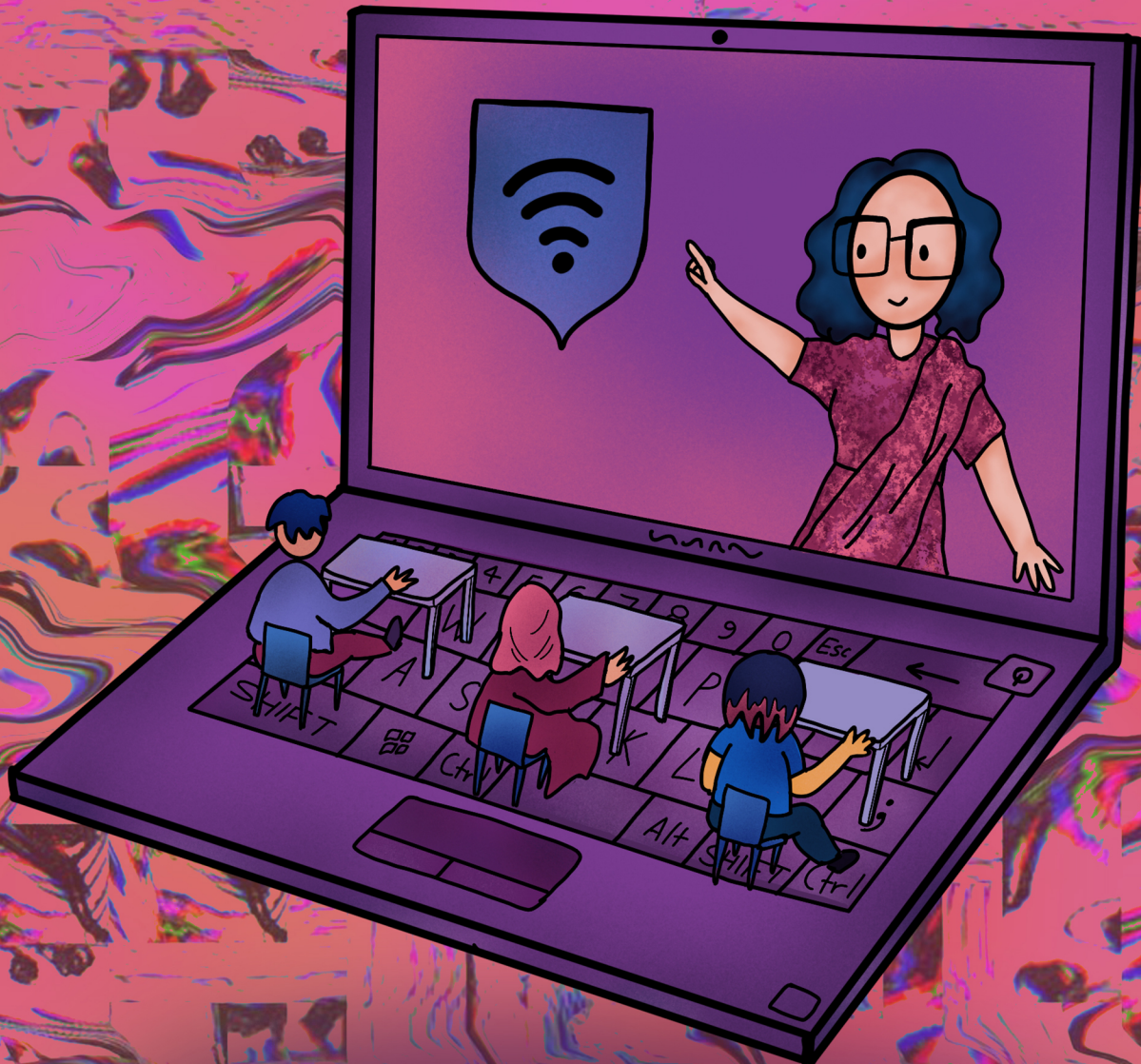


“VISIONS OF YOUTH: BATTLING MYOPIA IN INTERNET REGULATION”

How the Pakistani Youth Envisions the Internet in 2022



unesco



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Acknowledgements

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The report has been illustrated by Emil Hussain and designed by Ahsan Zahid (lead designer at DRF).

September, 2022

Table of Contents

01

Executive Summary

07

Recommendations

02

Introduction

08

Bibliography

03

Methodology

04

Survey Results

05

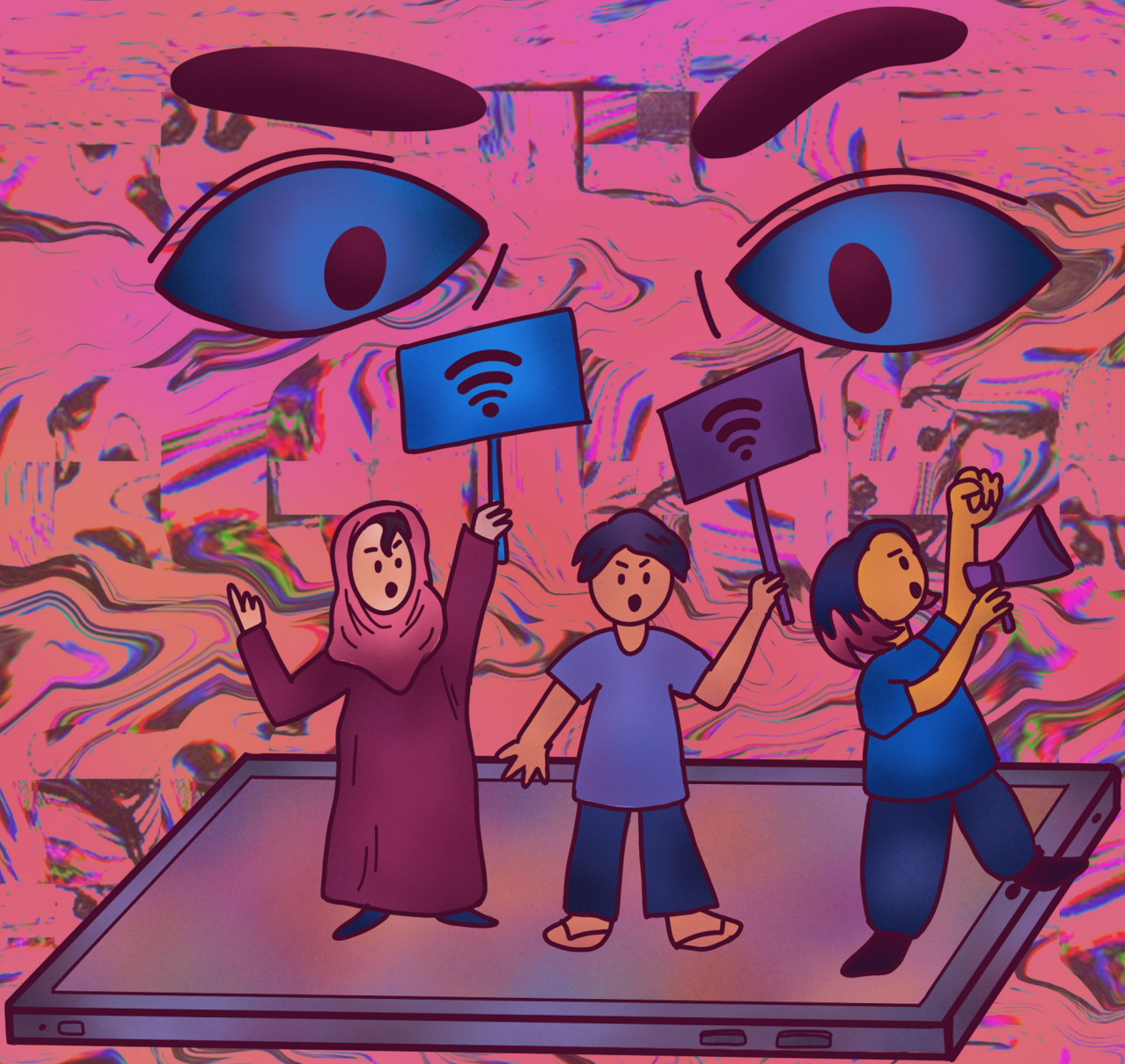
Analysis

06

Futuristic Vision: How the Youth See Internet Regulation?

Executive Summary

Regulation of the internet and technologies is one of the most urgent issues of our times, along with climate change and preservation of democratic values. This research focuses on the most important stakeholder in the discussion on technology: the youth. The research focuses on the youth in Pakistan who form an overwhelming majority of the population. The research finds that the youth's attitudes towards issues such as freedom of expression, access to information and internet regulation is not a monolith, however they care deeply about issues of equal access, privacy and economic opportunities through technologies. Awareness and investment about digital rights is reflected in findings such as the fact that 86.7% stated that the government should not have the right to ban entire platforms and 78.5% felt that internet shutdowns on the basis of security were unjustified. A majority of the respondents in this research stated that they regularly self-censored themselves on digital platforms and often felt unsafe online. Lastly, most respondents (72.3%) were largely in favor of regulation of the internet, however there was also a deep distrust of regulatory bodies with only 17.9% comfortable with the government taking content moderation decisions while only 40.5% expressed confidence in social media platforms making these calls. The research concludes with recommendations for greater youth participation in technology-based policy-making and creating an equitable and safe digital future for all.



Introduction

In 2017, the UN Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/34/L.7, for the first time in history, formally recognized the direct link between the information-based fundamental rights of privacy and freedom of expression with the right to free, unimpeded, development of personality.¹ The 'development of personality' by its nature concerns younger members of our societies the most. Expression and personal privacy have always been linked to personal development for young people, in present times this development cannot happen without taking into account digital technologies which have become the primary fora for the actualisation of these rights. Given the importance of digital spaces in the lives of young people, they emerge as one of the most important stakeholders, if not the most important, when it comes to digital technologies and digital freedoms. This research study aims to focus on internet governance and digital rights as a youth issue. The empowerment of youth is an important pillar of UNESCO's education and capacity building work and contributes to national development plans and align with international development goals such as the UN Secretary General's 5-Year Agenda and World Programme Action for Youth.²

Often categorized as a subject to be dealt with by technical experts, lawyers and policy-makers, internet governance has traditionally lacked the inclusion of young voices who use the internet the most. Given that the youth demographic counts as the largest subset of users of the internet and digital technologies (in 2020 71% of internet users were aged between 15 and 24)³ decisions regarding internet governance and regulation of technologies have the ability to disproportionately impact them. This is especially true for a country like Pakistan which has one of the largest youth populations in the world, with over 64% of the population below the age of 30 years⁴ who are approximately 1.35

times⁵ more likely to be using such devices compared to the other segments of the population⁶ given their propensity to it as "digital natives".

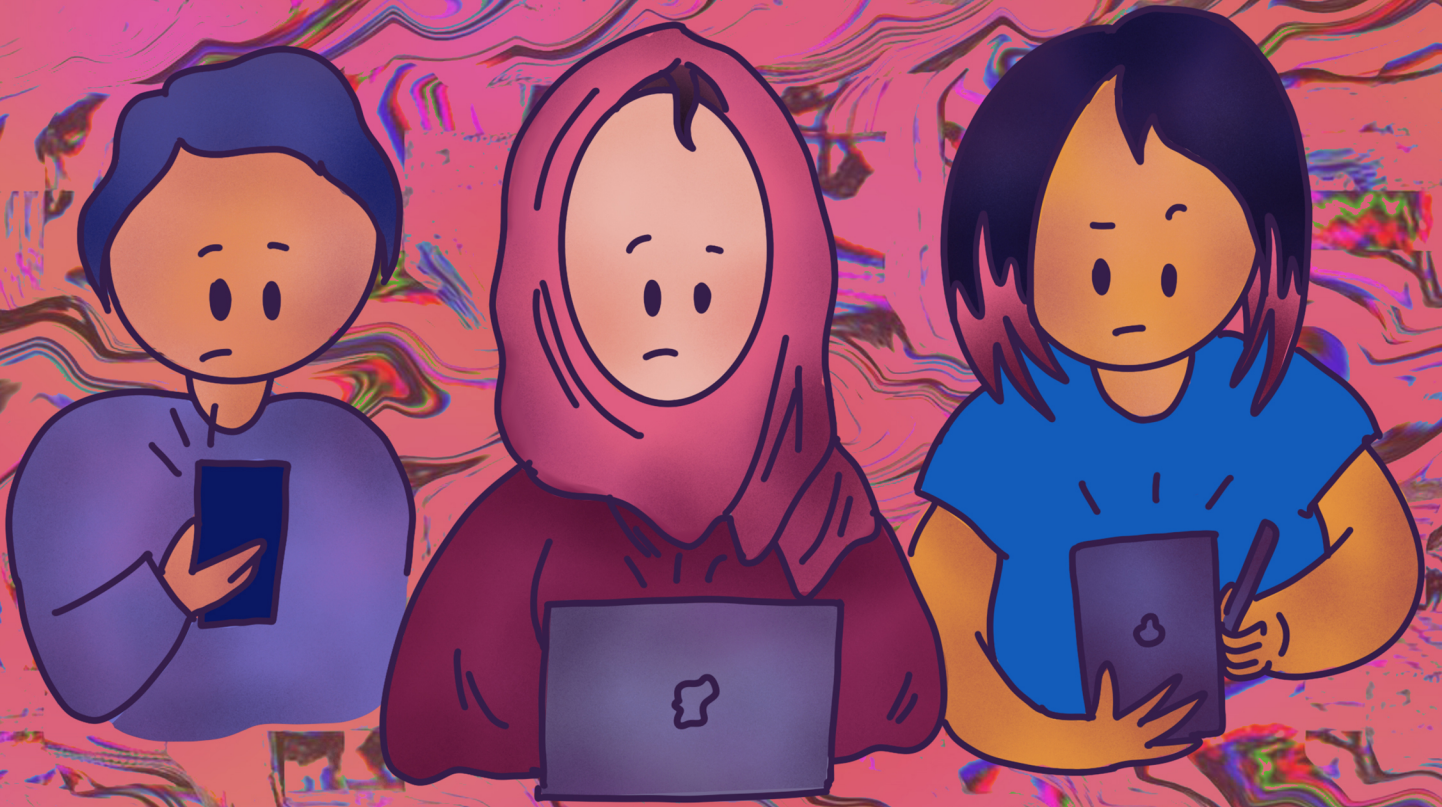
In the survey on 'Privacy in Media and Information Literacy with Youth Perspectives',⁷ conducted by UNESCO, the youth have demonstrated that they hold distinct opinions on data privacy and internet regulation and are capable of engaging with complexities such as wanting greater privacy online and protection of personal data but also somehow less regulation. Results have also shown that the youth is capable of understanding that increased government involvement and regulation is necessary to ensure data privacy whilst simultaneously that a more regulated internet would be a less open internet.⁸ It was noted that with access to the necessary resources, such as technology literacy classes, the youth would be even more capable of tackling the challenges technologies present. Presently there is no equivalent study that has been conducted in Pakistan.

