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Social Media Political Campaigns: Perceived Credibility of Political Leaders of Pakistan Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to understand the linkage between social media addiction and perceived credibility of three key political figures of Pakistan including Imran Khan of PTI, Shahbaz Sharif of PML-N and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari of PPP among the university students of Pakistan. Two additional constructs; perceived influence of social media campaign features and overall impact of social media campaigns on political perceptions are explored as extended constructs. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed and data were obtained from 300 respondents. Pearson correlation analysis was used to test for associations between social media dependency and each dependent construct across all three leaders, using IBM SPSS. The findings show that social media dependency is significantly a positive predictor for perceived credibility for all leaders and dimensions. Imran Khan (PTI) was getting the most consistent and positive credibility associations, especially on the trustworthiness dimension, getting endorsement by 67.3% of the respondents who termed him as the most active leader on social media. The most consistent expertise-based associations were done by Shahbaz Sharif (PML-N), while Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (PPP) had the weakest associations regarding the three dimensions. All the hypotheses were accepted that is, dependency towards social media and sensitivity to social media's features positively predicted the overall attitudinal impact. Respondents were particularly convinced that social media is the most credible way to communicate about politics, with 74% choosing that answer.



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1. Introduction

The advent of social media sites has completely changed the nature of political communications, not only in relation to the way political leaders and citizens interact, but also the way in which political messages are created, disseminated and understood. Contrary to the past in which mass media functions solely in the reciprocal direction, social media facilitates interactive, customized, and real-time politics allowing one to engage directly with the political participants. This trend has made social media the center of political campaigns in the modern day, credibility, visibility, and engagement of audiences are critical in influencing the social media on individuals (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). Pakistan has witnessed a significant change in political campaigning due to increasing infiltration of social media sites. While such platforms have established strong avenues for political agitation and awareness, they also give rise to concerns regarding the reliability, bias, and selective trust. The 2013 and 2018 general elections turned out to be a breakthrough in the political communication in Pakistan because political parties and leaders became very active users of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to mobilize supporters and counter political narrative of opponents (Muzaffar et al., 2020).

Credibility has always been taken as one of the core aspects of a competent political leadership and communication. Generally, credibility is based on trustworthiness and expertise of the source (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). The social media has transformed the processes by which credibility on politics is built and assessed. However, in contrast to institutional mass media in which credibility is normally endowed by editorial standards and professional frameworks, social media credibility is co-produced on the basis of the engagement of the audience, message tone, and source characteristics (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). The high growth in the sphere of social media has drastically transformed the field of political communications and the political figures started to directly address the citizens

without necessarily going through the traditional media. In Pakistan, social media has taken the center stage in campaigning politically, especially among the young and learned voters. Moreover, the growing reliance on social media as a source of political news bodes serious concerns on the impact of dependency on the perception of political leaders' credibility. Thus, the essence of the issues covered by the present research is the absence of empirical evidence to provide insight into the effects that political campaigns via social media can have on the credibility of political leaders among university students in Pakistan.

This research is significant in academic, theoretical and practical terms. Academically, it is significant to the discipline of political communication since it produces new understanding on how university students, an important electoral and social group, perceive and assess the credibility of political leaders on social media in Pakistan. Theoretically, the research offers the basis to use the Media Dependency Theory in understanding of political credibility. Through applying MDT on the special context of Pakistan's social media centered political context, the research brings the theory into a new environment extending its explanatory scope into emerging political communication patterns in the digital world of the Global South. In a real-world setting, this research study can be valuable to political leaders, campaign strategists, and policymakers through insight into what university students are looking for in terms of trustworthiness, expertise, and reliability in leaders they encounter on social media. This knowledge may improve the way political campaigns are constructed, delivered, and assessed. Moreover, for educators and media literacy advocates, the study raises the prospects of how students critically assess political content.

1.2 Research Objectives

The primary aim of the research is to investigate the effect of political campaigns on the credibility of the political leaders in Pakistan as perceived by the university students through the lenses of social media. Specific objectives include:

- (i) To investigate the degree of reliance of university students on social media as source of information on politics and content on campaigns
- (ii) To examine the credibility of the political leaders in the eyes of the university students as reflected by the social media political campaigns
- (iii) To determine the association between dependency on social media and perceived credibility of political leaders among university students;
- (iv) To determine the most important credibility dimensions (trustworthiness, expertise, and reliability) that affect the judgments of political leaders in social media.

2. Literature Review

Social media is one of the main source of political communication globally, and it has changed the way political discourses are framed, delivered, and consumed. Asif, Tabassam, and Naheed (2025) describe it as a two-sided sword, which can democratize political information access at the same time enhancing misinformation that shapes the opinion of people. Similar arguments also emphasize the role of platforms in transforming political participation by making politicians and citizens available to interact in real-time, although they also lead to polarization in the sphere of publicity (Khan et al., 2023). All these findings depict that digital media is at present a political megaphone as well as an opinion voting machine that weakens the traditional gates keeping systems. Social media has re-organized political communication and the popular discourse significantly in the Pakistani setting. Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have become indispensable tools for campaigning, policy discourse and building images of public figures (Muzaffar et al., 2020; Sadiq, 2020). Moreover, the evolution of communication over the internet in Pakistan has incorporated the aspect of reputation management as the politicians seek to position their virtual persona in manners that attract voters especially the young ones who form the bulky part of the electorate.

Perceived credibility in the context of political communication on the web refers to the level at which the listeners evaluate that a political leader is convincing, knowledgeable, and genuine with the message that they are conveying. It is a determining element in influencing whether such communication is accompanied by persuasion or doubt. Besalú, Pont-Sorribes and Martí (2021) examined how people assessed the credibility of opinion leaders when they tweet about the COVID-19 pandemic and noted that experts were perceived to be credible more than politicians and anonymous users, therefore, emphasizing the importance of expertise in perceived credibility. Similarly, Sanawi and Marzuki (2022) analyzed the political participation of young Malaysians and discovered that the perceived credibility on social media strongly increased political effectiveness and decreased political cynicism.

