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Impact Of Political Polarization Through Social Media On The Youth Of Pakistan

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Abstract

Through the perspective of social media, this study examined the consequences of political polarisation on the youth of Pakistan. A survey study design was used to collect data from social media users across Pakistan aiming to gather the perspectives of one hundred regular university students on the use of social media for political news. Following the informed consent process, a purposive sampling approach was employed to choose the research participants. To finish the inquiry, they were provided with an online Google form pre-fill link. The findings showed that most college students used social media for 5.35 hours a day on average. They were searching and researching the country's most recent political shifts. They also shared political material they found on social media with others and followed political leaders or parties they were affiliated with. However, most of them said they never switched their party allegiance because of content they saw on social media, especially from the various political pages they were following. They claimed that they follow the official social media accounts of several political parties in order to feel more intimately connected to the party and to stay informed. They also revealed that they follow the social media handles of political parties because they get access to political information in time and before others get it through mainstream media or other communication methods.

Keywords: Political Polarization; Social Media, Politics; Social Media Users/Activists, Survey research.

1. Introduction and Background

Because social media gives everyone equal access to talk, express, and publish on any topic or concern, it has become an indispensable part of many people's life in the modern era. Family relationships, social interactions, or social, political, cultural, or religious conversations have been significantly impacted (Hansen, et al., 2010). Due to the extensive growth and utilization of this platform, people from all over the world have become connected and closer. Furthermore, it has enabled different advocacy groups, including lobbyists and social media activists to shape their viewpoints on particular everyday-life issues. But on the other hand, due to the use of political hate speech and support, these arguments are usually based on distorted facts and information (Calder, 2013). Millions of users continue to delve into social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn and so have significantly disrupted the online social networking market. However, the administrations of Twitter and Facebook have expressed concerns about issues related to news feed hijacking and information that is primarily manipulated by social media activists who attempt to influence social media content by feeding and circulating it into various social media platforms because of their aligned interests (Safko & Brake, 2009).

This is because there is little control over false news posted on social media sites. In addition to constructing false narratives to malign the government or other relevant parties, they are also warping

the facts (Chan & Guo 2013). Millions of people typically follow politicians on Twitter who utilize the platform to express their precise views and debate public policy. Even the print and broadcast media see tweets as policy announcements or as the story of a certain political party or political organization.

Polarisation is the term used to describe the division of a society into opposing factions without a common foundation to unite them (Parmelee, & Bichard, 2011). Political polarization is causing unrest in countries all across the world, whether they are nascent democracies or well-established ones. In recent years in America, the Republican and Democratic parties have created Red and Blue zones across the nation (Feezellb, Guerreroc, & Conroye 2012).

Pakistan proclaimed its independence from British India on August 14, 1947. Pakistan was established with the goal of uniting all Muslims living on the subcontinent, regardless of their origins, ethnicity, race, or language. The goal was to unite them behind a single banner so they could feel free from any terrifying authority that may hinder them from practicing what they wished (Balkin, 2008). Equal citizenship, total freedom from discrimination, and the right to practice their own religion were also accorded to non-Muslims in Pakistan. Everything appeared ideal and went according to plan in the early years of the nation's establishment. However, over time fault lines became apparent. Moreover, the division was predicated on the same ideas that gave rise to the country. Consequently, disputes that incite hostility in Pakistan's social, political, and religious spheres are eroding Pakistan itself and jeopardizing national unity and democracy (Evans, et al., 2021). The emergence of sectarianism, provincialism, populism, polarised politics, religious fanaticism, linguistic divides, and disparities among various groups have led to the abandonment of social values in order to further the agenda for one's own advantage alone. Politicians that speak in a divisive manner, such as through hate speech, exacerbate tensions within their community and raise the possibility of terrorism and political bloodshed (Tsimonis, & Dimitriadis, 2014).