Existing research in Pakistan focusing on the youth's use of digital technologies and the internet has been limited, and the available research tends to frame online spaces as frivolous. In a paper published in the 'Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan', there was a focus on the "useless" and "less productive" online activities of the youth.⁹ Another study, titled 'Effect of Internet on the Academic Performance and Social Life of University Students in Pakistan' reports a correlation between using the internet for non-academic purposes with worsening CGPA and social life.¹⁰ While social media has the potential for negative consequences for the youth, discourse around these consequences is steeped in paternalism and results in recommendations that are censorship-heavy.

Despite the natural propensity of the youth towards technology and the potential of technology-based interventions to deal with

the “youth bulge” in the country, young voices are completely absent from policymaking and discussions regarding technologies and digital spaces. Discourse on young people and technology often involves other stakeholders, such as parents, guardians, teachers, schools, politicians, talking about and for them, but never truly engaging with the youth perspective. This exclusion has resulted in policymaking that is completely unaligned with how a majority of the population engages with and views the internet and technology. It has also meant that the youth is discouraged from taking ownership of issues of digital rights and engaging with them as citizens.

This research aims to facilitate young Pakistani voices in taking ownership over the discourse around internet regulation in Pakistan. As a first-step towards youth-led, bottom-up policy change, the report has sought to faithfully document youth perceptions of the digital landscape and in the process learn how the youth would structure internet governance. Subsequently, the findings of this study hope to support rights-based approaches to the topic of internet governance and digital rights, while keeping in mind goals highlighted by UNESCO’s mission such as gender-equality and non-discrimination, ensuring the input of marginalized and vulnerable youth groups, youth participation in developing initiatives that impact them directly, increased intergenerational dialogue, and youth-adult partnerships on all issues that disproportionately affect the youth.¹¹



Methodology

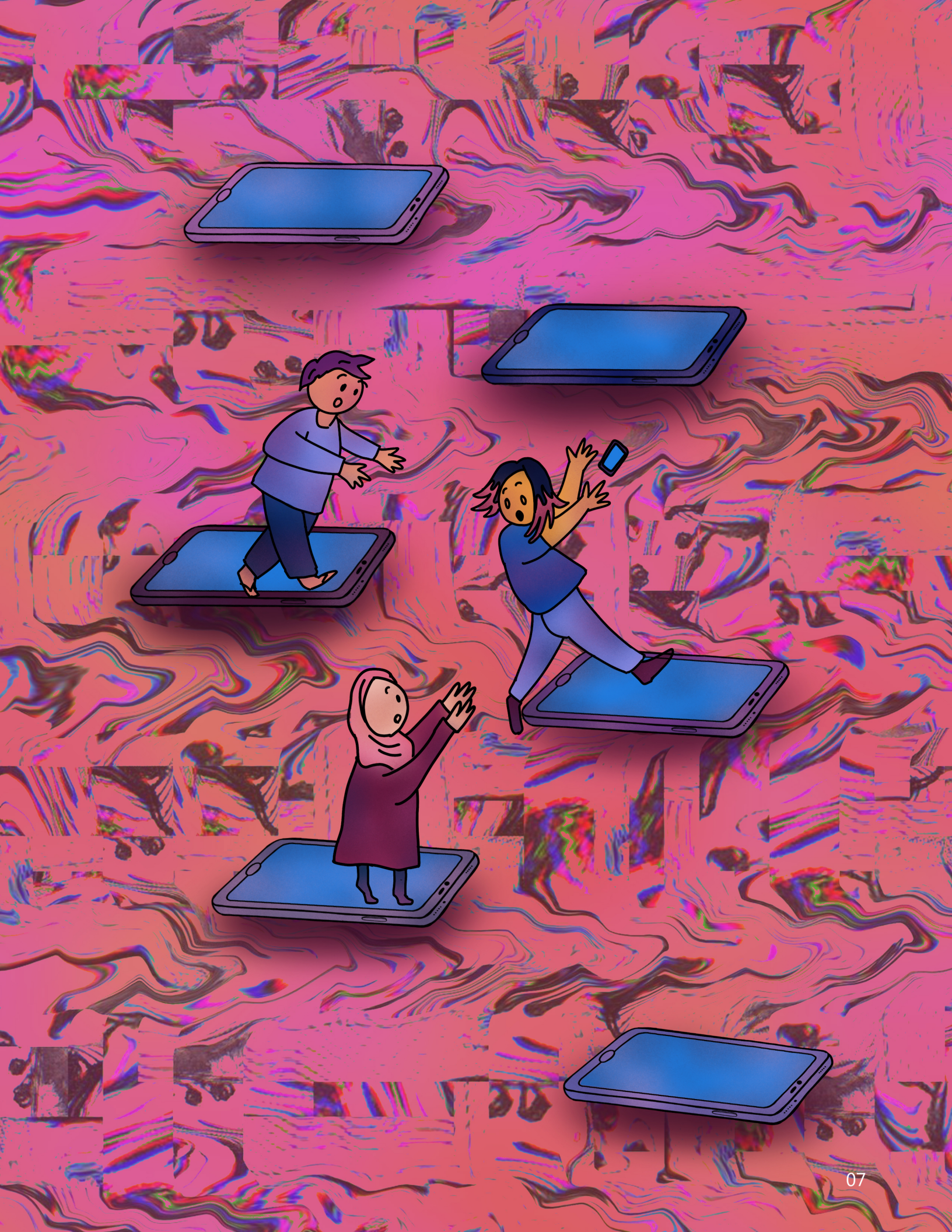
DRF conducted an online survey in order to understand the issues regarding digital rights as experienced by young users in Pakistan. The survey was not open to minors, i.e. those below the age of 18 due to internal policies barring retention of personal information regarding minors. Hence, the age range for the survey ranged from 18 to 35 in order to capture a wide cross-section of the young population in Pakistan.

The data collection period for the survey was between March and April 2022, and the survey was administered online. The survey was conducted in English and required written responses. This did limit the scope of data collected by the survey as it was open to only literate young people with digital access who were motivated enough to fill out the survey. In order to increase accessibility, the option to take the survey verbally over the phone with a member of the DRF research team was offered but was not availed by anyone. The survey was disseminated on social media as well as amongst networks of students and digital rights advocates who were contacted for this purpose.

Additionally, interviews were used to supplement the survey results and validate their findings through qualitative data. Some of the interviews deliberately focused on young people from the peripheries of the country to ensure that the data set was more diverse. A total of 9 interviews were conducted over Zoom calls during April 2022. 5 of the interviewees consisted of select respondents to the survey who demonstrated an understanding of online spaces which the researchers wanted to explore further. The remaining 4 individuals who were interviewed had been involved in mobilizing for digital rights issues in their respective communities, particularly belonging to non-urban and underserved areas such as parts of Gilgit-Baltistan, ex-FATA

and Quetta. A total of 7 women and 2 men were interviewed. These interviews were recorded and transcribed by the DRF team, and recordings were destroyed within 2 weeks of the interviews being conducted to ensure privacy and safety of the participants. The following sections of the report will draw on data and analysis from these sources.

The data from the surveys and interviews has been anonymised to protect the privacy of respondents. Explicit consent was taken for using this data for research purposes from all the participants.



Survey Results

The online survey was conducted with the aim of understanding patterns of use of digital technologies by the youth in Pakistan, their experiences of these technologies and perceptions of laws, policies and emerging technologies. The survey constituted 63 questions and received 84 responses. The following sections will be based on the data collected from these responses.

Demographic Breakdown

The target demographic of the survey was young audiences, ranging from 18 to 35 year olds. A majority of the respondents were from the 21 to 30 age bracket (63%), followed by 31 to 35 year olds (22.6%) and between 18 to 20 (14.3%).

Age
84 responses

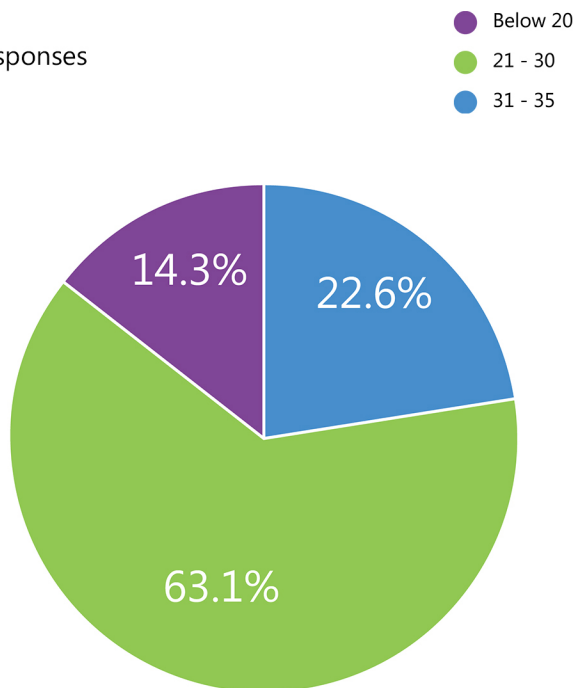


Figure 1: Demographic breakdown of respondents according to age group.

58.3% of the participants in the survey identified as women and 32.1% were men. There was also representation of gender minorities with 4.8% (4 respondents) identifying as non-binary. Respondents were also given the option to not reveal their gender, which 3 respondents opted for.

Gender Identity
84 responses

- Man
- Women
- Non-binary
- Transwomen
- Transman
- prefer not to say
- Other

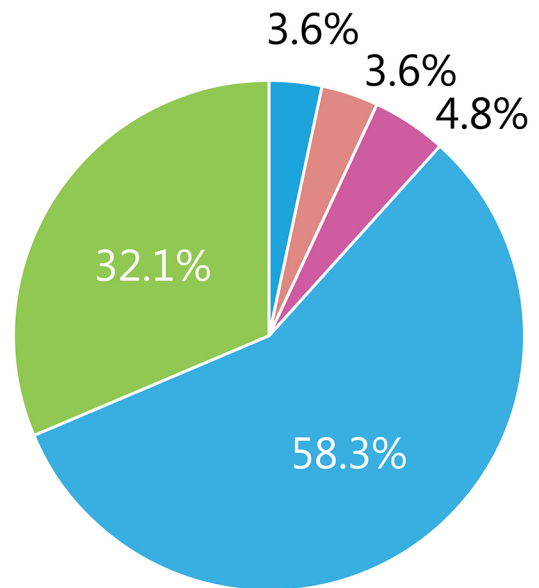


Figure 2: Demographic breakdown of respondents along lines of gender.

Most of the respondents resided in Punjab, constituting 61.9% of the total, while 23.8% belonged to Sindh and 10.7% were from Islamabad (Capital Territory). There was under-representation of respondents from Gilgit Baltistan and Balochistan in the survey that was addressed at the interviews stage of the research. The majority of the respondents belonged to Lahore (50%) and Karachi (25.5%) indicating that the respondents were concentrated in major urban areas. However the survey results also contained responses from Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, Kandkhot, Mirpurkhas, Muzaffargarh, Quetta, and Rawalpindi.



Figure 3: Demographic breakdown of respondents by geographical location.

In terms of socio-economic breakdown, there was a diversity of respondents based on their household income in Pakistani Rupees, however the majority of the respondents had a household income of above PKR 100,000 (73.2%).

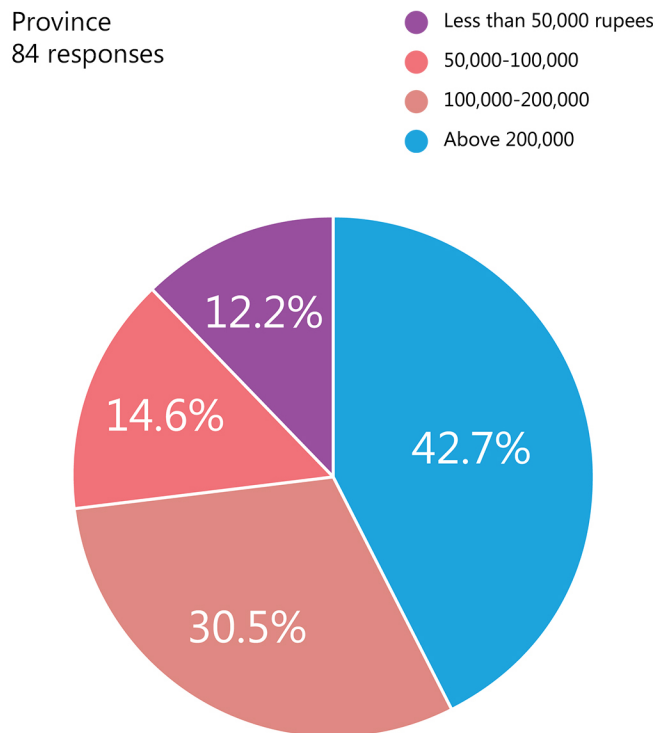


Figure 4: Demographic breakdown of respondents based on monthly income.

All the respondents indicated that they had access to a smartphone, while 89.3% stated that they had access to a laptop and 25% of the respondents used a desktop computer. Smart tablets were used by 22.6% and 7 respondents (8.3%) said they had access to a feature phone (non-smart phone). Respondents could choose more than one option given device ownership patterns are not restricted to one. An overwhelming majority of respondents said that they did not share their devices (81%) with others, particularly family members. Among the rest, 15.5% stated that they shared their devices with a family member but that the respondents used it primarily; while 3.6% said that it was used primarily by family members, not them.

