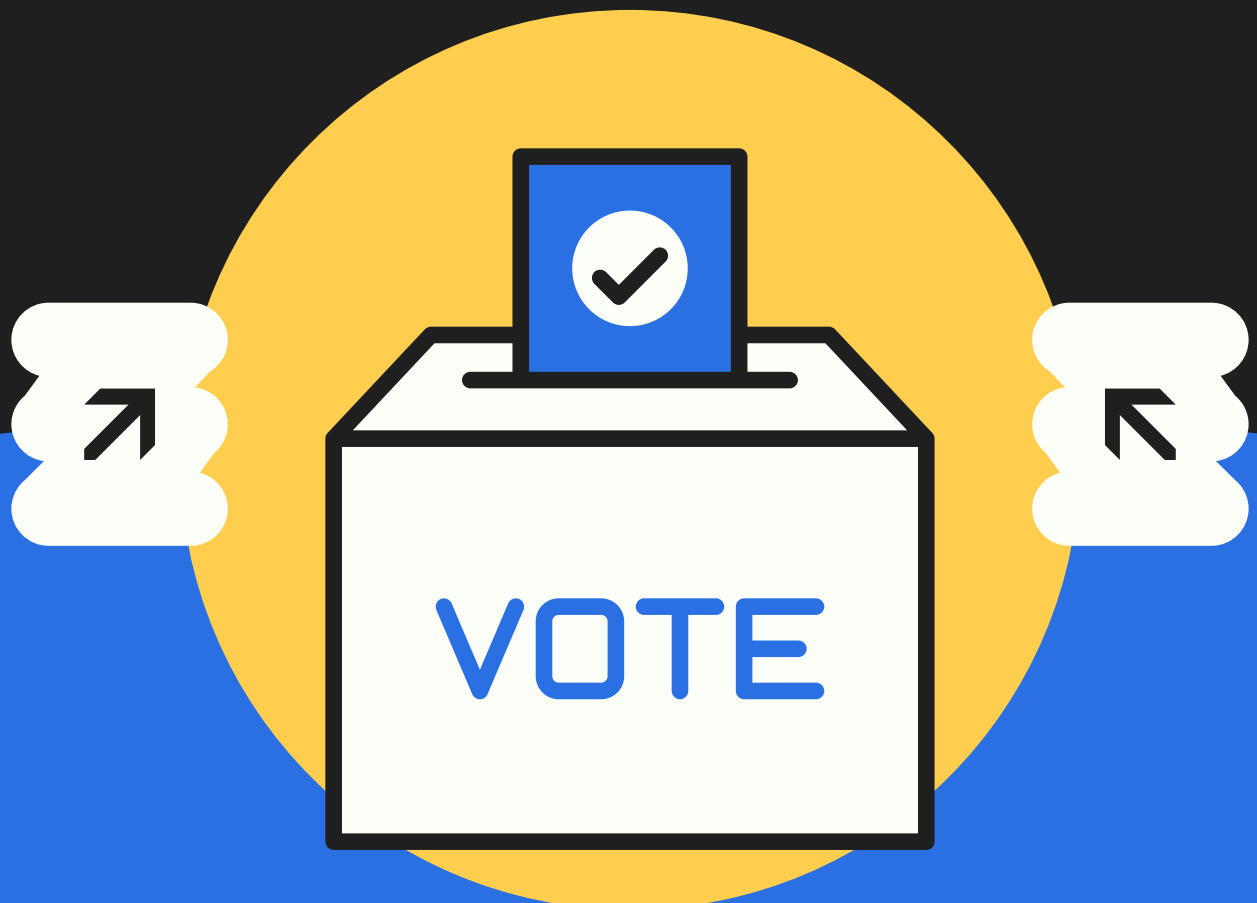




DigitalRightsFoundation
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

PLATFORMS AT THE POLLS: DISINFORMATION, POLITICAL ADS & ACCOUNTABILITY DURING THE 2024 PAKISTAN GENERAL ELECTIONS



DIGITAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION

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Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a women-led, not-for-profit organisation based in Pakistan working on digital rights freedoms since 2013. DRF envisions a place where all people, especially women and gender minorities, can exercise the right of expression without being threatened. DRF believes that a free internet with access to information and impeccable privacy policies can create safe online spaces for not only women but the world at large.

At DRF, we aim to strengthen the protections for human rights defenders (HRDs), with a focus on women's rights in digital spaces through policy advocacy and digital security awareness-raising. In addition, one of our main aims is to protect women from cyber harassment that they have to deal with throughout their lives by making them aware of their rights and making resources accessible when they need help.

With growing privacy concerns in digital spaces, DRF seeks to increase awareness about privacy issues and defend the right to privacy through research, monitoring and reporting the tactics around surveillance. To rally with other actors for strong legal protection for privacy in the country and to raise our voices against repressive censorship policies, we propose viable solutions to the government and other authoritative bodies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	01
2. Introduction	03
3. Methodology	05
Report Limitations	
4. Pervasiveness of Harmful Content on Platforms	06
5. Observations regarding Harmful Content on Platforms	07
6. Deepfakes and Generative AI Content	09
7. Platform Strategy on Harmful Content during the Elections	10
Meta's Policies on Political Advertisements during the Elections	
8. Political Ads Transparency during the Elections	11
9. List of Political Parties in Pakistan	12
10. Ad Spending Over Time	13
11. Top 10 Political Advertisers by Estimated Spending	14
12. Top 10 Political Advertiser Spendings by Party	15
13. Impressions by Demographics (Age and Gender)	16
14. Geographic Distribution of Ad Delivery	17
15. Political Advertisements and the Use of Generative AI	20
16. Ambiguity around Endorsements of Political Parties by Social Media Influencers	21
Ambiguity around Political Ads Authentication	
17. Current Measures/Policies by Platforms on Posting Advertisements in Pakistan	22
18. Platform Policies on Advertisements in Pakistan	23
a. TikTok	
b. X/Twitter	
c. Meta	
d. YouTube	
19. Recommendations	25
20. References	30
21. Bibliography	34

Disclaimer

This report contains content that may be distressing for some readers. Please note that pages 7 and 8 include sensitive material, including imagery that some may find uncomfortable. Reader discretion is advised.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first half of 2023 saw Pakistan boasting 87.35 million internet users, of which 71.70 million regularly use or interact with various social media platforms – a number that comprises over 30 percent of the nation's total population. Further to this, Pakistan also recorded 191.8 million active cellular connections – how the majority of Pakistanis will generally connect to the internet and utilise digital services – which in turn accounts for over 80 percent of the country's total population (DataReportal, 2024).

These numbers lie behind the necessity of this report in unpacking the key issues revolving around the role of large social media platforms in the run up to Pakistan's February 2024 general elections. We observed that all of Pakistan's major political parties ran political ads on social media. With the use of Meta's ad library, it was found that in the fortnight prior to the elections, these parties had spent a collective 54 million Pakistani Rupees (PKR), or 190,000 USD, with the majority of Facebook and Instagram ads targeting the 18-35 age demographic – considered to have the highest number of eligible voters.

When we broke down the ad spend by political party, we observed that the embattled Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the largest spender with 25 million PKR, followed by the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) at 13 million PKR, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) at 6 million PKR, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) at 5 million PKR, and Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) at 0.79 million PKR.

The comparatively smaller purchase of the political party PML-N was of interest, given the political instability leading up to and during the election, and that PML-N – both before and after the election - was the larger, more influential partner in the ruling political coalition with the PPP.

DRF researchers had also observed significant numbers of political advertisements on non-Meta social media platforms, but were unable to retrieve precise numbers owing to the unavailability and inaccessibility of that data.

Other key issues that our researchers recorded concerning social media platforms in the run up to, and even during, the elections included significantly high levels of harmful and hateful content, in clear violation of the community guidelines established by the platforms themselves. Numerous cases of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), particularly in the form of deeply misogynist content targeting senior women politicians and women journalists that were reporting on the elections themselves. DRF also recorded and observed derogatory hate speech to LGBTQ+ communities of Pakistan, which have been cited in this report. This harmful and hateful content included threats of physical assaults, organized trolling campaigns and gendered insults – in some instances being generated by certain political parties and their supporters.

