
Hashtag Politics and Voter Mobilization: Comparative Study of Official X Activity by Pakistan's Leading Parties During the 2024 General Election Campaign Period

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Abstract:

The study examines the role of hashtags in voter mobilization in Pakistan's 2024 general elections campaigns. Focusing on the Social media platform X(Twitter), the research analyzes the official accounts of Pakistani political actors on Twitter, such as Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf(PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-N(PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The research uses the quantitative content analyses of the political posts shared on the official political parties' Twitter page and their frequency of posting content during the election period of 2024 from 2nd Feb to 8th Feb, including the polling day. A total of 320 posts were analyzed to identify the pattern of hashtag usage to prompt their campaign on social media, the engagement level they received, and the political messaging.

The findings reveal that hashtags play a significant role in content visibility, and political actor use this advantage in their campaigns. Because now people are the active users of social media as compared to before, they react to the posts and show their interests, and these engagement metrics help political actors to connect with the voters, show their activities, and tell them about their new political policies, and get support, and can strengthen their influence on them and change their perception about them through their online campaigns.

Keywords: Hashtags, Elections campaigns, social media, Political actors, 2024 elections, visibility, algorithm.

Introduction

Social media has evolved beyond its traditional role of providing information, entertainment, and education, and now plays a very important role in political communication between voters and the representatives of different parties. In Pakistan, political parties began using social media after 2013 and connected with people to keep them updated about their rallies and mobilized them during election campaigns. These campaigns are conducted on many social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and especially Twitter, which plays a very important role in political communication of voter engagement and strengthening democratic participation.

Traditionally, political parties rely on the print and electronic media to communicate their ideas, policies, and activities to the public. Communication is relatively slow, and people depend on the newspaper, radio, and television to know what is happening. However, the emergence of social media platforms has changed the way people consume news and build their perspective. In the early times, the public was just passive users of the content broadcast through traditional channels of communication, but now they have become active users of the content and give their instant reviews about the happenings and give their piece of thought. Enabling continuous real-time access to information about political content (McKenzie, 2013). The democratic landscape of the country is

shaped by political processes where the politicians are the representatives of the public concerns. This process is done through physical gathering of the people, where they address supporters directly, and people also get a sometimes-limited chance to participate in table talks. In the context united states, politicians often communicate with the public through debates (Mohd, Hed, & Grasso, 2020). Similarly, in countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, political rallies, manifestos, and speeches play a very important role in influencing the success of the political leaders and parties (Malakar et al., 2020).

Most political parties are very active on social media platforms to connect with their supporters and enhance their outreach and engagement strategy. In Pakistan, major political parties such as Pakistan Muslim League-N(PMNL), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have a large number of followers on social media, especially on Facebook and Twitter. These platforms are commonly used to update them about their rallies, criticize the opponents, and share the party's key political decisions, which play a significant role in shaping public discourse. Imran Khan has 9.1 million followers on Twitter, positioning him among the most influential political figures in the world. In comparison, Nawaz Sharif has 5.1 million and Bilawal Bhutto has 3.9 million followers on Twitter (Kemp, S. 2021). These digital reach shows the potential of social media in influencing public discourse.

The widespread use of digital propaganda presents critical challenges to democratic values, and freedom has significant effects on democracy in Pakistan. By shaping public opinion and controlling the flow of information, political actors, particularly populist and authoritarian forces, can weaken democratic processes and reduce public trust in institutions. which results in society becoming more divided and political polarization increases, limited political debates and discussion (Muzaffar et al., 2020; Sabeen, Farooq & Naseer, 2023).

Significance

The study titled "Hashtag Politics and Voter Mobilization: Comparative Study of Official X Activity by Pakistan's Leading Parties During the 2024 General Election Campaign Period" has significant importance in understanding the evolving nature of political communication in Pakistan in this digital era. In recent years, social media platforms, particularly X (Twitter), have transformed how political parties interact with voters, beyond the traditional methods of communicating with voters through rallies and broadcast news and interviews on traditional platforms like television, radio, and newspapers, without having direct control over the broadcasting. This shift has made digital platforms central to election campaigns, especially in engaging younger and more digitally active audiences.

One of the key contributions of this study is its focus on hashtag politics, which has become a powerful tool for shaping public discourse. Hashtags help political parties represent themselves as they want and get interaction in real time, create trends, and keep their supporters updated about their polices. By analyzing how major political parties such as Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Pakistan Muslim League-N, and Pakistan People's Party utilize hashtags, this research provides insight into the strategies used to attract attention, influence opinions, and mobilize supporters during the 2024 election campaign.

Another important aspect of this research is its contribution to understanding political inequalities in digital spaces. Social media platforms provide all political leaders to run their campaign, but who gets more visibility its depend on how many followers and their content strategy. By comparing the official X activity of leading political parties, this study sheds light on how digital advantages may reinforce existing political dominance.

