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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BUILDING CITIZEN CAPACITY: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Objective*: This study aims at the effects of social media on the capacity-building of citizens in South Punjab, Pakistan. It examines the impact of social media on citizens' economic, social and political empowerment.*
Background*: Social media is an important tool for communication, information sharing, awareness and civic engagement. In south Punjab, Pakistan, there are issues of low internet connectivity, low digital literacy, socio-economic gap and rural-urban gap which have an impact on how citizens can use social media for citizen capacity building.*
Methodology*: The research design used in this study is quantitative research. The data was collected from the students of the university of South Punjab using a pre-designed questionnaire. Stratified sampling technique was applied and 386 valid responses were obtained. The data were analyzed using SPSS by descriptive, correlation, regression and moderation analysis.*
Results: *The results showed that there was a strong positive correlation between the use of social media and citizens' capacity. Social media, economic empowerment and social empowerment were significant and strongly correlated with citizen capacity, and political empowerment were weak and non-significant. There was no significant moderation of the association between social media and citizen capacity by empowerment.*
Recommendations*: The study suggests enhancing digital skills, narrowing the digital divide, providing affordable Internet connection, developing platforms that are socially inclusive, ensuring access to reliable information, and fostering credible and productive communication between government and citizens online.*
Keywords: *Social media, Citizen capacity, Digital literacy, Civic engagement, Economic empowerment, Social empowerment, Political empowerment.*

1. Introduction

Social media has set in motion a paradigm shift in the manner of communication, information and interaction for socio-political processes. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and other platforms have billions of users worldwide and have become the backbone of communication today, offering the chance to communicate in real-time, share the content, and talk about it in public. These platforms not only make interpersonal communication easy, but they are also very helpful in promoting a business, in influencing socio-political dynamics and in creating civic engagement. Social media is relevant and popular on a global scale with approximately 5.07 billion users, and just in Pakistan alone, there are approximately 71.70 million social media users who are active (Kemp, 2023).

In Pakistan, even with the high rate of expansion of digital connectivity, there are still huge gaps in access to technology and digital literacy. Even though these challenges, including financial accessibility and infrastructure are linked to lack of adequate Internet access, more than half of the population still lacks access (UNDP, 2024). The gap is significant in underdeveloped areas of South Punjab, where the Social-economic conditions,

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low access to technologies, and absence of education opportunities are hampering the successful use of digital platforms.

Social media are what they are — they allow people to make, share and disseminate information quickly, by passing traditional media channels. Such open and participatory character enables people to give their opinion, discuss, and access various sources of information. Additionally, the anonymity that is often claimed by social media encourages the user to express oneself freely, by fostering a dynamic communication environment (Betsch et al., 2012; Meleo-Erwin et al., 2017; Charles-Smith et al., 2015).

Notably, social media has become an important tool in building citizen capacity, which can be defined as knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to enable individuals to actively engage in civic and political activities. Social media enables citizens to learn, be aware, and participate in the process through increased access to information, interactive communication, and participation opportunities. It allows individuals to participate in decision-making processes, engage in a nationwide debate, and hold institutions accountable, thus enhancing democratic practices (Okafor & Obi-Nwosu, 2017; Lin and Kant, 2021).

Nevertheless, the possibility of social media to develop citizen capacity is not evenly distributed across all the regions. In marginalized and underdeveloped regions like South Punjab, structural barriers such as low levels of digital literacy, low internet access, and socio-cultural constraints, negatively affect the successful use of these platforms. Although the role of social media in empowering youth, promoting awareness, and civic engagement have received much-publicized recognition, its effects on rural and underdeveloped settings have not received the same attention (Ahmad et al., 2022; Shirazi et al., 2023).

Moreover, despite the fact that social media is often viewed as a democratizing force that allows marginalized voices to be heard, other issues, including misinformation, digital inequality, and unequal access to technology are still limiting the effectiveness of social media. Such problems are especially critical in the areas that experience the digital divide that intensifies the existing socio-economic disparities, denying citizens the right to fully enjoy the benefits of digital opportunities (Khan et al., 2023).

The study of the role of social media in developing the capacities of citizens must be carried out in a certain socio-cultural and regional background. The South Punjab with its largely rural population, socio-economic factors, and poor technological infrastructure, presents a critical setting in which the discussion of the power of social media to empower citizens takes place. The purpose of this study is to examine how social media can influence the development of citizen capacity in South Punjab, Pakistan, through exploring the effects of social media on economic, social and political empowerment of citizens.

2. Literature Review

Social media has become a paradigm shift in contemporary society, and it has greatly affected the trend of communication, distribution of information, and citizen participation. It offers an interface, through which users can create, share, and interact with content, allowing real-time communication and engagement in the general discourse. Social media in contrast to traditional media enables the free access of information without strict editorial control, which results in dynamic and participatory communication environment (Betsch et al., 2012; Meleo-Erwin et al., 2017; Charles-Smith et al., 2015).

