

Digital Interaction and Political Opinion Formation: A Parasocial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between the social media use of young people and political organization and the development of political opinion in Pakistan by referring to the theoretical framework of the Parasocial Interaction Theory. Although past studies have to a great extent focused on exposure and involvement in digital political communication, little has been done to look at interaction as a relational process that affects political attitudes especially in the developing democracies. The research sample is a survey of 400 university students in urban and semi-urban areas, analyzed using the descriptive analysis, the linear regression, and the independent samples t-tests to study the direct impact of interaction as well as possible gender difference. The findings show that there is a highly significant positive correlation between political leader interaction and political opinion formation that is, the interaction has significant proportions of explaining the attitudinal outcomes. There were no significant gender differences and this indicates that digital political influence through relational mechanics is similar between male and female young people. By the parasocial interpretation, the results indicate that the repeated interactive engagement with political actors leads to familiarity, trust, and interpretive congruence, thus determining the political perceptions. Placing the process of interaction in the center of the interaction with politics, this research paper will help in advancing the field of the digital nature of political communication and applying the parasocial interaction theory to the youth politics in the Global South.

Keywords: political opinion formation, parasocial interaction, social media, youth political communication, digital political engagement, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Political communication shifted to the interactivity of networked ecology in which political actors and citizens interact with each other regularly over digital platforms (Chadwick, 2017). Political messages have become a relational experience with the affordances of social media, including likes, comments, shares, and direct messaging, and have become the new channels of influence (Victor, 2020).

There is a direct implication of this revolution particularly with young people. The young adults are the brightest social-media users in the world and use internet platforms as the leading platforms where they build identity, socialize with people and have some civic thoughts (British Council, 2023). Recent national and sectoral surveys and reports on youth internet adoption and their active internet use on a daily basis indicate that, in Pakistan, most youths are online, with a significant percentage dedicating more than several hours to social networks each day and a large fraction sharing or accessing political news at critical political moments (Kemp, 2025). These patterns make social media the leading place where political discourses, affective stimuli, and mediated interactions between leaders and followers unfold among Pakistani youngsters (Jamil and Appiah-Adjei, 2023).

The Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) presents a penetrative perspective of comprehending the impact of such an interactive encounter that shapes political opinion. PSI was originally coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) to explain the

illusion of face-to-face relationships that the audience develops towards media personalities, but it is important to recognize that the conceptualized PSI can be applied to the process of familiarity and a sense of intimacy that can be produced by repetitive exposure to the media even in the absence of a two-way social exchange (Horton and Wohl, 1956). These one-sided relationships are further enhanced by the interplay of interactive cues that approximate responsiveness (e.g., visible replies, recognition through likes), erasing the difference between parasocial and social interaction and increasing the psychological impact of exposure mediated in a social-media context (Klinger & Svensson, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015).

Translated to political communication, PSI can be used in understanding why political leaders who create a personalized, interactive presence can create attitudinal influence beyond merely the delivery of messages. Recent reviews and empirical research indicate that the parasocial processes on social media platforms have a positive relationship with trust, affective alignment, and influence susceptibility, which have been established in the context of entertainment, influencer, and politics (McNair, 2024). Political actors posing as relatable online users (via self-disclosure, informal style, and personal communication) produce cues of relationality that are utilized by audiences (especially younger cohorts accustomed to norms of intimacy online) as heuristics when reviewing political information (Stromer-Galley, 2019; Kruikemeier et al., 2022).

Although this is theoretically fitting, there has been little empirical application of PSI on political leaders in non-Western contexts. The bulk of research about political Parasocial processes has concentrated on the West or entertainment setting, with a research gap in situations where young people represent a large population and the adoption of social media is swiftly increasing (Schramm et al., 2024). Pakistan - a relatively young polity in which social media has taken the center stage in recent elections (Safdar et al., 2025, Shafqat et al., 2025) is an interesting but under researched region to extend PSI to the Global South and can be used to determine empirically whether relational cues are more strongly shaped by interactions among the young population in forming their political opinion (Papacharissi, 2015, Muzaffar et al., 2019).

