



Digital Citizenship and the Reconfiguration of Public Participation in Pakistan's Digital Public Sphere: Negotiating Voice, Visibility, and Power

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ABSTRACT

In an era of digital technologies, citizenship, communication, and democratic participation have been fundamentally restructured and new forms of civic engagement in digitally mediated public spheres have emerged. Digital platforms have facilitated new ways of publicizing and participating in politics, but they have also created intricate regimes of algorithmic visibility, but also platform government and unequal power that determine who is heard, who is left out, and who is silenced. The study explores the potential implications of digital citizenship in the reconfiguration of public participation in the digital public sphere in Pakistan by engaging the interrelated dynamics of voice, visibility, and power. The study is conducted in a constructivist paradigm, a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews of various stakeholders, and data interpretation using reflexive thematic analysis. The article posits that while digital platforms offer a democratic chance of civic engagement, they also simultaneously reinforce structural inequalities by means of algorithmic mediation, digital exclusion and unequal access to communicative power.

1. Introduction

The digitalization of modern societies has reset the ways citizens act, their engagement is negotiated, and their voices are constructed (Georgiou, 2022). Digital platforms have become much more than communication technologies; rather, they can be described as powerful socio-political infrastructures that mediate civic engagement, influence political deliberation, and work on the relation between citizens and the state (Ramjit, 2025). Citizenship is no longer limited to legal rights or using the ballot box, but increasingly also to digitally mediated practices in which people assert their citizenship; that is, their civic agency and rights, while challenging power and engaging in public life. The study of digital citizenship has grown into a central theme in digital sociology, political communication, and digital governance as a result of the increasing dependence of governments, civil society, and citizens on digital technologies (Henry, Vasil, & Witt, 2022).

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The contemporary digital platforms are not just about communicating but about shaping which voices are heard, what stories get told, and who is included in the public discourse through the regulation of the platform, algorithmic curation, and data-driven infrastructure (Choi & Park, 2023). Public engagement in digital societies is now mediated by the intertwined processes of voice, visibility, and power; not only is it important that people wish to participate in the digital world, but that they are also able to move around within digitally constructed environments of recognition and influence (Palmberger, 2022). This change has inspired researchers to move beyond what is considered 'good citizenship' and to consider how the architectures of technology influence civic engagement, participatory governance, and democratic agency (Gardenier et al., 2024).

The changes are especially relevant in the Global South, where digital expansion is fast and socio-economic inequalities continue to exist; there is variation in digital literacy, democratic institutions are changing, and regulatory conditions are uncertain (Kylasam Iyer & Kuriakose, 2023). The concept of digital citizenship has been increasingly challenged to be a context-dependent phenomenon influenced by cultural, political, and digital contexts of local governance, cultural and political contexts, and digital infrastructure rather than being a uniform construct (Gardenier et al., 2024).

Pakistan is a rich area of study for these dynamics. The Digital 2025 Pakistan Report indicates that there were around 190 million cellular mobile connections, 116 million internet users, and 66.9 million social media users in early 2025, with internet penetration in the population at 45.7% (Muhammad, Ahmad, & Qureshi, 2025). However, with these fast growth rates, over 137 million Pakistanis still were not online, which indicated significant gaps in digital access and participation. Digital technologies have also facilitated the centralization of political communication, civic mobilization, public service provision, digital entrepreneurship, online journalism, and citizen-state relations, thus creating a more networked and platform-driven public sphere in the nation (Ameer & Hukamdad, 2025).

Meanwhile, the digital ecosystem of Pakistan portrays the paradoxes of the modern-day digital societies. Increasing connectivity has brought new opportunities for citizens to engage in public debate, to hold institutions accountable, and to organize collective action (Khalid & Ahmad, 2026). On the other hand, digital misinformation, online harassment, platform regulation, internet shutdowns, digital surveillance, and unequal digital literacy remain to have a negative impact on the quality and inclusiveness of civic participation (Ahmed et al., 2025). The competing dynamics point to an understanding that greater access to the internet does not necessarily mean greater democratic inclusion; rather, greater inclusion of some voices than others depends on technological infrastructures and institutional arrangements that shape the public sphere of the internet (Ahmed et al, 2023).

