MS THESIS

USE OF TWITTER (X) BY POLITICAL PARTIES IN GENERAL ELECTION 2018: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and dear friends, who gave me constant and important support and encouragement, enabling me to complete this thesis.

I want to offer a special thanks to my loving parents, who have made endless sacrifices, wisdom, and affection in helping me to gain knowledge. Their belief in me has pushed me in everything I have accomplished, and I am forever thankful for their faith in me.

I am writing to express my sincere gratitude to all my friends who constantly encouraged and supported me in achieving this. Their faith in me, companionship, and motivation have been invaluable, and I will always treasure and cherish their kindness and generosity.

DECLARATION

It is stated that the work in the thesis entitled "Use of Twitter (X) by Political Parties in General Election 2018: A Comparative Analysis" has been done by me under the supervision of Dr. Zafar Iqbal. I also assert that this thesis has not been submitted elsewhere to any degree. Four copies of this thesis are submitted for further processing.

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Abstract

This thesis evaluates the use of Twitter (X) by major political parties in Pakistan during the 2018 General Election. The analysis of the social media strategy of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) shows a lot of differences in the adopted strategy and their impact on the elections. The most active party on Twitter is PTI, which has a higher tweet frequency, engagement rates, and interactive voter mobilization efforts than PMLN and PPP. This thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative metrics of tweet volume and engagement rates with qualitative content analysis to examine political communication and framing in campaign messages. A strong positive correlation was established between Twitter activity and electoral success, suggesting that the use of Twitter by the PTI was effective with hashtags, multimedia content, and direct voter interaction. This thesis explored the mediating effect of traditional media coverage. It was verified that more obscure parties, in terms of traditional media coverage, used Twitter more to reach voters than obvious platforms such as PMLN and PPP. These results align with the Agenda-Setting Theory and global trends in digital political campaigning. However, while Twitter enhances political participation, it also increases polarization. This thesis underscores the growing importance of social media in shaping electoral processes and the need for balanced digital campaign strategies in Pakistan's evolving political landscape.

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CHAPTER 1

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

Information and communication technologies dramatically changed the world over a decade ago. For example, new media and technology have transformed interpersonal interactions, communication patterns, and social and political discussions (Lee et al., 2020). Media and communication scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and international relations scholars have conducted different studies on various aspects of social media usage (Sun et al., 2019).

The Internet plays a significant role in providing information to the public about political events, engaging its users, and encouraging them to become involved in offline political activities. The Internet has become vital for political discussions and participation. At first, the Internet was used as a one-way communication tool for political parties to inform the public through their websites (Stiglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). However, new media and technologies have transformed communication patterns into two-way communication. Millennials are the most active users of the Internet and social media. Online activities related to politics are useful and encourage youth to participate in political events. Internet use and political participation show the dual effect of the Internet on information and political participation (Khan et al., 2020).

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have emerged as significant communication platforms within 21st-century society, enabling citizens to connect worldwide. Recent

technological innovations have led to these platforms' widespread usage and adoption by developed nations (López-Meri et al., 2017). These novel communication services allow users to share personal updates, general information, discussions, shopping choices, educational information, political updates(Weaver et al., 2018). The use of social media during election campaigns is increasing worldwide and politicians have successfully utilized this medium for their popularity (Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Communication on Twitter with 280 characters may seem challenging; however, politicians and other groups extensively use this medium to develop online connections (Meri et al., 2017).

Extensive use of Twitter has been witnessed globally, particularly in USA, the UK, Sweden, India, Australia, and New Zealand (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). Most recently, a study evidenced that Donald J. Trump and his supporters mobilized their followers through Twitter and overcame the traditional Republican Party during the 2016 US elections (Bryden & Silverman, 2019). Twitter was a silent political tool for Trump's success, and he utilized it to spread politicized information more efficiently and widely (Hollinger, 2017). Research has also highlighted the existence of misinformation on popular Twitter topics (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Research has also explored political information sharing through social media by educated Pakistani youth and an emerging party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which has played a substantial role in increasing social media trafficking (Eijaz, 2013; Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). Currently, there are three popular political parties in Pakistan: the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The proposed study has potential practical and theoretical implications for politicians, social media policymakers, and information providers. Previous research has

highlighted how online campaigns increase voter engagement patterns (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014).

It was the first time in Pakistan's 2018 elections that public voters could contact parties and request a vote through communications. Facebook and Twitter (X) are utilized to select leaders who will run the country honestly, yet many ads and accounts were created just for the benefit of the parties.

This thesis focuses on the major political parties and leaders during the 2018 elections in Pakistan. In previous years, corruption has plagued Pakistani politics, and the 2018 election was closely followed around the world, including in the United States, which works closely with Pakistan concerning the war on terror. The first time Pakistani politicians used Twitter to share information and mobilize voters was during the 2013 elections. A significant reason for this exponential growth of online information sharing is terrorism threats in the country. Twitter played a significant role in engaging Pakistani youth in politics. Statistics indicate that males, specifically youth (18–24 years), are more actively engaged in social media than females (Digital 2019 Pakistan, 2019).

1.2   Background

1)   Twitter (X) Usage and Ranking

Twitter (X) is a leading dynamic online social network (OSN) that consistently ranks among the most popular OSNs, with over 650 million registered users. It is widely considered the third most popular OSN after Instagram and Facebook. This positioning shifted after Google+ was discontinued on October 8, 2018, as it counted all Google account

holders as active users (Wong & Solon, 2018). Recently, Twitter (X) has been ranked as the 49th most visited website globally (Alexa Internet Inc., 2023).

High Activity and Demographics

Twitter (X) currently hosts approximately 330 million active users and 152 million daily users. These users generate over 500 million daily tweets, demonstrating the platform's role as a critical hub for user interaction and information-sharing (Statista, 2023). On average, users spend more than three hours engaging with social networks daily, with Twitter (X) being a key medium for this interaction (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Additionally, approximately 45% of Americans aged 18–24 are active on Twitter (X), making it a particularly influential platform among younger demographic groups (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Information Dissemination and Media Spread

Kwak et al. (2010) explored how information spreads rapidly through Twitter (X), while Van Der Zed (2020) described how it integrates into mainstream media. Lotan et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of platforms in amplifying and disseminating information during emergencies. Similarly, Berger et al. (2019) argue that Twitter (X) enhances news distribution and ensures access to critical updates worldwide.

2)   Social Media and Politics in Developing Countries

Twitter (X) in Elections

Twitter (X) is now a critical source of political discourse and has played an active role in elections. Bruns and Burgess (2011) analyzed how the public communicated during

the 2010 Australian Parliamentary Election and indicated the trends in some public debate themes. For instance, Kim (2012) examined how Twitter (X) was used in the 2010 Korean elections and showed that users used the platform for political information, entertainment, and social value. Larsson and Moe (2012) categorized different types of users based on the elite Twitter (X) user types during the 2010 Swedish election.

However, Gaffney (2010) criticized using Twitter (X) during the 2009 Iranian electoral protests as a lack of significant power. According to Grusell and Nord (2012), as long as Twitter is considered novel, it deserves to be studied in terms of (X) its role in campaign politics; Strandberg (2013) adds to this, pointing out how Twitter can be used as a tool for political mobilization, resonating with the reasons for Internet-based engagement as described by Norris (2001).

It has a particular impact on US politics. In the 2008 US elections, Metzger and Maruggi (2009) emphasized Twitter (X) as enabling direct voter engagement. Livne et al. (2011) studied the differences in Twitter (X) usage patterns during the 2010 US midterm elections and observed the differences between Democrats, Republicans, and Tea Party candidates. Based on this, they concluded that conservative politicians effectively leveraged the medium in the campaign.

Using the two-party research, Christensen (2013) extended the research to minority candidates and how they use Twitter (X) in the US presidential elections. These candidates often touched upon marginal issues and themes, trying to appeal to minorities.

Twitter (X) in the UK and Arab Nations

(Graham et al., 2010) analyzed candidate tweets during the 2010 UK General Election and found that Twitter (X) was primarily used for unidirectional communication. However, some candidates utilized it to build relationships and mobilize citizens, reflecting the platform's evolving potential for political engagement.

Social media have dramatically influenced the political landscape of developing nations. The Arab Spring is a critical example, showcasing the power of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (X) to drive political change. During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, social media became instrumental in disseminating dissent messages. For instance, five million Facebook users in Egypt participated in protests at Tahrir Square (Ali, 2012).

The Egyptian government, led by President Hosni Mubarak, responded by imposing a nationwide Internet shutdown on January 28, 2011, which backfired, amplified unrest, and drew international criticism (Clinton, 2011). This Internet blackout costs Egypt approximately $90 million, underscoring the economic ramifications of restricting digital platforms (Noble, 2011).

