

SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN AGENT OF POLITICAL RADICALIZATION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN: A QUANTITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF DIGITAL EXPOSURE, POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND RADICALIZATION TENDENCIES

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Abstract

Social media has revolutionized political communication, making it possible to access information, political discussion and ideological communication in a very short time. These platforms can also promote political polarization and radicalization by exposure to extreme narratives and reinforcing online environments. The study explores how social media usage, exposure to radical content, and political attitudes contribute to political radicalization among university students in Pakistan, an analysis of the factors influencing political radicalization. The research design used was a quantitative cross sectional survey with 1000 university students, and the data were analyzed by Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that social media exposure has an impact on political attitudes and radicalization tendencies, and political attitudes play an important role in the relationship between social media exposure and radicalization outcomes. The study highlights that social media is not a direct driver of radicalization, but rather can reinforce political dispositions that are already held, if repeatedly exposed to ideological material. It shows the need to be digitally literate and think critically to avoid being easily manipulated by harmful political influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the swift growth of digital communication technologies, the methods by which people gain information and engage in political debate and social and ideological construction have changed. Social media platforms, among these technologies, have become important communication spaces in the political field, as they allow for the dissemination of information at high speed, for interactive communication and for direct contact between political actors and citizens. Social media is a space that enables political information to be created, disseminated, and consumed without the need for institutional gatekeepers, unlike traditional media (Akbar & Akbar, (2026; Akram et al., (2026; Butt & Ahmed, (2024; Gulzar et al., (2025; Habib et al., (2026). This change has had a significant impact on younger age groups, who are the most active consumers of digital platforms. Social media are the important space in which political attitudes and behaviours are formed, as

university students consume political information, interact socially and express their political opinions more and more through these platforms (Ahmed, (2025; Akram & Nasar, (2023; Butt & Ashfaq, (2024; Fian et al., (2025).

While social media has proven to be a positive medium for democratic participation, it has also posed challenges in relation to misinformation, polarization, conspiracy narratives, and extremist speech in its uncontrolled information space. Digital platforms can help to expose people to emotionally salient and ideologically extreme messages via recommendation systems, algorithmic personalization, and network-based communication (Jawed et al., (2023; Khalil, (2024; Khan et al., (2023). While not all users will become radicalized as a result of such exposure, this repeated exposure to polarizing content can shape political perceptions, strengthen existing beliefs, and over time, normalize extreme perspectives. Recent literature has highlighted that online radicalization is a multifaceted phenomenon that does not necessarily result from internet use but rather from a combination of personal traits, political grievances, online interactions, and patterns of online exposure (Butt & Ashfaq, (2024; Gopalan, (2026; Habib et al., (2026; Haq, (2026; Irfan, (2025).

Political radicalization is the process whereby a person becomes more extreme in his or her political views, is disaffirming of mainstream political values and may come to support radical political behaviour. Now, current studies indicate that social media can serve as a catalyst to radicalization by offering platforms where ideologically like-minded groups form, strengthen common narratives, and amplify group identities. The interactive nature of online communication can lead to repeated exposure to the same ideas and can cause ideological isolation and less exposure to other ideas. But the connection between social media and radicalization is also multifaceted: online spaces can also be a place for political involvement, social consciousness and democratic discussion.

Young adults and university students are of special interest when it comes to digital political influence as this life stage is linked to political identity formation, social engagement and active use of digital platforms (Roqib¹ et al., (2025; Sukabdi et al., (2026; Tariq & Shah, (2025; Widjanarko et al., (2025). Social media like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X are popular platforms among university students, where they consume news and discuss politics. Thus, their political attitudes could be influenced by the characteristics of the digital content they are exposed to, in terms of its nature, frequency and intensity. Recent research suggests that it is not the overall level of social media use, but rather the specific kinds of political information that people consume on social media, the trustworthiness that they attribute to online sources, and the degree of engagement that they have with ideological communities that is the more important influence (Hatim et al., (2025; Ismail et al., (2022; Kataria, (2025; Khalil, (2024).

The Pakistani context is significant to explore the correlation between social media and political radicalization. In Pakistan, political polarization, ideological challenge and the speedy growth of digital connectivity have been observed. Social media is now a hub for political campaigning, public debates, activism and spreading political stories. Studies of the digital landscape in Pakistan show that political polarization and ideological clustering are on the rise among internet communities, especially during times of political tension and competition (Lutful, (2025; C. A. Missier, (2025; Noufal et al., (2026; Nurdin et al., (2025). Moreover, recent studies conducted in Pakistan reveal that media consumption habits have an impact on political behavior and political orientations, underscoring the need to understand how digital exposure affects political attitudes among citizens (Pandey & Behera, (2026; Qureshi, (2026; Rahim et al., (2022; Shanto & Motaher, (2026; Troncoso-Tejada et al., (2026).

