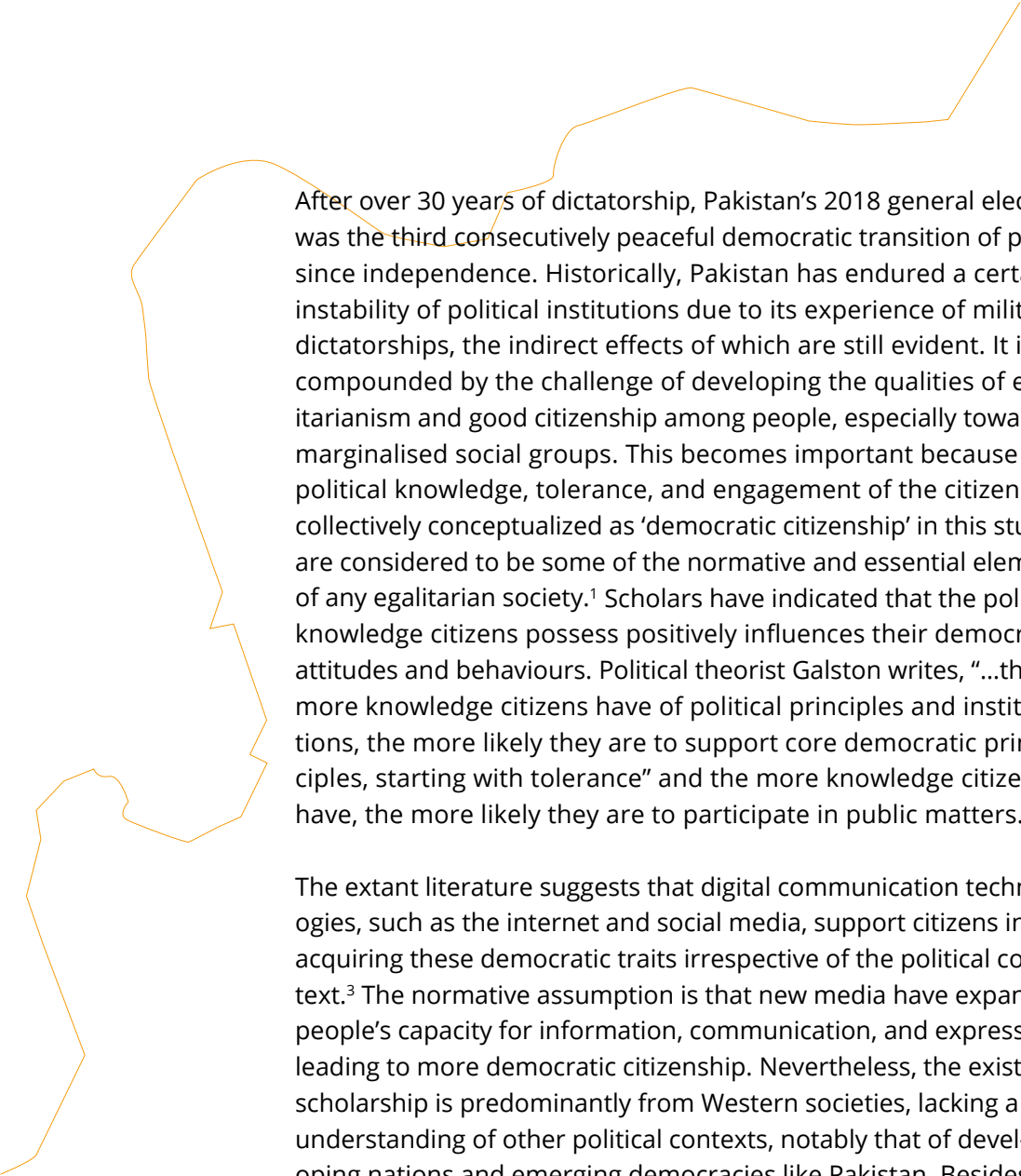# DIGITAL DIVIDE AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: A TALE OF TWO VALLEYS IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

Muhammad Masood

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- This study attempts to answer the question: Does the digital divide in Pakistan affect values connected to democratic citizenship, such as knowledge, tolerance, and engagement between Muslim and minority religious communities.

- The study compares two valleys in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan, one which lacks internet access of any kind, and the other with internet connectivity.

- Through interviews with local residents from both valleys, the study explores residents' knowledge and awareness of major issues pertaining to religious minorities in Pakistan and provides a qualitative and comparative understanding of the relationship.

- Data suggests Muslim locals who have access to the Internet and who use social media are more knowledgeable and willing to engage in protests in support of religious minorities than their counterparts who do not.

- Digital platforms work as alternative media, differing from Pakistani mainstream media in terms of content and dissemination, by providing alternative perspectives on socio-political issues.

- Findings from this study suggest that these values of democratic citizenship could be enhanced through improving access to internet infrastructure, initiating digital media literacy programmes, online inter-faith harmony campaigns, and, most importantly, monitoring the digital public sphere to reduce polarisation between different religious groups.

