



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Comparing Social Media Political Activism in Hong Kong and Islamabad from the perspective of Political Participation Theory**

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**ABSTRACT**

Hong Kong and Pakistan have the similarity of British colonial tradition of democracy, political activism is considered as manifestation of democratic value. Pakistan's capital Islamabad and China's special administrative region (SAR) Hong Kong observed this political expression of sit-ins in 2014 and 2015 by pro-democracy protesters of Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and *Pakistan Tehrek-e-Insaf* (Pakistan Movement for Justice, political party). This study aims to analyse the Facebook and Twitter pages of both movements. Twenty pages selected from frequently reported activism and sit-ins during 2014 to 2015 in the months of October 1<sup>st</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> March. Data collected through well-established coding sheet for content analysis to compare posts/tweets, likes/favourites, share/re-tweets and comments/conversation. Social participatory theory is the theoretical foundation of this study. The findings of the study revealed that protesters in Hong Kong are much frequently using pro-democracy propositions to criticise their government in comparison of Pakistani activists. Political mobilisation and activism of both countries are significantly dependent on FB and Twitter whereas the political activists from Pakistan significantly shared and expressed their thought during their sit-in as compare to the activists of Hong Kong.

**Introduction**

Political activism in physical and digital space is commonly emerging in recent years. Social media spaces are used as an instrument of political activism and young people are extensively expressing their political expression through

activism. Social media have become a tool by the political activists, the significant reason is common people can contribute in political activities and movements to attain political objectives. Social media pages and various other mediums have become a part of political activities in the world. The democratic and electoral reforms movements use social networking sites as an instrument and Facebook and twitter emerged as an alternative media for dissemination of political agenda. It is the interests of political and communication scholars to study this phenomena that how activists and political movements engage masses in political process adopting new trends in information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs observed as possible supporting platform for the political activists to mobilise the large number of protesters from their houses to on the roads in Special Administrative Region of China (SAR) Hong Kong and in the capital of Pakistan, Islamabad.

Pro-democracy protesters intended to win the public support through long sit-ins for their political demands in Islamabad, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay cities. Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) and Pakistan are having varied social, cultural and economic features but a similar feature that both remained colonies of England. Hong Kong is the centre of services economy and financial activities whereas Pakistan is relying on mix economic model where significant population of the country is dependent on agriculture and industry. Advent of ICTs have significantly influenced the society of Hong Kong. In the global communication infrastructure, Hong Kong has pivotal significance because of its trading and economic power. Hung (2016) argues that in the wakeup of pro-democracy protest in 2015, the significance of Hong Kong cannot *undermine* because of its significance as global financial center. This significance will be maintained as Asia-Pacific financial and mainland China's economic center and it will sustain because Chinese government will support it, extraordinary sophistication in financial and communication, no substitute center that can emerge it as Asia-Pacific leader. In comparison, Pakistan couldn't establish any financial center that may compatible to Hong Kong. However, changing political landscape of the Pakistan and Hong Kong become the reason of political activism in Islamabad and Hong Kong. Two political groups PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) and Umbrella Movement are leading pro-democracy protesters for long sit-in in Islamabad and Hong Kong. In Pakistan, the head of the political party Imran Khan claimed the rigging in election and he did not admit the results of general elections 2013 and demanded transparent investigation of rigging in general election. PTI demanded resignations of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, establishment of Judicial Commission to inspect, transparent inquiries of electoral rigging, reforms in electoral system and elimination of controversial Election Commission (Samaa, TV, 2014 December 14). Several demonstrations and protests are conducted against Prime Minister, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Geo TV, 2014). Imran Khan (Chairman PTI) announced on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2014 that PTI would start movement for justice, electoral developments and initiate removal of government that formed by electoral rigging. This political march started from

Lahore (A city of Punjab) on August 14, 2014 and after a long march it reached in Islamabad, stayed there on long sit-in till 17 December, 2014 in Islamabad.

Similarly, demonstration was also started from Chinese University of Hong Kong on 22nd September with one day class strike. Hong Kong students group beside democratic members occupy Mong Kok (capital city of Hong Kong). Demonstrations are turned in to movement when police shoot on the pro-democracy protesters with force to disperse them. The activists use yellow colour umbrellas to protect themselves to protect from tear gas (Thomas, 2014).