While there has been an increasing focus on the issue of online radicalization in academia, there are some gaps. Existing literature has studied aspects of Western societies, extremist organizations or violent radicalization, and there is a lack of empirical research data on political radicalization of university students in developing societies like Pakistan. Furthermore, many of the previous studies have concentrated on the use of social media or exposure to extremist contents separately, and insufficient attention has been paid to the mechanisms by which the exposure to social media influences a person's political attitude and hence his/her tendency to radicalization. Political attitude is thus a useful mediating variable to consider because it affords a more complete picture into how social media-related experiences could lead to political outcomes (Akram, (2025; Al Saab, (2025; Gopalan, (2026; Habib et al., (2026; Irfan, (2025; Khalil, (2024; Lutful, (2025).

The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the role of social media as a tool of political radicalization among the university students in Pakistan. It investigates the relationship between social media use, the exposure of radical content, political attitude and political radicalization tendencies in a quantitative research framework. The study tests direct relationships and the mediating role of political attitudes in the relationship between digital experiences and radicalization tendencies by using PLS-SEM analysis. The results add to the knowledge of the influence of the digital environment on political orientations of young adults and give evidence-based guidance for the development of strategies on digital literacy, responsible digital participation and prevention of harmful ideological influences.

Literature Review

As social media has emerged as a significant arena for political communication, ideological interactions, and the shaping of political identities, the link between social media and political radicalization has attracted growing scholarly interest. Previous studies have indicated that social media does not by itself generate radical views; it is rather a space where political ideologies, grievances, group identities, and more can be reinforced through continuous exposure and engagement. Thus, the impact of social media is contingent upon the nature of the content received, how it is used and how it is interpreted in the context of political information. Although early research concerning digital political communication emphasized the democratic potential of social networks by revealing that online networks boost political awareness and participation, subsequent studies illustrated that the same mechanisms can lead to polarization, especially when users are clustered in ideologically similar networks.

(Ahmed, (2025) have investigated cross-cutting political exposure and its impact on social media users and found that cross-cutting exposure does not necessarily have an impact on reducing polarization. But rather, political identities and previous beliefs shape the interpretation of contradictory information, sometimes, even deepening ideological divides. The results suggest that social media exposure influences political attitudes via psychological mechanisms and not just by transmitting information. Likewise, (Butt & Ashfaq, (2024) examined political polarization on various social media and showed that the platform architecture and patterns of user interactions are conducive to forming homogeneous information environments. Their findings indicated a tendency to greater polarization with algorithmic recommendations and selective engagement that reduces exposure to counter attitudinal content.

The influence of online networks for the facilitation of extremist and radical narratives has also been a popular area of study. (Fian et al., (2025) have studied the online extremist communities and concluded that social media platforms offer means to spread ideologies and ideas by linking people that hold the same positions and by allowing continuous reinforcement of the group narratives. Their research showed how

digital communities can help establish collective identities that reinforce radical perspectives. Similarly, (Gopalan, (2026) studied the conspiracy-oriented political communities on Twitter and found patterns of behaviours linked to radicalization processes. They found that conspiracy statements proliferate in densely networked online communities which involve a high amount of re-exposing to the same ideological material and therefore a high risk of belief reinforcement.

Research has increasingly moved beyond studying social media use to a better understanding of the impact of exposure to specific political content. This is because the mere use of social media is not a sign of radicalisation and rather the type and the level of content encountered can shape the political outcome. (Habib et al., (2026) examined the usage habits of digital media and attitudes of violent radicalization in young people and the results showed that different digital media usage patterns, psychological factors, and social factors were correlated with different radicalisation tendencies. Their research confirmed that digital exposure is not a direct cause of radicalization, but can interact with personal and social situations.

(Irfan, (2025) sought to review empirical studies on internet-based radicalization and concluded that online radicalization happens through many interconnected pathways including ideological exposure, online community building, identity reinforcement and emotion engagement with political narratives. Their analysis highlighted how digital platforms can reinforce the pre-established political trends by creating opportunities to keep seeing extreme ideas and have them socially validated. Likewise, (Kataria, (2025) analyzed how the filter bubble affects political decision-making and concluded that polarization is created by a combination of algorithms and that users simply prefer ideologically aligned information. The results suggest that political attitudes nurtured online are determined by technological characteristics and by individual behaviors.

Additional evidence on the relationship between social media exposure and political attitudes has been found in studies that investigate youth populations. A special attention to this group of users is the role of university students, who are at the same time one of the most intense users of digital platforms, while developing political identities and ideological orientations. (Pandey & Behera, (2026) discussed the impact of social networking sites on political polarization among the university students of Pakistan and concluded that the online political engagement contributes significantly to the political perceptions and attitudes. Their findings indicate that social media is a significant medium in political awareness among the educated youth. In the Pakistani context, the presence of digital political communication has grown significantly as the internet has become more accessible and platforms like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X have gained popularity. (Maqsood et al., (2024) examined political discourse on Twitter in Pakistan and found an ideological clustering of political communities. They discovered that online political networks tend to coalesce around beliefs and identities that can exacerbate polarization. In this regard, (Noufal et al., (2026) studied the relationship between media consumption and political behaviour in Pakistan and found significant impacts of digital media on the political orientations and behaviour of people. Their results highlight the significance of considering social media as an influencer in forming the political views of people in the evolving communication landscape of Pakistan.