There was pervasive use of Generative AI being employed to create fake – or “deepfake” – content, wherein political candidates appeared to announce the boycott of elections on the eve of the elections, which was also recorded by our researchers. The impact of the deepfaked boycott posts were such that not only were they condemned by the leadership of targeted political parties, but that they had generated international and national coverage.¹

In light of this behaviour, we observed that social media platforms take proactive interest and actions concerning content moderation, transparency and content violations in Global North territories, particularly during elections. This did not appear to be borne out, however, when it came to political ad buys and monitoring during Pakistan’s general elections in 2024. In our analysis, social media platforms have clear, wide-ranging and overarching policies and community guidelines which become a matter of concern, when they are unable to tackle or control material that violates those guidelines and policies in the first place.

The report concludes with a set of urgent recommendations that platforms must implement. As a priority, platforms must tackle Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) and Generative AI content in the form of deepfakes which are the cause of rising disinformation online. Social media platforms have a responsibility to block content that breach their own community guidelines, and protect the information integrity not solely during important events such as elections in Pakistan, but also and more broadly in the Global South. In the course of research for this report, the inability of the platforms under review to take proactive steps to remove harmful content and regulate political spending by political parties particularly when disinformation is on the rise due to monetized content tech companies must step up, especially outside of the Global North and uphold information integrity during the elections for all territories.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan held its 12th general election in February 2024, with 60.8 million people exercising their right to vote. The elections were announced by the Election Commission of Pakistan in November 2023, having been delayed from October 2023 to February 2024. The impromptu announcement gave political parties very little time for campaigning and mobilizing their voter bases. Because of this time crunch, many political parties turned to online platforms for their campaigning by sharing political advertisements, speeches and party manifestos on their official social media accounts. Moreover, in the midst of these elections, Pakistan witnessed a massive crackdown by the state against the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) - one of Pakistan's largest political parties, and one of its most social media-savvy.²

Months before the elections, PTI (whose name translates to "Movement for Justice") founder and former Prime Minister Imran Khan was arrested on corruption allegations.³ Furthermore, the aforementioned massive crackdown was launched against the party leaders and workers after they were accused of targeting military installations on May 9th, 2023.⁴

As political tensions worsened between the establishment and PTI, many prominent PTI leaders quit the party, and even quit politics, ahead of the elections. The last nail in the coffin for the party was when the Supreme Court deprived it of its popular election symbol (A cricket bat, in reference to Imran Khan's sporting legacy) a month before the elections, and which forced its candidates to run as independent candidates using different symbols. Political experts noted how this move was aimed at practically banning the party and confusing PTI voters on the election day.⁵ Despite the complete dismantling of its core structure, the internet remained the only lifeline for PTI to campaign during the elections and inform their voters, via a bespoke app, "Raabta", about the newly-minted electoral symbols being assigned to PTI-aligned independent candidates in their respective constituencies. Other mainstream political parties such as the Pakistan's People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Jamaat-e-Islami ("Islamic Society of Pakistan") and Istehkam-e-Pakistan ("Pakistan Stability") Party also turned to social media platforms for their campaigning. The digital campaigns carried out by these parties were not regarded to be as sophisticated and seasoned as that of PTI, which often and controversially utilized Generative AI in order to replicate Imran Khan's voice to engage their voters, as he was incarcerated at the time.

The periods under study also saw harmful content being pervasive across platforms, with a significant increase in disinformation targeting political party candidates, coupled with a rise in hate speech, Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), and gendered disinformation. Women political figures, such as Maryam Nawaz of the PML-N, and journalists such as Meher Bokhari and Gharida Farooqi, were subjected to gendered attacks, including the manipulation of their images and videos using Generative AI tools. Disinformation also targeted the spouses of politicians such as Imran Khan (PTI), while male politicians such as Bilawal Bhutto (PPP) faced attacks that questioned their masculinity. On numerous occasions, these harmful and gendered attacks originated from political parties and their supporters.

It is pertinent to mention, however, that despite many political parties turning to online platforms for their campaigning during the elections, the Election Act 2017 does not address campaigning on online platforms. Further to this, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) remained silent concerning expenditures on social media platforms, which in turn led to parties spending relatively extravagant amounts on campaigning on platforms, without being regulated. Social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter), Tiktok, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram (Meta)

have repeatedly given assurances of maintaining information integrity during elections worldwide and in Pakistan. However, these platforms have had overarching and wide policies and community guidelines for countries in the Global South, which has led many to question if the elections can be truly free, fair and without interference in countries such as Pakistan.

The Pakistani elections also marked an unprecedented number of internet shutdowns and speed throttling across the country with social media platforms being restricted for access on numerous occasions.⁶ Despite these odds, however, PTI-aligned candidates were able to secure the highest number of general seats in Pakistan's National Assembly. PTI's landslide success, due to its aggressive online campaigning, did not translate into being permitted to form a government at the federal level, however, and the victory was regarded as sounding a death knell for social media. X (formerly Twitter) was banned in Pakistan shortly after the election, for reasons of "national security".^{7 8} Since then, there have been calls by state authorities to stop "digital terrorism" on social media, and to take action against anyone spreading disinformation on social media platforms.⁹

The report also takes a step back and takes a close look at the nature of harmful content present on social media platforms in the run up to, and during, Pakistan's 2024 general election. It also unpacks how major political parties used social platforms to run their electoral campaigns, including via political ads and monetisation. Lastly, the report offers recommendations to the platforms on the steps they can take to effectively curtail harmful content and offer more transparency on how their platforms are being used for election campaigning in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this report, DRF focused on popular social media platforms namely Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), YouTube and Tiktok as these are among the most popular social media platforms in Pakistan.

To understand the nature and dissemination of harmful content, DRF's research team looked at a sample of 225 posts spread across various platforms around elections between November 2023 and March 2024. These posts were gathered during routine monitoring by DRF's election section and were flagged as potentially harmful content, utilising Check Media - an online data collection tool developed by the media and digital literacy nonprofit Meedan - across platforms, in order to ascertain how TFGBV and other forms of gendered disinformation against electoral candidates, activists and journalists was being disseminated both during and in the run up to the election.¹⁰ Additionally, the team scanned the platforms for AI-generated content ahead of the elections, identifying examples for qualitative analysis. Furthermore, the team conducted a desk review of platforms' policies on regulating political ads and monetized content on platforms. The research team additionally tried to look at the available data around political ads for the period of November 2nd 2023 - March 1st, 2024.

Report Limitations

The report is based on observations made by DRF's election desk research team, and data collected by the research team. Consequently, the analysis is limited to the data available and may not encompass all information present on platforms. Observations from research team members have been included in the report, forming the basis for the analysis. Additionally, in the report monetized content during the elections was also observed on only 10 media outlet pages on Youtube and does not capture all the monetized content during the elections.

Moreover, due to the unavailability of data on political ads for Pakistan from other platforms, the team primarily relied on Meta's ad library to understand trends related to political advertising on social media.

PERVASIVENESS OF HARMFUL CONTENT ON PLATFORMS

In an era that has been increasingly dominated by online spaces, political parties worldwide have also adapted and taken advantage of the combination of Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp to promote their candidates and widely disseminate party ideologies. Beyond social media posts and curated content, political campaigning in Pakistan and beyond has entered a digital era that has revolutionized political rallies into ‘digital jalsas’.¹¹

Political parties now have the power of live streaming and several interactive features to connect with potentially millions of supporters worldwide. These virtual rallies, “held” and broadcast on social media platforms, have redefined traditional political campaigning and allowed parties to be accessible to a much broader audience than ever before, fostering civic engagement. However, broader accessibility has also resulted in the misuse of online spaces to spread gender-based violence, dangerous speech, and harass minority groups, women, opposition political parties and their supporters.

There has been a growing call to regulate these spaces to ensure the safety and security of users, as well as ensuring that these platforms do not become complicit in dangerous and hateful movements that incite violence against individuals and protected groups, also known as “stochastic terrorism”. Social media platforms, by virtue of their reach and influence, have the responsibility of ensuring that content that falls under TFGBV, dangerous speech, and hate speech is properly regulated and removed in accordance with relevant regional, cultural, and linguistic contexts.