Do you have any of the following devices on a frequent basis (choose more than one option if applicable)?
84 responses

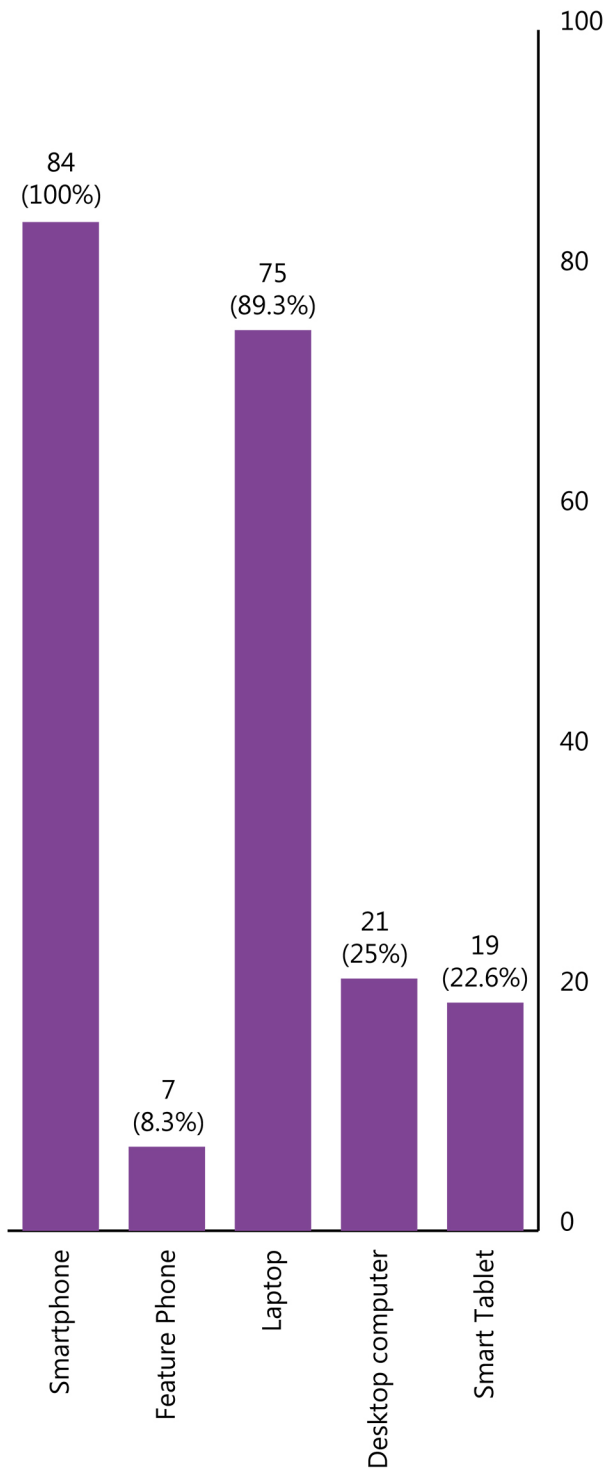


Figure 5: Breakdown of device access.

The respondents were overall very well-connected to the internet with 88.1% indicating that they used the internet for more than 4 hours daily, a minority (10.4%) stated that they used it between 1-4 hours a day and only one respondent (1.2%) used the internet less than one hour a day. One of the participants stated that they did not access the internet on a daily basis.

Time spent on the internet:
84 responses

- Less than an hour a day
- 1-4 hours a day
- More than 4 hours a day
- I do not use the internet everyday

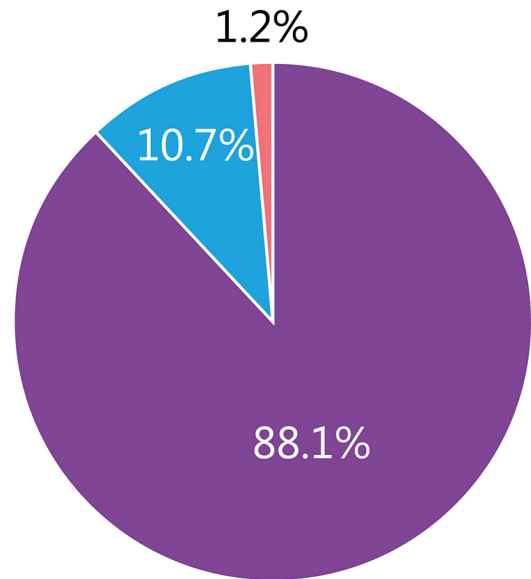


Figure 6: Number of hours spent on the internet daily.

Patterns of Social Media Usage

WhatsApp was the most used social media platform for the respondents (92.9%) closely followed by Instagram (90.5%). YouTube and Twitter were also popular among the respondents, 83.3% and 77.4% respectively. Other platforms used by respondents included Facebook (59.5%), Snapchat (33.3%) and TikTok (19%).

Which of the following platforms are you active on
(mark all that apply)

84 responses

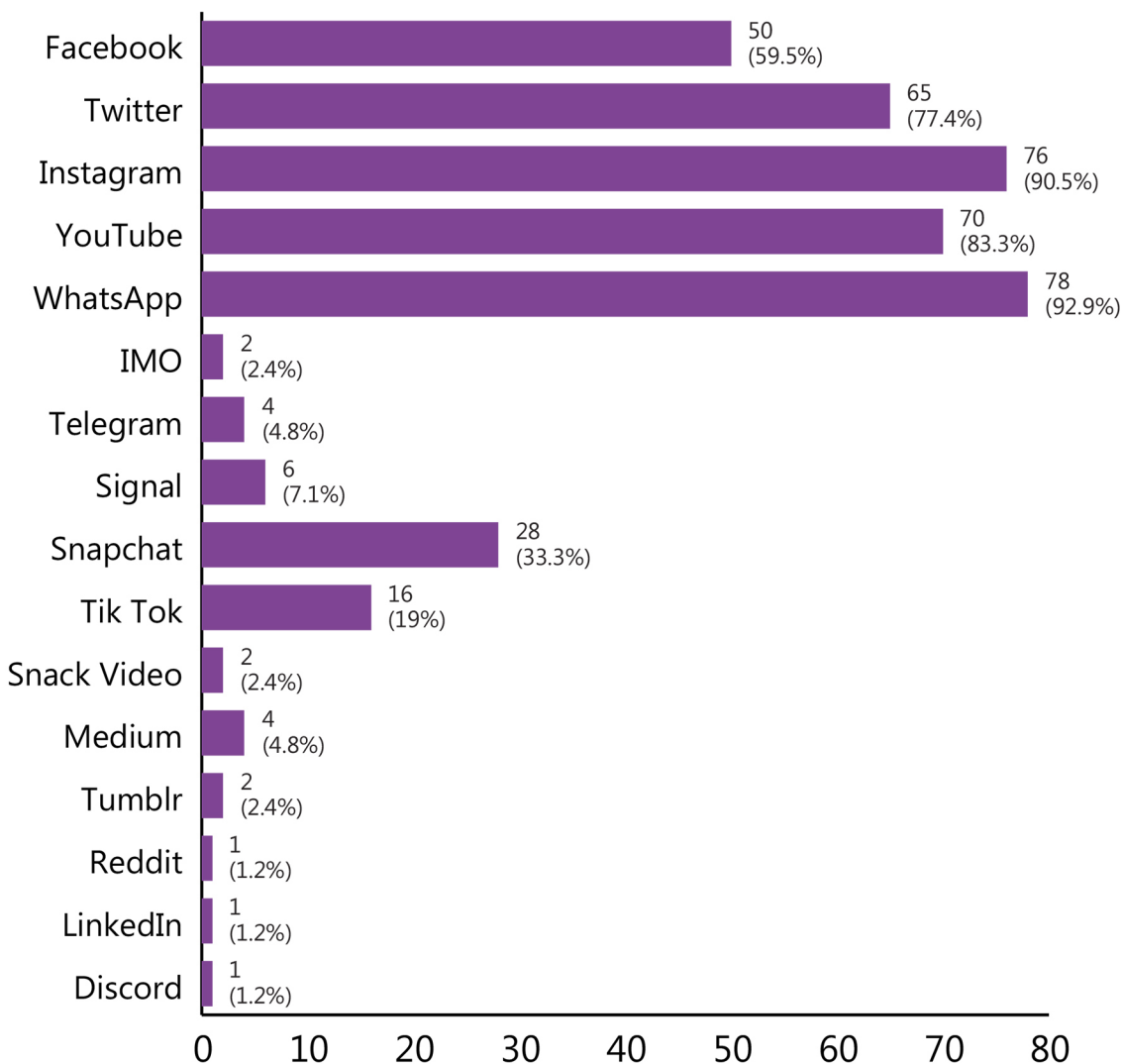


Figure 7: Breakdown of platforms used by respondents

In terms of frequency of use, 33.3% of respondents stated that Instagram was their most frequently used platform, 32.1% reporting it as their second most used platform and 19% as their third most used platform. WhatsApp was popular as well, with 16.7% indicating it was their most used platform, 26.2% used it second most frequently, and for 28.6% it was their third most used platform. 31% shared that Twitter was their most used platform.

When asked the purpose for using these platforms, the main reasons cited were: communicating with friends and family, entertainment, accessing professional or educational opportunities such as jobs and scholarships, and staying in touch with news and current affairs. Respondents also saw them as spaces of leisure and connecting on shared interests such as sport, pop culture, and politics. There are a fair amount of references to sharing and consuming content for non-productive purposes such as engaging in humor through memes and what some referred to as “shitposting”. Many use social media as a personal diary, posting a range of material and personal content, to archive their life, or to simply vent. Some young respondents used these platforms for educational and employment purposes. One respondent shared that they used YouTube:

“ [I]n comparison to any other app because it has basically everything: lectures for college [...], film archives, audiobooks, music, video essays, commentary channels [R15]

Another respondent said that had to use WhatsApp to keep up with university work since a lot of educational institutes and educators have been using it to stay in touch with students during and after the pandemic. Some respondents had started businesses online through platforms such as Instagram or were using them for professional purposes, this was especially true for freelancers.

Many young people use digital platforms to express themselves, however as one woman in Lahore pointed out one’s online presence can also impede the extent of their expression:

“ As a young woman, if I talk about Instagram where my life is on display, I have to screen my followers as it is my private space where I express myself, I have to be conscious of who I let into that space. Since I am also active in student politics, I have to take care of who has access to my private accounts so that my public work is not undermined using my personal information or life [I5]

Given that the respondents were mostly young, many answers referred to leisure as a main reason for why they accessed these platforms. One respondent shared that they used these platforms as a “distraction”, another said their primary motivation for using Twitter was to follow the K-Pop band BTS. One respondent said that they used Twitter for:

“ News, but also memes and jokes. Keeping up with my friends’ lives. Meaningless catharsis via tweeting... aimlessly scrolling. [R80]

Fandoms were a common entry point for many young people on the internet. As a woman interviewee based in Karachi in her 20s shares:

"My parents were extremely religious and conservative—for instance I heard my first song in the 6th grade. As I moved beyond Facebook, onto Tumblr and Twitter I was exposed to more pop culture. At that time I was a fan girl, not a Pakistani girl on the internet. Things changed as I was exposed to more political content and posts by journalists and I started expressing myself more online, my political views, my personal identity, that's when I became what I am now: a Pakistani woman on the internet" [I4]

A woman interviewee from Quetta saw TikTok as a more political space:

“ There is a general debate about TikTok, but regardless of the economic status of the person, it is accessible to them. You can use satire to speak truth to power that you can't say otherwise. On Twitter, we can't even do spaces on these subjects, but people are using TikToks to talk about them through humor [I1]

Usage of apps was also determined by geographical and cultural exposure, one respondent shares that:

“ People from other areas [of the country] don't know about a lot of apps. For instance, before coming to an urban area near Punjab for my studies I did not know that dating apps existed. But when I got here I saw a lot of young people were using them [I1]

Some young people are using social media as a coping mechanism for mental health. While not the focus of this research, young people shared that they are likely to use these platforms to talk about their mental health but are also triggered by content online. A respondent mentioned that a reason for making their account public was to keep their suicidal ideation in check. Another shared that Instagram was their third-most used platform and they used it:

“ Whenever my mental health allows, dysmorphia and insecurities feel like home now. Also obviously [I use it] to document my life and make it seem 'oh so much happening' even when I practically sulk all day long [R7]

Worldwide, the impact of social media platforms such as Instagram for teenagers and young girls has been a moot point. In the 2021 Facebook revelations it was found that Instagram was detrimental for the mental health of teenagers, particularly girls.¹² Internal research showed that 32% of teen girls reported that when they had body image issues, Instagram made them feel worse.¹³ One interviewee echoed this:

“ People tend to forget that Instagram is not real life, the curated content is not giving you an adequate look into someone's life. Often people develop self-esteem issues based on curated content about other people's lives [I2]

Mental health issues among young people are even more urgent in the context of Pakistan where there is an absolute absence of resources to address them. Mental health has emerged as an important reason for bans of popular applications such as TikTok and PubG.

Case Study: Gaming application cited as reason for violence among youth

In January 2022, it was reported that a 14 year old shot dead four family members, including mother and three siblings, “under the influence of gaming application PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PubG). The following excerpt from Dawn newspaper reports on the incident:

“ The authorities detained Zain Ali, 14, a son of the deceased LHW [Lady Health Worker], saying he used to play the popular online game, PubG, and allegedly killed his mother and three siblings influenced by the game.

Naheed Mubarak, 45; her son, Taimur Sultan, 20; and daughters, Mahnoor Fatima, 15, and Jannat, 10; were found dead in a room of their multi-storey home at LDA Chowk in Kahna area a week ago.

A senior police officer told Dawn that Ali had confessed to his crime. The suspect was a diehard PubG player and used to spend most of his time in his room playing the online game.

He said the teenage boy had turned aggressive after failing to achieve the given targets in the game. On the day of the incident, the officer said, the boy “lost his senses” after he missed a target after playing the game for hours, got hold of his mother’s pistol and went to her room where she was asleep along with her other children.¹⁴

The media coverage around the incident was sensationalist but also resulted in policy prescriptions for technologies:

“ This is the fourth such crime related to the online game in Lahore. When the first case surfaced in 2020, the then capital city police officer Zulfiqar Hameed had recommended a ban on the game to save lives, time and the future of millions of teenagers.

Three young players of the game have died by suicide in the last two years and the police in its reports declared PubG as the reason behind the deaths.¹⁵

Subsequently, AIG Operations issued a letter to the Additional Chief Secretary Home urging the provincial government to ban the online gaming applications such as PubG and Fortnite for their influence on the youth, creating “isolationist tendencies” among the youth. The letter drew a correlation between “violent” games and the incidence of crime in society.¹⁶

In another incident in April 2021, the murder of 4 people was linked to PubG on even thinner grounds. In the midst of a family quarrel regarding a man’s use of drugs, the man gunned down and murdered 4 family members. Subsequent reports noted that he was addicted to crystal meth and methamphetamine, and played PubG.¹⁷ Several reports noted his use of the gaming app, with one newspaper pointedly stating:

“ According to eyewitnesses, Bilal first opened fire on the family members and then came to the street and opened fire on the neighbors in PUBG style.