The guise of anonymity, emotional involvement and a sense of social acceptance has also recently been highlighted in the context of digital radicalization. (Rahim et al., (2022) explored the effect of anonymity and perceived safety on participation within radical online groups, and concluded that the decreased social accountability can make it easier for people to share and interact with extreme ideological material. This means that the technology features of social platforms may affect the association between exposure and political outcomes. Moreover, (Shanto & Motaher, (2026) explored the phenomenon of youth radicalization in the context of social media exposure and how radical content consumption can shape sympathy towards

radical ideas through exposure to social media narratives of political violence. Their results showed that content-specific exposure more significantly predicts radicalization-related outcomes than just using social media by itself. On a larger scale, there are also plenty of examples of how media exposure is linked to radicalization tendencies. In their multilevel meta-analysis, (Tariq & Shah, (2025) analyzed the relationship between media exposure and youth radicalization and found a significant link between media exposure and radicalization outcomes. Their results showed that the relationship between online media exposure and radicalization is stronger than the relationship between general media consumption and radicalization, underlining the need for research into the characteristics of digital media contents.

In general, existing research makes it clear that the effect of social media on political consequences can be mediated by exposure patterns, ideological reinforcement, political attitudes and online social networks. But there are still some pitfalls in the literature. Available evidence is mostly on the western population, extremisms or violent radicalization, and there is a dearth of empirical studies on political radicalization tendencies of university students in Pakistan. Furthermore, earlier research often looks at one aspect of social media use, one aspect of content exposure or one aspect of polarization in isolation, yielding only partial insights into the role that the combination of these aspects plays in the radicalization process and its impact on political attitudes. In the light of these gap-filling requirements, the current research aims to fill this gap by designing an integrated model to investigate how social media use and radical content exposure impacts political radicalization, intermediary political attitude is analyzed between the two variables among the Pakistan's university students.

Objectives of the study

- 1.To evaluate the effect of social media usage patterns on political radicalization of the university students.
- 2.To analyze the influence of radical political content exposure on the political attitudes and radicalization tendencies of university students in Pakistan.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the effect of social media usage patterns on political radicalization tendencies among university students in Pakistan?

RQ2: How does exposure to radical political content influence political attitudes and political radicalization tendencies among university students in Pakistan?

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is quantitative cross-sectional survey research design to investigate the relationship between social media exposure, political attitudes and political radicalization tendency of university students in Pakistan. The data were gathered using a structured questionnaire, which was measured with four major constructs namely, Social Media Usage, Radical Content Exposure, Political Attitude and Political Radicalization with five-point likert scale. The respondents for the study were university students from higher education institution in Pakistan. The sample consisted of 1000 respondents were purposively selected from five universities that showed some diversity in Pakistan. PLS-SEM was used to analyze the collected data using statistical techniques. To evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement model, outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, AVE, HTMT and Fornell-Larcker criteria were calculated. Path coefficients, t-values, p-values, R^2 , f^2 and model fit indices (SRMR and NFI) were used to

evaluate the structural model. For this, Mediation analysis was employed to understand the mediation role of Political Attitude in the relationship between social media exposure and political radicalization tendencies.

Results

The demographic data of the respondents gives a complete picture of the sample composition and digital participation patterns pertinent to the research on social media and political radicalization in university students. The study comprised 1000 respondents from different gender groups, age categories, educational backgrounds, institutional backgrounds and geographical regions as presented in the demographic results. The sample included a variety of demographically and academically diverse participants to gain a more meaningful picture of students' social media use and political views. The respondents in the study were both male and female, but male respondents had the largest proportion and the female respondents had a significant proportion of the study population. The majority of the respondents were in the young adult age group, which is a group of people who are generally very engaged in the digital world. The largest group of students was undergraduate students followed by postgraduates. Moreover, respondents were chosen not only from public universities but also private ones as well and geographically and institutionally distributed among the regions of interest. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to demographics.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	Mean	SD
Social Media Usage	3.256	0.930
Radical Content Exposure	3.425	0.890
Political Attitude	3.308	0.927
Political Radicalization	3.241	0.907

The digital behaviour profile also illustrates the high rate of using social media by university students and how they are engaging with modern platforms. Results show that a significant number of the respondents used to use social media applications for hours each day, which shows the growing influence of the use of social media in students' academic, social and personal lives. The most common platforms were WhatsApp, YouTube and TikTok, which showed their predominance in the students' online communication and content consumption. The main motives for social media consumption were for entertainment, academic work, information search, and social communication, while political engagement was normally defined by occasional political discussion, being active on political issues, and moderate political interest. Within this digital behaviour it is possible to study the connection between social media exposure, political attitudes and radicalization tendencies among university students (Table 2).