The given study thus takes youth engagement with political organizations on social media as a separate relational phenomenon (not a simple behavioral measure of exposure) and political opinion formation as an attitudinal phenomenon influenced by parasocial processes. In concrete terms, the interaction behaviors (liking, commenting, sharing, direct messaging) are hypothesized to produce the perception of familiarity and trust, which then lead to the way users rate the political messages and opinion formation. The study bridges converging literatures on social-media affordances, youth political communication and parasocial processes, and fills a substantive empirical gap in the PSI application to non-Western-democracy political communication, by testing this model using survey data of Pakistani university students (Degen, 2025).

Overall, going beyond exposure-based explanations of digital political influence, the current study inquiries about and to what degree the youth engagement with political actors on social media serves as a parasocial stimulus and influences political opinion development in Pakistan accordingly. The theoretical and practical importance of answering this question is as follows: it would help us understand what micro-psychological mechanisms are behind the political persuasion of the modern world, and it would help us understand how the relational strategies of political actors can influence the youth political attitudes in digitally mediated publics.

1.1 Youth Interaction with Political Leaders on Social Media

The engagement of the youth with political leaders via social media has become one of the most recognizable trends of political communication of the modern age, which is indicative of larger changes in the relationships of the youth to authority, information, and political figures. In contrast to the older generations, young people are more likely to be exposed to political figures in the context of personalized digital space where political information is integrated with entertainment, peer communication and daily socialization. Research shows that more young people are subscribing to the social media profiles of political leaders and more often respond to their posts and engage in the open aspects of interaction in the form of likes, remarks, and repins than through institutionalized engagement methods (Bennett and Segerberg, 2019; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021).

Notably, the nature of political communication based on interaction is qualitatively different from passive exposure. The research done in a variety of settings indicates that posting or responding to the posts of political leaders has greater attitudinal impacts than just watching political posts (Otto et al., 2024; Theocharis et al., 2020). The interactive behaviors are the behaviors that engage cognitive and emotional capital and make it more likely that political messages will be processed by the affective as well as relational signals and not evaluated dispassionately. These processes are especially relevant to the young population, who are indoctrinated into the culture of constant digital communication and can influence the perceptions of politics in unobtrusive but long-lasting dimensions (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2021).

The social interaction of the youth with political leaders over social media has a different meaning in developing democracies like Pakistan. Low trust in young citizens can be experienced by traditional political institutions and mainstream media, which leaves the digital to operate as alternative spheres of political communication (Yousef, 2020;

Shahzad, 2018). Increasingly, political leaders are using social media to communicate to youth audiences without trying to go through journalistic gatekeepers and offer more curated narratives that focus on responsiveness, authenticity, and reflecting the concerns of youth (Tareen and Adnan, 2021; Wasike, 2025). Recent regional research also suggests that the Pakistani youth are not in equal contact with political leadership but selectively participate in the relationship depending on the credibility, ideological orientation, and the style of communication (Maqsood et al., 2023; Zainurin et al., 2024).

Combined, the available literature illustrates that interaction between the youth and political leaders through social media is more of a relational and not a behavioral phenomenon. The interaction presented by social media allows repeated, personalized, and emotionally resonant experiences that provide the environment in which the formation of political opinions based on familiarity and trust, instead of deliberation alone, can take place. This view offers a vital transition to the parasocial explanations of political influence, which offers a theoretical explanation of the way in which mediated communication can generate significant psychological and attitudinal effects among young listeners.

1.2 Political Leaders as Digital Personalities

The modern literature indicates that political communication online becomes more personalized, performative, and affect-oriented, reflecting the strategies that are traditionally related to celebrities and social media influencers (Enli, 2017; Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor, 2020). The use of social media by political leaders is heavily focused on informality, emotional sharing, and storytelling, which portrays the politicians as people that people can relate to, as opposed to those in positions of authority. The literature on political self-presentation using platforms such as X (Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook shows that leaders often post personal reflections, behind-the-scenes content, and messages rich in values that will make them humanize their image (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Ott, 2017).

