

**THE MEDIATING ROLE OF MEMES IN THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL CYNICISM:
EXPLORING THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF MEMES.**



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Session
2021-2025
Department of Arts and Media
Foundation University School of Science and Technology

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICATION

I certify that the research work presented in this thesis is to the best of my knowledge for my own. All sources used and any help received in the preparation of this dissertation has been acknowledged. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, whether in whole or in parts, for any other degree at this or any other institution.

Signature

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First of all, I would like to start by praising God the Almighty, for blessing me with the strength, knowledge, and courage to start and complete my thesis.

I sincerely thank Dr. Adnan who served as my supervisor and made this work possible. His guidance and advice carried me through all the stages of writing my thesis. I have greatly benefited from his insightful criticism and valuable guidance, encouragement, and support during my thesis.

I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who assisted me in completing my thesis. I especially value the knowledge and inspiration exceptionally supportive and inspiring teachers offer.

I would like to thank my parents whose love and guidance were with me in whatever I pursued. They are the ultimate role models and the reason that inspired me to continue this far.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this study, directly and indirectly.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family for nursing me with affection and love and for their dedicated partnership for success in my life. I dedicate this thesis to my teachers as well for guiding me and having confidence in me in completing it.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OPA	Online Political Activities
IPM	Interaction with Political Meme
EPM	Engagement with Political Memes
PC	Political Cynicism
SMP	Social Media Platforms
RMM	Rely on-Main-Stream-Media
RSM	Rely on Social Media
SMU	Social Media Usage

ABSTRACT

This study rigorously examines the mediating role of political memes in the relationship between social media use and political cynicism, with a particular focus on their influence on online political activity. Grounded in Media Ecology Theory, this research explores the dynamic ways of digital platforms that reshape political engagement within Pakistan's socio-political landscape, an environment marked by pervasive political instability, institutional distrust, and the rapid rise of social media as a primary medium for political discourse. The study draws on empirical data collected through a structured survey of 202 students and staff at the Foundation University School of Science and Technology (FUSST), a demographic characterized by high levels of digital activity and exposure to political content.

The findings reveal that political social media use serves as a significant predictor of online political activity, both directly and indirectly, mediated by interactions with political memes. Memes are identified as pivotal digital artifacts, uniquely blending humor, satire, and critique to simplify complex political narratives. They foster critical engagement and emotional resonance, thus influencing public perceptions of governance and political systems. Importantly, the study highlights the dual nature of memes: while they amplify political cynicism by critiquing systemic inefficiencies and exposing governance failures, they simultaneously act as humor-based coping mechanisms, tempering disillusionment and encouraging constructive engagement with political content.

This nuanced interplay underscores the transformative role of political memes as both facilitators of political mobilization and potential contributors to partisan polarization. The research holds significant implications for political campaign strategies, media literacy programs, and policymaking. It advocates for the development of balanced frameworks that leverage memes' capacity for fostering informed political participation while mitigating their potential to propagate divisive or misleading narratives. By addressing critical gaps in the understanding of digital political communication, this study contributes substantively to the academic discourse on media effects, political behavior, and civic engagement in developing democracies, offering insights relevant to both local and global contexts.

Keywords: Political Cynicism, Social Media, Political Memes, Digital Media, Mainstream Media,

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

In the modern digital age, social media has revolutionized the way individuals engage with political information and discourse. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become central to the dissemination of political messages, fostering a dynamic and participatory political landscape. As of 2024, there are 71.7 million active social media users in Pakistan, representing 29.5% of the country's total population of 242.8 million (DataReportal, 2024). TikTok alone has seen exponential growth, reaching 54.4 million users, while Instagram's user base increased by 33.6% over the previous year, demonstrating the rapid penetration of these platforms in the country (PromiAD, 2024; PhoneWorld, 2024). YouTube remains the most-used platform, engaging 64.6% of Pakistan's internet user base, which totals 111 million (DataReportal, 2024).

Among the various forms of content circulating on these platforms, memes have emerged as a distinct and powerful mode of communication. By combining humor, satire, and brevity, memes distill complex political ideas into engaging and easily shareable formats, often shaping public opinion and political attitudes.

While social media's accessibility and reach have democratized political engagement, they have also raised concerns about their impact on public perceptions of political systems and actors. One critical issue arising in Pakistan's context is political cynicism, characterised as the growing distrust and skepticism towards political institutions and leaders. Political cynicism threatens to erode public trust and democratic participation, making it imperative to understand the factors contributing to its prevalence. This research examines the mediating role of memes in the relationship between social media use and political cynicism, seeking to uncover the nuanced ways

in which digital content influences public attitudes. In Pakistan, where political instability and dissatisfaction are prevalent, the exploration of political cynicism is particularly salient. The increasing role of social media in shaping political perceptions adds a layer of complexity to this phenomenon.

Social media platforms serve as a double-edged sword in the realm of political communication. On one hand, they provide users with unprecedented access to diverse information, fostering civic awareness and engagement. On the other hand, the algorithm-driven nature of these platforms often amplifies sensational or polarized content, contributing to political cynicism. This dual impact positions social media use as a significant factor influencing political attitudes.

Political cynicism can be heightened through exposure to content that emphasizes systemic failures, political corruption, or elite dominance. Social media platforms, being repositories of such critical narratives, play a pivotal role in reinforcing distrust among users. For instance, continuous exposure to posts or discussions highlighting unfulfilled promises, political scandals, or governance failures can exacerbate skepticism toward political leaders and institutions. Research aligns with this notion, suggesting that frequent consumption of critical or negative political content on social media correlates with heightened political cynicism (Halversen & Weeks, 2023).

1.2.Role of Political Memes

Memos, as a distinct subset of digital content, add complexity to the relationship between social media use and political cynicism. Acting as both a medium and a message, memos encapsulate political commentary in a manner that is engaging and

easily shareable. Their emotional appeal, albeit humor, satire, or critique, modulates how users perceive political narratives.

Satirical memes that emphasize the incompetence or corruption of political leaders can amplify political cynicism. By focusing on the flaws of political actors or institutions, these memes reinforce negative perceptions, contributing to a deeper sense of disillusionment. For instance, memes mocking unfulfilled electoral promises or highlighting political scandals often serve as catalysts for reinforcing public skepticism. Conversely, memes that employ humor to address political issues may serve as a coping mechanism, allowing users to engage with political topics without succumbing to overwhelming cynicism. By presenting political content in a relatable and entertaining format, such memes can make political discourse more approachable and reduce the emotional burden of disillusionment (Glăveanu & Saint Laurent, 2021).

1.3.Social Media Use, Memes and Political Cynicism

The interplay between social media use, memes, and political cynicism is multifaceted, shaped by various factors that render the relationship dynamic rather than linear. One significant determinant is the type of content encountered by users. Memes that focus on systemic critique (highlighting political corruption, governance failures, or societal inequities) often amplify political cynicism by reinforcing negative perceptions of political institutions and leaders. Conversely, memes that incorporate satire and humor can offer a counterbalance, presenting political issues in a way that tempers disillusionment while still encouraging critical engagement. This dual potential underscores the unique role of memes in shaping public attitudes.

Another critical aspect is the level of user engagement with memes. Active participation, such as liking, sharing, or commenting on politically critical memes, intensifies their impact, as users internalize and propagate the sentiments conveyed. In contrast, passive consumption, where users simply scroll past without active involvement, may result in a more muted effect on political cynicism. This divergence highlights how individual behaviors on social media influence the extent to which digital content shapes political perceptions.

Lastly, the cultural context in which these interactions occur adds further complexity. In Pakistan, where political humor has historically served as a coping mechanism for public discontent, memes often act as a safety valve. By offering a platform for critique cloaked in humor, memes allow users to express and process frustration without directly confronting the weight of systemic challenges. At the same time, these humorous portrayals of political realities can foster critical engagement by drawing attention to pressing issues in a more digestible and relatable manner.

Together, these factors reveal the nuanced and context-dependent ways in which social media use and memes intersect to influence political cynicism, particularly in a politically charged and socially connected environment like Pakistan. This complexity warrants further exploration to uncover the broader implications of digital media on political attitudes and democratic participation.

1.4.Problems Statement

The rapid growth of social media usage in Pakistan, coupled with the proliferation of political memes, has transformed the landscape of political communication and public discourse. Despite the potential of memes to enhance civic

engagement through humor and satire, their role in influencing political cynicism and online political activity remains poorly understood. While previous studies have explored the effects of social media on political behavior, there is a lack of research examining how exposure to political memes mediates the relationship between political social media use and online political activity. This gap is particularly significant in Pakistan, where political distrust is high, and social media platforms are increasingly shaping public opinion. Addressing this problem is critical to understanding how digital communication tools influence political participation and cynicism in a developing democracy.