- This preliminary study of two valleys situated in a relatively unique socio-economic context suggests further research on digital divide and attitudes of the majority group towards marginal social groups.
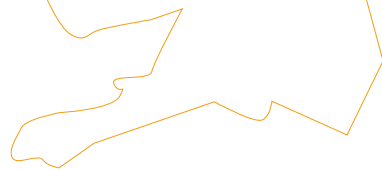
After over 30 years of dictatorship, Pakistan's 2018 general election was the third consecutively peaceful democratic transition of power since independence. Historically, Pakistan has endured a certain instability of political institutions due to its experience of military dictatorships, the indirect effects of which are still evident. It is compounded by the challenge of developing the qualities of egalitarianism and good citizenship among people, especially towards marginalised social groups. This becomes important because the political knowledge, tolerance, and engagement of the citizenry, collectively conceptualized as 'democratic citizenship' in this study, are considered to be some of the normative and essential elements of any egalitarian society.[1] Scholars have indicated that the political knowledge citizens possess positively influences their democratic attitudes and behaviours. Political theorist Galston writes, "…the more knowledge citizens have of political principles and institutions, the more likely they are to support core democratic principles, starting with tolerance" and the more knowledge citizens have, the more likely they are to participate in public matters."[2]

The extant literature suggests that digital communication technologies, such as the internet and social media, support citizens in acquiring these democratic traits irrespective of the political context.[3] The normative assumption is that new media have expanded people's capacity for information, communication, and expression, leading to more democratic citizenship. Nevertheless, the existing scholarship is predominantly from Western societies, lacking a full understanding of other political contexts, notably that of developing nations and emerging democracies like Pakistan. Besides, previous studies have rarely focused on how new media changes its users' democratic citizenship vis-a-vis minority groups in their communities. ■

1   Mutz, Diana C. 2006. *Hearing the other side: Deliberative versus participatory democracy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

2   Galston, William A. 2001. "Political knowledge, political engagement, and civic education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, 1: 217–234.

3   Bode, Leticia. 2016. "Political news in the news feed: Learning politics from social media." *Mass Communication and Society* 19, 1: 24–48; Boulianne, Shelley. 2019. "Revolution in the making? Social media effects across the globe." *Information, Communication & Society* 22, 1: 39–54; and Placek, Matthew Alan. 2017. "#Democracy: social media use and democratic legitimacy in Central and Eastern Europe." *Democratization* 24, 4: 632–650.
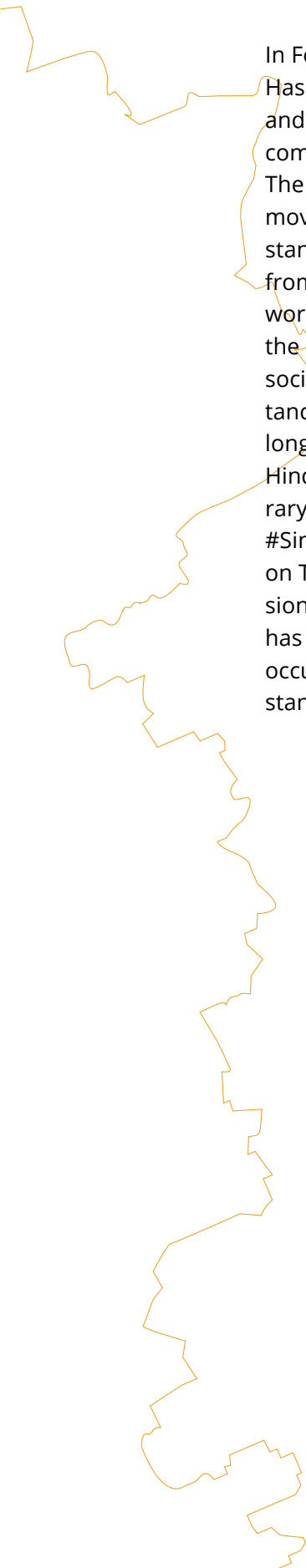
THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan was founded in August 1947 based on the critical narrative that minority Muslims in the Indian subcontinent should acquire an independent state to protect their fundamental rights.[4] Today, there are several non-Muslim minority groups in Pakistan, and the failure to fully protect them has been challenging the country's underlying ideology.[5] According to the 2017 census, a little less than 5% of Pakistan's population is non-Muslim. Hindu (1.8%) and Christian (1.6%) communities are the two dominant groups within the minorities. Since the new government took office in July 2018, at least 31 deaths, 58 injuries, seven attacks on places of worship, and 25 blasphemy cases against religious minorities have been reported.[6] On the other side, the Constitution of Pakistan safeguards the rights of minorities by protecting their interests and representing them in national and provincial assemblies on reserved seats. However, the constitutional protections and institutional representations do not always align with the opinions and actions of citizens. It is hoped that through the use of digital media, Pakistani citizens could get better acquainted with religious minorities, which could potentially lead to a positive change in attitudes and behaviours. Thus, this paper seeks to explore the impact of the internet and social media on democratic citizenship (i.e., knowledge, tolerance and engagement) of the Pakistani Muslim majority regarding non-Muslim minorities. ■

4   Talbot, Ian. 2015. "Themes, theories, and topics in the history of religion, violence and political mobilization in Pakistan." In Long, Roger D. et al. (eds). State and nation-building in Pakistan: Beyond Islam and security., New York: Routledge

5   Fuchs, Maria-Magdalena, and Simon Wolfgang Fuchs. 2020. "Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging." South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 43, 1: 52–67; freedomhouse.org. 2020. "Pakistan." (https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2019); and US Department of State. 2017. "2017 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan." (https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/).

6   Mirzahe, Jaffer, A. 2020. "Religious Minorities in 'Naya Pakistan'." The Diplomat, 16 March. (https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/religious-minorities-in-naya-pakistan/).