Additionally, this research is valuable in the context of democratic development in Pakistan. This study provides valuable insights into how digital platforms strengthen and challenge the democratic processes. While social media can promote transparency and engagement, it can also contribute to misinformation and polarization. It's essential to understand the political dynamics to evaluate the impact of digital campaigning on democratic participation.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how political parties in Pakistan use social media during the 2024 elections.
2. To examine the role of hashtag-based communication in shaping political messaging and online discourse during the election campaign.
3. To compare the hashtag strategies used by different political parties and identify variations in their digital campaigning approaches.
4. To explore the relationship between digital visibility (follower base and engagement) and the success of hashtag-driven political campaigns.

Literature Review

Digital propaganda has become an important tool for political manipulation in Pakistan. Research shows that social media platforms are widely used to spread misinformation on the internet. According to Muzaffar, Chohdhry, and Afzal (2019), digital platforms in Pakistan are used to mislead the public, just to show their political opponent as weaker and to promote their own agenda. This issue became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, where false information about the virus and vaccines created confusion and fear among the public (Stromback et al., 2020).

Research shows that politicians' use of Twitter is still developing and characterized by both opportunities and structural limitations. There is the best example of Barack Obama in 2011, "Twitter Town Hall," which introduced hashtag-driven engagement on Twitter, showing how using hashtags we can gain engagement more than usual, "#Askobama." Using citizens to submit their questions directly to them (Shear, 2011). Although this idea was created to direct interactions with the public, the results of many questions were ignored, and the responses were delivered through traditional means of communication, although it should be in a concise style. This raises the question of whether such platforms can truly prompt public participation or just uplift the prominent voices.

Research shows that political communication on twitter influenced by popularity and branding, where highly visible and influential actors attract disproportionate levels of engagement. Users are more likely to engage with those who have a high engagement rate, which is measured through engagement matrices, and followers consider them as well-known figures. People tend to follow, retweet, and support content that is already popular. Zappavigna (2011) conceptualizes this phenomenon as ambient affiliation hashtags help create a sense of connection among users, who don't directly interact with each other. Politicians use different communication platforms according to their goals, but mostly they use Twitter as their first means of communication to maintain support and win the elections. Lassen and Brown (2011) argue that politicians actively seek opportunities, highlight their policies, and take credit for their achievements. They avoid traditional media to broadcast their news because they don't have direct control over how their news is presented by broadcast, so they prefer social media to get full control over the transmission.

Populist political actors in Pakistan have strategically leveraged social media to mobilize support and communicate their messages. For example, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, led by Imran Khan, effectively used platforms like Facebook and Twitter during the 2018 general elections. This digital strategy played a pivotal role in engaging younger demographics and amplifying the party's political messaging, thereby contributing to its electoral success (Eijaz, 2013). Twitter gives more visibility to political content and entertainment content compared to other voices, like marginalized voices, and it works on the hashtag process. It's all on the algorithms, which hashtags should get visibility or not (Nayab, Bhadur, 2026). The studies show that the effectiveness of platforms like X in voter mobilization is not uniform; parties with large followings and strong digital presence get more engagement compared to others through hashtags-driven campaigns (Amjad et al., 2020).

Political movements in Pakistan have increasingly used social media platforms for political mobilization and discourse in Pakistan, extending beyond mainstream political parties to include grassroots movements. For example, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has effectively utilized digital platforms to highlight human rights issues and engage a wider audience despite facing censorship and state pressure (Alvernia, 2023). Within the framework of hashtag politics, platforms

like X allow such movements to amplify their messages through hashtag-driven campaigns where hashtag-driven communication enhances visibility, fosters ambient affiliation, and contributes to indirect voter mobilization. However, challenges such as online harassment, surveillance, and platform manipulation can limit the effectiveness of these digital mobilization efforts (Bano, Bilal & Azam, 2021).

Twitter has become a strong and effective platform for political candidates to directly connect with their voters and increase participation. As Parker (2012) notes, Candidates can use the platform to respond to criticism, target specific groups, tailor messages to specific voter segments, and experiment with campaign narratives through real-time interactions. They are also able to address voters' concerns, request support, solicit electoral support, and disseminate information efficiently through embedded links. This makes political participation more convenient, as users can engage simply by interacting with posts. Within the framework of hashtag politics, platforms such as X further enhance this process by amplifying campaign messages, and encouraging voter mobilization through targeted and accessible digital engagement. Hashtags play an important role in spreading political messages quickly on platforms like X. A notable example is the use of the hashtag **#dontdoublemyrate**, which was embedded within a political speech and rapidly spread across Twitter, appearing in more than 20,000 posts within a short time and becoming a trending topic (Tumulty, 2012).

Research Questions

RQ1. How do major political parties in Pakistan use X (Twitter) during the 2024 general election campaign period?

RQ2. What role does hashtag-based communication play in shaping political messaging and online discourse during election campaigns?

RQ3. How does hashtag usage contribute to voter mobilization and political participation during election campaigns?

Methodology

This study uses a quantitative content analysis approach to examine the hashtags' politics during the election of 2024 in Pakistan that how political leaders get visibility and advance their agenda through content strategy on social media, especially the leading platform X(Twitter) for political communication. This comparative study is designed to compare the three different Pakistani political parties' content visibility on Twitter.