Recently, hate speech has been used by politicians in speeches given in Egypt, Italy, Israel, Russia, Greece, Sri Lanka, Columbia, Ukraine, Iraq, and the Philippines, among other countries. The employment of hate speech targeted at minorities is a tried-and-true strategy for motivating and uniting political followers while dehumanizing and degrading political opponents (Evans, 2010). Following Pakistan's 2013 general election campaign, political parties used Facebook and Twitter to spread their views to the public and millions of internet users followed them. In 2013, many countries where recently established political parties began engaging with people and disseminating their political content on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Bruns, & Highfield, 2015). Students are using social media to communicate with one another and discuss political topics (Eijaz, 2013). In the lack of concrete proof, it has been customary for one side to accuse the other of corruption and shortcomings throughout the country. Politicians now often disparage one another to get support from the public. This dangerous game separates society into two groups.

Political parties in Pakistan have been compelled to improve their online presence because of the impact modern technologies have on political dynamics. These social media platforms include Facebook and Twitter. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) reports that 58 million individuals used the Internet during the country's most recent general election (2018). Compared to earlier times when politicians engaged the public through processions, leaflets, and door-to-door campaigns. The advent of technology and social media has significantly altered the methods of conducting political campaigns. Politicians can use Facebook and Twitter to spread their views and engage in direct public interaction. This has resulted in a noticeable shift in the election campaigns of the major political parties (Vergeer, et al., 2013). All of the major liberal, conservative, and religious parties focused on using social media in addition to more traditional modes of campaigning, which made it a significant impact on this election (Abdu, et al., 2020).

Individuals who share similar political opinions are much more likely to follow and engage with other people on Twitter. Facebook's algorithms have an impact on the news feed, but users' choices about what to read and share with their friends ultimately determine what appears in it. People often believe

that their friends share their opinions more than they do (Aragón, et al., 2013). Does political polarisation increase with social media use? Though arguments boil on Facebook and Twitter, they do not have as much of an impact on real politics as one may believe. However, academic research on the use of social media by Pakistani political parties and its aftermath in terms of hate speech, character assassination, and instigating party leaders, staff, and fans against one another is hard to come by. As a result, Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q), Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), and Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) all used Facebook and Twitter.

The purpose of youth's increased use of social media is to explore political news and different topics in addition to enjoyment. The younger generation in Pakistani society today heavily depends on the information available on social media pages, particularly those that have a strong following of their fans. These days, mainstream news also includes viral information from social media. It is imperative to investigate and scrutinize the political material disseminated by mainstream political party social media advocates in the context of political polarisation. Pakistan's political divisiveness drastically increased after the 2018 election. Already divided between the rich and the poor. Pakistani society is becoming more and more religiously sectarian. In a society, political polarisation will foster mistrust between the people and the government, the military and the government, the judiciary and the people, etc. A multitude of causes contribute to the growing polarisation of society, such as the misuse of social media, a dearth of rational discourse, misinformation, political special interests, and news outlets that propagate the views of one side or the other. Political parties and activists specifically concern this study with the use of social media. As well as the ways in which social media exacerbates political polarisation in Pakistani society.

The current study aims to investigate the effects of political polarisation on social media on Pakistani youth. Additionally, it looks into how people are utilizing social media to polarise political debates and discussions through official political party accounts or other political pages. The review of the literature shows that social media has led to a marked increase in political polarisation both internationally and in Pakistan (Masroor, et al., 2019). It is possible that people in Pakistan are becoming more politically polarised as a result of using social media platforms excessively to search for political matters. Despite the belief that the country's populace is no more politically knowledgeable citizens use their social networks to obtain political information, develop political personas, and cast ballots (Settle, Bond & Levitt, 2011; Sinclair, 2012). Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have the potential to strengthen the influence of peer effects on political behavior since they dramatically reduce the cost of human communication. It increases the amount of data that people are exposed to at first. It also alters the quantity and diversity of people within a person's network of communication. It is not anticipated to have a significant impact on voters' political behavior on its own (Khan, et al., 2019).