In Pakistan, credibility of political leaders has gained more prominence due to the growing influences of the social media platforms over the political views of people. As Zeib and Shahzad (2025) pointed out, the growing power of social media influencers in political activism is a phenomenon that often leads to transfer of the trust that the followers have in the influencers to the political leaders who are sponsored by them. Shami, Ashfaq, and Khan (2019) investigated the evaluation of online presence by citizens in respect of political leaders and discovered that perceived credibility had an excellent connection with regular participation, message tone, and responsiveness in social media. Zia and Riaz (2021) also revealed that the believability of the political news among the Pakistani millennials depends on both the credibility of the source and credibility of the medium.

To recap it all, both international and Pakistani perspectives of scholarship suggest that credibility is multidimensional, contextual, and not something that can be bestowed upon a speaker by virtue of authority alone. In the digital era, where information overload and competing narratives define political environment, credibility is what the audiences confer upon, based on

source cues, message quality, and medium characteristics.

2.1 Theoretical Approach of Early Scholars and Social Media Credibility

To have a better understanding of credibility in digital political communication, it is essential to base it on theoretical frameworks. The initial empirical studies used MDT to explain the trust of audiences on the news institutions plus their perceptions on political actors. Scholars have been using MDT more frequently to break down the credibility of information and political leaders online in terms of its role in the digital social media era. The accumulating knowledge of these studies provides a strong argument in the application of MDT in the study of political credibility in Pakistan's digital political communication environment characterized by growing social media dependency.

Credibility is a central decisive example of persuasive efficacy in the political communication sector, especially in the context of digital media. Metzger and Flanagin (2015) postulate that in information-saturated digital environments, users rely on heuristic cues including source characteristics, endorsement, and message design as proxies of credibility. Appelman and Sundar (2016) determined that heuristic cues are especially powerful in determining the perceived credibility in political leaders when the audience cannot critically analyze every message. Cross cultural scholarship also supports the mediation contribution of credibility when it comes to political persuasion: Choi and Lim (2022) discovered that the perceived credibility in social media mediates political persuasion through social media exposure. Credibility is also closely related to the persuasive nature of the social media in the Pakistani context. Saboor, Ali, and Ahmed (2022) in a large-scale sample of Pakistanis discovered that the credibility of social media political messages significantly influenced people's political beliefs in a way that was moderated by the degree of source credibility attributed to leaders.

Altogether, these researches demonstrate that the social media credibility is not a constant feature or a passive factor in political communication, but a co-constructed, dynamic evaluation where media dependency, source characteristics and audience orientations mutually interact.

2.2 Perceived Credibility of Prominent Pakistani Political Leaders

The three most electorally formidable Pakistani political leaders Imran Khan (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf PTI), Nawaz Sharif (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (Pakistan People's Party PPP) each represent a structurally distinct mode of social media credibility.

Imran Khan is the most empirically documented social media credible of the three major political leaders in Pakistan. Based on a structured questionnaire administered to 220 university students (Alam et al., 2025), PTI had the highest credibility mean score ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.8$). Most importantly, emotional appeal was also taken via the study and the results showed the highest level of PTI at $M = 4.3$ ($SD = 0.7$) — the low standard deviation of all party groups, which means that not only was the trust of students in the communication made by PTI high, but highly consistent and agreed upon as well. Pearson correlation also proved that the perceived usefulness of political advertising was found to be strongly and positively related to voting intention ($r = 0.68$, $p < .01$). These results are theoretically consistent with the social media approach chosen by Imran Khan that was based on avoiding traditional media gatekeepers so that information flows directly from him to followers through social media.

The credibility of Nawaz Sharif on social media works in a different principle. The digital communication of the PML-N is based on demonstrating the institutional competence, the success of governance, and the experience of the administration — the aspects that are described as the expertise dimension of credibility (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015). Alam et al. (2025) established that the average

credibility score of PML-N was $M = 3.6$ ($SD = 0.9$) in Islamabad university students. Together, these results suggest that credibility of Nawaz Sharif in the eyes of university students is both expertise-based but institutionally challenged — students may recognise his governance experience while at the same time discounting his message authenticity in the digital communication environment where credibility is co-constructed through interactivity, consistency, and perceived accountability.

Social media credibility of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has the most structurally distinctive credibility of the three leaders, based on what can be called as symbolic credibility — credibility based on inherited political legacy of the Bhutto family and consciously youth-oriented communicative image. Nevertheless, this type of credibility, on an empirical level, demonstrates the lowest measurable approval amongst the three leaders. PPP was the lowest credibility score of $M = 2.9$ ($SD = 1.1$) and lowest emotional appeal score of $M = 3.1$ ($SD = 1.0$) (Alam et al., 2025), suggesting the most fractured student opinion and the least consistency in credibility judgment.

The historical evidence of these three leaders confirms that perceived credibility of political leaders among students is neither uniform nor static, but is a leader-specific, platform-contingent, and context-moderated judgment. Choi and Lim (2022) established in cross-cultural empirical research that perceived credibility mediates the relationship between social media exposure and political persuasion — meaning that exposure alone is insufficient; it is the credibility dimension that converts platform dependency into persuasive effect.

