

## FRAMING, EMOTIONS, AND ENGAGEMENT: POLITICAL PARTIES' COMMUNICATION ON FACEBOOK IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

The current study is an exploration of the role of political communication in engagement-led discourse in Pakistan which is being analyzed at the level of the framing strategies of major political parties on Facebook. Although there is a lot of research on the polarizing effects of social media, little focus has been placed on the ways in which political actors strategically assemble messages in algorithmic structured environments. This study examines the patterns of framing, emotional tone and user engagement in the response to the question based on quantitative content analysis of 218 Facebook messages from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PMLN), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Results show that the general public tends to be more emotionally, morally, and human interest framed and policy oriented framing is somewhat marginal. There are significant differences in use of conflict and responsibility framing by party with adversarial content getting higher engagement – especially in numbers of shares. The study suggests that the incentives associated with using Facebook as a platform are pushing political communication towards more affective, more conflict, and more strategic messages designed to maximize visibility, rather than to inform citizens. The findings add to the knowledge on the reconfiguration of political communication via digital platforms in emerging democracies.

## INTRODUCTION

### Chapter 1

#### Introduction

Social media has transformed political communication from institutionally mediated systems to one of platform driven environments with algorithmic visibility and incentives for engagement. In these settings, the political actors have overcome the traditional gate-keeping mechanism and can now directly create and spread a narrative to many people (McNair, 2018).

In the process, however, there are important questions to ask concerning political

communication in the digital sphere. Social media platforms have the potential to support democratic deliberation, but they also tend to promote inflammatory and polarizing content because it will likely drive user engagement and visibility (Tufekci, 2015). Algorithmic curation also affects the way political information is presented to users, and how it is understood in the process (Bakshy et al., 2015).

Such developments question the rational deliberative and exposure to other voices aspect of democratic discourse (Dahlberg, 2001). Rather, digital spaces more and more favor

content material that can reinforce consideration, emotional reaction, and interplay.

In Pakistan, social media is a powerful platform for political engagement, making these dynamics more relevant. Political parties also widely use platforms like Facebook to mobilize their supporters and shape political discourses, particularly among youth (Jamil, 2021; Ali, 2019). Yet, even though this importance has increased, so far, most of the research has been directed towards the user behavior and the political participation of citizens, and the strategic building-up of political messages by parties has received only little attention.

The present study attempts to fill this void by analyzing the major political parties that are Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PMLN), and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and how they use Facebook to build political narratives. It particularly looks at the interplay between framing strategies, emotional tone and engagement patterns in an algorithmic organized communication setting.

This study, which examines the production of messages instead of the perception of audiences, offers empirical evidence on the adaptation of political actors to the platform dynamics, and thus to the broader discussion about digital political communication and polarization in emerging democracies.

This study explores the message building process and the dissemination of messages by political parties in an algorithmic structured engagement driven environment in Pakistan. In particular, it identifies the framing strategies and emotional tone, and how they are correlated with user's engagement.

Hence, the following research question is answered:

RQ1: What are the political parties' framing strategies in Pakistan and how do they affect the user engagement in the context of platform driven communication?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The advent of social media has found a way to completely change the way people communicate

politically, from gatekeepers to algorithmic curators (Tufekci, 2015). Digital systems of communication do not feature the editorial control that shaped the information flow of legacy media, but are based on engagement-based visibility, allowing political actors to build and spread narratives directly to a large audience (McNair, 2018). Not only has this changed the way in which people communicate, but it has affected the nature of political messaging as well.

From an empirical perspective, it is found that algorithmic systems shape the exposure to political information by reinforcing users' preferences and patterns of interaction. Research suggests that these kinds of spaces can reduce the visibility of a variety of perspectives and amplify emotionally charged and conflict material (Bakshy et al., 2015). This leads to a more attention and interaction oriented political communication, rather than deliberation.

Much of the previous literature, however, has emphasized the exposure of information and the behavior of the audiences, and neglected the adaptation of political messages to the platform incentives by political actors. This is an important missing element, especially in new democracies where digital media is an increasingly important part of the political sphere.

In the context of Pakistan, social media platforms have been a major field of political communication and political parties are actively using social media platforms like Facebook to mobilize its supporters, manipulate narratives (Jamil, 2021; Ali, 2019). However, the current literature tends to focus on political participation and involvement, and little systematic work has been done on the nature of political messages and how parties build and frame them in the algorithmic-designed world.

This study takes a stance in this gap and is based on Framing Theory which describes how political actors produce meaning by highlighting certain parts of an issue, by allocating blame and by helping audiences to interpret the significance of the messages (Entman, 1993). In digital settings, the frame is not only a communicative device, but also a mechanism and a strategy that is in line with the incentives of engagement.

Emotionally triggering or conflict frames are more likely to create interaction on social media, which in turn means they will get noticed. This establishes structural pressures on the political players to focus on emotion-laden, opposition rather than policy messages.

All these views indicate that the relationship between strategic framing and algorithmic amplification has an influence on political communication on Facebook. This study will add to the overall understanding of political communication in platform environments by examining how political actors (re)produce messages and how they work.