Content visibility is based on engagement metrics of the post, such as likes, shares, retweets, and views on the specific post of a political party. The analysis key focuses on the type of hashtag used, the frequency of hashtag usage, and the nature of political massaging. This methodology allows the researcher to examine how hashtag-based communication on digital platforms influences political engagement and voter participation in a comparative context.

Sampling

This study uses a purposive sampling technique on political communication on X(Twitter) during the general elections held in Pakistan in 2024. The sample is drawn from the official accounts of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Pakistan Muslim League-N, and Pakistan People's Party.

The data is collected over one week before the elections held in 2024 from 2nd Feb to 8th Feb which includes the days leading up to the election as well as the polling day. During this period, all posts shared by the selected political parties were collected.

The total number of posts varies across parties of data collected in a week with 155 posts from PTI, 85 posts from PML-N, and 80 posts from PPP. This variation exists because of posting frequency of each party. Since the study start to focus to collect data of post of political parties real-time campaign activity, and all post within the selected timeframe are included rather than equalizing the sample size.

This approach provides an accurate representation of each party's digital activity on X(twitter) and

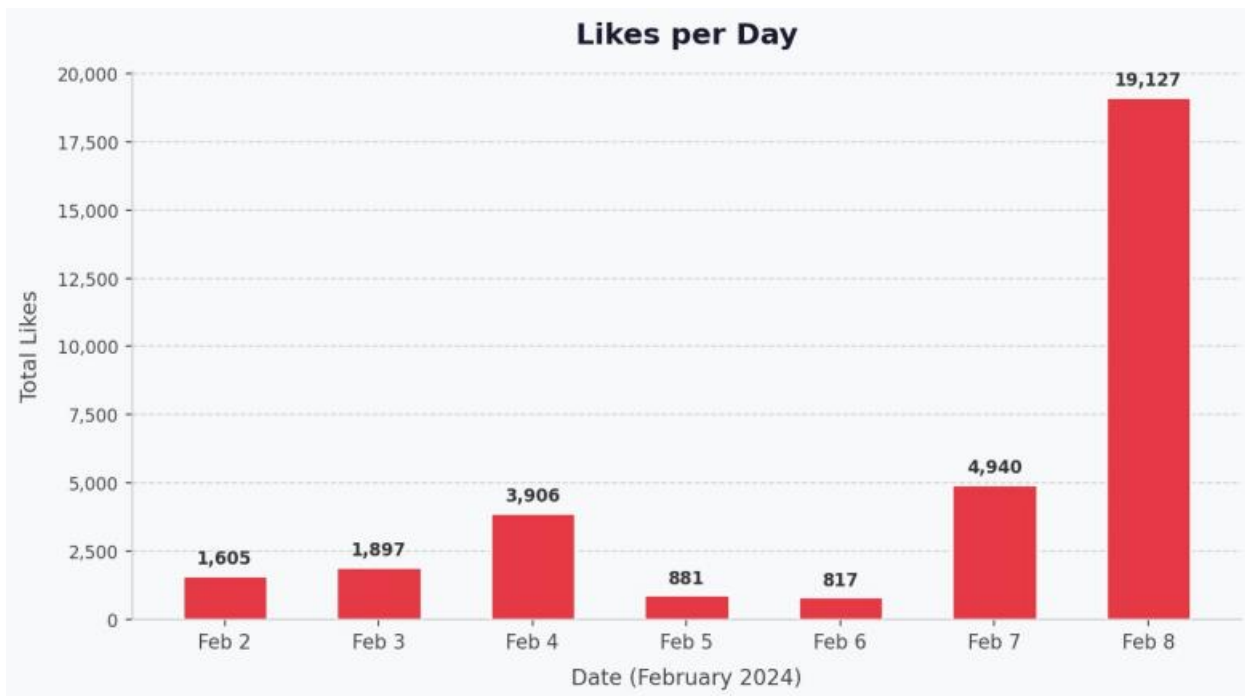
provide the realistic comparison of hashtag use and voter mobilization during the election campaigns which is present on X(twitter).

Results

Dates	Posts	Likes	Repost	Comments
2nd Feb,2024	18	1605	495	40
3rd Feb,2024	13	1897	617	55
4th Feb,2024	15	3906	1170	45
5thFeb,2024	22	881	288	35
6thFeb,2024	21	817	340	45
7thFeb,2024	21	4940	1870	70
8thFeb,2024	45	19127	5433	150

This table shows an overview of the average posts made by PTIs official handle (@PTIofficial) made during the period of 2nd February to 8th February 2024(election day) and this tables shows the average likes reposts and comments each post got which goes out to show how much PTI was active on the social media in this case X. These post mainly promoted their candidates alongside their constitution numbers and their symbols as the party was deprived of its regular electoral symbol which was bat. Alongside these posts some of the post featured the instructions and statements given by prominent leaders (e.g. Imran Khan, Barrister Gohar Khan, Umer Ayyub, etc.). The post frequency and the engagement goes on to show how PTI priorities social media as a tool of campaign and how much people like them there.