The intersection of social media and politics has become a defining feature of contemporary political engagement. In Pakistan, a nation marked by widespread political disenchantment and skepticism, the rise of social media platforms has introduced new dynamics in how citizens interact with political content. Memes, as a pervasive form of digital communication, are uniquely positioned to influence political perceptions by combining entertainment and critical commentary. However, the extent to which memes mediate the relationship between social media use and political cynicism or activity remains largely unexplored. This research problem emerged from an analysis of existing literature and empirical trends highlighting the dual role of social media in fostering both political engagement and distrust. Addressing this gap will shed light on the nuanced effects of political memes in shaping democratic discourse in Pakistan.

1.5. Research Question

The central research question, “*Whether exposure to political memes mediates the relationship between political social media use and online political activity?*” is pivotal to this study because it addresses a critical gap in the literature on digital political communication. By focusing on the mediating role of memes, the research seeks to unravel the complexities of how humor, satire, and political commentary interact with social media usage to influence political behavior. This question leads the research towards exploring causal relationships and identifying mechanisms that shape online political activity in a politically dynamic and digital-first environment like Pakistan. Focus research questions are given below.

RQ1. What is the prevalence of political cynicism among young adults in Pakistan?

RQ2. What is the relationship between exposure to political social media use and political cynicism?

RQ3. What is the relationship between political social media use and political participation?

RQ4. Whether exposure to political memes mediates the relationship between social media exposure and political cynicism?

RQ5. Whether exposure to political memes will mediate the relationship between social media use and political participation?

1.6. Research Hypothesis

The hypotheses in this study are designed to systematically investigate the relationships among political social media use, exposure to political memes, and online political activity.

1. Political social media use is expected to have a positive effect on online political activity. This hypothesis is grounded in evidence suggesting that engagement with political content on social media enhances users' participation in political discourse and actions within digital spaces. (H1)
2. Exposure to political memes is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between political social media use and online political activity. This proposition reflects the ability of memes to act as a bridge, transforming passive social media use into active political engagement by rendering political content more relatable and engaging. (H2)
3. The indirect effect of political social media use on online political activity, mediated by exposure to political memes, is anticipated to be statistically significant. This hypothesis underscores the quantitative significance of memes as facilitators of digital political engagement, highlighting their transformative role in shaping political communication. (H3)

Through the testing of these hypotheses, the research aims to uncover the mechanisms through which digital content influences political participation, contributing to both political advancements and practical applications in the fields of media and political studies.

1.7. Research Objectives

This study sets out to provide a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between social media use, political memes, and their influence on political engagement and cynicism in Pakistan. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Examining how engagement with social media for political purposes shapes online political activity among Pakistani users.
2. To investigate how exposure to political memes mediates the relationship between political social media use and online political activity.
3. To explore the influence of political memes on levels of political cynicism among social media users, assessing their potential to amplify or mitigate distrust in political systems.
4. To examine how specific interactions with memes (i.e. sharing, and commenting) correlate with distinct patterns of online political behavior.
5. Offer empirical insights from Pakistan to contribute to global academic discourse on the role of digital media in shaping political attitudes and behaviors.

Thereby addressing these objectives, this study will deepen understanding of intricate dynamics between digital media usage and political perceptions, through the lens of sociopolitical realities of Pakistan.

1.8. Academic Significance

This research delves into the complex interplay between digital media, political engagement, and public attitudes, making significant contributions to the fields of media studies, political communication, sociology, and psychology. The study integrates perspectives from these disciplines to provide a thorough analysis of how digital culture shapes political attitudes. It investigates the psychological mechanisms that enable memes to evoke emotional responses, simplify complex political issues, and influence public discourse, thereby enriching broader theories on media effects and

political behavior. The focus on Pakistan's distinctive sociopolitical context further adds to the global body of knowledge on digital political communication. Through this lens, the research sheds light on culturally specific practices, such as political humor and satire, and their impact on online political behavior and attitudes in developing democracies.

1.9. Industrial Significance

The insights from this study are expected to assist policymakers and social media platforms in tackling critical challenges, including political polarization and the spread of misinformation. A deeper understanding of how memes propagate political messages can enable the development of moderation strategies that balance the preservation of free expression with the need to mitigate the dissemination of harmful or misleading content.

Political campaigners and communication strategists can benefit from the actionable insights offered by this research. The findings help identify how memes effectively engage audiences, enabling campaigns to create ethical, impactful messaging strategies that encourage constructive discourse while avoiding the pitfalls of exacerbating cynicism or division.

The study's implications extend to educators and policymakers, who can utilize these findings to design media literacy programs that cultivate critical thinking in social media users. These programs aim to empower individuals, particularly younger audiences, to evaluate political content critically, engage meaningfully in political discourse, and resist manipulative or divisive messaging.

The role of memes in shaping youth political culture makes this study particularly valuable for understanding how younger generations engage with politics. The insights gained can assist educators and decision-makers in guiding youth toward thoughtful and informed political participation, fostering a critically aware and engaged electorate crucial for democratic health.

Through its exploration of meme dynamics, the research emphasizes the importance of informed digital citizenship. The findings serve as a foundation for strategies to cultivate an active, critically aware, and well-informed public, ensuring that the evolving landscape of digital media contributes positively to democratic systems rather than undermining them.

CHAPTER 2- LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Political Social Media Use and Online Political Participation

Social media platforms have transformed the landscape of political communication and participation, serving as primary conduits for political information dissemination and engagement (Newman et al., 2018). The ease of access to information and the interactive features of these platforms have democratized participation, bridging traditional and digital forms of civic engagement (Mossberger et al., 2007; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Political social media use is associated with both offline and online participation, with studies demonstrating that exposure to political content fosters active engagement in political discourse and actions (Boulianne, 2017; Skoric et al., 2016).

Social media has also revolutionized participatory practices, enabling users to replicate offline political behaviors in online spaces (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Shirky, 2011). Meta-analyses reveal a consistent positive relationship between political social media use and political participation across diverse sociopolitical contexts (Boulianne, 2017; Skoric et al., 2016). Building on these findings, this study explores the mediating role of political memes in the relationship between political social media use and online political activity. The hypothesis posits that political social media use increases online political participation, mediated by exposure to political memes.

2.2. Political Memes: A New Frontier in Digital Era

Political memes, a distinct subset of internet memes, have become a significant feature of participatory culture in the digital era (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2014). Memes blend humor, cultural references, and political commentary, making complex political issues accessible and engaging (McKelvey et al., 2021; Moody-Ramirez &

Church, 2019). They are defined as "artifacts of participatory digital culture" that spread through imitation and resonate at both individual and societal levels (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014; Shifman, 2013).

The incorporation of memes in political communication has gained attention in various domains, including election campaigns (Ross & Rivers, 2017), political activism (Milner, 2013), and misinformation (Al-Rawi, 2021). Memes not only entertain but also inform, influencing political attitudes and fostering a sense of political efficacy among users (Paz et al., 2021; Pearce & Hajizada, 2014). Their participatory nature makes them powerful tools for engagement, as they often inspire discussions and mobilize individuals to participate in political activities (Bülow & Johann, 2023).

Despite their potential, empirical studies on the relationship between exposure to political memes and online political participation remain limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating how political memes mediate the impact of political social media use on online political activity.

2.3. Political Cynicism and its Impact on Political Behavior

Political cynicism, defined as a lack of trust and confidence in political institutions, processes, and leaders, is a prevalent phenomenon in contemporary democracies (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Miller, 1974). It encompasses dimensions such as distrust of politicians, skepticism about institutional effectiveness, and disillusionment with political processes (Schudson, 1999). Research indicates that political cynicism can either inhibit or stimulate political participation, depending on contextual factors (Dalton, 2004; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004).

Cynicism's impact on political behavior is multifaceted. On one hand, it can lead to political apathy and disengagement (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Valentino et al., 2001). On the other hand, it may encourage critical thinking and active participation, particularly when individuals perceive opportunities to challenge the status quo (Fu et al., 2011). The role of media, especially social media, in shaping political cynicism is critical. Studies suggest that media framing and the quality of political information influence levels of cynicism, with higher information efficacy sometimes correlating with increased cynicism (Lariscy et al., 2011; Valentino et al., 2001).

In the context of this study, political cynicism is considered a critical factor influencing the indirect relationship between political social media use and online political participation via political memes. While cynicism often deters engagement, exposure to relatable and humorous political memes may mitigate its effects, mobilizing even the most disengaged individuals.

2.4. The Relationship of Political Social Media Use, Memes and Political Cynicism in Political Participation

The interplay between political social media use, exposure to political memes, and political cynicism underscores the complexity of modern political participation. Social media serves as a gateway to diverse political content, including memes that can bridge the gap between passive information consumption and active engagement. However, the extent to which memes facilitate participation depends on individual factors such as political cynicism. This study hypothesizes that exposure to political memes mediates the relationship between social media use and political participation, with cynicism acting as a potential moderator that influences the efficacy of this mediation.