This pro-democracy protesters call themselves the Umbrella Movement. It came into existence as a result of political activism. In September 2014 the students of Hong Kong began sit-ins and occupied the Mong Kok and Causeway Bay cities over 70 days. Activists use umbrellas for a sign of activism and protection from the tear gas from police. However, their activism named as Umbrella uprising or Umbrella Movement. The Mong Kok city activists end their protest on 25 December, 2015 and Causeway Bay city protest was finished on 14 December without any political special consideration (Applebaum, 2014). The People's Republic of China is governing under the two separate system of governance where the people of Hong Kong are having basic right of democracy and assembly. Pei (2016) argues that the basic laws of Hong Kong protects the status as special administrative region of China under *one country two system and capitalistic way of life* grant a *higher degree of autonomy* to the people of Hong Kong and it consists of independent legislative, executive and judicial powers for fifty years till 2047. However, Beijing exerts its indirect influence through loyalists that may influence the political sphere of Hong Kong.

Political consumption of social media in political activism is significant in the world and this consumption could observe in the sit-ins of Pakistan and Hong Kong. Social media emerged as an instrument of political activism and activists communicate their political program to the public. Political activists share their agenda, plan for their supporters and are interconnecting the opinion and political leaders. This study explores the participation and usage of social media for sit-ins. Social media is the virtual public space that provides an opportunity to a political leader/activist and his/her followers to participate in the political change following the idea of his political leaders for challenging of existing political form. Facebook and Twitter are social media tools that work without regulatory checks and participant are having enough opportunity to create their follower to launch their social or political agenda. In this study, Facebook and Twitter posts, tweets and content is analysed from the perspective of political participation theory. Kernetet., al. (2015) recognize five factor of political participation in emerging trends i.e. new media and classic forms of political engagements. They conducted nationwide survey with two set of samples to test the political participation theory. Their study take two factors i.e. exploratory and confirmatory. The five are comprising on traditional political participation, interpersonal political talk, voting, social media engagements and online information acquiring. The study

validates that all factors significantly related to political efficacy and Interest. However, traditional political participation negatively relates to political suspicion.

This study explores the handling and sharing of social media posts by pro-democracy protesters for opinion making, agenda sharing and activism for long time sit-ins in Islamabad (Pakistan) and Hong Kong (Causeway Bay cities and Mong Kok). This study also looks at the nature of political activism in both countries in different socio-economic setting and inspirations behind sit-in activism. This study provides the support for understanding the quantum of posts and Tweets of both cities activists in selected period of time, the significant issues highlighted and what is motive of using social media by the activists of the Islamabad and Hong Kong. Following are the objective of this study:

- a. To find on what issues the political activists disseminate the content on social media.
- b. To identify the magnitude of content on social platforms and observe nature of activism.
- c. To investigate significant technique of social networking platform by the political activists.
- d. To explore the issues/agenda highlighted on social networking sites by the political activist of both countries.

### **Literature Review**

Social media propose an opportunity for development of civilian interested by world-wide networks that are motivated to mobilizing support and public discourse in social activities. Social networks can be powerful tools in the hands of campaigners which tries to bring down authoritarian commands. Only, access to the internet and social networking sites are sufficient for democratization (Coleman, 2017, p.45). Social media sites have become an essential fragment of the lives of Internet users since social networking platforms permit the people to create online profiles, converse and share information with each other. Social media is becoming a bridge for the making of political discourse.

Abushouk (2016) argues that the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria happening due to decreasing in economic revenue, elevation of unemployment, decreasing in quality of life and conflict of interest in basic issues for social and political revolution. Social media networking sites might be most important reason among the other issues for the motive that the stimuli for demonstration against authoritarian law. Mass media tools has brought significant positive political amendment in the world. Political leaders use the numeral social media, mobile phones, smart Phones and computer applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media websites via internet for political

change. Social sites has acquired considerable significance by the political activist, which facilitated them to lead the social actions. Increasing information to voters for political participation is possible through social media. New political actors and new disputes, which declining the quality of politics are disseminated through electronic media. Karpf (2016) asserts that electronic media is like a bridge to circulation of political statistics but the gate keeping, agenda-setting, and framing continue question mark on conventional media. Facebook is a medium through individual's link with other individuals in today lives (Papic& Noonan, 2011). Internet and social media websites can store and transfer human information that develops the social relationships in public. Entire networks and web applications do not support the direct communication among people, while Facebook has some communication characteristics which are commonly used for message, comments, sharing calling and video calling (Trottier& Fuchs, 2013).