Over the last few years, the idea of social media in the context of the development of the citizen capacity has become an object of a lot of scholarly interest. Citizen capacity means what people need to know, have skills and resources to actively engage in civic and political activities. It encompasses political awareness, civic skills, and access to participatory resources, which are all necessary to the operation of a democratic society (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Verba et al., 1995). Social media helps to improve these capacities, by

accessing information, communication, and participation in the processes of making decisions by the population.

The nexus formed by social media and citizen capacity is mainly formed by the increase in civic engagement and political participation. Social media platforms, inform the citizens about the government policies, political developments and social issues, therefore enabling informed decision making. Research shows that civic participation, such as political participation and involvement in communities, is positively related to the use of digital media (Skoric et al., 2016; Bennett, 2012). In addition, social media improves social capital through reinforcement of social networks and interactions between individuals and communities (Verdegem, 2011; Lin and Kant, 2021).

In Pakistan, social media has been very influential in terms of political awareness and participation in elections. A study conducted in Bahawalpur showed that social media played a significant role in voter participation and political awareness, demonstrating its importance in influencing political behavior (Imran and Masood, 2020). Likewise, research on general elections in Punjab shows that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp were widely employed in the electoral campaigns, information dissemination and voter decision-making process (Ghani et al., 2020). These results indicate that social media has emerged as an important means of political communication and interaction in Pakistan.

Social media also helps in economic empowerment through the provision of opportunity to access information, network, and engage in economic activities. It allows people, especially young people, to discover the possibilities of employment, become entrepreneurs and get access to funds. Economic use of social media has been linked to better economic mobility and access to international markets, particularly in developing markets (Lin and Kant, 2021).

Along with economic factors, social media can be considered one of the key elements in achieving social empowerment. It enables interaction and connectivity among different groups of people, enabling them to form networks, contribute towards experiences and engage in collective activities. The social media platform gives the marginalized communities a voice, allowing them to create awareness about the social issues and bring change (Turing, 2024). Furthermore, the availability of information via social media expands the prospects of education and helps in learning processes, which contribute to the overall social development.

Another important dimension that is affected by social media is political empowerment. It gives citizens avenue through which they can talk about political matters, air their sentiments and engage in advocacy processes. Social media reduces the cost of political participation by making people participate in civic activities at the comfort of their homes (Bode et al., 2014). It also helps in building online communities, which build collective identity and mobilize people towards political action (Wellman and Hampton, 1999; Rheingold, 1993).

While social media can prove to be beneficial, there are several difficulties that can hinder its usefulness in citizen capacity development. Misinformation, echo chambers and algorithms biases are problems that may influence information and influence public opinion (Pariser, 2011). Moreover, the digital divide is also important issue particularly in developing countries where access to technology and digital literacy is not widely available (Elahi, 2020). The issues trigger attention to how specific interventions are needed to ensure that social media is included and used effectively.

In the specific case scenario of South Punjab the socio-economic factors, lack of technological development and cultural barrier make the role of social media in building the capacity of the citizens even more difficult. Despite the potential benefits of social media for empowering marginalized populations, low digital literacy and unequal access to technology

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have been shown to limit its effectiveness (Ahmad et al., 2022; Shirazi et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

The literature suggests that social media has a multi-dimensional impact on citizen capacity - impacting on social, economic and political dimensions. It offers empowerment and engagement opportunities, but contextual issues such as Technologies accessibility, e-literacy and socio-economic status are needed to achieve this. Thus, more empirical research is needed to learn how social media can be successfully used in order to develop the citizen capacity in such areas as South Punjab, Pakistan.

3. Methodology

This paper is quantitative research based on a positivist research paradigm and aims to investigate the association between social media and citizen capacity in South Punjab, Pakistan. The research design is deductive research design which involves the generation of hypotheses based on the existing theories and testing these hypotheses using the collected data.

3.1 Research Framework

The study employs a research framework that is based on three key variables: social media as the independent variable, citizen capacity as the dependent variable, and empowerment as the moderating variable. Empowerment is also subdivided into three dimensions economic empowerment, social empowerment and political empowerment.

3.2 Research Design and Instrumentation.

The main data collection tool was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into five parts:

- Demographic information of respondents
- Social media usage
- Scale items: social media.
- Empowerment scale (economic, social and political dimensions)
- Citizen capacity scale

The social media and empowerment items were borrowed and used in previous validated studies, whereas the citizen capacity scale was created by the researcher.

3.3 Data Collection and Sample

The research was based on primary information, which was gathered by filling out online questionnaires using WhatsApp and email via Google Forms. The research population was university students in South Punjab with an estimated population of over 100,000 people.