OBSERVATIONS REGARDING HARMFUL CONTENT ON PLATFORMS

DRF collected a sample of 225 posts, using online data collection tools to observe and break down how TFGBV and gendered disinformation - material against electoral candidates, activists and journalists was being disseminated. Of all the collected posts, 179 were collected from X, 17 from Instagram, 12 from Facebook, 9 from TikTok, 3 from YouTube while 5 were directly distributed. Furthermore, out of 225 posts, 163 of them fell under the category of gendered disinformation. Among PML-N, PTI and PPP, the highest number of gendered disinformation posts at 76 were targeted at PML-N, particularly related to Maryam Nawaz, followed by PTI at 61 and PPP at 19. The collected data also observed attacks on ethnic indigenous communities and the transgender community with 13 posts targeting them. Interestingly, out of the 13 posts, 2 posts claimed Bilawal Bhutto is a member of the transgender community in Pakistan, with almost all the attacks against him linked to perceptions of his masculinity. The remaining posts contained content comprising broader disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, fake news and Generative AI.

The following are examples of attacks on political candidates that focused on their sexual orientation or gender, in the form of and including sexist remarks and obscene imagery suggestive of misogynist intent.^{12 13 14 15}

Image 1

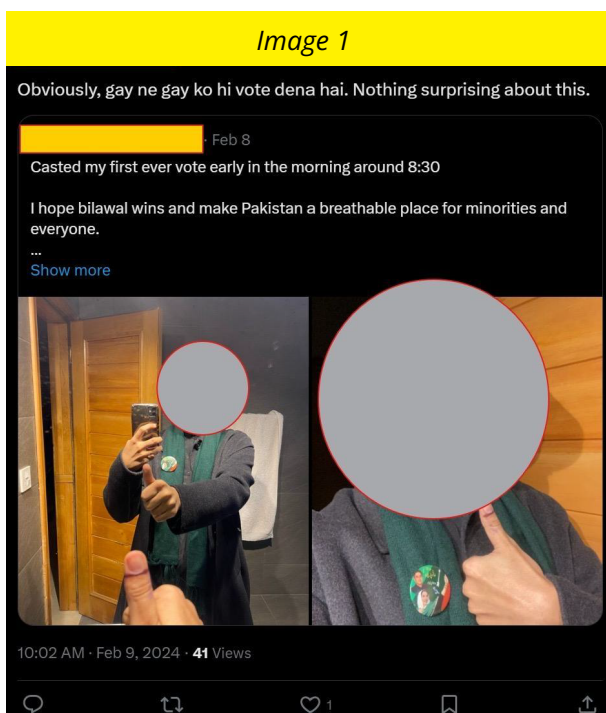


Image 2



Image 4



Image 3



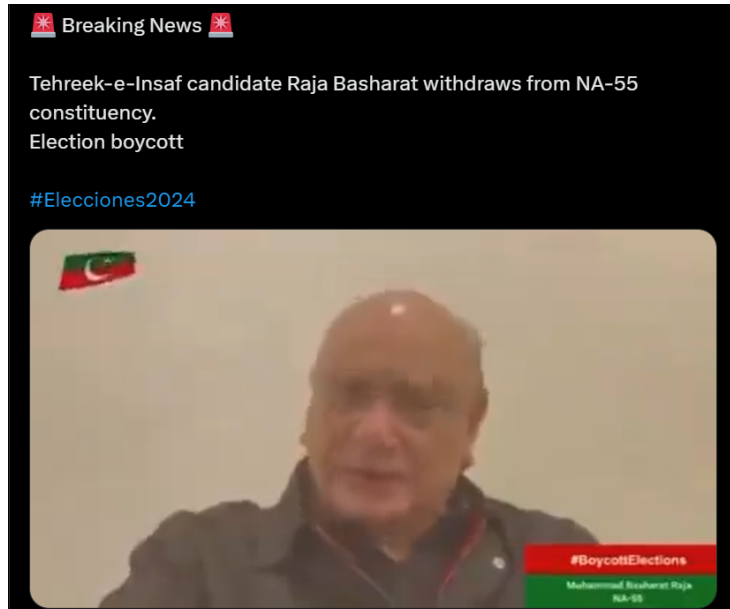
DEEPPAKES AND GENERATIVE AI CONTENT

An AI-generated video of PTI's former law minister and electoral candidate from Rawalpindi, Raja Basharat, seemingly announcing a boycott of the February 2024 election.

The use of deepfake content in the Pakistan elections underscored the broader issue of AI's role in manipulating public perception. Much of the Generative AI and disinformation content DRF identified primarily lacked disclaimers concerning the validity of the information presented. Following two examples show the type of AI-generated disinformation that spread around elections.

Another notable instance involved a deepfake audio clip, allegedly featuring PTI leader Imran Khan calling for an election boycott on February 7th, just a day before the elections on February 8th, 2024. This audio was widely circulated on social media platforms, including X. The wide reach of the deepfake audio

can be attributed to the fact that the incident was covered by prominent, global news outlets such as Voice of America (VoA) and France 24 English.^{21 22} PTI officials quickly debunked the clip, clarifying that it was fake and part of a broader campaign to mislead the public. Audio forensics experts analyzed the recording and identified several anomalies indicative of artificial generation. These included "unnatural white noise, monotone intonation, and mechanical-sounding sibilant consonants", all pointing to the sophisticated use of AI in creating the fake audio.²³



PLATFORM STRATEGY ON HARMFUL CONTENT DURING THE ELECTIONS

Trusted Partner channels had indicated the rise of harmful content on platforms during the elections. In Pakistan to uphold election integrity platforms like TikTok and Meta announced measures to curb misinformation. In December 2023, to uphold election integrity, TikTok announced an extensive strategy to curb misinformation, hate speech, and violence.²⁴ Recognizing Pakistan's intricate political, economic, and security challenges, TikTok emphasized its commitment to regulating misinformation and disinformation regarding civic processes, such as candidate eligibility, voter registration, ballot counting, and election results. Moreover, Meta also announced measures to curb harmful content during the elections in 2024. However, X and YouTube did not have any election specific announcements for Pakistan's 2024 elections.

Meta's Policies on Political Advertisements during the Elections

Meta introduced a comprehensive strategy to curb misinformation, promote digital literacy, and enhance transparency for Pakistan's 2024 general election. This strategy included forming an Election Operations team, ensuring transparency in political advertising, strengthening policies against harmful content, and advancing digital literacy and civic education programs. According to a presser by Meta, the platform emphasized its commitment to safeguarding the election process through considerable investments and coordination with local election bodies. This included initiatives such as voter education campaigns with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), third-party fact-checking partnerships with AFP Fact Check and Soch Fact Check, and the 'We Think Digital' literacy program launched in Pakistan in 2020. Meta also reaffirmed its dedication to community safety and supporting voter education campaigns.³⁴ It is pertinent to mention, however, that social media platforms like YouTube, where political advertisements were broadcasted, do not give access to political ad data and neither did introduce measures around accountability and transparency of political advertisements during the Pakistani elections.³⁵

POLITICAL ADS TRANSPARENCY DURING THE ELECTIONS

The 2024 general elections saw Pakistani political parties investing heavily in digital tools and strategies to attract younger voter bases through digital political advertisements. Social media platforms offer sophisticated targeting options that enable parties to tailor their ads to specific demographic segments and interests. Reportedly, all major political parties in Pakistan utilized social media platforms to run their political ads to reach a primarily younger audience. However, as observed in the first section of this report, there is a risk of the targeted campaign further reinforcing echo chambers on these platforms, exacerbating the potential spread of disinformation and/or misinformation.²⁵

Globally, Meta, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have developed various mechanisms to enhance transparency and accountability in political advertising. Facebook, for instance, has implemented an extensive Ad Library that provides detailed information about political ads, including ad spend, targeting criteria, and demographic reach.²⁶ Similarly, YouTube's Ads Transparency Center offers insights into political ad campaigns, although its implementation is less comprehensive in countries like Pakistan compared to others.²⁷ Despite these measures at the global scale, except Meta, no other platform offers political ads' data on Pakistan. Thus, in the section below, DRF has analysed the political ads' data based on the information made available by Meta.