The accused told the neighbors to run and later opened fire on them. Police officials also confirmed the firing of the accused in PUBG style.¹⁸

Three teenage suicides reported in 2020 were attributed to PubG.¹⁹ These incidents emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic and created moral panic regarding the youth's use of technologies, resulting in the month-long suspension of PubG by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority in July 2020.²⁰ The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) cited the following reasons for the temporary ban:

“ PTA has received numerous complaints against PUBG wherein it is stated that the game is addictive, wastage of time and poses serious negative impact on physical and psychological health of the Children.²¹

While there is a case to be made for more platform responsibility regarding the harmful impact on its most vulnerable users, chief among them children and young adults, the moral panic regarding the deleterious impact of applications such as PubG has drawn a correlation between the two without effective causation. Researchers have found that “engrossing videogames which take up many hours a day such as PUBG may pose a risk which in the most extreme cases may be fatal,” in most cases these outlier incidents have underlying predisposing factors relating to mental health that require a larger public health response.²² Issues of mental health for the youth have been exacerbated during the pandemic in the face of increased social isolation, screentime, uncertainty, and anxieties regarding safety and health-mental health could very well manifest in technologies. There needs to be better understanding of the relationship young people have with technology, and creating safeguards within it to provide tools for protections and prevention. One interviewee from Rawalpindi who identifies as non-binary notes that the internet holds the ability to help with mental illness:

“ The good thing about the internet is that you can find anything you want, if you're going through something you will be able to find resources regarding how to cope with it or find safe spaces where you can discuss what you're going through [I2]

In terms of privacy, respondents stated that for the most used platform, 70.2% used their real identity, while 11.9% neither used their name nor picture on the platform. These results could be connected to the fact that WhatsApp was the most used platform among respondents which is far more private than other social media platforms.

Do you use your real identity (name and/or picture) on the platform?
84 responses

- Yes, I use both my name and picture
- Somewhat, use only name or picture not both
- No

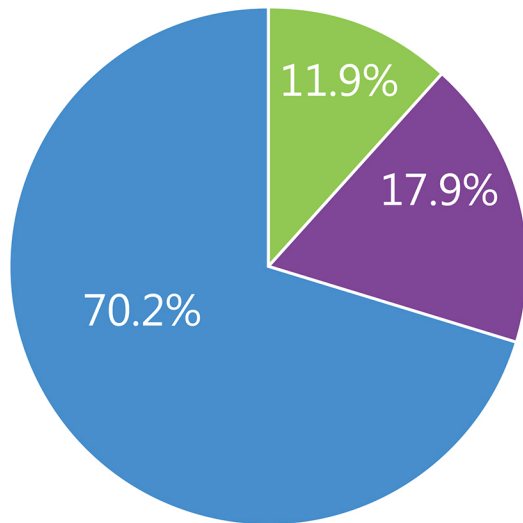


Figure 8: Breakdown for respondents who used their real identity on their most-used platform.

Gender played a partial role in whether someone chose to reveal their identity, though the results are mixed particularly given the fact that the sample size for the survey consisted largely of women. Aggregating data for the 3 most used social media platforms, of the people who said no, i.e. that they did not use their real identity on social media platforms, 64% were women and gender non-binary individuals and 25% were men. For those who used either their name or picture, 75% were women and non-binary and 13.6% were men. Out of those who said they use their real identity, 68.8% were women and gender non-binary and 30% were men.

The primary reason for not using real identity markers on platforms was lack of comfort and safety concerns. Many stated that they did not want their online activity to be associated with their real world identity, or IRL (In Real Life) identity, fearing backlash from family

and society. Severing the link between offline and online identity allowed many to express themselves more freely online as one respondent shared why their Twitter account was public:

“ I’m anonymous and say funny things and think people deserve to see what I have to share [R79]

For others, however, negative experiences in the past were reasons for keeping their accounts private or leaving these platforms altogether because of their inability to guarantee user privacy:

“ I don’t use my picture as I have experienced breaches in my private social accounts Facebook and Instagram, which I deleted and never joined back [R29]

“ I don’t feel unsafe on WhatsApp because it’s mostly used for family and I can easily control it [R48]

Young people are often misunderstood as not valuing privacy, however the respondents reveal a great deal of concern for privacy and understanding of trade-offs in the digital world. They demonstrated awareness of the compromised nature of private information in the digital spaces and the ways in which negotiations can be made within the system, one respondent shared:

“ I was originally using my own picture, and started receiving messages from random accounts. It grew to be off-putting and started to make me feel uncomfortable. Instead of doing the work of policing the privacy of another social media account, I made this one [current account] anonymous, to the extent that even my gender would be concealed. I have since stopped receiving unwanted messages [R80]

Respondents who maintained public accounts did so for a range of reasons; many stated that the nature of their work required them to share content publicly to build an audience. One user, who created content on Instagram, stated that their account was:

“ [P]ublic because I want others to listen to the videos I post [R11]

Others bifurcated their public and private lives by maintaining two separate accounts:

“ I have 2 accounts, my main is public since I share my photography and writing on it. My other account is private since I share photos of me and my friends and family [R13]

“ I did not have a lot of friends before the internet, and if anything the internet has really opened me up through a public profile [I2]

Others bifurcated their public and private lives by maintaining two separate accounts:

“ Well, I have both private and public accounts. I use my public IG [Instagram] as a form of self-expression, a place to put my thoughts out into the world. My private is for people I'm close to and who I want to stay in touch with [R40]

Overall a complex understanding of privacy was found among the young participants, the understanding of privacy was much more fluid than expressed in laws and policy documents. Many respondents were blurring the lines between the public and private by using tools to suit their specific needs:

“ [My profile is] public for now till I find my like minded set of people and then would switch to private [R5]

“ It's public, but I've locked some options, as in who can comment and like my posts [R4]

Lastly, there was an acute understanding of how seemingly 'non-personal' data can also constitute a breach of privacy. Two respondents pointed out how they were conscious about keeping their YouTube account private despite not posting any videos. They stated that data such as playlists also gives away crucial information:

“ Some of my playlists are private and some are public, depending on the content of each [R36]

“ I don't post anything on it but I do have playlists and stuff that I don't want to necessarily share with people. Like a playlist of my exercise schedule and videos I fall asleep to [R79]

Access

Most respondents did not face internet access issues at a structural level, which is not surprising given that they belonged mostly to urban areas. A majority (85.7%) had access to a stable internet connection; with only 1 sharing that they did not. Comparatively, lack of electricity and load shedding was a bigger barrier (17.9% citing it as a definite barrier and 14.3% identifying it as a partial barrier), often making internet supply unavailable for the duration of internet outage if the user is relying on broadband connections or making it difficult to charge devices used to access the internet. The following sections will explore infrastructural and geographical barriers to access in more detail.

However comparatively there was a significant minority of respondents (14.5%) who had to limit their internet usage due to economic issues. Internet affordability is a major issue in Pakistan which ranks 78 out of 100 countries in the Inclusive Internet Index 2021 report for internet pricing.²³ Lack of affordability affects young people disproportionately who might not have access to stable employment, often relying on low-paying and precarious jobs. Out of the respondents who stated that they faced financial barriers, 26.3% had a household income of less than PKR 50,000, 21% fell within the PKR 50,000 - 100,000 and 100,000 - 200,000 income brackets each.

Is lack of access to electricity a barrier to using a internet?
84 responses

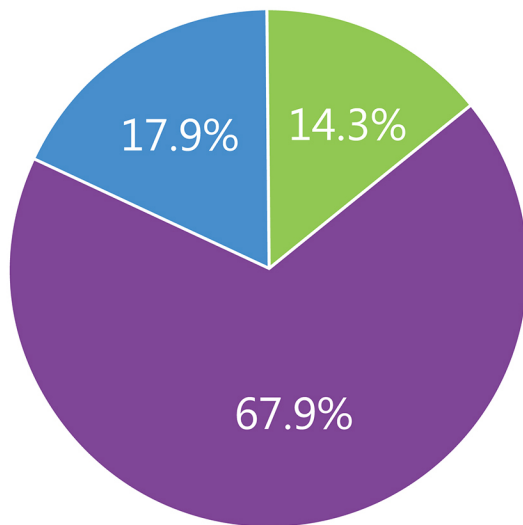


Figure 8: Percentage of respondents facing electricity barriers to internet access.

Is lack of finances a reason for limited internet use?
84 responses

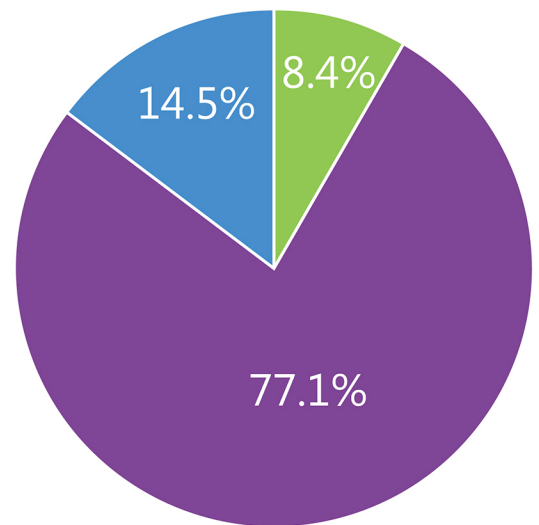


Figure 9: Percentage of respondents facing economic barriers to internet access.

When asked to self-identify whether gender identity, ethnicity, or religion constituted a barrier in terms of internet access, 73.8% answered no and 11.9% answered yes. One male respondent pointed out how his privilege gave him an advantage in terms of access:

“ As a Punjabi male, access to a superior internet connection is far easier than minority genders and ethnicities, especially women, many of whom don't have access to the internet either because of their area (GB, AJK, ex-tribal areas etc) or simply by virtue of being a woman [R84]

A respondent from Quetta pointed to barriers faced by minority ethnicities, intersecting with geographical discrimination in terms of access and ghettoization of marginalised communities:

“ I come from Balochistan. Whenever I go to Quetta, I face a lot of difficulty in terms of internet facility. My home is near Hazara town so major networks like Ufone do not operate well. Additionally, whenever there is a protest, VIP movement or when it is Muharram, there is no network facility for the whole day and is back late night. Load shedding in Quetta has become a severe problem which causes problem while taking online class/exam [R17]

One woman who belonged to a Shia family shared that:

“ During Muharram, for instance, there is a lot of hate content against Shias on the internet. The hate speech can sometimes get to you, making you log off for a while. If you happen to speak up, a lot of vitriol comes your way [on the basis of your religious identity] [I4]

Several women pointed out how gender is used as an excuse to delay providing internet access:

“ I did get access to personal device[s] and internet usage late, which was somewhat because of my gender. As men in my family got their personal devices and internet at an earlier age [R29]

“ My gender used to be a barrier before I was married [R67]

These experiences correspond with the fact that Pakistan has one of the highest digital gender gaps in the world.²⁴ According to a GSMA report, women in Pakistan are 34 percent less likely than men to own a mobile device and 43 percent less likely to use the internet.²⁵ A report by Media Matters for Democracy finds that 6 of every 10 Pakistani women are likely to have their internet usage restricted, monitored, or controlled by family members.²⁶

Analysis

Freedom of Expression and Safety

Worryingly, 65.1% of participants stated that they self-censored themselves on digital platforms, with only 19.3% respondents saying definitively that they had not.

Have you ever self-censored yourself on these platforms?
83 responses

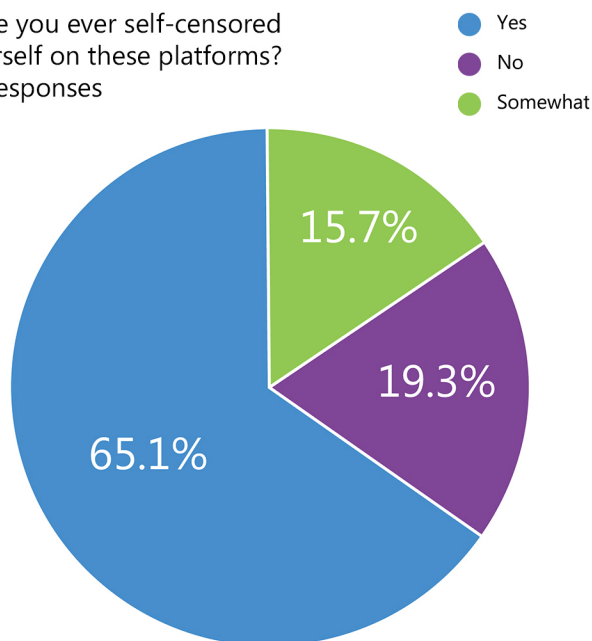


Figure 10: Breakdown of respondents self-censoring in digital spaces.

This corresponded with the fact that nearly as many respondents (60.7%) felt unsafe on digital platforms. A majority of those who answered that they felt unsafe also noted that they self-censored themselves online and vice versa. 80% of those who self-censored also felt unsafe online and 85% of respondents who felt unsafe engaged in some form of self-censorship online.

Have you ever felt unsafe on these platforms?
84 responses

● Yes
● No
● Somewhat

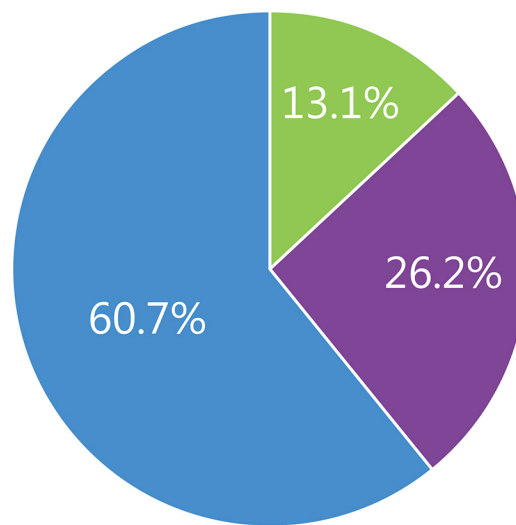


Figure 11: Breakdown of respondents who felt safe in digital spaces.

A woman interviewee from Rawalpindi shared that incidents of violence against students due to online speech led to self-censorship on her part:

“ With the Mashal Khan case we saw that he was just expressing his views, but people took the law into their own hands in order to silence him. His death had an effect on me. Some people like to misuse religion, political affiliations and institutions on Twitter, there are real-life repercussions for online expression. People should not be punished their views, they should be educated about it [16]

Respondents stated that talking about religion or civil-military issues was a no-go. Witnessing attacks on critics has a chilling effect for the youth:

“ Tweeting anything remotely critical with regards to the government, culture, religion, and gender inequality is always risky in my opinion. I've seen plenty of other people receive hate and threats for statements that I agree with and have also made before, so that's something that I now avoid [R6]

An interviewee shared that:

“ Since I am from Balochistan, I have to self censor myself on almost every social media platform. There are a lot of sensitive issues and injustices faced by my people but we cannot talk about them or educate others on social media because it is just not safe. There is a heavy price to pay, sometimes it's your life [I1]

For others the perception of threat came not from the state, but from within their own social circle—primarily surveillance by their own families:

“ I am worried about my tweets getting leaked to my family. I know I can get in trouble for my 'liberal' tweets [R11]

Experiences of sexualized abuse were common and resulted in many women and non-binary people altering their behavior online through self-censorship:

“ People sharing threatening and mean comments after I posted some of my views. Some of the comments were really graphic and violent [R49]

“ Many years back, when I was a minor, I received messages from a person who was not known to me personally but who I had mutual friends with. He would tell me he saw me walking around, where I would go out, when I would come back from school. That scared me, and I stopped walking. I asked to be picked and dropped from school and basically limited my mobility. I did not tell anymore, I had reason to believe that I would be blamed for it. I think that experience has informed much of how I try to make privacy a priority on social media till now. I avoid sharing personal information about myself [R79]

“ For many young girls, in their teenage years and 20s, sexting and sharing of intimate content is quite prevalent. This is a reality although we don't talk about it, but many women start getting blackmailed and fake IDs are created in their name [I1]

42.7% of respondents said that they had reported abuse and harassment to social media platforms using in-platform reporting tools. Out of those who reported, 51.4% of respondents felt that the response was not adequate and only 31.4% felt that it was. 54.9% of those who stated that they felt unsafe online reported harassment to platforms.