2.5. Political Social Media Use

Political social media use refers to an individual's active and passive interaction with political content on social media platforms. Active interaction includes posting updates, commenting on posts, and sharing political news, while passive interaction involves reading or browsing political discussions and news. This conceptualization stems from the understanding that social media platforms function as both information hubs and participatory arenas, allowing individuals to engage with political processes at various levels.

Political social media use serves as the foundation of this study as it signifies a key way in which people encounter political information and discussions in the digital age. Social media's widespread adoption in Pakistan has transformed how citizens access political news, enabling greater public discourse on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). By investigating this phenomenon, the study aims to understand its role in shaping public engagement with political content and its eventual impact on political participation.

Studies have demonstrated that time spent on political social media and the diversity of online activities strongly influence an individual's political awareness and participation. The inclusion of various types of engagement ensures a comprehensive exploration of the topic.

To measure political social media use, indicators were selected based on their alignment with behaviors typically associated with political engagement online. These include the frequency of posting, commenting, sharing, and reading political content. The time spent on social media platforms was also considered, as it offers a quantitative

measure of exposure. These indicators provide a holistic view of the extent and nature of individuals' engagement with political content.

- Frequency of engaging in activities such as posting, sharing, commenting on, or reading political content on social media.
- Time spent on social media for political purposes.
- Platforms predominantly used for political engagement.

2.6. Political Memes

Political memes are digitally shared artifacts that combine humor with political commentary. They simplify complex political narratives, making them more accessible and engaging for a wider audience. This conceptualization aligns with the participatory culture framework, which emphasizes the role of memes as tools for political expression and social critique.

In this research, political memes are viewed as a mediating variable that links political social media use with political participation. Within Pakistan's social media landscape, memes frequently serve as a medium for critiquing political systems, leaders, and policies. Their humor and relatability make political issues more approachable, even for individuals disengaged from formal political discourse. The emphasis on memes is warranted due to their distinctive capacity to merge entertainment with political messaging. They resonate across diverse demographics, fostering engagement and stimulating discussions on political topics. Furthermore, their widespread consumption in Pakistan underscores their significance and relevance to this study.

The operationalization of political memes involves measuring the frequency of exposure and engagement. This includes how often individuals encounter memes on various platforms and the extent to which they interact with them through likes, shares, and comments. Indicators were chosen to capture both passive consumption and active participation, providing insights into the role of memes in political engagement.

- Frequency of exposure to political memes on social media.
- Active engagement with memes, such as liking, sharing, or commenting.
- Perceived relevance and impact of memes in shaping political opinions.
- Primary sources of exposure to political memes (e.g., specific platforms or accounts).

2.7. Political Cynicism

Political cynicism refers to individuals' distrust of political leaders, institutions, and processes. It encapsulates skepticism about politicians' motives, dissatisfaction with the fairness of political systems, and disillusionment with their effectiveness. This definition aligns with established conceptualizations that frame cynicism as a psychological and behavioral response to perceived political inefficacy and corruption.

In this study, political cynicism is examined as a moderating variable, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to political memes and social media content. In Pakistan, political distrust is pervasive, fueled by corruption, nepotism, and the lack of accountability. This variable offers a critical perspective for understanding how cynicism influences political behavior.

Its inclusion is supported by previous research indicating that, while cynicism can deter political participation, it may also provoke critical engagement in certain circumstances. Political memes, with their humor and relatability, have the potential to mitigate cynicism's disengaging effects, fostering a renewed connection to political issues.

The operationalization of political cynicism involves assessing individuals' attitudes toward political leaders, processes, and institutions. Indicators include perceptions of corruption, dishonesty, manipulation, and elitism. These measures capture the multifaceted nature of cynicism, offering a nuanced understanding of its impact on political engagement.

- Trust in political leaders and institutions.
- Perception of fairness and transparency within the political system.
- Belief in the prevalence of corruption among political figures.
- Overall satisfaction with the performance of political systems.

2.8. Online Political Participation

Online political participation encompasses the range of activities individuals undertake in digital spaces to engage with or influence political discourse. This includes sharing opinions, commenting on political content, and participating in discussions on political issues.

As the dependent variable in this study, online political participation reflects the outcome of individuals' interaction with political content on social media, particularly

their exposure to political memes. In Pakistan, where traditional avenues for political participation are often limited, digital platforms provide an accessible space for citizens to voice their opinions and connect with larger political movements.

This variable is central to capturing the transition from passive consumption of political information to active engagement. It highlights the transformative potential of social media in fostering democratic participation and enabling meaningful political engagement in digital environments.

To measure political social media use, indicators were selected based on their alignment with behaviors typically associated with political engagement online. These include the frequency of posting, commenting, sharing, and reading political content. The time spent on social media platforms was also considered, as it offers a quantitative measure of exposure. These indicators provide a holistic view of the extent and nature of individuals' engagement with political content.

To operationalize online political participation, indicators were chosen to reflect both active and passive forms of engagement. These include commenting on political posts, sharing political news, and discussing political issues online. These measures ensure a comprehensive assessment of the various ways individuals engage with political content in the digital realm.

- Frequency of engaging in political activities online, such as sharing posts or participating in discussions.
- Diversity of activities, including signing petitions, joining campaigns, or creating political content.

- Level of interaction with others on political issues in digital spaces.
- Intensity of efforts to influence political discourse through online platforms.

2.9. Theoretical Framework: Media Ecology Theory

The theoretical foundation of this study is firmly rooted in Media Ecology Theory, which explores how various forms of media shape human perception, behavior, and societal structures. This theory emphasizes that media are not mere conduits for transmitting information but constitute environments that actively influence the way individuals think, feel, and act. By foregrounding the medium itself, Media Ecology Theory provides a sophisticated lens for understanding the transformative impact of political memes, as a distinct digital medium, on political discourse and behavior. This perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing the intersections of social media use, political memes, political cynicism, and online political participation in contemporary settings.

2.10. Social Media as Political Ecosystem

Media Ecology Theory offers an insightful framework to understand the interplay between digital platforms and political behavior. Social media platforms, as dynamic ecosystems, have redefined how political information is disseminated, consumed, and engaged with. In Pakistan, where traditional media often fails to provide comprehensive or impartial political coverage, social media has emerged as a critical arena for political discourse. These platforms allow individuals to actively shape the political narrative through sharing, posting, and commenting, empowering them to become contributors rather than passive recipients of political content.

The interactive, decentralized, and participatory nature of social media aligns seamlessly with Media Ecology Theory, which underscores the profound influence of media environments on societal dynamics. By creating spaces for real-time political engagement, social media platforms facilitate the flow of diverse political ideas, amplify marginalized voices, and enable users to challenge dominant narratives. This study posits that political social media use serves as an essential mechanism through which individuals navigate and interact within these digital political environments, shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

2.11. Political Memes as Cultural and Political Agents

Political memes, a unique subset of social media content, occupy a central role in this study's theoretical framework. Functioning as cultural artifacts, memes combine humor, symbolism, and commentary to distill complex political issues into digestible and highly shareable formats. From a Media Ecology perspective, memes represent a transformative medium, redefining the ways individuals engage with and critique political systems.

In Pakistan, where political institutions are frequently criticized for corruption and inefficiency, memes provide a creative and accessible platform for social and political critique. Their blend of entertainment and political messaging lowers the barriers to engagement, fostering participation even among individuals who may otherwise be disengaged from formal political processes. Memes thus act as both mirrors of societal sentiment and catalysts for political engagement, enabling users to critique authority, mobilize others, and build a collective understanding of political

issues. This dual role underscores the transformative potential of memes as powerful agents of political communication within digital environments.

2.12. Political Cynicism: Reframing Disillusionment

Political cynicism, defined as distrust or disillusionment with political leaders, institutions, and processes, is a critical moderating variable in this study. Traditionally, cynicism is associated with political disengagement and apathy. However, Media Ecology Theory suggests that digital media environments can offer alternative pathways for reframing such disillusionment.

Social media platforms provide spaces where politically cynical individuals can express their dissatisfaction, critique the status quo, and connect with like-minded individuals. Political memes, in particular, act as tools for reframing cynicism through humor, satire, and relatability. By fostering shared experiences and validating political discontent, memes can transform cynicism from a disengaging force into a catalyst for critical political engagement. This dynamic illustrates the ability of digital media to reshape the relationship between political disillusionment and participation, highlighting the transformative power of media environments in mitigating the negative effects of cynicism.

2.13. Public Participation in the Digital Era

The dependent variable in this study, online political participation, is deeply influenced by the characteristics of the digital media environment. Media Ecology Theory posits that the structural and functional attributes of digital platforms shape the

ways individuals engage in political activities. In Pakistan, where structural barriers often impede traditional forms of political participation, social media provides a viable alternative for political engagement.