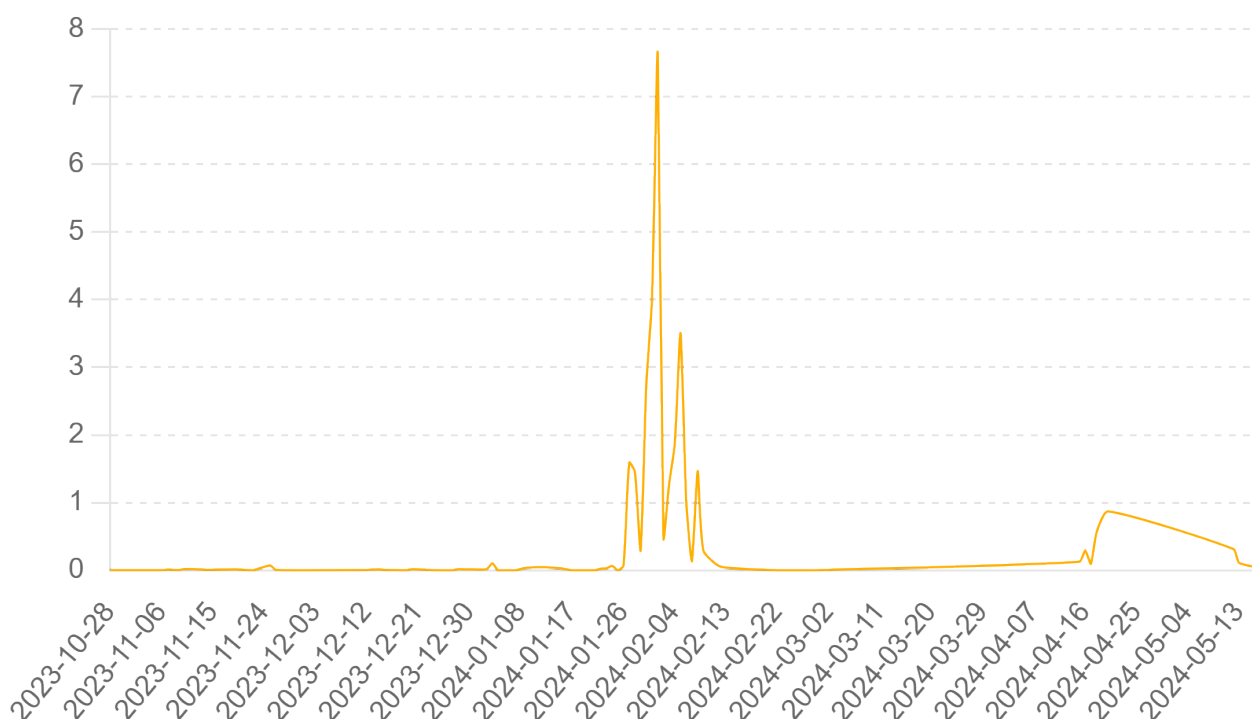
LIST OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN PAKISTAN

Party	Abbr.	Founded	Political position	Central leader
Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)	PTI	1996	Centre-right	Gohar Ali Khan
Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N)	PML-N	1993	Centre-right	Nawaz Sharif
Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)	PPP	1967	Centre-left	Bilawal Bhutto Zardari
Muttahida Qaumi Movement – Pakistan (MQM-P)	MQM-P	2016	Centre-left to Centre	Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui
Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam – Fazl (JUI-F)	JUI-F	1980	Right-wing	Fazl-ur-Rahman
Pakistan Muslim League (Q) (PML-Q)	PML-Q	2002	Centre-right	Shujaat Hussain
Awami National Party (ANP)	ANP	1986	Center-left to left-wing	Aimal Wali Khan
Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC)	SIC	2009	Right-wing	Sahibzada Hamid Raza
Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP)	PkMAP	1989	Centre-left to Left-wing	Mahmood Achakzai
National Party (NP)	NP	2003	Centre-left	Abdul Malik Baloch
Balochistan National Party (BNP)	BNP	1996	Left-wing	Akhtar Mengal
Balochistan Awami Party (BAP)	BAP	2018	Centre	Khalid Hussain Magsi
Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP)	IPP	2023	Radical Centre	Aleem Khan

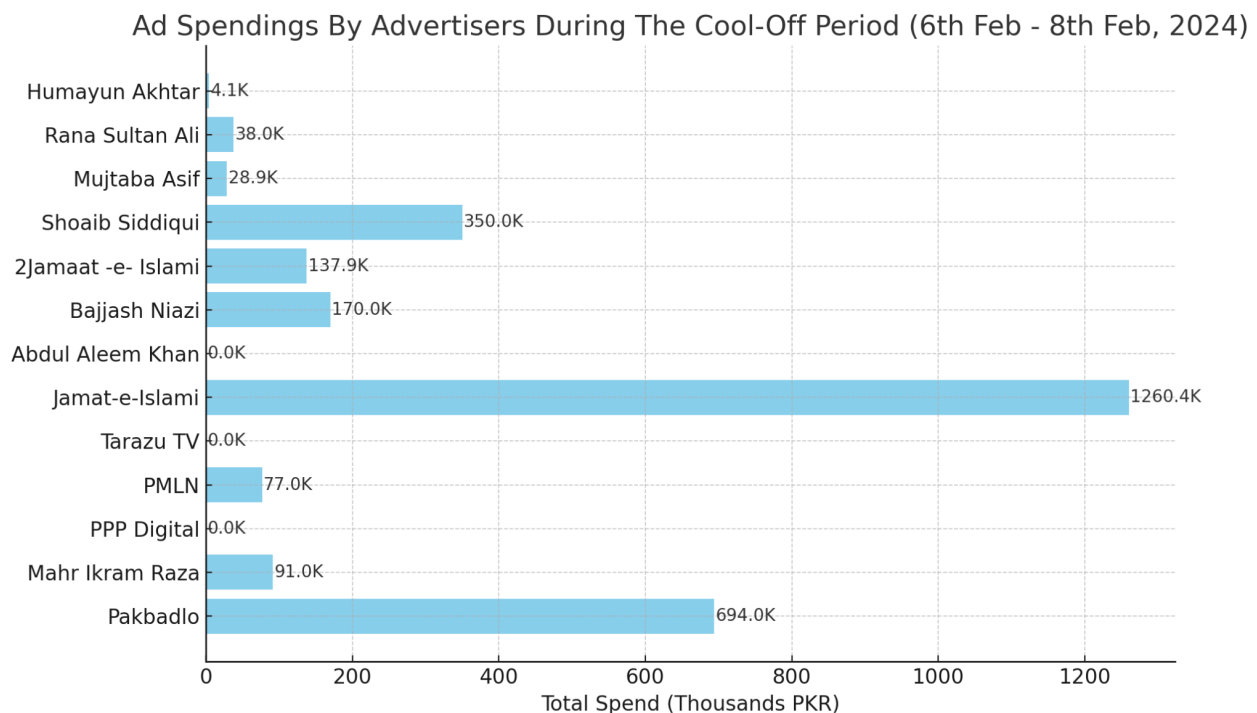
AD SPENDING OVER TIME

The line chart shows the fluctuations in ad spending on Meta over the election period, from November 1, 2023, to March 1, 2024. The trend reveals several spikes in spending, which may correspond to key moments in the election campaign. During the 2024 Pakistan general elections, political ad spending demonstrated a slight increase around key events, such as the PML-N's nationwide rallies starting on November 10, 2023, and a significant surge in the spending around the PPP's series of rallies leading up to February 6, 2024.^{28 29} These spikes in spending correlate with the parties' strategic use of these events to boost their visibility and voter outreach through digital platforms. Public holidays and heightened security measures, including disruptions during rallies and increased security deployments, also influenced ad strategies, with parties adapting to maintain campaign momentum despite on-ground challenges.³⁰ This synchronized spending pattern reflects the adaptive campaign tactics employed to engage voters effectively during critical moments; highlighting the dynamic nature of election campaigns, with spending intensifying as the election date approaches.

According to Section 182 of the Election Act 2017, all campaigning should cease 48 hours before election day.³¹ However, political ads continued to run and receive impressions on social media platforms during the restricted period of 6th Feb 2024 - 8th of feb 2024. This breach of election law by several parties reflects the challenges of enforcing traditional regulations in the digital landscape. Platforms failed to strictly enforce local rules, leading to an amplification of political content when it should have been halted.

