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FACEBOOK AS A PUBLIC SPHERE: RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG EDUCATED USERS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study highlights the type of political arguments by Facebook users based on the concept of the public sphere and deliberative democracy advanced by Jürgen Habermas. Besides other components of the public sphere, 'rational and logical argumentation' is of the primary concern set forth by Habermas. The study attempts to explore this dimension by finding out the use of type arguments by Facebook users during their political discussions on Facebook. The data was collected through in-depth interviews from 11 informants which helped get an insight into their experiences and the answers to the research question posed. The informants comprised eleven BS and PhD students (5 and 6 respectively; out of which 7 were males and 4 were females) who were registered voters and had liked the Facebook pages of any political party during the election campaign in Pakistan. The study uses the public sphere, as theoretical perspectives to guide the research questions. Thematic analysis was used and NVivo 12 was used for the categorization of data. Findings show that users used this platform to express their opinions and viewpoints freely; as educated users, they mostly engaged themselves in rational arguments. The study's findings are consistent with the existing literature that logical argumentation is used mostly by educated voters/users whereas most of the common users focus on emotional arguments. The study helps to shed light on the type of political discourses used by social media users which is an under researched area.

Keywords: Facebook, Arguments, Emotional, Components, Sphere.

Introduction

Scholars consider deliberation, debate, and argumentation as prerequisites for an ideal democracy to work. Political experts since the 18th century have stressed the need for establishing public debate and free expression of political ideas leading to public opinion formation. Deliberative democracy and the concept of the public sphere advanced by [Habermas \(1989\)](#) demand a rational critical discourse for ideal democratic practices. Habermas developed the concept of the bourgeois public sphere, a conceptual space between the sphere of public authority and the circle of the "private sphere ([1989, P.30](#)). According to him, public opinion was formed because of political deliberation comprising public discourse, association, and the debate. [Chadwick \(2006\)](#) declared Habermas as one of the founders of the concept of deliberative democracy having a major focus on political debate and discussion for the establishment of true democratic culture. In the current scenario, social networking sites have become an important forum for sharing political ideas and expressing opinions on issues. The content is available in various forms such as blogs, micro-blogs, social networks, tagging, news, and much more ([Buted et al., 2014](#)). Facebook has become significant in the political culture of Pakistan by "providing an opportunity to the public to express their opinions directed towards the politicians" ([Westling, 2007](#)) and political discussion and dialogue among the users ([Iqbal, 2024](#)). There are mixed opinions regarding social media as a true platform of the public sphere. However, several authors ([Castells, 2009](#); [Debatim, 2008](#); and [Dahlberg & Siapera, 2001](#)) consider the potential of social media to become a public sphere, allowing dialogue between politicians and active citizens and among citizens, thus contributing to public opinion formation ([McQuail, 2010](#)). Here, Facebook is a forum where every user with internet access can share his/her views freely and the users may

use this forum to express their opinions. [Smith et al \(2009\)](#) describes that SNS provides an opportunity for opinion expression to all the people whose views and opinions are normally not considered. The present study seeks to explore the existing practices of Facebook as a political forum and as a space for free expression and deliberation in the context of Pakistani society which is experiencing transition towards democracy. This journey to democracy had to face a lot of challenges in Pakistani society. ([Hussain, Rubab et. al. , 2023](#)), If we track the history of Pakistan, we come across the fact that she had to face the crisis of democracy since its establishment in the form of fragile, unelected regimes; a direct military rule, or its role as a major player in the politics ([Siddiq, 2007](#)); nexus of feudal elites, military and bureaucracy as the ruling elites, undemocratic culture within political parties thus leading to destabilizing democratic culture ([Akhtar, 2010](#); [Malik, 1997](#); [Rabbani, 1999](#); [Usman et.al., 2013](#)). Though many of the mentioned issues still exist in one way or the other, the electorate in Pakistan got an opportunity to deliberate and give its opinion on the social media platforms which conventional media could not offer. So, social media provided an opportunity for the users to discuss and deliberate on the issues of their concern. ([Stevic, 2024](#)), The present study hopes to shed light on one of the dimensions of political behavior in the form of political decision-making based on the type of arguments by Pakistani educated social media users. The study helps to explore whether educated users used rational arguments or emotional arguments in their political discussions on Facebook. The study has focused on the educated users of Facebook as educated users would preferably engage in rational and logical argumentation while discussing political matters ([Elsas, 2015](#); [Goenaga, 2022](#)) in comparison to those with less education. So, it is important to track the way political discussion was held, and the

