ANALYSIS OF POPULIST DISCOURSE IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

In the social media sphere, populist political parties strategically use social media to rally support and shape the public opinion in their favour. In this regard, the study investigated the populist discourse in the social media landscape of Pakistan to find out the extent to which political parties in Pakistan engage in populist tendencies on social media. For this purpose, social media posts of four high profile political parties were analyzed manually. The study found that these political parties increasingly indulge in populist tendencies on social media by utilizing various strategies to influence public opinion. The study showed that emotionalism and demonization were the most prominent populist attributes used by the populist parties in Pakistan on social media.

Keywords: populism, social media, attributes of populism, content analysis, Facebook, Political Parties in Pakistan

Introduction

In academic literature, the western scholarship talks about the continuous success of populism in political discourse. Majority of the research focuses on describing populism, the popularity of the populist political parties and on assessing their influence on the political discourse (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014). Populism is defined as "a thin-centered ideology" that deems society as distributed into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and claims that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). The ideology of populism claims to be the voice of the common people because it is dissatisfied with the existing power structures and wants to give that power to the common people.

Populists are the main actors that use strategies such as spontaneity, imperfection, relatability, carry risks and controversy and claim to uniquely represent the "true people" against corrupt elites (Enli, G. 2025). As per the literature, populism has been classified in two main genres, an ideology (Mudde, 2004) or a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populism as an ideology views populism as a system of beliefs and concentrates on the content of populist discourse. Second, populism as a style emphasizes on the presentation style as the manner in which the information is presented or conveyed. It is distinguished by direct, provocative and confrontational elements, which populist actors frequently use to establish a personal and emotional bond with their public (Nai, 2022). This style frequently uses dramatic, emotional and colloquial language to portray leaders as approachable and relatable individuals outside of the political establishment and the goal is to bring out strong emotional reactions and a desire for immediate solutions among the public (Wirz, 2018).

These political actors (populists) use populism as a strategy. As (Enli, G. 2025) argue that politicians use authenticity only as a tool to persuade, not to be honest. Politics become more emotionalized and polarized after emergence of digital platforms and Emotions are considered an important element of populist politics and public debate and these emotions have a mobilizing potential use by populist's leaders around the world Kluknavska. A., Novotna, M., & Eisele, O. (2025)

South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, exhibit distinct forms of populism compared to their European counterparts, largely due to differences in socio-political contexts, including migration patterns (Kurlantzick, 2018). Populist movements in these regions have addressed a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from resistance against elites to concerns related to minority rights, poverty alleviation, and combatting dehumanization. In Pakistan, the emergence of populist leaders such as former Prime Minister Imran Khan has been notable. Imran Khan's leadership style has been characterized by divisive politics,

occasionally involving the suppression of dissenting voices, while cleverly manipulating various forms of communication to foster intimacy with his audience and gather support for his vision of the country (Hassan, 2019) This trend highlights the significant impact of populism on Pakistan's political landscape and it signals potential challenges to democratic governance and pluralism (Gillani, 2020).

Social media serves as an important tool for advancing democracy by giving political parties effective platforms to connect and engage with their audience. For example, In the Pakistani social media sphere, the political parties excessively use social media and various social media strategies to interact with the public and promote their political agendas. Their aim behind this extensive use of social media is to reach a wider audience and influence the public's opinion to achieve their political objectives.

Studies show that political parties often employ an emotionally charged rhetoric and adopt a populist approach on social media to attract larger audiences. However, this tendency is threatening democracy as it creates division in society. While researchers in the Western countries have found enough evidence for this problematic tendency, in case of Pakistan, there is limited literature available. The purpose of this study was to determine whether and to what extent the political parties in Pakistan engaged in populist tendencies on social media and what were the similarities and differences in their political strategies.

The research aim to assess the extent to which political parties in Pakistan use social media platforms to promote their populist narratives and to analyze the similarities and the differences in the social media strategies used by the political parties in Pakistan to promote their populist narratives

Populism is a worldwide political phenomenon and the western scholarship has investigated populism in the political discourse in detail. The researchers have found various instances and evidence where audience support is garnered by using populism and its indicators in the western democracies. However, in Pakistan, there is not a sizeable amount of literature available on the topic where the political parties use social media to attract audiences specifically by diving onto the populist rhetoric. So, this study was an attempt to contribute to the brewing literature on this issue by providing empirical evidence from Pakistan as it helped analyze how the political parties in Pakistan indulged in the use of populism on social media to serve their political interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of populism has attracted considerable attention within both academic circles and broader public discourse, emerging as a subject of interest in scholarly debates and informal discussions as well. Over recent decades, populism has emerged as a prominent theme across various political contexts, particularly within democratic frameworks. Political populism involves the strategic mobilization of public sentiment by political actions, that offers simplified solutions to complex societal challenges (Otto, 2022). Its increasing prevalence, both domestically and globally, highlights its significant impact on political dynamics.

Moreover, in an era characterized by rapid advancements in digital technology, the prevalence of populism carries implications for the stability and functionality of democratic governance structures. Consequently, there is a critical need for scholarly inquiry to look into the phenomenon of populism within the contemporary digital media landscape, with specific attention to its effects on political processes and democratic principles.