Figure no:1



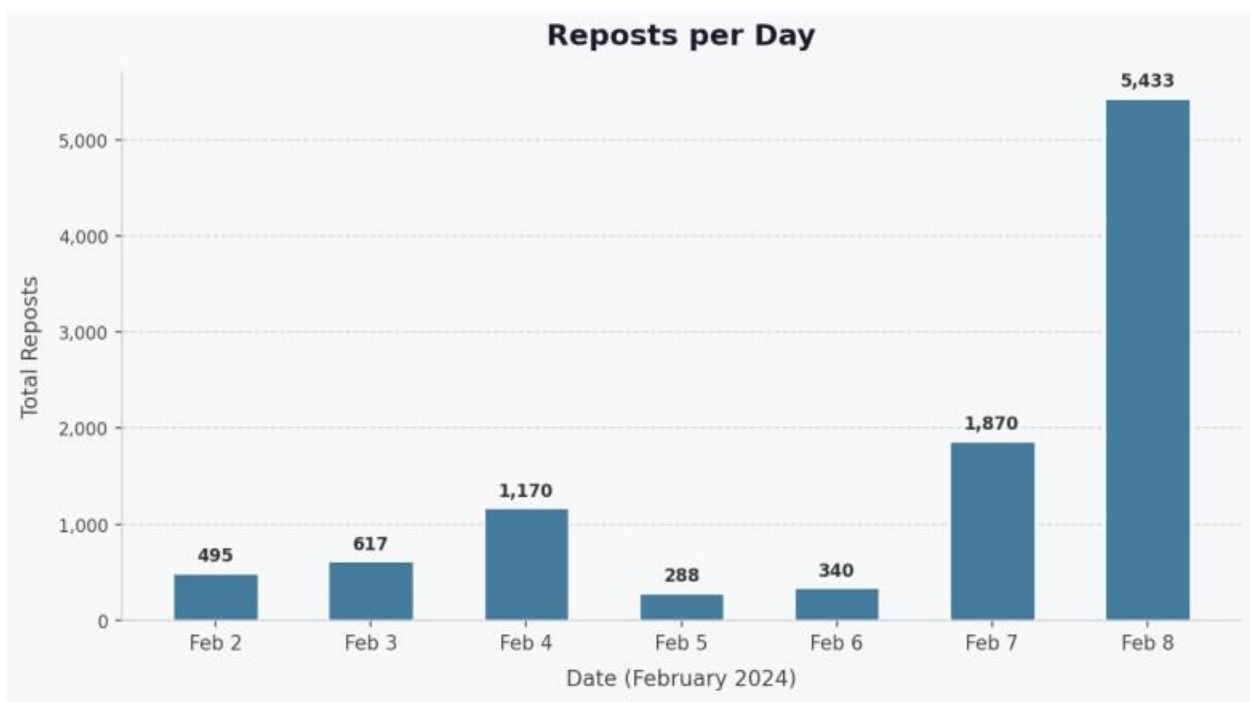
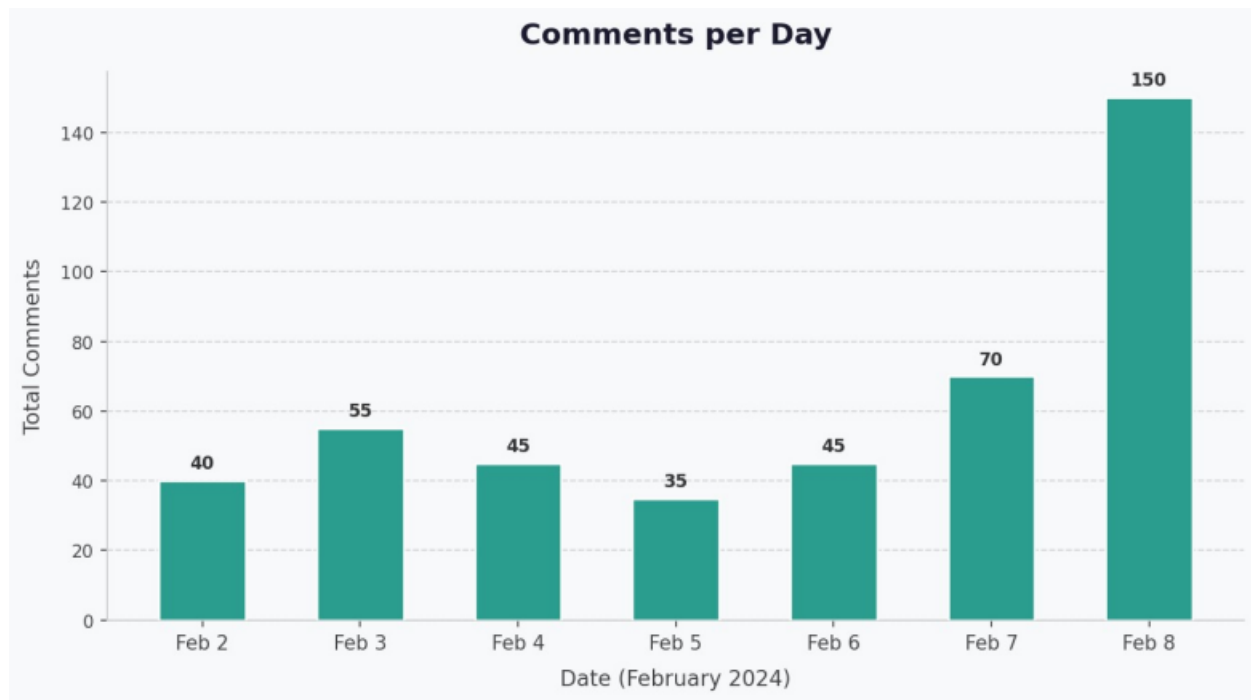