Mukhtar (2015) findsthat top 10 social media sites in which Facebook and Twitter are mostly used in the world. There are 1.35 billion active users of Facebook, while 900,000,000 monthly visitors globally. Facebook site is famous and widely used by more than 10 million Pakistanis. There are 304 million monthly active users of Twitter and 310,000,000 are estimated Monthly Visitors, while 2.5 million are users of Twitter in Pakistan. Hong Kong is the country where internet has fastest speeds in the world. The usage of smart phones in Hong Kong has highest rate in Asia. (63%) and (96%) smartphone customers use the Internet everyday via mobile in Hong Kong. Almost, 3.1 million people log on to Facebook daily and its consumers spending an average of 30 minutes in Hong Kong. Social media statistics reveals that Hong Kong is leading zone for Facebook users (Steimle, 2014). Twitter is an attractive social media networking sites in Hong Kong because of communication about views and political change as compare to other special media websites. Social media sites also displays the story of the democratic demonstrations. People are seeing to use their smart phones for mutual communication and tweeting their ideas with the world via social media in Hong Kong (Thomas, 2014). The School of Media studies of Chinese University in Hong Kong exposes that (33.9%) persons are supported the democracy demonstrators, whereas (42.3%) of persons are opposed it (BBC, 2014).

Developments in technological and the use of internet has changed the life style all over the world. Now individuals contribute in politics via the social network sites throughout the world. Public has become more active users of social networking sites (Valenzuela, 2013). Involvement for societal, financial and political changes, the contribution of youth in developments and focus on issues have increased as compare to conservative politicians. Social networks sites educate, activate, amuse, and create community groups. Access to information has increased transparency and accountability regarding government affairs. Social media network websites make possible that the large crowds of Middle Eastern countries were gathered for protests in a short period. Social media websites provided a stage for people to show their strength within society (Juris, 2016).

Activists express their frustrations and disappointment via social media networking sites regarding government corruptions, unemployment, inflation and economic conditions in their countries. Protesters used the social networking sites as a tool to attain their goals against authoritarianisms (Tung, 2011). Evolving and usage of social media networking sites in Middle East community set and produced political realization. The technology expansions set a difference and a more projecting political image in their regions (Keebler, 2011).

### **Material and Methods**

This study is a qualitative and comparative analysis of social media (Facebook and Twitter) pages contents which are used by the activists of Pakistan Tehrik e Insaf and Umbrella Movement during their sit-ins. Present study examine Posts/Tweets contents uploaded on selected pages. Content analysis technique is used to analyse Facebook and Twitter pages of political activists of Pakistan and Hong Kong. Content analysis counts different aspects of contents for the purpose of summarizing, analysing and making inferences from the data. Universe for this study consist of all Posts/Tweets Uploaded on selected 20 pages of Facebook and Twitter by PTI and UM. These selected pages of Facebook and Twitter have largest numbers of followers as compare to remaining pages of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Umbrella Movement activists. This Research work's sample consist of the whole universe which are Posts/Tweets of selected 20 pages of Facebook and Twitter; 5 from Facebook and 5 from Twitter pages of PTI and same case with UM. Unit of analysis of study is Post/Tweet on Facebook/Twitter by PTI and UM. Unit of analysis of this study is words, sentences, paragraphs and videos posted and tweeted by political activists in Pakistan and Hong Kong. The duration of this study is selected October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015. In this selected period of time the both movements shaped the political directions of both regions and onward policies and legislations have been a long term impact on the politics of Pakistan and Hong Kong.

The data is categorised broader frames first in as economic, social, political and other issues appeared in posts and tweets. The broader categories converted in to the following frames (Table1)

Table 1. Framing of Tweets and posts from categories to frames

Sr #	Category	Frames of Tweets and Posts
1	Political Issues	Electoral system, status quo, corruption, bad governance police enforcements, electoral reforms, election system, political change.
2	Economic Issues	Unemployment, poverty, tax revenues, inflation, revenue deficit, inflation and foreign loans
3	Social issues	Education, health, human rights, youth problems and freedom of expression.
4	Other Issues	Foreign affairs, foreign involvement, terrorist attacks, drone strikes