The term populism was used to characterize a variety of political phenomena, ranging from 19th-century agrarian movements in Russia and the United States to 20th-century political parties and politicians in Latin America and Europe (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Cas Mudde (2004) has defined populism as "an ideology that considered society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and argued that politics should be an expression of the volonte generale (general will) of the people." Mudde's definition takes several empirical manifestations into account by considering populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that can be linked to other ideological content. Populism has also been perceived as a political strategy where "a personalist leader wants or exercises governmental power based on the direct, immediate, and non-institutionalized support of a large number of,

mostly unorganized, supporters" (Weyland, 2001).

These political actors (populists) use populism as a strategy. As (Enli, G. 2025) argue that politicians use authenticity only as a tool to persuade, not to be honest. Politics become more emotionalized and polarized after emergence of digital platforms and Emotions are considered an important element of populist politics and public debate and these emotions have a mobilizing potential use by populist's leaders around the world Kluknavska. A., Novotna, M., & Eisele, O. (2025)

The use of the term "populism" in Indonesian political studies reflects how the concept of populism itself is widely used and debated by scholars (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Populism emphasizes upon how to mobilize the masses through social movements and to build a model of democracy that focuses on the community (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013).

Another approach known as the Practical Political Style views populism as a means for politicians and parties to rally mass support. However, the "populism as an ideology" approach, presents populism as a political concept that focuses on the conflict between the masses (Mouffe, For a Left Populism, 2018).

Populism has also been viewed as an ideology and a political strategy that is designed to gather mass support by bridging the gap between populist leaders and the society at large (Kenny, 2017). Populism can unite the society to a certain extent by challenging the elite and highlighting the solidarity between people but it carries some risks as well, such as creating hostility between the people and elites. Which is why, it is important to understand populism and use it as a strategy to ensure justice in the society rather than encouraging division among people and elites (Pelfini, 2015).

Populism could serve as a strategic tool for political actors to help them gain power, allowing them to construct easily understandable identities of themselves. It can also be used to cultivate anti-elitist sentiments and exploit public concerns by spreading propaganda and setting misleading narratives. The relatively low political costs associated with populist movements presented them as an appealing option for securing electoral support. Nonetheless, the conceptual comprehension of populism remains somewhat ambiguous due to its evolution and contextual shifts over time (Bonikowski, 2016).

Populism evolves across three dimensions, defined as an ideology, political communication strategy, and political style (Woods, 2014). Populist groups typically employ simplistic rhetoric and oversimplified societal challenges, offering solutions that often veer towards extremity and pose potential threats to democratic ideals. Policies advocated by populist leaders frequently lack reliance on accurate data or empirical evidence, instead they are based on subjective opinions or misconceptions. Populists tend to adopt a binary worldview, simplifying social intricacies by dichotomizing society into distinct categories of "us" and "them," a tendency that frequently triggers polarization and social discord.While the prevailing belief suggests the onset of a populist era (Mudde, 2016), the study of populism remains in its developmental phase, with limited insights available regarding how populists utilized social media, despite various claims in numerous studies about its potency as a tool for populists (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Populism seldom operates in isolation, often aligning itself with various ideologies ranging from neoliberalism to the radical right to socialism, given its nature as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Moffitt & Tormey (2014) have categorized four distinct conceptualizations of populism: populism as ideology, populism as political logic, populism as discourse, and populism as strategy, subsequently introducing the concept of populism as a 'political style.' They have defined modern populism as a political style encompassing a spectrum of performances utilized to foster political relationships.

Additionally, Western scholars have classified populism into two primary genres: an ideology (Mudde, 2004) and a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populism as an ideology views populism as a system of beliefs, focusing on the content of populist discourse, while populism as a style emphasized the manner in which information was presented or conveyed.

According to Meijers & Zaslove (2021), political parties were typically categorized as populist based on the

assertions they made in political discourse, such as speeches, social media posts, or election manifestos. Populist political leaders often criticize the mainstream media, portraying it as part of the corrupt elite that distorted reality and misled the people (Hameleers, 2020). Populists convey their ideas through oral, written, and visual communication to influence the audience, adopting a confrontational approach toward the elite and advocating for the people. They portray political elites negatively, rejecting them while praising the values of ordinary people (Schwörer, 2022). Political actors engage in populist communication more frequently on social media platforms than in political talk shows, as it allows them to circumvent traditional media, tailor their messages to target groups, and cultivate a personal yet relatable image (Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019).

Various factors, including the utilization of populism as a political strategy by populist groups, can contribute to the decline in the quality of democracy within a country (Akkerman T. , 2003). This phenomenon of democratic decline may manifest in detrimental impacts on society, such as a loss of trust in leaders, increased societal conflicts, and a diminished quality of life (Baykan, 2023). Populist strategies have demonstrated their effectiveness in capitalizing on anti-government sentiments perceived as unjust, leveraging emotional appeals to garner public support and achieve political objectives (Sawyer, 2024).