In February 2019, the provincial information minister Fayyaz-ul-Hasan Chohan was swiftly removed after making controversial and derogatory remarks against Hindus in the wake of a recent air combat engagement between the Pakistani and Indian militaries. The decision to dismiss the minister was taken following an online movement against him instigated by Kapil Dev, a high-profile Pakistani Hindu activist, whose tweets went viral.[7] Civil society activists from across the country condemned the minister for using the words 'Hindu' and 'India' interchangeably.[8] The forced removal of the provincial minister shows the influential and emerging role of social media in mobilising the public on issues of national importance, having a positive influence on Pakistani democracy in the long term. This event was one of the notable cases linked to the Hindu community and general citizen engagement in contemporary Pakistan. The civil society recently also contributed to making #SindhRejectsForcedConversion one of the most tweeted hashtags on Twitter in Pakistan.[9] To give some context, the forced conversion of underage girls from religious minorities by extremist goons has been a critical issue in Sindh province.[10] When some new cases occurred in June 2020, the hashtag was seen trending across Pakistani social media networks.

THE RISE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PAKISTAN

7   Schaflechner, Jürgen. 2020. "Betwixt and Between: Hindu Identity in Pakistan and 'Wary and Aware' Public Performances." South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 43, 1: 152–168.

8   Schaflechner, Jürgen. 2020. 167.

9   Shahid K, K. 2020. "#SindhRejectsForcedConversions trends as minority girls continue to be targeted." Pakistan Today, 9 June. (https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/06/09/sindhrejectsforcedconversions-trends-as-minority-girls-continue-to-be-targeted/).

10 Ackerman, Reuben. 2018. "Forced Conversions & Forced Marriages In Sindh, Pakistan." University of Birmingham. (https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/ptr/ciforb/Forced-Conversions-and-Forced-Marriages-in-Sindh.pdf).; Jahangir, Sulema. 2020. "Forced conversions." Dawn, 12 April. (https://www.dawn.com/news/1548550/).

←   🔍   @iambhevishk progressive Muslim   •••

Figure 1: A Hindu Activist Shared a Screenshot of the Hashtag Thanking Progressive Muslims.

Top   Neueste   Personen   Fotos   Videos

Bhevish Kumar Maheshwari @iambhevishk · Jun 6   •••
Thank you comrades, especially my **progressive Muslim** fraternity for making #SindhRejectsForcedConversions trend on top for constant 12 hours 🙏 This is our response to constant oppression and extremism against minorities and actual owners of this land. 225k is not an easy job 👏👏

#SindhRejectsForcedConversions ⌄

225K Tweets

7   9   63

Furthermore, Pakistan sent a positive message to the world by opening the Kartarpur Corridor, which connects Pakistan with India, allowing Sikh devotees from the neighbouring country to visit the *Gurdwara Darbar Sahib* without a visa. *Gurdwara Darbar Sahib* is the shrine of *Guru Nanak*, the founder of Sikhism. It is located in the Punjab province of Pakistan and is one of the holiest sites for the Sikh community in the world. News related to the opening ceremony circulated widely on mainstream media and social media, indirectly educating Muslim Pakistanis about members of other religions in the country. Moreover, this project was collectively supported by politicians. Another example of politicians endorsing interreligious tolerance on social media is Prime Minister Imran Khan's series of posts regarding the Kartarpur Corridor.[12] As a result, Pakistanis are increasingly accepting and aware of the existence and grievances of the millions of people from religious minorities in their country.

11   Maheshwari, Bhevish Kumar. 2020. "Twitter / @iambhevishk: Thank you comrades…" Twitter, 6 June (https://twitter.com/search?q=%40iambhevishk%20progressive%20Muslim&src=typed_query).

12   Khan, Imran Official. 2020. "Facebook / @ImranKhanOfficial: Islam preaches peace…" Facebook, 6 June (https://www.facebook.com/ImranKhanOfficial/photos/a.149165218459240/4022759264433130).