Table 2 Construct Scores Across Gender Groups

Construct	Gender 1 (n=543) Mean	Gender 2 (n=443) Mean
Social Media Usage	3.225	3.290
Radical Content Exposure	3.422	3.424
Political Attitude	3.275	3.359
Political Radicalization	3.181	3.307

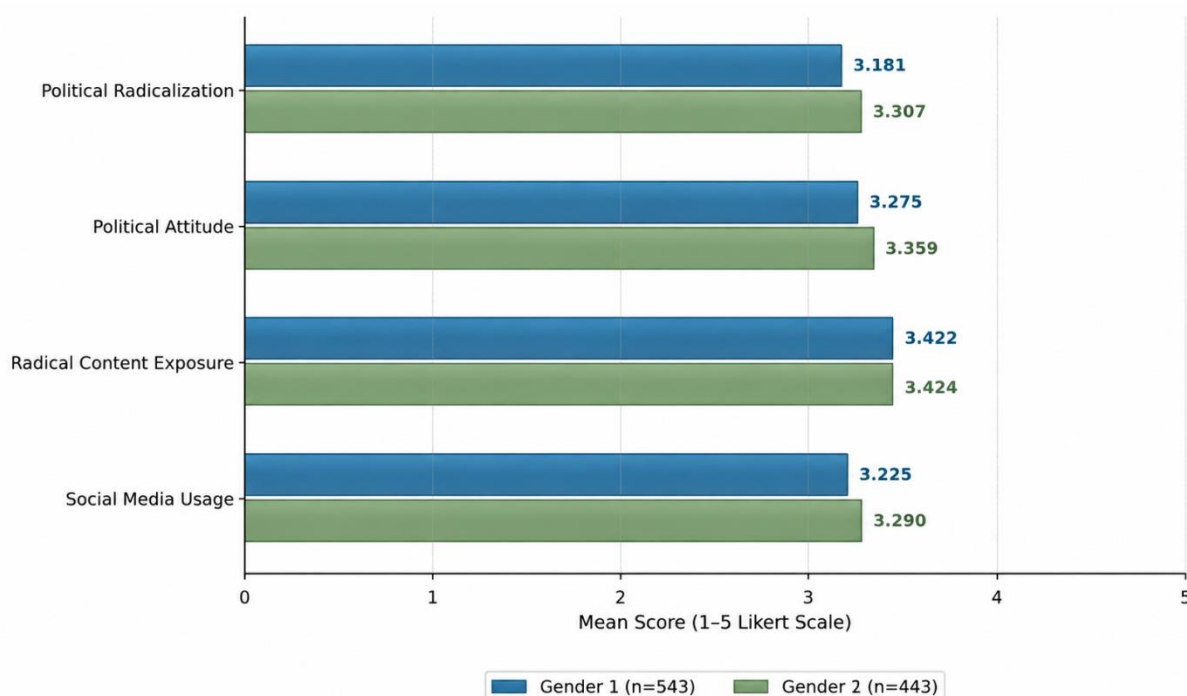


Figure 1 Construct Scores Across Gender Groups

The descriptive analysis of the study constructs showed that the level of the variables examined is moderate. Overall, Radical Content Exposure showed the highest mean score, while Political Radicalization had the lowest mean score among the constructs investigated, with Political Attitude and Social Media Usage in between. The results indicate that the respondents were very exposed to politically-related information and very active in using social media; but for some time the level of political radicalization observed was not so high as to indicate high extreme ideology. The findings indicate the multifaceted nature of the relationship between digital exposure and political outcomes, which is not necessarily linear – exposure to political content does not automatically equal radicalisation, but rather, may interact with other attitudinal and contextual factors. Table 3 presents the mean values and standard deviations of all the constructs.

Table 3 Explained Variance of Endogenous Constructs

Endogenous Construct	Predictor Variables	R ²
Political Attitude	Social Media Usage + Radical Content Exposure	0.230
Political Radicalization	Social Media Usage + Radical Content Exposure + Political Attitude	0.418