Similarly, nations such as Tunisia, Libya, and Iran have witnessed the transformative power of social media during political uprisings. Malaysia's 13th General Election in 2013, which recorded an unprecedented voter turnout of 84.4%, further highlighted the mobilizing potential of social media, particularly in countries with restricted press freedom (Gomez, 2014).

Technology-Driven Social Protests

Technology-driven protests have redefined social activism by providing new avenues to express dissent. The rise of "cyberactivism" reflects how platforms like Twitter (X) have

transformed traditional protest organization methods. Social media has become crucial for marginalized groups seeking to challenge the status quo and advocate reform (Lim, 2012).

However, social media activism has been studied in terms of its political implications. For example, Howard et al. (2011) studied the role of social media in the Arab Spring, a significant political transformation linked to political transformation. On the other hand, Waller (2013) assessed Facebook's function in the political outreach of young individuals and concluded that, even though it boosted dialogues among the politically active on the platform, it did not promote participation in general.

1.3   Problem Statement

Most Twitter (X) has become a central platform for political communication, enabling parties to engage with the public, promote narratives, and influence perceptions during election campaigns (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014; Kugelman, 2012). In Pakistan's 2018 General Election, major parties such as PTI, PML-N, and PPP actively used Twitter to communicate with voters. However, there is limited systematic research on how these parties structured their online campaigns, the nature of content they shared, and the level of engagement their messages generated (Saud, 2018).

Existing studies note inconsistencies in how parties manage official and leader accounts, often resulting in scattered messaging and uneven campaign strategies (Khan et al., 2020). Yet, little is known about whether these differences in online engagement translated into meaningful visibility during the election campaign.

This thesis addresses this gap by comparatively examining the Twitter activity of PTI, PML-N, and PPP during the 2018 General Election. It focuses specifically on content

themes, engagement strategies, and audience interaction patterns. By doing so, the research provides a clearer understanding of how political parties in Pakistan employed Twitter as a campaign tool and how these practices were associated with their broader communication strategies.

1.4   Significance of Study

This thesis provides one of the first systematic examinations of how Pakistan's three major political parties—PTI, PML-N, and PPP–used Twitter (X) during the 2018 General Election campaign. By analyzing party-level content, engagement strategies, and audience interaction patterns, the thesis offers important insights into the role of social media in shaping political communication in Pakistan.

The findings highlight differences in how parties adopted Twitter for visibility, message consistency, and public engagement, showing how digital tools complement traditional campaign approaches. These insights are valuable for political strategists, media practitioners, and academics seeking to understand the evolving dynamics of election campaigning in Pakistan.

More broadly, this thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on digital political communication in emerging democracies, where social media platforms play an increasingly influential role in mobilization, visibility, and voter outreach. It also provides a comparative perspective that can guide future research in South Asia and similar political contexts, where digital platforms are transforming electoral competition.

campaigns.

1.5   Research Objectives

The research objectives **(RO)** of this thesis are as follows:

1. To explore which political party used Twitter most frequently during the 2018 Pakistani elections.

2. To compare how political parties use Twitter for content sharing and engagement.

3. To analyze the relationship between political party success and voter engagement patterns on Twitter

1.6   Research Questions

The research questions **(RQ)** of the thesis are as follows:

RQ1: Which political party used Twitter (X) most frequently during Pakistan's 2018 General Election?

RQ2: What is the relationship between differences in Twitter usage among political parties and their performance in the 2018 national elections?

RQ3: To what extent were Twitter (X) campaigns associated with patterns of voter engagement and electoral outcomes in Pakistan's 2018 General Election?

1.7   Limitations of the Study

- **Focusing on Three Major Political Parties**

The thesis examines only Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), excluding smaller parties and independent candidates.

- **Timeframe Restriction for the 2018 election**

The research is limited to the 2018 General Election, which may not reflect trends in subsequent elections.

- **Exclusion of Other Social Media Platforms**.

Only Twitter (X) was analyzed, leaving out platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which also play significant roles in campaigns.

- **Fragmented party message**

The focus on individual accounts over unified party accounts creates inconsistencies in the analysis of coherent strategies.

- **Limited Analysis of Misinformation**

This thesis does not comprehensively address the role of misinformation or fake accounts in influencing voter behavior.

- **Focus on Pakistani Politics**

This thesis is limited to analyzing political campaigns and Twitter usage within Pakistani politics, excluding comparisons with other countries.

CHAPTER 2:

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Pakistan's democratic process has strengthened over the past decade, marked by the successful transfer of power through the 2018 General Election—a rare milestone in its political history. While institutions such as the military remain influential, rising civic participation, particularly among the youth, has encouraged greater democratic consolidation. Against this backdrop, digital media has become an increasingly important feature of political campaigning.

Social networking platforms, especially Twitter (X), have accelerated political communication by enabling rapid message dissemination, interactive campaigning, and visibility for parties beyond traditional media (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014; Kugelman, 2012). In Pakistan, nearly one-quarter of the population uses social media to access political information, making these platforms vital campaign arenas.

For conceptual clarity, this thesis distinguishes between three key terms. *Engagement* refers to measurable user interactions, such as likes, retweets, replies, and mentions (Jungherr, 2016). *Mobilization* refers to the extent to which parties encourage offline participation, including rallies, volunteering, and voting behavior (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). *Visibility* is the degree of attention a party achieves on Twitter, measured by posting frequency, trending hashtags, and media amplification (Bright et al., 2020). Defining these concepts ensures that online popularity is not conflated with offline influences.

This introduction sets the stage for a comparative assessment of how the PTI, PML-N, and PPP adopted Twitter during the 2018 elections and how their varying strategies aligned with the broader global and regional patterns of digital campaigning.

2.2   Social Media Usage in Pakistani Elections

2.2.1   Major Political Parties and Twitter Strategy

Political parties in Pakistan have also used Twitter (X) as a part of their election campaigns. PTI, PML-N, and PPP all acknowledged that the use of the medium allowed them to target younger and more technology-savvy voters through a method that was more direct than other forms of media such as television or print media (Ahmed et al., 2017). PTI communicated interactively by posting real-time policy tweets, hashtag campaigns (including retired social media #1 trenders), and leader-driven tweets. The PML-N and PPP communicated more through traditional publication posts that summarized their governance records and declared their policies.

Research has determined that PTI's Twitter strategy reflects several interactions that are more than those of its competitors (Iqbal et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020). This not only reveals the early embrace of social media, but also its preference for personalized and leader-driven communication. In contrast, for PML-N and PPP, the modalities of voter engagement were weaker, which implies that digital tools complemented rather than changed their campaign strategies. These findings reveal Twitter's role in Pakistan as a mobilizing force for digitally active citizens and as a tool for strengthening offline campaigns.

2.2.2 Narrowing the Gap Between Citizens and Government

Twitter (X) has also bridged the gap between political rulers and the public by decreasing reliance on middlemen in mainstream media. For instance, in the 2018 elections, Imran Khan's vision was shared on Twitter by him and his party, responding to the public's anxieties regarding public projects (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). This creates a more open and trusting environment because followers can listen to these real-time talks instead of waiting for official announcements.

However, these effects were not equal. PTI provides the impression of open access through live tweeting and direct interaction. On the other hand, PML-N and PPP used Twitter as a one-way broadcast. This imbalance is thought to influence the public's perceptions of authenticity and responsiveness (Ahmed et al., 2017; Ahmed et al., 2020). At theoretical level, the Agenda-Setting theory accounts for how parties tried to put certain issues onto the public agenda, whereas Strategic Political Communication (SPC) describes the extent to which digital engagement was embedded in wider electoral strategies.

2.3 South Asian Context

2.3.1 Overview of the Indian General Election 2014

India's 2014 Sixteenth General Election is widely classified as the largest democratic event in the world, with more than 815 million registered voters returning to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with a clear majority (Taylor & Kaphle, 2014). There was unprecedented buzz around the polls in South Asia, not just for the immense scale of the election but also because it was the first to feature social media platforms at the core of their campaigns.

2.3.2 Influence of Social Media in India

Although less than 12% of people in India had Internet access in 2014, research has suggested that the influence of social media campaigns was especially powerful in urban seats, with the power to sway resulting in 160 parliamentary seats (Patel, 2014). Evidence indicates that digital campaigning has persuasive effects independent of traditional television advertising and avenues for direct contact (Haq & Ray, 2013). Twitter (X) and local telephone companies actively collaborated with political parties to extend the use of these messages, comparable to how political digital networks can augment traditional campaigning methods (Kalra, 2014).

2.3.3 Targeting First-Time Voters

One of the most notable innovations of the 2014 campaign was targeting first-time voters, estimated at 150 million (Virmani, 2014). With the majority concentrated in urban areas, digital campaigns have become particularly effective in influencing younger, educated electorates. Scholars argue that this emphasis on first-time voters illustrates the role of social media as a mobilization tool rather than just a communication channel, since it encourages active participation both online and offline (Baishya, 2015).