The algorithmic systems have prioritization of contents that create interaction, which motivates political leaders to use conversational tones and personal stories that encourage the audience to respond (Klinger and Svensson, 2018; van Dijk, Poell, and de Waal, 2018). Empirical evidence suggests that viewers receiving personalized political communication are more prone to form a positive attitude towards political leaders and view them as trustworthy and some to be emotionally engaged with them (Wasike, 2025; Papathanassopoulos, & Giannouli., 2025). These impacts are more manifest, especially in the young generation who have been socialized into the digital cultures where authenticity and interaction with one another matter, as well as relational interaction.

Personalization of political leadership on social media is especially important in such a context as Pakistan. According to studies on Pakistani political communication, Pakistani leaders have come to use social media to circumvent traditional media houses and directly target youth audiences, usually positioning self as relatable, visionary, or morally aligned representatives (Huzaifa et al., 2025; Tareen and Adnan, 2021). In the situation when political leaders are perceived mainly on the basis of personalized and affective information, the political judgement can be less grounded in the policy evaluation and more influenced by the perception of intimacy, trust, and emotional belonging (Papacharissi, 2015; Bennett and Livingston, 2018). This change highlights the importance of theoretical approaches that are capable of explaining the way that mediated personality cues are changed into political attitudes and opinions.

Thus, the literature indicates that the transformation of the political leaders into digital personae is at the center of the interpretation of contemporary political communication. Personalized leadership communication provides the conditions in which political influence can happen with the help of relational and psychological processes by means of familiarity, accessibility, and emotional resonance. This point of view offers a conceptual direct linkage into the Parasocial Interaction Theory, which offers a systematic account of how mediated personalities, such as political or not, can have influence via perceived social relationships in digitally mediated situations.

1.3 Parasocial Interaction Theory in Digital Political Communication

The Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) offers a conceptual base on the way in which mediated experiences with popular personalities could yield intimacy, familiarity, and social bonding even though no interpersonal relations had been established. PSI was initially proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956) and has been conceptualized as an explanation of perceived relationships between the audiences and individuals in the media, such as television hosts and performers. These were one-sided but were claimed to have the same psychological reaction as face-to-face social interactions. Though originally designed in terms of original offline mass media, PSI has acquired fresh significance in the realm of digital space that is interactive and personalized (Su et al., 2021; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019).

As highlighted in recent literature, the social media services have radically changed the quality and the degree of parasocial interaction. In contrast to the traditional media, social media provide people with the chance to be directly engaged with public figures due to the likes, comments, shares, and replies, thus pretending to be interpersonally responsive (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011; Hartmann, 2017). Such affordances make the line between parasocial and social interaction indistinct and cause scholars to refer to the current state of Parasocial processes as more dynamic,

immersive, and psychologically influential than its previous manifestations in the mass media (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen, 2016; Su, 2021).

Research carried out in Western democracies indicates that parasocial relations with politicians relate to increased amounts of trust, positive attitudes towards the leaders, and attitudinal agreement (Victor, 2020; Hidayanto et al., 2025). In social media, in particular, the effects in question are especially acute because the personalized self-presentation of political leaders and the feeling of their approachability and intimate social presence is reinforced by the perceived accessibility (Papathanassopoulos, & Giannouli, 2025; Wasike, 2025).

Notably, PSI-related political persuasion is not based on rational persuasion, and it is rather on relational heuristics. Political information turns into a cause of affective and identity-based processing as opposed to systematic judgment when audiences view political leaders as a known, believable, or emotionally relevant person (Papacharissi, 2015; Bennett and Livingston, 2018). It is particularly applicable to young people, whose socialization is made in digital cultures where constant interaction and connection with mediated personae is considered normal (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Otto et al., 2024).

Studies have shown that frequent exposure to political leaders through social media makes them perceived as credible, reinforces their ideological stance, and makes them prone to opinion manipulation, despite not being politically mobilized (Lacap et al., 2024; Schramm et al., 2024). These results highlight the usefulness of PSI in the description of subtle types of political influence that arise during daily digital interaction and not due to campaign messaging.

Although gaining increasing relevance, the study of political communication based on PSI has been massively focused on the Western environment. Researchers have long been urging the use of PSI more actively in non-Western and developing democracies where the use of digital media is growing rapidly, and a large part of the electorate consists of young people (Su, 2021; *Frontiers in Psychology* review, 2024).