Likewise, the recent federal government land allocation and approval for constructing the first temple for the Hindu community in Islamabad is a promising step. Although extremists spread hate speech against Hindus and vandalised the initial construction, online discourse supporting the temple's construction and religious minorities' rights was also notably visible, as were offline protests in favour of the temple's construction by civil society in the capital.[13] In conclusion, the internet and social media have enabled Pakistani civil society members to directly acquire information, communicate, and express their opinions about events related to Pakistani religious minorities; also, to translate their online pro-minority behaviours into offline actions.[14] ■
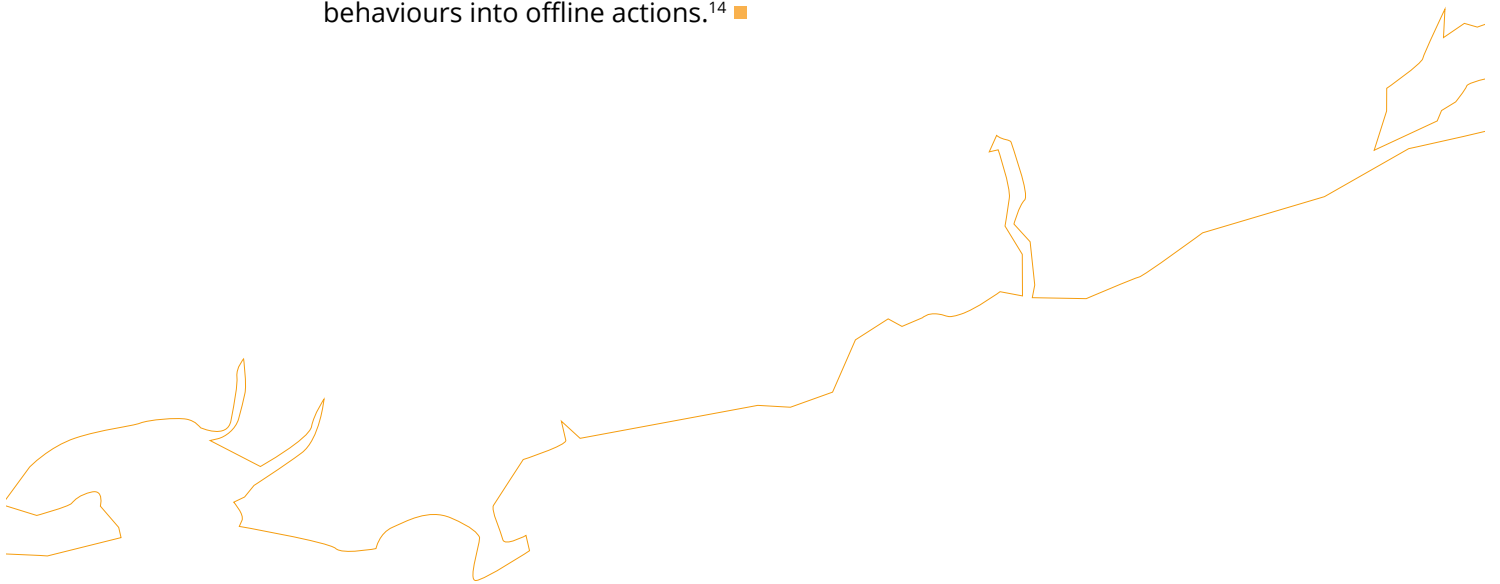
13 *Abi-Habib, Maria. 2020. "Islamists Block Construction of First Hindu Temple in Islamabad." The New York Times, 8 July. (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/world/asia/hindu-temple-islamabad-islamists-pakistan.html).*

14 *Masood, Muhammad. 2020. "Construction of blurred social boundaries on Twitter: Discourse analysis of #JusticeForNimrita movement in Pakistan." 103rd Annual Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC 2020)-Virtual Conference.*

In recent years, digital media penetration in Pakistan has been growing significantly. According to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, as of August 2020, there are 85 million 3G/4G subscribers (40% penetration) and 169 million cellular connections (80% penetration).[15] There are also more than 37 million active social media users.[16] Facebook is the most popular social networking site, and WhatsApp is the most popular instant messaging application.[17] In 2020, there was an increase of 17% of internet subscribers, 6.2% of mobile connections, and 7% of active social media users compared to the previous year.[18] This number could grow exponentially as the state has recently launched the "Digital Pakistan" initiative to expand digital connectivity.[19] However, the digital divide still exists on a large scale, especially in the digitally unconnected rural areas where close to two-thirds (64%) of the population resides.[20] The digital divide is not only between urban and rural areas but also exists between gender and generation in the male-dominant and young population of Pakistan.[21] Currently, the significant majority of social media users are between 18–34 years old (75%) and male (79%).[22] These users are likely to have high socioeconomic status and to be from urban areas.

The growth in internet usage demonstrates the potential for digital democracy in Pakistan. Digital democracy includes public administration via digital apps, online deliberation on civic issues, mediated contact with politicians, and many other such possibilities. However, among the socio-political challenges mentioned in the introduction section, interreligious relations in Pakistan attract news media attention worldwide. Nevertheless, there has been little or no

15   *Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. 2020. "Telecom Indicators." (https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/telecom-indicators).*

16   *Datareportal. 2020. "Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview." (https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-global-digital-overview).*

17   *Datareportal. 2020. "Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview.".*

18   *Datareportal. 2020. "Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview."*

19   *News Desk. 2019. "PM Imran launches 'Digital Pakistan' initiative." The Express Tribune, 5 December. (https://tribune.com.pk/story/2112360/8-digital-pakistan-pm-imran-addresses-launch-ceremony/).*

20   *Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. 2017. "District Wise Census Results Census 2017." (http://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/provisional-summary-results-6th-population-and-housing-census-2017-0).*

21   *Datareportal. 2020. "Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview."*

22   *Datareportal. 2020. "Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview."*