2.3.4 Innovative Campaign Strategies

Indian political parties have attempted various strategies. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), for instance, put all its efforts into two-way communication with voters through mass interaction through online messages, whereas the BJP used awardees through SMSs, WhatsApp groups, and viral marketing (including the much-talked-about "selfie campaign" of Narendra Modi) (Baishya, 2015). The BJP also set up special IT cells to keep track of public moods, place specific advertisements, and mobilize volunteers (Roy & Das, 2013).

Regional parties such as AIADMK and AITC have also used social media to move regional narratives to the national space (Graham et al., 2013).

2.3.5 *Lessons for Pakistan*

If India's 2014 election showed how social media can change the game of electoral politics in South Asia, its context would be very different from that of Pakistan. With a higher urban Internet base in India, social media has been used effectively as a mobilizing tool for millions of first-time voters, as opposed to Pakistan, which had a more selective use that pertained only to the elites residing in urban areas (Saud, 2018). This contrast indicates that Twitter (X) was more of a visibility and engagement tool than an immediate mobilization mechanism in Pakistan's 2018 election.

Theoretically, a comparison across the two contexts reinforces the relevance of the Agenda-Setting Theory, in which political actors raise certain themes and 'stand tall, and SPC, as a framework that views digital connectivity as an extension of broader electoral strategies. Bringing together these frameworks enables this thesis to contextualize Pakistan's 2018 elections in terms of regional trends and global discussions about digital campaigning.

2.4 Evolution of Digital Campaigning

2.4.1 *From Early Online Campaigns to Twitter Politics*

The Internet's potential to revolutionize campaigning has been recognized since Jesse Ventura was elected the governor of Minnesota in 1998. Furthermore, his team utilized a basic campaign website to disseminate agendas and rally supporters with scarce financial resources (Stromer-Galley, 2000). This is an elementary example, but it shows how digital platforms can help mitigate resource imbalances and build alternative pathways for political campaigns.

Digital campaigning has come a long way since then. The 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential campaigns of Barack Obama demonstrated how social media can be used as an effective campaign strategy for postmodern elections. Obama's campaign blended on-the-ground mobilization with sophisticated Twitter and Facebook messaging, doing so on a scale never before seen (Owen, 2014). Donald Trump's 2016 campaign more recently demonstrated the disruptive force of Twitter, turning the platform into an active campaign broadcast tool and a direct channel of unmediated communication to voters (Enli, 2017).

These cases show the development since the late 1990s, when social media was an add-on to election campaigns, to now, when it was a campaign's lifeblood. They also highlight Twitter's double-edged nature – a platform that allows campaigns to broadcast their messages en masse, but at the same time facilitates a more intimate, direct conversation with and between voters (Patel, 2014).

2.4.2   Twitter as a Dual-Hatted Campaign Tool

Twitter (X) is a broadcast platform and interactive conversational tool. Candidates can communicate widely via tweets and retweets, whereas replies and direct messaging facilitate one-on-one contact with voters. This also helps reinforce perceptions of legitimacy and build supportive digital communities (Patel, 2014).

In Pakistan's 2018 elections, for example, PTI deployed Twitter in its traditional one-to-many mode, not only promoting policy messages, but also engaging directly with followers. Hashtags, live-tweeting events, and Khan's individual outreach created a participatory culture of expanded visibility and legitimacy. In contrast, PML-N and PPP used relatively more one-way push messages with minimal two-way interaction (Khan et al.,

2020). This indicates that Twitter was equally accessible to all major parties, but how well they combined broadcasting and conversational strategies made all differences.

2.5 Twitter as a Campaigning Tool

2.5.1 Resource Equaliser in Party Competition

Social media campaigns can be less expensive than television and print campaigns, making them attractive to underfunded or upstart parties. In particular, on Twitter, homespun content is provided for a fraction of the advertising cost (Eijaz 2013). PTI leveraged this to dedicate resources to digital teams rather than waste resources on expensive advertising. The research suggests that this strategy generates a higher level of engagement than the PML-N and PPP traditional campaign strategies (Iqbal, Perveen, & Waheed, 2020). International examples suggest that digital platforms enable resource-poor candidates to bypass mainstream media, thus reducing the ubiquity of the playing field (Bright et al., 2020).

2.5.2 Mobilisation, Branding, and Media Spillover

Globally, Twitter has become a cornerstone of campaign strategies. Obama's 2008 and 2012 victories in the U.S. illustrate its use for grassroots mobilization (Owen, 2014). In India, Narendra Modi leveraged Twitter as both a mobilization tool and a media agenda-setter, with his tweets frequently shaping television and newspaper headlines (Bajaj, 2017; Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020).

This dual capacity is especially relevant in hybrid media systems, where social media content often migrates to mainstream outlets (Jungherr 2016). Therefore, Twitter acts as both a voter engagement tool and a news source. In Pakistan in 2018, PTI's dominance on

Twitter not only enhanced online visibility but also influenced traditional media coverage, reinforcing perceptions of electoral momentum.

Equally important is Twitter's role in **branding and building an image**. By bypassing media gatekeepers, politicians can directly craft their public personas and control narratives. PTI used this strategy to portray Imran Khan as accessible, modern, and reform-driven, while PML-N and PPP were slower to adapt, resulting in less interactive online identities (Ali & Farooq, 2019).

2.5.3   Polarisation and Political Engagement

An expanding set of studies ties Twitter campaigning to increase political polarization. According to strategic communication theories, binary electoral alternatives (pro- or anti-policy) are likely to be echoed in digital environments, generating echo chambers with partisan viewership for campaigns (Pedersen, 2014; de Vreese, 2007). The website of The Telegraph, a British newspaper, embodies the concept of tabloidization in framing political content and democracy (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014:274).

In Pakistan's election 2018 often did not reflect party lines. PTI and PML-N supporters fought opposing hashtag wars, and the episode illustrated how online campaigns have become a way to galvanize voters and deepen the nation's political divide. However, this enhanced engagement generates quality deliberation and representativeness of online debates as issues of concern (Ahmed et al., 2020).

2.5.4   Comparative Insights from Other Democracies

International evidence indicates that Twitter has varying effects on voters' perceptions depending on the context. In Sweden, exposure to candidate accounts has led to

increased political learning and a modest impact on turnout. In Japan and South Korea, personalized tweets from candidates increased feelings of social closeness, but did not necessarily change voting behavior (Jungherr, 2016). Opposition parties harnessed Twitter to mobilize voter support in Singapore's 2011 elections, helping fuel unprecedented gains in parliament.

For Pakistan, these cases highlight Twitter's dual significance: while it may not directly cause voter shifts, it shapes perceptions of accessibility, responsiveness, and credibility. The PTI's experience in 2018 illustrates how digital campaigning amplified party narratives and voter engagement, even if the precise causal link to electoral outcomes remains limited.

2.6   Theoretical Framework

2.6.1   *Agenda-Setting Theory*

Agenda-setting theory explains how the media influence public perceptions by shaping the salience of issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; De Vreese, 2005). By highlighting certain topics while ignoring others, the media guide audiences in determining what is important. Traditionally, this function was performed by newspapers and television channels. In the digital era, social media platforms such as Twitter (X) also perform gatekeeping roles through the algorithmic prioritization of trending hashtags, likes, and retweets (Bright et al., 2020).

In Pakistan's 2018 General Election, PTI and PML-N both strategically used Twitter to emphasize selective narratives. PTI amplified hashtags such as *#NayaPakistan* to push issue salience, while PML-N highlighted its governance achievements. By controlling

digital visibility, parties sought to shape public discourse and direct voter attention toward favourable narratives.

2.6.2 Strategic Political Communication (SPC)

Campani SPC interprets election campaigning as the combined management of the media, messages, and public images on various platforms (Esser and Pfetsch, 2004). Twitter is an extension of such strategies, providing opportunities for real-time involvement and the ability to amplify key campaign themes in the offline world.

In the 2018 election, PTI leveraged Twitter as a segment of a larger communication strategy, knitting online rhetoric on rallies and appearances on television. This marriage gave the party a uniform face across platforms and helped strengthen its image of reformism. The PML-N and PPP employ traditional media more than the PTI and use Twitter merely to disseminate information and not engage with users (Ali & Farooq, 2019). Looking at campaigns through the SPC lens can help us understand why PTI's digital dominance was not an exception but simply part of a larger media strategy.

2.6.3 Connective Action

The logic of connective action explains how and why digital media helps transform political participation toward personalization, hashtags, and leader-centered narratives (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). While collective action relies on an organizational structure, connective action is animated by a personalized, digitally networked engagement.

Throughout Pakistan's 2018 election, PTI voters rallied around personalized hashtags, including #ImranKhanForPM, which drove peer-to-peer sharing and formed online communities without needing a cumbersome central organization. This shows how

connective action allowed PTI to widen online participation and visibility, even though PML-N and PPP failed to create a similar bottom-up digital wave.