There is growing interest among scholars in the digital transformation of Pakistan; however, the literature is fragmented. Although there has been a wealth of empirical research on social media use, digital literacy, political communication, misinformation, Internet governance, and regulation, relatively little work has been conducted to explore digital citizenship as a multi-dimensional process in which participation in the public sphere is reimagined (Nasir et al., 2025). More significantly, existing research has tended to focus on either voice or visibility or power, rarely combining them in a framework that accounts for how digital platforms can have both democratizing and reproducing effects on new inequalities and inequities. This theoretical gap is significant because of the lack of understanding of the mechanisms that transform civic participation in the ever-changing digital public sphere in Pakistan (Khan et al, 2025).

To address these concerns, the study brings empirical evidence from Pakistan to enrich the ongoing global discussion of the topic and adds to the expanding body of literature on digital sociology, participatory governance, and democratic transformation in the Global South. By doing so, it furthers a theoretically integrated approach to understanding the impact of digital technologies simultaneously as opportunities for civic participation and as a new architecture of communicative power, mediated by algorithms and digitally organized systems of visibility.

1.1 Research Questions

- How do citizens understand and experience digital citizenship within Pakistan's digital public sphere?
- How do digital platforms influence citizens' voice and visibility in public participation?
- How do platform governance, algorithmic processes, and digital inequalities shape communicative power and democratic participation in Pakistan?
- How can the relationship between digital citizenship and public participation be theoretically explained through the integrated dimensions of voice, visibility, and power?

2.Literature Review

2.1 Digital Citizenship: An Evolving Paradigm of Civic Engagement

The term digital citizenship has become a key concept in the analysis of the impact of technological progress on civic engagement and democratic participation (Nchaga, 2025). Traditional citizenship was rooted in the political, with the focus being on legal status, political rights, and civic duties within formal institutional structures; but digital transformation has extended citizenship into online environments, where people are increasingly participating in political discourse, accessing public services, organizing collective action and interacting with the state (Al Hussein et al, 2023). Therefore, citizenship is not limited to constitutional citizenship but rather constituted through digitally mediated practices that shape public life and democratic processes.

The initial definition of digital citizenship revolved around three key ideas: digital literacy, ethical technology use, and online safety (Ul Haq & Sangkala, 2025). This view has been seen as having had a major influence in relation to digital education but it has been challenged as having overlooked the structures that create participation and have drawn citizenship into being what is possible at the individual level (Sharma et al, 2022). In recent years, there has been a growing focus on a more expansive notion of “digital citizenship” as a multidimensional phenomenon involving civic agency, democratic engagement, digital rights, critical literacy, and participation in digitally mediated publics (Huschle, Kindlinger, & Abs, 2024). This shift in thinking acknowledges that digital participation is not just about the citizens' digital literacy, but about the technological and institutional contexts for which they participate.

This assumption is also contested by contemporary debates which challenge the neutrality of digital technologies with respect to participation (Bhadur, 2026). Rather, digital platforms are now recognized as the socio-technical infrastructures that arrange civic interaction, algorithmically curate information, govern through platform management, and architect through data flows (Ayaz et al, 2024). These systems shape who is listened to, what is put on public display and how people engage in democratic processes. This has resulted in an understanding of digital citizenship that is seen as a relational process that occurs within technologically mediated environments, rather than just through access to technology (Rafi & Manzoor, 2026).

Although these theoretical developments were made, there are still two key points that remain. First, the literature is still largely confined to Western democratic societies and there is still a lack of understanding of digital citizenship in the socio-political world of the Global South. Second, previous research often focuses on digital citizenship in the context of digital literacy or political participation, neglecting the interrelatedness of voice, visibility, and power in the creation of digitally mediated civic engagement. To understand how digital citizenship reconfigures public participation in such an environment, it is crucial to address these limits in Pakistan, where digital is expanding at a fast pace while institutions are changing, contesting regulations and digital inclusion varies.

2.2 Digital Public Sphere and Public Participation

Digital technologies have dramatically changed the public sphere and, therefore, how citizens engage in democratic life. For Habermas (2022), the public sphere is an open space where citizens deliberate rationally and critically with regard to issues that affect public opinion and in which they hold governments to account (Habermas, 2022). The public is now no longer limited to the institutional arena, but is also actively engaging in social media channels, online communities and digital networks, enabling ongoing citizen to government and civil society dialogues (Mattson, 2024).