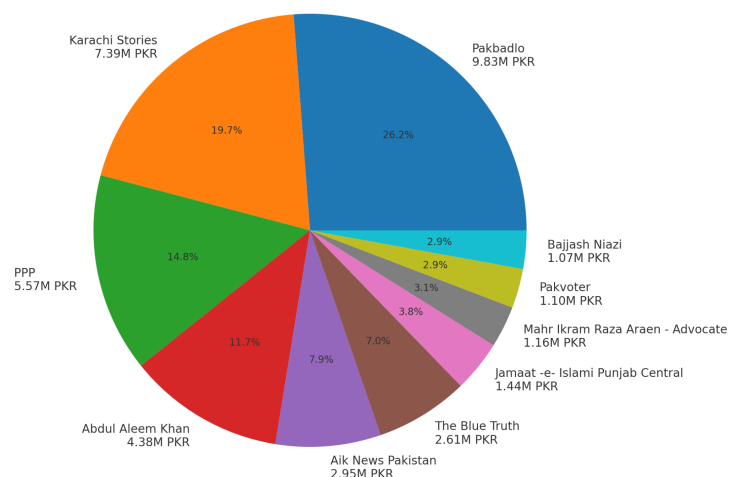


TOP 10 POLITICAL ADVERTISERS BY ESTIMATED SPENDING



A breakdown of the top 10 political advertisers, by estimated spending, highlights the most active players in the election campaign. The advertisers include political parties, political candidates, news sites, and NGOs. The distribution of spending indicates a highly competitive environment, where key advertisers invested heavily to influence voter perceptions. The concentration of spending among the top few advertisers suggests a strategic allocation of resources by these entities, focusing on maximizing their impact on social media platforms during the election period. Our observations of the ads library data show that the topmost political advertiser, Pakbadlo's ads were in support of PTI whereas Karachi Stories (at number 2) ran advertisements to promote Jamat-e-Islami (JI). The Karachi Stories Facebook page frequently posts content supportive of JI, a political and religious party in Pakistan; featuring news, stories, and opinions aligning with the party's perspectives. Out of the top ten, one advertiser aligned with PTI while two others were user accounts of PTI backed candidates promoting their candidacy. Two advertisers endorsed JI, one at the national level and the other at the provincial level (Punjab). One supported the People's Party Pakistan (PPP) while another endorsed Istehkam Pakistan Party (IPP). The remaining three users were neutral news and awareness outlets.

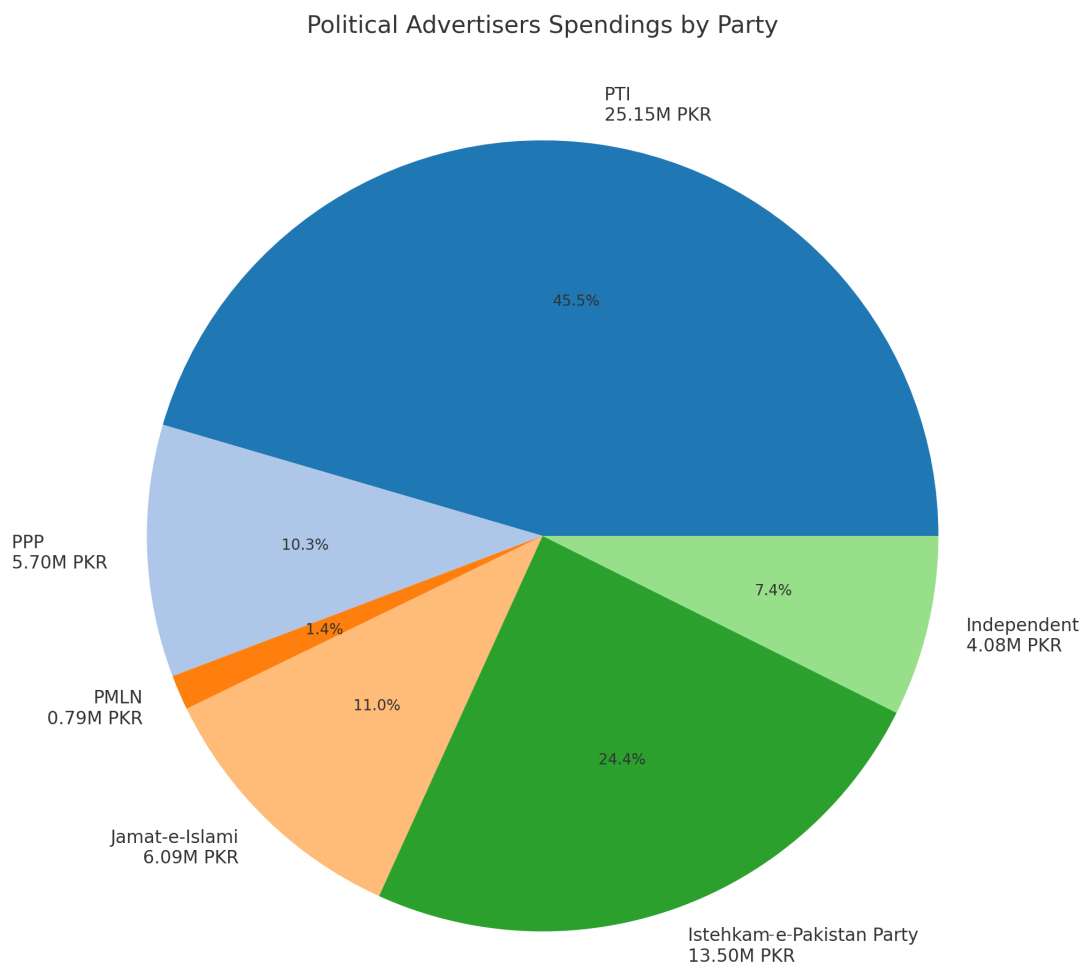
Top 10 Political Advertisers by Estimated Spending (Master Sheet)



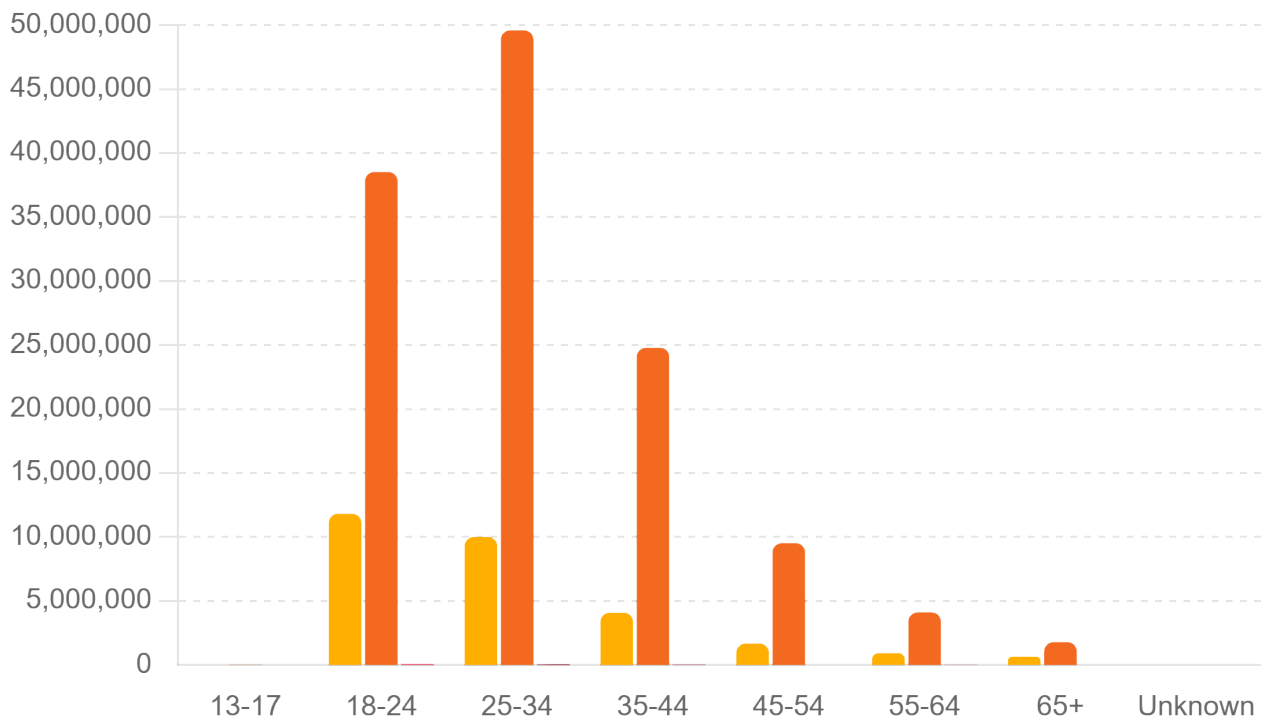
TOP 10 POLITICAL ADVERTISER SPENDINGS BY PARTY

The chart shows the proportion of total spending attributed to each party (including PTI, PPP, PML-N, JI, IPP, and independent candidates, providing insights into how resources were allocated during the election campaign period.