2.6.4   *Relevance to This Thesis*

By combining these three frameworks, this thesis examines Twitter's role in shaping political communication during Pakistan's 2018 General Election.

- **Agenda-Setting** explains how parties attempted to highlight issues through hashtags and selective framing.

- **SPC** clarifies how Twitter is embedded within broader campaign strategies.

- **Connective Action** reveals how leader-centric narratives and personalized engagement mobilized digital supporters.

These theories provide a comprehensive lens to assess the differences between PTI, PML-N, and PPP in their adoption of Twitter for electoral visibility and engagement.

2.7   Link to Research Design

The application of Agenda-Setting, Strategic Political Communication (SPC), and Connective Action theories extends beyond conceptual framing and directly informs the research design of this thesis. Each theoretical framework guided the operationalization of variables, coding categories, and comparative approach used in analyzing the Twitter activity of PTI, PML-N, and PPP during Pakistan's 2018 General Election.

Agenda-Setting Theoryguided the measurement of issue salience. Hashtags and themes were coded to assess the saliency of political issues and partisan-framing efforts (McCombs 2004; Scheufele 2000). This method helped the study explore how the recurrent

mention of issues (e.g., corruption, governance, and reform) aimed at raising them on the public agenda. Agenda building was further considered by following how these digital narratives gained wider salience in mainstream media.

The operationalization of visibility and message consistency SPC informed the operationalization of visibility and message consistency. The coding categories were the number of entries, correspondence between online messages and offline events in the election campaign (e.g., rally, press conference), and relationship to TV or newspaper references (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Chadwick, 2013). By doing so, we avoided analyzing Twitter in isolation compared to other electoral strategies and underscored how the use of communication infrastructure is not monolithic across PTI, PML-N, and PPP.

Connective Action forms measurements of engagement and personalization. We analyzed leader-centric hashtags (e.g., #ImranKhanForPM), retweet networks, and interactive posts that urged peer sharing among supporters (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). This coding reflected how the PTI supporters mobilized as networked publics who performed stunts that amplified the party's visibility, which was far less than that of the PML-N and PPP supporters.

Positioning these theoretical frameworks in relation to research design is how this thesis situates its methodology in established communication studies. The coding framework is grounded in salience, visibility, and engagement, making the findings empirically and theoretically robust. This incorporation adds to the study's explanation and attenuates the limitations of previous Pakistani studies, in which explorations of social media were regarded as only descriptive, neglecting to take a theoretical or methodological posture.

Table 1: *Comparative Analysis of Political Parties' Use of Twitter (X) in Elections*

Study	Country	Key Findings	Parties Examined	Social Media Strategy	Impact on Elections
Ahmed & Skoric (2014)	Pakistan	The PTI used Twitter for direct engagement, bypassing traditional media.	PTI, PML-N, PPP	Hashtags (*#NayaPakistan*), high tweet volume	Increased youth participation
Ahmed et al. (2017)	Pakistan	PTI dominated social media with a higher frequency than its competitors.	PTI, PML-N, PPP	Automated bots, live updates, multimedia	Greater visibility & engagement
Ali & Farooq (2019)	Pakistan	PML-N and PPP were less interactive than PTI.	PTI, PML-N, PPP	One-way announcements	Lower online engagement
Iqbal, Perveen, & Waheed (2020)	Pakistan	Comparative analysis of party activity during GE2018.	PTI, PML-N, PPP	Engagement analysis (likes/retweets)	PTI outperformed rivals
Bright et al. (2020)	UK	Higher Twitter activity is linked to greater mobilization.	Labour, Conservative	Hashtag-driven movements	Increased online participation
Stier et al. (2018)	Germany	Politicians' use of Twitter shapes political discourse.	Multi-party	Direct vs broadcast tweets	Higher issue salience
Lee, Lee & Choi (2020)	South Korea	Candidate blunders reduce authenticity perceptions.	Multiple candidates	Direct interaction failures	Lower trust in campaigns
Kapoor, Mendez & Smith (2020)	India	Social media has shaped youth mobilization.	BJP, Congress	Meme-based campaigns, WhatsApp integration	Increased youth turnout

2.8   Research Gap

Research on social media and elections has substantially expanded over the past two decades. Research has demonstrated that platforms such as Twitter(X) can work as both broadcast and interactive media to affect issue salience, voter involvement, and media agendas (Jungherr, 2016; Bright et al., 2020). Research at the regional level, notably around India's 2014 and 2019 elections, illustrates how digital campaigns can activate significant proportions of urban youth and reshape party communication strategies (Chakrabarty & Roy 2015; Kapoor, Mendez, & Smith 2020). These results illustrate the double-edged nature of Twitter in terms of visibility and mobilization.

In Pakistan, the available research has focused on past elections or specific political parties. Ahmed and Skoric (2014) examined PTI's early adoption of Twitter in 2013, whereas Ahmed et al. (2017) visualized the PTI's dominance over its rivals when it came to online activity. More recent studies (Ali & Farooq, 2019; Iqbal et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020) have reaffirmed PTI's popularity as the most active party. However, these studies tended to report party strategies separately, neglecting a systematic comparison among the three main parties in the media. Furthermore, few studies have combined content categories to form a single analytical model with topic themes, engagement, and election outcomes.

Another limitation lies in theoretical applications. Although the agenda-setting theory has been used to examine traditional media in Pakistan, there is a dearth of literature linking this theory to digital platforms. Similarly, the views from SPC and connective action have not been used sufficiently in Pakistan, even though they have the explanatory potential to understand how online campaigns fluidize into offline politics and how personalized digital networks configure mobilization.

This thesis aims to fill these gaps by comparing Twitter usage of PTI, PML-N, and PPP in the context of the 2018 General Election. It combines content analysis with engagement metrics for how political parties frame issues, connect with voters, and pursue digital visibility. By utilizing agenda-setting, SPC, and connective action, this thesis adds to the literature on digital political communication in Pakistan and locates our case in larger debates about the role social media plays in emerging democracies.

CHAPTER 3

3.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1   Research Design

This thesis adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of how political parties used Twitter (X) during Pakistan's 2018 General Election. The integration of these methods allows for both the measurement of patterns of Twitter use and the interpretation of the meanings embedded in party communication.

The **quantitative component** involves the systematic measurement of posting frequency, user engagement (likes, retweets, replies), and visibility (mentions in traditional media, trending hashtags). These indicators establish comparative benchmarks across three major parties: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

The **qualitative component** focuses on the content analysis of tweets to examine issue framing, leader-centric narratives, and mobilization appeals. This interpretive analysis captures how parties used Twitter to highlight salient issues, personalize political messaging, and encourage offline participation.

The mixed-methods approach ensures **triangulation**: quantitative measures of frequency and engagement are contextualized by qualitative interpretations of messaging strategies. This strengthens the validity and explanatory depth of the findings.

The research design is guided by the three theoretical perspectives introduced in Chapter 2.

- **Agenda-Setting Theory** directs attention to the salience of issues and framing strategies as expressed in hashtags and campaign themes.

- **Strategic Political Communication (SPC)** informs the analysis of how Twitter activity aligns with broader campaign strategies, including rallies and television appearances.

- **Connective Action** highlights the role of personalized, leader-centric hashtags in mobilizing supportive digital communities.

By aligning these theoretical perspectives with a mixed-methods design, this study addresses the research questions through empirical measurement and critical interpretation. The design ensures that the comparative analysis of PTI, PML-N, and PPP captures not only the scale of Twitter use but also the strategic choices that shaped their digital campaigning efforts.

3.2   Data Collection

The data for this thesis were collected from the official Twitter (X) accounts of Pakistan's three major political parties: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The **unit of analysis** is *party-level account activity* rather than individual candidates, ensuring consistency with the research questions, which focus on comparative party strategies. Candidate-level accounts were excluded to avoid inconsistencies in scope and data availability.

The collection period was from **June 1 to July 25, 2018**, which represents the official pre-election campaign phase leading up to polling day. This timeframe captures the peak digital activity when parties used Twitter most intensively for visibility, mobilization, and issue framing.

Tweets were retrieved using the **Twitter API (Academic Research Track)**, supplemented with secondary datasets available through research repositories and archival sources. For each tweet, the following metadata were collected.

- Tweet content (text, hashtags, media links)
- Posting date and time
- Number of likes, retweets, and replies
- Mentions and hashtags associated with the post

The dataset was then organized into two categories of analysis:

1. **Quantitative data**: Tweet frequency, engagement metrics (likes, retweets, replies), and visibility measures (e.g., trending hashtags and mentions in news reports).

2. **Qualitative data**: Contentment of tweets was coded into thematic categories, including issue framing, leader-centric communication, and mobilization appeals.

In addition, **secondary data** were collected to assess visibility beyond Twitter, including media reports from Dawn, The News, and the Express Tribune. These sources provided contextual evidence of how Twitter narratives were amplified in mainstream coverage, aligning with the Agenda-Setting Theory.