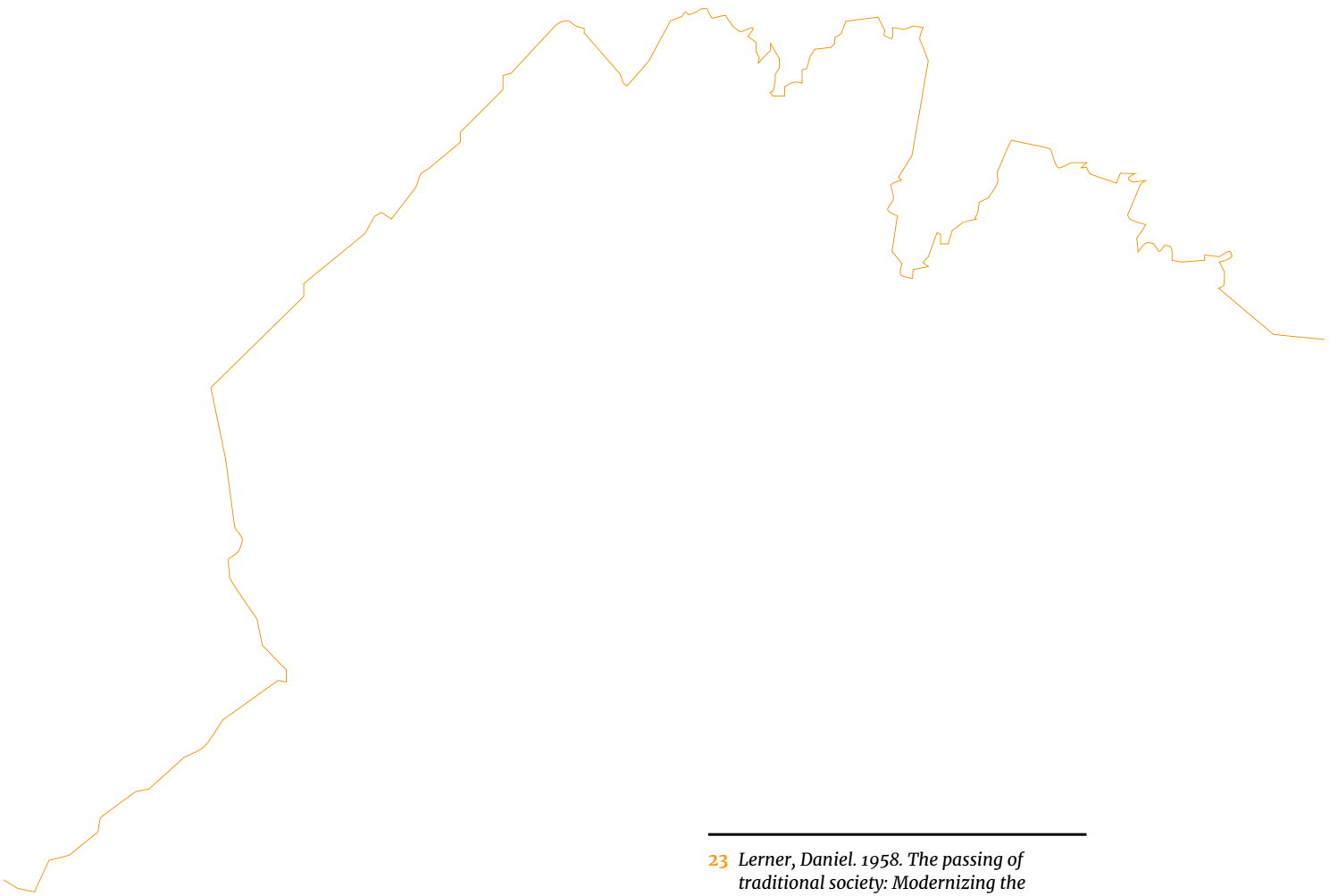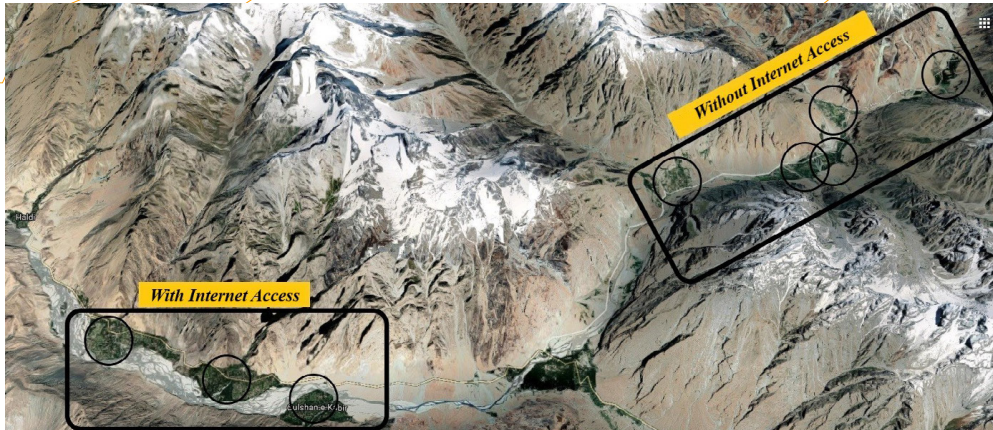study exploring the association between the growing popularity of digital media and evolving relationships between religions. Hence, it is an opportune moment to investigate whether the internet and social media platforms can promote democratic citizenship – defined for the purposes of this study as knowledge, tolerance, and the engagement levels of people with respect to marginalised social groups. In the past, traditional media has played a role in modernising different parts of the world, and in the present, digital media could play the role of democratisation.[23] This paper examines the (un)democratic citizenship impact of the digital divide in two remote adjacent valleys of Pakistan to investigate these normative assumptions. ◼

23 *Lerner, Daniel. 1958. The passing of traditional society: Modernizing the Middle East. Glencoe: The Free Press.; and Michaelsen, Marcus. 2011. New media vs. old politics. The Internet, social media, and Democratisation in Pakistan. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.*

The two valleys in the study are comprised entirely of Muslim residents and located in Gilgit-Baltistan – the region also known as the Western Himalayas of Pakistan. Only one valley has an internet connection, but both valleys have access to satellite television and radio services.