The stratified sampling method was used so that there would be representation of various groups. The sample size of 384 respondents was found to be suitable to the population based on the Krejcie and Morgan table. The research was able to obtain 386 responses which are statistically adequate to make generalization at a 95% confidence level and 5 percent margin of error.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The pre-test of the questionnaire was carried out before the main data collection to ascertain the validity of the questionnaire. A pilot study with 30 students was also conducted to determine reliability and to refine the instrument. The members of the pilot study were not included in the ultimate data analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The data obtained were analyzed with the help of the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used. The data were summarized by using descriptive statistics and includes means and standard deviations and analysis of relationships between variables was done through the use of inferential statistics which include Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis.

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4. Results

This section will present the empirical results of the study including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression results to examine the relationship between social media and citizen capacity in South Punjab, Pakistan.

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The study obtained a total of 386 valid responses, which is above the recommended sample size of 384 when the population size is more than 100,000, and therefore, gives the study statistical adequacy with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error.

Demographic profile reveals that most of the respondents were females (62.4%), whereas males were 37.3% of the sample. A large fraction of respondents (85.2) was of 1825 age group (youth), which is a majority. Moreover, 78.2 percent of the participants were urban residents implying a greater representation of digitally connected populations. .

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

To investigate the central tendency and dispersion values of the study variables, descriptive statistics were calculated. The findings show that the respondents have a relatively high level of social media use and citizen capacity.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable		ean	Std. Deviation
Social Media (SM)	86	6.56	17.46
Economic Empowerment (EE)	86	9.70	4.75
Social Empowerment (SE)	86	7.45	6.11
Political Empowerment (PE)	86	6.08	3.10
Citizen Capacity (CC)	86	8.63	8.37

These results indicate that the respondents demonstrate high activity in social media, moderate to high empowerment and citizen capacity.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation analysis was done to determine the relationships between the variables. The findings indicate that there are strong and statistically significant positive relationships between social media and all dimensions of empowerment, and that of citizen capacity.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variables	**M**	**E**	**E**	**E**	**C**
SM		761**	802**	726**	801**
EE			700**	735**	746**
SE				774**	777**
PE					716**

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Variables	M	E	E	E	C
					C
C					

The relationship between social media and citizen capacity (r = .801, p < .01) is strong and positive, indicating that a higher level of using social media is linked to a higher level of citizen capacity.

4.4 Regression Analysis

In order to test the predictive relationships further, a multiple regression analysis was conducted whereby the citizen capacity was the dependent variable.

Table 3: Regression Results

Variable		eta (β)	E -value	ig.
Constant	.919		.782	000
Social Media	164	343	.652	000
Economic Empowerment	404	229	.011	000
Social Empowerment	379	277	.340	000
Political Empowerment	228	085	.783	075

The findings indicate that citizen capacity is positively influenced by social media the most (=.343, p =.001). Also, economic empowerment =.229 and social empowerment =.277 both have significant impacts in terms of citizen capacity.

Nevertheless, political empowerment exerts a weak and statistically non-significant effect (p = .075), which means that it does not significantly predict citizen capacity in the model.

4.5 Moderation Analysis

The moderation analysis was done to investigate whether empowerment moderates the relationship between social media and citizen capacity. The interaction term (SM × Empowerment) was observed to be statistically non-significant (p = .151) which implies that empowerment does not have a significant moderate impact on this relationship.

4.6 Summary of Findings

The findings are clear that social media is of great importance in increasing the citizen capacity in South Punjab. The results indicate that:

- Social media: The influence of social media on citizen capacity is strong and positive.
- Economic and social empowerment are significant in increasing the citizen capacity.
- Political empowerment plays a limited and insignificant role.
- There was no effect of empowerment that was moderating.

On the whole, the empirical evidence helps to support the argument that social media is an important driver of citizen capacity, especially the impact it has on the economic and social empowerment dimensions.

5. Discussion

The study results provide valuable insights into the potential of social media for building the capacity of citizens particularly in the context of South Punjab, Pakistan. The

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results obtained show that social media has a great influence on the development of citizens' capacity, which is in accordance with the main objective and hypothesis of the study. The strong positive correlation between social media and citizens capacity is a signpost that digital platforms play an important role in soaring civic awareness, participation and engagement among citizens.

Among the most important findings of the study is the demographic makeup of the respondents, most of them are university students, especially those of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. This is crucial because university students are a more active user of social media and are more likely to engage in digital content such as government communication. This discovery matches other studies that indicate that young people and students are more likely to engage and interact with public institutions through digital means (Smith, 2020; Zhou & Li, 2022).

The sample gender distribution due to the increased number of female respondents (62.4%), also offers an interesting point of view. The findings indicate that female users are more engaged in the social media usage, empowerment aspects, and citizen capacity. This confirms the existing evidence that states that women are more likely to use social media as a communication tool, participating in a community, and consuming information (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Fuchs, 2017). This imbalance, however, can also restrain the generalizability of the findings, with the possible underrepresentation of male views.