The analyzed literature on the topic of the chapter confirms that social media has radically changed the way political communication functions in Pakistan; however, despite the extensive literature, three interrelated gaps persist. First, although there are aggregated credibility ratings, there is no theory and no research to empirically support how the social media dependency results in leader-specific credibility perceptions of

university students. Second, the extant literature on source credibility in Pakistan, such as Shami et al. (2019), Shah et al. (2025), and Zia and Riaz (2021) treat credibility as a general construct without disaggregating findings by specific leader or credibility dimension. Third, students of universities are mostly considered as a uniform audience. The high variance in PPP's credibility scores indicates a significant subgroup variation that has not been systematically explored. The three gaps are united by a sole empirical gap; the lack of a study to integrate Media Dependency Theory with a dimensionalized, leader-specific analysis of political credibility in a Pakistani university student context. The present study fills this gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

Media Dependency Theory (MDT) is one of the theories of communication research that are very useful in offering a wide perspective to the issues surrounding the role played by the dependence of individuals on the media systems in terms of the cognitive and affective orientation. Firstly, created by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), MDT offers a way that enables media to become central in the perception of the social and political reality, especially when there is little certainty or change. According to the theory, the higher the level of reliance that people put on the media, in accessing information, the higher the media implications on their perceptions and attitudes.

Media Dependency Theory is based on a number of assumptions. To start with, the media influences depend on the level of audience dependency. Cognitive, affective and behavioral effects are determined by the greater dependency of the media in meeting the informational and orientation needs of people (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Second, the structure of social system contributes in dependency relationships. The more the media forms the core of information distribution and the less the alternative channels, the more the dependence. Third, media dependency is even greater when there is political uncertainty or change. Such periods of time are represented by political campaigns in which

citizens seek instructions so as to decode messages of the rivalry, judge the rivals, and arrive at voting judgment.

In the virtual world, Johnson and Kaye (2014) discovered that politically minded users that rely on social network sites for political information attribute significantly higher levels of credibility to the information those platforms offer. In case of university students, who more often may use social media to update themselves on politics and discover their political orientation, the dependency-credibility connection may be especially robust (Intyaswati et al., 2021). Moreover, the cognitive effects of dependency include changes in what one believes and knows about political leaders, including assessments of their competence, sincerity, and reliability (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

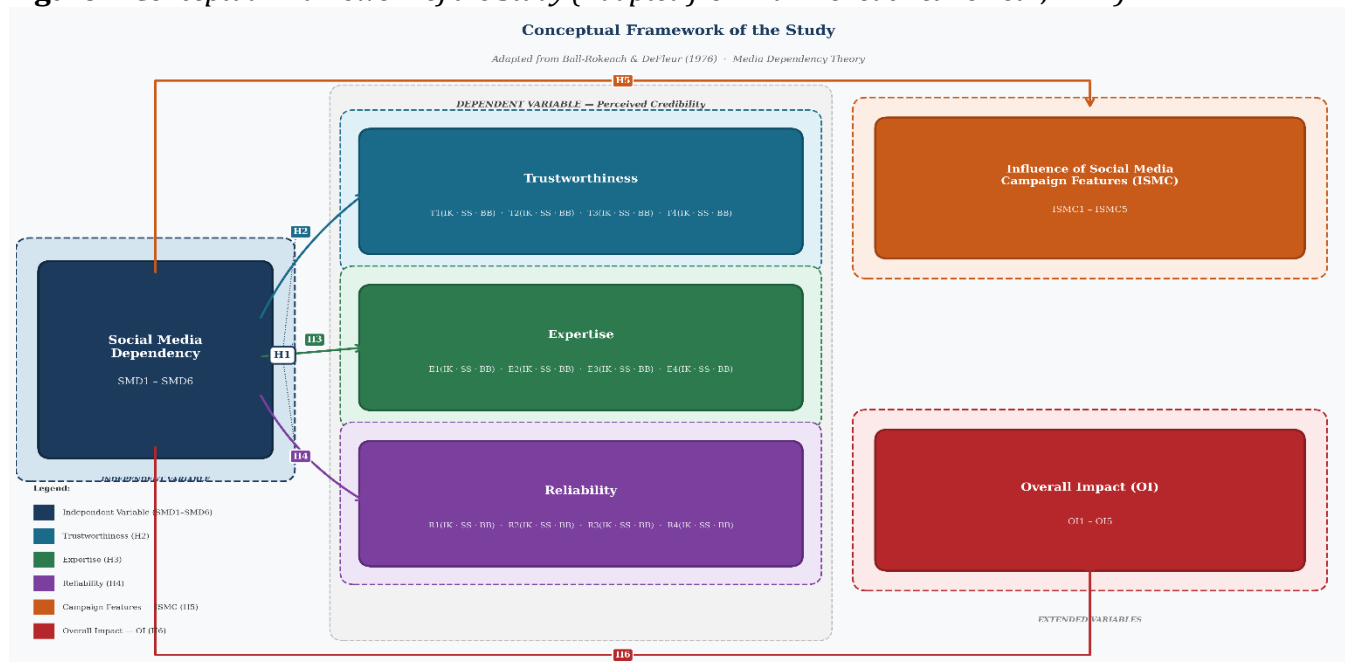
It is proposed that in this research study, social media dependency will be the independent variable; these will indicate how dependent students are towards social media as a source of political information, updates on campaigns, and the evaluation of leaders. Perceived credibility of the functions of political leaders acts as the dependent variable, which is the judgments of the students towards trustworthiness of the political leaders, their expertise and reliability related to

their social media presence. Media Dependency Theory is in favor of the assumption that the more students have social media dependency, the more credibility judgments in social media can be influenced by online political communication.

3.1 Hypotheses

- H1:** Social media dependency and perceived credibility of political leaders are significantly correlated among university students.
- H2:** Greater degrees of social media dependency are linked with greater perceptions of trustworthiness of political leaders.
- H3:** Increased levels of social media dependency correlate with increased perceptions of the expertise of political leaders.
- H4:** The greater the degree of social media dependency, the greater the perception of reliability of political leaders.
- H5:** Social media dependency has a significant positive relationship with the perceived influence of social media campaign features.
- H6:** Social media dependency has a significant positive relationship with the overall impact of social media political campaigns on students' political perceptions.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study (Adapted from Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976)



4. Research Methodology

The current research design is quantitative, referring to the analysis of the connection between social media dependency and perceived credibility of political leaders. Quantitative research also enables operationalization as it is able to measure the complex constructs like media dependency and perceived credibility in consistent, repeatable ways across a large number of participants. The research design specifically uses the cross-sectional survey design where the information is gathered at one instance at the time. One of the best-known approaches in the social science research is cross-sectional surveys as it allows having an effective tool to collect the information about a significant number of people in a comparatively short time.

