

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL CONTENT ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF POLITICAL AWARENESS

Dr. Arbab Alam Khan^{*1}, Qirat Naz^{*2}, Tony T Williams³

^{*1}Lecturer, Communication and Media Studies, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KPK, Pakistan

^{*2}Department of Social Policy, University of South Wales, United Kingdom

³MHA, Ed.S., PhD(h.c.), Department of Health and Human Services, Ashford University-UAGC

^{*1}arbab.alam.7798@gmail.com ^{*2}qiratnaz95@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Arbab Alam Khan

Qirat Naz

Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally transformed political communication by enabling citizens to access, share, and engage with political information in real time. This study examines the effect of social media political content on political participation, with political awareness as a mediating variable. Drawing upon Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Cognitive Mobilization Theory, the study proposes that exposure to political content on social media enhances political awareness, which subsequently leads to increased political participation. A quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey was employed, and data were analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to test direct and indirect relationships among variables. The findings reveal that social media political content has a significant positive effect on political awareness ($\beta = 0.52$) and political participation ($\beta = 0.28$). Political awareness also significantly influences political participation ($\beta = 0.41$). Mediation analysis confirms that political awareness partially mediates the relationship between social media political content and political participation (indirect effect $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). The model explains a moderate to substantial proportion of variance in political participation ($R^2 = 0.42$). Effect size analysis further indicates that social media political content has a large effect on political awareness, while political awareness has a medium effect on political participation. Overall, the study demonstrates that social media political content influences political participation both directly and indirectly through the enhancement of political awareness. The findings highlight political awareness as a key cognitive mechanism linking digital media exposure to democratic engagement. The study contributes to theoretical advancement by integrating Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Cognitive Mobilization Theory into a unified framework. Practically, it offers implications for policymakers, educators, media organizations, and political actors aiming to promote informed and meaningful civic participation in the digital era.

1. Introduction

The emergence of social media has revolutionized the way citizens obtain political information, communicate with political actors,

and participate in democratic processes (Stieglitz et al., 2013). Over the past two decades, platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, TikTok,

WhatsApp, and Reddit have transformed political communication from a one-way dissemination model into an interactive and participatory process. Citizens are no longer passive consumers of political information; instead, they actively produce, share, evaluate, and debate political content. This transformation has significantly altered the dynamics of political participation, making political engagement more accessible to individuals regardless of geographical location, socioeconomic status, or institutional affiliation. The increasing accessibility of smartphones and high-speed internet has accelerated the integration of social media into everyday life (Singh et al., 2026). According to recent global digital reports, billions of individuals actively use social networking platforms daily, with a considerable proportion engaging with political information either intentionally or incidentally. Political parties, government institutions, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens increasingly rely on these platforms to disseminate political messages, mobilize supporters, discuss public policies, and organize collective action. Consequently, social media has become an indispensable component of modern democratic systems.

Political participation is generally regarded as one of the most fundamental indicators of a healthy democratic society (Macedo et al., 2006). It encompasses a wide range of activities through which citizens attempt to influence governmental decision-making, public policies, or political outcomes. Traditional forms of political participation include voting in elections, attending political meetings, joining political parties, contacting elected representatives, participating in campaigns, and engaging in community organizations. Contemporary scholarship further recognizes online political participation, including sharing political information, commenting on political issues, signing online petitions, participating in digital campaigns, and engaging in political discussions through social networking platforms. The expansion of social media has blurred the distinction between online and offline political participation. Digital engagement frequently serves as an entry point for broader civic involvement. For example,

individuals who regularly consume political news through social media often become more informed about public affairs, leading them to participate in electoral campaigns, volunteer for political organizations, attend protests, or advocate for policy reforms. This interconnectedness has encouraged researchers to reconsider traditional models of political participation and explore the role of digital communication technologies in fostering democratic engagement.

Despite these developments, the influence of social media on political participation remains a subject of considerable academic debate (Boulianne et al., 2020). Early scholars argued that social media democratizes political communication by lowering barriers to participation, increasing access to information, amplifying marginalized voices, and facilitating political mobilization. According to this optimistic perspective, digital technologies strengthen democracy by encouraging greater citizen involvement in public affairs. Conversely, critics contend that social media may contribute to misinformation, political polarization, selective exposure, algorithmic filtering, echo chambers, and declining trust in democratic institutions (Tucker et al., 2018). These challenges may reduce meaningful political engagement despite increased political communication. Accordingly, empirical studies have produced inconsistent findings, with some reporting positive effects of social media on political participation, others identifying weak relationships, and still others suggesting negative consequences under certain conditions.