## Results and Discussion

Accumulative 20745 tweets and posts posted on Twitter and Facebook during the identified time period by the activists of both countries. The followers of PTI shared 260 posts whereas 3590 posts shared by the activists of UM and the tweets posted by the PTI are 8125 and 8770 by the UM on Facebook in the time frame of 06 months. It depicts that the followers of UM that significantly are comprising on university students and civil society of Hong Kong that are having competitive advantage of activists of Islamabad because of socio-economic difference. Although, demographically there is similarity on the activists of both countries. The significant participation observed by the activists of PTI on liking, commenting, sharing, tweeting and extended commenting, conversations in comparison of UM activist (See Table 2). The accumulative 984425 shares/retweets, likes and favourite are 3745070 and 419870 are comments and conversations among the following of activists' sit-inns. The trend observed among the activists of Pakistan in sharing and commenting higher than the activists of Hong Kong.

**Table 2**  
**The accumulative posts/tweets by PTI and UM and following of sharing and commenting**

P.A <sup>1</sup>	SNS <sup>2</sup>	P/ T <sup>3</sup>	L/ F <sup>4</sup>	S/ Ret <sup>5</sup>	C/ Con <sup>6</sup>
P.T.I	FB	260	2412830	200054	226269
	T	8125	1078400	685567	183097
U. M	FB	3590	201760	16935	5266
	T	8770	52098	81880	5249
Total		20745	3745070	984425	419870

1. P.A: Political Activist
2. SNS: Social networking sites
3. P/ T:post/tweet
4. L/ F:like/favourite
5. S/ Ret:shares/retweets
6. C/ Con:comment/conversation

Fig. 1 reflects the percentage of tweets and posts appeared on Facebook and Twitter. These posts appeared on the issues of political, economic, social and other issues. All the political demands either by the pro-democracy protesters of Hong Kong or the demand of reform in Election Commission in Pakistan are included in the category of political issue. The posts disseminated by the activists of P.T.I. are (1.21%) and U.M. (17.29%) on the Facebook.

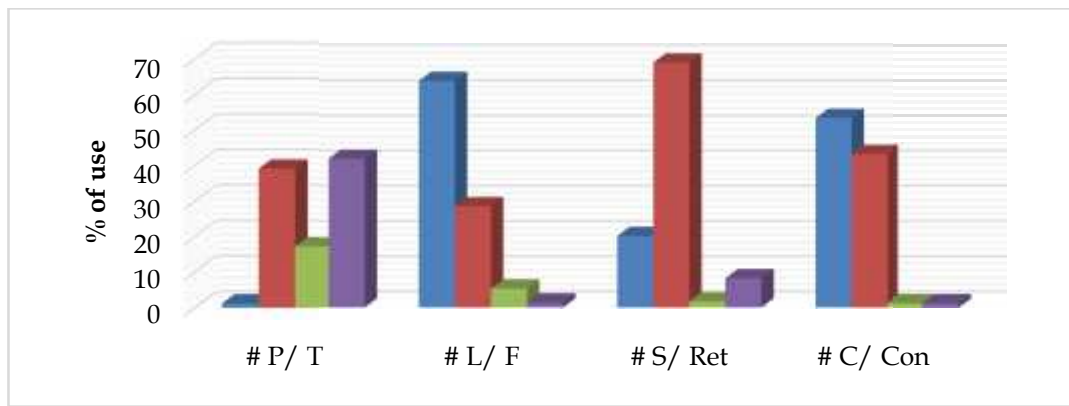


Figure 1. Accumulative usage of Facebook and Twitter pages of PTI and UM in (%)

The twitter is extensively use for dissemination of political agenda and communication to follower in both regions. (39.18%) tweets uploaded on twitter whereas Umbrella Movement (42.29%) on all major issues indicated above. The significance of sharing of posts and re-tweeting is higher because the disseminated content reached significantly. There are (21%) the sharing of PTI pages and (71%) on twitter for re-tweeting. The shares of UM are (2.1%) and (8.1%) re-tweeting. It indicate that the PTI social media campaign was centrally organised and continuously updating their political moves on social media as compare to UM. The comments and conversation is also similarly appeared as comments and conversation appeared (54.1%) and (44.1%) on twitter by the Pakistani activists and comparatively by the Hong Kong’s activists comments and conversation appeared insignificant.