The sampling and organization of data ensured that all three parties were analyzed in comparable terms. By capturing both the quantitative scale and qualitative substance of Twitter use, the dataset provides a foundation for a robust comparative analysis of PTI, PML-N, and PPP's digital campaigning strategies.

3.2.1 Selection Criteria

Political Parties and Leaders

Selection of Parties: The thesis focuses on three major political parties in Pakistan:

1) **Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)**

2) **Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)**

3) **Pakistan People's Party (PPP)**

These parties were selected based on their prominence in Pakistan's political landscape, substantial Twitter (X) activity during the 2018 General Election, and their significant role in shaping political discourse.

Tweets Selection

1) **Inclusion Criteria**

- **Language**: Only tweets in English and Urdu were included to ensure relevance and comprehensibility, reflecting the primary languages used in Pakistani political communication.

- **Relevance**: Selected tweets were directly related to the 2018 General Election, covering campaign messages, policy announcements, voter mobilization efforts, and interactions with followers.

- **Official Accounts**: To ensure authenticity and relevance, only tweets from official party accounts and verified leader accounts were considered (e.g., @imrankhanpti for PTI, @ShahbazSharif for PML-N, and @bilawalbhutto for PPP).

2)   Exclusion Criteria

- **Irrelevant Content**: Tweets unrelated to the election, such as personal updates or unrelated discussions, were excluded to maintain focus on election-related activities.

- **Automated or Spam Tweets**: To enhance data quality and reliability, tweets identified as spam or from automated bots without meaningful engagement were excluded. This was achieved by implementing filters based on account verification status, tweet content analysis, and engagement patterns (Ahmed et al., 2020).

3.3   Sampling Technique

3.3.1   Sample Size

A total of **12,000 tweets** were analyzed, comprising **4,000 tweets from each of the three major political parties** (PTI, PML-N, and PPP). This volume was selected to provide sufficient breadth for quantitative analysis while allowing detailed qualitative interpretation.

Justification:

- **Statistical reliability:** A sample of 4,000 tweets per party is large enough to detect meaningful patterns and ensure representativeness without being so large as to hinder in-depth analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

- **Qualitative depth:** The dataset enables holistic content analysis by capturing a wide variety of themes and communication strategies while remaining manageable for systematic coding (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

- **Comparative balance:** Equal sample sizes from each party ensure that the analysis is not skewed toward the more digitally active PTI, making cross-party comparisons fair and valid.

3.3.2 Sampling Method

A **random sampling technique** was employed to ensure fairness and avoid bias. Each tweet within the campaign period (June 1–July 25, 2018) was assigned a unique identifier, and a random number generator was used to select 4,000 tweets for each party. This approach:

- This eliminates researcher bias in tweet selection.

- This ensured that every tweet had an equal probability of being included.

- Enhances the generalizability of findings to the broader body of each party's Twitter activity.

As Patton (2015) notes, random sampling in large datasets provides robust representativeness while retaining feasibility for both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

3.3.2 Mixed-Methods Design and Variables

This thesis employed a mixed-methods design that integrated quantitative and qualitative measures to capture both the scale and the substance of Twitter (X) campaigning.

- **Quantitative component**: Measured posting frequency, engagement levels (likes, retweets, replies), and visibility (mentions in media, trending hashtags).

- **Qualitative component**: Examined issue framing, leader-centric narratives, and mobilisation appeals through systematic coding of tweet content.

This dual strategy ensured **triangulation**, where numerical patterns were supported by thematic insights, thereby increasing validity and reliability.

Table 2: *Variables and Measurement Strategies*

Variable	Definition	Measurement	Source
Tweet Frequency	Number of tweets per party account during campaign	Count per day/week	Twitter API
Engagement	User interactions with tweets	Avg. likes, retweets, replies per tweet	Twitter API
Visibility	Public prominence of parties on Twitter	Trending hashtags, media mentions	Content analysis + media reports
Framing / Issue Salience	Topics highlighted in tweets	Coding of themes/issues	Manual coding
Mobilisation Appeals	Calls to vote, attend rallies, donate, etc.	Frequency of mobilisation-related tweets	Content analysis

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages: a **quantitative analysis** of activity and engagement metrics, followed by a **qualitative content analysis** of tweet themes. This dual approach ensured that the study captured both the *scale* of Twitter use and the *strategic meanings* embedded in parties' communications.

3.4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis focused on three main variables: frequency of tweets, engagement, and visibility.

Descriptive Statistics

- *Tweet Volume:* The total number of tweets from each party's official account was calculated to determine the level of digital activity. Daily and cumulative frequencies were compared across the PTI, PML-N, and PPP.

- *Engagement Metrics:* Likes, retweets, and replies per tweet were aggregated to evaluate audience responsiveness. These measures provide insights into the reach and resonance of party messages.

- *Hashtag Usage:* The frequently used hashtags were identified and ranked. Their relationship with engagement metrics was analyzed to assess whether hashtag strategies supported mobilization and visibility.

Inferential Statistics

- *Correlation Analysis:* Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to test the relationship between Twitter activity (tweet frequency and engagement) and electoral performance (vote share and number of seats won). This analysis established whether parties with greater Twitter activity achieved stronger electoral outcomes (Bryden & Silverman, 2019).

- *Regression Analysis:* A multiple regression model was applied to examine the predictive value of Twitter activity. The independent variables were tweet frequency, engagement, and visibility, and the dependent variable was electoral success. The control variables included historical vote share and media coverage (Khan et al., 2020).

Together, these tests assessed whether Twitter usage correlated with electoral outcomes, linking directly to **RQ1** (which party used Twitter the most) and **RQ2** (differences in usage and success).

3.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis examined the *content and framing* of party communications on Twitter.

Coding Scheme: Tweets were manually coded into predefined categories.

- Campaign Updates (rallies, policy announcements)

- Promotion (self-branding, endorsements)

- Criticism (attacks on rivals)

- Call to Vote (direct mobilisation appeals)

- Political News (commentary on national events)

- Party Details (candidates, nominations, structures)

- Others (personal remarks, unrelated content)

Theme Identification: Coding was iterative, with categories refined in multiple rounds to ensure reliability and minimize subjectivity. Thematic patterns were then compared across the parties to identify similarities and differences.

Theoretical Integration

- **Agenda-Setting Theory** guided the identification of issue salience and framing strategies.

- **Strategic Political Communication (SPC)** helped interpret how Twitter activity aligned with offline rallies and campaign events.

- **Connective Action** informed the analysis of leader-centric hashtags (e.g., #ImranKhanForPM) and peer-to-peer mobilization.

This qualitative analysis addressed **RQ2** (differences in Twitter usage strategies) and **RQ3** (how online activity correlates with mobilization and electoral outcomes).

3.5　Validity

Ensuring validity and reliability was a central consideration in the research's design. Given the mixed-methods approach, measures were taken at both quantitative and qualitative stages to guarantee consistency, transparency, and robustness.

Content Validity

The coding framework for qualitative analysis was derived from the established political communication and social media literature, ensuring that the categories captured the key dimensions of Twitter campaigning (Bennett Vreese, 2005; Bennett Segerberg, 2013). Categories such as mobilization appeals, promotion, and criticism were selected because they directly reflect the theoretical constructs of **agenda-setting**, **strategic political communication**, and **connective action**.

Construct Validity

The variables—tweet frequency, engagement, visibility, framing, and mobilization—were clearly defined and operationalized, in line with existing studies (Bright et al., 2020; Jungherr, 2016). This ensured that the measurements accurately reflected the concepts being studied, avoiding overlap between online popularity and actual political mobilization.

Triangulation

Triangulation was achieved through the integration of:

- **Quantitative data** (tweet counts, engagement metrics, and regression outputs).

- **Qualitative content analysis** (themes, issue framing, and mobilization calls).

- **Secondary data** (media coverage in *Dawn*, *The News*, and *Express Tribune*).

This combination cross-validated the findings and enhanced the credibility of the interpretations, ensuring that the results were not dependent on a single method or dataset (Patton, 2015).

Reliability

To strengthen the reliability of coding, tweets were subjected to multiple rounds of thematic categorization. Coding consistency was checked through repeated reviews and refinements, minimizing subjectivity and ensuring replicability. Clear operational definitions of the variables further reduced the ambiguity in the measurements.

Limitations to Validity

Direct **member checking** (validating findings with participants) was not feasible because of the use of publicly available Twitter data. However, the interpretations were continuously compared with theoretical frameworks and prior empirical studies to ensure coherence and accuracy.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

3.6.1 Data Privacy

- **Anonymization**: Twitter users' data were anonymized to protect privacy. Only aggregated data and non-identifiable information were presented in the thesis

- **Compliance**: The thesis adheres to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, ensuring that data collection and analysis respect user privacy and consent norms.

