

Digital Diplomacy and Youth Transition to Adulthood in Pakistan: A Secondary Analysis of Urban–Rural Disparities in the Age of Globalization

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Abstract

Pakistan's youth are facing the challenges of growing up in a world defined by globalization, swift urbanization, and a burgeoning digital landscape. This research provides an insight into the mediation of youth identity formation, political engagement, and urban–rural social dynamics through digital diplomacy platforms in Pakistan. The study is based on a systematic secondary data analysis of institutional reports, such as those from the World Bank and PTA, as well as peer-reviewed sociological literature (2015-2025) and comparative demographic research. The results show a long-standing digital divide: 85% of the urban population had access to the internet in 2023, compared with 42% in rural areas, directly linking unequal access to digital political participation. On the one hand, the city's young people actively build their identities through social media and engage in transnational politics; on the other, rural youth are structurally constrained to passively consume digital content. Digital diplomacy does not yield a uniform picture of Pakistan's future and creates divergent pathways to adulthood that accentuate socioeconomic inequalities. The study suggests a multi-level theory about the relationship between the macro level of globalization, the meso level of institutional access, and the micro level of identity negotiation. The policy implications of bridging the digital divide and promoting inclusive youth engagement are discussed.

Keywords: Youth Transition, Adulthood, Digital Diplomacy, Social Media, Political Participation, Digital Divide

Introduction

Global Environment: Globalization and World Politics

The twenty-first century has witnessed a ubiquity of inter-connectivity between countries, their economies and their societies which has revolutionized world politics (Baylis et al., 2020). Globalization, which is characterized by increased flows of capital, information, labor and ideas across national borders, has upset traditional conceptions of state-centric international relations (Rosenau, 2006). The change has added new aspects to classical diplomacy, especially with the use of digital technologies which allow for instant communication at a trans-geographic and trans-political level (Nye, 2008). Globalization is not only influencing the behavior of state actors and international institutions, it has also been influencing the perception of citizenship, political involvement and national identity of people, in particular young people, in a profound way (Held and McGrew, 2007).

National Environment: Urbanization and Social Transformation in Pakistan

Pakistan, having a population of over 230 million, is one of the fastest urbanizing countries in the world, with the urbanization rate increasing from 32 percent in 2000 to about 37 percent in 2023 (World Bank, 2024). The economic inequalities, decreasing agricultural opportunities, and the clustering of educational and employment opportunities in cities have contributed to an increasing rural to urban migration (Hassan, 2018). Urbanization is not only a geographical process but a paradigm shift in social relations, cultural life and pattern of political participation in the context of Pakistan (Abbasi et al., 2024). Urban areas, especially Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, have become spaces for political discussion, cultural expression and international connections, but there are limited economic opportunities in rural areas and their political voice has been lost (Haynes et al., 2023).

Youthful Demographic: Transition to Adulthood in Pakistan

According to the United Nations (2023), Pakistan's young population (15-29) accounts for about 27 percent of the total population, and is among the largest youth groups worldwide. This study defines youth operationally as a period from 18 to 28 years of age, which encompasses the age range of emerging adulthood (18-25) as defined by Arnett (2000) and is extended slightly to include the age range of delayed adulthood transitions which are documented in the Pakistani context (Shah, 2025). The definition is deliberately restricted to UN's definition of a long transition (15-29) and expanded from Arnett's clinical definition, given the socioeconomic conditions of extended transition in Pakistan. In Pakistan, cultural norms and expectations regarding family, social roles and religious identity complicate this process of emerging adulthood, which involves exploring identity, instability, self-focus and feeling in-between, further adding to the complexity in maneuvering emerging adulthood (Kaniusonyte and Zukauskiene, 2018).

Digital Diplomacy: A New Paradigm of Political Interaction

Today, digital diplomacy, defined as the use of the internet and social media as tools for diplomatic purposes and for communicating political messages, is a strong element in international relations (Copeland, 2009). Digital diplomacy opens up the dialogue of politics and allows not only the political actors in the traditional sense, but also non-state organizations, civil society groups and individual citizens to engage in transnational political discourse (Manor, 2019). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are the main sites where political narratives are developed, challenged, and disseminated, especially among young people (Khan, 2021). Digital diplomacy has helped Pakistani youth in connecting with political movements outside Pakistan, joining them as a part of the movement and expressing their grievances and aspirations which are often ignored by conventional media (Ashraf, 2022).