Facebook has more than a billion users per day, making it the most popular social networking site globally. Over 3.5 billion 140-character tweets are posted on Twitter each week. This enormous volume of content has a significant political component. In most industrialized democracies. For example, members of parliament, elected MPs in Pakistan's provincial assemblies, political parties and candidates, media outlets and political journalists, interest groups, and non-governmental organizations regularly update their social media profiles. Ali (2010) asserts that radicalism, the downturn in the economy, and population increase have all influenced the polarisation of political ideologies in Pakistan. Globalization, digital technology, and media organizations have nevertheless brought about the emergence of interwoven communities and cultures within Pakistan. Political scholars have long argued that social media and the internet are democratizing since they enable people to participate in politics and access a variety of information (Delli, 2000; Morris, 1999). Researchers Smith & Rainie (2008) found that young people heavily rely on social media as a source of political knowledge. Users of social networking sites now have an additional means of sharing information on such instances. A social media site, sometimes referred to as a social network site or

social media platform, is a website that lets users create a public or semi-public profile and share both their own and other users' contact lists (Ellison, 2007).

According to Wilson and Dunn (2011), social media is also intimately associated with the characteristics and communication around protest events, including documentation, inspirational content, content dissemination, and the perception of the material's dependability. Voters and political players might engage in a variety of ways as a result. A citizen's access to information may be limited, but user-generated content could fill the void. Social media's collaborative and open character makes it easier for those who are less politically perceptive to get involved in politics (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Thus, social media has the power to profoundly affect politics. Studies reveal that politicians who use social media more frequently gain more votes; in the Dutch national election held on June 9, 2010, nine out of sixteen parties had a positive link with social media. The purpose of this study is to look into how young people are impacted by political polarisation and how social media plays a role in it. It also examines why individuals follow political figures on social media, how they disseminate political content to others with limited access, and why they depend on these individuals for their main source of political news.

2. Research Questions

The present investigation aims to address the following research inquiries:

1. RQ:1 Which social media platforms do Pakistani youth use to access political information?
2. RQ:2 Which social media platforms do Pakistani youth prefer to use while looking for political news or information?
3. RQ:3 How much time do Pakistani youth spend on social media looking for political information?
4. RQ:4 Do Pakistani youth follow any politicians, political figures, or political parties on social media?

3. Research Methodology

The current study is primarily focused on quantitative analysis (Hanson, et al., 2005). In order to collect information from participants regarding political polarisation and its effects on Pakistani youth the research study used a survey research methodology. After a review of the literature on the topic of political polarisation on social media and its consequences on users, a pre-made questionnaire was employed for this purpose (Curry, et al., 2009). The questionnaire of sixteen items that contained demographic information about the research participants. There were very few multiple-choice questions; all of the questions were closed-ended. The survey was produced using Google Forms and distributed via the Internet to university students across several disciplines. Only after giving their informed consent were they asked to share their responses.

3.1. Sample Size

Due to time constraints, a sample of one hundred university students was chosen for the research study. Students are important sources of relevant information as in addition to using social media, the young students make an effort to keep themselves updated about recent political events in the country (Ritchie, et al., 2013). Thus, they might fairly portray activists and users of social media. A purposive sampling technique was applied in order to choose a sample from the population. All university students across Pakistan who utilize social media platforms to research political issues made up the study's population.

3.2. Inclusion Criteria & Selection Sample

- University students who use social media accounts and profiles to stay up to date on political news.
- Students having access to Wi-Fi or cell phone data plans.

- University students who agreed to take part in the study and have the convenience of answering an online survey that has been shared via a link.

4. Data Collection & Analysis

Each online response was coded and entered into an Excel document in preparation for SPSS analysis. The results, displayed in tables and graphs, are the responses to the questionnaire's questions. Descriptive statistics and frequency analysis were used to complete and answer the study's research objectives.