These inconsistencies indicate that the relationship between exposure to political content on social media and political participation is unlikely to be purely direct (Gil et al., 2014). Instead, several intervening psychological, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms may explain how political information influences citizens' political behavior. Among these mechanisms, political awareness has emerged as one of the most important explanatory variables. Political awareness refers to an individual's knowledge, understanding, interest, and consciousness regarding political institutions, political actors, governmental policies, electoral processes, and

current public affairs (Mattes et al., 2007). Politically aware individuals are generally better equipped to evaluate political information critically, distinguish credible information from misinformation, understand policy implications, and make informed political decisions. They are also more likely to perceive political participation as meaningful and effective. Social media provides unprecedented opportunities for enhancing political awareness by exposing users to diverse political perspectives, real-time news updates, political debates, governmental announcements, and issue-based discussions. Even individuals who do not actively seek political information frequently encounter political content incidentally while interacting with friends, influencers, or news organizations. Such repeated exposure may gradually increase political knowledge and awareness.

Political awareness, in turn, is expected to encourage various forms of political participation. Citizens who understand political issues are generally more likely to vote, discuss politics with others, contact elected representatives, participate in civic organizations, and engage in democratic processes. Therefore, political awareness may function as a mediating mechanism through which social media political content influences political participation. Although numerous studies have separately examined social media use, political awareness, and political participation, relatively fewer studies have simultaneously investigated political awareness as a mediator between exposure to social media political content and political participation. Many previous investigations have focused primarily on general social media usage without distinguishing political content from entertainment or social interaction (Matthes et al., 2023). However, not all social media activities contribute equally to political engagement. Exposure to political content specifically may have distinct cognitive and behavioral consequences.

Furthermore, previous studies have predominantly concentrated on developed democracies in North America and Europe. Considerably less attention has been devoted to emerging democracies and developing countries,

where social media has become an increasingly influential source of political information, particularly among younger populations. Understanding these relationships in such contexts is essential because social media frequently compensates for limitations associated with traditional news media, enabling broader access to political discourse. The present study seeks to address these research gaps by examining the direct effect of exposure to political content on social media on political participation while investigating the mediating role of political awareness. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does exposure to political content on social media significantly influence political participation?

2. Does exposure to political content on social media enhance political awareness?
3. Does political awareness significantly influence political participation?
4. Does political awareness mediate the relationship between social media political content and political participation?

The study contributes to political communication literature in several important ways. First, it distinguishes political content from general social media use, allowing a more precise examination of digital political communication. Second, it integrates cognitive and behavioral perspectives by identifying political awareness as an explanatory mechanism linking political information exposure with political action. Third, it extends existing theoretical models by integrating insights from Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Cognitive Mobilization Theory. Finally, the findings provide practical recommendations for policymakers, election management bodies, educators, media organizations, political parties, and civil society organizations seeking to encourage informed democratic participation through responsible digital communication.

The significance of this study extends beyond academic inquiry. As democracies increasingly rely on digital communication technologies, understanding how political awareness develops through social media becomes essential for strengthening democratic institutions. Responsible dissemination of political

information has the potential to cultivate informed citizens capable of participating meaningfully in governance, holding public officials accountable, and contributing constructively to democratic decision-making. Consequently, this study argues that political awareness represents a critical cognitive pathway through which exposure to political content on social media translates into meaningful political participation. By examining this mediating mechanism, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital political engagement within contemporary democratic societies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Political Content

Social media political content refers to any form of politically relevant information, messages, visuals, opinions, or discussions shared through digital networking platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and similar platforms (Lipschultz et al., 2022). This content may originate from governmental institutions, political parties, journalists, activists, influencers, or ordinary users. It includes political news updates, campaign messages, policy debates, political advertisements, satire, commentary, and user-generated discussions about political issues. The defining feature of social media political content is its participatory and interactive nature. Unlike traditional mass media, where information flows in a one-directional manner from media institutions to audiences, social media allows users to actively engage with political content by liking, sharing, commenting, remixing, or creating their own political messages. This interactivity increases the visibility and reach of political information, thereby influencing public opinion formation and political behavior.

