a psychological phenomenon (Spreitzer, 1995) that refers to citizens' ability to analyze the political issues, make political decisions and exercise their capacity to organize and mobilize the community freely and independently (van-Dop et al., 2016). According to Boulianne (2015), the effects of social media political expression vary among youngsters and the general population, different types of users, active and passive social media use, interest-based uses, and cross-sectional and panel data. However, a comprehensive examination of the aforementioned research divulges that substantial gaps exist within the literature, specifically regarding the use of intervening variables, which may help in

enhancing the effect of the explanatory variable. So far, we have concluded that the scientific community has a shared consensus on the relationship of political expression and its effects on political empowerment of users. However, confirmation about the strength of this relationship i.e., strong or weak, direction of relationship i.e., positive or negative, and whether it is a direct or indirect relationship is not yet clear (Boulianne, 2015). Many studies, despite having a positive relationship between political expression and political empowerment, could not explain the high variance (Gil-de-Zúñiga et al., 2014). The central question here is whether the effects are primarily related to digital media use or associated with the people who are more politically interested. This argument firstly shows an inconsistent or triggering relationship of political expressions with political empowerment on which many researchers agree and secondly, it explains the importance of the moderation of political interest in this inconsistent relationship.

Political interest refers to personal attention towards political news and current affairs with keen observation of political activities and seeking political information from everyday communication (Himmelboim et al., 2012). Political interest is contested by many contemporary communication scholars as a key for sustaining democracy and it has been found that political interest is a decisive precursor for political efficacy i.e., self-understanding of political abilities and that one's political actions affect the political process (Prior, 2019). Kalogeropoulos et al. (2017) found a positive spiral of reinforcement and suggest that highly motivated or politically active citizens are more likely to get into lengthy discussions and comment on others' posts, which primarily requires political interest to process the information. Our scholarship implies that if political interest can prove to be an effective explanatory variable, it also qualifies as an effective moderating variable.

However, this article builds on the question: "Can the individual's political interest enhance the capacity of political expression for political empowerment of youngsters?", by specifying that effective political expression is expected to have a strong relationship with political empowerment, which is moderated by political interest to achieve the desired goals. Nevertheless, Bimber et al. (2015) revealed contradictory arguments and found a positive and consistent relationship of digital media use with political talks and voting, for having lower political interest. However, we believe a negative relationship exhibits an equally effective implication of political interest as an important moderating variable.



Hence, on par with the previously mentioned arguments and in the light of previous literature, the viability of social media or partisan-based political expression for the models of political empowerment weakens, declining the direct paradigm of political expression and political empowerment and engagement. Consequently, we found a strong agreement on a substantial moderating variable of political interest as an important legitimizing mechanism. Based on the previous literature and hypotheses, we design the following conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1.

4. Methods and measures

4.1. Study setting and design

Because of the increasing importance of youth in Pakistan, we targeted young voters as the unit of analysis in this study. According to the ministry of youth affairs in Pakistan, people aged 15 to 29 are considered youth (Ashraf et al., 2013). However, the voting age in Pakistan starts from 18 years old, therefore, individuals aged 18 to 29 years were considered as the study population. The most recent population census reported that the total population of Pakistan is 207,774,520. The young voters comprise 29% of the total population which is approximately 60,254,611 (United Nations Development Pakistan, 2018).

To determine the sample size and demonstrate confident findings, we combined G-power analysis with Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula. G-power 3.1.9.7 determined a sample size of 85 for four predictors. A power of 0.80 is calculated for this sample size. As the study population was heterogenous, to yield maximum power it is recommended to increase the sample size (Hair et al., 2019). Here, we applied the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula and increased the sample size to 385. We received 410 usable responses that yield a power of 0.9, which is sufficient to claim confident findings.

Due to the COVID-19 spread, we collected the data through an online survey using snowball sampling that is appropriate in the absence of a sample frame (Bobbie, 2013). The survey took four months to complete; from July to October 2020. Sarstedt et al. (2019) reported that snowball sampling produces sample bias and generalizability problems.

To address these issues, increasing the sample size and comparing the gender ratio in sample demographics with the ratio of national population statistics are recommended. G-power analysis, the male and female ratio in demographic data, demonstrates the true representation of the population of Pakistan (Table 1). Hence, the issues of true representation and sample bias were addressed.