I explore whether local people from a valley with internet access show more knowledge, tolerance, and willingness to engage with issues concerning Hindu and Christian religious minorities in Pakistan compared to their counterparts. In general, locals can only know about other faiths via media or opinion leaders, such as clerics. Face-to-face contact and learning opportunities with members of other religions are not readily available unless people from outside the region travel to the valleys for tourism or business purposes. Both valleys are culturally similar but socioeconomically slightly different. In other words, the populations of both valleys speak the same language, follow the same faith (but different denominations; both populations have Shia and Noorbakhshia Muslims), and have similar cultural characteristics due to their geographical proximity (a distance of approximately 20 kilometres separates them). The valley with internet access is more developed (e.g., better road infrastructure and educational institutions) and has a bigger population than the valley without internet access, which is located at the furthest point of the region.

The valley with internet access is known as "sub-Masherbrum" (it comprises Gulshan-e-Kabir, Sino, and Thagas villages, and consists of 1078 households), and the valley without internet access is known as "Kondus" (representing five small villages, including Khorkondo, Lachet, Choghogrong, Thang, and Karmanding, and 544 households). Moreover, variability in internet services is not purely natural. For instance, among several factors, the Kondus valley has a small population with a particular terrain, which might require more than one telecom tower to provide signals to its five small villages, which are at some distance from each other.

Figure 2: Aerial View of the Two Remote Valleys Located in the Gilgit-Baltistan (Google Maps).


For the purpose of comparing attitudes and behaviours regarding religious minorities in Pakistan, I asked the following three central questions to locals from both valleys.

1/   a) In your opinion, what are the political issues, including political rights, political challenges, etc., of Hindus and Christians in Pakistan?

     b) Can you name some of the Hindu and Christian politicians in Pakistan?

     c) Do you know that Pakistan's supreme court recently freed a Christian lady from prison due to a lack of evidence about an act of blasphemy in Punjab?

     d) Do you know that last year a Hindu girl, a BDS student, was found dead in her hostel room in Sindh, which became a big issue related to minorities' safety?

2/ In your opinion, do you think Hindu and Christian religious minorities in Pakistan should be free to express their political views like Muslims are?

3/ Are you willing to participate in a protest or demonstration for the protection of Hindu and Christian religious minorities in Pakistan? ■

METHOD

A total of twenty-four semi-structured interviews with only male participants were conducted, twelve from each valley. According to qualitative analysts, twelve interviews are a reliable number to extract meta themes.[24] Interview data was collected in May 2020 via a research assistant, and audio-recorded for analysis. Adult respondents across age, education, and income groups were included. The average age of participants from each valley was 33, ranging between 24 to 60 years old from the valley with internet (sub-Masherbrum), and 25 to 50 years old from the valley without internet (Kondus). The average income of participants from both valleys was similar, but the average education level from the valley with the internet was higher than its counterpart. All the interviewees from Kondus valley belonged to the Shia denomination of Islam. However, sub-Masherbrum valley interviewees were mixed, being from the Shia and Noorbakshia denominations of Islam. Interviews were conducted in the 'Balti' language, a dialect of the Tibetan language spoken in the Baltistan region of Pakistan where the two valleys are located. Lastly, it is essential to note that this study only interviewed locals who had not spent a significant amount (e.g., more than a year) of their lives outside their native valleys and the Gilgit-Baltistan region. ■
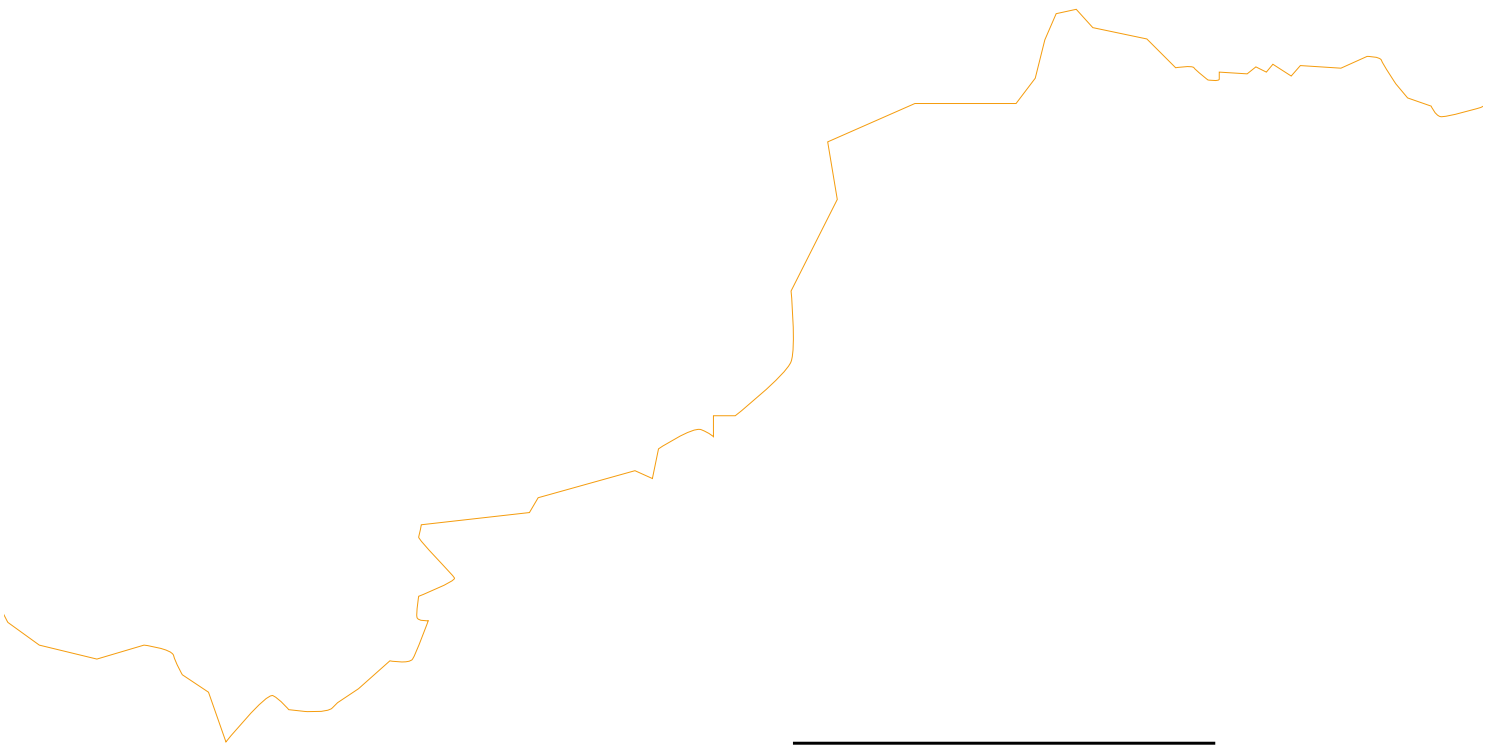
24 Guest, Greg, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson. 2006. "How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability." Field Methods 18, 1: 59–82.