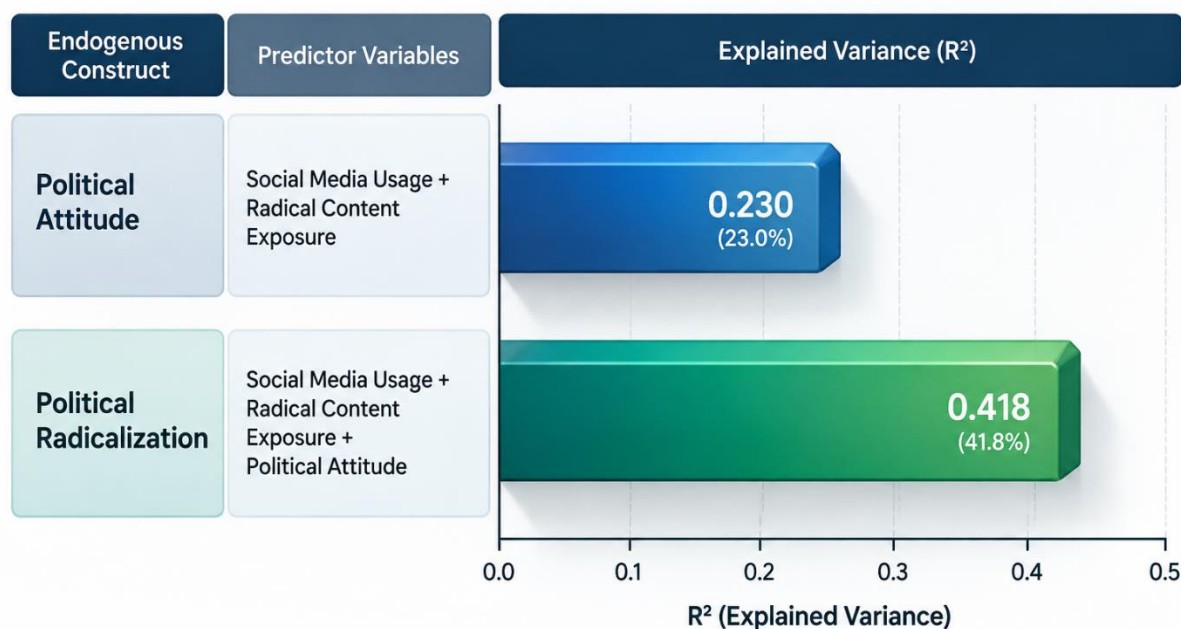


Figure 2 Explained Variance of Endogenous Constructs

The differences between gender groups in construct scores were relatively small with regard to Social Media Usage, Radical Content Exposure, Political Attitude, and Political Radicalization. While one gender group had slightly higher mean scores on political attitude and radicalization-related measures, differences in radical content exposure were nearly equal across groups. The results show that there were gender-based differences in the sample but the extent of differences was limited. This implies that the explanation of the impact of social media on social media influence and political consequences of university students is not limited in explanation using only a demographic approach but may be caused by the combination of various personal, social and digital factors (Table 4).

Table 4 Outer Loadings (Indicator Reliability)

Construct	Indicator	Outer Loading
PA	PA1	0.741
PA	PA2	0.770
PA	PA3	0.794
PA	PA4	0.756
PA	PA5	0.761
PA	PA6	0.749
PA	PA7	0.774
PA	PA8	0.802
PR	PR1	0.703
PR	PR2	0.731

PR	PR3	0.768
PR	PR4	0.802
PR	PR5	0.710
PR	PR6	0.732
PR	PR7	0.750
PR	PR8	0.781
PR	PR9	0.712
PR	PR10	0.800
RC	RC1	0.729
RC	RC2	0.756
RC	RC3	0.767
RC	RC4	0.715
RC	RC5	0.784
RC	RC6	0.732
RC	RC7	0.787
RC	RC8	0.769
SM	SM1	0.738
SM	SM2	0.767
SM	SM3	0.772
SM	SM4	0.756
SM	SM5	0.769
SM	SM6	0.724
SM	SM7	0.785
SM	SM8	0.784

The measurement model was examined to determine the reliability and validity of the research constructs before examining structural relationships among the variables. Indicator reliability was evaluated by the assessment of outer loadings in the model, which is presented in (Table 5).

Table 5 Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach Alpha	rho_A	rho_C	AVE
PA	0.901	0.901	0.920	0.591
PR	0.913	0.915	0.928	0.562
RC	0.892	0.895	0.914	0.570
SM	0.897	0.898	0.917	0.581

The indicators showed acceptable levels of association with the latent constructs. In addition, the reliability and convergent validity test confirmed that all constructs had good internal consistency and measurement quality. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and average variance extracted showed that the constructs captured their dimensions and provided enough variance in their indicators (Table 6).

Table 6 HTMT Discriminant Validity

Construct Pair	HTMT Value
PA-PR	0.620
PA-RC	0.412
PR-RC	0.468
PA-SM	0.416
PR-SM	0.475
RC-SM	0.227

The results of the test for discriminant validity indicated that constructs were indeed unique theoretical dimensions in the proposed research framework. Construct differentiation was acceptable as determined by the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) criterion, which indicated the measures represented distinct concepts and not overlapping dimensions. Likewise, Table 7 and 8 also showed the evidence of discriminant validity between constructs in this study because the variance of each construct is larger than the variance between the construct and the other constructs that are in the model, as indicated by the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Moreover, the collinearity diagnosis revealed that variance inflation factors (VIFs) were acceptable, which means that multicollinearity was not a problem and had no adverse effect on the estimation of structural relationships (Table 9). Together these results indicated that the measurement model was appropriate and suitable for further structural model analyses.