Findings

(Table 4.1) Descriptive Statistics Of Demographics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	100	19	38	28.96	4.964
Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	42	42.0	42.0	42.0
	Female	58	58.0	58.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

Above (Table 4.1) reveals the empirical results of the demographics of respondents of the selected population. The study results show that participants' ages ranged from 19 to 38 years old, with an average age of 29 years and a standard deviation of 4.96 years seen in the aforementioned table. The table also contains information related to the gender of respondents. Throughout the total study sample, (42%) of respondents were male, and (58 %) of respondents were female.

(Table 4.2) Descriptive Statistics Of Qualification and Location				
	Qualification	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Undergraduate (BS)	29	29.0	29.0
	MS/M.Phil.	49	49.0	49.0
	PHD	22	22.0	22.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0
Valid	Urban	57	57.0	57.0
	Rural	43	43.0	43.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

Above (Table 4.2) reveals the results of qualification and location of respondents of the 100 university students. (29 %) were enrolled in undergraduate courses, (49 %) were pursuing an M. Phil or MS degree, although (22 %) were pursuing a Ph.D degree. Out of the total sample, (57 %) were belonging to urban living while (43 %) were from rural backgrounds as the data in the above table indicates.

(Table 4.3) Descriptive Statistics Of Time Spend On Social Media					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Everyday	97	97.0	97.0	97.0
	3-4 Times a week	2	2.0	2.0	99.0
	Rarely	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0
Time spent on Social Media	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	100	1	15	5.35	2.528

(Table 4.3) shows the results of the social media usage of respondents. (97 %) of the students said they use social networking sites on a daily basis when asked about their use of social media. Merely (2 %) of the students reported using social media three to four times a week, and one student stated he used it very infrequently.

(Table 4.4) How much time are you currently spending using social media platforms seeking political information/news?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1-3 Hours daily	28	28.0	28.0	28.0
	3-6 Hours daily	43	43.0	43.0	71.0
	7-10 Hours daily	28	28.0	28.0	99.0
	11-15 Hours daily	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

(Table 4.4) reveals the daily time spent on social media of respondents. According to a descriptive analysis of university students' social media usage habits, they spent 5.35 hours a day on average looking for political news and information on social media. While (28 %) of respondents used social media for 1-3 hours every day, (43 %) used it for 3-6 hours, and (28 %) used it for 7–10 hours per day to get political updates. One student even admitted that they exclusively use social media for 11–15 hours a day to look for political news and political information.

(Table 4.5) Have you ever noticed any political party's activity on social media?

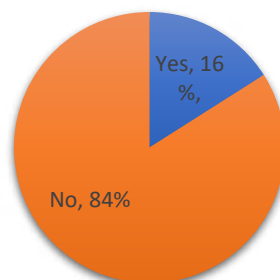
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	93	93.0	93.0	93.0
	No	7	7.0	7.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

Regarding noticing the activity of the political parties almost (93 %) said that they had noticed the political activity disseminated on social media while only (7 %) said they had never noticed this. This means that political parties are active users of social media to disseminate political news and information about their party.

(Table 4.6) Have you ever searched for political information on social media?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	97	97.0	97.0	97.0
	No	3	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Above empirical (Table 4.6) reveals, the information about respondents either they are putting their interest in searching political news and political information using social media. With regard to searching political information on social media sites, (97 %) gave the opinion that they search for political updates and information while using social media sites while only (3 %) shared that they never do this.

Did you choose or change your political party based on information from social media?