It is based on this literature that the current study uses Parasocial Interaction Theory to explain the emergence of politics opinions among the youth in Pakistan as a result of interaction with the political entities on social media. The study takes interaction to a paradigm shift by conceptualizing the interaction as a parasocial cue, which promotes familiarity, trust, and perceived social proximity, establishing the problem of political opinion formation in a relationship communication context. Thus, it adds to the expansion of PSI to digital political communication studies in the Global South and offers an empirically based description of how mediation between leaders and youth is likely to influence political perceptions in modern social media settings. Therefore, the study seeks:

1. To examine patterns of youth interaction with political entities on social media in Pakistan.
2. To assess the relationship between youth interaction with political entities on social media and political opinion formation.
3. To interpret the influence of social media interaction on youth political opinions through the theoretical lens of parasocial interaction.

1.4 Research Gap and Hypotheses Development

Although previous studies have already proved that social media enables communication and engagement in politics, a significant portion of existing literature focuses on exposure accounts or the result of participation. Interaction as one of the relational processes in which formation of political opinion takes place has received very little attention especially in the case of youth in developing democracies. The Parasocial Interaction Theory holds that a continuous interaction with public scores through mediation leads to the perception of familiarity and trust which, in turn, results in attitudinal outcomes.

Along this theoretical reasoning, engagement in social media with political leaders should be viewed as a relational signal that should be used to shape the way political information is perceived and internalized. Instead of acting as behavioral engagement, interaction can trigger parasocial processes which can help form political opinion. In this connection, the initial hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Social media contact with political establishment has a positive relationship with political opinion development among the young population.

Besides the investigation of the major relational mechanism, the study takes the possible demographic variation in political interaction and opinion formation. Previous studies have recorded gender disparities in digital political engagement, with mixed results in all situations. A closer look at the notion of heterogeneity of the youth population can be made through the examination of the differences between male and female youth in terms of their interaction level as well as the level of political opinion formation. So, the next hypotheses will be offered:

H2: The amount of interaction between the male and female youth and political entities on social media is highly different.

H3: No significant difference exists in the holding of political opinion by male and female youth.

These additional hypotheses extend the primary theoretical model by exploring demographic variation without altering the central parasocial interaction framework (see figure 1).

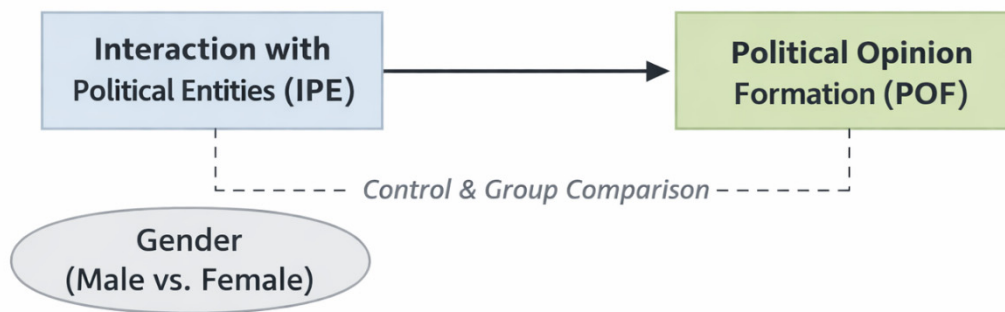


Figure 1. Political interaction and opinion formation (study model)

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was a quantitative and cross-sectional survey design to determine the association between how young people engage with political organizations through social media and their formation of political opinions. A survey method was deemed suitable because it is suitable in terms of the ability to collect perceptual and attitudinal information on a large sample, as well as provide the ability to test hypotheses derived through theory in the field of political communication.

2.2 Sample and Data Collection

The research was carried out among the Pakistani youths between 18 and 29 years of age, who were pursuing their studies in some of the public and private universities in the urban and semi-urban areas. The sampling approach that was used was stratified to be able to represent both genders and the type of institutions. A structured questionnaire that was administered using Google Forms was used to collect data from (n=400) respondents. To ascertain controlled distribution in the set strata, the survey link was distributed to the sample students of the university via institutional and peer networks. These were voluntary, and the respondents were briefed about the academic nature of the research before being involved.