The current study is based on deductive research approach; this type of research is typically applied to social science studies that are theory-oriented. The paper is based on Media Dependency Theory. The study is thus explanatory by nature since it aims at explaining the existence and relevance of dependency on social media in shaping perceived credibility judgments about political leaders through the interplay of theoretical orientation.

The study population was university students, which are in both the public and the privately-owned universities in Pakistan. Besides their high level of use of the social media, university students are also believed to be well informed politically, and can be seen as well-positioned to evaluate political communication. The current research uses the methods of probability sampling including stratified sampling to provide proportional representation of both the students of the public and private universities. Most of the past literature investigating the impacts of social media on political attitudes tend to use over 300 respondents to obtain the required level of statistical power and reliability (Boulianne, 2015); thus, the current research targeted 350 to 400 university students with a minimum of 300.

The research tool adopted in this work is a structured questionnaire that aims at gauging

major variables concerning dependency on the social media as well as the perceived credibility of political leaders. The second section measures the degree of dependence on social media in political information; questions in this category describe the dependence patterns and their characteristics according to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976). The third part measures credibility of political leaders via social media — evaluating whether respondents view them as honest and trustworthy, knowledgeable and competent, consistent in their statements, and dependable and reliable. All items in the questionnaire are measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'.

A pilot study was conducted prior to the actual collection of the research data to test the efficiency of the research tool on around 30 to 40 university students. Besides qualitative feedback, pre-pilot reliability analysis was also done at the pilot stage. After the data collection process is over, the responses collected were examined using statistical package of the social sciences (SPSS). Validity and reliability are essential in quantitative research: content validity was established through expert evaluation by academic supervisors. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient; a coefficient of 0.70 and above has been deemed as satisfactory in social science research studies (Eisinga et al., 2013). Pearson correlation analysis was performed to research the relationship between the key variables.

5. Results

Table 5A shows a breakdown of survey answers. The number of questionnaires sent to the students of the University is 320. Of these 11 responses (3.44%) were found to be fabricated (inconsistent response pattern), with 9 responses (2.81%) being omissions (incomplete response). Thus, the data retrieved was 300 valid complete responses which was 93.75 percent of the total data collected. The proportion of usable responses is high and reinforces the argument for the representativeness and reliability of the data.

Table 5 A: Summary of Response Rate

Response	N	Percentage
Number of Responses Collected	320	100%
Fabricated Responses	11	3.44%
Incomplete Responses	9	2.81%
Invalid Responses	0	0%
Usable Responses	300	93.75%

Table 5B includes Cronbach's alpha reliability statistics for all six measurement scales in the study on 300 usable responses in IBM SPSS 27. The 6 items of the Social Media Dependency scale had an alpha of .908, showing Excellent reliability. All three sub-scales of Perceived Credibility — Trustworthiness (C1, 12 items, $\alpha = .814$), Expertise (C2, 12 items, $\alpha = .844$) and Reliability (C3, 12 items, $\alpha = .820$) — had Good reliability

values, which validates the use of the leader-specific Likert format items across the three leaders. The Influence of Social Media Campaign Features scale (ISMC, 5 items) returned the highest alpha in the study with a value of .912 (Excellent). Overall Impact scale (OI, 5 items) returned $\alpha = .869$ (Good). All results validate the reliability and feasibility of all the measurement instruments for inferential analysis.

Table 5 B: Reliability Statistics of Variables of Study

Variable / Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Interpretation
Social Media Dependency (SMD)	.908	6	Excellent
Trustworthiness — C1 (T1IK–T4BB)	.814	12	Good
Expertise — C2 (E1IK–E4BB)	.844	12	Good
Reliability — C3 (R1IK–R4BB)	.820	12	Good
Influence of SM Campaign (ISMC)	.912	5	Excellent
Overall Impact (OI)	.869	5	Good

Table 5.1 displays the age range of 300 participants. The majority belonged to the 21–23 age bracket ($n = 126$, 42.0%), followed by 18–20 ($n = 102$, 34.0%). Respondents aged 24–26

constituted 12.7% ($n = 38$) and those above 26 years accounted for 11.3% ($n = 34$), confirming a predominantly young undergraduate sample.

Table 5.1: Age of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
18–20	102	34.0	34.0
21–23	126	42.0	76.0
24–26	38	12.7	88.7
Above 26	34	11.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	