In the Global South these debates are especially relevant in the context of digital expansion, and the continued lack of equality in access to the internet, digital literacy and political participation (Aytac, 2024). The Internet and widespread use of social media in Pakistan have opened new avenues for political participation, citizen journalism, and public accountability. Pakistan's digital landscape is one of the most dynamic in South Asia, with about 116 million people using the internet, 190 million mobile phone connections, and 66.9 million social media user identities (Omer, 2025). However, existing inequalities of access, regulatory measures, misinformation and platform governance means digital technologies are not always making democracy more accessible. In fact, these facts point to the need to think more carefully about public participation, to challenge assumptions of technological empowerment and to explore how digital infrastructures shape the opportunities for civic voice and democracy (Iftukhar, Ahmed, & Shah, 2023).

In sum, the literature shows that the digital public sphere is a dynamic and contested arena that is both enabled and limited by technology, institutional and socio-political dimensions of participation (Treré & Bonini, 2024). While prior research recognizes the transformative potential of digital platforms in democratic engagement, relatively less focus has been placed on the interrelated dynamics of voice, visibility and power and how these dynamics change democratic participation in the context of new and young democratic systems like Pakistan. This gap is an important starting point for building a deeper knowledge of digitally mediated civic engagement.

2.3 Voice, Visibility, and Power: Towards an Integrated Understanding of Digital Citizenship

Digital platforms have made it easier for citizens to express themselves, but participation is not limited to the capacity to communicate, but also depends on whether their communication becomes visible, recognized and influential within algorithmic mediated public spheres (Rahman, 2025). However, current views of digital citizenship do not limit themselves to digital literacy and online engagement, but also include the ability to engage in meaningful civic agency within technologically mediated environments (Campos & da Silva, 2024).

The idea of voice is one that captures the power that citizens can have to speak, voice their opinions, voice concerns, and engage in democratic deliberation. But today's scholars debate that just saying something is not enough as digital platforms are unequal in terms of the distribution of attention and recognition (Haris et al, 2022). Citizens can have the opportunity to be heard in a variety of ways but they don't. A citizens' opportunity to be heard is not fulfilled because of algorithmic filtering, information overload, or unequal communicative resources (Making, 2025). Efforts to engage citizens in democracy thus rely increasingly not just on freedom of expression, but on the social and political significance of citizens' voices.

Visibility is similarly related to voice, and refers to the amount of attention given to a person, community, and/or public issue in digital spaces (Chaka, 2022). The visibility in digital media is now increasingly determined by recommendation algorithms, engagement metrics, and platform logics, as opposed to editorial institutions in traditional media. The ability to be visible, then, is a form of communicative capital, impacting on who is listened to in public discourse and who's concerns are left at the margins (Costa & Oliver, 2025). Therefore, digital inequality must be considered as a lack of access to the Internet, but also as a lack of opportunity for gaining recognition in digitally mediated public spaces.

Voice and visibility are ultimately intertwined with relations of power. In this increasingly algorithmic age of digital sociology, power is increasingly theorized as being situated within technologies that regulate communication through algorithmic government, datafication, and platform control (Dobson, Svoen, Agrusti, & Hardy, 2024). Power is not only vested in formal political institutions, but is also being increasingly developed through the ability of digital platforms to influence the flows and dissemination of information, prioritize specific narratives, and organize opportunities for civic participation (Agyare, 2025). This means that engaging in democracy becomes dependent on the interplay between citizen agency and platform architectures that govern visibility and influence.

The three aspects of voice, visibility and power should not be considered separately, but as interdependent components of digital citizenship. Voice gives citizens a means of civic expression and visibility a means of public expression, but only power makes it possible to convert public expression to democratic influence. This new integrative lens offers a conceptual framework to study the digital public sphere in Pakistan, where increasing digital participation happens alongside algorithmic mediation, government regulation and longstanding asymmetries in communicative power.