Through activities such as sharing posts, initiating discussions, commenting on issues, and supporting online campaigns, individuals can actively participate in the political process. Political memes further amplify this engagement by serving as low-threshold entry points into political discourse. Memes simplify complex political narratives, making them accessible to broader audiences and encouraging even casual users to engage in political discussions. This democratization of political participation aligns with the Media Ecology perspective, which highlights the role of media in transforming individual behaviors and societal norms.

2.14. Integration of the Theory

The interplay among political social media use, political memes, political cynicism, and online political participation can be comprehensively understood through the integrative lens of Media Ecology Theory. This theoretical framework emphasizes the medium of communication as a central force shaping societal dynamics. Political memes, as both reflectors and shapers of societal beliefs, bridge the gap between passive consumption and active engagement, offering a novel mechanism for political expression. Political cynicism, when mediated through memes and social media, moderates this engagement by influencing how individuals interpret and respond to political content.

Together, these variables illustrate the transformative power of digital media environments in reshaping political behavior. By situating this study within Media Ecology Theory, the framework not only explains the roles of individual variables but also elucidates their interrelationships, providing a cohesive understanding of how digital media influences political participation in Pakistan's sociopolitical context.

CHAPTER 3-METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to explore the interplay between social media use, political cynicism, and the moderating role of political memes. A quantitative approach is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for the systematic collection and statistical analysis of data, enabling the identification and measurement of relationships among the variables. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence on how social media engagement and exposure to political memes influence political attitudes, particularly cynicism, among users. Furthermore, the integration of memes as a moderating factor underscores the novelty of the study and justifies the use of a design that can capture complex interactions between variables.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population for this research consists of students and staff at the Foundation University School of Science and Technology (FUSST) in Pakistan. This specific population was chosen because students and staff are generally active users of social media platforms, making them an ideal group for investigating the study's variables.

The study employs purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to recruit participants. This method is appropriate as it ensures that only individuals who meet specific criteria—such as being active users of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok—are included in the study. Active social

media users are more likely to encounter and engage with political content, including memes, making their responses particularly relevant to the research objectives.

The sample size(N=202) was determined based on considerations of statistical power and the need for representativeness within the Foundation University of School and Science Technologies (FUSST) community. The inclusion of both students and staff diversifies the sample and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how different demographics interact with social media and political content.

3.3. Data Collection

The primary data collection method for this study was a structured survey questionnaire. Surveys are a widely accepted tool in quantitative research for collecting standardized data from large groups of participants. The questionnaire was designed to capture information on the key variables: social media use, political cynicism, and exposure to political memes. Administered online, the survey ensured accessibility and convenience for respondents, increasing the likelihood of participation.

The questionnaire comprised closed-ended questions to facilitate the quantification of responses. Likert-scale items were predominantly used, as they are effective in measuring attitudes and perceptions. The integration of variables into the questionnaire was carefully planned to ensure comprehensive data collection. Each section of the questionnaire was aligned with the study's conceptual framework and research objectives.

3.5. Social Media Use

To measure social media use, respondents were asked about their frequency and intensity of engagement with various platforms. Questions included:

- “How often do you use social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)?” with response options ranging from “Never” to “Several times a day.”
- “On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media?”

These questions provided insight into the extent of respondents’ exposure to social media, a critical variable for understanding their interactions with political content.

Additional items in this section assessed specific activities, such as:

- “How often do you like or share political posts on social media?”
- “Do you use social media to engage in political discussions or debates?”

These detailed inquiries helped capture not just the frequency of use but also the nature and depth of engagement with political content on social media.

3.6. Political Cynicism

Political cynicism was measured through a series of items designed to assess respondents’ trust and confidence in political systems, leaders, and institutions.

Examples of questions included:

- “To what extent do you agree with the statement: ‘Politicians are more interested in personal gains than serving the public’?”

- “How confident are you in the ability of the government to address the country’s key issues?”

These items were scored on a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” To further understand the nuances of political cynicism, additional questions addressed perceptions of specific institutions and processes, such as:

- “The electoral process is free and fair.”
- “Political parties genuinely represent the interests of the public.”

These items provided a comprehensive measure of respondents’ levels of skepticism and mistrust, allowing for a nuanced analysis of political cynicism within the target population.

3.7. Political Memes

To evaluate the role of political memes, the questionnaire included questions assessing both exposure to and perceptions of memes as a form of political commentary. Sample items included:

- “How often do you come across political memes on your social media feed?”
with options ranging from “Rarely” to “Very Frequently.”
- “To what extent do you find political memes to be an effective way of conveying political messages?”

Respondents were also asked about their engagement with memes, such as sharing or creating them, to understand how they interact with this form of content. Specific questions included:

- “Have you ever shared a political meme to express your own political views?”
- “Do you think political memes simplify complex political issues in a way that influences public opinion?”

Additionally, items probed the impact of memes on political attitudes, such as:

- “Exposure to political memes makes me more skeptical of political leaders.”
- “Political memes help me understand political issues better.”

These questions allowed for a detailed examination of the dual role memes play as both a source of information and a potential driver of cynicism.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was a cornerstone of this research. Before data collection, approval was obtained from the relevant ethical review board at FUSST. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. The consent form outlined the purpose of the study, the nature of the data being collected, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

Respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. Data was securely stored, and anonymously collected to safeguard participants’ privacy. Furthermore, the survey design ensured that no personally identifiable information was collected, adding an extra layer of anonymity

to the process. By adhering to these ethical guidelines, the study prioritized the dignity and rights of all participants, aligning with the standards of academic research.

CHAPTER 4-ANALYSIS

This section will present the statistical analyses conducted to test the hypotheses and address the research objectives. This is conducted by examining reliability, descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and regression models, the chapter aims to uncover the relationships between political social media use, exposure to memes, and online political activity. These analyses are crucial for understanding how memes mediate the interaction between digital media engagement and political behavior.

4.1. Reliability of Key Variables

The reliability analysis of the scales used in the study reveals high internal consistency, as shown in table 4.1, for all measured variables. Online Political Activities, consisting of six items, scored a Cronbach's alpha of 0.862, indicating strong reliability. Engagement with Political Memes, which included three items, achieved a reliability score of 0.764. Similarly, Interactions with Political Memes, with six items, recorded a reliability coefficient of 0.844. The highest reliability was observed in the Political Cynicism scale, comprising fifteen items, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.911.

Table 4. 1

RELIABILITY OF KEY VARIABLES:

No	Variable	Items	Cronbach alpha Value
1	Online Political Activities	6	.862
2	Engagement with political memes	3	.764
3	Interactions with Political Memes	6	.844
4	Political Cynicism	15	.911

4.2. Respondent's Profile

The demographic profile of respondents, as detailed in Table 4.2, provides valuable insights. The majority of participants (40%) were aged between 21 and 23 years, followed by those aged 18 to 20 years (29.7%). A smaller proportion (5.4%) were aged above 30 years. Most respondents identified as unmarried (84.7%) and male (60.9%). In terms of education, a significant majority were BS students (83.2%), while MS and PhD students accounted for 14.8% and 2.0%, respectively.

Table 4. 2

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

Item	Category	Frequency	Valid %
Age	18 – 20	60	29.7
	21 – 23	81	40
	24 -26	36	17.8
	27-30	14	6.9
	30 above	11	5.4
	N		202
Marital Status	Unmarried	171	84.7
	Married	31	15.3
	N	202	100

Gender	Male	123	60.9
	Female	79	39.1
	N	202	100
Education	BS	168	83.2
	MS	30	14.8
	PhD	4	2.0
	N	202	100

4.3. Political Affiliations of the Respondents

Political affiliation data, presented in Table 4.3, indicates that PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) enjoys the highest level of support among respondents, with 53% aligning themselves with the party. A significant proportion (25.2%) indicated support for other, unspecified parties, while support for PMLN, PPP, and other major political entities was below 13% for each.

Table 4. 3**POLITICAL AFFILIATION (N=202):**

No	Item	Political Affiliation (%)								Overall (%)
		PTI	PMLN	PPP	JI	MQM	TLP	PSP	Others	
1	Which of the following political parties do you support?	53	12.4	2.5	4.5	0.5	1.5	0.5	25.2	100

4.4. Respondents Monthly Household Income

The respondents' household income levels, as detailed in Table 4.4, show that 18.8% of participants have a household income exceeding 300,000 PKR, making it the largest category. Conversely, only 6.4% fall into the 251,000–300,000 PKR range, which represents the smallest group. The mean household income across the sample was calculated as 3.68, with a standard deviation of 2.12.