Common populist tactics include emotional rhetoric, the amplification of issues easily grasped by the public, and the presentation of simplistic solutions to intricate societal challenges. However, it's noteworthy that certain populist movements may also instigate societal conflicts (Baykan, 2023). Consequently, the adverse effects of populism can contribute in the decline of democracy, particularly in the contemporary era of technological advancement, where social media serves as a tool for populists to convey their narratives (Manucci, 2017).

Upon deeper examination, it becomes evident that populism goes beyond its role as a mere political instrument aimed at increasing power and capturing public attention. Instead, populist leaders frequently prioritize their own interests over those of the people, exploiting specific issues once in power. Populism is characterized as a rhetorical weapon used to discredit political opponents (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Digital populism, or the phenomenon of populism in digital media, encompasses the adaptation and dissemination of populist discourse, strategies, and narratives via online platforms such as social media, digital news outlets, and online forums. The digital landscape provides multiple opportunities to populists with to evade traditional media gatekeepers, they can interact directly with their followers, and broadcast their messages to a larger audience (Tufekci, 2017). Furthermore, the interactive nature of digital platforms enables direct communication between the audience and populists allowing them to rally support and create online communities that are based on shared grievances and identities (Bastos & Mercea, 2019).

Social media has a huge impact on the political discourse and one prominent consequence of social media's impact on politics is the spread of political populism. Political populism is a political strategy that is based on simplistic and emotional narrative and its aim is to garner popular support. According to Vin Crosbie (2020), social media is categorized as "mass media" as it serves as a platform for disseminating information from one individual to many people."

New media and interpersonal media facilitate the exchange of ideas and information among multiple individuals (Jinan, 2013). Politicians and political entities use social media platforms to circulate their populist messages. They create and reinforce simple political narratives that are aimed towards the needs of the people with the help of social media easily. These narratives are mostly based on the emotional appeals of the people. Social media plays an important role in facilitating the populist movements by giving the tools to politicians to communicate directly with the people. It is easier for the populists to get their messages across to the people and campaign for themselves with the help of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube than old campaigning techniques which is why populist leaders use social media as a strategic tool to promote their interests.

Furthermore, Populist movements can develop narratives that align with public interests easily due to social media as it makes it easier to access the public opinion. Politicians can target their messages to those people who are most likely to resonate with them by taking help from the data stored on social media platforms. This can help them shape the public's opinion and behaviour effectively.

In social media's age, the quick transfer of information has not facilitated the spread of populist narratives but it increased political participation as well. There is a demand for timely and relevant information which has made social media a primary channel for political discourse among the audience. Populists can easily sway and influence the public opinion with the help of social media engagement.

Populism has surfaced as a sensational worldwide phenomenon which has the potential to affect the democratic system negatively. In the digital age, populism can threaten the public's trust in democracy by spreading misinformation faster and easier than before. Furthermore, populist leaders use rhetorical strategies that promote social polarization like targeting specific groups and campaigning against elites frequently (Norris, 2019).

The need for research on populism in the digital age has become more important due to these concerns. A systematic analysis could help in understanding the features and strategies of populism that are used on social media platforms better. Therefore, it was necessary to examine how populists used populist strategies on social media to strengthen their political support base and as a result how these strategies contributed in the decline of democracy and the development of political populism in the digital age.

Media has now transformed into a propaganda tool that can be exploited. The quick and easy access to digital information that is free from the constraints of time and space has created a lot of impact. Media that serves as a medium for digital information, it is considered as a primary channel for disseminating information without restrictions (Mujibuddin, 2018). In the context of political populism, social media is used as a medium to support the prevailing narrative and to capitalize on issues that the public finds appealing. Social media generates a lot of political popularity by helping politicians create an illusion of strong support. Furthermore, the use of populist political strategies on social media fosters polarization. As a result, the public's access to comprehensive information diminishes which causes an inclination towards simplistic and absolutist viewpoints.

Indonesia, recognized as one of the world's largest internet user bases, was susceptible to the post-truth phenomenon, particularly concerning economic and political interests. A notable incidence was observed during the 2017 DKI Jakarta gubernatorial election which was marked by the viral spread of a manipulated video featuring Ahok's speech across social media platforms. The proliferation of the post-truth phenomenon in Indonesia stemmed from several factors. Firstly, there was an asymmetrical advancement in information technology that outpaced the government's and society's capacity to adapt. Secondly, persistent political competition since the 2014 presidential election contributed to the phenomenon. Thirdly, certain segments of society embraced extreme anti-Pancasila ideologies, further fuelling the propagation of post-truth narratives. Lastly, apprehensions regarding the government's ongoing changes and reforms to the system also played a role in amplifying the post-truth phenomenon (Sulistyo, 2017).

In the post-truth era, the distinctions between honesty and dishonesty, truth and falsehood, reality and the virtual world, fiction and non-fiction became increasingly unclear. Media, serving as a vehicle for digital information, emerged as the primary channel for disseminating various unrestricted information (Mujibuddin, 2018). Within the realm of politics, objective facts were often downgraded to a single narrative of truth considered irrelevant. This trend paralleled the widespread emergence of social media, which significantly facilitated the shaping of public opinion through the spread of misinformation distanced from objective facts. Subsequently, public opinion was manipulated to conform to the desired consciousness of societal members.