3.6.2 Consent and Anonymity

- **Public Data Usage**: Since Twitter (X) data is publicly accessible, explicit consent from individual users was not required. However, the thesis ensured that no private or sensitive information was disclosed.

- **User Anonymity**: Any references to specific users or interactions excluded personally identifiable information unless the user was a public figure (e.g., party leader), in which case their public status justified the inclusion.

3.7 Limitations of the Methodology

3.7.1 Scope and Generalizability

- **Focus on Three Major Parties**: The thesis's focus on PTI, PML-N, and PPP may limit the generalizability of findings to other political entities, including smaller parties and independent candidates that also utilize Twitter (X).

- **Single Election Cycle**: Analyzing only the 2018 General Election may not capture longitudinal trends in Twitter (X) usage and its evolving impact on political communication and voter behavior.

3.7.2   Data Limitations

- **Potential Biases**: Twitter (X) data may be subject to biases, including the prevalence of fake accounts, bots, and automated tweeting, which could distort engagement metrics and content analysis.

- **Representation Issues**: Not all voters use Twitter (X), and the platform may not represent the broader electorate's demographics, potentially skewing the analysis towards more tech-savvy and younger populations.

- **Language Constraints**: Limiting the analysis to English and Urdu tweets excludes content in other languages that may be relevant in a multilingual country like Pakistan.

- **Data Incompleteness**: The reliance on Twitter (X) data may omit other relevant forms of online political communication, such as indirect interactions on other platforms or offline activities not captured through tweets.

CHAPTER 4

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1   Introduction

This chapter presents the results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses of Twitter (X) activity during Pakistan's 2018 General Election. The study examines how political parties used Twitter to communicate with voters, the extent of their interaction, and the degree to which social networking platforms were associated with patterns of electoral engagement. The analysis focuses on posting frequency, user engagement (likes, retweets, replies), and visibility (hashtags and mentions), alongside qualitative insights into issue framing, leader-centric narratives, and mobilization appeals.

The findings are structured around the research questions outlined in Chapter 1 and interpreted considering the theoretical frameworks presented in Chapter 2. This approach ensures that descriptive trends in Twitter use are systematically linked to agenda-setting, strategic political communication, and connective action.

Importantly, the **unit of analysis is the official party-level Twitter activity** of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Candidate-level accounts or direct comparisons with media coverage are beyond the scope of this study, ensuring consistency with the research questions and methodological design.

4.2   Research Questions and Their Answers

This section addresses the research questions guiding this thesis and provides detailed analyses supported by quantitative data and the relevant literature.

RQ1: Which political party used Twitter most frequently during the 2018 elections in Pakistan?

An analysis of Twitter (X) activity during Pakistan's 2018 General Election indicates that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the most active political party on the platform. In addition, Iqbal et al. (2020), PTI led social media outreach by consistently posting campaign content, engaging with voters, and using Twitter to mobilize political support.

Compared to PTI, (PML-N) and (PPP) had significantly lower engagement. While these parties maintained an online presence, their approach was less interactive, relying primarily on one-way communication such as press releases and official announcements (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Daily tweet frequency, average likes, and retweets were analyzed across the three parties to compare their Twitter activities.

Table 3: *Twitter Activity and Engagement Metrics During the 2018 Election Campaign*

Party	Average Daily Tweets	Average Likes per Tweet	Average Retweets per Tweet
PTI	200	10,000	3,000
PML-N	120	3,000	150
PPP	80	2,000	100

1. **PTI's High Activity & Engagement:** PTI tweets 200 times a day, whereas PMLN tweets 120 times a day, and PPP tweets 80 times daily. PTI's higher activity has

enabled it to dominate discussions on trending international topics and remain highly visible throughout the entire period of elections (Kapoor et al., 2020).

2. **PTI's strategy:** Interactive and real-time engagement, fundamentally different from its main competitors, PTI interacted with voters via hashtags *#NayaPakistan,* Twitter polls, and tweets from its leader, Imran Khan's (*ImranKhanPTI* verified account). This two-way interaction made the supporters amplify the party's message.

3. PMLN and PPP had fewer engagements compared to other parties. This is due to the low usage of hashtags, live Q&A, and interactive media by PMLN and PPP (Ali & Farooq, 2019). Besides, more reliance was put on their formal party statements than on talking with voters.

Table 4: *Comparative Analysis of Different Political Parties*

Criteria	PTI	PMLN	PPP
Frequency of Tweets	- High frequency of tweets during campaign period (Ahmed et al., 2017) - Automated bots for timely responses (Ahmed et al., 2017)	- Moderate frequency, focused on policy updates (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014) - Less use of automated tools	- Lower frequency, traditional messaging approach (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014) - Minimal use of automated tools
Content Types	- Policy announcements - Mobilization calls - Engaging multimedia (videos, infographics) (Ahmed et al., 2017)	- Governance records - Policy platforms - News updates (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Governance records - Traditional messaging - Limited multimedia use (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Use of Hashtags	- Strategic use of hashtags like "#NayaPakistan" (Ahmed et al., 2017) - Viral campaigns through hashtags	- Limited hashtag usage - Focused on branded hashtags (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Minimal use of hashtags - Traditional campaign slogans (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Engagement Metrics	- High engagement through retweets, likes, replies (Bright et al., 2020) - Interactive Q&A sessions	- Moderate engagement - Primarily broadcast messages (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Lower engagement metrics - Focus on information dissemination (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Use of Multimedia	- Extensive use of videos, infographics, live-streams (Ahmed et al., 2017)	- Limited use of multimedia - Focus on text-based updates (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Minimal multimedia usage - Traditional text and images (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Interaction with Voters	- Direct interactions through replies and DMs - Real-time responses to queries (Bright et al., 2020)	- Limited direct interaction - Primarily broadcast messaging (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Minimal interaction - Focus on one-way communication (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Use of Bots and Automation	- Use of automated bots for timely responses (Ahmed et al., 2017)	- No significant use of bots (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- No use of bots (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)

	- Automated tweet scheduling		
Data Analytics and AI	- AI-driven sentiment analysis (Ahmed et al., 2020) - Data-driven targeting and ads	- Limited use of data analytics - Traditional campaign methods (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Limited use of data analytics - Traditional campaign methods (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Sentiment and Public Perception	- Positive sentiment due to interactive campaigns - High voter support and engagement (Bright et al., 2020)	- Mixed sentiment - Less dynamic public perception (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Neutral to negative sentiment - Traditional voter base (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Challenges Faced	- Spread of fake news and misinformation (Ahmed et al., 2020) - Managing high volume of engagement	- Limited digital engagement tools - Lower adaptability to real-time communication (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Reliance on traditional media - Less effective digital strategies (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Overall Impact	- Significant electoral success (Ahmed et al., 2017) - Enhanced visibility and voter mobilization	- Moderate impact - Less effective digital strategy (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Limited impact - Traditional approach less effective in digital age (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)

Key Findings

The findings highlight PTI's dominant presence on Twitter (X) compared with PML-N and PPP, demonstrating how a data-driven, interactive digital campaign can enhance political outreach. The party's frequent engagement, strategic use of hashtags, and multimedia content have contributed to its strong online visibility.

Implications for Future Research

- Political parties should invest in real-time engagement, personalized voter interactions, and high-frequency posts.

- Strategic #hashtagsuse, and multimedia content (videos and infographics) significantly boosted voters' reach.

- Future elections will likely increase reliance on social media over traditional media for political mobilization.

RQ2: How did differences in Twitter usage among political parties during the 2018 elections influence their success in national elections?

The 2018 General Election in Pakistan marked a change in political campaigning, with social media platforms, particularly Twitter (X), playing a crucial role in influencing voter engagement and mobilization. The differences in Twitter strategies among PTI, PML-N, and PPP significantly impacted their electoral performance.

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) was identified between tweet frequency, voter engagement, and electoral success, reinforcing the idea that higher social media engagement contributes to stronger election results (Ahmed & Skoric, 2019). Electoral data from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) were compared with Twitter metrics including tweet volume, engagement rates (e.g., retweets and replies), and hashtag usage. Pearson's correlation analysis examined the relationship between daily tweet frequency and the number of National Assembly seats won by each party, confirming that higher social media activity is linked to better electoral outcomes.

Key Findings: Twitter Usage and Electoral Performance
1. PTI's Digital-First Approach and High Twitter Engagement

- PTI led the digital campaign, posting the highest number of tweets per day compared to other the parties.

- The party uses multimedia-rich content (videos, infographics, and live Q&A sessions) to engage with voters in real-time.

- The #NayaPakistan hashtag dominated the campaign and trended consistently during the pre-election period.

- PTI successfully targeted urban youth, who are highly active on Twitter (X), increasing voter engagement patterns in key constituencies (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018).

Impact on Electoral Success

  ✓ 116 seats won by the National Assembly (the highest among all parties).

  ✓ 35% follower growth during the campaign (from 2.3M to 3.1M).

  ✓ High engagement rate (8.5%) on average per tweet.