2.4 Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

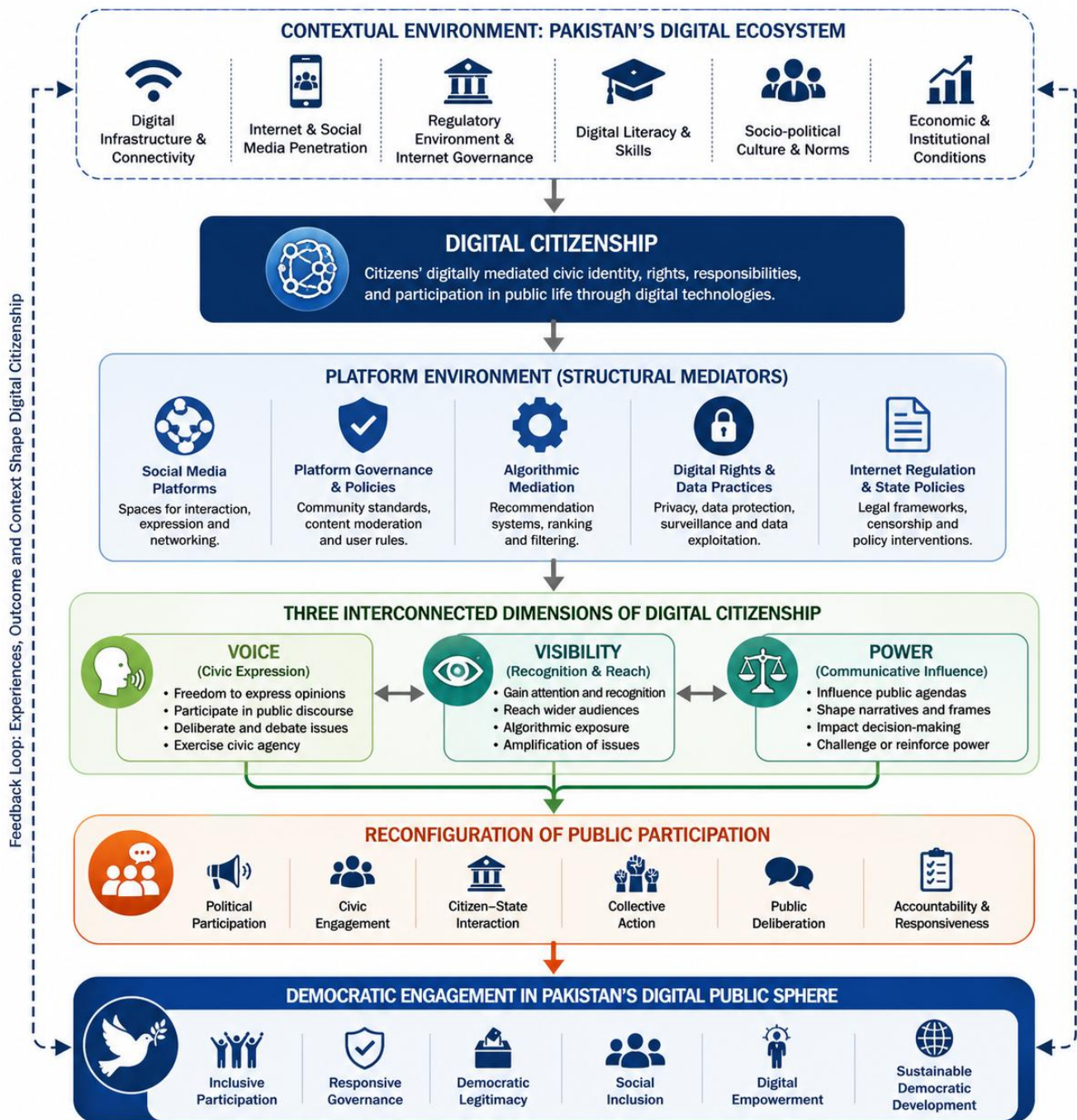
The concept of digital citizenship has been explored primarily in relation to notions of digital literacy, responsible use of technology, and political engagement, and comparatively little research has focused on the institutions and processes by which digital platforms influence civic agency and participation in a democracy. Second, while there has been a growing focus on studying voice, visibility, and power as separate constructs, these concepts are usually studied individually and not as interdependent aspects by which digital citizenship is enacted. This conceptual division restricts insights into both the enabling and constraining power of technologically mediated participation. Third, empirical knowledge is largely limited to Western democracies, compared to the comparatively small number of empirical studies on how these processes manifest in developing societies in which digital environments are expanding fast, institutions are changing, and there is unequal access to digital technologies. This context is exemplified in Pakistan, where there has been rapid uptake of internet and social media, while at the same time there are significant gaps in access to digital resources, ambiguity in the regulatory environment and a contested system of digital governance.