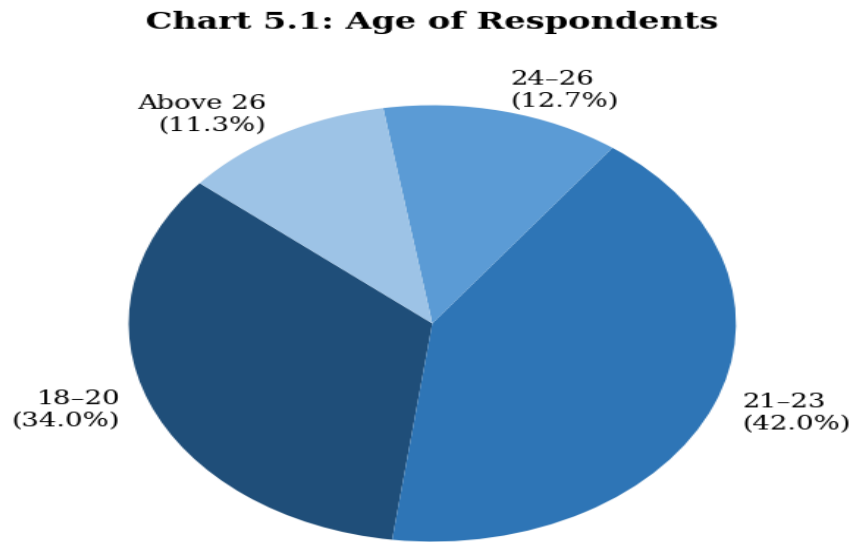
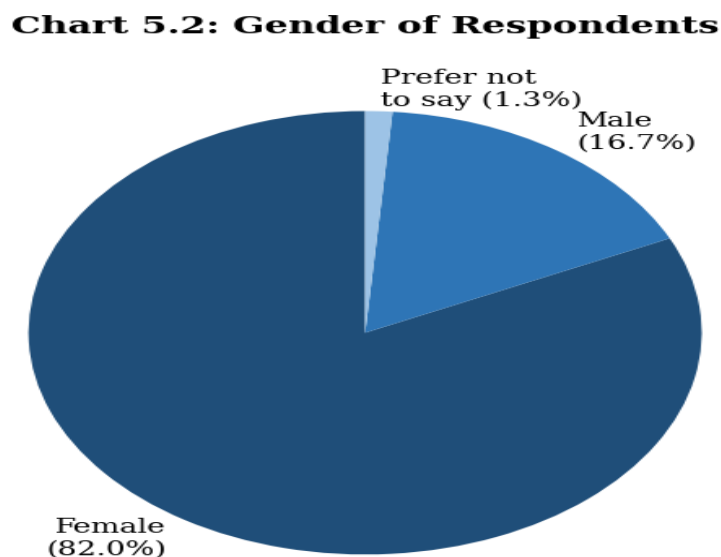
Chart 5.1: Age of Respondents

Table 5.2 shows that the sample is extremely female. Of all the respondents, 82.0% (n = 246) were women and 16.7% (n = 50) were men. This

gender skew, while limiting in terms of generalizability, reflects broader enrolment patterns in Pakistani social science faculties.

Table 5.2: Gender of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Female	246	82.0	82.0
Male	50	16.7	98.7
Prefer not to say	4	1.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	

Chart 5.2: Gender of Respondents

The majority of students were undergraduate (BS) students (73.7%, n = 221), with MS/MPhil graduate students at 21.0% (n = 63). As shown in Table 5.4, the majority of respondents (n = 130, 43.3%) spent more than 4 hours a day on social

media. Combined, 75.6% of respondent's report spending 3+ hours per day on social media, which is very pertinent to the premise of Media Dependency Theory.

Table 5.3: *Social Media Platform Used for Political Information*

Platform	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Instagram	121	40.3	40.3
TikTok	59	19.7	60.0
YouTube	41	13.7	73.7
Other	31	10.3	84.0
Facebook	28	9.3	93.3
X (Twitter)	20	6.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	

The results of the survey show a strong agreement among students regarding social media being the most credible and effective way to campaign politically. The medium with the highest level of credibility was social media campaigns (74.0%, n = 222), followed by Community Speeches (20.3%, n = 61). Almost one-half (49.0%, n = 147) cited Social Engagement (likes, comments, shares, and replies) as the top reason for the effectiveness of social media campaigns, while 39.3% (n = 118) cited Visual Engagement (videos/photos). Table 5.9 reveals that according to the majority of respondents (67.3%, n = 202) Imran Khan is the

political leader who engages the most with the public through social media, followed by Shahbaz Sharif (25.7%, n = 77) and Bilawal Bhutto (7.0%, n = 21).

5.1 Analysis of Research Variables

This section discusses the correlation analysis conducted between Social Media Dependency (SMD1–SMD6) and all five groups of dependent variables. Pearson correlation coefficients and significance levels (2-tailed) are reported for each item pair.

Table 5.4: *Correlation between SMD and Trustworthiness of Political Leaders*

Variable	Statistic	SMD1	SMD2	SMD3	SMD4	SMD5	SMD6
T1(IK)	Pearson r	0.327**	0.358**	0.366**	0.341**	0.325**	0.358**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
T1(SS)	Pearson r	0.057	0.080	0.112	0.144*	0.086	0.116*
	Sig.	0.322	0.166	0.053	0.012	0.136	0.045
T1(BB)	Pearson r	0.001	0.045	0.061	0.096	0.069	0.095
	Sig.	0.993	0.434	0.291	0.096	0.236	0.100
T2(IK)	Pearson r	0.296**	0.299**	0.327**	0.329**	0.320**	0.371**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
T2(SS)	Pearson r	0.149**	0.164**	0.187**	0.196**	0.173**	0.228**
	Sig.	0.010	0.004	0.001	.000	0.003	.000
T2(BB)	Pearson r	0.140*	0.146*	0.200**	0.160**	0.141*	0.199**
	Sig.	0.015	0.011	.000	0.006	0.014	.000
T3(IK)	Pearson r	0.255**	0.246**	0.271**	0.273**	0.293**	0.328**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
T3(SS)	Pearson r	0.130*	0.144*	0.150**	0.197**	0.150**	0.146*
	Sig.	0.024	0.012	0.009	.000	0.009	0.011
T3(BB)	Pearson r	0.132*	0.167**	0.194**	0.166**	0.143*	0.187**
	Sig.	0.022	0.004	.000	0.004	0.013	0.001
T4(IK)	Pearson r	0.270**	0.303**	0.278**	0.263**	0.298**	0.347**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
T4(SS)	Pearson r	0.111	0.165**	0.176**	0.151**	0.196**	0.167**
	Sig.	0.055	0.004	0.002	0.009	.000	0.004
T4(BB)	Pearson r	0.073	0.109	0.193**	0.096	0.138*	0.205**
	Sig.	0.206	0.059	.000	0.097	0.017	.000
N		300	300	300	300	300	300

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

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

IK = Imran Khan; SS = Shahbaz Sharif; BB = Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

The statistically processed Pearson correlation coefficients of SMD items and the 12 Trustworthiness items indicate a clear pattern: all the items of Imran Khan's trustworthiness are correlated positively and statistically significant with all the 6 items of SMD at $p < .001$ with coefficient ranging from $r = .250$ to $r = .371$. This means that as more people increased their

dependency on social media, their level of perceived trustworthiness of Imran Khan also increased. The entirety of Shahbaz Sharif's trustworthiness items (T1(SS)–T4(SS)) has mostly moderate yet significant correlations suggesting moderate dependency-based credibility attribution. Items in Bilawal Bhutto's section demonstrate the weakest and most

diverse pattern: T1(BB) is not significant at all in relation to all the SMD items, suggesting that the social media dependency pattern does not

consistently predict Bilawal Bhutto's perceived sense of honesty. The differentiated patterns support Hypothesis H2.