Problem Statement

While there is considerable literature on urbanization in Pakistan and on youth political participation as well as on digital diplomacy as a individual issue, few studies have explored the interaction between these three elements of young people's lives as they navigate a period of transition to adulthood in a context of simultaneous globalization, urbanization and digital connectivity. This interaction between such processes gives rise to unique social dynamics, which are worthy of research, especially in relation to youth from urban and rural backgrounds, their interplay, identity formation, political resources and perspectives, and aspirations for the future. This research aims to fill this void by examining how digital diplomacy mediates Pakistani youth's transition to adulthood, specifically through urban-rural differences in platform use, identity effects, and the resulting policy implications.

Significance of Study

The present study has significantly contributed in three ways. Theoretically, a multi-layer model combining the theories of globalization, urbanization and digital communication is constructed to analyze urban-rural digital divide within the Pakistani youth. Secondly, the empirical evidence presented in this research addresses the significant structural difference in digital accessibility and political participation in urban and rural areas, also discussing the digital divide within Pakistani context as well as the Global South.. Last but not the least, the study has provided recommendation for policy makers, educators, and other youth-serving organizations to develop more successful civic education, digital literacy, and youth engagement initiatives.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and compare the digital platforms used by Pakistani youth (18 - 28) in rural and urban areas from 2018 to 2023.
2. To analyze the effects of global political processes through digital platforms on family relations, and identity formation of Pakistani youth.
3. To suggest ways for policy makers, civil society and educators to reduce the digital divide and support healthy youth development in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Globalization and World Politics

Globalization is one of the key characteristics of modern world politics and has transformed international relations and the nature of state sovereignty (Baylis et al., 2020). The classical international relations theory, which is based on realism and neorealism, viewed world politics as a system of sovereign states in anarchy (Waltz, 1979). The model has been challenged by globalization, which allows non-state actors, such as multinational corporations, international organizations, transnational social movements, and individual citizens, to have a much broader impact on political outcomes (Held and McGrew, 2007). Globalization has developed in various aspects: economic globalization, cultural globalization, political globalization, and ideological globalization (Rosenau, 2006).

But there is still disagreement regarding the way these globalizing forces work at the grassroots. Held and McGrew (2007) highlight the democratizing power of transnational flows, whereas Stiglitz (2010) suggests that for countries such as Pakistan, there has been selective integration into global markets, which has increased inequality. This tension, between globalization as opportunity and globalization as a structural constraint, is at the heart of the

Pakistani youth's experience of globalization, and one that is often left unaddressed in the literature on digital diplomacy.

The effects of globalization have been ambivalent in the Global South, especially in South Asia (Haynes et al., 2023). Incorporation in the world markets has created economic opportunities for some, but has also brought about inequality, displacement of traditional livelihoods and new forms of economic vulnerability (Stiglitz, 2010). In the case of Pakistan, globalization has been characterized by partial integration into global economic systems, dependence on international financial institutions, and vulnerability to global economic shocks (Hussain, 2020).

Urbanization and Rural–Urban Dynamics in Pakistan

The urbanization process is one of the most important demographic shifts in South Asia, having a far-reaching impact on social organization, economic structure and political life (World Bank, 2024). In Pakistan, rural to urban migration is caused by the deterioration of agricultural sectors, lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, unequal distribution of educational facilities and economic activities in urban areas (Hassan, 2018). This has resulted in significant urban–rural divides in infrastructure, service provision, economic opportunities and political representation (Shah, 2025).

The material difference between the urban and rural is also a cultural and social difference in Pakistan. Major cities are the hubs of cultural innovation, global influence, and cosmopolitan identity formation, whereas rural areas maintain stronger connections to traditional cultural practices, religious conservatism, and local social structures (Abbasi et al., 2024). One of the key constraints of the current urbanization studies in Pakistan is the binary opposition between urban and rural. This dichotomy masks the situation of young people in secondary cities and peri-urban areas who are neither fully integrated into the metropolitan digital infrastructure nor are they

completely cut off from it (Hassan, 2018). The present study aims to partially fill the gap of lack of nationally representative longitudinal data on urban–rural digital engagement among youth.

Youth Identity Negotiation in Digital Spaces

Young people in the global south face the challenge of developing their identities in an unprecedented technological environment characterized by connectivity and exposure to a variety of, often conflicting, cultural influences (Boyd, 2014). Social media platforms are important spaces for identity construction, experimentation and performance, where young people can try out various identity positions and gain feedback from a variety of audiences (Livingstone, 2008). In Pakistan, youth is navigating a space between local culture and global norms, between traditional gender roles and new opportunities for self-expression (Khan, 2021) through digital platforms.