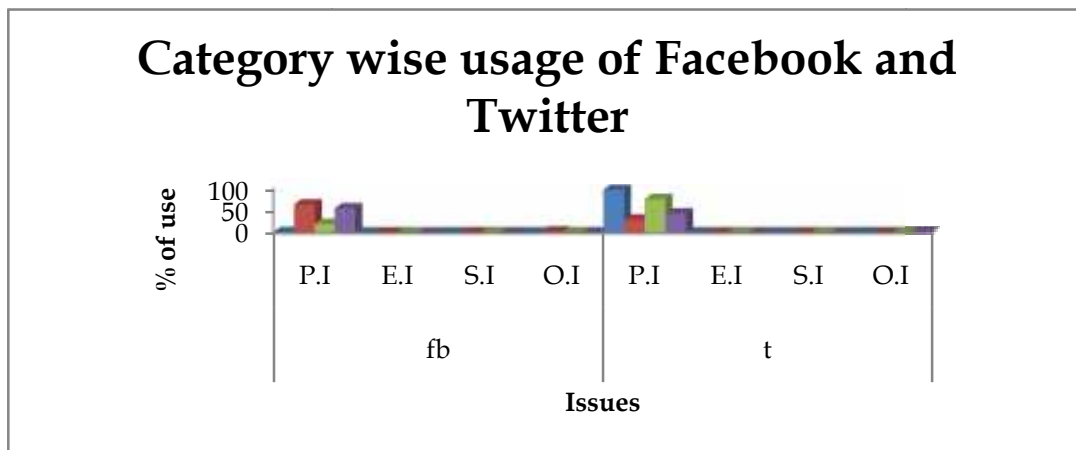


Figure 2. Accumulative category wise usage of PTI pages on Facebook and Twitter

Figure 2. reflects the comparison of posts and tweets appeared on two social media platforms. It is observed from Fig. 2 that political issue has significance over all other issues. On Facebook the sharing is meagre whereas likes are (64%), share are (20.5%) and comments are (54.4%). On twitter posts (95.6%)



twitter posts are uploaded (29.8%), favourite (74.9%), retweeted and (43.2%) are on comments and conversation.

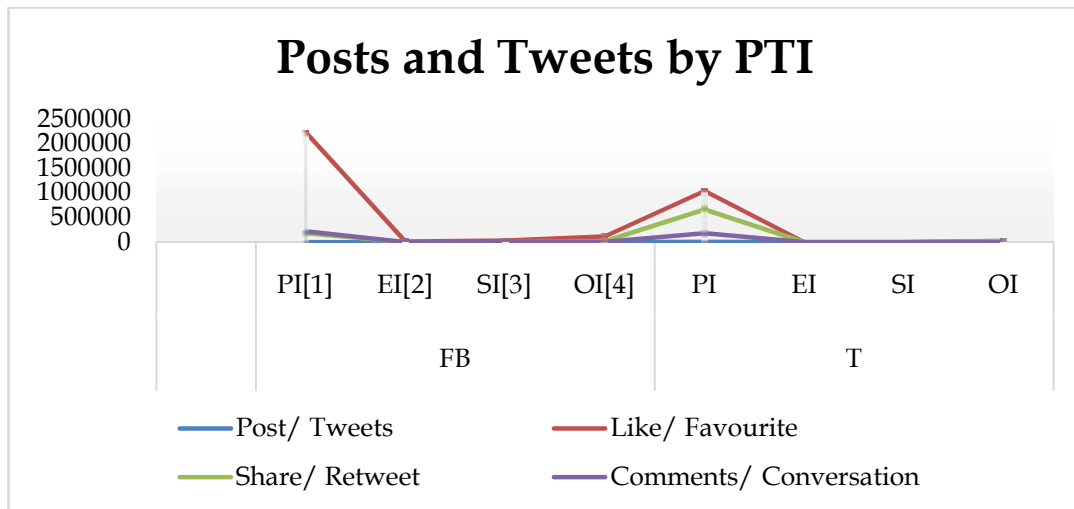


Figure 3 Coverage of issues on posts and tweets by PTI

Fig.3 portrays the posts and tweets on various issues converted in categories. The number of post appeared on political issues are (260) and their likes, shares and comments are very significant whereas the number of tweets appeared on twitter are (8004) and their favourite, re-tweets and conversation are extensively significant. The issues appeared in categories are marginally discussed or disseminated by the political party of Pakistan.