political decisions taken by the educated voters.

Research Question

1. What type of discourses are employed by educated Facebook users while discussing political issues on Facebook during election campaigns?
2. What is their opinion about the political deliberation of many Facebook users?

Problem Statement

Political campaigns have always been an important area of exploration in the context of political communication. With the advent of social media, the communication patterns for campaigners and citizens have met new directions. Now, the users may engage in dialogic communication with one another and with the politicians regarding campaign issues. This situation has added new dimensions to the patterns of political communication. Most of the users of Facebook follow the stances of their political leaders and party lines without judging the merit and quality of the arguments and make political decisions based on emotional attachment. This practice may hinder the true spirit of a healthy democracy. However, it is expected that educated social media users will deliberate on the issues based on facts figures, and logic. So, it is significant to explore the use of Facebook by young, educated users to come to know about types of discourses (rational/emotional) and practice for political deliberation and decisions. It is equally important to seek their opinions regarding the type of arguments by other majority Facebook users while discussing political issues. For a democracy to work, deliberation is important; it may lead to a healthy democracy if deliberation is based on rational and logical argumentation. It merits exploring the patterns of deliberation by the users in the form of rational and/or emotional discourses on Facebook.

Literature Review

A lot of media and political communication research relies on Jürgen Habermas's (1989;

1984; 1987; 1996) concept of the public sphere and deliberative democracy concerning free debate and discussion. According to Gerwin (2011), Habermas's public sphere initially focused on the enlightenment idea of reason and rationality, capitalism seeking personal autonomy and liberalism, and the beginning of the press thus, catering to the needs of early capitalism. McQuail (2010) describes the public sphere as the "notional 'space' which provides an autonomous and open arena or forum for public debate". However, this ideal public sphere was eroded due to the emergence of commercial mass media channels having 'their commercial interests in the form of advertisements and other public relations activities' (Habermas, 1989). Habermas's concept of deliberative democracy focused on political debate and discussion for the establishment of a true democratic culture (Chadwick, 2006). According to the proponents of deliberative democracy, political deliberations and the exchange of well-thought-out logical arguments among the electorate may help to improve the quality of democracy (Habermas, 1996; Mutz, 2008; Ruiz et al. 2011) by the formulation of public opinion based on the deliberation and discussion (Graham, 2009). The discussions based on deliberation-rationality and critical reflection (Graham, 2009; Wessler, 2018) among the voters help them gain contrary arguments and comparative knowledge (Landemore & Mercier, 2012) leading to better political decisions. Political deliberation on social media may engage citizens in discussion the political issues which may lead to the promotion of diverse viewpoints (Kim & Chen, 2016) and lead to political participation of youth in real-life situations (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Social media platforms have provided the youth opportunity to share their political viewpoints (Alodat et al., 2023) in a manner that was not possible before the advent of these platforms (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020),