Studies on the youth in Pakistan showed that the youth develop hybrid identities, which include elements of traditional Pakistani culture, Islamic values, global consumer culture and contemporary social movements. Language is an integral part of this process and youth code switch between Urdu, English and regional languages based on context, audience and communicative purpose. Digital platforms amplify these processes, enabling youth to access larger audiences, get real-time feedback and engage in geographically dispersed communities of practice. But identity negotiation studies in Pakistan focused on the urban, educated and economically privileged young people (Khan, 2021; Boyd, 2014), while the experiences of less formally educated and economically marginalized youth in rural areas remain under-theorized. Moreover, the literature focused mainly on the liberating and experimental aspects of digital platforms, and has underdeveloped the ways in which the expression of identity is limited by surveillance, censorship, and social pressure in these spaces, even though the latter has been more extensively discussed in the literature on political engagement than in the field of identity studies.

Digital Diplomacy and Youth Political Engagement

Digital diplomacy has transformed political communication and diplomacy and opened up new opportunities for citizens to engage in political processes (Copeland, 2009). Governments, civil society groups and individual activists have been able to use social media to engage in public diplomacy, agenda setting and mobilizing political action (Manor, 2019). Digital diplomacy has been used in South Asia to promote youth engagement on various topics such as climate change, gender justice, religious tolerance, and democratic governance (Social Media and Youth Activism in South Asia, 2024).

Digital diplomacy in Pakistan has both potentialities and challenges. Social media has provided young Pakistanis the opportunity to engage in transnational politics, connect with international activist communities, and voice political demands that challenge official narratives (Abbasi et al., 2024). However, digital platforms also have been a source of intense political polarization, misinformation and government surveillance, posing serious challenges for young political activists (Exploring the Extent of Digitalisation and Digital Diplomacy in Pakistan Embassies, 2022). Although valuable, these studies have a methodological limitation in that the majority are based on content analysis of social media or urban focus groups, and thus the results are representative of digitally active, urban populations. The systematic marginalization of rural youth from digital political spaces is under-theorized in Pakistan. The present study tries to contribute towards bridging this gap.

Emerging Adulthood and Transition to Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a transitional period between adolescence and adulthood with the following characteristics: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and feeling “in-between” (Arnett, 2000). This time of life (usually ages 18–25) is a time of experimentation in education, career, relationships, and self-identity (Arnett, 2007). However, this phase of development is not universal, but more evident in industrialized countries, where educational systems are longer and families are formed later in life. Transitions to adulthood in developing countries are usually influenced by economic necessity and cultural norms (Schulenberg et al., 2012).

The process of transition to adulthood in Pakistan is multifaceted, influenced by the lack of financial security, employment opportunities, family responsibilities, gender roles, and religious identity formation (Shah, 2025). “Waithood” is a phenomenon that has been recognized as a key characteristic of youth life in South Asia, especially among the economically disadvantaged (Shah, 2025). This transition has new parameters with the advent of digital connectivity, which has created new pathways to adulthood as well as new global standards and expectations that may be impossible within local realities.

Table 1

Comparative dimensions of emerging adulthood across developed and developing country contexts.

Adapted from Arnett (2007) and Schulenberg et al. (2012).

Dimension	Developed Countries	Developing Countries (Pakistan)
Age of Emerging Adulthood	18–25 years	Variable; often compressed or extended

Primary Transition Markers	Educational completion, career establishment, residential independence	Marriage, family formation, economic stability
Role of Education	Extended tertiary education; identity exploration encouraged	Limited access; education viewed as pathway to employment
Family Expectations	Emphasis on individual autonomy	Strong emphasis on family obligations and collective welfare
Gender Dynamics	Increasing gender equality in transition pathways	Significant gender disparities; different expectations for men and women
Digital Access	Ubiquitous; integrated into all life domains	Unequal; concentrated in urban areas and among privileged populations
Political Engagement	Established democratic institutions; multiple channels for participation	Weak institutions; limited formal channels; digital activism as alternative
Economic Context	Relative stability; established job markets	Economic uncertainty; informal employment; limited opportunities