Have you ever reported an incident of harassment to a social media company?
82 responses

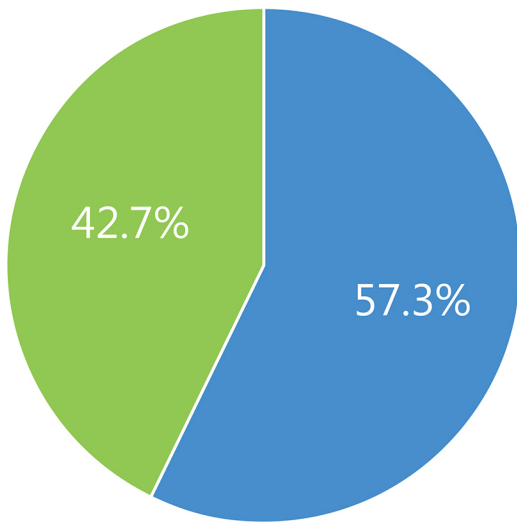


Figure 12: Percentage of respondents who reported cases of harassment to platforms.

There was a general lack of confidence in social media platforms and their ability to protect users, especially for content in local languages:

“ These social media moderators are utterly useless. Women will have account suspended because they wrote ‘men are shit’ in English while literal violent extremists who write in Urdu do just fine [R5]

Lack of response after reporting content was also a common experience:

“ I couldn’t say [how my report was handled], they never updated me on any action taken in most cases [R12]

Abysmally, only 12.2% of respondents said they reported cases of harassment to law enforcement, which in the case of online harassment is the cyber crime wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA).

Only 15.6% of those who felt unsafe in digital spaces reported to law enforcement. 30% of the small subset that reported shared that they responded adequately.

Have you ever felt unsafe on these platforms?
84 responses

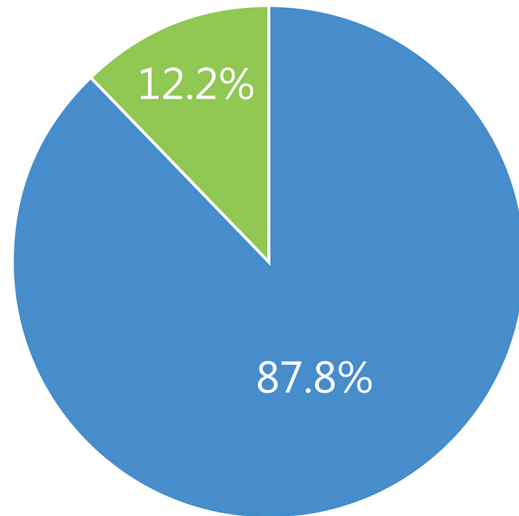


Figure 13: Percentage of respondents who reported cases of harassment to law enforcement.

Again a lack of trust in law enforcement institutions was expressed by respondents:

“ I have no hopes from official enforcement, unless one has personal connections [R4]

“ This harasser [I want to report] is well connected and is using a gang of their friends to dodge accountability. Inability of FIA to deal with organized crime gangs player a role [R41]

One respondent who did report her case to law enforcement had a discouraging experience when she contacted them:

“ [When I went to law enforcement] they told me to limit my social media use instead [of pursuing my case] [R8]

Digital Rights: Content Moderation and Privacy



“ Nothing really is private, is it? That's scary [R74]

In terms of attitudes regarding digital rights issues, i.e. online freedom of expression, access to information, and right to information, most respondents felt that these were important issues. When asked to rate these issues on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being very important and 10 being insignificant, most respondents rated them as important. Overall, privacy was rated as the most important issue with 71.7% ranking it at number 1:

On a scale of 1 to 10, do you think right to privacy is important in online spaces? (1 being very important and 10 being insignificant)
83 responses

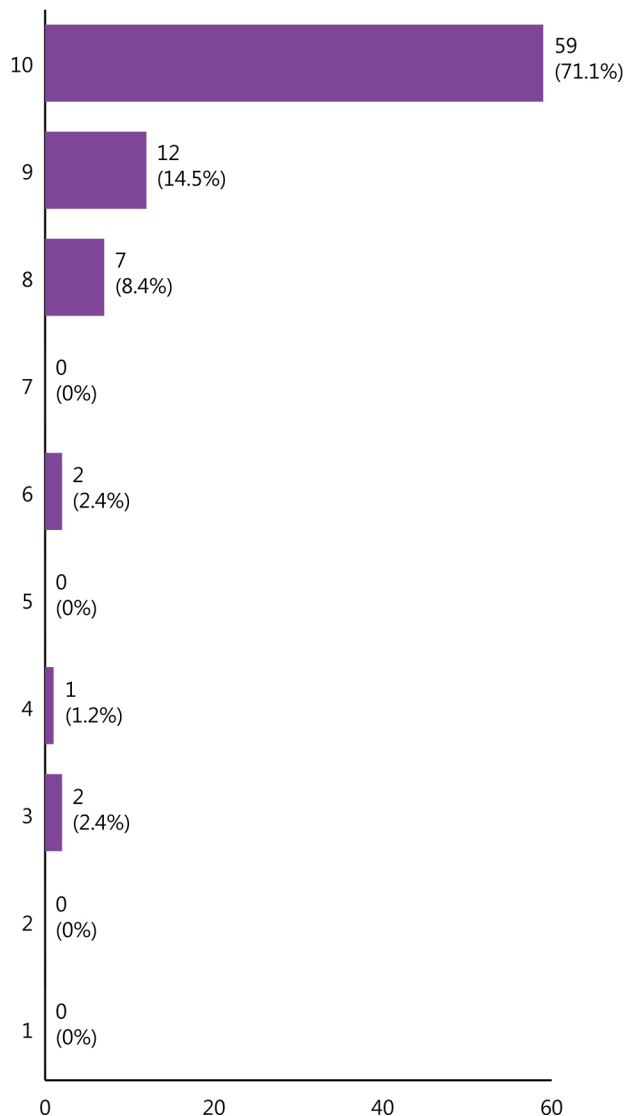


Figure 14: Rating given by respondents to the digital right to privacy

Right to access to information was rated the second most important as 61% ranked it at 1 and 25.6% as number 2.

On a scale of 1 to 10, do you think right to information is an important freedom in online spaces? (1 being very important and 10 being insignificant)
82 responses

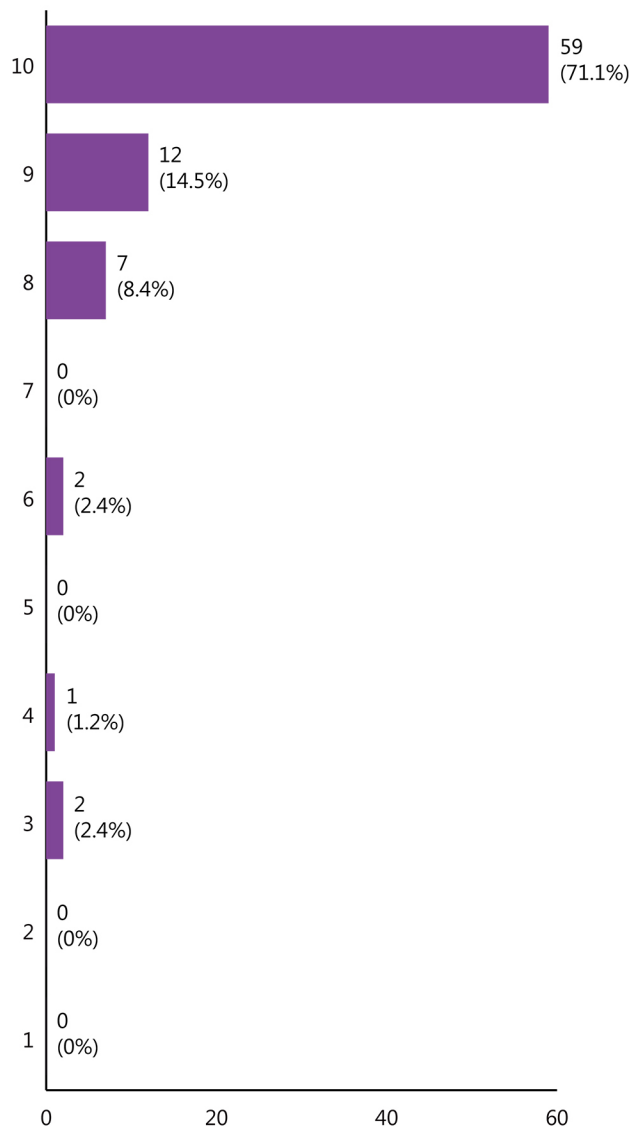


Figure 15: Rating given by respondents to access to information in digital spaces.

45.8% of respondents rated the right to freedom of expression as very important, while 19.3% rated it at number 3. Interestingly, 5% of respondents rated it at number 5, neither important nor insignificant.

On a scale of 1 to 10, do you think freedom of expression is important in online spaces? (1 being very important and 10 being insignificant)
83 responses

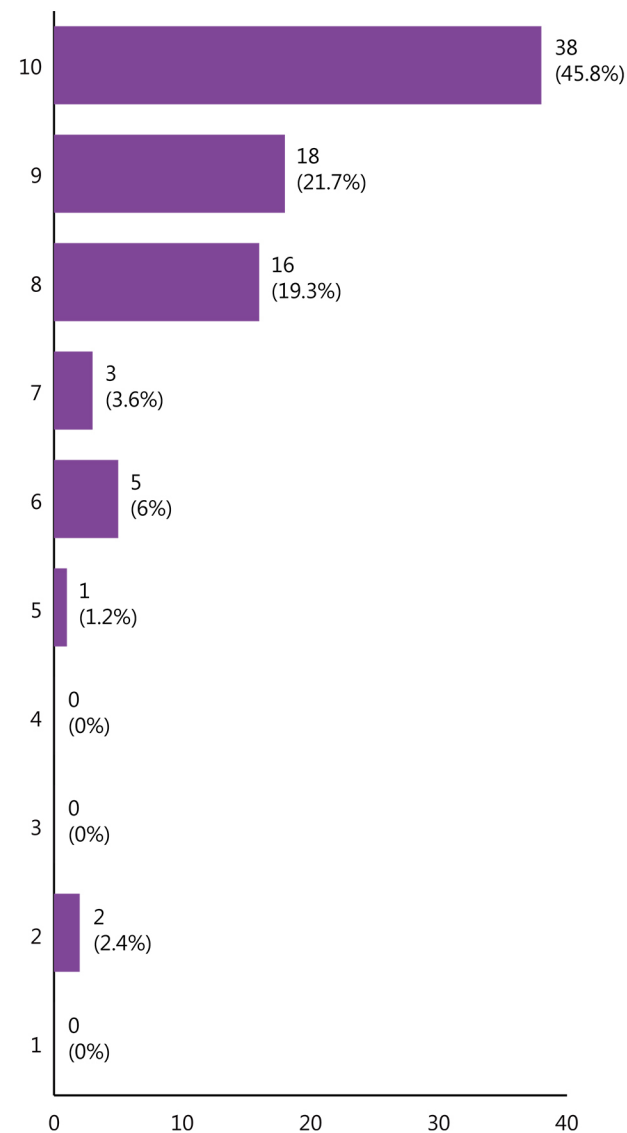


Figure 16: Rating given by respondents to access to information in digital spaces.

This is reflected in the issues identified by respondents in their answers to the question “according to you, what are the biggest issues in online spaces?”. Only 2 respondents specifically cited freedom of expression, and in fact some raised concerns regarding unfettered free speech. A respondent stated that a major issue was “[f]reedom of speech going unchecked” [R85]. Another respondent said that:

“ When freedom of speech is misused in [the] form of hate speech [due to] people's illiteracy in Pakistan [R57]

Safety and the need for content moderation against harassment, hate speech and misogyny was seen as a far bigger issue, identified by 47.6% of the respondents. Furthermore the prevalence of misinformation and controlling it was cited by 19% of respondents. One respondent expressed ambivalence over the complications of regulating speech while recognising the issue of misinformation:

“ The problem of fake news is rampant. Somehow I think controlling fake news goes [against] the concept of free speech, though I'm not sure. That makes it very confusing for me [R71]



However when it came to state-led censorship, 86.7% believed that the government should not have the right to ban entire platforms/ applications/ websites. When asked if internet shutdowns were justified on the basis of security, a slightly smaller (78.5%) believed that they were unjustified.

Do you think the government has the right to ban entire platforms/applications/websites?
83 responses

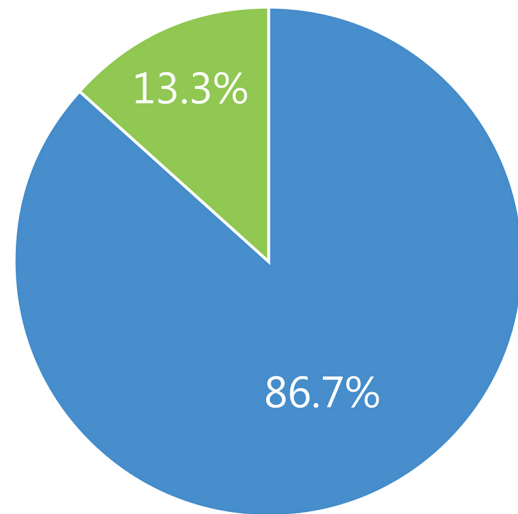


Figure 17: Percentage of respondents' opinion on blanket bans.