Firstly, when the interviewees were asked about their daily life in the valley, many from the valley with internet access brought up the increasing role of social media in their everyday life. In contrast, some interviewees from the valley without internet access mentioned their lack of communication facilities. It is to be noted that these responses might have been influenced by the consent form for the interview, where the research topic was introduced. Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube were the most popular social media platforms among interviewees from the valley with internet access, and most of them spend more than three hours on their favourite platform every day. Google was the most common search engine among internet users.

When asked "how do you keep yourself informed about what is going on in Pakistan?", all interviewees from the valley with internet access explicitly said they got most of their information through the internet and from social media platforms. In contrast, most interviewees from the valley without internet access reported that they received information from traditional media, primarily television. It must be mentioned here that with the help of satellite television, locals access not only national media channels but also international ones, such as Indian media channels, the content of which is easier for them to understand due to language similarities between Urdu and Hindi.

They were also specifically asked about their sources of information about religious issues and minorities in Pakistan, mainly about Hindus and Christians and their problems. Again, most interviewees from the valley with internet access named the internet and social media, with examples. A majority of them explained that they do not intentionally search for such information on digital platforms, but the exposure is incidental. This finding is in line with the notion of incidental cross-cutting exposure, which argues that although social media algorithms may play a role in forming echo-chambers, there is always the possibility of incidental learning via different groups, pages, friends, and friends of friends.[25] According to incidental learning literature, social media usage frequency is the key

25 Lu, Yanqin, and Jae Kook Lee. 2019. "Stumbling upon the other side: Incidental learning of counter-attitudinal political information on Facebook." New Media & Society 21, 1: 248–265.

predictor of incidental cross-cutting exposure. The interviewees from the valley with internet access reported that they spend more than three hours on social media during a typical day, which is above average. However, most interviewees from the valley without internet access reported that they predominantly learn about Pakistani Hindus and Christians and their problems through television and books, particularly from their school curricula.

Furthermore, the interviewees from the valley without internet access were less aware of the latest events related to religious minorities in Pakistan than their counterparts. For instance, some interviewees from the valley with internet access were aware of the Hindu temple construction issue and related happenings in the country's capital, whereas the residents from the valley without internet access were not – most likely due to their dependence solely on traditional media for news and information. A recent study shows that Pakistani mainstream news provides limited space for religious minorities.[26] Thus, digital platforms work as alternative media, differing from mainstream media in terms of content and dissemination by providing alternative perspectives on socio-political issues. Besides, when the interviewees from the valley with internet access were asked to name Hindu and Christian Pakistani politicians, most of the interviewees either recalled names or at least mentioned which party the politician represented or the politician's designation, such as a minister. As compared to respondents from the valley without internet access who did not have such information, many respondents from the valley with internet access also knew about the alleged blasphemy case against Asia Bibi, the Christian woman, and gave positive responses.[27] Some indicated that they knew about the case of the Hindu girl who died mysteriously in the Sindh province of Pakistan.[28] It is probable that they were more aware of the former story because of the huge global and national attention it had garnered. Notably, a few interviewees from both valleys said they were not interested in issues related to Pakistani religious

26 Rehmat, Adnan. 2019. "Helping minorities find a voice in Pakistani media." International Media Support, 24 May. (https://www.mediasupport.org/blogpost/helping-minorities-find-a-voice-in-pakistani-media/).

27 Sherwood, Harriet. 2020. "Asia Bibi begins new life in Canada – but her ordeal may not be over." The Guardian, 8 May. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/08/asia-bibi-begins-new-life-in-canada-but-her-ordeal-may-not-be-over).