Table 5.5: *Correlation between SMD and Expertise of Political Leaders*

Variable	Statistic	SMD1	SMD2	SMD3	SMD4	SMD5	SMD6
E1(IK)	Pearson r	0.346**	0.334**	0.329**	0.339**	0.364**	0.318**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
E1(SS)	Pearson r	0.157**	0.201**	0.184**	0.149**	0.178**	0.175**
	Sig.	0.006	.000	0.001	0.010	0.002	0.002
E1(BB)	Pearson r	0.129*	0.133*	0.224**	0.156**	0.187**	0.203**
	Sig.	0.025	0.022	.000	0.007	0.001	.000
E2(IK)	Pearson r	0.277**	0.312**	0.263**	0.252**	0.327**	0.311**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
E2(SS)	Pearson r	0.147*	0.267**	0.202**	0.188**	0.191**	0.208**
	Sig.	0.011	.000	.000	0.001	.000	.000
E2(BB)	Pearson r	0.078	0.152**	0.192**	0.075	0.173**	0.183**
	Sig.	0.178	0.009	.000	0.193	0.003	0.002
E3(IK)	Pearson r	0.312**	0.313**	0.289**	0.278**	0.324**	0.313**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
E3(SS)	Pearson r	0.199**	0.313**	0.278**	0.245**	0.210**	0.227**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
E3(BB)	Pearson r	0.176**	0.292**	0.223**	0.196**	0.182**	0.165**
	Sig.	0.002	.000	.000	.000	0.002	0.004
E4(IK)	Pearson r	0.366**	0.322**	0.326**	0.269**	0.341**	0.331**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
E4(SS)	Pearson r	0.182**	0.263**	0.252**	0.196**	0.256**	0.279**
	Sig.	0.002	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
E4(BB)	Pearson r	0.101	0.141*	0.145*	0.053	0.145*	0.173**
	Sig.	0.080	0.015	0.012	0.356	0.012	0.003
N		300	300	300	300	300	300

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

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5.5 shows the correlation of each item on the SMD with the 12 Expertise items. Overall, the four Imran Khan expertise items (E1(IK) to E4(IK)) are found to have positively significant relationships with all six SMD items (ranging as high as .366 to .268) at $p < .001$, suggesting a

constant positive correlation between increased social media dependency and increased perception of Imran Khan's governance competence. The relationships between Shahbaz Sharif's expertise items (E1(SS)–E4(SS)) and most of the SMDs are of positive moderate order with

significant results. Bilawal Bhutto's expertise items showed the weakest associations, with

E2(BB) and E4(BB) showing non-significant results for several SMD items.

Table 5.6: *Correlation between SMD and Reliability of Political Leaders*

Variable	Statistic	SMD1	SMD2	SMD3	SMD4	SMD5	SMD6
R1(IK)	Pearson r	0.377**	0.367**	0.404**	0.315**	0.361**	0.350**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
R1(SS)	Pearson r	0.159**	0.242**	0.259**	0.185**	0.254**	0.199**
	Sig.	0.006	.000	.000	0.001	.000	.000
R1(BB)	Pearson r	0.141*	0.188**	0.199**	0.144*	0.210**	0.116*
	Sig.	0.015	0.001	.000	0.013	.000	0.044
R2(IK)	Pearson r	0.307**	0.289**	0.303**	0.298**	0.331**	0.354**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
R2(SS)	Pearson r	0.141*	0.188**	0.138*	0.160**	0.192**	0.189**
	Sig.	0.014	0.001	0.017	0.005	.000	0.001
R2(BB)	Pearson r	0.128*	0.095	0.122*	0.095	0.146*	0.153**
	Sig.	0.027	0.099	0.034	0.099	0.011	0.008
R3(IK)	Pearson r	0.349**	0.240**	0.300**	0.270**	0.273**	0.254**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
R3(SS)	Pearson r	0.263**	0.297**	0.271**	0.276**	0.236**	0.126*
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	0.030
R3(BB)	Pearson r	0.237**	0.208**	0.234**	0.229**	0.181**	0.160**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	0.002	0.006
R4(IK)	Pearson r	0.306**	0.309**	0.274**	0.273**	0.301**	0.338**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
R4(SS)	Pearson r	0.143*	0.164**	0.150**	0.153**	0.144*	0.138*
	Sig.	0.013	0.004	0.009	0.008	0.012	0.017
R4(BB)	Pearson r	0.084	0.075	0.151**	0.081	0.067	0.101
	Sig.	0.145	0.194	0.009	0.163	0.248	0.082
N		300	300	300	300	300	300

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

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5.6 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient values of the SMD items with the 12 Reliability items measuring respondents' perceptions of consistency, dependability and follow-through. The reliability items included communicative consistency items which showed positive correlations with the communicative

items of the SMD. Imran Khan's R1(IK) returned the highest single correlation in the reliability dimension ($r = .404$, SMD3, $p < .001$). For Bilawal Bhutto, R4(BB) showed non-significant associations with four of six SMD items, indicating the weakest behavioural reliability perception across all three leaders.