**Chapter 3  
Methodology**

The data utilized in this study has been collected through the quantitative content analysis of 218 Facebook posts from official Facebook page of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PMLN) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

Purposive sampling was done to choose posts that are relevant to political communication and

strategic party messaging. The posts were coded in the following variables:

1. Framing – conflict, responsibility, human interest
2. Emotions (neutral, moderate, high)
3. Policy focus (present/absent)
4. Likes, shares and comments

Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used in the analysis of data to determine differences between parties. Mean comparisons were used to determine the engagement patterns.

**Chapter 4  
Results**

**Descriptive Findings**

Political communication is characterized by emotional and narrative based content. Content is mostly human interest (62.8%) or moral (53.2%) and less policy (40.8%). This pattern indicates that political messages are more connected to the audience and it is more emotional than informative, which is consistent with the engagement-oriented communication approaches.



**Table 1.**  
*Distribution of Content Characteristics (N = 218)*

Variable	Category	%
Conflict Frame	Yes	31.2
Conflict Frame	No	68.8
Responsibility Frame	Yes	33.5
Responsibility Frame	No	66.5
Human Interest	Yes	62.8
Human Interest	No	37.2
Emotional Tone	High	50.0
Policy Focus	Yes	40.8

Note. Percentages based on total posts.

**Comparative Analysis**

Chi-square analysis reveals significant differences across parties in:

- Conflict framing ( $\chi^2 = 10.67, p < .05$ )
- Responsibility framing ( $\chi^2 = 15.15, p < .01$ )

These differences reflect the use of different strategic approaches in adversarial communication by parties. In particular, the

increased use of conflict and responsibility framing is indicative of a more confrontational style of messaging that is used to mobilize supporters and distinguish political identity.

The results for human interest framing or emotional tone do not differ significantly, implying that emotionally charged narratives are a universal means of communication among all involved – irrespective of their ideologies

**Table 2.**

*Chi-Square Results by Political Party*

Variable	$\chi^2$	p
Conflict Frame	10.67	.005*
Responsibility Frame	15.15	.001*
Human Interest	3.39	.183
Emotional Tone	9.32	.054

Note. \*p < .05

**Engagement Analysis**

Shares are higher for posts that have a higher emotional tone and conflict framing which means the diffusion potential is higher. This implies that content that elicits powerful responses is more inclined to draw interaction and sharing throughout the platform.

The increased impact on stocks shows that there is not only an appetite for emotionally charged and conflict-driven posts but that they are also shared, thereby further enhancing their visibility. This is the way of engagement focused ranking systems, which give higher chances to the content that is more interactive in nature.

**Table 3.**

*Engagement Metrics by Framing and Emotional Tone*

Variable	Category	Likes (M)	Shares (M)	Comments (M)
Conflict Frame	Present	2846.31	700.57	314.04
Conflict Frame	Absent	2306.12	250.95	201.50
Emotional Tone	Neutral	2348.94	234.02	—
Emotional Tone	Moderate	2308.52	365.30	—
Emotional Tone	High	2617.36	492.97	—

Note. Higher engagement is associated with conflict and high emotional tone.

**Chapter 5**

**Discussion**

The results show that in Pakistan, the political communication on Facebook is mostly driven by emotional and narrative framing than policy oriented. The prevalence of human interest and moral framing suggest that politicians’ use of storytelling and value-based messaging are to gain attention and keep audiences engaged.

Emotional framing, which does not differ across parties, implies that there are major differences in conflict and responsibility framing, which indicate that political actors have different strategic approaches. PTI demonstrates a greater emphasis on adversarial and blame-oriented messaging, potentially signaling an approach to heighten political competition and rally support by fostering opposition-driven narratives. However, Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PMLN) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have comparatively less confrontational approaches,

but still are in the same engagement-driven communication environment.

One of the study's findings is that there is a correlation between emotional intensity, conflict framing, and user engagement. The higher the emotional reaction, the more interaction you will see, especially in shares. This implies that the material that elicits emotional responses, like anger, solidarity or sense of belonging to a group is more likely to be followed and shared by users. This can be explained using the logic of algorithmic amplification. The algorithms on social media judge content by how much engagement it receives, so content that is emotionally charged and conflict driven is more likely to be seen. This encourages political actors to create content that will have the highest engagement, even if at the cost of information quality. This over time forms a cycle where content which is more likely to be engaged with becomes more prominent.

Overall, these results suggest that political communication on Facebook is not only influenced by the party strategies, but also by the platform dynamics. Although there is a different degree of adversarial framing across parties, all live in a world that supports emotional intensity and interaction.

## Conclusion

This study provides evidence that the political communication in Pakistan is based on emotional framing and engagement strategies. Although parties use adversarial framing differently, they all do so within an environment of platforms that are incentive for content that elicits emotional response.

The results indicate that the dynamics of the platforms are key in shaping political communication and favour content that aimed to maximize interaction over anything else.

## Restrictions and future investigations

This study has a number of limitations. The analysis is limited to a sample of Facebook posts, and this sample might not adequately reflect the development of political communication over time. Furthermore, the research is limited to one platform and it is not possible to transfer the results to other social media platforms that have different algorithmic systems. The study data should be extended in time and incorporate other platforms to gain a better idea of digital political communication. Qualitative methods could also provide more in-depth understandings of the construction and interpretation of political narratives.

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