Taken together, it can be argued that there is always a tension, largely under-examined, in which digital technologies can be considered tools of political empowerment (Manor, 2019; Copeland, 2009) while at the same time they are understood as vehicles of inequality and surveillance (Castells, 2015; Abbasi et al., 2024). In the Pakistani context, this tension corresponds

to the urban–rural dichotomy, where many forms of construction of a cosmopolitan identity for the young, enabled by the same media, are also sources of aspiration and frustration for the rural youth who have less access to these media. The two populations are treated separately, with existing scholarship. The contribution of this study is to analyze them relationally – as part of the same national system – and to explore how digital diplomacy not only serves as a means of political engagement, but also plays a role in the wider developmental transition to adulthood, which has not yet been explicitly made in the literature.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study is conducted by using a systematic secondary data analysis in which published literature, institutional reports, and publicly available datasets are analyzed to explore the nexus of digital diplomacy, urbanization, and transition of youth to adulthood in Pakistan. As this is a secondary data study, the literature reviewed represents a purposively sampled body of work within the 2015 to 2025 window, not an exhaustive census of all publications. This study uses an integrated method of macro-level statistical patterns and case-based qualitative evidence to build an analytical picture of the phenomenon in a coherent manner without the constraints of small-scale primary data collection. The research is interpretive and analytical in nature – it is designed to uncover patterns, relationships and theoretical connections from different sets of data.

Literature Search Protocol

Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and Web of Science were used to conduct a systematic search. The search terms used were combinations of: 'digital diplomacy Pakistan', 'youth political participation Pakistan', 'urban-rural digital divide Pakistan', 'emerging adulthood South Asia', 'social media youth identity Pakistan', and 'globalization Pakistan youth'. Sources were included

for analysis after applying the inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed publication from 2015 to 2025, studied Pakistan or similar South Asian settings, and related to at least two of the core variables of the study. This time frame applies to the literature search. The quantitative institutional data in Figure 1 and Objective 1 draws on Pakistan Telecommunication Authority records, which are only consistently available for 2018 to 2023. Other sources of quantitative data, such as institutional reports, originated from the World Bank, the United Nations, the PTA and the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and have been used separately.

Sources of Data and Selection Criteria

The data sources include reports from international organizations (World Bank, United Nations, UNICEF), national statistical organizations (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority), and peer-reviewed academic studies from 2015 to 2025. Selected studies and reports were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) focus on Pakistan youth groups; (2) analysis of digital connectivity, social media use or digital diplomacy; (3) analysis of urban–rural demographic change; and (4) analysis of social transition or political engagement. Un-methodological sources or sources that could not be verified as a publication were not included.

Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic synthesis was applied in three phases and was carried out in line with the protocol developed by Thomas & Harden (2008). Stage 1 involved quantitative extraction of internet penetration, demographic change and social media use data from institutional sources and tabulation to provide a structural baseline data. The qualitative data from literature in Stage 2 was coded line by line and initial codes were assigned under the three thematic areas of (i) identity negotiation (ii) Internet use and political participation (iii) Global politics and localized social

Effect. In Stage 3, codes were consolidated from each source and produced themes that are analytical in nature, higher order and crosscut through the findings of each study to a multi-level interpretive framework. There were documented and discussed instances where sources present conflicting findings instead of an artificial resolution.

Validity and Reliability

Triangulation was used in this secondary research to ensure the validity of the data collected from the several data sources. Potential bias is countered by using internal cross-analysis, comparing institutional reports with statistical data with qualitative evidence from academic literature. The systematic review process is documented and clearly stated with source selection criteria, ensuring reliability.

Ethical Considerations

This study used only publicly available secondary data and published literature, did not involve human subjects and did not require institutional review board (IRB) approval. Ethical obligations were fulfilled by accurately representing the work of original authors, by strictly using the citation method to avoid plagiarism, and by objectively interpreting the political and social issues that were controversial.