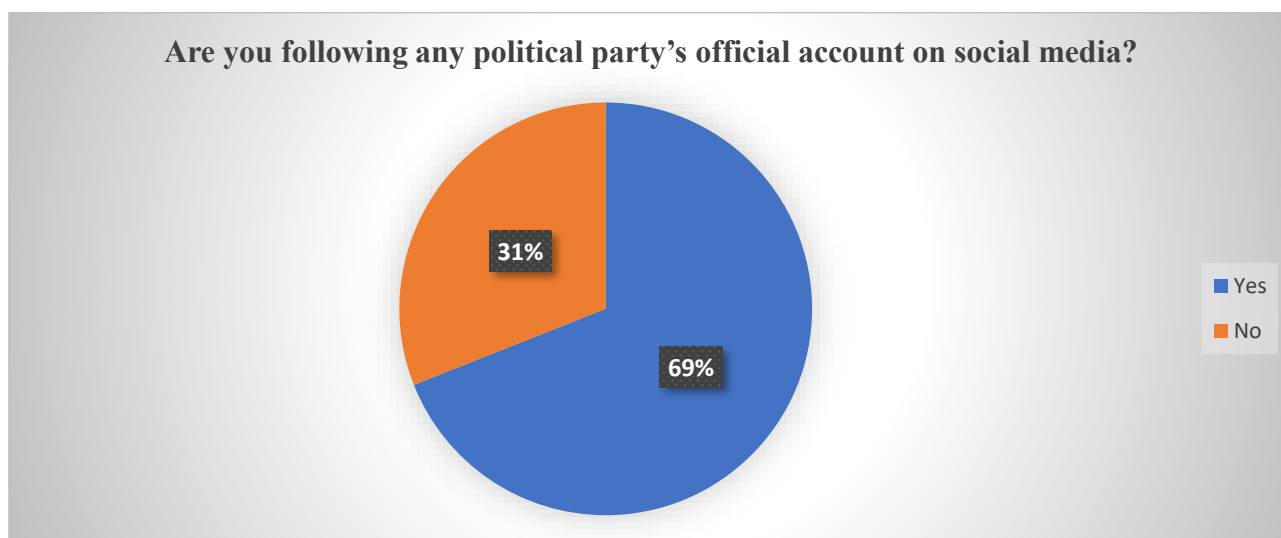
(Graph 4.1) shows empirical results regarding changing political party affiliation based on information provided on social media almost the majority (84 %) said that they never changed but

(16 %) said that they changed political parties after getting awareness provided by social media about those political parties.

(Table 4.7) Have you ever verbally spread out political information to people who do not have social media accessibility?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	66	66.0	66.0	66.0
	No	34	34.0	34.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

When it came to verbally sharing political information with individuals who have access to social media following close exposure to political updates on those platforms, 66% of respondents indicated they had done so, while 34% said they had never done so.



(Graph 4.2) reveals empirical results of the political affiliation of respondents through official political pages. When it came to following political leaders and political party pages on social media, it was found that (31 %) of university students claimed not to follow these accounts, while the majority (69 %) followed the pages of political parties.

(Table 4.8) It is important to stay informed about political issues.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	4.0	4.0	4.0
	Disagree	2	2.0	2.0	6.0
	Neutral	17	17.0	17.0	23.0
	Agree	44	44.0	44.0	67.0
	Strongly Agree	33	33.0	33.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

Following politicians, political leaders, or political parties on social media is mostly done to remain up to date on national political matters, according to (Table 4.8), results show that (44 %) of respondents and (33 %) strongly agree respondents. (17 %) of overall respondents disagreed with this notion while (4 %) strongly disagreed, and a small number (2 %) continued to dispute that keeping up with political parties' official pages is necessary to stay up to date on the most recent issues in politics.

(Table 4.9) It helps me to find out political news before others do.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	11	11.0	11.0	11.0

	Disagree	4	4.0	4.0	15.0
	Neutral	20	20.0	20.0	35.0
	Agree	43	43.0	43.0	78.0
	Strongly Agree	22	22.0	22.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

In terms of seeking assistance and learning political news or information ahead of others on social media in order to stay informed, the following statements about staying informed about them are not necessary: (22 %) strongly agreed, (43 %) agreed, (20 %) remained neutral, (11 %) strongly disagreed, and only (4 %) disagreed to selected notions.