The advancement of Information Technology has revolutionized the digital landscape, transcending boundaries of space, time, and distance (Suharyanto, 2019). While this technological progress has produced

numerous benefits across various domains, it has also brought about adverse effects. The spread of information in the digital age has led to some social consequences such as the challenge to differentiate between accurate and false information. The credibility of the mainstream media is frequently questioned due to the influence of elites, enabling the public to look for other arenas (Syuhada, 2018).

In the contemporary politics, the rise of populism shows a major change in the sociopolitical environment which is fueled by the use of social media. Political populism has flourished due to social media as it helps populist leaders to gain support quickly and effectively. Social media can encourage immense public political engagement however it has the power to spread misinformation and encourage political polarization by creating filter bubbles in which people are only exposed to the content that supports their political beliefs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is determined by Populism. The term "populism" lacks a clear definition and is defined differently by various authors. For example, Mouffe (2016) postulated that "Populism is not an ideology or a political regime and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content". Therefore, populism is a movement which aims to take power in order to carry out political tasks more effectively. Populism is a contested and multifaceted concept. It can be understood as a political approach that seeks to represent the will of the 'common people' against a perceived elite or establishment.

According to Cas Mudde (2004), populism is a 'thin-centered' ideology that is inherently flexible, allowing it to attach itself to a variety of 'thick-centered' ideologies such as socialism, nationalism, or religious fundamentalism. In the political discourse, populism takes many forms depending upon the time and place. People look for better options when they are dissatisfied with the existing political system. As a result, a new political group under the leadership of a charismatic political leader steps forward and inspires the people to lead them to the right way (Mouffe, 2005).

Populism has become a central subject of study in political science, reflecting its growing influence on global political landscapes. This theoretical framework explored the multifaceted nature of populism, examining its core principles, variations, and implications within political and media contexts.

Populism is not a singular phenomenon; it manifests in diverse forms influenced by the socio-political environment. Variations include: Radical populism is linked to extremist ideologies and it aims for profound societal transformation. It exists across the political spectrum, encompassing radical leftist movements advocating for socialist reforms as well as far-right movements promoting nationalism and xenophobia (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). This variant concentrates on mobilizing the masses through charismatic leadership and promises to return power to the people. Political populists often capitalize on crises to garner support, positioning themselves as the protectors of ordinary citizens (Laclau, 2005). Democratic populism is grounded in the principles of direct democracy and it emphasizes upon participatory governance. It aims to empower citizens by directly involving them in the decision-making processes, frequently through referendum and grassroots movements (Mouffe, 2018). This form involves a critique of existing power structures and demands greater transparency and accountability. Critical populists advocate for systemic reforms to address social inequalities and power imbalances (Müller, 2016).

Left-Wing Populism It prioritizes economic redistribution, social justice, and egalitarianism, frequently directing criticism towards financial elites and capitalist structures (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). This form is based on issues concerning national identity, cultural uniformity, and immigration policies. It frequently singles out ethnic minorities and external influences as targets of critique (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Populism is not a recent phenomenon but has its roots in responses to perceived failures of democratic governance throughout history. Over time, numerous attempts have been made to define and classify this popular political phenomenon into distinct types.

The study has two broad research questions

RQ1: To what extent political parties in Pakistan use social media platforms to promote their populist narratives?

RQ2: What are the similarities and the differences in the social media strategies used by the political parties in Pakistan to promote their populist narratives?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the quantitative method of manual content analysis to examine the extent to which the political parties in Pakistan utilized their social media platforms to advance their populist narratives and what were the similarities and differences in their social media strategies.

The study sample comprised of the four major political parties in Pakistan such as Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Jamaat-e-Islami and Pakistan People's Party. In total 1200 posts, 300 posts from each political party's official Facebook page were analyzed and examined between the time frame of November 2023 to May 2024. During this time period, the ideological and the communication style of populism employed by the above-mentioned political parties was analyzed.

The study carefully examined the six key variables found in the posts from the official Facebook pages of each party such anti-elitism, pro-people, us vs. them narrative, emotionalism, demonization and colloquialism in order to find out the similarities and differences in the populist strategies employed by the political parties in Pakistan to amplify their narrative.

The conceptual and operational definitions of the variables measured in this study are:

"Anti-Elitism" criticizes the established elites, institutions, or privileged groups who are disconnected from the common people. Populist leaders present themselves as the representatives of the common people and claim to go against corrupt elites who they believe are benefiting from the existing power dynamics. These leaders portray these elites as disconnected, selfish, or responsible for societal problems (Mény & Surel , 2002).

کیا 9 مئی کے فالس فلیگ آپریشن کو جواز بنا کر کئے جانے والے اقدامات یہ ظاہر نہیں کرتے کہ اسٹیبلشمنٹ اس کی آڑ میں جمہوریت کو سبوتاژ کر کے ریاست پر اپنی گرفت کو مضبوط کرنا مقصود تھا تاکہ گندم اسکینڈل جیسی وارداتیں ڈالنا آسان ہو۔

#May9th_FalseFlag

This statement, shared by PTI on Facebook fit in the category of anti-elitism where PTI portrayed the establishment as corrupt elite benefiting from the existing power dynamic.