Table 5.7: *Correlation between SMD and Influence of Social Media Campaign Features (ISMC)*

Variable	Statistic	SMD1	SMD2	SMD3	SMD4	SMD5	SMD6
ISMC1	Pearson r	0.480**	0.587**	0.502**	0.529**	0.503**	0.471**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
ISMC2	Pearson r	0.490**	0.604**	0.547**	0.486**	0.529**	0.447**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
ISMC3	Pearson r	0.341**	0.435**	0.387**	0.359**	0.388**	0.372**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
ISMC4	Pearson r	0.415**	0.517**	0.487**	0.459**	0.466**	0.434**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
ISMC5	Pearson r	0.433**	0.511**	0.475**	0.472**	0.460**	0.376**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N		300	300	300	300	300	300

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

Data are provided in Table 5.7 as Pearson correlation indexes between items of SMD and ISMC on the perceived effect of campaign features on students' political credibility judgments. What emerges from the ISMC results are uniformly high and significant positive correlations for all 30 relationships ($p < .001$)? The biggest correlations occurred between ISMC2 (live sessions and direct

interaction) with SMD2 ($r = .604$, $p < .001$), and between ISMC1 (visual content) and SMD2 ($r = .587$, $p < .001$). The results suggest that those with committed high social media-based political information are much more likely to believe the features of the political campaigns are credible, especially interactive and visual elements, supporting Hypothesis H5.

Table 5.8: *Correlation between SMD and Overall Impact (OI)*

Variable	Statistic	SMD1	SMD2	SMD3	SMD4	SMD5	SMD6
OI1	Pearson r	0.457**	0.412**	0.427**	0.416**	0.421**	0.393**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
OI2	Pearson r	0.325**	0.341**	0.358**	0.355**	0.365**	0.372**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
OI3	Pearson r	0.410**	0.424**	0.385**	0.381**	0.432**	0.359**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
OI4	Pearson r	0.343**	0.384**	0.368**	0.357**	0.395**	0.334**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
OI5	Pearson r	0.412**	0.455**	0.388**	0.420**	0.439**	0.342**
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N		300	300	300	300	300	300

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

Table 5.8 shows the relationships between social media items and Overall Impact (OI) items for

measuring the aggregate effect of political campaigns on student political perceptions. That

all five OI items showed similar and significant links between social media dependency and students' judgments of political leadership in the age of social media supports the view that social media dependency is a meaningful and robust predictor of evaluative judgments of political leadership, supporting Hypothesis H6.

6. Discussion

H1: Social media dependency and perceived credibility of political leaders are significantly correlated.

The first hypothesis based on the basic idea underlying MDT predicted that social media's perceived credibility toward political leaders would be greater for those students who were more dependent on social media. The Pearson correlation analysis shows correlations between the SMDs and the composite items of the credibility items within all three leaders and dimensions, supporting H1. SMD1, SMD2, and SMD5 showed positive associations across all leaders. The items reflecting active dependency (SMD3, I depend on social media to understand the positions of political leaders; and SMD4, I often follow updates from political leaders' official accounts) had more associations whereas items reflecting passive dependency (SMD6) did not have. This result corroborates the findings of Kim, Chen, and Gil de Zúñiga (2020), who concluded that there was a systematic difference between the receptivity to political credibility cues for socially media-dependent vs. non-social media-dependent university students. Hypothesis 1 is supported.

H2: Higher social media dependency is associated with higher perceived trustworthiness.

Cognitions of Imran Khan's perceived trustworthiness showed the most consistent and widespread positive relationship with SMD items, especially cognition about his information delivery via social media (T2(IK)) or his perceived sincerity in dealing with public concerns (T4(IK)). This corroborates Alam et al.'s (2025) result of the highest credibility score ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.8$), and the lowest standard deviation meaning that

students recorded the most agreement with the level of sincerity and authenticity with PTI. More varied trustworthiness associations for Nawaz Sharif were generated by SMD items, consistent with evidence that Pakistani students' credibility evaluations drop significantly when they encounter association with leaders who suggest concerns regarding institutional integrity (Bashir et al., 2022). Weakest associations were seen around Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, which is in line with his comparatively limited social media efforts (Alam et al., 2025; Intyaswati et al., 2021). Hypothesis 2 is supported.

H3: Higher social media dependency is associated with higher perceived expertise.

Metzger & Flanagin (2015) and Shami et al. (2019) present the cognitive component of source credibility as reflecting perceptions of knowledge, competence and experience. Among the three, Nawaz Sharif (E(NS)) showed the strongest and most consistent relationships between expertise — especially E3(SS) (r up to .313, $p < .001$) and E4(SS) (r up to .279, $p < .001$) — and SMD items, coherent with PML-N's explicitly governance-centred digital communication strategy (Haider & Mubarik, 2024). Bilawal Bhutto's expertise associations were weakest. Hypothesis 3 is partially supported: the expertise-SMD relationship is strongest for Shahbaz Sharif's governance content and more variable for the other two leaders.

H4: Higher social media dependency is associated with higher perceived reliability.

Reliability — the behavioral dimension of credibility, i.e., consistency, dependability and follow-through on what is communicated — proved the most contextually variable dimension. The reliability items included communicative consistency items which showed positive correlations with the communicative items of the SMD and Imran Khan scored positive on these items (R1(IK): $r = .404$, SMD3, $p < .001$). But scores for measures relating to alignment of communication and action — R4(IK) — had

lower associations, reflecting contradictions between PTI's rhetorical consistency and governance outcomes during Imran Khan's tenure. Partial support for Hypothesis 4: the SMD–reliability relationship is positive, though behavioural reliability is more variable than communicative reliability across all three leaders.

H5: Social media dependency has a significant positive relationship with perceived influence of social media campaign features.

The fifth hypothesis further posited that when students were more dependent on social media, they would be more likely to believe that the specific features of political campaigns on social media — like visual content, live sessions, follower counts, engagement metrics, and verification status — increase political credibility. Results from Pearson correlation analysis of items on SMD with ISMC indicated there were uniformly positive estimates (all $p < .001$). The biggest correlations occurred between ISMC2 (live sessions) with SMD2 ($r = .604$) and ISMC1 (visual content) with SMD2 ($r = .587$). The results suggest that students with high social media-based political information are much more likely to believe campaign features are credible. Hypothesis 5 is supported.