Do you think the government should have the power to shut down the internet for security reasons?
84 responses

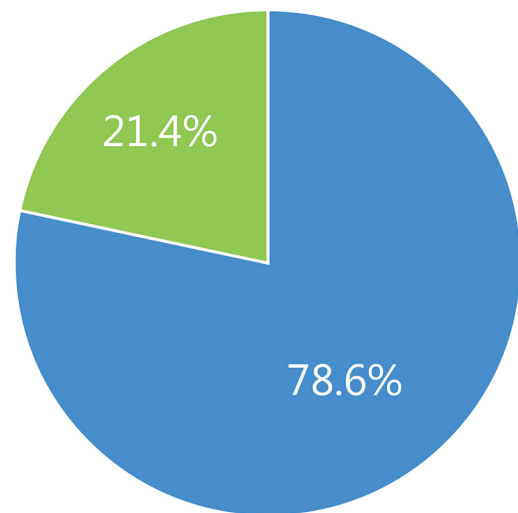


Figure 18: Percentage of respondents' opinion on internet shutdowns.



For content moderation, opinions were far more diverse, reflecting the complicated nature of the discussion. The majority (52.4%) stated that the government should have the right to remove content sometimes, whereas 29.8% believed that that state should not have that power at all.

Do you think the government has the right to censor or remove content on the internet?
84 responses

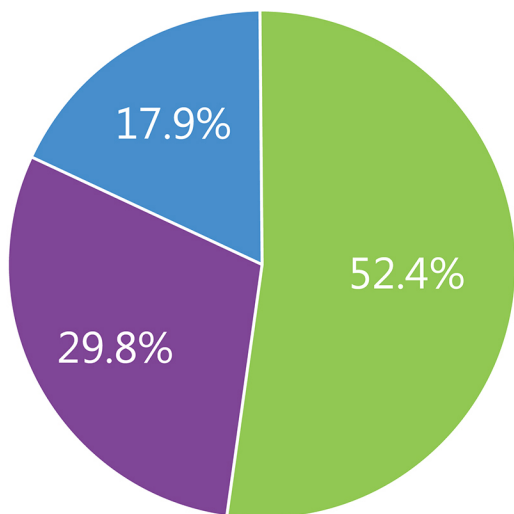


Figure 18: Breakdown of respondents' opinion on content moderation by the government.

The categories of speech identified in need of regulation and moderation were as follows:

Speech Category	% of Respondents Identified
Abuse and Harassment	20.2%
Hate Speech	19%
Misinformation, disinformation, fake news	14.2%
Violent/extremist content	9.5%
Propaganda	7.1%
Pornography	7.1%
Child pornography	5.9%
Immoral/vulgar	3.5%
Private information	2.3%
Religiously insensitive content	1.1%

Some respondents identified a vague criteria for content moderation speaking of content that can "hurt" or "harm" someone or be deemed "offensive":

- “ Content that is democratically offensive [R84]
- “ Any content that doesn't potentially hurt anyone should be regulated [R78]
- “ Anything that can endanger or harm someone else's life [R82]

But others expressed confusion, alluding to the complicated nature of these decisions one respondent said:



“ This is a gray area, because who decides what is right and wrong and what should be regulated or not? But I do think that hate speech against vulnerable groups, threats of violence and rape, or depiction of violence should be regulated [R74]

An interviewee also pointed out that youth-based applications are disproportionately targeted for content moderation and bans, often leading to a bias in the type of content that is seen as in need of moderation:

“ Platforms getting banned is framed as a trivial issue, the reaction is expressed in cringe material and people making memes about it. I have not seen the anger that should be there as this is very much about our digital rights. TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, because they are primarily youth-based, no one really cares about them because they're seen as jokes [I4]

Content moderation is also very difficult to implement as one respondent points out that ultimately many of these efforts “don't matter, VPNs render everything useless” [R75]. The government of Pakistan has attempted to restrict VPNs. In June 2020 and in 2022,²⁸ the PTA has instructed internet users to register their VPNs through an online portal for VPN registration.²⁹ Although there have been no crackdowns on unregistered VPNs, users have reported intermittent throttling of registered VPNs, which the PTA denies.³⁰

One interviewee drew on her experience as having worked with law enforcement to highlight the harms of leaving “pornographic” content online to advocate for an expansive content moderation approach:

“ I am okay with the government taking down religiously offensive and vulgar content. In my experience I've seen a lot of cases of child pornography; in one nearly 10,000 DVDs of pornography were recovered, some of it contained child pornography. When dealing with such harmful content, the government has to take decisive action [I3]

Respondents were largely in favor of regulation of the internet (72.3%), however there was some disagreement on what that regulation should look like.

Do you think the government has the right to censor or remove content on the internet?
84 responses

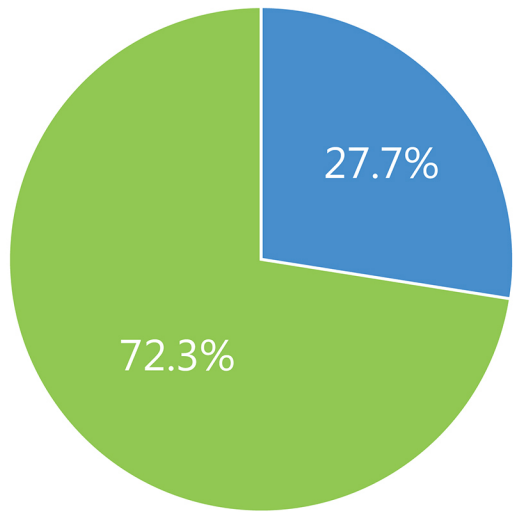


Figure 19: Breakdown of respondents' opinion on content moderation by the government.

Are you comfortable with social media companies having the power to remove content from their platforms?
84 responses

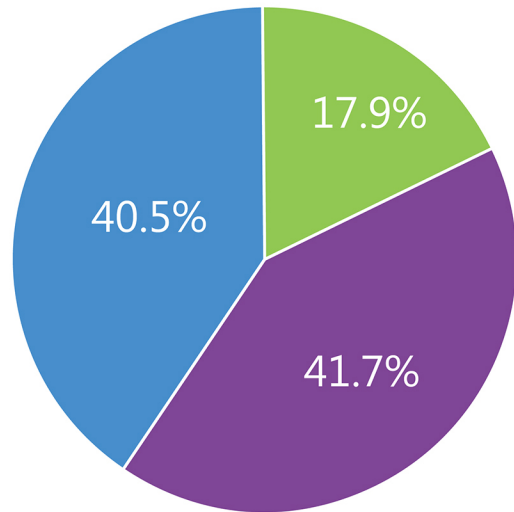
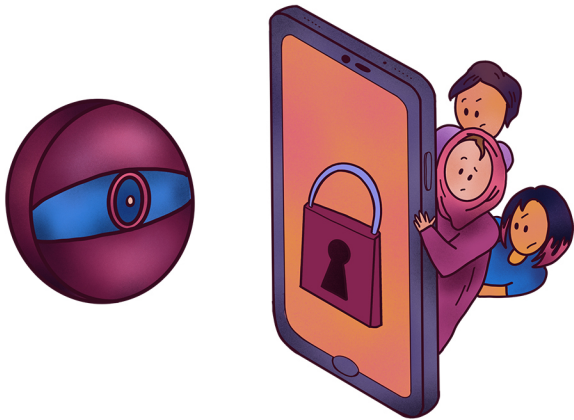


Figure 20: Breakdown of respondents' opinion on content moderation by tech companies.



2 respondents identified lack of implementation of laws as a crucial issue. Another stated that absence of defamation laws was an issue for them, perhaps the respondent was unaware of the fact that defamation is criminalized under section 400/500 of the Pakistan Penal Code and section 20 of PECA.³¹

Privacy was also a major concern for many with 15.4% respondents citing it as a major digital issue. Surveillance was separately identified by 2 respondents along with unchecked power of tech companies by another 2. When asked about whether tech companies should have the power to remove or censor content, opinion was also split with 41.7% saying that they should not have that power and 40.5% saying that they should. Interestingly more people were comfortable with tech companies regulating content (40.5%) compared to the government (17.9%).

Digital Rights Advocacy

An overwhelming majority (86.7%) of those who filled out the survey stated that they used online spaces to talk about political and social issues. These high numbers are indicative of the fact that digital spaces are political spaces and the youth is actively engaging with online politics. There was a firm belief among the majority (70.8%) that digital platforms were effective tools for raising awareness and advocacy. 19% stated that digital platforms were somewhat effective and only 1 respondent stated that they were not. A 26 year old resident of ex-FATA shared in their interview:

“ There are some organizations that come from an old mindset that real politics happens offline. But a lot of us [young people] know that Twitter trends are noticed by government officials, and with effective social media trends even security agencies are forced to listen. Once something is trending on social media the media also picks it up [I8]

Have you ever used digital platforms for raising awareness or your voice about political or social issues?
83 responses

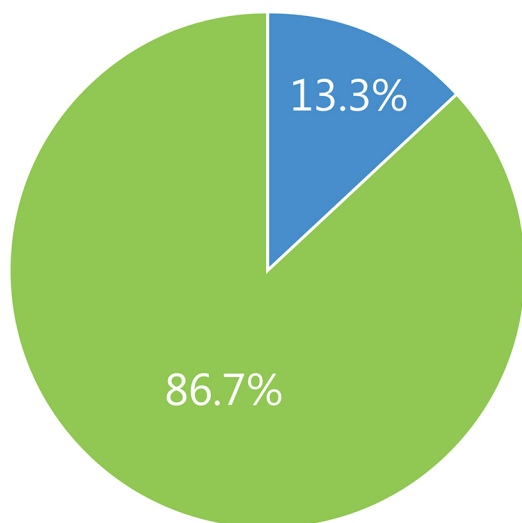


Figure 21: Percentage of respondents who used online platforms for political and social advocacy.

While social media has the potential of politicizing the youth,³² some felt that it also has the potential to mislead:

“ Social media can inform you, and it can also make you part of cultish politics or incel groups. It depends on you if you are intellectually sound enough to be influenced. Pakistani youth do not even know how to assess sources and the news, I am disappointed to see my peers being easily manipulated [I1]

A woman interviewee based in Lahore pointed out that while more and more people are engaging in politics through the internet,³³ there has also been a memeification of politics where complex political messages have been reduced to short videos:

“ I’ve seen videos where people go to Jalsas, they combine the videos with a patriotic song track to evoke an emotional reaction. The goal of these videos is to elicit a purely emotion-based reaction. As a result you see professional social media teams of political parties putting in resources for this and reduces the entire online political discourse to entertainment [I3]

This belief in the power of digital advocacy was further strengthened during the pandemic. Interviewee 1 posited that “during COVID, people were not able to gather otherwise, so social media became the main site of protest” [I1]. The internet as a site of protest came as second nature to many of the respondents engaged for this research study. This was most apparent in the campaign to fight for internet access in areas deprived of access—a fight that was led by young students across the country.

Case Study: Internet Access for Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic



Experiences of the internet in Pakistan can be very different if you come from an area such as Gilgit-Balistan (GB). One interviewee from Gilgit shared:

“ The first time I used the internet properly was when I got into undergrad in Lahore. By then, back home in Gilgit town there was very little internet. There was an internet cafe called Comsats I believe, but you could use that for checking emails. We had a basic internet connection at home that didn’t allow me access to a lot of content. It was only when I started undergrad was when I had a proper introduction to the formal internet world. [I7]

Many students who traveled to other parts of the country for education would start using the internet for their education. When they would come back home for their summer vacations they would not have access to high speed internet.

There is a monopoly of S-Com in GB which is run by the Special Communication Organization (SCO) under the Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996. Section 40 of the Act says:

“ Within the Northern Areas and Azad Jammu and Kashmir shall be operated by the Special Communication Organization and the Authority [PTA] shall issue a license to the Organization accordingly

On the other hand, in the ex-FATA region, mobile internet access had been banned due to “security issues” in 2016.³⁴

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, many students and professionals working in urban areas were asked to go back to their home towns where they were expected to attend online classes and work-from-home. The interviewee from Hunza pointed out that:

“ I worked for an IT firm in Islamabad, and when I had to go back home during the pandemic, that’s when the problems started. I couldn’t answer my employers on WhatsApp, I couldn’t attend meetings, my call would not connect and when it did I couldn’t hear anything or participate. I got a lot of negative feedback from my employers. The same situation was with my younger brother, he would only join classes for attendance but could not hear anything” [I9]

A male student from ex-FATA interviewed for the study shared:

There are 35,000 university students from ex-FATA who were cut off from the internet and especially during the pandemic I was forced to miss classes due to the internet, missed quizzes for 2 semesters. My studies suffered because I used to be the topper. When the pandemic started, I talked to the district administration, spoke to the military and civil admin and journalists. They didn't do anything so I was forced to protest [I8]

People who had to use the internet in Hunza had to go to extraordinary lengths to access it:

“ The nearest S-Com tower was quite far away [from my house], but we realized that there was some connectivity near [the tower] so we decided to take our work and classes there. I remember it was at quite a height. We used to go to the mountaintop and work, but only as long as our laptop charging would last. There was also a huge issue of electricity, we often had to resort to asking shopkeepers to let us charge our devices [I9]

Advocacy for Access

During the pandemic, borne out of the connectivity and access issues faced by so many in these regions, campaigns demanding internet access started to emerge. The interviewee from Hunza shared that she took a picture of her younger sister working on her laptop sitting on a mountaintop and put it on Twitter, quickly the Tweet started to garner more than a thousand re-Tweets:

“ After that the movement [to demand internet access] was strengthened. People started to share their personal stories as well.

Some NGOs in Hunza and journalists got together and they made a platform on Facebook to discuss these issues. Our movement only grew after that and we even did peaceful protests [I9]

The hashtag, #Internet4GilgitBaltistan, soon became a top trending one on Pakistani Twitter in the summer of 2020. Similarly the hashtag #Enable3G4GInExFata also received a lot of traction. The participants in these movements revealed that once these hashtags started to trend on social media, the local mainstream and even international media started to cover the story.

Students from ex-FATA engaged journalists, politicians and activists as well as filing a petition at the Islamabad High Court on April 7, 2020. The petitioner Sayad Muhammad was able to get orders from the court stating that access to the internet was a fundamental right for the citizens of ex-FATA and directed the Federal Government to restore the internet.