TABLE 4.4

RESPONDENTS' MONTHLY HOUSEHOLD INCOME (N=202):

No	Household Income	%	Overall %	Mean	SD
1	Less than 50,000 PKR	17.3			
2	51,000-100,000 PKR	20.3			
3	101,000- 150,000 PKR	16.3			
4	151,000-200,000 PKR	13.4	100%	3.44	1.66
5	201,000-250,000 PKR	7.4			

6	251,000-300,000 PKR	6.4
7	More than 300,000 PKR	18.8

4.5. Online Political Activities

The analysis of Online Political Activities, summarized in Table 4.5, shows that the most frequent activity among respondents is reading posts about social, political, or public affairs, with a mean score of 3.73 (SD = 1.12). Posting and sharing such content on social media were moderately frequent, with mean scores of 3.27 and 3.03, respectively. The least frequent activity was following political pages, which scored a mean of 2.95 (SD = 1.29).

Table 4. 5

MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF ONLINE POLITICAL ACTIVITIES (N=202):

No	Item	Types of Online Political Activities					Overall V. (%)	Mean	STD
		1 V. Rarely	2	3	4	5 V. Frequently			
1	Post news or updates about social, political, or public affairs on my social media timeline.	12.4	11.4	28.7	32.2	15.3	100	3.27	1.21
2	Comment on social, political, or public affairs posts that appear on my social media feed.	25.7	11.4	34.7	20.3	7.9	100	2.73	1.26
3	Read posts about social, political, or public affairs in my social	6.4	6.9	19.8	41.1	25.7	100	3.73	1.12

	media feed.								
4	Visit my friends' social media timelines to read posts or news about social, political, or public affairs	15.8	11.4	36.1	28.2	8.4	100	3.02	1.17
5	Share posts related to social, political, or public affairs news on my social media accounts.	16.8	14.4	30.2	25.7	12.9	100	3.03	1.26
6	How frequently do you follow political pages of political parties, influencers, or groups on social media?	19.3	14.9	30.7	21.8	13.5	100	2.95	1.29

4.6. Engagement With Political Memes

In table 4.6, respondents' engagement with political memes was assessed. The highest level of engagement was observed for item EPM1, with a mean score of 3.42 (SD = 1.22). Engagement with item EPM3, however, was notably lower, with a mean score of 2.38 (SD = 1.35). Table 4.6 highlights respondents' engagement with political memes, with the highest mean score observed for 'Liking Political Meme Posts' (M=3.42,SD=1.22). This suggests that passive engagement, such as liking, is more common than active participation, like posting comments (M=2.38,SD=1.35). These findings suggest that while memes are widely consumed, their ability to provoke active engagement may depend on the context and content of the memes. This observation aligns with the hypothesis that memes act as a bridge between passive social media use and active political participation.

Table 4. 6**Mean And Standard Deviation of Respondents' Engagement With Political Memes (N=202):**

No	Item	Perceived Level of Engagements with political memes					Overall (%)	Mean	STD
		1 Very Rarely	2	3	4	5 Very Often			
1.	Liking political meme posts	8.9	13.9	25.2	30.2	21.8	100	3.42	1.22
2.	Sharing political memes with others	15.3	15.3	31.2	24.8	13.4	100	3.05	1.24
3.	Posting comments on meme posts	37.1	20.3	19.8	12.9	9.9	100	2.38	1.35

4.7. Respondents Rely in News Media

The table 4.7 highlights respondents' reliance on news media. Relying on mainstream news outlets was low, with a mean score of 2.93 (SD = 1.2). Digital and online news platforms were trusted slightly more, achieving a mean score of 3.5 (SD = 1.07).

Table 4. 7

Mean And Standard Deviation Of Respondents' Trust In News Media (N=202)

No	Item	Level of Trust in News Media %					Overall (%)	Mean	SD
		1 Very Rarely	2	3	4	5 Almost Always			
1	To what extent do you rely on social media platforms to stay updated on current political events?	5.9	8.5	32.2	34.7	18.3	100	3.5	1.07
2	To what extent do you rely on mainstream news media (news channels, newspapers etc.) to stay updated on current political events?	16.8	15.8	34.7	23.3	9.4	100	2.93	1.2

4.8. Interactions With Political Memes

The data from Table 4.8 reveals substantial engagement with political memes among respondents. The most prominent interaction, "I often notice political memes targeting specific political leaders or parties," scored the highest mean (3.77, SD = 1.03). This highlights the prevalence of memes as tools for political critique and satire. Respondents also reported high exposure to political memes on their social media feeds (mean = 3.69, SD = 1.12), emphasizing their ubiquity in digital political discourse.

The high mean scores for items such as encountering memes frequently (mean = 3.52, SD = 1.01) indicate the embedded role of memes in the respondents' digital ecosystems. This aligns with Shifman's (2014) theory that memes are integral artifacts of participatory culture, enabling widespread dissemination of political commentary.

While memes were a common part of social media feeds, fewer respondents actively followed accounts posting political memes (mean = 3.07, SD = 1.16). This suggests that while political memes have broad reach, direct engagement remains selective, possibly reflecting the impact of algorithm-driven visibility rather than active user choice.

Respondents acknowledged memes as a source of political information (mean = 3.42, SD = 1.18) and entertainment (mean = 3.63, SD = 1.17). These dual roles underscore their capability to simplify complex political issues while engaging audiences emotionally. This finding echoes Ross & Rivers (2017), who argued that memes blend humor with critique to foster political engagement.

The strong agreement on noticing memes targeting leaders or parties indicates their role in shaping public perceptions of political entities. Memes' satirical nature can influence narratives around accountability and trust, reinforcing or challenging existing political cynicism.

Table 4. 8**Mean And Standard Deviation Of Respondents' Interactions With Political Memes (N=202)**

No	Item	Interactions with political memes					Overall (%)	Mean	STD
		1 Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5 Strongly Agree			
1	Political memes are a common part of my social media feed.	5.4	8.4	24.8	34.7	26.7	100	3.69	1.12
2	I frequently encounter political memes when browsing social media.	3.5	10.4	33.7	35.1	17.3	100	3.52	1.01
3	I actively follow accounts/pages that post political memes.	9.9	22.8	28.7	27.2	11.4.7	100	3.07	1.16
4	I often notice political memes targeting specific political leaders or parties.	2.5	9.9	21.8	39.6	26.2	100	3.77	1.03
5	Political memes are a key source of information about political events for me.	7.4	14.9	26.2	31.2	20.3	100	3.42	1.18
6	I find political memes to be an entertaining way to engage with political topics.	7.4	9.4	20.3	38.6	24.3	100	3.63	1.17

4.9. Political Cynicism

The table 4.10 presents a stark picture of political cynicism among respondents. Statements reflecting distrust in politicians and systemic unfairness consistently scored high, with mean values above 4.00 across most items. The statement, "The political

process in Pakistan serves the interests of the powerful elites, not the general public," had the highest mean (4.47, SD = 0.76), highlighting pervasive disillusionment with political systems

Respondents strongly agreed that politicians are dishonest and untrustworthy (mean = 4.20, SD = 0.98) and that political systems are unfair (mean = 4.41, SD = 0.80). These sentiments reflect entrenched skepticism about the integrity and efficacy of political institutions in Pakistan.

High mean scores for items addressing corruption (mean = 4.33, SD = 0.85) and elite dominance (mean = 4.47, SD = 0.76) underline the perceived disconnect between governance and public welfare. This supports Cappella & Jamieson's (1997) assertion that political cynicism thrives in environments where systemic failures are evident.

Respondents expressed significant distrust in the media, perceiving it as a tool for elite manipulation (mean = 4.20, SD = 0.89). This aligns with research on media framing.

The sentiment "My vote in Pakistan does not matter" (mean = 3.98, SD = 1.21) indicates a potential disengagement from democratic processes, driven by a sense of futility. This is consistent with Pinkleton & Austin (2004), who found that cynicism often correlates with lower political participation.