2. PML-N's Traditional Approach with Limited Engagement

- PML-N maintained a moderate presence on Twitter, focusing on policy-related posts and party announcements rather than voter engagement.

- The #VotePMLN hashtag was used but did not achieve viral status as in the PTI campaign.

- Unlike PTI, the PML-N did not conduct interactive sessions or use multimedia effectively.

- Their Twitter (X) engagement was lower, mainly because of a more traditional campaign approach that relied on TV and print media.

Impact on Electoral Success:

  ✓ 64 seats won in the National Assembly.

  ✓ 20% follower growth (from 1.4M to 1.7M).

✓ Moderate engagement rate (5.2%) per tweet.

3. PPP's Low Twitter Presence and Minimal Digital Strategy

- PPP had the least active digital campaign, with low tweet frequency and limited engagement.

- The *#PPPZindabad* hashtags failed to gain significant traction, and their digital outreach did not appeal to younger voters.

- The party relied heavily on traditional campaigns, such as physical rallies and print media advertisements.

Impact on Electoral Success:

✓ 43 seats won in the National Assembly.
✓ 15% follower growth (from 900K to 1.05M).
✓ The lowest engagement rate (4.0%) was observed for each tweet.

Table 5: Twitter Activity and Its Impact on Electoral Performance

Metric	PTI	PML-N	PPP
Tweet Frequency (Avg. Daily Tweets)	200 (Most active party)	120 (Moderate activity)	80 (Lowest activity)
Engagement Rate per Tweet (%)	8.5% (High public interaction)	5.2% (Moderate engagement)	4.0% (Limited engagement)
Follower Growth During Campaign (%)	35% (From 2.3M to 3.1M followers)	20% (From 1.4M to 1.7M followers)	15% (From 900K to 1.05M followers)
Use of Political Hashtags	#NayaPakistan (Most engaged hashtag)	#VotePMLN (Moderate engagement)	#PPPZindabad (Low engagement)
Multimedia Tweets (%)	60% (Videos, infographics, live tweets)	45% (Limited visuals, mostly text-based)	40% (Few images, minimal engagement)
Direct Voter Interaction	High (Live Q&As, Replies, Twitter Polls)	Moderate (Limited replies, no Q&As)	Low (Minimal voter engagement)
Seats Won in National Assembly	116 (Highest among all parties)	64	43

Key Findings

The findings confirm that higher Twitter activity is a key factor in electoral success, with PTI outperforming its competitors. The party's strong engagement strategy, direct voter interaction, and campaign-driven hashtags gave it digital advantage. In contrast, 's lower social media presence of the PML-N and PPPlimited their ability to mobilize voters effectively.

Policy Recommendations for Political Parties

- Prioritize digital outreach strategieswith targeted engagement rather than relying solely on traditional campaign methods.

- Leverage interactive featuressuch as live sessions, Q&A interactions, and Twitter polls to enhance voter connections.

- Focus on youth and urban votersMore engaged in social media, tailoring content to their interests and concerns.

RQ3: To what extent were Twitter (X) campaigns associated with patterns of voter engagement and electoral outcomes in Pakistan's 2018 General Election?

The 2018 General Election in Pakistan highlighted the growing significance of social media in political communication. Twitter (X) served as a platform for visibility, interaction, and mobilization, particularly among younger and urban voters. A comparative analysis of PTI, PML-N, and PPP indicates that, while all three parties used Twitter, their strategies and outcomes varied considerably.

Comparative Twitter Metrics and Electoral Patterns

Table 6: *Correlation Between Twitter Activity and Electoral Outcomes*

Metric	PTI	PML-N	PPP

Follower Growth During Campaign (%)	35% (2.3M → 3.1M)	20% (1.4M → 1.7M)	15% (900K → 1.05M)
Multimedia Tweets (%)	60%	45%	40%
Use of Political Hashtags	#NayaPakistan (High engagement)	#VotePMLN (Moderate)	#PPPZindabad (Low)
Average Engagement Rate per Tweet (%)	8.5%	5.2%	4.0%
Use of Twitter Polls	Frequent	Rare	None
Direct Voter Interaction	High (Q&As, replies)	Moderate	Low
Reported Bot Activity (%)	18%	10%	5%
Influence on Youth & Urban Voters	Strong (Lahore, Peshawar, Islamabad)	Moderate	Weak
Correlation with Voter Mobilization	Strong positive	Moderate	Limited

Key Observations

Follower Growth and Engagement

- PTI recorded the largest increase in followers (+35%), compared to PML-N (+20%) and PPP (+15%).

- This indicates stronger online visibility and interaction, particularly among digitally active voters.

Hashtags and Online Mobilization

- PTI's **#NayaPakistan** consistently trended and correlated with an 8.5% engagement rate, higher than PML-N's **#VotePMLN** (5.2%) and PPP's **#PPPZindabad** (4.0%).

- Hashtags have become key tools for reinforcing party narratives and visibility, although their direct impact on turnout cannot be confirmed.

Direct Interaction and Perceived Responsiveness

- PTI frequently held Twitter polls and Q&A sessions, building the perception of accessibility and responsiveness.

- PML-N engaged occasionally, while the PPP relied mostly on offline campaigning.

- Higher interactivity is correlated with greater online engagement and visibility.

Urban and Youth Mobilization

- PTI gained the most traction in urban centers such as Lahore, Peshawar and Islamabad, where Twitter penetration was the highest.

- Younger voters, who are more active on digital platforms, engaged heavily with PTI's online content.
- PML-N retained its traditional base but lagged in digital mobilization, the while PPP showed minimal correlation between Twitter activity and electoral engagement.

The findings suggest that, while Twitter activity correlates positively with PTI's electoral momentum, the relationship is **associative rather than causal**. PTI's higher engagement and follower growth aligned with increased youth and urban mobilization, but offline factors (historical party support, constituency structures, and traditional media exposure) also shaped the electoral outcomes. Therefore, Twitter functions as a **complementary tool for visibility and interaction** rather than a standalone determinant of voter engagement patterns or success.

4.3 Statistical Analysis: Correlation Between Twitter Engagement & Electoral Success

4.3.1 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation test was used to examine the relationship between Twitter engagement and voter engagement patterns.

Variable	Correlation (r)	Significance (p-value)
Tweet Frequency & Vote Share	0.78	$p < 0.01$ (Strong Positive Correlation)

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) confirmed that higher Twitter engagement is significantly associated with higher voter engagement patterns.

4.3.2 Regression Analysis
A multiple regression model was used to analyze the impact of Twitter engagement on traditional media coverage.

Table 7: Regression Analysis of Twitter Activity and Electoral Success

Variable	Beta (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Tweet Frequency	0.65	$p < 0.001$	Regression analysis indicated a strong positive association between tweet frequency and vote share ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that parties with higher levels of Twitter activity tend to perform better electorally. However, this relationship should be interpreted with caution, as the data are correlational and do not establish a causal link between Twitter activity and election outcomes
Engagement Rate (Likes & Retweets per Tweet)	0.50	$p < 0.01$	Regression results showed that higher engagement rates (likes, retweets, replies) were positively associated with vote share ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$). This pattern suggests that parties receiving greater online interaction also tend to achieve stronger electoral performance, though the direction of influence cannot be confirmed.
Traditional Media Coverage	0.20	$p = 0.15$ (Not Significant)	Media coverage showed a weaker and statistically insignificant association with vote share ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.15$), suggesting that in this dataset, digital engagement patterns were more closely aligned with electoral performance than traditional media visibility.

Key Interpretation & Political Implications

1. **Tweet Frequency (β = 0.65, p < 0.001)**

- This strong, statistically significant relationship means that higher Twitter activity directly translates into greater electoral success.

- **Implication:** Political parties should prioritize frequent, high-quality social media engagement over passive or infrequent updates.

2. **Engagement Rate ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$)**

- High engagement (likes, retweets, and replies) predicts higher vote shares, confirming that audience interaction matters.

- **Implication:** Campaigns should focus on interactive strategies, such as Twitter polls, Q&As, and hashtag **movements** to enhance voter participation.

3. **Traditional Media Coverage ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.15$, Not Significant)**

- This low, statistically insignificant value suggests that TV and newspaper coverage no longer predict election success as strongly as Twitter engagement.

- **Implication:** Traditional media is still relevant but is less influential than digital engagement. Political parties should shift resources toward social media marketing and real-time digital campaigning.

Key Findings

The findings establish a clear link between Twitter engagement and increased voter engagement patterns among younger and urban populations. PTI's high-frequency digital outreach contributed to greater political mobilization, while PML-N and PPP struggled to replicate similar engagement levels.

Implications for Future Elections

- Digital-first campaign strategies should be developed to maximize voter engagement patterns.

- Hashtag-driven mobilization (#NayaPakistan) proved effective, indicating that structured social media campaigns directly influence electoral participation.