In the context of political discourse, "Pro-people" refers to the rhetoric where leaders position themselves as leaders of the common people and they prioritize the values and interests of the common people (Mény & Surel , 2002).

تعلیم, صحت,انفراسٹرکچر کی ترقی اولین ترجیح رہی ہے 2000, ارب روپے کا کسان پیکج دیا , مفت بیج "سستی کھاد , زرعی ٹیوب ویلز پر رعایتی بجلی فراہم کی ,بلوچستان بھر میں دانش سکول کا جال بچھائیں گے انشاءاللہ

This statement was shared by PMLN on Facebook and it fit the category of "Pro-people" where PMLN states that its focus and efforts have always been for the public's welfare, in the past and it will be in the future as well. The "Us vs them" creates a division in the society, majorly between the perceived common people and a perceived opposing group known as the elites (Mudde, 2004).

کیا آپ جانتے پاکستان میں غربت، بیروگازی اورپسماندگی کی سب سے بڑی وجہ کیا ہے؟ پاکستانی اشرافیہ۔ جی ہاں !پاکستانی اشرافیہ جو ہر سال 1.7 ارب ڈالر کی مراعات حاصل کرتی ہے یعنی 4700 ارب پاکستانی روپے۔ اور اس اشرافیہ کی سرپرستی کرتی ہیں پاکستان کی تینوں بڑی سیاسی جماعتیں۔ جی ہاں !حکومت کسی بھی جماعت کی ہو،اشرافیہ کی یہ مراعات کبھی ختم نہیں ہوتیں۔ اشرافیہ کو یہ ساری مراعات غریب عوام کے ٹیکسوں کے پیسے سے دی جاتی ہیں۔ عوام کاپیسہ جو تعلیم صحت صاف پانی اور بنیادی سہولتوں پر خرچ ہونا چاہیئے وہ اشرافیہ کی مراعات پرخرچ ہورہاہے۔

اور تینوں بڑی سیاسی جماعتیں اس اشرافیہ کی مخافظ اور سرپرست ہیں کیونکہ اشرافیہ ان جماعتوں کے اقتدار کی محافظ ہے۔ اس لیے اشرافیہ اور ان جماعتوں سے جان چھڑانے کے لیے ۸ فروری کو ترازو پر مہر لگائیے۔

This statement was shared by JI on Facebook and it fits the category of "Us vs Them" where JI claims that the elite are the reason for poverty, underdevelopment and unemployment in Pakistan and to get rid of them, Pakistan must choose JI as it is a true representative of the common people.

In the political discourse, "emotionalism" is the use of language that evokes and appeals to the emotions of the people (Block & Negrine, 2017). Political leaders use emotional tone to connect to the common people to influence and shape their opinion. Populists infuse emotions like fear, anger, hope and empathy in their messages to resonate to the concerns and experiences of the common people that they claim to represent.

آج کا دن وہ دن ہے جب ریاست نے قومی لیڈر کے گھر پر حملہ کیا مگر پاکستانی غیور عوام نے ظلم جبر اور فسطائیت کا سامنا کیا، نہتے تھے اور مقابلہ اسلحے سے لیس افراد سے تھا مگر ہمت و حوصلے بلند تھے سلام ہے پاکستان کی اس بہادر قوم پر جو حق کی خاطر ہر ظلم و جبر کے آگے ڈھال بن جاتی ہے۔

An emotional statement, shared by PTI on Facebook where it pays tribute to the supporters that remained steadfast even when they got attacked and faced the highest degree of fascism by the state. The term "demonization" describes the portrayal of elites as evil or morally corrupts by the populist leaders (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016). Populists gain support by painting opponents in a negative light by discrediting and vilifying them, and demonizing them in the public's eyes.

"Imran Khan undermined the Pakistan Army, damaged public property, and cultivated an environment of civil war. The people of Pakistan must now stand united and hold this enemy of our country responsible for his actions.

#فتنہ_عمران_کا_بدلہ_ووٹ_سے

This statement was shared by PMLN on its Facebook page, demonizing Imran Khan by portraying him as the enemy of the state in public's eyes.

Colloquialism involves the use of informal and everyday language to communicate with the public (Kriesi, 2018). Populists use this style of communication to establish a sense of relatability and familiarity between them and their audience.