Scholars such as Mercea (2016) argue that digital media platforms have transformed political communication into a more networked and decentralized process. Political actors are no longer gatekeepers of information; instead, citizens themselves play an active role in disseminating political narratives. This shift has led to what is often described as the “networked public sphere,” where political discourse is

shaped by both institutional and non-institutional actors. Empirical research has shown that exposure to political content on social media varies significantly across demographic groups. Younger users tend to encounter more political content through informal networks, while older users often rely on news-based platforms or official political pages. Moreover, algorithms play a crucial role in determining the type and frequency of political content individuals are exposed to, raising concerns about selective exposure and ideological filtering. Despite these concerns, social media remains a primary source of political information for millions of users worldwide. Studies have demonstrated that individuals who are frequently exposed to political content online are more likely to develop political interest, engage in political discussions, and participate in civic activities. However, the strength and direction of this relationship often depend on mediating psychological factors such as political knowledge and awareness.

2.2 Political Participation

Political participation is broadly defined as the set of activities through which citizens attempt to influence political decisions, public policy, or governmental outcomes. It is a fundamental component of democratic systems and serves as a key indicator of civic engagement and democratic health (Ekman et al., 2012). Traditional forms of political participation include voting, attending political rallies, contacting public officials, joining political parties, participating in protests, and contributing to political campaigns. With the rise of digital communication technologies, new forms of participation have emerged, including online petitions, hashtag activism, political expression on social media, digital campaigning, and online political mobilization. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) conceptualize political participation as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by resources such as time, money, and civic skills. In contrast, more contemporary scholars emphasize the role of digital platforms in reducing these resource barriers, thereby expanding opportunities for political engagement.

Political participation is also influenced by psychological factors such as political efficacy, trust in government, political interest, and political knowledge. Individuals who believe that their actions can influence political outcomes are more likely to engage in both online and offline political activities. In this context, political awareness becomes a critical determinant of participation. Recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of “digital political participation,” which refers to politically oriented activities conducted through digital platforms. These include sharing political content, commenting on political issues, engaging in online debates, and mobilizing others through social networks. While some scholars argue that digital participation complements offline engagement, others suggest it may substitute for traditional forms of participation, leading to what is sometimes called “slacktivism.”

2.3 Political Awareness

Political awareness refers to the level of knowledge, understanding, and cognitive engagement an individual has regarding political systems, institutions, actors, policies, and current political issues (Grönlund et al., 2006). It reflects both factual knowledge (e.g., awareness of political structures) and interpretive understanding (e.g., ability to analyze political events and policy implications). Political awareness is a central construct in research on political communication and political behavior because it shapes how individuals process political information and decide whether to participate in political activities. Citizens with higher political awareness are more likely to interpret political messages critically, evaluate policy alternatives, and make informed electoral decisions. According to Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), political knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of democratic citizenship. Individuals who are more informed about politics are more likely to vote, engage in political discussions, and participate in civic activities. Political awareness also enhances political efficacy, the belief that one's actions can influence political processes. In the digital era, social media platforms play a significant role in shaping political awareness.

Users are constantly exposed to political information through news feeds, shared posts, and algorithmically recommended content (Spohr et al., 2017). This exposure may increase incidental learning, where individuals acquire political knowledge without actively seeking it. However, concerns have also been raised regarding misinformation, misinformation overload, and algorithmic bias, which may distort political awareness rather than enhance it. Therefore, the relationship between social media exposure and political awareness is complex and context-dependent.

2.4 Social Media Political Content and Political Participation

A substantial body of literature has examined the relationship between social media use and political participation. Early studies suggested a positive relationship, arguing that social media facilitates political engagement by lowering participation costs and increasing access to political information. For example, individuals exposed to political content online are more likely to discuss politics, share opinions, and engage in civic activities. Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) found that Facebook use was positively associated with civic participation and political engagement among young adults. Similarly, research by Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) demonstrated that social media news use significantly predicts both online and offline political participation.

However, other studies have reported mixed findings. Some researchers argue that passive exposure to political content does not necessarily translate into meaningful political participation. Instead, individuals may engage in low-effort forms of participation, such as liking or sharing political posts, without engaging in offline civic action. Moreover, the effect of social media on political participation may depend on user motivation, political interest, and the type of content consumed. Active engagement with political content (e.g., discussions, debates) tends to have a stronger effect on participation than passive exposure.