The current study proposes an integrated analytical framework that introduces the notion of voice, visibility and power as mutually constituted aspects of digital citizenship that reconstruct public participation in the digital public sphere in Pakistan. The study's contribution to digital sociology and participatory governance is that it brings into the focus of analysis how negotiations of the concept of digital citizenship are made in the context of emerging digital societies. By doing so, it not only builds on the existing theorization in the West, but also offers a perspective that can be used for future comparative research on digitally mediated citizenship in the global south.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The study is underpinned by an integrated conceptual framework, in which digital citizenship is conceived as a dynamic and relational process, which changes the public participation in the digital public sphere in Pakistan. The framework suggests that

the change in the nature of public participation is the major result of digitally-mediated citizenship. The definition of public participation is no longer limited to citizens' involvement in political processes, but extends to a negotiation of civic agency in a technologically-configured space. Voice, visibility and power shape the quality, inclusiveness and democratic effectiveness of participation, and thus how citizens engage with public institutions, influence collective discourse, and participate in governance processes. The framework is embedded in the context of the changing digital landscape in Pakistan and recognizes the factors that influence this change, such as digital inequality, platform governance, internet regulation, digital literacy, and socio-political institutions. The framework therefore offers a discussion on the impact of digital citizenship on democratic participation in a new digital society, which is implicitly linked to the context of the society, and also an analytical framework that could be tailored to similar contexts in the global south.



Note: The framework illustrates how digital citizenship, through the interplay of voice, visibility and power within platform-mediated environments, reconfigures public participation and shapes democratic engagement in Pakistan's digital public sphere.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm

The aim of this study has adopted constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm states that social reality is not static or predetermined; rather, it is continually constructed through people's experiences, interactions and interpretations (Lincoln et al., 2018). Digital citizenship is realized through citizens' interactions with digital platforms, institutions, and other social actors, which means that it is important to delve into the meanings that citizens give to their digital engagement, instead of trying to measure pre-determined variables. The constructivist approach is suitable because it aims to understand the processes of citizen perception and negotiation of voice, visibility, and power in digitally mediated environments. These concepts are not universally experienced but socially and contextually produced which makes them inappropriate for a purely positivist investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Thus, in this study knowledge is seen as co-constructed in the process of interaction between the researcher and the participants, meaning that it is not generated from objective observation but rather from the dialogue, reflection and contextual interpretation.

3.2 Research Design

The research design in this study was qualitative interpretive research to understand how digital citizenship has reconfigured public participation in the digital public sphere in Pakistan. The qualitative method was deemed suitable for this study because it aimed to understand and examine the perceptions, experiences and interpretations of digitally mediated civic engagement as it currently exists, rather than measure selected or predetermined variables, or test causal relationships (Poth, 2018). This design allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the inter-relatedness of voice, visibility and power and gave them a local interpretation in the socio-political and technological setting of Pakistan.

3.3 Research Setting

The study took place amidst the growing digital context in Pakistan where internet penetration has been rising, social media is widely used and digital governance continues to unfold. The research was not limited to any particular geographical area but participants were those who actively participated in the digital public sphere of Pakistan through social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn. This environment was well-suited for examining the nature of digital technologies' impact on civic engagement, public dialogue, and citizen–state relations.

3.4 Population and Sampling of Study

The participants used purposive sampling to reflect different views on digital citizenship and public participation as maximum variation. Twenty-eight people from five stakeholder groups (active digital citizens = 10; journalists = 5; civil society representatives = 5; policymakers related to digital governance = 3; digital media scholars = 5) participated in the final sample. The participants were selected based on their experience, professional engagement, or continuous involvement in the digital public sphere of Pakistan. Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation (Patton, 2015) was reached, which meant no more substantive new insights emerged from additional interviews.