Table 4. 9**Mean And Standard Deviation Of Respondents' Levels Of Political Cynicism (N=202)**

No	Item	Levels of Political cynicism					Overall (%)	Mean	STD
		1 Strongly disagree	2	3	4	5 Strongly Agree			
1	Politicians in Pakistan are mostly dishonest and untrustworthy.	2.0	5.0	12.9	31.7	48.5	100	4.2	0.98
2	The political system in Pakistan is totally unfair and rigged.	0	2.5	9.4	29.7	57.4	100	4.41	0.80
3	The promises made by political parties in Pakistan are often empty and unfulfilled.	0	2.5	12.9	39.1	45.5	100	4.28	0.78
4	Political environment in Pakistan is absolutely corrupt and discouraging.	0	5.4	8.9	32.7	53	100	4.33	0.85
5	The political process in Pakistan serves the interests of the powerful elites, not the general public.	0	2.5	8.9	27.7	60.9	100	4.47	0.76
6	My vote in Pakistan does not matter and will not lead to real change.	5	9.9	14.4	23.8	47	100	3.98	1.21
7	Most politicians in Pakistan use public	2	2	9.4	36.1	50.5	100	4.31	0.87

	manipulation and deception to advance their own agendas.								
8	Most politicians in Pakistan spend too much time debating issues and not enough time solving them.	0	1.5	8.4	32.7	57.4	100	4.46	0.71
9	Most politicians in Pakistan are disconnected from the realities and problems faced by ordinary people in society.	2	3	11.4	33.2	50.5	100	4.27	0.92
10	The establishment in Pakistan uses politicians as puppets to maintain its control over the country.	1.5	1.5	18.8	27.7	50.5	100	2.24	0.91
11	The media in Pakistan deliberately misleads the public to protect the interests of politicians and corporate sponsors.	2	3	11.4	40.6	43.1	100	4.20	0.89
12	The media has become a mouthpiece for the elite, ignoring the voices of ordinary citizens.	3	2.5	12.4	37.6	44.6	100	4.18	0.95
13	Family-based political parties in Pakistan prioritize personal wealth and power over	2	2.5	9.9	30.7	55	100	4.34	0.90

	serving the public.								
14	Leadership in family-run political parties is more about maintaining dynastic control than addressing national issues.	1	2	13.4	34.7	49	100	4.29	0.84
15	Political leaders in Pakistan often serve the agenda of the establishment instead of the people who elected them.	2.5	0.5	18.3	34.2	44.6	100	4.18	0.92

4.10.Zero Order Correlations

The zero-order correlation analysis provides detailed insights into the relationships between the study’s predictors and criterion variables, illuminating patterns and associations that support the hypotheses under investigation. Below is a structured interpretation of the correlations presented in Table 4.10.

4.10.1.Affiliation

Political affiliation exhibited limited significant correlations across the criterion variables. Notably, it displayed a significant negative relationship with Overall Political Activism Index (OPA_idx) ($r = -.193, p < .01$) and Internet Political Mobilization Index (IPM_idx) ($r = -.166, p < .05$). These findings suggest that individuals with strong political affiliations may engage less in broad-based or online political activism, potentially due to a reliance on institutionalized channels of influence.

4.10.2. Demographic Variables

- Age showed a moderate positive correlation with Education ($r = .575$, $p < .01$) and Marital Status ($r = .445$, $p < .01$), indicating that older individuals are more likely to have advanced educational attainment and to be married. However, no significant correlations were observed between age and the political or media-related indices.
- Gender was negatively correlated with Political Affiliation ($r = -.209$, $p < .01$), reflecting potential gendered differences in political engagement or alignment. It also showed a weak positive correlation with Social Media Use Hours ($r = .186$, $p < .01$), suggesting that gender plays a minor role in determining the extent of social media activity
- Education correlated positively with Reliance on Mainstream Media (RMM) ($r = .206$, $p < .01$), suggesting that individuals with higher education levels are more likely to rely on traditional news platforms. However, household income did not exhibit significant relationships with the primary criterion variables, highlighting its limited role in influencing media use or political activity within this sample.
- Marital status correlated positively with both Education ($r = .475$, $p < .01$) and Age ($r = .445$, $p < .01$), consistent with demographic trends. However, it did not significantly relate to the political or media-reliance indices.

4.10.3. Social Media Use Hours

Social Media Use Hours revealed several significant relationships, emphasizing its role as a predictor of political and media behaviors. Positive correlations were

observed with Internet Political Mobilization Index (IPM_idx) ($r = .170, p < .05$), Overall Political Activism Index (OPA_idx) ($r = .219, p < .01$), and Engagement with Political Memes Index (EPM_idx) ($r = .203, p < .01$). These findings underscore the importance of social media use in fostering both online and offline political engagement.

4.10.4. Media Reliance And Trust Variables

- SMP demonstrated a significant positive correlation with gender ($r = .166, p < .05$), suggesting a slight gendered preference for social media as a source of information. However, it did not exhibit significant relationships with other key indices.
- RMM was positively correlated with Reliance on Social Media (RSM) ($r = .249, p < .01$) and Engagement with Political Memes Index (EPM_idx) ($r = .380, p < .01$), indicating that individuals reliant on mainstream media often engage emotionally in political mobilization. This finding suggests that traditional media platforms still play a role in stimulating political action, albeit through complementary relationships with social media platforms.
- Political Cynicism Index (PC_idx) and Internet Political Mobilization Index (IPM_idx) were both positively correlated with Reliance on Social Media (RSM) ($r = .150, p < .05$; $r = .237, p < .01$, respectively). These correlations highlight the interplay between skepticism toward traditional institutions and a preference for participatory digital environments.

4.10.5.OPA_idx

OPA_idx exhibited significant positive correlations with Social Media Use Hours ($r = .219, p < .01$), Reliance on Social Media (RSM) ($r = .354, p < .01$), and Internet Political Mobilization Index (IPM_idx) ($r = .644, p < .01$). These relationships reinforce the argument that social media acts as a catalyst for diverse forms of political engagement.

4.10.6.EPM_idx

EPM_idx correlated positively with Reliance on Social Media (RSM) ($r = .367, p < .01$), Reliance on Mainstream Media (RMM) ($r = .380, p < .01$), and Social Media Use Hours ($r = .203, p < .01$). These findings suggest that emotional engagement in political discourse is strongly tied to reliance on both digital and traditional media platforms.

Table 4. 10
Zero-order correlations between the study’s predictors and criterion variables

Criterion Variables	Zero Order Correlations													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1 Affiliation	1													
2 Age	-0.127	1												
3 Gender	-0.209**	0.083	1											
4 Education	-0.046	0.575**	0.026	1										
5 Household Income	-0.070	0.025	0.036	-0.004	1									
6 Marital	-0.134	0.445*	0.081	0.475*	0.001	1								

Status	*	*	0												
7 Social Media Use Hours	-	0.000	.186*	-0.133	.193*	-0.108	1								
8 SMP	0.091	-0.103	.166*	-0.060	0.087	-0.051	-0.005	1							
9 RSM	-.170*	0.137	0.105	0.040	.179*	0.132	.240*	0.068	1						
10 RMM	0.004	.155*	0.100	.206*	0.057	.164*	-0.056	-0.033	.249*	1					
11 PC_idx	-0.018	-0.083	0.081	-.138*	0.125	-0.071	0.137	0.069	.150*	-0.118	1				
12 IPM_idx	-.166*	0.073	-0.025	-0.081	0.030	0.041	.170*	-0.058	.237*	.181*	0.01	1			
13 OPA_idx	-	0.010	-0.060	-0.095	0.096	0.076	.219*	0.032	.354*	0.134	.139*	.644*	1		
14 EPM_idx	-	0.096	0.006	0.012	0.029	0.045	.203*	-0.030	.367*	.380*	0.046	.609*	.526*	1	

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

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.11. Mediation Analysis

The purpose of this mediation analysis is to examine the indirect effect of political social media use (X) on online political activity (Y) through interaction with political memes (M). Specifically, we aim to understand whether political memes serve as a mediator in the relationship between political social media use and online political activity. The analysis consists of several key paths: the effect of political social media use on interaction with political memes (Path A), the effect of political memes on online political activity (Path B), the direct effect of political social media use on online political activity (Path C'), and the total effect of political social media use on online political activity (Path C).

4.11.1.Path A: Effect Of Political Social Media Use On Interaction With Political Memes

The first path, Path A, represents the effect of political social media use (X) on interaction with political memes (M). The estimated coefficient (β) for this path is 0.5356, indicating a positive relationship between political social media use and interaction with political memes. This relationship is statistically significant, as evidenced by a t-value of 8.2165 ($p < .001$), suggesting that greater political social media use is associated with increased interaction with political memes.

- Predictor: Political Social Media Use (X)
- Outcome: Interaction with Political Memes (M)
- Effect (b): 0.5356
- Standard Error (SE): 0.0652
- t-Statistic (t): 8.2165
- p-Value (p): $< .001$
- 95% Confidence Interval (CI): [0.4071, 0.6642]
- Standardized Effect (β): 0.5024

This result shows that political social media use is a strong predictor of interaction with political memes, with the magnitude of the effect being moderate ($\beta = 0.5024$).

4.11.2.Path B: Effect Of Interaction With Political Memes On Online Political Activity

The second path, Path B, evaluates the effect of interaction with political memes (M) on online political activity (Y). The coefficient for this path is 0.0470, with a standard error of 0.0154. The relationship is statistically significant ($t = 3.0630$, $p = .0025$), suggesting that greater interaction with political memes contributes to higher levels of online political activity.