2.5 Social Media Political Content and Political Awareness

The relationship between social media political content and political awareness has received increasing scholarly attention. Social media provides continuous exposure to political information, which can enhance users' knowledge and understanding of political affairs (Park et al., 2019). Empirical studies suggest that individuals who frequently encounter political content on social media demonstrate higher levels of political knowledge compared to those who do not. This is particularly evident among younger populations who rely heavily on digital platforms for news consumption. However, some researchers caution that not all political content contributes positively to political awareness. The presence of misinformation, biased reporting, and emotionally charged content may lead to a distorted understanding of political issues. Algorithmic filtering may also create echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Despite these challenges, most studies support the notion that social media political content contributes to increased political awareness, particularly when users are actively engaged in consuming and discussing political information.

2.6 Political Awareness and Political Participation

Political awareness is widely recognized as a key predictor of political participation. Individuals who possess greater knowledge and understanding of political systems are more likely to participate in democratic processes. According to cognitive mobilization theory, politically aware individuals are more capable of independently processing political information and making informed political decisions without relying heavily on traditional institutions. This increased cognitive capacity encourages participation in various political activities. Empirical evidence consistently shows that political awareness is positively associated with voting behavior, campaign participation, protest activities, and civic engagement. Politically informed individuals are more confident in their ability to influence political outcomes, which enhances their likelihood of participation.

2.7 Research Gap

Despite the extensive literature on social media use and political participation, several gaps remain. First, many studies examine general social media usage rather than focusing specifically on political content exposure. This limits understanding of how politically relevant information influences civic engagement. Second, although political awareness has been identified as an important variable, relatively few studies have examined it as a mediating mechanism between social media political content and political participation. Most research treats political awareness as either a control variable or an independent predictor, rather than a psychological pathway linking media exposure to behavior. Third, existing literature is heavily concentrated in Western democratic contexts, with limited empirical evidence from developing or emerging democracies where social media plays a rapidly expanding political role. Finally, there is a need for more integrated theoretical models that combine media exposure, cognitive processing, and behavioral outcomes in a single framework. This study addresses these gaps by proposing a mediation model in which political awareness explains how exposure to social media political content translates into political participation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the effect of social media political content on political participation, with political awareness as a mediating variable, using the methodology of Chan et al. (2017). A quantitative approach is considered appropriate because it allows for the statistical testing of hypothesized relationships among variables and enables generalization of findings based on numerical data. The study employs a cross-sectional survey design, where data are collected at a single point in time from respondents who are active social media users. This design is suitable for analyzing perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral tendencies related to political communication and participation.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population of this study consists of social media users who are exposed to political content. Given the increasing penetration of digital platforms among youth and educated populations, the study focuses primarily on individuals who actively use platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp for information and communication purposes. A non-probability convenience sampling technique is used due to accessibility constraints and the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for social media users. Although probability sampling enhances generalizability, convenience sampling is widely used in digital media research due to the dispersed nature of online populations. The recommended sample size for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) ranges from 200 to 500 respondents. Following Ali et al. (2026), a minimum sample size of 300 respondents is considered adequate for testing mediation models with acceptable statistical power.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data are collected through a structured questionnaire distributed both online and offline. Online distribution is conducted via social media platforms, email, and messaging applications, while offline distribution may include university students and working individuals who actively use social media. Before participation, respondents are informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses, and voluntary participation. Ethical considerations are strictly followed to ensure anonymity and data protection.

3.4 Measurement Instruments

The study uses validated measurement scales adapted from previous literature (Baharum et al., 2023). All items are measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

3.4.1 Social Media Political Content (SMPC)

Social media political content is measured using items that assess the frequency and intensity of exposure to political information on social media platforms. Sample items include:

- I frequently encounter political news on social media.
- I often read or watch political content shared on social media.
- Social media is my main source of political information.
- I engage with political posts on social media.

3.4.2 Political Awareness (PA)

Political awareness is measured using indicators of political knowledge, understanding, and attentiveness to political issues. Sample items include:

- I am well-informed about current political issues.
- I understand how government and political institutions work.
- I follow political developments regularly.
- I can interpret political news effectively.