2.3 Measures

i. Interaction with Political Entities on Social Media

Youth engagement with political organizations was sampled based on a series of Likert scale items that evaluated how the respondents interact with political leaders or party representatives on social media. The things shared included aspects of behavioral interaction (e.g., liking, commenting on, sharing political material, and direct messaging) and perceived communicative influence, including increased perception of political visions and trust in information provided by political leaders. The responses were taken on a five-point Likert scale, that is, strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items were ideologically based on the Parasocial Interaction Theory and formed to depict the interaction in the form of relational communication experience rather than exposure.

ii. Political Opinion Formation

Formation of political opinion was operationalized as perceived effects of social media interactions on political views and attitudes of the respondents. The items measured the role of exposure to political leaders and parties online in influencing the political views, beliefs, and evaluative judgments of respondents. This construct was considered attitudinal and perceptual in character, which is in line with the theoretical emphasis of the study on the psychological impact, but not the behavioral results. The political opinion formation scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .742$).

2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was performed with the help of SPSS. The initial step to be undertaken was the computation of descriptive statistics to analyze trends of interaction of youth with political bodies on social media. The proposed hypothesis was tested through the Pearson analysis of correlation, which determines the degree and the direction of the interaction between interaction and political opinion formation. Since the study was theory-based and the measurement was on the level of continual, the correlation analysis was considered suitable. Simple linear regression was also used in cases where the aim is to test the prediction ability of youth interaction to political opinion-making. All statistical tests were conducted using a significance threshold of $p < .05$.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The social science research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards. The respondents were informed about the aim of the research, and their rights to remain anonymous and confidential were guaranteed. There was no information gathering in the identification of the information, and the participation was completely voluntary.

3. Results

Table 1. Descriptive Profile of Respondents

Respondents' Demographics		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	193	48.3
	Female	207	51.8
	Total	400	100.0
Age	18-21	191	47.8
	22-25	159	39.8
	26-29	50	12.5
	Total	400	100.0
Education Level	BS (14 or 16 years)	323	80.8
	MS / MPhil	64	16.0
	PhD	13	3.3
	Total	400	100.0
Household Income	<50,000	107	26.8
	51,000-100,000	122	30.5
	100,000>	171	42.8
	Total	400	100.0
City	Karachi	100	25.0
	Lahore	100	25.0
	Islamabad	100	25.0
	Peshawar	30	7.5
	Quetta	20	5.0
	Multan /Faisalabad	30	7.5
	Hyderabad	20	5.0
	Total	400	100.0

The demographic features of the respondents are shown in Table 1. It was a sample of 400 students of universities, in which the gender representation was relatively equal (48.3 % men, 51.8 % women), which enhances the representativeness of the youth opinion. Ages wise, almost fifty percent of the respondents were aged 18-21 years (47.8 %), then there were those who were aged 22-25 years (39.8 %), which shows a good representation of the youthful and the middle-aged. In terms of education, most of them were undergraduate students (80.8 %), 16 % of them were MS/MPhil, and a very small fraction (3.3 %) of the population were PhD students. Socioeconomic diversity was measured according to household income levels, with 42.8 % indicating that they had monthly incomes of above PKR 100,000. The respondents in the study were encompassed in the major urban and semi-urban centres of Pakistan that comprised Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and the regional cities as per the study sampling strategy. The demographics of the population suggest a digitally aggressive and educated young audience, which is targeted by the modern political communication in the context of the social media platforms.