Table 7 Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	PA	PR	RC	SM
PA	0.769			
PR	0.563	0.750		
RC	0.371	0.425	0.755	
SM	0.375	0.433	0.205	0.762

Table 8 Collinearity Assessment (VIF)

Structural Path	VIF
PA → PR	1.301
RC → PA	1.044
RC → PR	1.167
SM → PA	1.044
SM → PR	1.171

Table 9 Direct Effects and Hypothesis Testing

Path	Original Sample (β)	Sample Mean	STDEV	T-value	P-value	Decision
PA → PR	0.387	0.387	0.026	14.943	0.000	Supported
RC → PA	0.307	0.309	0.028	10.890	0.000	Supported

RC → PR	0.232	0.232	0.025	9.115	0.000	Supported
SM → PA	0.312	0.313	0.027	11.574	0.000	Supported
SM → PR	0.240	0.241	0.026	9.093	0.000	Supported

The hypothesized relationships between Social Media Usage, Radical Content Exposure, Political Attitude, and Political Radicalization were examined by the structural model analysis. Results on the direct effects presented in Table 10 showed that all the proposed relationships were statistically significant. The results of the study indicated that there was a significant relationship between Social Media Usage and Radical Content Exposure with Political Attitude as well as between Political Attitude and Political Radicalization. The results denote that there is a relationship between how much students use social networks and their political perceptions and radicalization tendencies. The results offer empirical data on the interdependency of digital experiences and political orientations, and their effects on political outcomes of students.

Table 10 Mediation Effects

Mediation Path	Original Sample	Sample Mean	STDEV	T-value	P-value	Decision
RC → PA	0.119	0.119	0.013	8.923	0.000	Supported
→ PR						
SM → PA	0.121	0.121	0.013	8.974	0.000	Supported
→ PR						

The mediator analysis was also used to further explore the mechanism by which the factors of social media affect political radicalism. Table 11 presented the results of the mediation analysis indicating that the relationship between Social Media Usage and Radical Content Exposure to Political Radicalization was significant and mediated by Political Attitude. This discovery suggests that the influence of social media on radicalization tendencies can be indirect, via political attitudes, perceptions and interpretations of political information. The connection between being exposed online and the radicalization thus seems to be rather an attitudinal path than an exclusively direct one.

Table 11 Total Effects

Relationship	Total Effect
PA → PR	0.3866
RC → PA	0.3072
RC → PR	0.3506
SM → PA	0.3123
SM → PR	0.3610

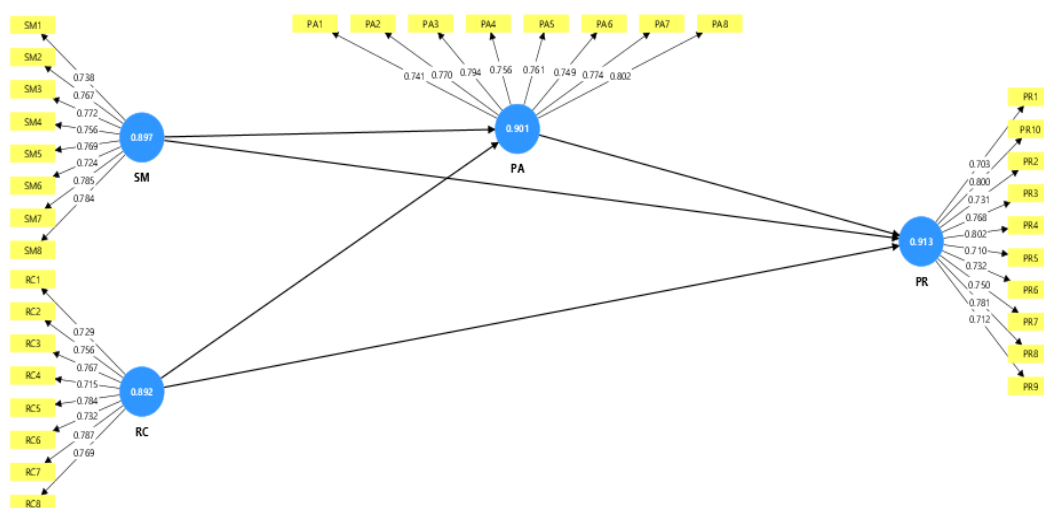


Figure 3 SEM Structural Pathway Diagram

The findings of the total and indirect effects also confirmed the suggested structural relationships. Social Media Usage, Radical Content Exposure had impacts both directly on political outcomes and indirectly on political outcomes via Political Attitude, as reported in Tables 12 and 13, respectively. These results highlight the need to take into account the role of the psychological and attitudinal mechanisms in relation to the relationship between digital environments and political radicalization of university students. Overall, the findings indicate that the influence of social media is not solely the dose received, but also the way in which the information is received and processed.

Table 12 Indirect Effects

Relationship	Indirect Effect
RC → PA → PR	0.1188
SM → PA → PR	0.1207

Table 13 Coefficient of Determination (R²) Analysis

Endogenous Construct	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Predictive Power
Political Attitude (PA)	0.231	0.230	Weak
Political Radicalization (Prasetyo et al., 0)	0.420	0.418	Moderate

The coefficient of determination (R²) analysis was used to assess the explanatory power of the structural model. Table 14 showed that there was a significant amount of variance accounted for by the predictor variables for both Political Attitude and Political Radicalization. When social media related factors and political attitudes were analyzed together, the model demonstrated greater explanation power for political radicalization. This suggests that tendencies towards radicalization can stem from a mixture of exposure patterns in the online environment and personal political orientations than from a single influencing factor.