PTI emerges as the dominant spender, accounting for the majority of the ad spend. This reflects the party's aggressive digital campaign strategy to reach a broad audience across different regions. PPP also has significant shares of spending, indicating their active engagement in digital advertising to influence voter perceptions. IPP, while relatively new and small in terms of total spending, still maintains a notable presence in the digital ad space. Jamaat-e-Islami and independent candidates have smaller shares, suggesting either limited resources or a more targeted campaign approach focusing on specific voter segments. Sitting at 1.4% share of political ads on Meta, PML-N did not partake much in online advertisements, as evidenced in Meta's ad library report. However, there were PML-N candidates who had independently paid for their election campaigns, although even those efforts were not significant enough compared to financial investments in online campaigns by PTI, IPP and PPP.



IMPRESSIONS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (AGE AND GENDER)



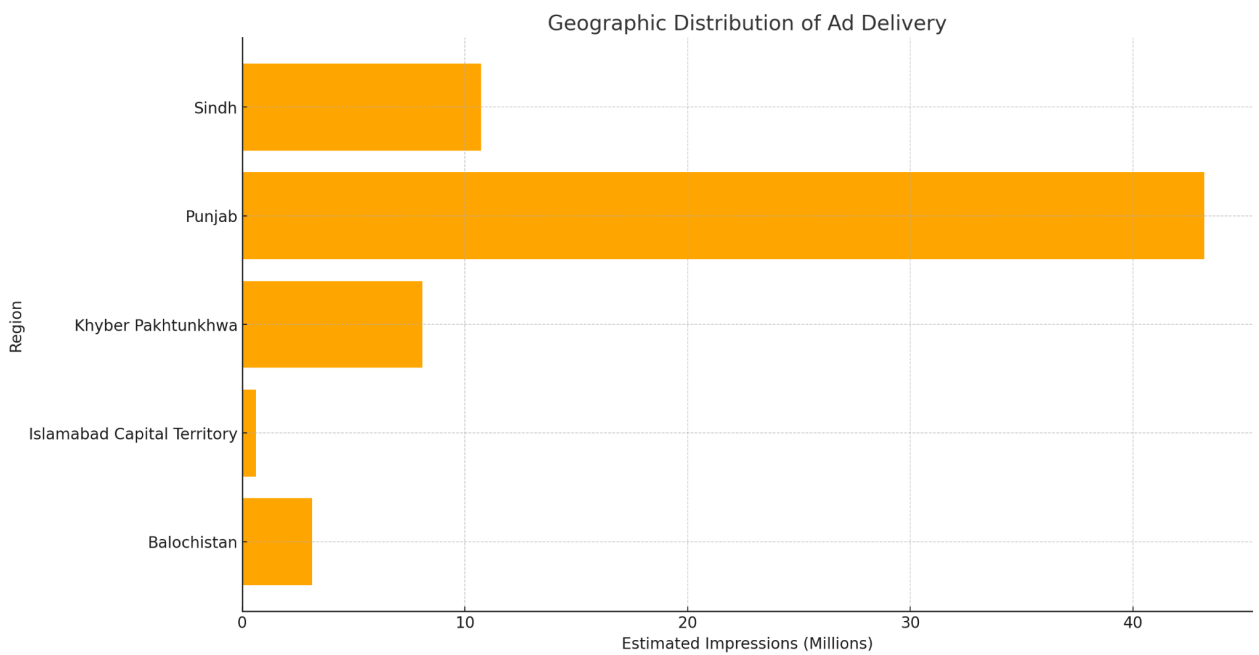
The bar plot presents the distribution of ad impressions across different demographic groups, segmented by age and gender. It provides insights into which demographic segments were most targeted by political ads during the specified period.

The largest share of impressions is directed towards the 25-34 age group, particularly males, indicating this demographic was a primary target for political messaging. There is also significant ad exposure among the 18-24 and 35-44 age groups, reflecting efforts to engage with younger and middle-aged voters. The gender distribution shows a higher number of impressions targeting males across most age groups, suggesting a gender-specific targeting strategy by the advertisers. According to a 2024 report published by Simon Kemp from DataReportal, 25.9 percent of Pakistan's social media users are female, while 74.1 percent are male. The trend observed in the ads targeting relates directly to the percentage of male and female social media users in Pakistan.³²

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF AD DELIVERY

The bar chart illustrates how ad impressions were distributed across different regions, showcasing the geographic focus of political ad campaigns during the election period. The province of Punjab emerges as the most heavily targeted region, receiving the majority of ad impressions. This aligns with the region's political significance and its large voter base. Other provinces such as Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also received substantial ad impressions, indicating a broad geographic outreach by political campaigns. The concentration of ad delivery in these key regions highlights the strategic targeting of areas with high electoral importance.³³

DRF observed political ads using deepfake audios of Imran Khan to spread candidate information



the week leading up to the 2024 general elections in Pakistan. According to Meta’s Ads Library report, a Facebook page posting ads about PTI backed candidates under the name of PakBadlo spent between 21,512,900 PKR and 25,461,506 PKR on political ads campaigning from November 1, 2023, till 1 March, 2024, for independent candidates backed by PTI.



PTI's precise ad campaigns, especially in the week leading up to the elections, undoubtedly played a pivotal role in securing majority seats in the National Assembly for PTI-backed independent candidates. Their majority win could be considered particularly more impressive considering the fact that PTI had been contesting these 2024 elections without their electoral symbol. In such a situation, it was critical for the PTI to ensure that voters were aware of the electoral symbols of the PTI-backed independent candidates in their constituency. PTI's social media campaign played a crucial role in getting that information across.

Meta

Ad LibraryAd Library reportAd Library APIBranded content

PakistanIssues, elections or politicsPakbadlo

KeywordFiltersSort bySave SearchExport CSVSubscribe to summary

Launched in February 2024

Sponsored · Paid for by Pakbadlo

NA-130 (Lahore-XIV)
Yasmin Rashid
LAPTOP
پی ٹی آپ
PP-173 (Lahore-XXIX)
Zubair Niazi
PARACHUTE
پیر الٹو

Library ID: 1048324379726591
Inactive
6 Feb 2024 - 8 Feb 2024
Platforms
Categories
Estimated audience size: >1M
Amount spent (PKR): PKR35K-PKR40K
Impressions: 400K-450K

Sponsored · Paid for by Pakbadlo

NA-78 (Gujranwala-II)
Muhammad Mubeen Arif
RADIO
ریڈیو
PP-61 (Gujranwala-III)
Tahir Majeed Khan
DOVE
دھنک

Library ID: 2137008393325438
Inactive
6 Feb 2024 - 8 Feb 2024
Platforms
Categories
Estimated audience size: 100K-500K
Amount spent (PKR): PKR15K-PKR20K
Impressions: 150K-175K

Sponsored · Paid for by Pakbadlo

NA-77 (Gujranwala-I)
Rashida Tariq
CLOCK
گھڑی
PP-70 (Gujranwala-XII)
Tashkul Abbas Warraich
CRICKET STUMPS
کرکٹ وکٹ

Library ID: 899727255230202
Inactive
6 Feb 2024 - 8 Feb 2024
Platforms
Categories
Estimated audience size: 100K-500K
Amount spent (PKR): PKR35K-PKR40K
Impressions: 100K-125K

Sponsored · Paid for by Pakbadlo

NA-123 (Lahore-VII)
Afzaal Azeem Pahat
RADIO
ریڈیو
PP-159 (Lahore-XV)
Mehar Sharafat Ali
CRICKET STUMPS
کرکٹ وکٹ

Library ID: 1040980730324698
Inactive
6 Feb 2024 - 8 Feb 2024
Platforms
Categories
Estimated audience size: 100K-500K
Amount spent (PKR): PKR15K-PKR20K
Impressions: 70K-80K

POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS AND THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

DRF researchers also came across ethical issues pertaining to the use of AI for political ads. During the 2024 Pakistani general elections, PTI utilized AI to conduct virtual rallies and deliver speeches, including AI-generated videos of their leader, Imran Khan. Generative AI images of Khan were also spread on social media platforms to influence public perception and garner mass support.³⁶ The party, however, was not entirely transparent in its heavy use of AI during its electoral campaign.³⁷

The following frames show an AI-generated address delivered during a virtual rally conducted by PTI in December 2023. The party did not consistently disclose across all platforms that the address was AI-generated. Additionally, the English-only disclaimers on the videos of the address furthered the possibility of misleading the public.³⁸



The disclaimer did not appear at the beginning of the speech, where an original audio-visual clip from one of Imran Khan's previous addresses to the public was shown. It appeared on the screen when the visuals transitioned to stitched clips from the PTI's previous public rallies

Political advertisements being run by a Facebook page called "PakBadlo" contained AI-generated audio messages in Imran Khan's voice to encourage the public to vote for PTI-backed candidates within their constituencies. The AI-generated voice in each ad was tailored to mention a specific candidate within a constituency. However, in this instance there was no disclaimer about the content being Generative AI within any of the ads.