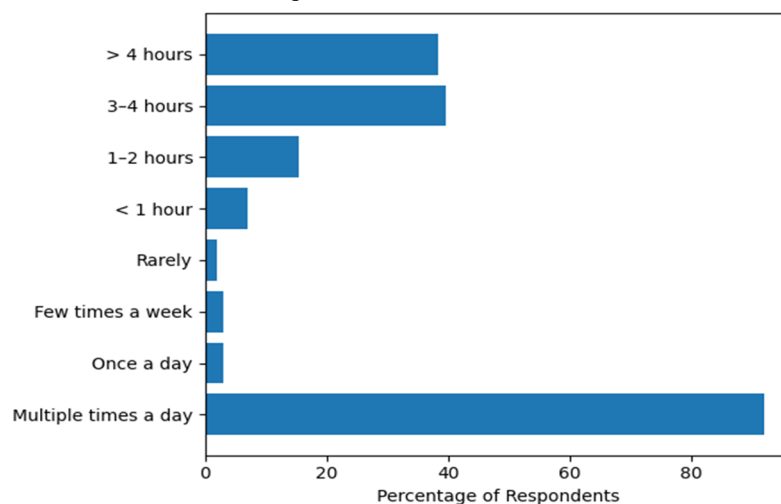


Figure 2. Social media usage pattern of Pakistani youth

Descriptive findings in figure 2 suggest that the social media usage by Pakistani young people is very intensive. A massive majority of interviewees (92 percent) indicated that they used social media more than once a day and about 78 percent of respondents reported spending three or more hours a day on social media sites. This degree of online engagement can be compared to more recent results that prove the primacy of social media in the political information landscape of young people, especially in emerging democracies where digital media are increasingly becoming supplementary or replacementary of traditional media (Boulianne, 2020; Newman et al., 2023). Repeated encounters between political actors and the repetitive nature of mediations are due to high exposure and frequent use of platforms. On the parasocial side, familiarity in relations can only occur with exposure being repeated (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). Therefore, the strength of the social media use presents the structural context of interaction-based political influence.

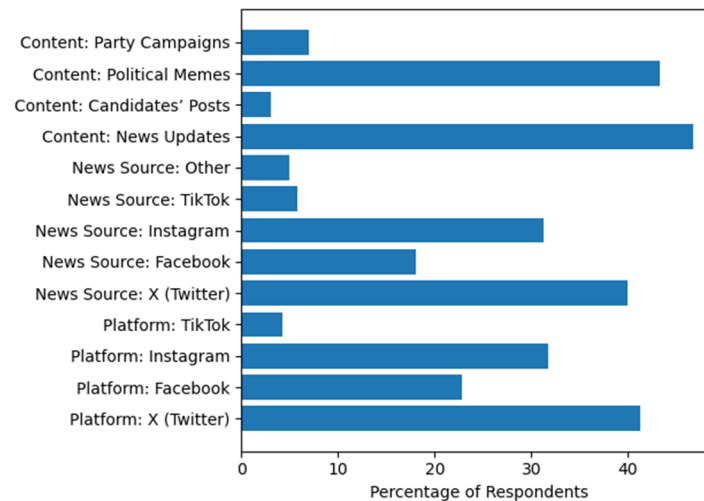


Figure 3. Political engagement on social media

Figure 3 shows the political engagement on social media. The preferences on platforms show that X (previously Twitter) and Instagram are seen as the most preferred sources of political information and election-related updates compared to Facebook. In terms of content type, the respondents said that they interacted most often with news updates (46.8) and political memes (43.3), but direct interaction with posts of candidates and campaign hashtags was relatively lower. These results represent the modern trends in the digital political communication where informational and symbolic messages tend to be more engaging than formal campaign messages (Enli, 2017; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2021). Political communication in memetic and news can be a gate way to political discussion, although direct involvement may not be present. Notably, this material continues to contribute to the mediated exposure to political actors in a repeated manner, which strengthens the circumstances in which the parasocial mechanism might develop.