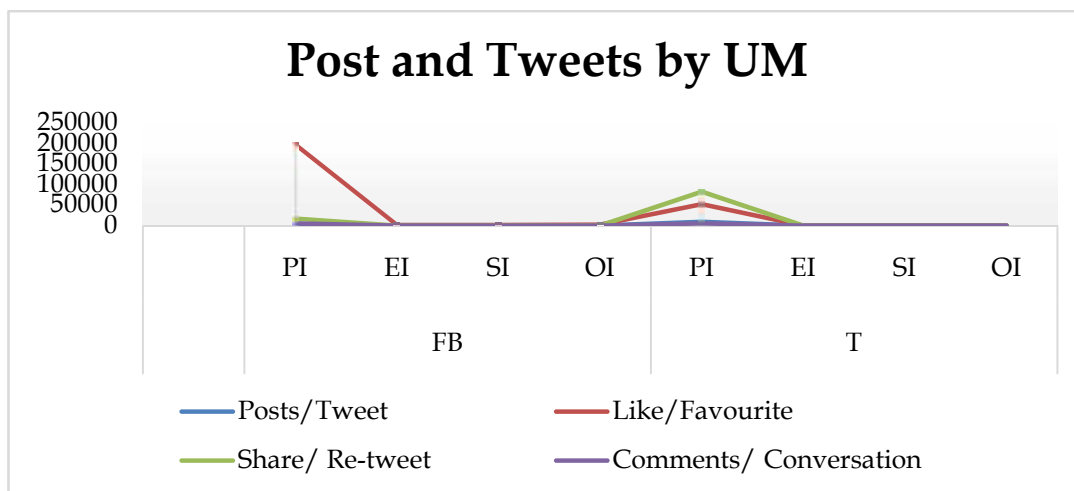


Fig. 4. Accumulative posts and tweets by UM on various Issues

Overall 3568 posts are posted regarding political issue on Facebook and 8760 tweets are twitted regarding to the political issues by the political activists of Hong Kong, while economic, social and other issues are totally neglected on

Facebook and Twitter pages by the activist. Political issues base posts/Tweets, likes/favourites and comments/conversations are in greater then collectively other three issues (Fig. 5).

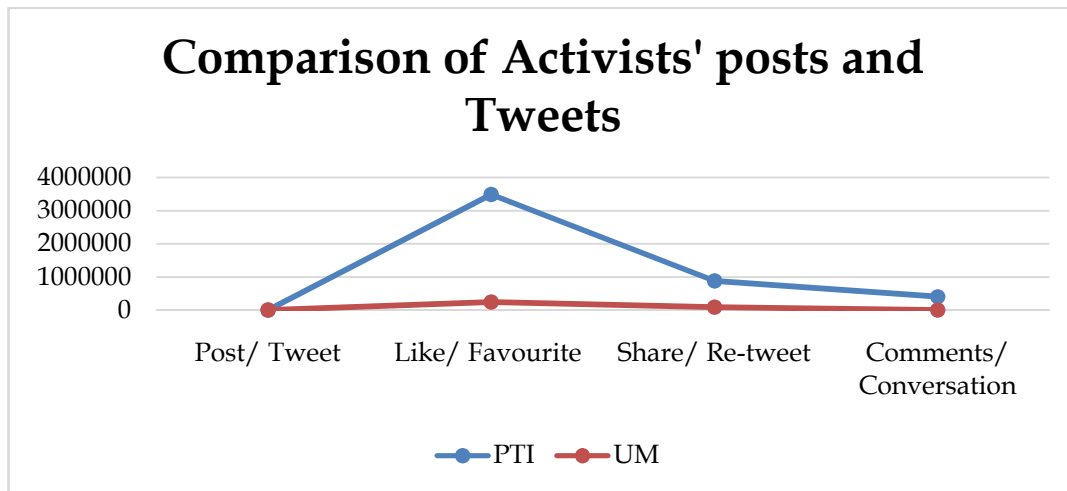


Figure 5. Overall comparison of PTI and UM on Political, Social, Economic and Other issues

It shows that the inclusive 8369 posts and tweets of the Facebook and Twitter are disseminated by PTI activists, in which 3491224 likes/favourites, 885613 shares/retweets and 409359 comments/conversations are observed for all issues. It is found that number of posts on political issues are 260 numbers which has greater coverage on Facebook but lesser in number than tweets on Twitter but likes, share and conversations on political issues are having greater numbers on Facebook then Twitter whereas 12349 posts and tweets are loaded during selected period of time by the political activists of Hong Kong, in which 253848 likes/favourites, 98807 shares/retweets and 10510 comments/conversations are devoted by the users on Facebook and Twitter on all issues. Number of posts on Facebook are lesser in number than tweets on Twitter.