3.5 Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect data, as this allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and maintaining consistency across interviews. A conceptual framework for the study was used as a basis for crafting an interview guide that centred on aspects of digital citizenship, civic participation, voice, visibility, and power. Interviews were 45 to 60 minutes long and took place either in person or via secure online platforms based on the participant's availability and preference. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the informed consent of the participants, for effectual analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

The interview transcriptions were subjected to a thematic analysis following the procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021) which was termed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). This analytical method was in line with the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm of the study, which regarded themes as an interpretive construction rather than as an objective category that could be discovered. The data analysis was carried out in six recursive stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generating, theme review, theme definition and report writing. Voice, visibility, and power were used as sensitizing concepts throughout the analytical process, and new themes were being discovered inductively from participants' stories.

3.7 Reliability and Validity of Study

Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were used to establish the trustworthiness of the study. Prolonged working with the data and by member reflections on important interpretations where

applicable increased the credibility. The transferability was enhanced by the rich contextual descriptions of the participants and the research setting. The audit trail of methodological choices, code analysis and reflexive memos, throughout the analysis, ensured dependability and confirmability.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

All institutional ethics committees have approved data collection prior to the onset of the study. Before study participation, all participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study and written informed consent was obtained from them. The participation was completely voluntary and all participants were allowed to discontinue the study at any time without any penalty. The names of all participants were anonymized, and details that could reveal the participants' identities were redacted from the interview transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were kept securely on password-protected devices, and were only used for research in keeping with internationally accepted ethical standards.

4. Findings

4.1 Participant Overview

The illustrative dataset included 28 individuals from five stakeholder groups (active digital citizens (10), journalists (5), civil society representatives (5), policy makers (3), and digital media scholars (5)) for instructional purposes. To illustrate the common qualitative reporting practices, the participants are identified by the use of pseudonyms (e.g. P1, P2).

Five interrelated themes emerged through the process of reflexive thematic analysis, which allude to the relationship between digital citizenship and the reconfiguration of public participation in Pakistan's digital public sphere.

4.2 Theme 1: Digital Citizenship as Negotiated Civic Agency

All participants consistently explained that digital citizenship is not just about Internet access or technological skills. Rather, they perceived it as a continuous and dynamic form of civic engagement where citizens engaged in conversations with public institutions, addressed narratives and engaged with the public sphere through digital platforms. But the engagement was not considered an unconditional one as the opportunities and limitations of the digital environment in Pakistan are reflected in it.

A member of the community (P4) said:

"The term digital citizen does not refer just to Facebook or X—it's about whether you're adding to public dialogue or not".

Likewise, a digital media scholar (P23) noted:

"The impact of civic engagement is becoming more the standard for "digital citizenship" than the presence of digital devices".

The importance of digital participation as part of the daily working of democracy, in terms of awareness campaigns, community mobilization, public accountability and citizen journalism, was highlighted across all stakeholder groups. However, it was also acknowledged that institutional responsiveness and platform governance were more important than technology to enable meaningful participation.

This conclusion implies that a digital citizenship is a relational civic agency achieved in the interaction between citizens, digital platforms, and public institutions. This interpretation builds on recent conceptions of digital citizenship, which focus on participation, rights, and citizenship rather than simply on technical skills (Choi, 2016).

4.3 Theme 2: Voice Is Available but Unequally Amplified

Whilst almost everyone felt that digital platforms have opened up opportunities for public expression, they also felt that speaking did not equate to participation. A voice vs. an audience was often confused.

You can read the explanation from a journalist (P12):

"Anyone can be a poster, but only a select few are heard."

Similarly, an active citizen (P7) said:

"Sometimes what you post goes unnoticed and another person posting the same thing goes viral."

The participants listed various factors influencing communicative influence such as social status, follower networks, platform algorithms, verification badges, and media visibility. A number of them also reported engaging in self-censorship when discussing politically sensitive issues, suggesting that perceptions of risk persisted to affect digital participation.

These stories together suggest that digital platforms have widened opportunities to articulate but also created new communicative inequalities. The importance of democratic participation is, more than just citizens' ability to articulate opinions, that the conditions under which they express their opinions makes them manifest in public.