AMBIGUITY AROUND ENDORSEMENTS OF POLITICAL PARTIES BY SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

During the days leading up to the elections, celebrities and social media influencers were seen endorsing specific parties through their online platforms. While there is no evidence of paid partnerships or endorsements, influential personalities expressed support for particular parties which have the potential to shape/influence public perceptions. For instance, on election day, Pakistani actor Atiqah Odho, posted a photo of her inked thumb showing her support for PTI on Instagram.³⁹

Ambiguity around Political ads authentication

Political advertisements in Pakistan can consist of sensational content particularly reinforcing gendered disinformation, TFGBV and hate speech. The authentication process for posting political advertisements in Pakistan also lacks robust mechanisms and raises concerns for the potential misuse of political advertising and its impact on electoral outcomes.⁴⁰ Additionally, digital rights groups have repeatedly raised concerns with regards to lack of reinforcement of existing policies of platforms in the country.⁴¹ In Pakistan, the authentication process for posting ads varies across platforms, with YouTube and Meta implementing stringent measures while others like X and TikTok lag behind.



CURRENT MEASURES/POLICIES BY PLATFORMS ON POSTING ADVERTISEMENTS IN PAKISTAN

Platform	Is there an authentication process to post ads?.	Can you post Political ads without authenticating yourself?	Is the Political ads data available?	Do you need to specify/verify who is posting the ads? i.e. disclaimers
X	Yes	No	No	Yes (mostly News publishers)
Tiktok	Yes	No	No	No
YouTube	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Meta (Facebook & Instagram)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Advertisements on social media platforms in Pakistan play a vital role in defining user preferences and generating revenues. The table below depicts ad reach on platforms with respect to internet users in Pakistan with YouTube and Meta having the most reach as compared to X and Tiktok.

Platform	Ads reach on platforms with respect to internet users in Pakistan (87.35 Million)
X	4.65 million
YouTube	71.70 million
Meta	50.25 million
Tiktok	16.51 million

PLATFORM POLICIES ON ADVERTISEMENTS IN PAKISTAN

Policies concerning the posting of advertisements in Pakistan varies from platform to platform. While some require comprehensive authentication processes, others still lack adequate policies/procedures for posting advertisements in the country. This section delves into the different policies of platforms on posting advertisements and how these policies vary from countries based in the Global North as compared to countries in the Global South.

TikTok



Policies on TikTok vary from country to country. For Pakistan, in order to post ads on TikTok, users need to register on TikTok for Business, an option which is not available in Pakistan at the time of this report. Due to the aforementioned unavailability, Pakistani users also lack access to extensive platform resources for advertising and ad campaigns. For example, TikTok Insights does not list Pakistan as one of the countries for which this tool is accessible.⁴² TikTok has also stipulated a comprehensive “Branded Content Policy” with “Country-specific Requirements” on what is prohibited from being advertised within specific countries. While advertisers can select Pakistan as the target demographic country, there is no mention of Pakistan in the branded content policy or the type of content that is prohibited.⁴³

TikTok's Branded Content Policy elucidates the platform's market-facing regulatory framework, which includes country-specific requirements and policies. However, the absence of country-specific consumer/user-facing policies highlights the inconsistency in their approach, suggesting a disparity in how they prioritize different aspects of platform governance. Although even the market facing policies and regulatory frameworks leaves out countries like Pakistan. These greatly differing policies concerning advertising content in Pakistan raises questions for many around the lack of efforts made by platforms for users in Pakistan particularly with certain features remaining unavailable. Influencers and media personalities end up capitalising on the lack of branded content/paid promotions in regards to political advertisement. For example, in June of 2024, PML-N faced controversy when celebrities and influencers, who were paid to promote the government's “100 days performance” campaign, faced public outrage, leading some to delete their posts and turn off comments due to severe criticism.⁴⁴

X/Twitter



As a part of X's (formerly Twitter) compliance with the EU's Digital Services Act, DSA, the platform's Ads Transparency Center allows users in the European Union to view details about political ads, including the payer, the ad spend and the target audience. However, due to access being limited to countries within the EU, users in regions like Pakistan are left without access to similar insights. As a result, Pakistani users cannot scrutinize political ad campaigns, understand their reach or analyze their impact.

Moreover X's pay to access model for their API, hinders the general accessibility of the data for audits and accountability reports. While X does require identity verification for political advertisers, the lack of a public-facing tool outside Europe means this verification process is not transparent to the general public. This gap leaves room for potential misuse of the platform in regions with less regulatory oversight.

Meta



Meta's ad library is the most comprehensive as compared to all the other platforms. Users can look up "all ads" data based on a specific country, as well as the subcategory of "issues, elections, or politics" for a particular country in the list.⁴⁵ The detailed reports provide information about the ad spendings of a particular advertiser, demographic and target audience information, and the option to download each dataset as a csv file for further analysis. The policy by Meta to prohibit the running of political ads in the two weeks leading up to elections in the United States represents a significant step towards reducing misinformation and undue influence during the critical final stages of electoral campaigning.⁴⁶ However, this policy's application is limited to the U.S., leaving others, such as Pakistan, without similar protections. Despite Section 182 of the Election Act 2017 of Pakistan stating the same around prohibiting campaigning 48 hours before the election, we witnessed that on Meta, 48 hours prior to the elections, political advertisements were nonetheless heavily circulated on the platform.

It is also important to note that Meta complies with local laws where exceptional restrictions are required in their policies under local law provisions.⁴⁷ Currently, Meta prohibits political ads in the United States, Brazil, Israel, and Italy, where the ads "discourage people from voting in an election, call into question the legitimacy of an upcoming or ongoing election, and make premature claims of election victory."⁴⁸ The absence of such policies in countries like Pakistan raises questions about the equitable treatment of electoral information integrity across different global contexts. Moreover, the customary identity verification of the individuals who want to post political ads has its own shortcomings. The lack of sufficient information made public about the person running a political ad introduces a barrier to the accountability process under local laws.

YouTube



Within Google's ad transparency center, one can only look up ad data using the name of an advertiser or the website name. However, only verified advertisers are included in the transparency dataset. With advertisers not fulfilling the verification criteria and still being able to post ads on the platform, it becomes impossible to search for ad data through this portal. Unlike Meta, YouTube's search query limits the data you can look up. With further restrictions based on region and country, it becomes even more difficult to access ad data in certain countries, like Pakistan.

When examining the availability of political ads data on Google's Transparency Portal, a clear discrepancy emerges.⁴⁹ Although the portal provides detailed data for a handful of countries, including India, the United States and members of the European Union, offering insights into spending amounts, targeting criteria, and reach of ads, such transparency is conspicuously absent for countries like Pakistan. This inconsistency highlights a broader issue within the digital advertising ecosystem, where the commitment to electoral transparency and accountability does not uniformly extend across all regions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the course of the research, Digital Rights Foundation found several areas where social media platforms are sorely lacking in terms of efficacy and impact. In the context of those findings, however, the recommendations below reflect key priority areas that the platforms must seriously analyze and implement, in order to ensure a more transparent and safer digital space for all:

1. Addressing Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)

It is important that all platforms introduce clearly defined community guidelines for TFGBV content. However a carefully curated policy needs to be introduced by platforms on TFGBV content in order to ensure substantial reduction and instant removal of such content. Support services should be curated for victims of TFGBV content, in addition to more efficient reporting mechanisms that are available in multiple languages for users.

2. Third-party Audits

Platforms should carry out large-scale impact assessments on how effective and efficient the content moderation policy has been in reducing cases of gendered hate speech. These could be received through user feedback and data analysis, as conducted by independent experts. Such tests should measure the effect moderation practices have on different demographic groups to ensure sound enforcement across the board.