Figure no 2



These histograms show us the engagement parameters that shows us how the likes, reposts and comments average remained on each individual day during week from 2nd Feb till 8th Feb,2024 and these shows us how well the posts did on the polling day and the rest of the week was pretty good as compared to other parties but 5th and 6th Feb were less engaging days for the posts made by PTI.

Dates	Posts	Likes	Repost	Comments
2nd Feb,2024	8	195	103	6
3rd Feb,2024	9	153	70	3
4th Feb,2024	12	110	54	2
5thFeb,2024	7	222	106	2
6thFeb,2024	12	233	98	8
7thFeb,2024	14	203	85	10
8thFeb,2024	23	153	53	9

This table shows an overview of the average posts made by PML(N)'s official handle (@pmln_org) made during the period of 2nd February to 8th February 2024(election day) and this tables shows the average likes reposts and comments each post got which goes out to show how much Pmln was active on the social media in this case X. These post mainly promoted their campaign and the their most successful electoral campaign of Kasur most of the post were made on those topics or some posts were made on the election day to deny the oppositions claim of rigging. The social media activity of Pmln is relatively lower than that of PTI and the average engagement as shown in the table above is much lower than of PTI their best day in terms of engagement remained the 7th Feb the day before polling.

figure no 3
Figure no:4

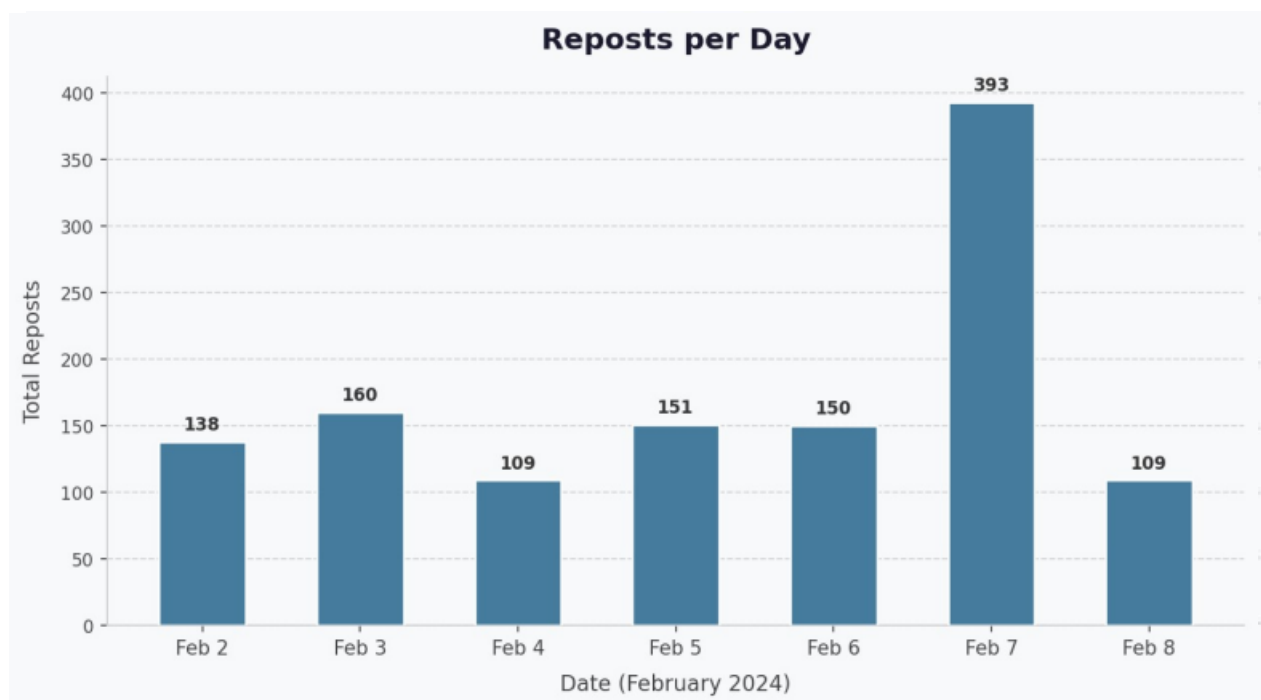
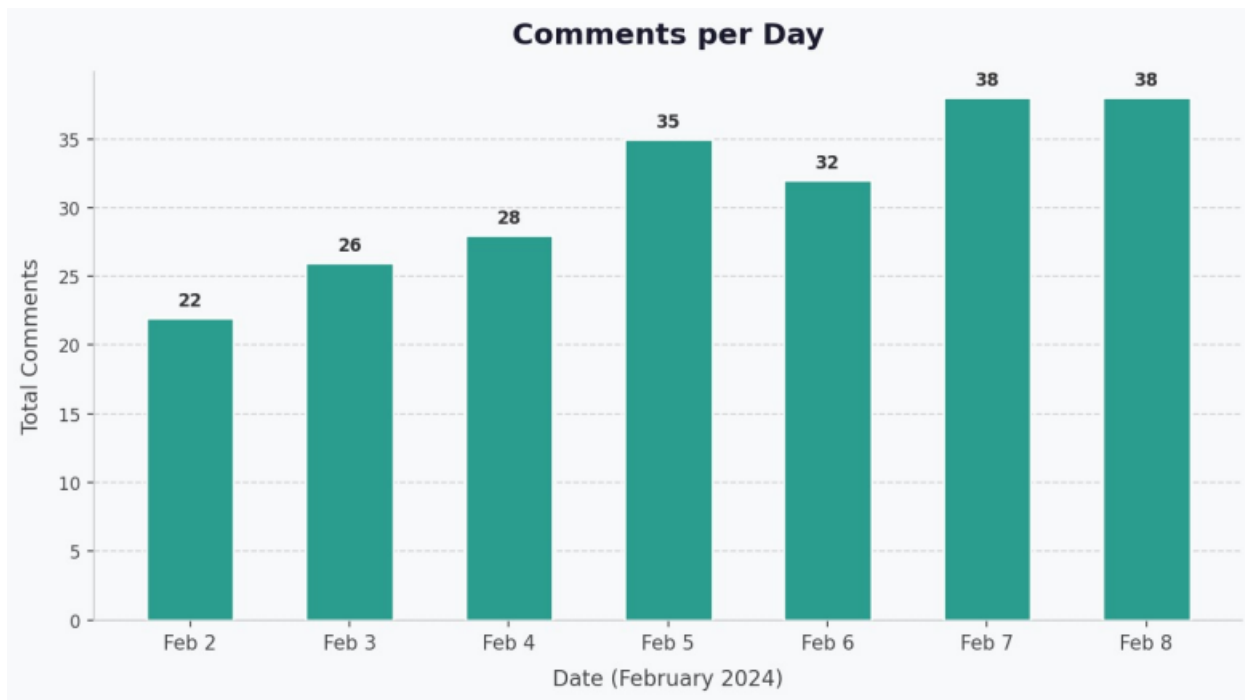


figure 5

These histograms above show us the engagement per day on average. Each graph shows us the likes,



reposts and comments gained by pmln’s posts on X. As per the graph all the days did pretty even in the terms of engagement but 7th Feb was the best performing day for the Pmln by far as compared to other days.

Dates	Posts	Likes	Repost	Comments
2nd Feb,2024	10	195	103	6
3rd Feb,2024	10	153	70	3
4th Feb,2024	8	110	54	2
5thFeb,2024	12	222	106	2
6thFeb,2024	7	233	98	8
7thFeb,2024	13	203	85	10
8thFeb,2024	20	153	53	9

This table shows the posts made by PPP’s official X handle (@MediacellPPP). These posts mainly consisted of the campaign videos and some promoting their candidates. The table show relatively less active account and way lower engagement than of PTI and even lower than that of Pmln. The most active day was the election day itself and the average engagement remains nearly the same all over the week which is pretty low to take in account to as other political parties.