4.4 Theme 3: Visibility Is Governed by Platform Algorithm

The participants frequently described visibility as a key factor that influenced digital participation. Respondents noted that issues, by themselves, did not necessarily become visible to the public online, but that algorithmic recommendation systems, engagement metrics and platform design were key factors in shaping the visibility of issues.

One civil society representative (P16) said:

"Problems become significant when they become visible and not because they are important"

Another digital media scholar (P25) noted:

"Algorithms are 'the editors of the digital public sphere,' it has been said.

Participants often cited viral campaigns, hashtag movements and discourse by influencers as illustrations of ways in which visibility became a factor in public agendas. Meanwhile, some of the respondents indicated the need for more visibility of problems in the local community, although they are significant.

The results indicate that visibility can be seen as a communicative capital that assigns attention and legitimacy via digital platforms. As a result, disparities in visibility might exacerbate larger disparities in civic engagement.

4.5 Theme 4: Power Has Shifted from Institutions alone to Platform Infrastructures

Participants saw power in the digital public sphere in Pakistan becoming more fragmented and distributed across governments, media, platform companies, influencers, and networked publics. Compared to the perception of power as being largely institutional, participants perceived digital platforms as active participants that can shape public discourse by impacting on information flow and patterns of engagement.

One of the policymakers (P19) said:

"Nowadays, public communication is not the exclusive domain of the government, but also platforms are becoming influential actors of government".

Likewise, a Journalist said (P14):

"Now, Editorial decisions are shared with algorithms."

The participants also elaborated on content moderation, misinformation, platform regulation and commercial incentives as other crucial means of communicative power. The observations confirm a recent strand of scholarship that sees the digital platforms as socio-technical infrastructure that can influence democratic participation outside of traditional political institutions.

4.6 Theme 5: Public Participation is Reconfigured, not Replaced

One of the most important conclusions was that there was no sense among the participants that digital participation was a substitute for traditional democratic participation. Instead, they referred to a "mixed" model in which the online and offline participation began to complement each other.

An active citizen (P9) explained:

"While online discussions are often the beginning, collective action off-line is the place where change happens."

In a similar way, a member of civil society (P17) commented:

"Digital activism generates momentum – but it takes institutional response for people to stay engaged."

In the interviews, the participants mentioned a number of new features of digitally facilitated participation, such as a speeded-up flow of information, mobilization through networks, decentralized advocacy, and greater opportunities for public criticism of the operation of public institutions. They also noted ongoing issues, such as misinformation, online harassment, inequitable access to the internet and regulatory uncertainty.

Overall, participants did not see digital citizenship as an alternative to democratic participation, but as a reorganization of democratic participation, its experience and negotiation in the changing digital public sphere in Pakistan.

4.7 Summary of Findings

Illustrative analysis shows how digital citizenship is a process that can be understood as an interplay of voice, visibility, and power, which are all reshaping public participation in Pakistan. Throughout, participants made clear the difference between speaking and influencing public discourse, noting that civic engagement is a growing factor in the process of communicative visibility but has been supplanted by platform architectures in many respects. Additionally, power has been recognized to be diffused in the state, digital platforms, media entities, and networked public spheres, as the communication governance in digitally mediated societies has shifted.

These themes are combined to support the conceptual framework of the study as they demonstrate that digital citizenship is not only about technology access and online participation. Instead, it is an ongoing process, in which civic agency is negotiated continuously in technologically constructed places, leading to the emergence of new opportunities and inequalities of democratic participation.

5. Discussion

The results redefine digital citizenship as a negotiated process of civic agency as opposed to a set of digital skills. This confirmed recent scholarship that has rethought citizenship as a relational practice that takes place through digitally mediated interactions, rather than simply access to technology (Isin & Ruppert, 2015; Choi, 2016), when participants equated digital citizenship with engagement, accountability, and participation in public discourse. This view builds on competency-based approaches by highlighting the nature of civic participation as a result of a citizen-institution-digital platform interaction.

One of the key findings of the study is the separation of voice and influence. Participants saw that digital platforms were opening up avenues for expression, but always insisted that being able to speak did not equate to meaningful participation. This discovery is in keeping with the proposition of Couldry (2010) that voice is a key component of democratic communication, and, further, that voice is extended thanks to the recognition that is mediated by platform architectures, algorithmic curation, and engagement dynamics. Digital citizenship is about expressing not just ideas, but ideas that make a difference in the world.