3.4.3 Political Participation (PP)

Political participation is measured using both online and offline participation indicators. Sample items include:

- I vote in elections whenever possible.
- I participate in political discussions online.
- I share or comment on political issues on social media.
- I attend political or civic events when possible.
- I engage in activities that aim to influence political decisions.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the quality of measurement instruments, both validity and reliability tests are conducted (Taherdoost et al., 2016).

3.5.1 Content Validity

Content validity is ensured through literature review and expert evaluation. Measurement items are adapted from established studies in political communication and digital media research.

3.5.2 Construct Validity

Construct validity is assessed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Factor

loadings above 0.60 are considered acceptable. Convergent validity is evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), where values above 0.50 indicate adequacy.

3.5.3 Reliability

Reliability is assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). Values above 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency.

3.6 Data Analysis Technique

The study employs Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships. Specifically, Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM) is considered appropriate due to its suitability for complex models and mediation analysis. The data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) following a two-stage analytical procedure comprising the assessment of the measurement model and the structural model. In the first stage, the measurement model was evaluated to establish the reliability and validity of the latent constructs. Internal consistency reliability was examined using Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR), with values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 indicating satisfactory reliability. Convergent validity was assessed through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and standardized factor loadings, where AVE values greater than 0.50 and indicator loadings above 0.70 confirmed adequate convergent validity. Discriminant validity was further evaluated to ensure that each construct was empirically distinct from the others using established criteria.

Following the confirmation of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. The significance and strength of the hypothesized paths were evaluated using standardized path coefficients (β). The explanatory power of the model was determined through the coefficient of determination (R^2), while the contribution of each exogenous construct to the endogenous constructs was assessed using effect size (f^2). Furthermore, the model's predictive capability was examined using predictive relevance (Q^2) obtained through the blindfolding procedure. To test the mediating

effects, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was performed to estimate the significance of both direct and indirect effects. Mediation was considered significant when the bootstrapped confidence intervals did not include zero and the corresponding p-values were below the accepted significance level, thereby providing robust evidence for the proposed mediation relationships.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical research standards. Participation is voluntary, and respondents are informed about the purpose of the study before data collection. No personal identifying information is collected. Data are used solely for academic purposes and stored securely to ensure confidentiality.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Data Screening

Before conducting the main analysis, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. Responses with substantial missing data were removed, and remaining missing values were treated using mean substitution. Outlier detection was performed using standardized z-scores, with values beyond ± 3.0 carefully examined. No extreme outliers that could distort the analysis were retained. Although Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) does not require strict normality assumptions, skewness and kurtosis values were examined to ensure data suitability. All variables were found to be within acceptable ranges, indicating no severe violation of distributional assumptions.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize respondents' perceptions of social media political content, political awareness, and political participation. The results indicate (Table 1) that respondents generally reported moderate to high exposure to political content on social media, along with relatively moderate levels of political awareness and participation. This suggests that social media serves as a meaningful source of political information for the sampled population.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Social Media Political Content (SMPC)	3.84	0.71	1.20	5.00
Political Awareness (PA)	3.67	0.76	1.10	5.00
Political Participation (PP)	3.58	0.79	1.00	5.00

4.3 Reliability Analysis

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) as presented in Table 2. The results indicate that respondents generally reported moderate to high exposure to

political content on social media, along with relatively moderate levels of political awareness and participation. This suggests that social media serves as a meaningful source of political information for the sampled population.

Table 2: Reliability Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite Reliability (CR)
SMPC	0.86	0.89
PA	0.88	0.91
PP	0.90	0.93

4.4 Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and factor loadings. All AVE values are above the threshold of 0.50,

indicating satisfactory convergent validity (Table 3). Additionally, all item loadings exceed 0.70, confirming that indicators strongly represent their respective constructs.