- Parties must combine online and offline strategies to ensure engagement translates into real-world voter action.

4.4 Summary of Comparative Engagement Patterns

A comparative analysis of PTI, PML-N, and PPP reveals clear differences in the extent and style of Twitter (X) use during the 2018 General Election. These findings focus on descriptive and correlational patterns rather than causal effects, ensuring alignment with the study's design.

Key Observations

- **PTI's dominance in digital activity:** PTI consistently posted more frequently and engaged more directly with its followers than PML-N and PPP. Its use of interactive hashtags (e.g., *#NayaPakistan*) and leader-centric messaging created greater visibility and stronger online engagement.

- **PML-N's moderate reliance:** PML-N maintained a higher presence in traditional media, but its Twitter activity was comparatively moderate. Tweets were largely informational with limited interactivity.

- **PPP's weaker presence:** PPP's Twitter activity was the lowest among the three parties, with fewer tweets, limited hashtag use, and minimal direct engagement with voters.

Quantitative Trends

- The tweet volume was highest for PTI (average of 200 tweets per day), followed by PML-N (120) and PPP (80).

- Engagement rates (likes and retweets per tweet) were highest for PTI (8.5%), moderate for PML-N (5.2%), and lowest for PPP (4.0%).

- Direct interaction features (replies, Q&A sessions, live tweeting) were more frequently adopted by PTI, reflecting its greater responsiveness to online audiences.

Comparative Summary

These results suggest that PTI maximized Twitter as both a broadcasting and engagement platform, whereas the PML-N and PPP used it primarily for announcement-based communication. The findings reinforce the importance of digital strategies for visibility and voter interaction, with PTI's intensive use of Twitter being associated with higher levels of online engagement.

4.5   Discussion: Linking Findings to Literature

This section contextualizes the findings of this thesis within the existing literature on political communication, social media influence, and digital political engagement. The results validate established theories, highlight similarities with international case studies, and discuss Twitter's role in voter mobilization and political polarization.

4.5.1 Validation of Agenda-Setting Theory

The findings confirm the **Agenda-Setting Theory**, which suggests that media and political entities influence public discourse by prioritizing specific issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Twitter (X) played a critical role in shaping public discussions during the 2018 General Election by allowing political parties, especially PTI, to amplify key political narratives.

- **PTI's** campaign strategy focused on framing political issues such as corruption, governance reforms, and youth empowerment through high-frequency tweets and strategic hashtags like *#NayaPakistan.*

- **PML-N and PPP**, with less interactive engagement, relies more on traditional media to shape public discourse.

- Twitter's **real-time nature** allowed for a rapid response to political development, reinforcing first-level Agenda-setting (what issues to think about) and second-level agenda-setting (how to think about those issues) (Entman, 1993).

4.5.2 Comparative Studies: Social Media and Voter Mobilization

The role of Twitter (X) in voter mobilization in Pakistan aligns with global trends observed in countries such as the United States, India, and the United Kingdom.

United States

- During the 2008 and 2012 US Presidential Elections, Barack Obama's campaign effectively utilized Twitter to mobilize younger voters and create direct digital engagement (Tumasjan et al., 2010).

- In 2016, Donald Trump's campaign used Twitter to dominate news cycles and bypass traditional media gatekeeping (Kreiss, 2017).

India

- In the 2014 Indian General Election, Narendra Modi's BJP campaign extensively used Twitter and WhatsApp for voter outreach, resulting in a historic electoral victory (Chakrabarty & Roy, 2015).

- Twitter played a role in urban voter mobilization, like PTI's success in cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad in 2018.

United Kingdom

- Research on the 2016 Brexit Referendum indicated that Twitter campaigns significantly shaped public opinion, with political leaders using the platform to control narratives and influence voters (Bennett & Segerberg, 2018).

4.5.3 *Polarization and Digital Politics*

While Twitter (X) enhances voter engagement, it also contributes to political polarization, a global phenomenon in digital political communication.

- PTI's highly interactive strategy led to strong in-group mobilization and contributed to partisan divides on social media.

- PML-N and PPP's less aggressive digital presence resulted in weaker counter-narratives, further amplifying PTI's dominance in online discourse.

Similar trends have been observed in:

- In the United States, Twitter (X) played a role in deepening the political divide during the 2016 elections (Bail et al., 2018).

- In India, social media campaigns have led to ideological segmentation among voters (Chakrabarty & Roy, 2015).

The thesis confirms that while Twitter enhances political participation, it also facilitates filter bubbles and echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Pariser, 2011).

Key Findings

These findings align with global research on agenda-setting, digital voter mobilization, and political polarization. The thesis validates the Agenda-Setting Theory, demonstrating how Twitter enables political parties to influence public discourse. However, it also highlights the role of social media in increasing political division.

Implications for Digital Governance and Electoral Policy

- Twitter and other social platforms will continue to shape electoral processes, which will require regulatory frameworks to prevent misinformation.

- Political campaigns must balance engagement with ethical digital practices to avoid reinforcing polarization.

- Comparative analysis with the US, UK, and India suggests that social media will remain a central tool for voter influence in future elections.

CHAPTER 5

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

5.1. Conclusion

This thesis critically examines the role of Twitter (now X) in Pakistan's 2018 General Election, focusing on how the PTI, PML-N, and PPP adopted the platform for political communication and voter mobilization. Using a mixed-methods design, this study combined a quantitative analysis of activity and engagement metrics with a qualitative content analysis of framing and mobilization appeals.

The findings show that the PTI dominated the digital sphere through high tweet frequency, interactive hashtags such as *#NayaPakistan*, and direct leader-to-voter communication. These strategies translated into stronger online visibility and reinforced electoral momentum, particularly among urban and youth demographics. In contrast, the PML-N and PPP maintained moderate or low digital activity, relying more heavily on traditional campaigning and one-way announcements, which limited their online resonance.

The results contribute to three theoretical discussions. First, the study confirms the relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory, demonstrating how parties used Twitter to frame issues and highlight selective narratives, with PTI being the most successful in pushing corruption and reform as central themes. Second, Strategic Political Communication (SPC) is evident in PTI's integration of Twitter with rallies and television coverage, illustrating how digital tools complement broader campaign strategies. Third, Connective Action is visible in the use of personalized, leader-centric hashtags that enabled peer-to-peer sharing and grassroots digital mobilization.

Comparative insights from global contexts (e.g., Obama's 2008 campaign, Modi's 2014 campaign, and Brexit 2016) further validate Twitter's transformative potential in modern electioneering. However, this study also highlights its polarizing tendencies, as PTI–PML-N hashtag battles deepened partisan divides and reinforced selective echo chambers. This thesis concludes that Twitter is not a causal determinant of electoral success but a complementary tool that amplifies party visibility, mobilizes targeted voter groups, and reinforces existing support bases.

5.2. Contributions of the Study

This thesis makes several contributions.

- **Empirical Contribution:** It provides one of the first systematic comparative analyses of PTI, PML-N, and PPP's digital strategies in GE2018, highlighting how differences in online visibility and engagement shaped electoral momentum.

- **Theoretical Contribution:** By integrating Agenda-Setting, SPC, and Connective Action, this study extends their application to the Pakistani context, showing how global theories of political communication apply to hybrid democracies.

- **Methodological Contribution:** This mixed-methods approach demonstrates the value of combining quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative framing analysis to capture both the scale and substance of digital campaigning.

5.3. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations.

- **Scope:** It focused on three major parties, excluding smaller parties and independents, which may have used Twitter differently.

- **Timeframe:** The analysis was limited to the 2018 election cycle, meaning that longitudinal changes in strategy could not be captured.

- **Platform Dependence:** The reliance on Twitter excluded other platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which also shaped voter communication.

- **Representation Bias:** Twitter users in Pakistan are not representative of the broader electorate, as the platform skews towards urban, younger, and more educated populations.

5.4. Practical and Policy Implications

The findings suggest several practical lessons.

- **For Political Parties:** Invest in interactive strategies—live Q&A sessions, hashtag campaigns, and multimedia content—rather than relying solely on press-style announcements. PTI's success demonstrates how digital-first campaigns can effectively mobilize youth and urban voters.

- **For Policymakers:** Regulatory frameworks are needed to ensure transparency in digital campaigning, especially regarding paid promotions, misinformation, and bot activity. Such measures would balance free expression and electoral integrity.

- **For Educators and Civil Society:** Training in digital literacy and fact-checking can help voters navigate misinformation and engage more critically with political content online.

5.5. Future Research

Future studies can build on this work in the following ways:

- Conducting longitudinal analyses of party strategies across multiple election cycles.

- Expanding cross-country comparisons with other hybrid democracies to identify regional similarities.

- Advanced analytics and AI tools can be used to study bot activity, misinformation flows, and sentiment shifts in real time.

- Exploring the role of emerging platforms (e.g., TikTok) in shaping political communication in Pakistan's future elections.

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