Table 14 Effect Size (f^2) Analysis

Structural Relationship	f^2 Value	Effect Size
Political Attitude → Political Radicalization	0.198	Medium
Radical Content Exposure → Political Attitude	0.118	Small
Radical Content Exposure → Political Radicalization	0.079	Small
Social Media Usage → Political Attitude	0.122	Small
Social Media Usage → Political Radicalization	0.085	Small

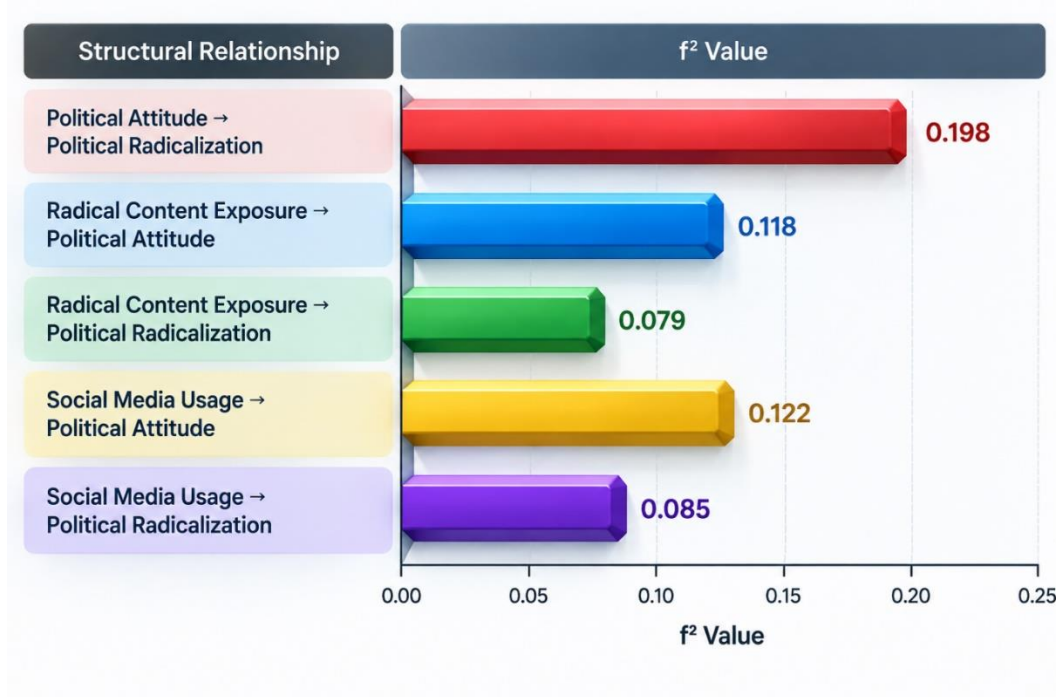


Figure 4 Effect Size (f^2) Analysis

The contribution of each predictor in the structural model was then investigated by the effect size analysis. Political Attitude was found to be the best predictor of Political Radicalization, as was Social Media Usage and Radical Content Exposure, as indicated in Table 15. These results suggest that exposure to social media is indeed a significant factor that contributes to political radicalization, but that this effect is highly mediated by political orientations and cognitive sense-making about politics. So, the function of social media seems to take place in a larger attitudinal context.

Table 15 Model Fit Assessment

Model Fit Index	Value	Recommended Criterion	Assessment
SRMR (Saturated Model)	0.034	< 0.08	Good Fit
SRMR (Estimated Model)	0.034	< 0.08	Good Fit
NFI	0.951	> 0.90	Good Fit

Last, the model fit assessment supported the validity of the posited structural model. According to fit indices presented in Table 16 model performance was acceptable, that is, the relationships between Social Media Usage, Radical Content Exposure, Political Attitude and Political Radicalization was appropriately represented within the proposed model. In general, the results achieved from the structural model can be considered as an empirical evidence of the role of social media related factors in shaping political attitudes and radicalization tendencies of university students. It is shown that each of the three factors, namely digital engagement, exposure to political content, and attitudes development is contributing to the understanding of political radicalization processes among the student population in the university.

Discussion

The results of this study add to the ongoing discussion about how digital environments influence the political attitudes of young adults. The results do not indicate that social media is a direct driver of political radicalization but rather a more nuanced consideration where social media is an influential environment that plays a role in relation to political attitudes, political exposure, and personal interpretation. This aligns with current research that conceptualizes radicalization as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, where digital environment exposure, identity development, social networks, and political perceptions contribute to the radicalization process, and internet usage is not the sole factor (Troncoso-Tejada et al., (2026; Widjanarko et al., (2025).

The results of this significant relationship between social media engagement and political outcome support the previous studies that highlighted the importance of these digital platforms as spaces of political learning, discussion, and ideological forming. According to (Sukabdi et al., (2026), the impact of social networking sites on political perceptions among university students is rooted in how young people access and process political information, which in turn influences their perceptions. In the same vein (Roqib¹ et al., (2025) pointed out that, in the context of Pakistan, digital media exposure can lead to differences in political orientations and behaviours. The present study adds to these observations by showing that influence on social media is not limited to awareness of political issues but can also shape tendencies to radicalization when it is coupled with certain ways of interpreting politics.