Table 3: Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Factor Loadings Range
SMPC	0.62	0.71 - 0.84
PA	0.65	0.73 - 0.86
PP	0.68	0.75 - 0.88

4.5 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Table 4). The square root of AVE for each construct was compared with inter-construct correlations. The results

confirm that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs, establishing adequate discriminant validity.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	SMPC	PA	PP
SMPC	0.79		
PA	0.52	0.81	
PP	0.49	0.58	0.82

4.6 Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis (Table 5) was conducted to examine the relationships among variables. The results indicate significant positive relationships among all variables. Social media

political content is positively correlated with political awareness and political participation, while political awareness also shows a strong positive correlation with political participation.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix

Variables	SMPC	PA	PP
SMPC	1.00		
PA	Z	1.00	
PP	0.49**	0.58**	1.00

4.7 Measurement Model Summary and Transition to Structural Model

Overall, the measurement model demonstrates strong psychometric properties, confirming its suitability for further analysis. The constructs exhibit high internal consistency reliability, with both Cronbach's Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity is also well established, as evidenced by Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values greater than 0.50, indicating that the observed indicators adequately represent their underlying latent constructs. In addition, discriminant validity is confirmed through the Fornell-Larcker criterion, demonstrating that each construct is empirically distinct from the others. These results collectively verify that the measurement model meets the required standards and is appropriate for structural model evaluation. Having established the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the analysis proceeds to the structural model assessment. This stage involves testing the hypothesized relationships among constructs using structural equation modeling, including the examination of direct effects (H1-H3). Furthermore, the mediating role of political awareness (H4) is evaluated through bootstrapping procedures to determine the significance of indirect effects and the robustness of the proposed mediation model.

4.8. Structural Model Analysis

Table 6: R² and Predictive Power

Endogenous Variable	R ²	Interpretation
Political Awareness (PA)	0.27	Moderate
Political Participation (PP)	0.42	Moderate to substantial

4.8.2 Path Coefficient Results (Direct Effects)

The hypothesis testing results indicate that the structural model demonstrates both adequate explanatory power and statistically meaningful relationships among the study variables. The coefficient of determination (R²) shows that

After confirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This section presents the results of hypothesis testing, including direct effects, mediating effects, and model explanatory power. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied to determine the significance of path coefficients.

4.8.1 Structural Model Fit and Explanatory Power

The structural model results indicate that the proposed framework demonstrates acceptable explanatory power in explaining both political awareness and political participation. The coefficient of determination (R²) shows that social media political content accounts for 27% of the variance in political awareness, which reflects a moderate level of explanatory strength (Table 6). Furthermore, when combined with political awareness, social media political content explains 42% of the variance in political participation, indicating a moderate to substantial level of predictive accuracy. These findings suggest that the model is reasonably effective in capturing the key determinants of political participation behavior, with political awareness playing a meaningful mediating role in strengthening the relationship between social media political content and political participation.

social media political content explains 27% of the variance in political awareness, reflecting a moderate level of explanatory strength, while social media political content together with political awareness explains 42% of the variance in political participation, indicating a moderate

to substantial level of predictive power (Table 7). Regarding the direct effects, the findings confirm that social media political content has a significant positive impact on political participation ($\beta = 0.28$), suggesting that greater exposure to political content on social media encourages individuals to engage more actively in political processes. In addition, social media political content exhibits a strong positive effect on political awareness ($\beta = 0.52$), highlighting its

role in enhancing individuals' understanding of political issues. Furthermore, political awareness significantly and positively influences political participation ($\beta = 0.41$), confirming that informed individuals are more likely to participate in political activities. Overall, these results support all hypothesized relationships and demonstrate the important role of both social media exposure and political awareness in shaping political participation behavior.

Table 7: Hypothesis Testing Results

Endogenous Variable	R ²	Interpretation	Endogenous Variable	R ²	Interpretation
Political Awareness (PA)	0.27	Moderate	Political Awareness (PA)	0.27	Moderate
Political Participation (PP)	0.42	Moderate to substantial	Political Participation (PP)	0.42	Moderate to substantial

4.8.3 Mediation Analysis (Indirect Effect)

The mediating role of political awareness in the relationship between social media political content and political participation was examined using a bootstrapping procedure. The results revealed a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 5.12$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that political awareness acts as a meaningful mediator in this relationship (Table 8). Since both the indirect effect and the direct effect ($\beta = 0.28$) remain statistically significant, the results indicate partial mediation. This suggests that social media political content influences

political participation not only directly but also indirectly by enhancing individuals' political awareness. In addition, the overall structural model supports all proposed hypotheses, as H1, H2, and H3 are confirmed, and H4 is also supported through the mediation effect. The model further demonstrates acceptable explanatory power, explaining 42% of the variance in political participation ($R^2 = 0.42$), indicating a substantial level of predictive relevance for behavioral outcomes in political engagement.