As a result of protests and online digital rights advocacy several changes came about in Gilgit-Pakistan. The interviewee in Hunza shared:

“ The initial relief that SCO gave was that they temporarily increased the PKR 600 monthly mobile data package from 10 GB to 20 GB because 10 GB would finish in a matter of days. Subsequently, as a result of our sustained protests, the S-Com even made a Unit for people to use the internet in our district, but still that's not the same as having personal access because how long can you stay there? Thirdly, they also started a Dongle device but it was in a limited amount so many did not get it. Even when I applied for the device, I never got it [I9]

In ex-FATA there has been progress on restoration of internet services . In June 2021, the Ministry of Interior cleared Turbat city, Kech, Awaran, Panjgur, Washuk, Kalat, and Awaran-Bela Road in Balochistan after five years and Khyber district in KP for mobile internet coverage.³⁵ Security clearance was also provided for internet services in Waziristan and Bajour.³⁶ Announcements were made in late 2021 that mobile internet services will be restored in Kurram district of KP as well.³⁷

While these measures were inadequate, the pressure did result in immediate relief and has created more awareness about the importance of the internet:

“ Now even our parents and elders realize that the internet is used for other things apart from social media. Many people lost their jobs or couldn't get education because of our advocacy—they see the internet as important now [I7]

Emerging Issues in Technology

In terms of knowledge and understanding regarding emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML) and Virtual Reality (VR), experiences were quite varied (refer to Figure 22 below). However it is noteworthy that more people rated their knowledge as higher (10.8% at 1 and 2 respectively) than on the lower end of the spectrum (3.6% at 9 and 1.2% at 10):

On scale of 1 to 10 (1 being understanding it completely 10 being i don't understand it), Please rate your understanding of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality:
83 responses

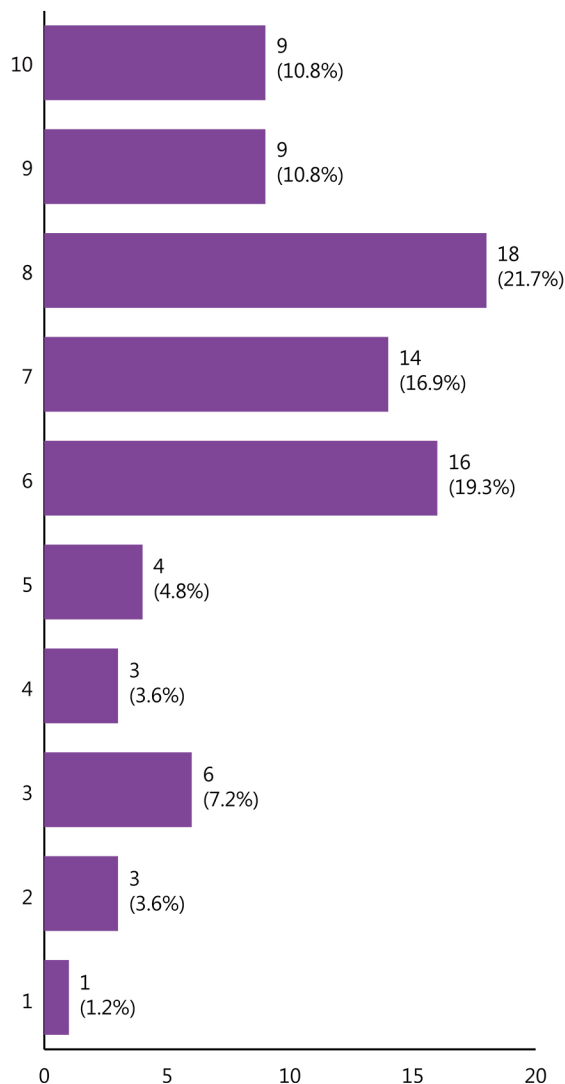


Figure 22: Respondents' ranking of understanding of emerging technologies.

There was also a diversity of opinion regarding the integration of these technologies into their lives. Respondents explaining their discomfort raised concerns regarding the intrusion of privacy and increased surveillance, particularly real-time collection of location data.

Is lack of finances a reason for limited internet use?
84 responses

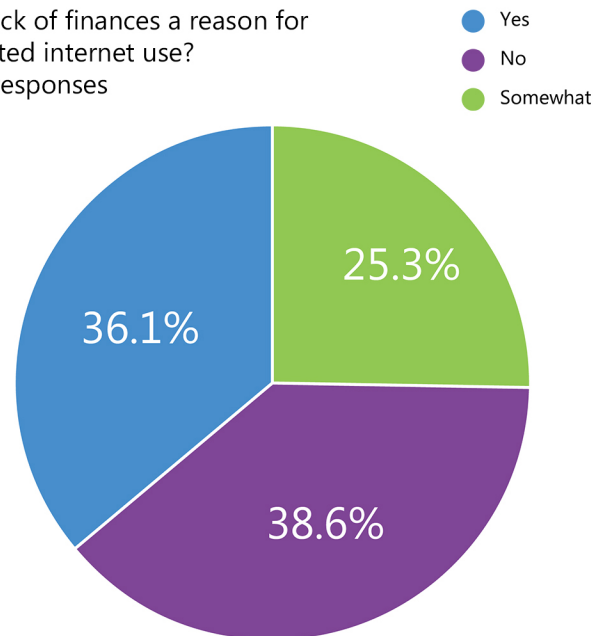


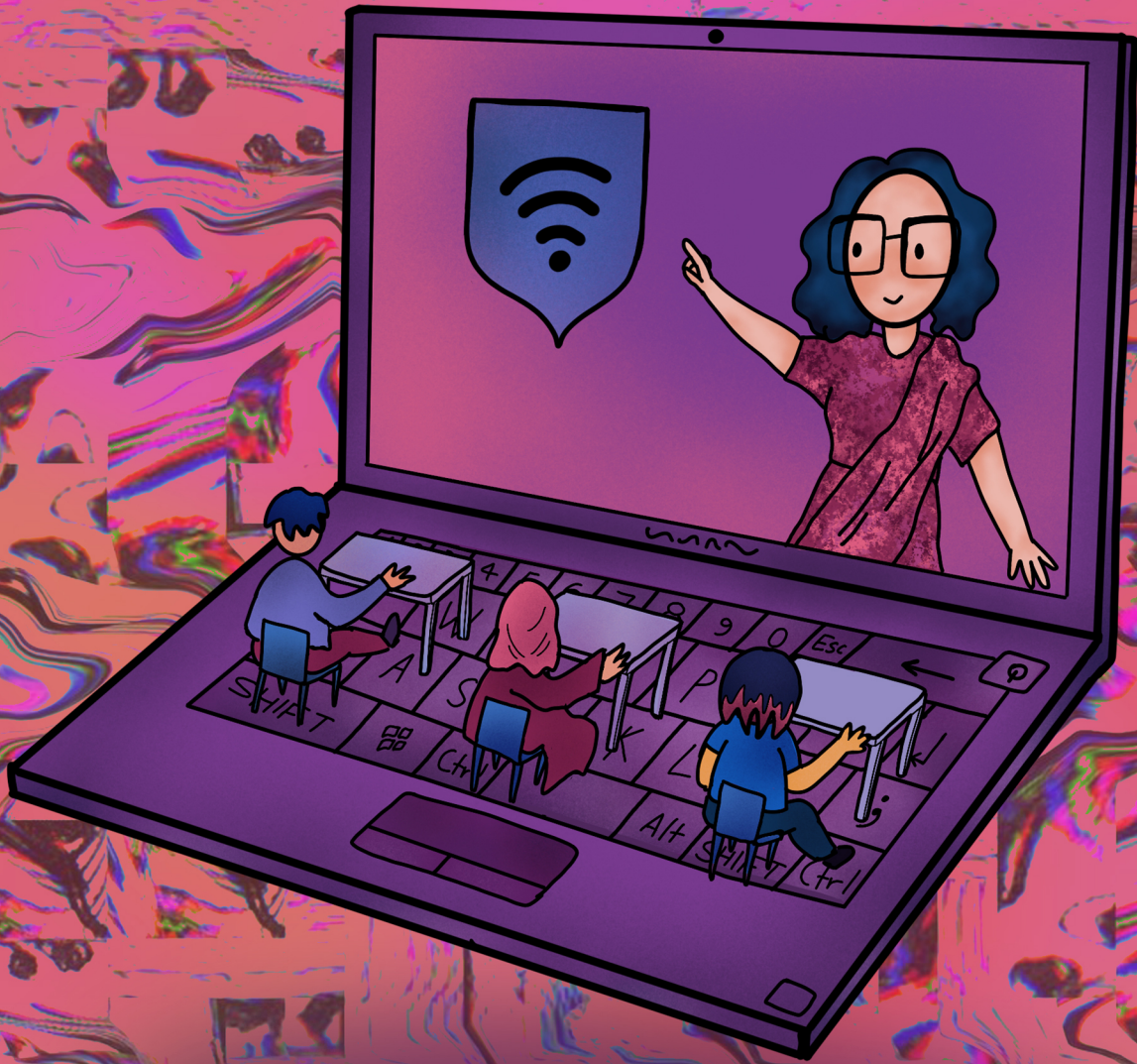
Figure 23: Breakdown of respondents' comfort with emerging technologies.

Some expressed fear at the loss of control as more aspects of their lives are becoming automated. One respondent cited distrust, not of the technologies themselves, but of those building these technologies. For them the "invasion of privacy, selling of my data for company profit" was a major issue [R62]. Another respondent stated:

“ Virtual reality and AI's biggest concerns are privacy. People should not become products in order to engage with technologies that become a requirement to use due to how widespread they are. There are serious privacy concerns here and private companies must be held to a high standard in regards to it for the sake of the internet as a whole [R69]

Others recognised the potential of these technologies but expressed apprehension regarding lack of safeguards:

“ I’m not completely opposed to all of it but the meta universe thing makes me a little anxious because I feel like people already have become so terminally online and are constantly consuming so much media and information that it’s a little concerning because we don’t know how much we’re capable of handling mentally. I feel like a boomer just thinking it but especially for the next generation and the kids that are literally being born into it, are on the internet before they’ve even felt a sense of self and don’t really have an alternative because even now it’s almost like you don’t exist if you don’t exist on the internet [R15]



Futuristic Vision: How the Youth See Internet Regulation?

Youth-inclusive Policy Making

A majority of respondents surveyed (72.6%) lacked confidence in policymakers' ability to understand issues related to technology. Only 4.8% stated that they believed that policymakers understood these issues.

Do you think policy makers understand issues of technology when they make laws and policies?
84 responses

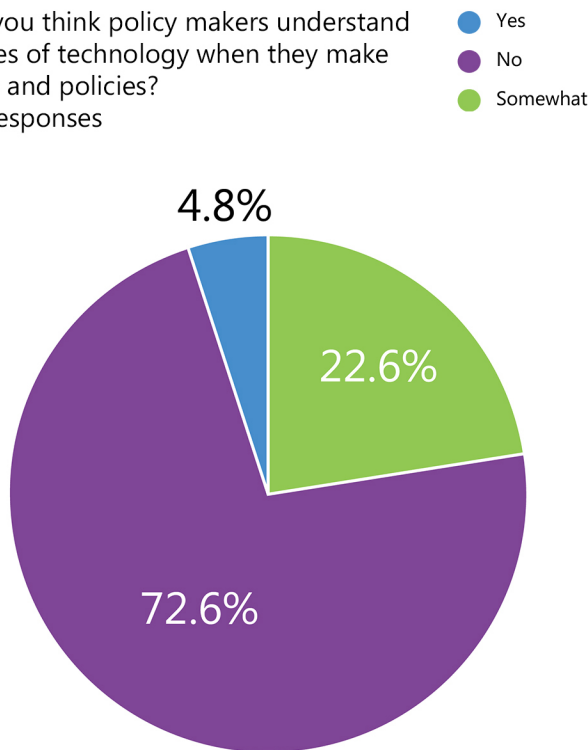


Figure 24: Breakdown of respondents' opinion on tech policymakers.

Furthermore, engagement of youth groups with civil society was also minimal. When asked about the effectiveness of digital rights groups in advocacy and awareness, most were on the fence about it (48.2% said they were somewhat effective) and 20.5% said that they were not. Interviewees suggested that:

“ Digital rights groups should work with marginalized women, women from rural areas who do not have access to awareness regarding how to protect themselves—how to secure their pictures and data [I1]

Do you think digital rights groups have been effective in protecting your online rights?
83 responses

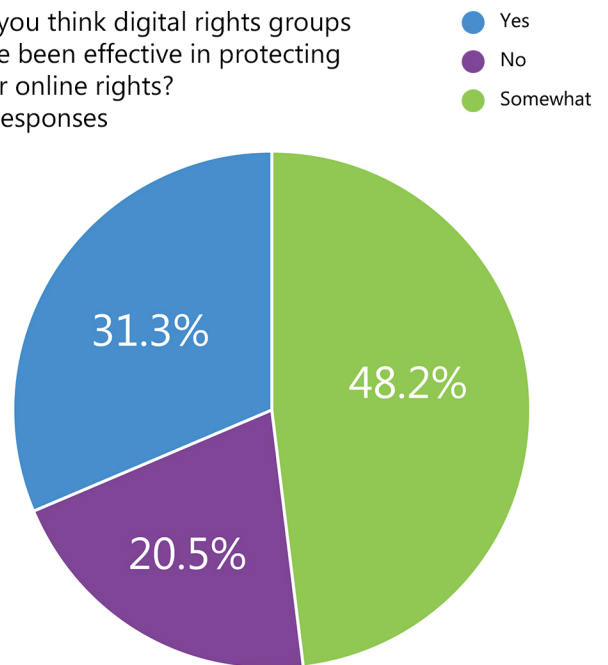


Figure 25: Percentage of respondents' opinion regarding digital rights groups.