Results

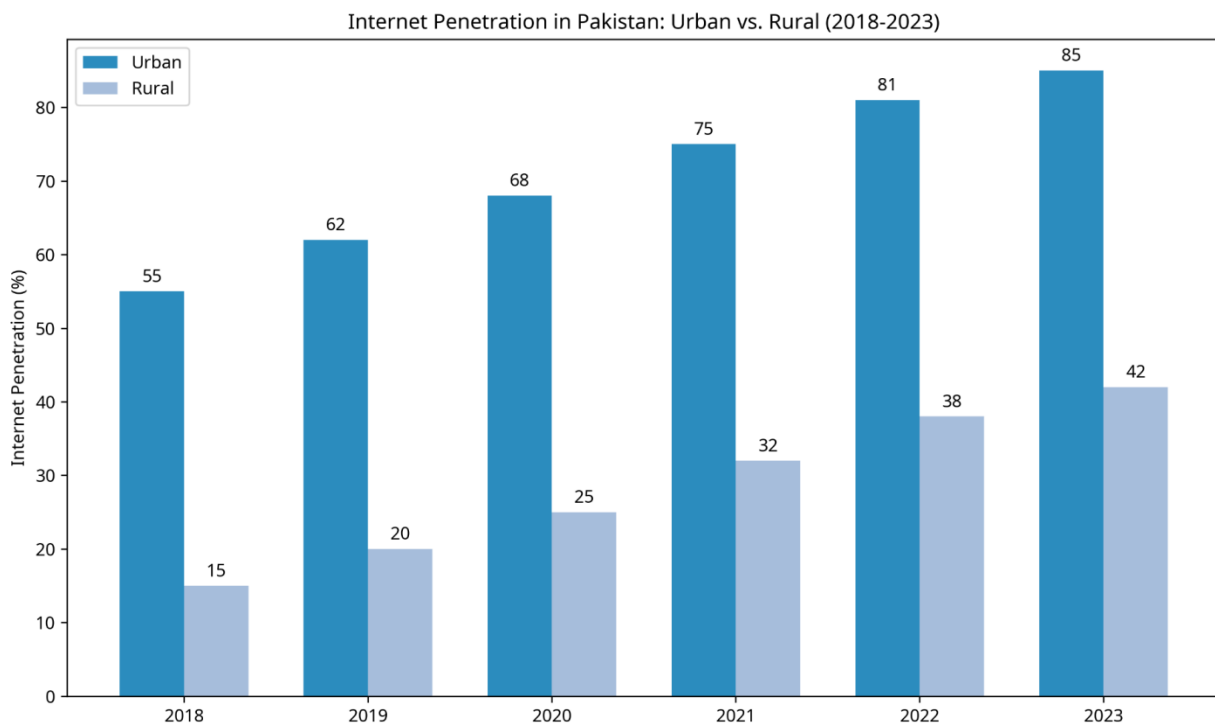
Population Change and Internet Connectivity

A detailed analysis of the data collected from Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and data from the World Bank shows that Pakistan has changed significantly in terms of its population and internet connectivity. Younger people aged 18-28 years have become the main adopters of the digital. Overall there has been a lot of growth in Internet penetration but a clear divide is still seen between the urban and rural Internet users.

By 2023, urban internet penetration is around 85 per cent, while rural areas are at 42 per cent as shown in Figure 1. This structural inequality is one of the major factors that influence participation in digital diplomacy – political discussion and digital identity negotiation is focused in urban areas, and rural young people remain largely marginalised from these areas.

Figure 1

Internet Penetration in Pakistan: Urban vs. Rural (2018–2023). Source: Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (2023) as cited in World Bank (2024).



Internet Use and Political Participation

The results of a recent sociological study showed that social media (mainly Facebook, WhatsApp, and X/Twitter) is the main space for youth political engagement in Pakistan. Analyses of digital campaigns of political activism reveal that urban youth play a disproportionately large role in the political debate on the internet, using social media to spread information, participate in ideological debates and to mobilize transnational solidarity movements. Digital literacy and

infrastructure, however, remain a major hurdle for rural youth, who are more likely to be passive consumers of digital political information.

Identity Negotiation and the Transition to Adulthood

A review of the literature in the Pakistani context reveals that digital diplomacy spaces are an important arena to negotiate the transition to adulthood. The use of digital media to communicate international political discourses or different cultural values speeds up the path of finding new positions of identity. In the case of young people in cities, this usually involves the fusion of local and cosmopolitan dreams. But for rural youth, the literature suggests that encounters with the digital can often deepen the rifts that exist between family values and individualistic modernity, and can complicate the path to adulthood.

Global Politics and Localized Social Effects

Analysis of secondary data shows that there are obvious connections between the global political and the local social. Local actors are becoming involved in transnational movements, as global movements, like climate action and gender equality, are transmitted to the Pakistani youth via digital means in a flash. This process of localization is transforming the way that domestic political debates and community-level social relations are carried out. Meanwhile, the literature also registers negative affects such as the spread of international models of political polarization and the exacerbation of sectarian polarization within local actors.

Discussion

Overall, the secondary data synthesis strongly supports the argument that digital diplomacy is a crucial mediator between international political processes and domestic social outcomes with regard to Pakistani youth transition to adulthood. Digital platforms do not lead to uniform results in every place: the interactions are very differentiated and depend on the urban or rural

environment and the availability of digital infrastructure. Global forces are not necessarily experienced the same way in digital spaces, which filter, reframe and redistribute them in varying ways across urban and rural settings, creating different pathways to identity formation and civic involvement.