Table 8: Mediation Results

Relationship	Indirect Effect (β)	t-value	p-value	Mediation Type	Relationship
SMPC $\rightarrow$ PA $\rightarrow$ PP	0.21	5.12	< 0.001	Partial Mediation	SMPC $\rightarrow$ PA $\rightarrow$ PP

4.8.4 Effect Size (f^2)

The effect size (f^2) analysis was conducted to evaluate the strength of the relationships among the constructs in the structural model. The results indicate that social media political content has a large effect on political awareness ($f^2 = 0.36$), demonstrating that exposure to political content on social media plays a major role in shaping individuals' understanding of political issues. In contrast, its direct effect on

political participation is small to medium ($f^2 = 0.11$), suggesting a relatively weaker but still meaningful direct influence on participatory behavior. Additionally, political awareness shows a medium effect on political participation ($f^2 = 0.24$), confirming that individuals with higher levels of political awareness are more likely to engage in political activities. Overall, these findings highlight that the strongest relationship in the model exists between social

media political content and political awareness, while political awareness serves as an important intermediate factor influencing political participation.

4. 8.5 Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Stone-Geisser's Q^2 test was used to assess predictive relevance using blindfolding

procedures (Table 9). The findings from the structural model provide empirical evidence that social media political content plays a significant role in shaping political participation, both directly and indirectly through political awareness. The next section discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Table 8: Stone-Geisser's Q^2 test Results

Construct	Q^2 Value	Interpretation
Political Awareness (PA)	0.19	Predictive relevance confirmed
Political Participation (PP)	0.28	Strong predictive relevance

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the effect of social media political content on political participation, with political awareness as a mediating variable. The findings provide strong empirical support for all proposed hypotheses and offer important insights into how digital political communication shapes civic engagement in contemporary society.

5.1 Social Media Political Content and Political Participation

The results confirm that social media political content has a significant positive effect on political participation. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that exposure to political information on digital platforms encourages citizens to engage in both online and offline political activities. From a practical standpoint, social media serves as an accessible space where individuals are exposed to political discourse, campaign messages, and civic discussions. This exposure reduces informational barriers and increases opportunities for political engagement. The finding aligns with earlier studies by Cheng et al. (2023), who emphasized that social media news use enhances civic and political participation. The result also supports the argument that digital platforms have transformed political engagement from a resource-intensive activity into a more accessible and inclusive process.

5.2 Social Media Political Content and Political Awareness

A strong positive relationship was found between social media political content and political awareness. This suggests that exposure to political information on social media significantly enhances individuals' understanding of political systems, issues, and events. This finding is consistent with the principles of incidental learning, where individuals acquire knowledge without actively seeking information. Social media platforms expose users to political content through news feeds, shared posts, and algorithmic recommendations, thereby increasing political awareness even among passive users. The result is in line with Cognitive Mobilization Theory, which argues that increased access to political information enhances citizens' cognitive capacity to understand and evaluate political issues independently (Albright et al., 2009; Salam et al., 2024). However, the findings should also be interpreted cautiously, as prior literature highlights the potential risks of misinformation and selective exposure, which may distort rather than enhance political awareness in certain contexts.

5.3 Political Awareness and Political Participation

The study found a significant positive relationship between political awareness and political participation. Individuals with higher levels of political awareness are more likely to engage in political activities such as voting, discussing political issues, participating in campaigns, and engaging in civic discussions.

This finding reinforces the theoretical argument that knowledge and understanding are critical drivers of democratic engagement. Politically aware individuals are better able to evaluate political alternatives, understand policy implications, and recognize the importance of their participation in shaping political outcomes. The result aligns strongly with Delli Carpini and Keeter (2005), who emphasized political knowledge as a key determinant of effective citizenship. It also supports Cognitive Mobilization Theory, which suggests that politically informed individuals are more capable of independent political action.

5.4 Mediating Role of Political Awareness

One of the key contributions of this study is the identification of political awareness as a partial mediator in the relationship between social media political content and political participation. The mediation analysis demonstrates that social media political content affects political participation both directly and indirectly through the enhancement of political awareness, indicating that while exposure to political content can independently encourage participation, its more substantial impact occurs through cognitive development and increased understanding of political issues. This finding is consistent with the integrated theoretical framework of the study, where Uses and Gratifications Theory explains individuals' motivation to engage with political content, Social Cognitive Theory explains learning through observation and exposure, and Cognitive Mobilization Theory explains how increased political awareness translates knowledge into active participation (Luo et al., 2014). Collectively, these theories support a sequential pathway of Exposure → Awareness → Participation. Moreover, the partial mediation effect suggests that additional psychological and contextual factors, such as political efficacy, trust in government, and social influence, may also play significant roles in shaping political participation behavior.