Figure no: 6

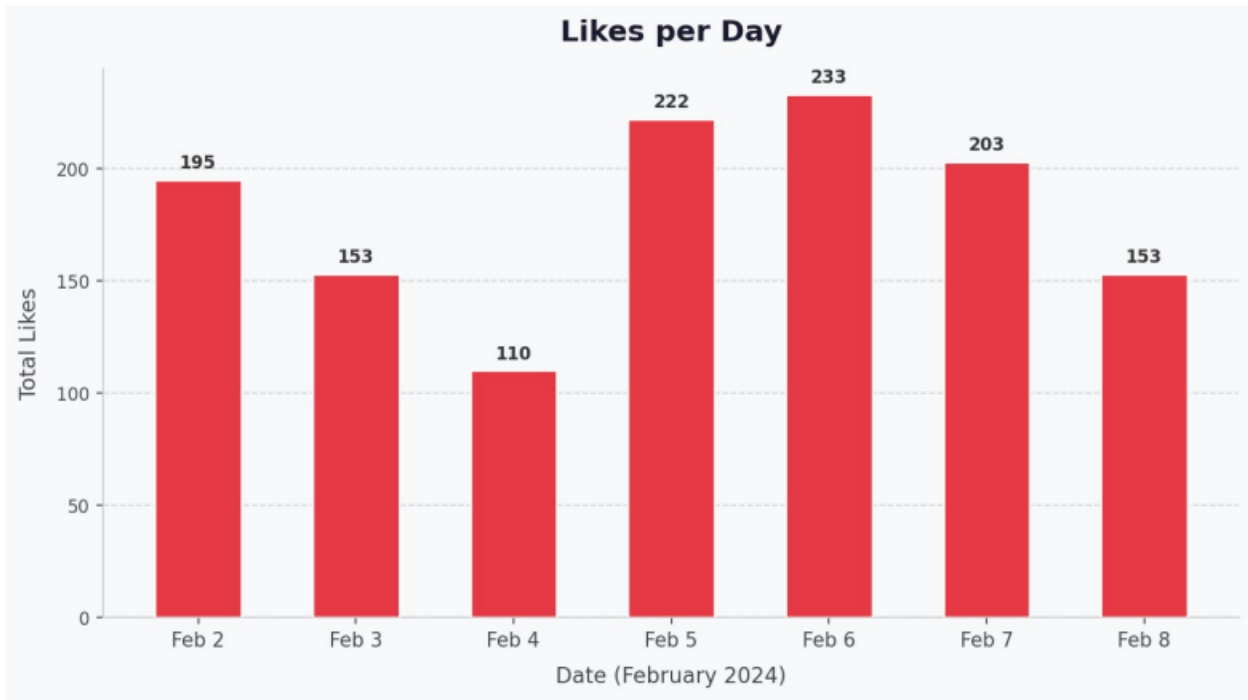


Figure no:7