Reporting from institutions and literature in the academic world combine to create a comprehensive picture of stratified digital activity in Pakistan. The difference in internet penetration between urban and rural areas (85% to 42%, in PTA 2023) is directly correlated with the amount and type of political participation found in the sociological literature. Youth in urban areas have a strong ability to actively build their identities through digital media and to engage with politics, whereas those in rural areas are structurally constrained in their engagement and access to broader opportunities. This trend clearly supports Castells' (2015) theory that digital networks do not erase social inequalities, but rather are the medium that reinforces them, and reinforces Loader and Mercea's (2011) finding that digital political participation is not only a matter of access to technology, but also a matter of social and educational capital.

This finding calls into question simplistic understandings of globalization as a homogenizing phenomenon. The secondary sources show that the digital divide plays an active role in changing the way of transitioning to adulthood, thereby establishing parallel tracks of social development. Rural youth are increasingly left out of mainstream political processes and more and more excluded from political participation, with urban youth being integrated into the global political arena, further widening existing socioeconomic inequalities in the name of digital expansion and modernization.

The synthesis results build on digital divide scholarship from around the world. Theories of the network society, as theorized by Castells (2015) and Loader and Mercea (2011) were

dominated by a Western perspective, but can be applied to the Global South with some adaptations. However, the Pakistani case study shows that the digital divide is not just about technology, but also about sociocultural factors because rural youth who have access to digital media may not have the digital literacy and community reinforcement to transition from passive consumption to active political involvement, which is not adequately emphasized in Papacharissi (2010). This is more in line with Stiglitz's (2010) structural critique of the unequal distribution of the benefits of globalization. Moreover, the findings align with Shah's (2025) concept of “waithood” which is the deferment of full adulthood under the pressure of the economic condition and digital exclusion is a new face of this waithood in the context of Pakistan.

Conclusion

This study has explored how the dynamics of digital diplomacy, youth transition to adulthood, urbanization and globalization are interlinked and interconnected, using systematic synthesis of secondary sources such as academic literature, policy documents and empirical research. This synthesis reveals digital diplomacy as a very important and complex filter, through which the processes of world politics create local social impacts, resulting in new ways of interaction and exchange. Through this mediation, the youth have been able to participate in transnational politics, creating cross-border solidarity and awareness of global issues, but also imposing global norms on local identities in a subtle way that influences values, behavior and aspirations.

The analysis showed that the passage to adulthood in Pakistan is a very unequal one, with some great differences between the urban and rural worlds, in a world that is more interconnected than ever with unequal resources and opportunities. The digital infrastructure in urban areas, which provides constant connectivity, access to multiple sources of information and real-time access to

ideas and networks globally, affords opportunities for identity exploration, civic involvement and political participation for urban youth that are far greater. Meanwhile, rural youth still have to deal with a combination of institutional barriers – limited connectivity, low digital skills and lack of infrastructure – which block their access to such pathways. Digital connectivity is not a magic bullet; it can exacerbate inequalities and introduce an additional layer of marginalization for those already on the margins, worsen gaps in knowledge, political engagement and personal growth.

The findings of this research have significant implications for policy making and academic research in digital studies, youth development, and globalization. The results underline the need for specific infrastructural investments, such as the need to expand broadband coverage and make technology more accessible, as well as comprehensive digital literacy programs, specifically designed to minimize existing urban-rural disparities in Pakistan. Such strategic integration can help policymakers create a more inclusive framework of digital diplomacy that transcends borders and enables equal participation. In the end, this would help to ensure more equitable transitions to adulthood for the young citizens of Pakistan, and that the gains of globalization are distributed widely, and not just among the urban elite, which would help to bring national cohesion, to lessen regional disparities, and to allow Pakistan's young citizens to realize their potential in a globalized world.

Future Directions

Longitudinal secondary analysis is an important next step, and will allow researchers to see how new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and the spread of 5G, affect youth political participation in various parts of the world.

Local research on policies is also crucial to determine if government policies are succeeding in closing the urban-rural divide in information and communication technologies and fostering more balanced and inclusive development.

Another important constraint of this study should be noted here: Secondary data analysis is not able to provide a lived qualitative experience of the individual youth who go through these transitions. The statistical trends revealed here need to be confirmed with ethnographic data which focuses on the voice of rural youth in particular. Another area for further research is the platform-specific aspects of the dynamics that yield distinct forms of political engagement, which are not always differentiated in the literature.

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