Many young people said that they had not been taught about online laws and policies at schools and colleges. A female interviewee from Karachi pointed out that as someone who does not know much about laws, she relies on and trusts the judgment of digital rights groups and activists when they raise the alarm regarding its potential impact:

“ I follow some people who work on digital rights on Twitter and I know that they point out that the law has been or has the potential to be mis-used against people who dissent with the government [I4]

Another interviewee felt that while digital rights groups make a lot of noise online regarding laws and advocacy, she felt that there need to more seminars and interactions on the ground:

“ Holding more seminars at universities and schools can help educate the public and create more grassroots groundwork [I2]

Interviewees belonging to GB and ex-FATA pointed out that there was a disconnect between digital rights work in the mainstream parts of the country and their areas. The interviewee from ex-FATA expressed frustration that:

“ I felt that NGOs were missing in our movement. I got emotional and isolated that nobody was listening to me and I kept wasting time there. There is no security for people in ex-FATA and was quite disappointed to see the lack of solidarity. Civil society should take people on board who are leading movements and should approach people and communities that are affected [I8]

Another interviewee from Hunza echoed these sentiments:

“ The key is to work with local leaders who have worked for internet access. Working with local leadership and civil society in Gilgit-Baltistan in the form of technical and financial assistance that will sustain the movement for the future [I9]

When asked whether there was a generation gap in terms of policy making, 72.6% felt that there was one, pointing out that the older generation often fails to see the true value of the internet:

“ The older generation does not understand the usefulness of technology for community building, self expression, and awareness and the empowerment to be found with freedom of expression [R6]

Many felt that their use of the internet was misunderstood and mischaracterized as a waste of time:

“ They tend to dismiss social media and anything to do with technology as a waste of time or purely entertainment while not realizing that technology can be used for education, awareness, activism, networking etc. [R10]

Several respondents stated that the older generation, often referred to as “boomers” in their responses, were more likely to be manipulated by misinformation and internet-based scams—raising doubts over their grasp of these technologies and spaces:

“ Yes, certainly [there is a generation gap]. The older generation often doesn’t understand social media and assumes credibility of sources shared online [R3]

Technology is constantly changing, something that should inspire policymakers to be more humble in their approach when making regulations rather than exhibiting fear of the unknown. As one young woman from Lahore pointed out:

“ They mostly view the Internet as a new, frightening thing and are not aware of its power or advantages [R67]

Another young person from Islamabad points out that policymaking should be grounded in respecting and empowering users of technology, rather than patronizing them:

“ Older people are unable to understand the potential of technology, and they also find a reason to impose limits such as the banning of certain websites. People should be trusted with how they access and use information and banning certain forms of it will not help anyone. The apprehension is because it is new to them, and based on conservative fears that believe removing access to certain websites or censoring things will prevent behaviors they perceive as harmful. What a person sees and reads on an open platform is their responsibility and not the government's. Furthermore the potential of the internet is tossed aside. The attempted ban on PUBG showed this, as gaming and esports is taken seriously in other countries. Furthermore freelancers that depend upon the internet and people taking online courses and so on should not have to deal with difficulty regarding internet regulation [R69]

An interviewee belonging to Karachi expressed similar frustration at being excluded from policy making discussions:

“ I don't think they care about what we think. The state is paternalistic as hell, but this idea that they control parts of the internet and what we should do is so very 'dad of the house'. Why would you do that to kids in a country where they have very little avenues for expression and fun anyway? I don't think our voices will ever be included, even when the state is engaging with

TikTok ambassadors for peddling social and political messages it is never going to be the state acknowledging that the youth are an important faction of society whose voices need to be heard, it's them using [young people] to appeal to young people. They don't consider us equals nor do they care about what you want to say, at the end of the day [the state] know best [I4]

One respondent pointed out that even as a 26 year old they felt that their understanding of technology was different from teenagers.

“ I'm 26, and there's already a generation gap I feel with those who are teens and kids now. TikTok and other apps are increasing the gap [...] What we need to change is that as we get older, we need to be cognizant of these gaps and actively try to bridge them. Currently lawmakers are much older and are too quick to brush off new technology, heck, they're still confused about things like WhatsApp and Google. Technology is a reality, this is something they need to understand [R40]

The youth largely feels excluded from policy debates regarding digital spaces, what one 31 year old woman from Karachi referred to as "gatekeeping":

“ Folks over 45 gatekeep everything including [tech policymaking], which is why there is massive resistance to listening to people who have actual experience in the field versus the people who are just taking up those spaces" [R8]



Inclusion of young populations in policy making circles will not only mean more nuanced knowledge regarding technology and its use being included in policy circles, but also a greater diversity of experiences being represented:

“ Lived experiences of people of a certain age and beyond are vastly different from those that have lived the majority of their lives in an online space; where they learnt to form and navigate relationships, gain access to information and possibly even work professionally. Readiness and ease of acceptability, adaptability is also a differentiating factor between different generations [R83]

This lack of inclusion is not only leading to the alienation of youth from issues concerning digital rights, it has also meant that opportunities open to the youth in the digital economy are limited due to outdated understandings of the internet and its uses:

“ Content creation, making music and art are all stigmatized career paths and hence poorly regulated and compensated, let alone incentivised. Our lawmakers don't adequately recognise how instrumental tech is to these careers taking off in the age of YouTube and TikTok. When such basic tech eludes their understanding, regulation of AI, crypto, virtual reality, and other emerging tech is far fetched [R79]

One of the most insightful comments on policymaking came from a respondent who highlighted how policymakers tended to view tech regulation in a binary:

“ Yes. Older generations still think in terms of dated notions of absolute control or full freedom. There's no attempt at engaging with tech in general, to actually understand it, for better use/regulation [R35]

This binary thinking has resulted in unannounced policies such as banning entire platforms rather than more targeted regulation that balances concerns of safety as well as free speech:

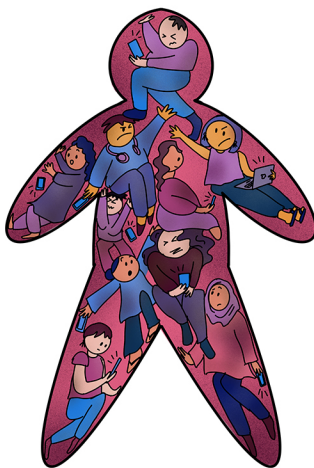
“ Government regulation on internet use is something that has continuously affected the younger generation because of negligence by older decision-makers. The YouTube ban undeniably destroyed a generation of content creators from Pakistan, killed future revenue sources and viewership. It also alienated a lot of Pakistanis from important cultural assimilation that they would have otherwise grown up with during the 3-4 year ban (especially people around the ages of 12-17). Even now, we have routing and latency issues which kills several industries

and communication platforms (Discord, Vmix, other video/audio software) and directly affects jobs (even mine) [R64]

The overall sentiment was that the older generation has less literacy and knowledge when it comes to technologies which results in inadequate policy making:

“ [Older generation] focus on banning things. That is the most they can do. They don't work on real issues. They think by removing the medium, issues get solved. A gap is when they don't understand the use of technology, young minds grab [new technologies] quickly. The use young students can offer, older people cannot unless are taught to [R11]

While the generation gap is a prevalent view, it is somewhat exaggerated in popular discourse and reflected in the responses received for the study—the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Author and researcher danah boyd has pointed out in their work on “networked teens” that generations are never a monolith:



“ Because teens grew up in a world in which the internet has always existed, many adults assume that youth automatically understand new technologies... The rhetoric of “digital natives,” far from being useful, is often a distraction to understanding the challenges that youth face in a networked world. In my fieldwork, I often found that teens must fend for themselves to make sense of how technologies work and how information spreads. Curiosity may lead many teens to develop meaningful knowledge about social media, but there is huge variation in knowledge and experience.³⁸

Not all young people hold uniform opinions of the internet and its regulation, much like their older counterparts. While gaming is very popular among many, for instance, one interviewee shared that:

“ I do think violent video games encourage violent behavior. I'm sorry I sound like a conservative when I say that. But when children play a lot of violent games, it does have an effect. It depends on a case-to-case basis so parents need to keep an eye on what children do. Even adults can become addicted to video games [I2]

What does youth-led internet governance look like?

In conclusion, there is a great deal to learn from the youth when it comes to the future of technologies and internet spaces, and their regulation. This research study is a starting point and an exercise in practicing more openness—openness to listening to the youth and including them in discussions on digital rights and technologies. It is clear that technology will be an integral part of the lives of Pakistan's youth for the foreseeable future, setting the course for their lives, for better or worse. Just like issues such as climate change, there is a lot to be gained from re-framing issues of digital governance and regulation as a youth-based one.

Policy debates and solutions concerning digital governance issues are extremely complex and constantly evolving; good policy making on technology requires us to let go of our long-held belief systems on "how things are done" and embrace the discomfort of not knowing all the answers. This is something that the young people involved in this study have demonstrated at every level. Policy engagement requires a certain level of humility and openness to having old ideas challenged. The irreverence shown by the youth, irreverence towards established systems and norms, should not be interpreted as disdain for policy-making or meaningful engagement. The onus is on other stakeholders in the tech sector to build trust with them. Furthermore this suspicion of authority needs to be embraced when it comes to issues like content moderation. As one respondent summarizes:

“ I think it's very difficult to arbitrarily draw a line, but there are some clear cases where I encourage regulation such as removal of child pornography, banning markets for hard drugs and things that fall under a similar non-negotiable umbrella. I don't think any regulation should be based on what we're allowed to talk about or discuss unless it incites direct violence or jeopardizes safety. Pretty difficult discussion to have since the definition of security is debatable [R64]

Building common ground between the youth, civil society and policy makers is key to having this discussion. The fear of the unknown and emerging technologies is shared across generations as many respondents themselves expressed apprehensions regarding emerging technologies. A non-binary person in their 20s from Lahore shared:

“ It's just overwhelming, reality still exists but we're building digital art, NFTS and digital real estate! It's silly to me. I know I might sound contradictory to my previous answer but platforms are one thing and creating metaverses is a whole other thing. The real world is burning but we're here to create meta worlds- make it make sense! [R40]

The stereotype of the youth as lacking connection to the offline world is greatly exaggerated. Many young people in this study expressed the same concerns regarding the impact of technologies on social life as the adults around them. A man in his 20s from Lahore shared:

“ I fear that connections made over virtual reality or AI can never compare with the connections we make in our daily life with our classmates, coworkers or comrades [R46]

Additionally, to view the youth as short-sighted is also a misunderstanding, many expressed anxieties for the future, contemplating the long-term consequences of some of the technologies in use:

“ I have a lot of respect for human connection and fitness which will be affected by technologies. The vast majority of people drowning in mobile apps and the internet today are up for physical and psychological effects that are unprecedented in human history, which will seem a lot clearer in hindsight when most of us are older and in our 40s to 60s [R64]

In the responses for this research, young people expressed suspicion of private companies and their data collection practices. They urged drawing from global best practices in order to regulate the private sector:

“ Intense checks on the private companies with emphasis on the right to privacy similar to how the EU has imposed on various websites and Apple [R69]

There has been a push from the respondents for the government to make interventions beyond the law, while laws are important most people lack trust in institutions implementing them. Furthermore laws do not address the root causes of these issues. As one respondent pointed out, interventions through the education system and awareness building are equally important if not more:

“ Laws (not PECA), but also digital literacy and safety integrated into the education system, democratization of online spaces including access related issues [R48]

By placing young people at the center of policy making, one interviewee shared that the trivialization of digital rights can also be addressed, she posited that these rights need to be connected to material needs in our advocacy:

“ In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a clear division in terms of class regarding who has access to technology and who doesn't and how that translates into basic rights such as access to education, employment and information. We need to build on that messaging, connect it to material needs. In progressive politics, digital rights issues are seen as secondary. Even though there is a fair amount of sexism going on, when women's pictures are leaked, these are seen as middle or upper-class issues even though women across classes are impacted [I4]

This suggestion was echoed by a male student from ex-FATA, who shared that the biggest challenge for their advocacy on internet access was working with a community that wasn't even aware that the internet was a thing. He lamented that:

“ There are many issues in Pakistan, and people often trivialize [digital rights]. I had to convince people through social media videos that the internet is very important in this era. Students already knew about its importance. For people in my community I had to convince them by talking about how the internet will benefit them. For instance, in my hometown many people go for employment in Gulf areas, Europe, and Australia, so I told their relatives back home that they can speak to their loved ones abroad on video call for free through the internet.

Eventually, the community was mobilized and recognised the benefits of the internet [I8]

Further, advocacy on digital rights should not be treated as an abstract issue, it should be geared towards addressing the issues faced by today's youth and reflect their material realities. A respondent from Quetta suggested that awareness regarding digital rights needs to be more creative to appeal to the youth:

“ The way our education system works is based on outdated methods, now kids are learning through the internet, video games, YouTube videos. I didn't know a lot about AI but I watched this movie 'Free Guy' and it taught me how AI works and what issues can emerge from advanced AI. I was never taught this in school [I1]

Another interviewee pointed out that:

“ There was a surge in digital rights conversations after watching the social dilemma, but that was not in our native language nor was it accessible for a majority of the population. We need to spread the word about it in simpler terms, smaller clips to send a message to them that is engaging. People are not interested in didactic messages [I5]

Lastly, while inclusion of the youth is an important goal to work towards, it is also important to ensure that inclusion is not just an eyewash exercise geared towards placating the youth without “involving them in the design, development and deployment stages inhibits their capacity, and limits their ownership” as a report by ISD Global points out.³⁹ Participation should not be an item to tick off a checklist, but a practice at every level of policy making.

Working with the youth to imagine new designs, policies and systems is the path forward, including them as agents of change rather than as recipients of policies is one of the few ways we can preserve the early optimism around technology and the internet. Meaningful participation can allow us to harness the optimism of people like one respondent, a 19 year old woman from Lahore, who shared possibilities of a borderless world:

“ I simply hope that in the future as technology accelerates in every corner of the world that people will at least have the freedom to choose what life they want to live [R75]

We conclude with the boundless hope of a young man from Karachi who responded when asked if they had any fears for our technological future:

“ No fears. This is what makes today amazing and makes for an exciting tomorrow [R77]

Recommendations

1. Take immediate steps to ensure connectivity and internet access for all, especially for areas such as Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Kashmir and ex-FATA territories to ensure equal educational, economic and social opportunities to youth from across Pakistan.
 - a. Laws and policies that allow for internet and network shutdowns should be repealed, particularly board powers accorded to the PTA under section 54 of the Pakistan Telecommunications (Re-organization) Act, 1996 and section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016.
 - b. Investment to improve internet infrastructure for increased connectivity, investing in solar and renewable energy projects to address electricity shortage, and building climate resilient infrastructure to ensure connectivity to climate disaster-prone areas.
2. As a matter of priority, reinstate and encourage the formation of student unions throughout the country who can bring youth perspective to various national/provincial fora regarding technologies and digital rights. It is important to provide space for young people to organize, debate and collectivize on issues relating to digital rights and internet freedoms.
 - a. Develop awareness campaigns and material which is accessible to the youth by collaborating with young content creators and the art community to develop discourse around digital rights and safety in creative ways.
 - b. Law enforcement agencies and relevant government departments must partner with civil society to run awareness campaigns to make reporting online harassment and bullying more accessible for young people. Furthermore allocation of resources to the cyber crime wings of the FIA to ensure offices are opened across Pakistan should be a priority.
3. The government, in consultation with various CSOs and education specialists, should develop digital rights curriculums to be implemented in educational institutions on the primary, secondary and university level (regardless of liberal arts or STEM concentration) as a first step toward media and information literacy.
 - a. Create opportunities for research and learning on emerging issues such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automated machine learning for young people, while at the same time placing parallel emphasis on issues of privacy, human rights and anti-discrimination through technologies.
4. Allocation of resources to increase accessibility to technologies and opportunities for the youth to pursue careers in tech, particularly through establishing tech hubs in small towns to reach disenfranchised and marginalized students/young people from non-urban centers.
5. Policy makers, government departments and ministries and politicians take proactive and meaningful steps to create trust and links with youth groups and collectives, and create pathways to ensure they are consulted on issues of internet governance and tech policy in the country.

6. Civil society organizations must work to forge connections with youth-based organizations and collectives, and include them in advocacy on issues of digital rights. Civil society must frame issues of digital rights and freedoms in light of lived and material realities faced by Pakistan's youth.

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