But the results should not be taken as proof that the use of social media inevitably leads to radical political orientations. Past research has disputed very simplistic explanations linking extremism with frequent web use. Radicalization outcomes are the result of an interplay between digital behaviour, psychological factors and social conditions, as argued by (Akbar & Akbar, (2026; Akram et al., (2026). Thus, the impact of social media is highly conditional on the content being experienced, how much ideological community one is engaged with, and what meanings they are given to political stories. This argument is supported by the present research which finds political attitude as an important mechanism by which online experiences are translated into political radicalization tendencies.

This finding of a role of content-specific exposure is consistent with findings of prior studies showing that it is content exposure, rather than general media use that is more important. (Gulzar et al., (2025; Haq, (2026) demonstrated that online communities have the potential to contribute to the reinforcement of common ideologies, connecting people who share views and consolidating the sense of community. In a similar vein, (Ali & Sultan, (2026; Butt & Ahmed, (2024) argued that political networks created around conspiracy theories can foster the propagation of the same conspiracies and same interactions, which can lead to reinforcement of beliefs. The present results support these arguments and indicate that political extreme or

polarizing content exposure can impact students' political perceptions, which in turn can affect their openness to radical views.

The results also offer corroboration to studies that stress that online radicalization is a gradual process of attitudinal change, rather than of immediate behavior changes. The mediating role of political attitude suggests that digital exposure can go on to shape the way people understand political events, judge political institutions and form political ideologies before having an impact on radicalization tendencies. This confirms with (Jawed et al., (2023; Khalil, (2024; Lutful, (2025) who showed that the influence of social media exposure on polarization is not only informational but also psychological and identity-based. Political opinions can hence be shaped in digitally amplified spaces that potentially make extreme narratives more acceptable, or convincing.

This is also in line with the algorithmic personalization and ideological clustering research. (Akram & Nasar, (2023; Al Saab, (2025; Fian et al., (2025; Gopalan, (2026) pointed out that social media architectures could lead to the formation of "selective information environments" in which users come into contact with the same information and perspectives on a regular basis. These contexts can limit exposure to different views and bolster political identities. In the Pakistani context, (Jawed et al., (2023; A. Missier, (2025; Nurdin et al., (2025) detected ideological clustering in online political communities, implying that online spaces might exacerbate polarization by creating clusters of users with similar political identities. The present research contributes to this discussion by showing that such processes apply to university students, who are in the process of identity development in relation to politics.

However, this link between social media and radicalization must be considered with care, as digital platforms can also create opportunities for democratic engagement, political knowledge and civic participation. Previous studies have focused on how social media can facilitate positive political participation when people are exposed to different information and have a real conversation. The problem is, then, not whether there is online political communication, but its quality, diversity, and nature. Based on the current results, prevention should not be directed at limiting social media use but, rather, at enhancing digital skills, critical assessment capacities, and an awareness of manipulative political information.

The Pakistani university context is therefore a valuable addition to the literature as much of prior work has centered on western societies, extremist organizations or violent forms of radicalization. Studies have found that there is scarce empirical data on the tendency to political radicalization among the young in developing societies. This study contributes to the understanding of the impact of digital political environments on emerging political identities in a society with fast-growing digitalization and political contestation by looking at university students in Pakistan.

The results overall indicate that there is a need for an integrated understanding of digital radicalization where social media exposure, radical political content and political attitudes work together. There is strong evidence that online platforms should be seen not as places of radicalization but as facilitators of political influence. Future research is needed to explore in greater detail the interaction and interplay between various factors (political dissatisfaction, socioeconomic conditions, offline social networks, media literacy and platform-specific algorithms) and digital exposure in the radicalization processes of youth groups. This would be a more holistic way to understand political radicalization in an increasingly digitalized society.

Conclusion

The findings of the study are that social media has influential role in perception and radicalization tendencies of the university students in Pakistan. The results show that digital exposure has an impact on political

outcomes not only directly, but also indirectly, by shaping and sustaining political attitudes. Thus, social media should be seen as a space that can promote both democratic involvement and polarization of ideology based on the content and way the users interact with them. The study highlights the importance of promoting digital literacy programs, media literacy, and responsible engagement on social media platforms to counteract negative ideological impact while maintaining the constructive role of social media.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

There are some limitations to this study. This cross-sectional study does not allow for causal inferences to be drawn about the relationship between social media exposure and political radicalization. Further, there might be a response bias because of the sensitive nature of political beliefs in the use of self-reported survey data. The study was conducted only with the students of the universities in Pakistan, which means the results of the study cannot be generalized to other population groups. Future studies should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method designs, incorporate a wider range of demographic factors and explore other factors, including political grievances, socio-economic factors, psychological factors, and platform-specific factors. Digital literacy and awareness programs should also be studied to assess their efficacy in diminishing vulnerability to radical online content.

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