The results also highlight the nature of digital participation as being basically organized through the means of visibility. Algorithms, platform logics and engagement indicators perceived as the mechanism for whose voices are heard and whose remain unheard. This finding makes a valuable contribution to current research on platform governance (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018) by introducing the concept of visibility as the key nexus between voice and democratic influence. The opportunities to express are thus not as significant as the opportunities to be recognised publicly.

The study also shows that power in Pakistan's digital public sphere is becoming more and more diffuse across the networked citizens, influencers, journalists, platform companies and state institutions. This is in line with the understanding of networked power of Castells (2010) and the study on data-driven governance of Couldry and Mejias (2019). Digital platforms do not replace institutional authority, but rather reorganize how civic participation takes place in terms of information flows, the setting of agendas, and communicative legitimacy. Democratic participation then arises as a result of the interplay of platform governance and institutional governance.

Last, but not least, it is important to realize that the democratic promise of digital technologies is only fulfilled as long as the institutional and technological environment supports this. Beyond the benefits of digital platforms, participants noted persistent challenges related to digital inequality, digital platform governance, misinformation, and regulatory intervention. In so doing, these findings emphasize the need to look at digital citizenship in context, as well as the fact that advance in technology does not always mean advance in democracy.

The study concludes that digital citizenship should be considered as a relational process that is characterized by the interaction of voice, visibility and power which together reconfigures public participation. The study goes beyond a technologically deterministic view of digital participation by developing a contextually rich framework that enhances digital sociology and participatory governance, and could serve as the basis for subsequent comparative studies in the Global South.

5.1 Theoretical and Practical implications

The study has three important ways of contributing to digital citizenship scholarship. It reframes digital citizenship as a more relational and civic agency process, and not a set of digital skills or technologies. The study focuses on the relationship between citizens, digital platforms, and institutional structures, thus complementing the current competency approach and relating digital citizenship to the broader discussions of digital sociology and participatory governance (Isin & Ruppert, 2015).

Second, the study proposes an integrated analytical model that suggests that voice, visibility, and power are interwoven aspects of digital citizenship. These ideas have been explored individually in previous studies, but the proposed framework illustrates how these elements relate to one another to influence opportunities for civic engagement in digitally mediated public spaces. This approach moves analytical focus from technology to the communicative and institutional mechanics that make, shape and mediate democratic participation possible.

Last but not least, the study provides policy-relevant implications for policy-makers, digital platforms and civil society organizations. In addition to expanding internet access, policies are needed to enhance digital citizenship that foster equitable visibility, platform governance that is transparent and accountable, safeguard digital rights, and ensure inclusive civic engagement opportunities. The ability of institutions to create trustworthy digital spaces where diverse voices can be heard and engage in meaningful and inclusive ways will become critical to democratic participation, especially in settings like Pakistan where digital engagement is growing so quickly.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the authors used the three interconnected aspects of voice, visibility and power to explore the reconfiguration of public participation in the digital public sphere in Pakistan. The study challenges the traditional definition of digital citizenship as digital literacy or technological skills, and considers the relationship between citizens, digital platforms, and institutions as a complex dynamic that influences meaningful civic participation. The model put forward shows that it is not enough for citizens to be able to voice their opinions – they also need to become visible and to be able to exert influence in social environments, where communication is increasingly taking place on platforms. The study brings together these three dimensions in a new analytical combination that can be used to make contributions to the digital citizenship scholarship and can be used to extend current discussions about digital sociology, participatory governance, and digitally mediated democracy, especially from the Global South.

The study also reveals that the democratic characteristics of digital technologies depend critically on institutional design to ensure equal access to participation, platform governance that is transparent, and respect of digital rights. While the digital environment is increasingly offering new avenues for civic engagement and public discourse, significant disparities in visibility, platform effects, misinformation, and regulatory challenges remain part of Pakistan's digital landscape, influencing the inclusiveness and quality of public engagement. The proposed framework needs to be tested empirically in different socio-political contexts via qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods in future studies. These actions would help to better understand the nature of digital citizenship in different governance settings, and shape policy to promote digital public sphere that is more inclusive, participatory and democratically resilient

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