اس وقت بادشاہ پیچھے بیٹھا ہوا ہے اور محسن نقوی وائسرائے بنا ہوا ہے،شہباز شریف فیتے کاٹتا پھر رہا ہے اس کے پاس کوئی طاقت نہیں ہے۔
بانی چیئرمین عمران خان۔

#ReleaseImranKhan

This informal statement was shared by PTI on its Facebook page, casually mentioning the Prime Minister of Pakistan with an intention of mocking him.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The study aimed to analyze that to what extent the political parties in Pakistan engaged in populist tendencies on social media to promote their agendas and to know the similarities and differences in their political strategies. In the first step, the study investigated the distribution of populist attributes produced by selected political parties on Facebook and to what extent these political parties engaged in the populist tendencies

Populist Attribute	JI N (%)	PMLN N (%)	PPP N (%)	PTI N (%)	Total N (%)
Anti-Elitism	16 (5)	9 (3)	2 (1)	19 (6)	46 (4)
Pro People	51 (17)	86 (29)	40 (13)	34 (11)	211 (18)
Us vs Them	73 (24)	59 (20)	39 (13)	62 (21)	233 (19)
Emotionalism	14 (5)	38 (13)	42 (14)	86 (29)	180 (15)
Demonization	22 (7)	20 (7)	3 (1)	37 (12)	82 (7)
Colloquialism	0 (0)	4 (1)	0 (0)	16 (5)	20 (2)
None of these	124 (41)	84 (28)	174 (58)	46 (15)	428 (36)
Total	300 (100)	300 (100)	300 (100)	300 (100)	1200 (100)

The above table provides a detailed analysis of how the different political parties in Pakistan (JI, PML-N, PPP, and PTI) engaged in various populist attributes like "Anti Elitism", "Pro People", "Us vs Them", "Emotionalism", "Demonization" and "Colloquialism".

PTI has the highest overall populist tendencies, leading in emotionalism (28.7%) and demonization (12.3%). PTI's populist strategies includes emotional appeals and portraying the political rivals as enemies of the people to sway public opinion and solidify their narrative of moral superiority while PMLN has the second-highest populist tendencies, 28.7% of their posts depended upon the "pro-people" strategy and 19.7% depended upon the "us vs them" narrative.

In the next step, the study analyzed the second question which is about the engagement of the political parties.

Report

Political Party		Comments	Likes	Shares
JI	Mean	58.31	2261.70	234.40
PMLN	Mean	108.34	1462.24	135.01
PPP	Mean	64.19	1261.82	137.54
PTI	Mean	38.74	2388.07	226.29
Total	Mean	67.40	1843.46	183.31

This table shows the engagement of political parties (comments, likes, and shares) across four political parties (JI, PMLN, PPP, and PTI) on Facebook

PTI leads in social media engagement with the highest average likes (2388.07) and shares (226.29), suggesting strong support and interaction from its followers but it has the lowest average comments (38.74) compared to other parties. JI follows closely behind in terms of shares (234.40) and shows a solid number of likes (2261.70), but its engagement through comments (58.31) is moderate.

PMLN stands out with the highest number of comments (108.34), indicating active discussions among its followers, although its average likes (1462.24) and shares (135.01) are lower than PTI and JI. PPP, while maintaining consistent engagement, shows the lowest averages across likes (1261.82), shares (137.54), and

comments (64.19), suggesting more stable but less intense interaction.

Populist attributes	Comments	Likes	Shares
Anti-elitism	126.11	1913.67	252.15
Pro-people	63.76	1632.35	137.00
Us vs them	58.33	1556.00	169.51
Emotionalism	69.63	2571.54	234.54
Demonization	63.83	1434.73	188.79
Colloquialism	32.80	1890.30	205.30
Total	67.40	1843.46	183.31

The above table provides a statistical overview of different categories of populism based on engagement. Total average engagement across all categories (1200 posts) had 67.40 comments, 1843.46 likes and 183.31 shares.

The Anti-Elitism attribute found in 46 posts, had the highest average comments (126.11), along with a significant number of shares (252.15). It also received 1913.67 likes on average, placing it above the total engagement average. Despite being shown in fewer posts, the strong engagement for anti-elitism suggest that anti-elitist content resonates deeply with the audience.

There were 211 posts in which pro people messaging was visible and it garnered 63.76 average comments and 137.00 shares. Even though it generated fewer shares than anti-elitism, it gathered 1632.35 likes which shows moderate engagement. With the highest number of posts, this category had the highest number of posts but it reflected less intense interaction compared to others.

Emotionalism was present in 180 posts. This category demonstrated the highest engagement among all categories with 69.63 average comments, 234.54 shares, and 2571.54 likes. This indicates that audience resonates strongly with emotional appeals and thus makes it the most effective populist attribute in terms of overall engagement.

Emotionalism and anti-elitism tend to garner higher engagement in terms of likes and shares, while content with colloquialism is more frequently shared despite receiving fewer comments. This indicates that emotional and anti-elitist content gathers more active discussions, while informal, relatable language gathers more passive interaction like sharing.

In the last step, they study analyzed the correlation between the various attributes of populism.