- Predictor: Interaction with Political Memes (M)
- Outcome: Online Political Activity (Y)
- Effect (b): 0.0470
- Standard Error (SE): 0.0154
- t-Statistic (t): 3.0630
- p-Value (p): .0025
- 95% Confidence Interval (CI): [0.0168, 0.0773]
- Standardized Effect (β): 0.0417

This result confirms that interaction with political memes plays a significant role in promoting online political activity, though the effect is relatively small in magnitude ($\beta = 0.0417$).

4.11.3.Path C': Direct Effect Of Social Media Use On Online Political Activity

Path C' represents the direct effect of political social media use (X) on online political activity (Y), controlling for the mediator (interaction with political memes). The coefficient for this path is 1.1605, with a standard error of 0.0164. The t-value is 70.8682, and the p-value is less than .001, indicating that political social media use has a strong and significant direct effect on online political activity.

- Predictor: Political Social Media Use (X)
- Outcome: Online Political Activity (Y)
- Effect (b): 1.1605
- Standard Error (SE): 0.0164
- t-Statistic (t): 70.8682
- p-Value (p): < .001
- 95% Confidence Interval (CI): [1.1283, 1.1928]
- Standardized Effect (β): 0.9645

The direct effect of political social media use on online political activity is substantial, with a strong magnitude ($\beta = 0.9645$). This indicates that political social media use is a powerful predictor of online political activity.

4.11.4.Path C: Total Effect Of Social Media Use On Online Political Activity

Path C represents the total effect of political social media use on online political activity, which includes both the direct and indirect effects (via political memes). The coefficient for this path is 1.1857, with a standard error of 0.0145. The t-value is 82.0390, and the p-value is less than .001, indicating that the total effect is highly significant.

- Predictor: Political Social Media Use (X)
- Outcome: Online Political Activity (Y)
- Effect (b): 1.1857
- Standard Error (SE): 0.0145
- t-Statistic (t): 82.0390
- p-Value (p): < .001
- 95% Confidence Interval (CI): [1.1572, 1.2142]
- Standardized Effect (β): 0.9855

The total effect is also large ($\beta = 0.9855$), suggesting that political social media use strongly predicts online political activity both directly and indirectly through interaction with political memes.

4.11.5. Bootstrap Indirect Effect: Indirect Effect Of Political Social Media Use On Online Political Activity Via Political Memes

The bootstrap analysis provides an estimate of the indirect effect of political social media use (X) on online political activity (Y) through interaction with political memes (M). The indirect effect is 0.0252, with a standard error of 0.0091. The 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap estimates ranges from 0.0083 to 0.0440, indicating that the indirect effect is statistically significant.

- Indirect Effect Path: SMU_Pidx → IPM_idx → OPA_idx
- Effect (b): 0.0252
- Bootstrap SE (BootSE): 0.0091
- 95% Confidence Interval (CI): [0.0083, 0.0440]
- Standardized Effect (β): 0.0209
- Bootstrap SE (BootSE): 0.0075
- 95% Confidence Interval (CI): [0.0070, 0.0363]

The indirect effect is statistically significant, indicating that interaction with political memes serves as a meaningful mediator in the relationship between political social media use and online political activity. The standardized effect of 0.0209 confirms that the indirect effect is modest in magnitude.

Mediation Analysis of Political Social Media Use (X) on Online Political Activity (Y) through Interaction with Political Memes (M)

Path	Predictor (X/M)	Outcome (M/Y)	bbb	SE	ttt	ppp	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	β \beta
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Path A	Political Social Media Use (X)	Interaction with Political Memes (M)	0.5356	0.0652	8.2165	<.001	0.4071	0.6642	0.5024
Path B	Interaction with Political Memes (M)	Online Political Activity (Y)	0.0470	0.0154	3.0630	.0025	0.0168	0.0773	0.0417
Path C' (Direct Effect)	Political Social Media Use (X)	Online Political Activity (Y)	1.1605	0.0164	70.8682	<.001	1.1283	1.1928	0.9645
Path C (Total Effect)	Political Social Media Use (X)	Online Political Activity (Y)	1.1857	0.0145	82.0390	<.001	1.1572	1.2142	0.9855

Table 2 Bootstrap Indirect Effect of Political Social Media Use (X) on Online Political Activity (Y) through Interaction with Political Memes (M)

Indirect Effect Path	Effect bbb	BootSE	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	Standardized Effect β	BootSE	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
SMU_Pidx → IPM_idx → OPA_idx	0.0252	0.0091	0.0083	0.0440	0.0209	0.0075	0.0070	0.0363

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, this research investigated the mediating role of political memes on social media use and political cynicism, with an emphasis on how these elements interact to shape online political activity. The findings illuminate the nuanced dynamics of digital political communication in Pakistan, shedding light on how political memes influence public perceptions, engagement, and discourse in a politically tumultuous landscape.

The study confirmed that political social media use significantly influences online political activity, as hypothesized. This aligns with Newman et al. (2018) and Boulianne (2017), who established that political content on social media fosters civic engagement by enabling users to interact with political narratives. Similarly, the role of political memes as mediating factors was substantiated, complementing Shifman's (2014) assertion that memes simplify complex political issues into accessible formats, fostering engagement even among less politically active users. In Pakistan, platforms like Twitter and Facebook are frequently used to discuss political developments involving major political parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Political memes serve as powerful vehicles for critique, often targeting figures like Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, or Asif Ali Zardari to highlight governance failures or perceived hypocrisies.

The findings revealed that exposure to political memes amplifies both political cynicism and engagement. Satirical memes highlighting corruption or systemic inefficiencies often exacerbate distrust, consistent with Halversen and Weeks (2023), who found that negative political narratives on social media heighten skepticism toward institutions. For example, satirical memes about unfulfilled promises, such as those

surrounding the PML-N's infrastructure-centric governance, resonate deeply with disillusioned voters. However, the study also demonstrated that humor within memes can act as a coping mechanism, mitigating the emotional burden of disillusionment, a perspective supported by Glăveanu and Saint Laurent (2021).

Interestingly, political cynicism moderated the relationship between meme exposure and online political activity. In the context of Pakistan's current political instability—marked by economic challenges, judicial controversies, and protests over political leadership—this dynamic becomes particularly relevant. Cynical individuals who engage with memes criticizing the lack of accountability or judicial partisanship often channel their frustrations into online activism, seeking collective solidarity through relatable content. This phenomenon aligns with Dalton's (2004) argument that cynicism can transform into critical engagement when channeled constructively.

Hence, by bridging the gap between social media use and political engagement, political memes emerge as transformative tools in Pakistan's digital political discourse. They play a critical role in fostering awareness and participation, especially among the youth, who dominate social media platforms. However, the study also highlights the dual potential of memes to unify and polarize audiences. For instance, memes mocking political rivals often fuel inter-party animosity, exacerbating divisions between PTI, PML-N, and PPP supporters during an already volatile political period. The impact of recent political unrest on meme discourse cannot be ignored. Events like the May 2024 crackdown on PTI supporters, accompanied by internet shutdowns under Section 144, demonstrate the state's recognition of social media's role in shaping public sentiment. Memes produced during this period critiqued government suppression of free

expression, acting as a symbolic resistance against censorship while also fueling political cynicism (Jahangir, 2024).

In summation, this research emphasizes the transformative potential of political memes in shaping digital political discourse. Thereby bridging the gap between social media use and political engagement, memes emerge as powerful tools for both critique and connection in Pakistan's evolving democratic landscape. Their unique ability to combine humor with social critique makes them invaluable in fostering political awareness and participation, particularly among younger demographics. However, their dual potential to empower and polarize necessitates a balanced approach from stakeholders to harness their benefits while mitigating risks. Policymakers, educators, and platform developers must work collaboratively to ensure that the evolving landscape of digital political communication contributes positively to democratic health. Through its integration of theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital media's role in contemporary politics, offering a foundation for future scholarship and action in this critical domain.

5.1. Implications

5.1.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to Media Ecology Theory by illustrating how digital platforms, particularly memes, serve as environments that actively shape political behavior. By acting as cultural and political agents, memes redefine traditional boundaries of political discourse, enabling more participatory engagement. The findings affirm the

theory's assertion that media are not mere conduits of information but transformative ecosystems influencing societal perceptions and actions. Moreover, the study enhances understanding of political cynicism as a dual-edged phenomenon. While traditionally viewed as a barrier to participation, this research underscores its potential to catalyze engagement when moderated by accessible and relatable digital content, such as memes. This nuanced perspective expands existing frameworks on political cynicism's role in democratic participation.