thus leading to their increased political engagement and participation (Lee, 2020). According to Marzinkowski & Engelmann (2022), rational critical discourse is based on the premise that the parties should engage in erudite arguments so that serious discussion may be held on the political issues which according to Wessler (2018) should be based on justified claims. Stroud et al., (2015) opine that these justified claims might be verified by the other participants, though, such verifiable evidence is very less in proportion. Moreover, those engaged in rational debate are in a better position to discuss and build an understanding of the opponent's viewpoints, consequently leading to better critical participation (Cappella, Price, & Nir 2002; Lu, 2019). Rational critical discourse is based on a disagreement between the participants (Chen & Lu, 2017) which is necessary for the quality of deliberation and leads to the generation of new perspectives and a politically tolerant electorate (Mutz, 2008; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Most of the users are engaged in and respond to the emotional discourses, however, several studies (Elsas, 2015; Nie et al., 1996; Tahat et al., 2022) have found that highly educated voters have more political attention, participation, awareness, and understanding of the political issues in comparison to those with less education. Verba et al., (1995) found that the level of education has a profound impact on political participation and the quality of democracy. According to Muzaffar et.al. (2020), web 2.0 has empowered Pakistani netizens to share and communicate political information with other Pakistani fellows. Iqbal (2024) states that less information is available about the political behavior of the users, however, this study may add to this missing dimension in the literature.

Research Methodology

The design of the current study is cross-sectional. Though it is a widely used design in social sciences, it has certain limitations like its limitation to determine the temporal and causal relationship. The researcher analyses and

elucidates the data collected from young, educated Facebook users who had liked at least one official Facebook page of any political party or leader during the election campaign 2013. To explore users' experience with their Facebook use for political purposes, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 informants. The informants were selected after some preliminary questions to determine whether they were found to be political activists on social networks. The inclusion criteria for the selection of informants included: a student studying at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, a registered voter with the Election Commission of Pakistan, and having joined at least one Facebook page of any major political party of Pakistan for political activities. The informants, who fulfilled the above-mentioned criteria, were selected by the application of convenience and purposive sampling techniques. A total of 11 informants were selected out of which 7 were males and 4 were females comprising five BS students and six PhD scholars. The interviews were conducted in Urdu and English languages and recorded in audio form. All the interviews were transcribed and then those in Urdu language were translated into English. The interviews were translated by a Ph.D. teacher from the Department of Communication and Media Studies having a good command of the English language a vast experience in reporting in leading English newspapers. The translator's command of the English language with a background in journalism and mass communication helped avoid potential biases. At this stage, the necessary data reductions were also made to avoid unnecessary repetitions. The questions were sent initially to three experts for the sake of the credibility and applicability of the instrument. After input from the experts and finalization of major questions, a pilot interview was conducted with an informant. A few more changes were made in the question items based on certain confusions that emerged during the pilot study. One of the major confusions faced by the informant of the pilot study was mainly with one question which was related to 'the affordances provided by Facebook as a

platform'. So, the question was rephrased as "In your opinion what, if any, are the additional benefits offered by Facebook which conventional mass media and/or other social media platforms don't offer to you?" The focus of the questions was to explore the users' opinions regarding Facebook as a medium of political expression and the way the political decisions were taken rationally or emotionally. The phenomenological approach has been used for interpretive thematic analysis. The researcher read thoroughly the interview transcriptions to look for data patterns and probable themes. This process made the researcher well familiar with data tendencies. The integrated approach of coding was used at this stage; as a result, the coding structure and basic meaningful units of data appeared. The informants' detailed interviews were analyzed using Nvivo 12 Plus software. The software helped in the categorization, theme development, and analysis of data.

Coding process of interviews with examples of extracts from the interviews

Extracts	Codes	Sub-themes	Themes
<i>in case of contrary logical arguments, I just try to ignore them and remain silent in favour of my party</i>	Affiliation to leader/ unconditional support to party	Party affiliation	Emotional aspects
<i>Just like me, most of the people are sticky to their arguments, opinions, and party</i>	Considering own viewpoints as justified; not ready to argue on alternatives	Pre-disposition	
<i>They have taken up with some issues like poverty, employment, education, health, sanitation, and most importantly to make Pakistan's impression better in the entire world</i>	Political issues, social issues, religious issues, economic issues	Issue based	Logical reasoning
<i>If there are more logical arguments by my opponents after my logic, I take it as a positive aspect; if the information is better and logical then you must do so</i>	Honouring logical arguments; agreeing with the justifications; agreeing with facts and figures	Morality based	

Analysis and Discussion

The informants were questioned about their usage of Facebook as a political platform. They were asked about the type of discourses they were engaged in rational or emotional. The researcher asked about the employment of the discourses by them and their opinion about most Facebook users who are relatively less educated. After a detailed and repeated reading of the interview transcripts; the initial themes and coding categories were structured.