(Table 4.10) It makes me feel more personally connected to the political candidate/party I follow

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	14	14.0	14.0	14.0
	Disagree	6	6.0	6.0	20.0
	Neutral	21	21.0	21.0	41.0
	Agree	38	38.0	38.0	79.0
	Strongly Agree	21	21.0	21.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

The assertion that people do not feel personally linked if they are not following any political party on social media was received with mixed reactions from respondents (21 %) strongly agreed, (38 %) agreed, (21 %) remained neutral, (14 %) strongly disagreed, and just (6 %) disagreed. According to this claim mentioned in above (Table 4.10), respondents have a stronger sense of personal kinship with the political parties they follow on social media.

(Table 4.11) The information I get on these pages/sites is more reliable than the information I get from traditional news organizations.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	19	19.0	19.0	19.0
	Disagree	2	2.0	2.0	21.0
	Neutral	25	25.0	25.0	46.0
	Agree	26	26.0	26.0	72.0
	Strongly Agree	28	28.0	28.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0

Merely (2 %) of respondents disagreed that official social media accounts of political parties are a more trustworthy source of news than other conventional and mainstream outlets. Regarding the credibility of the political content on these pages compared to more established news sources, (28 %) strongly agreed, (26 %) agreed, (25 %) remained neutral, and (19 %) disagreed.

5.1 Discussion & Conclusion

Social media has grown like a weed and altered the way people talk about politics, culture, and religion since it gives everyone the freedom to express himself or herself and share their ideas on anything they choose. Right-wing politics have benefited from the increased use of social media since it has given populist leaders a larger platform to interact with their followers. Globally, social media has brought people closer, but it has also polarised communication and allowed lobbyists to spread arguments, perspectives, and political tirades against governments without fact-checking them. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, with their millions of users and expanding have taken the world by surprise with the surge in extremism, terrorism, false news, and cyberbullying caused by a lack of regulation. Politicians' comments have caused online ideologies to spread widely. Endorsers' interactions with social media users led to a polarisation of political and

social groups. As a result, internet echo chambers were developed, which politicians exploit to sway others to believe their story whether it is genuine or not. Echo chambers are so tightly knit, nevertheless, that the public views them as normal, which changes public opinion and expands the base of followers.

This study also examined the impact of political polarisation on the social media usage of the youth of Pakistan. The results of the current study revealed that a great majority of university students were following politicians, political pages of the parties, or political figures on social media in addition to watching the political activities of the political parties and searching for political content in order to stay informed about the political parties to which they are affiliated.

Of the 100 participants who answered the Google Forms online survey, 42% were men and 58% were women. The respondents' ages, with a mean of 29, varied from 19 to 38 years old. Students from undergraduate, graduate, and MS/M.Phil/Ph.D programs across multiple university and college departments made up the majority of the student body. Likewise, most of the students came from urban areas. Based on the feedback, most students looked up political information on social media every day. A third of the sample showed a high level of reliance on social media, using it for more than seven hours a day. 5.35 hours a day were spent on social media on average looking for political updates. When asked if they had ever changed their thoughts about anything, the majority of them denied having ever changed their party affiliations in reaction to information they had received via social media. Most of those who disseminated political content among those without or with restricted access to social media did it verbally. Most of them said that they followed politicians, political figures, or political parties they were affiliated with in order to stay informed because they thought they could find the most recent developments in politics on their official social media pages before others.

It was also revealed that they believed they had a personal connection to the political parties and candidates they backed. Furthermore, they believed these social media sites to be more reliable and trustworthy than other traditional media sources. Overall, the results demonstrated that, in contrast to other media sources, social media users were heavily relying on and following political information on social media. Most significantly, while looking for political news, they spent more time on social media than is typically advised. While social networking is unquestionably wonderful, it has also led to serious issues that require attention for both adults and children. Previously, content that could be construed as bullying, disparaging remarks, character assassination, insurrection, or anything else that could be considered anti-racist or anti-state could be freely disseminated through digital media, particularly social media. According to the type of content being shared, the information about the individuals disseminating it, and the motivations behind such actions. As a result, social media will grow significantly in importance and relevance. Comparably, by incorporating viewpoints from other social groups, the research sample size of 100 might be expanded to improve the study's external validity in terms of generalization.

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