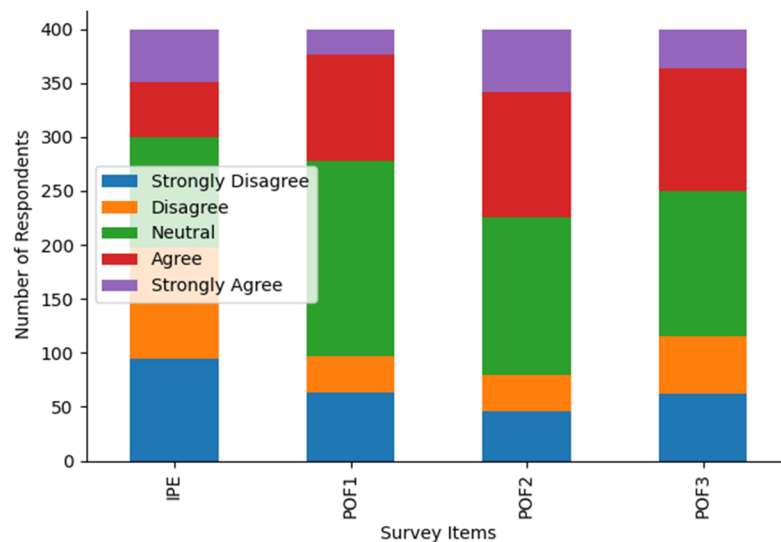


Figure 4. Interaction with political entities political opinion formation

The above (Figure 4) shows the distribution of the answers to Interaction with Political Entities (IPE) and Political Opinion Formation (POF1-POF3). Whereas interaction behavior is an indicator of moderate levels of engagement, the indicators of political opinion formation have greater concentration on the categories of agreement, which implies that perceived influence and understanding is more high than direct behavioral interaction. Theoretical consistency of this pattern with Parasocial Interaction Theory is possible. Horton and Wohl (1956) believed that even minimal mediated communication can produce the sense of familiarity and interpersonal proximity. Liking, commenting, and following as interactive features in digital space can also imitate the responsiveness of inter-people interaction, which can boost perceived intimacy, and credibility (Labrecque, 2014; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). Interaction is, therefore, not just a simple reflection of behavior engagement, but it is a relational signifier that influences political cognition.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

		IPE	POF
IPE	Pearson Correlation	1	.571**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
POF	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		

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

In order to evaluate the hypothesis of the study, the Pearson correlation analysis and the linear regression analysis were performed. The correlation analysis showed (table 2) that there was a strong to moderate positive correlation between the youth engagement in political entities on the social media and political opinion formation ($r = .571$, $p < .001$). This observation means that the stronger perceived influence on political views, the higher political knowledge, and the increased trust in information of political leaders depend on the higher levels of interaction.

Table 3. Regression Analysis

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	6.015	0.260		23.151	<.001
Interaction with political entities on sm.	1.225	0.088	.571	13.883	<.001

Model Fit Statistics
 $R = .571$
 $R^2 = .326$
Adjusted $R^2 = .325$
 $F(1, 398) = 192.74$, $p < .001$

In order to test H 1, the linear regression analysis was done in which political opinion formation was the dependent variable, and the interaction with political entities was the independent variable. Gender was chosen as a control variable. These findings in table 3 suggest that exposure to the political entities is a strong predictor of the formation of political opinions ($b = .572$, $p < .001$). The model accounts 32.7 percent of variance in the formation of political opinion ($R^2 = .327$), $F(2, 397) = 96.38$, $p < .001$. Gender did not directly affect it in a statistically significant way ($b = .024$, $p = .562$).

The findings are good empirical evidence in favor of H1. The size of the effect indicates that interaction-based political communication is a significant explanatory factor of youth political opinion formation. In line with the parasocial interaction literature, repeated interaction with political leaders seems to create a feeling of familiarity and trust as well as interpretive agreement, which in turn influence political judgments (Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019; Bond, 2021). The lack of a compelling direct gender influence also shows that this interaction mechanism is widespread among young readers.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test Examining Gender Differences in Interaction and Political Opinion Formation (N = 400)

Variable	Gender	N	Mean (M)	SD	t	df	p
Interaction with Political Entities (IPE)	Male	193	2.70	1.29	0.88	398	.379
	Female	207	2.58	1.32			
Political Opinion Formation (POF)	Male	193	9.25	2.73	0.03	398	.979
	Female	207	9.25	2.87			

Independent samples t-tests were done to further examine the variation of demographics. According to the table 4, There were no statistically significant gender differences in interaction with political entities, $t(398) = 0.88$, $p = .379$. In a similar vein, no gender differences were found in the formation of political opinion $t(398) = .03$, $p = .979$ or the results of interaction, $t(398) = .03$, $p = .979$, which means that there are similar levels of interaction and opinion formation between male and female youth which negates both H2 and H3.