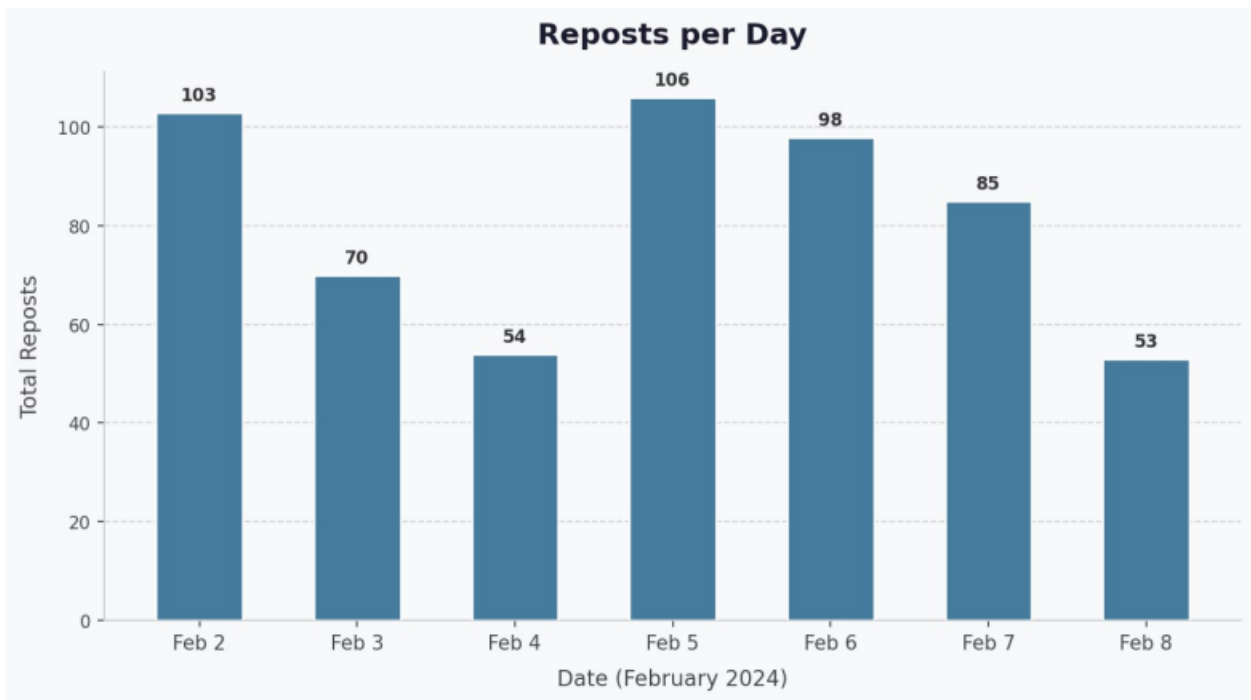
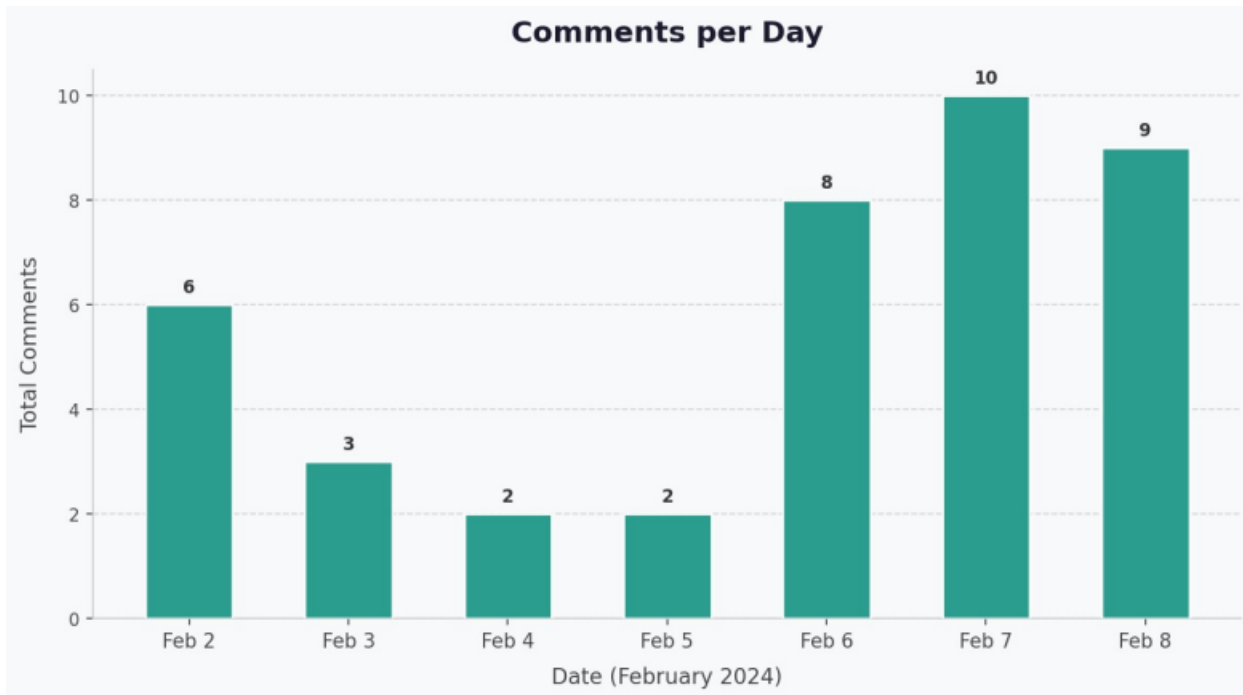