After that, the emerging themes were placed under its relevant main category. The illustration of the major theme is given below in Figure 1.

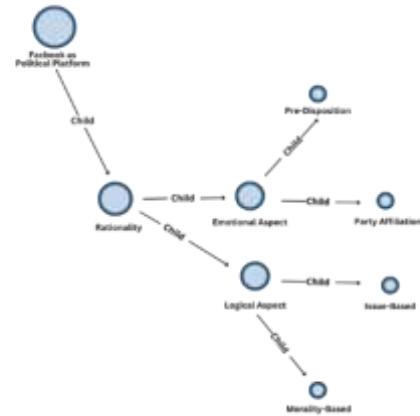


Figure 1 Hierarchy figure of Theme structure

Figure 1 depicts the main categories of emerged themes. The figure highlights two major themes emerging out of the major component of rationality in the public sphere i.e. Emotional aspect and logical aspect; the theme 'emotional aspects' was further based on two sub-themes including 'party affiliation' and 'pre-disposition, whereas the theme 'logical aspect 'was further based on two sub-themes including 'issue-based' and 'morality-based'. The emergence of these themes and sub-themes helped to get answers to the research questions of the study.

Rationality

One of the important components of the Habermasian Idealistic Public Sphere is rational argumentation and logical discussion on political issues. The major theme - rationality- conceptualizes the role of logical arguments towards political debates/arguments and political support decisions. The researcher tried to find whether the informants were adopting rational ways or the other way around while discussing their political ideas on Facebook. It has emerged that educated youth (informants) of the current study are inclined towards logical ways rather than emotional behaviors. Most of the time, they contended, that they were arguing the power of logical arguments comparing the

emotional pathways. However, at times both aspects go side by side. (Irum, Shamsi, 2023). Moreover, while responding to the questions regarding the adoption of rational or emotional aspects of communication by the common users, they responded that most of the users indulge in emotional communication and do not make logical decisions.

Emotional Aspect

The political views of people are much obliged with emotions, especially in developing countries like Pakistan. Social media is considered to provide space for political catharsis and argumentative discussions. Although this function of Facebook has been taken and practiced by people in Pakistan, there are still emotional inclinations among people. The informants of the current study were investigated about their political views and decisions which were affected after the usage of Facebook. Though it appeared in the later themes that they engage mostly in rational critical discourse, there are people, who make their political decisions based on previously owned emotional attachments. Even if they receive opposing logical political views, they are not willing to accept them. These findings support the existing studies (Bavel et al., 2022; & Robertson et al, 2023). A few of the inserts making this sub-theme are given below for an explanation: *Logic does not dominate, very clearly, even for people who have a basic understanding of how social media works. I think feelings and emotions, play, I would say, a stronger role in forming, opinion-changing... (Informant 9).* The sub-theme emotional aspect was further divided into two themes i.e. party affiliation and pre-dispositions described below.