5.1.2. Social Implications

The findings highlight the duality of memes in fostering both political awareness and disillusionment. In Pakistan's politically charged context, where trust in institutions is low, memes offer an alternative medium for citizens to voice concerns and critique authority. This democratization of political discourse has significant implications for civic engagement, particularly among youth, who dominate social media usage. For example, memes mocking the delayed electoral process or the IMF-imposed austerity measures enable citizens to critique authority and process systemic inefficiencies collectively (Malik, 2023). However, the same tools can deepen partisan divides, as seen in the meme wars between PTI and PML-N supporters, which often devolve into vitriolic exchanges.

The ability of memes' to distill complex issues into relatable and often humorous content also means they can act as tools for social critique, providing a low-risk platform for individuals to express dissent. For instance, memes mocking unfulfilled political promises or governance failures provide users with a collective space to process and critique systemic shortcomings.

Additionally, the study highlights the implications of digital shutdowns during political instability, as seen in the government's internet restrictions during anti-government protests ("Pakistan Police Crack Down," 2024). These actions reflect an acknowledgment of social media's centrality to news dissemination and political mobilization. Policymakers must tread carefully to balance national security concerns with citizens' rights to information and expression. However, the potential for memes to perpetuate political polarization and misinformation warrants caution. The study underscores the need for balanced content moderation policies that preserve free expression while mitigating the spread of divisive or misleading narratives. Policymakers and social media platforms must recognize the power of memes as both tools of empowerment and vehicles for manipulation.

5.1.3. Political And Practical Implications

The political implications of these findings are significant. As political campaigns increasingly leverage digital platforms, understanding the nuanced role of memes can inform strategies to engage voters effectively. Campaigners can use memes to communicate complex policy proposals in an engaging and accessible manner, fostering dialogue while avoiding sensationalism.

The use of memes by political parties in Pakistan, such as the PTI's reliance on viral digital campaigns, exemplifies their role in modern political strategy. Campaigners can harness memes to engage voters effectively, simplifying complex issues like judicial independence, inflation, or foreign policy decisions. However, unchecked proliferation of misleading or divisive memes could undermine democratic discourse, emphasizing the need for ethical content strategies.

Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of fostering digital literacy among users. In a landscape where memes can easily blur the line between satire and misinformation, equipping individuals with critical thinking skills is essential for navigating the digital political ecosystem. Such initiatives can help mitigate the risks of echo chambers and misinformation.

Building digital literacy remains critical in a context where memes often blur the line between satire and misinformation. For example, memes misattributing quotes to political leaders like Maryam Nawaz or Bilawal Bhutto have spread confusion during election campaigns. Equipping citizens with the ability to critically evaluate such content can mitigate the risks of manipulation while fostering informed participation.

5.2. Recommendations

- **Expand Research on Digital Political Engagement:** Future studies should explore the role of visual and multimedia content beyond memes, such as videos or infographics, in shaping political attitudes and participation.
- **Investigate Longitudinal Impacts:** Examining how sustained exposure to political memes influences attitudes over time could provide deeper insights into their long-term effects on political behavior.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** Comparative studies across different sociopolitical contexts can enrich understanding of how cultural factors mediate the relationship between meme exposure and political engagement.
- **Examine Psychological Mechanisms:** Future research could delve deeper into the psychological processes—such as humor’s role in reducing cognitive dissonance—that make memes effective tools for engagement.

- **Media Literacy Initiatives:** Educators and policymakers should prioritize digital literacy programs that equip individuals with critical skills to evaluate political content, fostering informed engagement while reducing susceptibility to manipulation.
- **Strategic Communication by Campaigners:** Political campaigners can leverage memes to engage audiences ethically, emphasizing constructive discourse over divisive rhetoric.
- **Platform-Specific Strategies:** Social media platforms should develop nuanced content moderation frameworks that balance user engagement with the responsibility to counter harmful narratives.
- **Encourage Diverse Content Creation:** Efforts to encourage diverse and inclusive content creation can help mitigate the risks of polarization by promoting a variety of perspectives in digital political discourse.

5.3.Limitations

- **Sample Representation:** The sample was restricted to students and staff at Foundation University School of Science and Technology (FUSST), limiting the generalizability of findings to broader demographics. Future research should incorporate more diverse populations to capture a wider spectrum of social media behaviors and political attitudes.
- **Self-Reported Data:** The reliance on self-reported survey responses introduces potential biases, such as social desirability or recall errors. Incorporating observational data or experimental designs could mitigate these limitations.

- Focus on Memes: While memes were the primary focus, other forms of digital political content, such as videos or interactive posts, may also significantly influence political attitudes. Expanding the scope to include these elements would provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital political communication.
- Cultural Specificity: The study's findings are grounded in Pakistan's unique sociopolitical context, which may limit their applicability to other settings. Cross-cultural studies are essential to validate and contextualize the findings.
- Quantitative Focus: The study's quantitative design, while robust, does not capture the rich qualitative nuances of user interactions with political memes. Future research could integrate qualitative methods to provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

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APPENDICES

This section asks about your general social media use habits and preferences. Please read each of the questions carefully and respond accordingly.

1) On average, how many hours in a day do you spend on social media platforms?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1 hour
- 2 hour
- 3 hour
- 4 hour
- 5 hour
- 6 hour
- 7 hour
- 8 hour
- More than 8 hour

2) How frequently do you engage in the following activities concerning social, political, or public affairs news:

	Very Frequently	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Very Rarely
Post news or updates about social, political, or public affairs on my social media timeline.					
Comment on social, political, or public affairs posts that appear on my social media feed.					
Read posts about social, political, or public affairs in my social media feed.					

Visit my friends' social media timelines to read posts or news about social, political, or public affairs					
Share posts related to social, political, or public affairs news on my social media accounts.					

3) Which of the following social media platforms do you use most frequently for news & information about social, political and public affairs?

- Facebook
- X (Twitter)
- Instagram
- You Tube
- Tiktok
- Snapchat
- Whatsapp

4) How frequently do you follow political pages of political parties, influencers, or groups on social media?

- Very frequently
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Very rarely

5) To what extent do you rely on social media platforms to stay updated on current political events?

- Almost always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Very rarely

6) To what extent do you rely on mainstream news media (news channels, newspapers etc.) to stay updated on current political events?

- Almost always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Very rarely

7) How frequently do you come across memes on politics, political issues, or politicians on the following?

	Very frequently	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Very rarely
Social media sites (such as Facebook, X, Instagram, etc.)					
Instant messengers (such as WhatsApp, Facebook messenger etc.)					
The internet (other than social media sites)					

8) How often do you engage with political memes in the following ways?

	Vey often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Very rarely
Liking political meme posts					
Sharing political memes with others					

Posting comments on meme posts					
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9) Please express the extent to which you agree or disagree to each of the following statements.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Political memes are a common part of my social media feed.					
I frequently encounter political memes when browsing social media.					
I actively follow accounts/pages that post political memes.					
I often notice political memes targeting specific political leaders or parties.					
Political memes are a key source of information about political events for me.					
I find political memes to be an entertaining way to engage with political topics.					

This section contains a set of statements to know your perceptions and views about political actors in Pakistan. For each statement, please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree based on your personal perceptions and experiences.

1) Politicians in Pakistan are mostly dishonest and untrustworthy.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

2) The political system in Pakistan is totally unfair and rigged.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

3) The promises made by political parties in Pakistan are often empty and unfulfilled.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

4) Political environment in Pakistan is absolutely corrupt and discouraging.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5) The political process in Pakistan serves the interests of the powerful elites, not the general public.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6) My vote in Pakistan does not matter and will not lead to real change.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7) Most politicians in Pakistan use public manipulation and deception to advance their own agendas.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8) Most politicians in Pakistan spend too much time debating issues and not enough time solving them.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly agree

9) Most politicians in Pakistan are disconnected from the realities and problems faced by ordinary people in society.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10) The establishment in Pakistan uses politicians as puppets to maintain its control over the country.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

11) The media in Pakistan deliberately misleads the public to protect the interests of politicians and corporate sponsors.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12) The media has become a mouthpiece for the elite, ignoring the voices of ordinary citizens.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13) Family-based political parties in Pakistan prioritize personal wealth and power over serving the public.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

14) Leadership in family-run political parties is more about maintaining dynastic control than addressing national issues.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

15) Political leaders in Pakistan often serve the agenda of the establishment instead of the people who elected them.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Demographics

1). Your age in years

2). Gender

- Male
- Female

3). You are currently enrolled in:

- Bachelors (BS-level program)
- Masters (MS-level program)
- Doctorate (PhD-level)

4). Which of the following political parties do you support?

- PTI
- PML(N)
- PPP
- JI
- JUI(F)
- PML(Q)
- TLP
- PSP
- MQM
- Others

5). Your average monthly household income

- Less than 50,000 PKR
- 51,000-100,000 PKR
- 101,000-150,000 PKR
- 151,000-200,000 PKR
- 201,000-250,000 PKR
- 251,000-300,000 PKR
- More than 300,000 PKR

6). Marital status

- Married
- Unmarried