4.2. Measurement

The responses of participants were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. For social media use, political interest and political empowerment scale were used ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. However, for the partisanship scale, it ranged from “weak” to “extremely strong”, and for political expression from “never” to “all the time”. The social media use items were adapted from the research of Zolkepli et al. (2018), political interest items from Bimber et al. (2015), Becker and Copeland (2016) and Himelboim et al. (2012), political empowerment items from van-Dop et al. (2016) and Spreitzer (1995), partisanship items from Huddy et al. (2010) and Chan (2018), and political expression items from Gil-de-Zúñiga et al. (2014) and Chen and Chan (2017).

Though all the items used to measure variables were adapted from past research, still we went through a rigorous validation process. An expert panel comprising three academics was consulted. Their feedback was incorporated to modify the items. After this, we conducted a pilot study among 50 respondents. The results of the pilot study assisted us in refining the measurement scale for this study.

5. Results

5.1. Demographics

The demographics show that most of the participants were male (52.20%), followed by female (47.80%). The statistics on the world's social media users back up these results (Barnhart, 2021).

The largest group (43.20%) of respondents were aged between 22 and 25, which coincides with the previous study, showing that the highest percentage of young social media users were between the age of 21 to 25 years in Pakistan (Zulqarnain & Taimur-ul-Hassan, 2017). Table 1 presents demographic details as well as interesting characteristics of the Pakistani population published by the government of Pakistan referring to our findings.

	Description	Percent (%)	National Population (%) (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021)
Gender	Male	52.20	51.02
	Female	47.80	48.98
Age	18-21	21.70	18 to 29 Years 29
	22-25	43.20	
	26-29	35.10	
Education Level	Less than high school	1.20	Literacy Rate 60
	High School	8.30	
	Madrassa	1.50	
	Bachelor's Degree	47.10	
	Master's Degree	39.30	
	PhD Degree	1.00	
	Prefer not to answer	1.70	
Profession	Full Time	32.00	Labor Force Unemployment 6.30
	Part Time	6.10	
	Self-Employed	8.00	
	Student	36.60	
	Unemployed	10.5	
	Prefer not to answer	6.80	
Income (PKR)	Below 25000	21.00	Average Monthly Household Income Rs 41545
	25,001 to 50,000	32.20	
	50,001 to 75,000	17.10	
	75,001 to 100,000	11.20	
	Above 100,000	18.50	

The validation of measurement and structural model for PLS path analysis was achieved employing Smart PLS 3.3.3. To assess the collinearity of single-source data, we measured the variance inflation factor (VIF) and found VIF between the acceptable range of five or less ($VIF \leq 5$), as directed by Hair et al. (2017).

5.2. Measurement model assessment

We applied internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity criterion for the assessment of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2017). The criteria to determine the internal consistency reliability are labeled as Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.60$), Composite Reliability (CR > 0.70), and Henseler's rho ($\rho_A > 0.70$) (Ramayah et al., 2018), which are illustrated in Table 2.

Construct	Items	Loadings	CA	rho_A	CR	AVE
PTS	PTS1	0.761	0.864	0.866	0.896	0.552
	PTS2	0.786				
	PTS3	0.716				
	PTS4	0.710				
	PTS5	0.794				
	PTS6	0.760				
	PTS7	0.666				
SMU	SMU1	0.637	0.800	0.811	0.856	0.500
	SMU2	0.690				
	SMU3	0.772				
	SMU4	0.785				
	SMU5	0.639				
	SMU6	0.706				
PEX	PEX1	0.774	0.869	0.878	0.897	0.522
	PEX2	0.813				
	PEX3	0.768				
	PEX4	0.697				
	PEX5	0.735				
	PEX6	0.687				
	PEX7	0.678				
	PEX8	0.607				
PI	PI1	0.856	0.848	0.850	0.892	0.625
	PI2	0.792				
	PI3	0.826				
	PI4	0.691				
	PI5	0.778				
PEM	PEM1	0.704	0.816	0.824	0.865	0.516
	PEM2	0.796				
	PEM3	0.672				
	PEM5	0.716				
	PEM6	0.698				
	PEM7	0.719				

Note: PEM (Political Empowerment), PEX (Political Expression), PI (Political Interest), PTS (Partisanship), SMU (Social Media Use), CA (Cronbach's Alpha), CR (Composite Reliability), AVE (Average Variance Extracted)

Outer loadings of the indicators and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are recommended to evaluate the convergent validity of the construct. In this study, we kept items above 0.60 loading. We deleted only

those items necessary to meet the Average Variance Extracted (AVE>0.50) criterion or with the loading less than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017). Following these steps, PEM4 with loading 0.629 was deleted to establish the AVE criterion of convergent validity for political empowerment. All the relevant values are listed in Table 2.