One more significant point that the study draws is that the young respondents, especially the one aged between 18 to 25 years, are dominant. This age group is reported to be very active on social media platforms, and more receptive to digital communication, including government-related content. The results are in line with previous studies that have indicated that youths are more susceptible to getting involved in political discussions, follow current events, and engage in civic activities via social media (Perez and Martinez, 2020; Yang, 2019).

Education became also a decisive element in the amount of social media interaction and the ability of citizens. Most of the respondents were well educated and this could have contributed to their higher capacity to understand, interpret and interact with information posted on social media sites. The finding follows the results obtained in earlier studies that postulated that people with higher educational attainments have a higher likelihood of accessing online political and governmental content (Cao, 2023; Campbell and Tsuria, 2021).

The paper also raises the question of the digital divide, with a good majority of the respondents being urban (78.2%), and rural representation being minimal. This implies that access to digital resources, and internet connectivity are key factors in the effectiveness of social media in the building of citizen capacity. These conclusions are promoted by the previous studies, which state that urban population is more likely to access technology and have higher rates of digital engagement than rural population (Hargittai, 2019).

With regards to the content and the involvement, the study demonstrates that the respondents tend to feel that government communications on social media are relevant and informative. Nonetheless, the degree of interaction and responsiveness is an issue of concern. An interesting percentage of respondents thought that government agencies are more interested in keeping an online presence than in having a two-way communication. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies, which indicate that as the use of social media by governments increases, most of them do not have effective engagement strategies (Caplan and Boyd, 2020; Molyneux et al., 2021).

The regression analysis also supports the results of the study since it reveals that social media has the highest influence on citizen capacity, then economic and social empowerment. It signifies that social media plays a role in citizen capacity mainly by

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increasing access to economic opportunities and boosting social networks. The role of political empowerment was however discovered to be weak and statistically non-significant. This implies that, whereas social media can lead to awareness of the political scene, it does not automatically result in any actual political empowerment or participation in the specified setting.

Moreover, the moderation analysis revealed that empowerment does not significantly moderate the relationship between social media and citizen capacity. This implies that the influence of social media on the capacity of citizens is independent, and not an interaction effect with empowerment. This observation indicates that, although the dimensions of empowerment are significant, they do not have any effects on the observed fundamental relationship between social media use and citizen capacity in this research.

Comprehensively, the discussion points out the fact that social media is a potent instrument in increasing the capacity of citizens, especially in the context of economic and social empowerment. However, its potential is still not realised due to structural problems such as the digital divide, low participation of rural communities and low political participation. The findings here depict the relevance of certain policies and interventions that must be put in place to enhance digital access, the attitude of online engagement, as well as the inclusivity of participation at all levels of society.

6. Conclusion

The study findings conclude that social media is an important tool to enhance the citizen capacity in South Punjab, Pakistan. The results indicate that social media can positively and significantly influence the citizens by increasing their access to information, communication, and participation in socio-economic and civic activities.

The findings also show that social media has a role to play in the various aspects of empowerment. Specifically, economic and social empowerment demonstrate the close relationships with the capacity of citizens, which hints at the social media helping people to enhance their economic opportunities and social life. Nevertheless, the correlation between political empowerment and citizen capacity is weaker in this regard, denoting that social media has less influence on political outcomes in this respect.

Besides, the article emphasizes the idea that despite the potential of social media to put citizens in power, the usefulness of social media is limited by the structural problems that exist. Limited digital access, low rates of digital literacy, and socio-economic problems all limit the complete use of social media, particularly in underdeveloped regions such as South Punjab.

On the whole, the research points out that social media may be used as a significant tool to enhance the capability of citizens, as well as support the processes of democratic development, but only under one condition: the relevant measures should be taken to address the current limitations.

7. Recommendations

Judging by the results of the research, it is possible to recommend the following:

1. Enhance Digital Literacy

Citizens are in need of digital literacy skills to enable them to effectively utilize social media platforms in accessing information, learning and participation.

2. Close the Digital Divide.

An attempt should be made to narrow the digital divide by enhancing access to and the affordability of internet services, especially in rural regions of south Punjab.

3. Advance Non-Discriminatory Social Media Networks.

The design and use of social media platforms should be in a manner that will attract all the segments of the society including the marginalized and underrepresented groups.

4. Develop Targeted Programs

The introduction of specific programs and initiatives should be provided to maximize the beneficial effect of social media on the capacity of citizens, especially with regard to education, awareness, and engagement.

5. Strengthen Information Access

The policies need to be aimed at enhancing access to correct and timely information via social media which can help citizens make the necessary decisions and become active members of society.

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