Party Affiliation

Party affiliation is the sub-sub theme while discussing the emotion-based political decisions of Facebook users. People are previously attached to some political party and *in case of contrary logical arguments, -- just try*

to ignore them and remain silent in favor of my party (Informant 11). The above statement expresses a very interesting claim. According to informant 11, he tries to counter opposing arguments, and when he feels that the opponent side is justified; he becomes silent but is not ready to accept the opposing views. Even if they counter valid opposing arguments, they are not willing to accept. The reason is that they are emotionally attached to their political party and do not allow themselves to accept even logically opposing arguments during political discussions. This sub-theme is further supported by the following excerpts from the informants' interviews: *People do not accept easily opposing arguments and 'respond with offending and negative ways and will not leave their party (Informant 2)'. After having this emotional attachment to their chosen political party, 'they defend it with counterlogics without thinking to accept logical opposing views' (Informant 7)'.*

Pre-dispositions

Based on the informants' responses about the other majority of users, it was revealed that only a few persons accept logic and then change their political thoughts. Most of the time, Facebook users do not convince themselves of others' arguments which are against their already-held beliefs and perspectives. This theme emerged out of the following sample statements from the informants' interviews: *'...those are considered important or dominant who are emotionally attached to a particular subject. So, emotions are more important (Informant 2)'. 'Unfortunately, most people do not like to have a logical approach. They have emotional attachments, irrational approaches, and dynastic sorts of things (Informant 8)'. This sub-theme reveals that most of the respondents do not respond to rational arguments; they prefer and make decisions based on their already-held beliefs, even if they encounter communication based on supporting facts. It may hinder the true*

development of deliberative democracy as political decisions are taken based on emotions which might be wrong.

Logical Reasoning

The second major emerged sub-theme of the study is logical reasoning. The informants of the current study have a good level of education. It has emerged that they were giving logical arguments to their opponents in political debates on Facebook. Moreover, they were also accepting opposing political views if supported with better logical reasoning. This is an important finding of the current study as the informants were mostly not following the emotional track. They are open to discussion and willing to accept facts that are contrary to their previously held political views. The emergence of this theme is well supported by several references as follows: *You can also debate on issues. Other friends belonged to other political parties. If we were discussing something on Facebook and they were wrong, so I proved my stance with logical reasoning... (Informant 1) ...people are giving logic from Facebook. So, I think that it's a resource developed in people's minds in political discussion to argue, to get the facts, to get the things, to get the analysis... (informant 3).* The sub-themes of logical reasoning i.e. issue-based and morality-based are discussed below.

Issue-Based

It was found that educated Facebook users were much occupied with logical reasoning. The emergence of the sub-sub theme 'Issue-Based' is a good example to strengthen the sub-theme 'Logical Reasoning'. The informants of the current study were found to be more logical than emotional in their political discussions on Facebook. Their in-depth answers lead the researcher to identify the current theme. Many of the informants have good knowledge and understanding of current political issues. They discussed those issues with their political opponents and provided logical reasoning to support their views by

highlighting major issues. A few of the examples are given below: *I think economic issues, how to curb **corruption**, and how to deal with the issue of **militancy**... (Informant 9). They have taken up with some issues like **poverty, employment, education, health, sanitation, and most importantly to make Pakistan's impression better in the entire world... (Informant 8) ... Also, he raised the issue of **energy crisis and corruption** (Informant 3).*** Their responses further reveal that while discussing social, political, and economic issues, they agree with the opposing viewpoint if they are logical and based on facts and figures.

Morality-based

This sub-theme reveals that the informants accept opposing viewpoints on moral grounds considering the opponents' arguments as stronger or more justified as compared to their arguments. Several responses indicate that the informants accept logical arguments even if they are contradictory to their viewpoint. It is evident from the response of the informant who states that: *"People got convinced using FB pages, (due to) the arguments there (Informant 1)".* The above-mentioned line has been taken from one of the informants' interviews. The informant believes that if there are logical arguments, then people get convinced by opposing political thoughts. The power of logical arguments is claimed by another informant: *If there are more logical arguments by my opponents after my logic, I take it as a positive aspect; if the information is better and logical then you must do so (informant 2).* The rational deliberation and acceptance of better arguments is a very encouraging and positive tendency at least from the educated informants which may lead to a healthy democracy.