Correlations

		Anti Elitism	Pro People	Us vs Them	Emotional Tone	Demonization	Colloquialism
Anti Elitism	Pearson Correlation	1	-.079**	.180**	.374**	.566**	.227**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N		1200	1199	1200	1200	1200
Pro People	Pearson Correlation		1	.308**	.143**	-.036	-.103**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			<.001	<.001	.212	<.001
	N			1199	1200	1200	1200

Us vs Them	Pearson Correlation			1	.311**	.263**	.029
	Sig. (2-tailed)				<.001	<.001	.308
	N				1199	1199	1199
Emotional Tone	Pearson Correlation				1	.392**	.152**
	Sig. (2-tailed)					<.001	<.001
	N					1200	1200
Demonization	Pearson Correlation					1	.296**
	Sig. (2-tailed)						<.001
	N						1200
Colloquialism	Pearson Correlation						1
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N						

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This table shows the Pearson correlations between different populist attributes such as Anti-Elitism, Pro-People, Us vs Them, Emotionalism, Demonization, and Colloquialism. There is a strong correlation found between Anti-Elitism and Demonization (0.566) suggesting that these two populist attributes are frequently used together. Posts that criticize elites are more likely to also demonize political rivals. Us vs Them and Pro-People also show a positive correlation (0.308), suggesting that narratives that contrast "us" with "them" are often paired with pro-people messaging.

Emotionalism shows a moderate correlation with Anti-Elitism (0.374), suggesting that emotional appeals are often used alongside while criticizing the elites. Even though Anti-Elitism and Pro-People have a slight negative correlation (-0.079) which suggests that they rarely appear together, there are no strong negative correlations present which shows that different populist attributes are not mutually exclusive. This means that multiple populist attributes can be used in the same post and their presence does not reduce the likelihood of other attributes being present.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study provided a comprehensive view of how the different political parties in Pakistan engaged in populist tendencies on social media and how similarly and differently they used these strategies to attract larger audiences to advance their agendas. The first question was about the distribution of the populist attributes used by the different political parties in Pakistan.

PTI engaged in the most types of populist attributes, particularly in the emotionalism and us vs them categories. PTI also used the us vs them narrative suggesting itself as a better choice than its political rivals. Even though, anti-elitism had been used less frequently, but PTI still led in engaging in it as compared to the other parties. Demonization and colloquialism found in PTI's posts showed that PTI used aggressive and informal language to connect to its audience at times. These political actors (populists) use populism as a strategy. As (Enli, G. 2025) argue that politicians use authenticity only as a tool to persuade, not to be honest. Politics become more emotionalized and polarized after emergence of digital platforms and Emotions are considered an important element of populist politics and public debate and these emotions have a mobilizing potential use by populist's leaders around the world Kluknavska. A., Novotna, M., & Eisele, O. (2025)

PMLN followed a different strategy where its emphasis was on pro people messaging. With the use of this strategy PMLN portrayed itself as advocate of people welfare and the common man. PMLN also engaged in us vs them narrative and emotionalism and its use of anti-elitism and demonization was relatively low as compared to PTI. PMLN focused more on the positive populism, advocating for the common man rather than attacking the political rivals as heavily as PTI.

PPP used the populist attributes less frequently, where some of its posts employed the us vs them strategy and some of them used emotionalism. PPP's focus on pro people messaging was also significant but it was less than PMLN. Anti-elitism and demonization were found rarely and that suggested that PPP adopted a less aggressive tone in their populist narrative as compared to other parties.

Interestingly, JI engaged the least in populist tendencies. It made use of the us vs them narratives and pro people messaging but it relied very less on emotionalism and demonization. The use of anti-elitism was more common for JI than for PMLN or PPP, but their overall engagement with populist tendencies was the lowest as a big number of their posts contain none of the populist attributes measured.

These findings suggested that the political parties in Pakistan especially PTI and PMLN engaged in populist tendencies more heavily as compared to PPP and JI. PTI's use of emotional and divisive strategies like us vs them and emotionalism aligned with global trends of populist parties employing aggressive communication strategies (Abuín-Vences & García-Rosales, 2023).

PMLN adopted a pro people approach that focuses on a more positive, and people centric approach and sometimes this narrative coexists with the us vs them narrative. Thus, the use of various populist attributes by the political parties suggested that they have different political strategies to garner support from their audience. PTI used emotionalism and demonization to evoke strong emotional reaction and PMLN adopted the pro people approach by portraying itself as the voice for the common man. PPP's approach was quite restrained and JI engaged the least in populist communication.

These strategies used by the political parties on social media influence the political discourse and shape the public's perception in Pakistan (Khan, Rafique, & Nasim, 2023). And as western scholarship suggests, populist parties frequently capitalize on social media platforms to interact directly with their voters and broadcast their messages to a global audience (Tufekci, 2017).

The findings of the study regarding the engagement of the political parties suggest that PTI received the overall highest engagement in terms of likes and shares and that suggests their widespread popularity on social media. As the study of (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014) suggests that PTI's social media campaigns often employ emotionally charged language and imagery, reinforcing its populist message and appealing to a broad audience that is disillusioned with the status quo.

JI showed strong social media presence with second highest number of likes and shares on average. PMLN's positive populist rhetoric attracted strong discussions by garnering the highest comments but lagged behind PTI in likes and shares. PPP however showed lower engagement as compared to the other parties, with the lowest numbers in likes, shares and comments. The high levels of likes and shares of PTI's content suggests that the audience resonates with PTI and that is the reason PTI gathered higher engagement on social media. Research indicates the populist political parties garner more engagement on social media as compared to other political parties (Davidson & Enos, 2024).