Discriminant validity ensures that each construct is unique and is empirically measuring a phenomenon different from other constructs in the same framework. We utilized the traditional Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion to assess the discriminant validity. According to Fornell and Larcker, discriminant validity is established if the diagonal values of each construct are larger than its corresponding correlation coefficients. For the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, Henseler et al. (2015), in a discussion on the HTMT threshold level, stated that it is debatable. In this study, following Gold et al. (2001) and Teo et al. (2008) recommendations, we considered 0.90 (HTMT0.90) as the threshold level and met the discriminant validity (Table 3).

Table 3. Discriminant validity criteria

	Fornell-Larcker Criterion					HTMT Criterion				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1.PEM	0.719									
2.PEX	0.376	0.722				0.429				
3.PI	0.562	0.393	0.791			0.649	0.450			
4.PTS	0.320	0.445	0.398	0.743		0.365	0.493	0.461		
5.SMU	0.546	0.359	0.591	0.339	0.707	0.657	0.410	0.720	0.403	

Note. PEM (Political Empowerment), PEX (Political Expression), PI (Political Interest), PTS (Partisanship), SMU (Social Media Use)

5.3. Structural model assessment

After fulfilling the requirements, we assessed the structural model to measure the model's predictive capability and relationship between constructs (Hair et al., 2017). To test the significance of the relationship, we followed Ramayah et al. (2018)'s directive and conducted bootstrapping of 410 cases with 5,000 samples. Results of direct and indirect relationships in structural path analysis, referring to the Pakistani young voters, are presented in Table 4. We found a positive and significant relationship between social media use and political expression ($\beta=0.235$, $p=0.000$, $t=5.182$). Hence, H1 secured substantial support. The path coefficient between partisanship and political expression ($\beta=0.365$, $p=0.000$, $t=8.563$) was positive and significant. The result is supportive towards H2 and suggests that respondents with partisan behavior have a tendency toward political expression. Similarly, political expression was found to be a positive predictor of political empowerment ($\beta=0.160$, $p=0.000$, $t=3.727$). Hence, H3 was also supported. In addition to β , p , and t values, the confidence interval bias-corrected (CIBC) results are also required to report the strength of path analysis (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). The significance of the relationship is determined if zero "0" does not fall between the lower and upper levels of the confidence interval (Ramayah et al., 2018). The results in Table 4 illustrate that H1, H2, and H3 met the CIBC criterion.

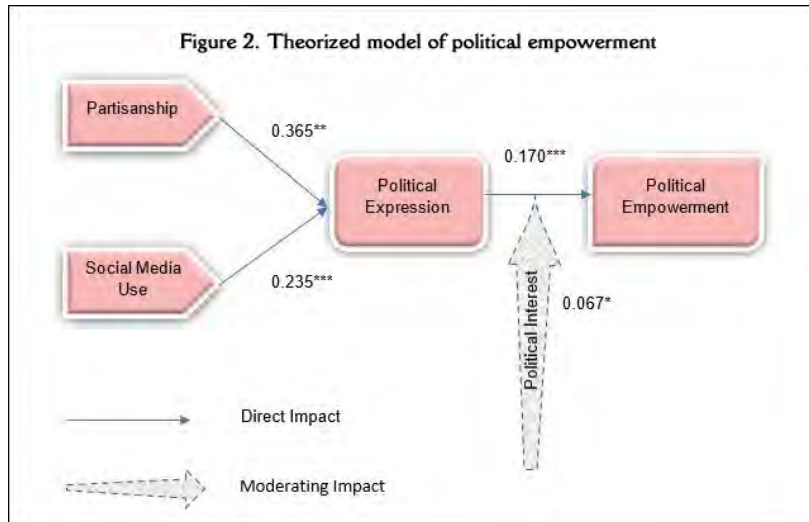
Table 4. Direct and indirect effect hypotheses

Relationships	β	t-value	p-value	CIBC LL=5%, UL=95%	Supported
SMU -> PEX	0.235	5.182	0.000***	[0.151, 0.303]	Yes
PTS -> PEX	0.365	8.563	0.000***	[0.289, 0.430]	Yes
PEX -> PEM	0.170	3.727	0.000***	[0.093, 0.241]	Yes
PEX*PI -> PEM	0.067	1.847	0.032*	[0.008, 0.126]	Yes

Note. β values, t-values, and p-values were computed through bootstrapping with 5000 samples, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

We tested indirect effect relationships to determine the moderating role of political interest between political expression and political empowerment. Political interest proved as a significant moderator ($\beta=0.067$, $p=0.032$, $t=1.847$). Thus, H4 was also supported. The indirect hypotheses' results suggested that showing political interest as a moderator strengthens this relationship.

Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed that the framework's outcome variable has a moderate coefficient of determination (R^2). R^2 describes the percentage of variance in the dependent variable caused by the predicting variables. In this study, the R^2 value for political empowerment was 0.345 (Figure 2), which depicts moderate and satisfactory predictive accuracy of the model (Hair et al., 2017).



6. Discussion

This article aimed at exploring the main research question of “whether political interest moderates/enhances the effect of the political expression on political empowerment of youngsters”. The study also includes three other paths of relationships. First, it explores the direct relationship of social media with political expression. Second, it discovers the relationship between political partisanship and political expression. Third, it enquires about the effects of political expression on the political empowerment of youngsters. The study is structured based on the theoretical framework of rational choice theory from the work of George C. Homans (1958), Peter Blau (1964), and Tajfel’s (1974) social Identity theory.

Multiple statistical procedures have been carried out to measure the direction, significance, and strength of the relationships. The findings identified a positive and significant path for the relationships of social media use with political expression, which is endorsed by many previous and contemporary studies (Bimber et al., 2015). The study findings also suggest a positive and significant relationship between partisanship of youngsters with their political expression. Several relevant studies provide support to these findings. Partisanship has proved a key variable that encourages political expression on various political issues (Dancey & Goren, 2010; Kim, 2018). These studies were carried out in the stable political environments and strong democracies of the United States and South Korea. However, the same outcome in the case of Pakistan’s developing democracy in a turbulent political environment demonstrates the consistency of partisanship in influencing political expression. Moreover, the results show that political expression in any form increases the likelihood of political empowerment of youngsters.

The goal of this study was to explore the twofold requirements of an overarching theoretical framework. The study findings are sufficiently in accordance with rational choice theory, which poses high reliance on deliberate choices of individuals in selection matters. Findings suggest political interest as a substantial moderator that enhances the effect of political expression on the political empowerment of youngsters. Meanwhile, the theory about partisanship i.e., SIT, recalls the behavioral position of an individual as a cohort. They are more likely to express themselves in an in-group setting having a like-minded ideology. Political partisanship tends to exhibit the same political norms in political groups of the same ideology which SIT suggests.

In Pakistan, there is a widespread belief that young, educated people, particularly females, are disinterested in politics. There are multiple explanations for this political inactivity. The absence of political training in the form of student unions, weak economic conditions, political victimization by institutions, and intensive screen use are some of the reasons consistently presented (Hassan & Sabir, 2020). In contrast, the findings of this study negated all these. Most of the participants in this research were graduates from universities, 47.80% were female, and almost all were frequent social media users. Considering all possible reasons for political deactivation, as mentioned earlier, the findings of this study revealed that

the political interest of respondents develops a sense of political empowerment among social media users. From the above discussion, we conclude that if the aim is to establish a democratic political structure in the country and the democratic strength of citizens for the stability of the political setup, political interest is a very substantial element in catalyzing youngsters' political empowerment. Although the role of political interest in shaping political behaviors has been studied in the past, its moderating role in enhancing political empowerment and moreover, in the context of Pakistan was novel in the literature.

Based on the current research, that primarily highlighted the importance of social media in democracy and its effect on political empowerment, the importance of political expression for political empowerment is also determined. This study suggests that policymakers in Pakistan should encourage social media and political forums so that citizens can express themselves as much as possible.

7. Limitations and recommendations

The main limitation of this study is related to data collection challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, the multistage cluster sampling approach was intended for data collection. This technique required physical administration which was not viable at that time. Overcoming this hurdle, we applied snowball sampling, which resulted in a change in the predetermined data collection method. Second, this study is cross-sectional. If data is collected in a longitudinal research design during and after elections, the findings may vary. Data collection during the election campaign will help elucidate the effects of the negative and positive political campaigns.

Referring to the demographic distribution of the Pakistani population, 62.60% population of the country lives in rural areas and 37.40% in urban areas (World Bank, 2021). Therefore, this study recommends future researchers to conduct a multi-group analysis (MGA) to compare the political characteristics of the rural and urban population of Pakistan.

Authors' Contribution

Idea, T.R, Z.F; Literature review (state of the art), Z.F; Theoretical Framework, Z.F; Methodology, T.R; Data analysis, T.R; Results, T.R; Discussion and conclusions, T.R, Z.F; Writing (original draft), T.R, Z.F; Final revisions, T.R., Z.F; Project design, T.R., Z.F.

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