Determination of a stronger theme

It was found that logical reasoning has more weightage for most of the informants in comparison to the emotional aspect. The major category is supported by two sets of themes,

'Emotional Aspect', and 'Logical Reasoning'. Both notions are opposing and contrary to each other with many minor conceptions. Even, an informant appeared with both sets of ideas. In this situation, it is quite difficult to identify a stronger theme. Nvivo provides such solutions with many options. The following data has been taken from the main analysis file of Nvivo and presented here in the form of Chart 1.

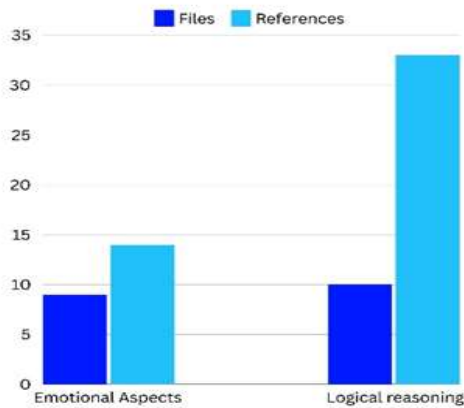


Chart 1 Emotional aspect vs logical reasoning in rationality

The chart shows the number of files (informants) partaking in the emergence of themes and the number of references in the last row. Rationality with the emotional aspect emerged with 9 informants having only 10 references. On the other hand, rationality with logical reasoning appeared with 10 informants and 33 references. This chart clarifies the complex situation. The theme, 'Logical Reasoning' is way stronger than the theme 'Emotional Aspect'.

Conclusion

The data focused on the type of arguments whether emotional or rational. Political deliberation on social media may engage citizens in the discussion of political issues which may lead to the promotion of diverse viewpoints (Kim & Chen, 2016) and leads to political participation of youth in real-life situations (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Based on the responses of the informants it may be argued that Facebook has the potential to become a platform in the public sphere at least

based on the responses of the informants that they made the political decisions based on logic. Yet due to the lack of rational argumentation by the common people revealed from previous studies and responded by the informants of this study. The findings of the study reveal that at least the educated users are involved in rational argumentation which is a very important aspect for the deliberative democracy in a transitional democracy like Pakistan. The findings of the study are in line with the viewpoint of Goenaga (2022) who stated that better-educated citizens will assign more importance to rational thinking. These findings, though, indicate that rational deliberation is employed mostly by the better-educated users, yet this finding is encouraging that at least some people make rational political decisions. What important is that the electorate should deliberate with one another on political issues, listen to the arguments of others, and then make their decisions. Based on the findings of this study, it may be argued that Facebook as a platform provides opportunities for deliberation and discussion on all types of issues including political issues. The use of rational and logical arguments mainly by a small, educated segment is an encouraging factor for democracy as well as a matter of concern that the majority makes decisions based on their emotions, party affiliation, and pre-disposition. The current political polarization in Pakistani society may be reduced by educating and sensitizing the electorate to discuss and judge the policies and issues based on logic, facts, and figures which may lead to a healthy, long-lasting democracy in Pakistan.

Limitations

- This study is confined to election campaigns only where there is a specific environment and spirit, the studies in routine life may produce different results.
- For the current study, the data has been collected from the better-educated segments; however, the situation may

further crystallize if the data is collected from across the sections of society including uneducated, less educated, and highly educated segments.

- The role of Facebook algorithms, echo chambers, and filter bubbles and the use of AI by Facebook in creating echo chambers was not the concern of the researcher in this paper. However, a lot of research (Bavel et al., 2022; Barret, 2022; Kitchens et al., 2020, Min & Wohn, 2020) is focusing on these dimensions.
- The researcher collected the data from young, educated Facebook users only based on the assumption that Facebook is mostly used by youngsters and better educated may indulge in rational discourses; it is important to collect the data from the age groups 30 and above to determine their patterns of deliberation.

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