H6: Social media dependency has a significant positive relationship with overall impact of social media campaigns.

The sixth hypothesis suggested that higher social media dependence would produce greater overall impact of the social media campaigns on the political perceptions of the students. The Pearson correlations in Table 5.8 showed positive and significant relationships between SMD items and OI items, with OI1 returning $r = .457$ (SMD1, $p < .001$) as the strongest individual correlation in the OI block. This doesn't contradict the results of Shah et al. (2025) who identified that credibility perceptions were behaviorally and attitudinally salient among Pakistani university students, nor Salam et al. (2024) who noted that social media dependency amplifies political impact of digital campaign content among young audiences in

developing political contexts. Hypothesis 6 is supported.

6.1 Overall Pattern and Differential Credibility Across Leaders

In all Six hypotheses data manifested that social media dependency is contributing in a positive manner to perceived credibility, level features of campaign along with overall political impact among the University students of Pakistan. This confirms the MDT assertion that audiences with strong attachment to a medium are more open to the effects of the medium on their feelings and attitudes (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Media environment is a structural condition in which strong symmetry of dependency is formed, with 43.3% of respondents spending more than 4 hours a day on social media and 74% labelling the platform as their most credible source for political campaign information.

Such a pattern is quite similar to the heuristic credibility processing model by Appelman and Sundar (2016): dependency-embedded students use platform cues — follower counts, posting frequency, verification status, visual production quality — as rapid credibility proxies. These cues are most abundantly and consistently available for Imran Khan's social media output, explaining the consistently stronger SMD–credibility associations for him than for the other two leaders.

The comparative analysis of leader-specific effects shows that the credibility impacts from social media dependency are not consistent, but instead mediated by the communicative strategy, social media usage, and political narratives of the leaders involved. The dimension of trustworthiness is considered one of the most riveting effects of dependency in the case of Imran Khan, as this dimension had been linked with emotionally resonant and authenticity-emphasizing digital communication of PTI (Muzaffar et al., 2020; Sajid et al., 2024). In the case of Nawaz Sharif, dependency effects are mediated via expertise (tied to governance-centred messages of PML-N) and made less visible to appraise on trustworthiness and reliability measures. The dependency effects are lowest for all facets of

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari; both the size and frequency of PPP's social media posting and the depth of its comments remain small, and he never asserted digital credibility in any substantive way (Alam et al., 2025).

7. Conclusion

The current study examined the perceived credibility of Imran Khan (PTI), Nawaz Sharif (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (PPP) on the three dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise and reliability and overall political impact of social media campaign features among the university students in Pakistan. By using the Pearson correlation analysis on 300 responses, it is proven that social media dependency is a positive and statistically significant predictor of all dependent constructs.

In the context of a very politically volatile Pakistan, where platforms have been restricted, there have been many leadership crises and partisan polarization is deep, the central finding has proved to be of great strength and suggests that the dependency mechanism which Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) discovered is fundamental. The comparative leader analysis brings out the fact that this mechanism is not consistent: it is most powerful for Imran Khan (dominant digital ecosystem), channelled through expertise for Nawaz Sharif (governance-focused communicator), and attenuated for Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (weakest and most inconsistent digital presence).

Some restrictions can be noted. First, the cross-sectional survey design does not allow causal inference. Second, the study only includes university students, limiting generalisability. Third, self-reported Likert data can be affected by response biases, or socially desirable responses in a politically charged environment. Fourth, political partisanship as a covariate is not controlled for in the current design.

Overall, this study contributes in the theoretical, empirical and practical areas. We claim that, in order to construct the theory as cross-contextually valid, the dependency-effect relationship of MDT can be extended to multi-leader political

communication in a social media context in the South Asian cultural setting. In practical terms, the results revealed that the more one is dependent on social media, the more likely one was to think that this social media was politically credible, despite the fact that the information they consumed was not necessarily balanced.

7.1 Key Findings

Key contributions to knowledge resulting from this study include the following:

- Social media dependency was a statistically significant positive predictor of perceived credibility of political leaders across all three leaders and all three credibility dimensions.
- The SMD-credibility relationship is the highest and most consistent for Imran Khan (PTI), who has digital dominance in the student population (67.3% follow him most actively).
- The strongest association with social media dependency across all three leaders is trustworthiness, while the strongest dimension varies by leader: trustworthiness for Imran Khan, expertise for Nawaz Sharif.
- The differential credibility profiles are empirically verifiable and consistent with independent national-level credibility assessments.
- Social media campaign features (ISMC) showed the highest correlation values in the entire study (up to $r = .604$, $p < .001$).
- Students' political perceptions are correlated positively with the Overall Impact (OI) of political campaigns across all SMD items.

8. Recommendations

The study design (correlational) should be increased to mediation and moderation. ISMC (Influence of Social Media Campaign Features) should be formally tested as a mediator between the dependency and credibility using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS or structural equation modelling to determine the indirect pathway by which dependency is supposed to influence the credibility. As a moderating variable, political partisanship needs to be introduced. Longitudinal panels of similar students over

electoral periods would provide a causal order and time stability to the found dependency-credibility effects.

The best ways to gain the confidence of the university student segment on social media is authenticity, direct communication and emotional bonding. The conclusion gives campaign strategists valuable actionable intelligence: If the usual "public has lost faith" in the credibility of parties like the PPP or PML-N, for example, then it suggests that those groups would be well served by a more responsive two-way campaign and an abundance of issue-oriented content over the broadcast campaign. PPP in particular will have to overcome the feeling of low perceptions of reliability, which is that "the line of action is consistent and the policy is followed-through" and that little of this behavioral credibility actually finds itself at the hands of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

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