There should be periodic third-party independent audits regarding how content moderation systems are carried out by social media platforms. These audits, the results of which will be made publicly available, can inform how to frame policies better. The said audits shall result from implications surrounding algorithmic biases, the consistency of its application, and user satisfaction relating to the moderation process. SOC 2 standards⁵⁰ should be followed for these audits. For monetisation purposes, it is important that platforms collaborate with each other to define common monetisation practices that are also regularly audited by a third party.

Platforms must establish independent oversight bodies with representatives from CSOs, academics, and competent industry technical professionals for regular reviews of each social media platform's policies, with suggestions for changes. These boards should be accommodated with automatic, compulsory assessments connected to regular suggestions towards better ways to practice moderation. A clear advantage of CSO collaboration is that it enhances the effectiveness of platform policies and helps ensure policy content is sure to be responsive to the needs and rights of users. The principles of Participatory Governance emphasize the importance of stakeholder engagement in policy development and implementation (Fung, 2006). Therefore, platforms should allow for the inclusion of various voices of CSOs to ensure that content moderation policies reflect an inclusive and culturally sensitive input, addressing the uniqueness of the challenges that differences in these communities pose.

Platforms should allow access to third party tools and independent fact checkers on their platforms for CSOs and trusted partners. The said organizations should be able to moderate their content and verify large amounts of data through such tools to further legitimize and strengthen the impact of their suggestions to platforms.

3. Enhanced Disclaimer and Labeling Standards

Platforms should introduce mechanisms to require users to clearly label Generative AI content. For instance, asking for information on the AI tool used and the purpose that the content was generated for.

Clear labeling of paid/sponsored content should be required by all platforms. Although paid partnerships can be labeled on certain platforms, users are still able to bypass them. For instance, viewers of the celebrity-endorsed “100 days of Punjab government” campaign videos claimed that these videos were a result of a paid partnership; however, no disclaimers were provided by the creators. Some participants later admitted to being paid for the online posts, therefore enhanced detection mechanisms need to be devised to stay up to date with evasion techniques. Although the case in question is from post-election observation, there is currently no accountability mechanism in place in platform policies to address this issue during elections.

4. Human Reviewers and Analytic Intervention for Content Moderation

Behavioural analysis tools need to be developed in order to identify patterns of content containing online abuse and harassment for time-efficient removal. Alongside AI tools, there is a pressing need to increase human reviewers and moderators to more effectively tackle evasion techniques used by bad actors. For example, while Meta claims to use human reviewers in addition to automated systems, platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have unclear reporting mechanisms and review techniques in Pakistan.

Collaborations with local experts are essential to identify keywords, codes, and symbols frequently used in the region to bypass moderation efforts. This approach will help address the unique challenges of content moderation in countries like Pakistan, where cultural and language nuances jeopardize a safer online environment.

5. Electoral Content Moderation Readiness

Social media platforms need to collaborate with CSOs through trusted partner programs to ensure that annotations made to natural language processing (NLP)-based machine learning models are aware of the contextual and regional, localised nuances. Using this hybrid and inclusive approach in content moderation automation will help drive a more inclusive mechanism, resolving regional inconsistencies within current moderation policies on election integrity. If harmful content is not immediately flagged for removal, its visibility must be significantly reduced to discourage users from engaging with the content.

Just as Meta has political ads blackout policies for the the U.S.,⁵¹ similar efforts should be made for countries around the world. For consistency, platforms should align their policies with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) guidelines on electoral

integrity to provide a consistent framework for managing political ads during critical periods.

6. Transparency and Accuracy in Completely Localised Automated Content Moderation

Social media platforms must: a) be transparent in the automated system that they use; b) include additional mechanisms to increase content moderation accuracy for languages other than English; and c) use NLP-based image classifiers to identify and flag misleading content. For example, according to X, the process of reporting, flagging and removing content is carried out through an automated system. However, there is no information provided on the automated system itself. If, like other social media platforms such as Meta, X uses NLP within large language models (LLMs) that ostensibly have the ability to remove content in all languages, the system still lacks robust mechanisms to identify and take down harmful content.

Reports show that Meta, despite its use of LLMs, left 70 percent of overall global COVID misinformation content shared in Italian and Spanish unflagged compared to 29 percent of English content in 2020 (Avaaz, 2020). Use crowd-sourced data to continuously improve language models, ensuring accurate and culturally sensitive moderation. Collaborate with local universities and linguistic experts to ensure models are accurate and culturally sensitive, addressing the unique challenges of moderating content in different languages and contexts.

To increase content moderation accuracy, it is important that platforms take spelling variations, misspelled words and diacritics into consideration. For example, on Facebook, searching the Urdu word "مرتد" (Apostate) shows a disclaimer related to activities of dangerous organizations and individuals however variations of the same word such as "مُرتد" or "مَرْتَد" do not show the same disclaimer.⁵²

7. Comprehensive, Interactive Transparency Reports with Detailed Insights on Content, Localisation and Ad Moderation

Social media platforms should provide interactive and user-friendly dashboards for their transparency reports. These reports should be updated regularly to provide detailed insights into ad spending, targeting, and content moderation. There should also be increased transparency and disclosure of the ad revenue being generated by harmful content. For instance, Meta's ad library currently has active and running ads that promote pornography and non-consensual data leaks.⁵³ It is important that policies are clear and transparent; however, it is equally imperative to regularly update the content moderation policies to stay up-to-date with new evasion techniques.

Meta ads and content libraries should include information on harmful content advertisements that have been removed from the library. Although information on the ad spend and the ad account is available, there is no categorization of the type of content that was removed. Meta, though providing detailed categorization, should address the content moderation policy against which the ad was taken down.

The reports, as they are as of the time of our research, only show content in the English language. The transparency reports should include regional language options for specific countries.

8. Implement Comprehensive Political Ad Libraries, Available To All

Other platforms should take a page out of Meta's book and include detailed information about ad spend, targeting criteria, demographics reached, context, and the content of the ads to ensure availability of comprehensive ad libraries. Google's AdChoices⁵⁴ program should also be implemented across all platforms, with mandatory participation for political advertisers, ensuring comprehensive coverage and transparency. Ensuring transparency and accessibility in data sharing allows stakeholders to draft better policies and to ensure greater user safety on platforms.

Further to this, platforms should develop and enforce a unified API for real-time reporting of ad data to ensure consistency and accessibility across all regions.

9. Stronger Political Advertiser Identity Verification and Accountability

Platforms must strengthen the identity verification processes for political advertisers. Advertisers must be required to provide detailed legal documentation and make verified information public for enhanced accountability during election campaigns. Social media platforms should employ multi-factor authentication and identity verification tools such as "Know Your Customer" standards.

Ensuring the uniqueness, legitimacy, and identifiable information of the advertiser is important to ensure that the advertising accounts are not misused. Platforms could work on developing secure database channels with government institutions for voter and candidate verification to cross-verify ad sponsors, ensuring that only verified entities can run political ads. Public-facing reports should be shared regularly to ensure transparency and ethical considerations are upheld. Any channels and processes developed should be done so with the help of trusted partners, civil society organizations, and subject matter experts. Like other platforms, YouTube should partner with independent fact-checking organizations to verify content containing AI, potential misinformation, and/or disinformation.

10. Public Access to Advertiser Information

To mitigate the challenges that researchers face in accessing and extracting publicly available data from social media platforms, platforms should create a RESTful API,⁵⁵ through which researchers will be able to access and gather comprehensive information on political advertisers, their ad spend in addition to the targeting criteria used by them. Moreover, this API should also cover the content library database.

In order to increase transparency, public evaluation and reusability, and encourage accountability, it is important that platforms embrace the Open Data Charter principle for political advertising. Currently, Meta provides access to such data through the Meta content library however general access is limited to the ad library through which anyone can view ads related to social issues, elections or politics within the last seven years. In order to get into the content library and the content library API, an application needs to be filed where eligible candidates need to be associated with an academic or research institution. For X, no information is publicly available, one needs a developer account to purchase the API. Whereas, YouTube's API key is available through which one can access its content library however data related to advertisements is not available unless one is aware of the advertiser or the particular ad itself. However, for Pakistan, specifically political advertisement data is not available. As far as Tiktok is concerned, there is a complete lack of data

transparency. Platforms like Crowdtangle have been invaluable in terms of data collection and accessibility. With Crowdtangle shutting down its operations in August of 2024⁵⁶, social media platforms need to revisit their policies on how their data is shared in a user-friendly manner.

Further to this, and similar to Recommendation #8, reports only show content in the English language. The transparency reports should include regional language options for specific countries.

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