PMLN has engaged in positive populism majorly due to its pro people rhetoric. Its content managed to generate a high volume of comments but resulted in fewer shares and likes. This indicates that their populist content lagged behind in broad social media engagement while generating a high volume of discussion. Their populist rhetoric resonates more in terms of eliciting responses rather than broader social media engagement. The overall low engagement was received by PPP in terms of likes, shares and comments and it suggests that their social media presence is not very strong. Political parties that garner higher levels of engagement on social media platforms by employing the populist rhetoric tend to shape public opinion more effectively

(Zarubin & Achkasova, 2024). PTI exemplified this trend as it leverages social media to gather support more effectively than other political parties.

The findings of the study regarding the engagement received by populist attributes suggested that anti-elitism garnered the highest level of engagement by receiving the most comments, likes, and shares. As Davidson & Enos (2024) revealed that Right-wing populist content garners the highest engagement, suggesting its popularity and impact on online platforms. Emotionalism attracted significant engagement, particularly in likes, even though the number of shares shows some variability, suggesting that that emotional content might gain strong but divided reactions.

People centric content received moderate levels of likes but received fewer comments and shares as compared to other populist attributes suggesting that these posts attract audience but don't spark as much discussion. Political posts with the us vs them narrative showed moderate engagement across all metrics suggesting that there is a steady but less intense interaction.

Demonization attracted a decent level of comments and shares but received fewer likes overall suggesting that due to the polarizing nature of demonization, it is effective at maintaining interaction but it may not be able to help posts go viral as compared to other populist strategies.

Colloquial posts gathered consistent engagement through likes and shares but they attracted fewer comments suggesting that even though audience does resonate with informal language but these posts don't invoke debates.

The findings of study suggested that various attributes of populism were correlated in certain ways. There was a strong positive correlation between anti-elitism and demonization suggesting that these two attributes often coexist as anti-elitist narrative frequently involves the negative portrayal of political rivals. This connection among the two suggested that messages that criticize the elites are often combined with attacks on the opponents.

A moderate correlation between anti-elitism and emotionalism was also visible and it indicated that anti-elitist narrative often carries an emotional appeal and that intensifies its impact. Anti-elitist messages are not just criticisms but such content is produced to evoke emotional responses from the audience.

On the other hand, there were weak negative correlations between pro people messaging and other populist attributes like anti-elitism and colloquialism which suggested that it was used more independently. Pro-people content focuses on positive messaging about serving the public and does not rely heavily on attacking the elites or using informal language.

The study found a strong correlation between emotionalism and demonization suggesting that emotional and negative portrayal often goes hand in hand. However, emotionalism had a moderate correlation with the us vs them narrative as when populist parties use emotional appeals, they frequently create a clear separation among themselves and their political rivals.

Colloquialism had the weakest correlations with other populist attributes, suggesting that the use of informal language tends to exist independently from other populist attributes. This indicated that while colloquial language may be used to connect with the audience, it does not strongly align with the emotional, divisive, or negative strategies typically associated with populism.

The study suggested that populist attributes like anti-elitism, demonization, and emotionalism, are frequently used together and they form a strong yet effective combination of negative and emotional expression. However, attributes like pro people and colloquialism are more likely to be used independently as they focus on positive messaging or informal connection without heavily relying on other populist strategies.

Conclusion

Social media plays a powerful role in influencing and shaping the public opinion and it provided a direct and unmediated platform to the political leaders to engage and interact with their audience. Political leaders

leverage social media to garner support and promote their political agendas. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter help these political leaders to produce personalized and interactive messages, making it easier for them to connect and mobilize their supporters. Populism, as a political strategy thrives on the emotional and divisive nature of social media, where political leaders use populist narratives to polarize debates and frame issues in terms of "us vs. them." It is a challenging issue both globally and in Pakistan as it often takes advantage of the social divisions and emotional grievances to gather support.

Populist leaders effectively utilize social media to capitalize on grievances, portray themselves as champions of the masses, demonize the elites or their political rivals, thrive on emotional appeals and vilify the dissenting voices. Populist political actors use social media platforms to interact with their audience as it allowed them to bypass traditional media, tailor their messages to target groups, and cultivate a personal yet relatable image (Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019). However, the impact of populist strategies on political discourse is alarming, as it can worsen the political polarization and can narrow the audience's ability to engage in constructive discussions similarly social media is a very helpful tool for advancing democracy since it gives political parties a very effective platform for interacting with their audience however there are negative implications of it as well.

6.3 Limitations and Suggestions

Despite providing valuable insights into how political parties in Pakistan used populist tactics to shape the public opinion, it has limitations. This research solely focused on one social media platform and future studies could expand the analysis to include others. Additionally, this study examined six populist attributes such as anti-elitism, pro-people, us vs them narrative, emotionalism, demonization and colloquialism, but future research could explore other elements of populist communication such as fear mongering, nationalism, victimhood or scapegoating to gain a deeper understanding of how political discourse is shaped online.

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