Social media contents on all issues are having different projections of political activists in both countries. Fig. 3 reflects the overall category wise usage of PTI pages on Facebook and Twitter, the political issues has significance which has been significantly depicts the coverage on Facebook as compare to other issues. Political issues are comparatively slighter in number than tweets on Twitter comparing other issues. The political structure of Hong Kong is shifting slightly from democratic regime to an authoritarian regime of Mainland China. On the other hand, overall 12347 posts and tweets are loaded by the political activists of Hong Kong, in which 3569 posts are posted regarding political issue on Facebook and 8760 tweets are twitted regarding to the political issues by the political activists of Hong Kong, while economic, social and other issues are totally neglected on Facebook and Twitter pages by the activist. The study here is in line

with Abushouk (2016) that state that access to internet and social networking sites is a way of democratization. In a controlled regime, the consumer of social media can create and follow the trends set by the activists of sit-ins. However, PTI pages significantly depicts politics and political issues on their Facebook and Twitter pages and posts/tweets. Social media has become a bridge for creating and developing political discourse among masses. Political activism is significantly increasing in the regions where authoritarian regimes are in power and economic issues are emerging. Elevation of unemployment, decreasing quality of life and conflict of interests of political groups are primary reasons of political activism. In the case of Pakistan, the findings of the study are in line with the Kern et., al. (2015), whereas Hong Kong is the one of the strong financial centre of Asia and its per capita income is 67,810 PPP dollars (World Bank, 2017) and findings are contrast to it. Political activists of both sides use social media for pro-democratic purposes. Results reveal that political issues has 226 posts on Facebook and has 8004 tweets on twitter respectively on PTI social media pages . PTI pages of Facebook and Twitter collectively 8230 out of 8370 posts/tweets are uploaded on political issues, while remaining only 159 posts/tweets are uploaded on three issues. On the other hand, overall 12347 posts and tweets are loaded by the political activists of Hong Kong (see table 4), in which 3569 posts are posted regarding political issue on Facebook and 8760 tweets are twitted regarding the political issues by the political activists of Hong Kong, while economic, social and other issues are totally neglected on Facebook and Twitter pages by the activist. However, the study is in line with Karpf (2016) that assert that in traditional and contemporary factors of political participation the political movements or parties are keeping their political efficacy and self-interest on first place. However, there are several other issues related to non-political factors in Islamabad and Hong Kong that get meager attention of the political leaders, opinion leaders and in post and re-tweets. The above discussion and facts reflects that Political activists in Hong Kong are more transparent to criticize their government than Pakistan. The findings validates the variables of political participation theory from the perspective of contemporary social media practices.

## **Conclusion**

This research work reveals that the political activists and their followers of Pakistan and Hong Kong express the pro-democratic association on Facebook and Twitter during the sit-ins in both countries. Social media sites are used by the Political activists for political purposes. Feedback on the posts and tweets of political activists by the users generates the political participatory approach. As a result, political activists are able to bring out a big crowd from their houses on the roads and able to continue their sit-ins for a long time in Hong Kong and Pakistan. Activists' expression reflects the specific purposes regarding posting and twitting of political problems as compare to cover the social, economic and others issues of both societies. Activism is detected lesser in Pakistan than Hong Kong, but the participation on political issues of their followers are greater in Pakistan

than Hong Kong. Umbrella Movement's activists uploaded more posts on their social media pages regarding political issues as compared to economic, social and others issues because Hong Kong is more cosmopolitan, socialized and peaceful as compared to the Pakistan. This results reveal that the political activists of Umbrella Movement are clear to criticise their government on political issues. The large figures of feedback on political issues besides on economic, social and others issues of Pakistani activist's pages shows that; the Pakistani masses are facing many political, economic, social and other problems. Pakistan is suffering from several problems such as bad governance, status quo, lack of accountability, election rigging, corruption, poverty, inflation, unemployment, terrorism, suicide attacks, target killing, health and education problems etc. Above issues are basic ingredients to beginner of social and political change. Political activists of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf are used the above issues as tool and their social media followers fascinate these social media contents. Political activists create a democratic sense in public of Pakistan and Hong Kong.

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