Theoretically, the lack of gender dissimilarity indicates that the operations of the parasocial in online political space

should be the same between male and female young people. Although existing studies have reported the gendered disparities in political participation (Boulianne, 2020), social media relational engagement is not always gender-stratified, especially among highly digitized youth. This finding supports the main theoretical input of the work: the processes of interaction-elicited parasocial seem to be a generalized mechanism and not a gender-specific phenomenon in such a situation.

4. Discussion

All of the above findings convey the idea that the Parasocial Interaction Theory can be regarded as a strong explanatory construct of political opinion formation in digitally mediated settings. The relationship with political entities shows a positive correlation with the formation of political opinion, a significant part of which is explained by interaction (Degen, 2025).

Similar to the initial argument proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), interpersonal contact can be simulated through mediation by means of interaction. The interactive affordances of social media ecosystems enhance this effect through the symbolic signs of accessibility and responsiveness (Labrecque, 2014; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). It can be possible that the perceived familiarity and trust through comments, likes, and follows can be built due to youth involvement with political leaders and, consequently, influence political interpretations and evaluations.

Notably, the uniformity of this association among the gender groups implies that relational digital political communication is a mechanism that is consistently applicable to youth groups. Instead of working with an explicit persuasion, digital political influence seems to be instilled in the daily interaction patterns.

Collectively, the findings extrapolate the parasocial interaction theory into the Global South digital political communication setting and confirm that interaction as opposed to exposure is a key factor in the process of youth political opinion formation.

4.1 Implications

The results generalize the Parasocial Interaction Theory to digital political communication within a Global South framework that interaction rather than exposure is one of the most important relational processes that form the opinion development in youth politics. Through the empirical observation of the connection between interaction and political organizations and attitudinal consequences, the paper strengthens the mediated relational remarks (e.g., familiarity, perceived responsiveness, trust) in political influence mechanisms of the present day.

To political actors, the findings demonstrate the significance of interactive approach to engagement rather than sending messages in one way. The importance of relational communication practices like responsiveness and regular digital presence could have a greater impact in creating youth political perceptions compared to the traditional broadcast-type campaigning.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

The study is based on self-reported survey data and cross-sectional study, which restricts causal analysis. A single-item indicator was used to measure the interaction variable, which might not reflect the complexity of online interaction. Future studies are advised to use multi-item interaction scales, longitudinal study, and experimentation. The studies of platforms and comparative cross-national studies would shed more light on the variations in parasocial political processes in digital settings and sociopolitical systems.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between engagement with political parties on social media and the development of political opinions among Pakistani youth through the lens of Parasocial Interaction Theory. The findings indicate a strong and positive association between social media interaction and political opinion formation, suggesting that digital platforms play a significant role in shaping how young individuals perceive and interpret political issues. Interactive features such as commenting, sharing, and direct engagement with political actors contribute to a sense of familiarity and perceived connection, thereby enhancing the influence of political communication.

The results further reveal that there are no significant gender differences in this relationship, indicating that social media influences political opinion development in a relatively consistent manner across male and female youth. This highlights the inclusive nature of digital platforms, where access to political content and opportunities for engagement are broadly available, reducing traditional barriers to participation.

Moreover, the study underscores the relational dimension of contemporary political communication. Rather than passively consuming information, youth actively engage with political content, contributing to the construction of their political understanding. Parasocial Interaction Theory helps explain this process by illustrating how repeated exposure to political figures fosters perceived interpersonal connections, which in turn shape attitudes and opinions.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that interaction on social media is a key mechanism in the formation of political opinions among Pakistani youth. The findings emphasize the importance of considering interactive and relational dynamics in understanding modern political communication. As digital media continues to evolve, its role in influencing political perceptions and engagement is likely to grow, making it an essential area for future research.

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Author contributions

Dr. Ghulam Safdar was responsible for study design and revising. Andleeb Basharat Abbasi was responsible for data collection. Dr. Majid Ul Ghafar drafted the manuscript and Kareem Mohamed Abdelhafiz revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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