5.5 Theoretical Interpretation

The findings provide strong support for the proposed theoretical model by confirming the explanatory relevance of Uses and Gratifications

Theory (UGT), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), and Cognitive Mobilization Theory (CMT) in understanding political participation through social media political content. The significant relationship between social media political content and political awareness supports UGT's assumption that individuals actively seek and use media content to satisfy informational needs, indicating that political content consumption is purposive and contributes to cognitive development. Similarly, the positive effect of social media political content on political participation aligns with SCT, which emphasizes observational learning, suggesting that individuals are influenced by observing political discussions, behaviors, and civic engagement within online environments. Furthermore, the mediating role of political awareness provides strong empirical support for CMT, which posits that political knowledge enables individuals to engage more effectively in political processes, with political awareness functioning as the key cognitive mechanism that translates information exposure into active participation.

5.6 Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings are consistent with most contemporary research in digital political communication. Studies by Valenzuela et al. (2013) and Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) similarly found that social media use enhances political participation through informational and interactive pathways. However, this study contributes a more refined explanation by distinguishing political content exposure from general social media use. It demonstrates that not all social media activity is equally influential—political content specifically plays a crucial role in shaping civic engagement. Additionally, the identification of political awareness as a mediator provides a deeper psychological explanation for previously observed relationships, addressing a gap in earlier research that often treated the relationship as purely direct.

5.7 Summary of Key Insights

Overall, the findings suggest that social media serves as an important and influential source of political information for individuals, shaping how they engage with political issues. Exposure

to political content on social media significantly enhances political awareness, indicating its role in strengthening users' cognitive understanding of political matters. In turn, political awareness emerges as a strong predictor of political participation, highlighting its critical role in translating information into active civic engagement. Moreover, the relationship between social media use and political participation is partially explained through cognitive processes, particularly the development of political awareness, suggesting that social media influences participation not only directly but also indirectly through enhanced understanding. These insights emphasize the importance of examining not just whether social media affects political behavior, but also how and why such influence occurs through underlying psychological and cognitive mechanisms.

5.8. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study makes significant contributions to the growing literature on digital political communication by offering a clearer explanation of how social media influences political participation. First, it extends existing models by differentiating social media political content from general social media usage, thereby providing a more precise and context-specific understanding of digital media exposure. Second, it integrates Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Cognitive Mobilization Theory into a unified explanatory framework, demonstrating that political participation in the digital age is shaped by a combination of motivational, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms rather than a single explanatory pathway. Third, the identification of political awareness as a mediating variable represents a key theoretical advancement, confirming that cognitive processing plays a central role in translating media exposure into political action and strengthening knowledge-based models of democratic engagement. In terms of practical implications, the findings suggest that policymakers and government institutions can utilize social media platforms to disseminate accurate political information and enhance citizens' political awareness, thereby promoting transparency, civic engagement, and

trust in institutions. Educational institutions are encouraged to incorporate digital literacy and civic education programs to help students critically evaluate political content and develop informed participation skills. Political parties and campaign strategists should use social media not only for outreach but also for providing informative and educational content that fosters meaningful political engagement rather than emotional persuasion. Additionally, civil society organizations and media outlets should focus on promoting fact-based reporting and reducing misinformation to improve the overall quality of political discourse online, ultimately strengthening democratic participation.

6. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study uses a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Longitudinal studies would provide stronger evidence of causal effects over time. Second, the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample may not fully represent the broader population of social media users, particularly in terms of age, education, and political orientation. Third, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall of political behavior and media usage. Fourth, the study focuses primarily on political awareness as a mediator, while other important psychological variables, such as political efficacy, trust in government, and political interest, were not included.

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Author Contributions

Dr. Arbab Alam Khan, Tony T Williams, MHA, Ed.S.: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, project administration, formal analysis, manuscript review and editing, and final approval of the manuscript. Qirat Naz: Data curation, investigation, literature review, visualization, original draft preparation, validation, and manuscript editing. All authors contributed substantially to the study, reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work

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