Figure no: 8



The above figures show us the engagement on the posts made by PPP, and these posts, although had very less interactions, as discussed in the table above the engagement graph shows no different picture. All the posts on average performed pretty even all over the week, but the posts performed lowest on the 3rd and 4th Feb. However, if we compare them to other big parties in this case, PTI and PMLN, PPP performed the worst in terms of engagement.

Discussion:

The findings of the paper show how political actors use social media, especially Twitter, actively during elections to mobilize their campaigns and influence the perception of the public through social media posts. The study also shows how different Pakistani political parties get visibility and support on social media during the 2024 elections.

The results show that political parties actively use hashtags for their post to prompt narratives highlighting political issues. The existing literature also supports the same point of view as our results evidence shows that social media has transformed political communication by enabling faster and more direct interaction between voters and political actors, and gives them the opportunity to participate in trending conversations, thereby expanding their reach.

The study also reveals that the party with higher posting frequency and strong digital presence generated more engagement, showing that content visibility is not the same for everyone. This supports the argument that digital platforms may apply some filter on the content visibility and existing political advantages rather than to give equal visibility to all political actors, and this can help during the elections and the 2024 elections, which is the true evidence of it.

The study also highlights the challenge with hashtag politics, where the hashtags play a role in gaining visibility and high engagement it can be a way to misinformation, fake news, selective exposure, and political polarization. The increase of content on social media makes it difficult to control the accuracy of the content and spread of information, which can influence the public perception towards the content and make it difficult to make the right decision during election campaigns. Overall, hashtags play a significant role in modern political campaigning in Pakistan. It provides an opportunity to communicate, but also some inequalities come with it.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of hashtag work and how political parties get visibility

and influence the perception of the public discourse and its role in voter mobilization through a comparative examination of official activity on X (Twitter) during Pakistan's 2024 general election campaign. The findings of the study show the transformation of political communication in the digital age, where on digital platforms like X(Twitter), political actors and voters interact with each other in real time.

The comparative analysis of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) shows that hashtag-driven communication functions as the strategic mechanism for amplifying political narratives, enhancing visibility, and fostering audience engagement. However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies among parties due to differences in follower base, content strategy, and level of activity.

The finding shows that while hashtag politics may be described as "ambient affiliation," enabling users to align with political communities and get real-time access to their new policies and updates. The conclusion of the research highlights the dual nature of political communication in Pakistan. Where hashtag politics serve as both voter mobilization and a mechanism of the structural inequalities. This research contributes to the broader field of political communication by offering empirical insights into the dynamics of digital campaigning and underscores the need for further research into the long-term implications of social media on democratic processes.

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