28 Khurram, Shahjahan. 2019. "Twitter wants justice for Larkana medical student Nimrita Kumari." National Courier, 17 September 17. (https://www.natcour.com/news/2019/09/twitter-wants-justice-for-larkana-medical-student-nimrita-kumari/).

minorities and their challenges. Therefore, the individual's interest is also a key factor, irrespective of the digital divide and levels of democratic citizenship.

Knowledge of an issue can be a strong predictor of attitudinal and behavioural changes.[29] On the one hand, regarding tolerance, when locals were asked whether Hindu and Christian religious minorities in Pakistan should be allowed to express their political views freely, just as Muslims are, the majority of the interviewees from both valleys expressed that Pakistani religious minorities should have political opportunities equal to those of the religious majority. Most interviewees mentioned that persons from religious minorities are fellow citizens, and the country's constitution allows marginalised social groups to express their political views. This finding is in line with the common in-group identity model, which argues that a common social identity should be highlighted to achieve intergroup harmony over an in-group identity.[30] These responses could have been shaped by the school curricula, which contain lessons on Pakistani religious minorities and their constitutional rights. On the other hand, regarding engagement, when asked about the locals' willingness to participate in a protest or demonstration to protect Hindu and Christian religious minorities in Pakistan, most respondents from the valley with internet access responded that they are willing to participate in such protests. This response was possibly influenced by the various calls for protests or mobilisation information that reached the respondents via the internet and social media platforms, organised by civil society activists and organisations. Their higher levels of knowledge might have also influenced their responses compared to their counterparts from the other valley. However, some interviewees said their willingness is conditionally connected to the clarity of purpose, such as participation not harming their religion. Hence, locals from both valleys exhibited equal levels of tolerance, but locals from the valley with internet access were more willing to engage in civic activities due to a grasp of the relevant issues, most likely with the help of the alternative narratives from digital platforms. In sum, locals of the valley with internet access possess a greater degree of democratic citizenship than their counterparts.

29 Galston, William A. 2001. "Political knowledge, political engagement, and civic education." Annual Review of Political Science 4: 217–234.

30 Dovidio, John F., Samuel L. Gaertner, and Gladys Kafati. 2000. "Group identity and intergroup relations: The common in-group identity model." Advances in Group Processes 17: 1–34.

Figure 3 (left): A Telecom Tower;
Figure 4 (right): A Young Local Using Facebook

Finally, since both valleys have satellite television and radio services, locals with traditional media in their homes have access to information, but at a low level – due to television and radio's limited capacity to cover issues related to religious minorities, as well as the lack of reportage.[31] On the other hand, locals from the valley with internet access receive news both from traditional media and through their smartphones. Their information consumption patterns are transitioning from listening to the news in the evening to constant browsing online. They have not only substantial sources of information consumption but also information exploration and dissemination. Thus, one can assume that access to traditional media does not significantly add to peoples' stores of information as compared to access to the internet and social media. Besides, regular internet users in the valley with internet access can potentially influence non-users by sharing their acquired information offline. For instance, social media users might share a hashtag movement about religious minorities with their friends and family members. ■

31 *Rehmat, Adnan. 2019. "Helping minorities find a voice in Pakistani media."*

This case study presents an inquiry into examining the role that digital access plays in (un)democratic citizenship by taking advantage of a "naturally occurring" variability in internet availability in Pakistan. It finds the differences in knowledge and engagement levels between the natives of two valleys, but no difference regarding tolerance, indicating that locals from the valley with internet access have a higher level of democratic citizenship.

One could argue about the undemocratic impacts of digital media platforms, such as the social media filter bubble causing polarisation. Given the role of echo chambers, the internet may re-trigger pre-existing prejudices, biases, and stereotypes leading to undemocratic attitudes and behaviours regarding marginalised social groups. Yet, some studies criticise taking social media for granted as a cause of this problem.[32] For instance, a study of the entire Facebook network showed that, on average, every user is at only four degrees of separation from the other,[33] showing a greater likelihood of cross-cutting exposure or conversation with different others on social media platforms. Therefore, the debate is shifting from whether the new communication "environment is good or bad for democratic politics to how and in what contexts specific attributes of this environment are having an influence on specific theories and practices of democracy," as the political theorist Michael Carpini avers.[34] In the case of this study, one way to address the question is to investigate whether people are now less polarised on the issues faced by religious minorities, as well as less knowledgeable, intolerant, and unwilling to engage with matters concerning them than before the arrival of the internet in Pakistan. We could also compare reported incidents of communal violence against religious minorities before and after the internet era. It is suggested that scholars focus on this comparison in future studies.

32 Barberá, Pablo. 2014. "How social media reduces mass political polarization. Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the US." Job Market Paper, New York University 46; Anderson, Janna and Rainie Lee. 2020. "Hopeful themes and suggested solutions." PEW, 21 February. (https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/hopeful-themes-and-suggested-solutions/); and Thompson, Nicholas. 2020. "Why Are We Polarized? Don't Blame Social Media." WIRED, 13 February. (https://www.wired.com/story/why-are-we-polarized-dont-blame-social-media-ezra-klein/).

33 Backstrom, Lars, Paolo Boldi, Marco Rosa, Johan Ugander, and Sebastiano Vigna. 2012. "Four degrees of separation." Proceedings of the 4th Annual ACM Web Science Conference: 33–42.

34 Carpini, Michael X. Delli (ed.). 2019. Digital Media and Democratic Futures. Democracy, Citizenship, and Company. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 167.
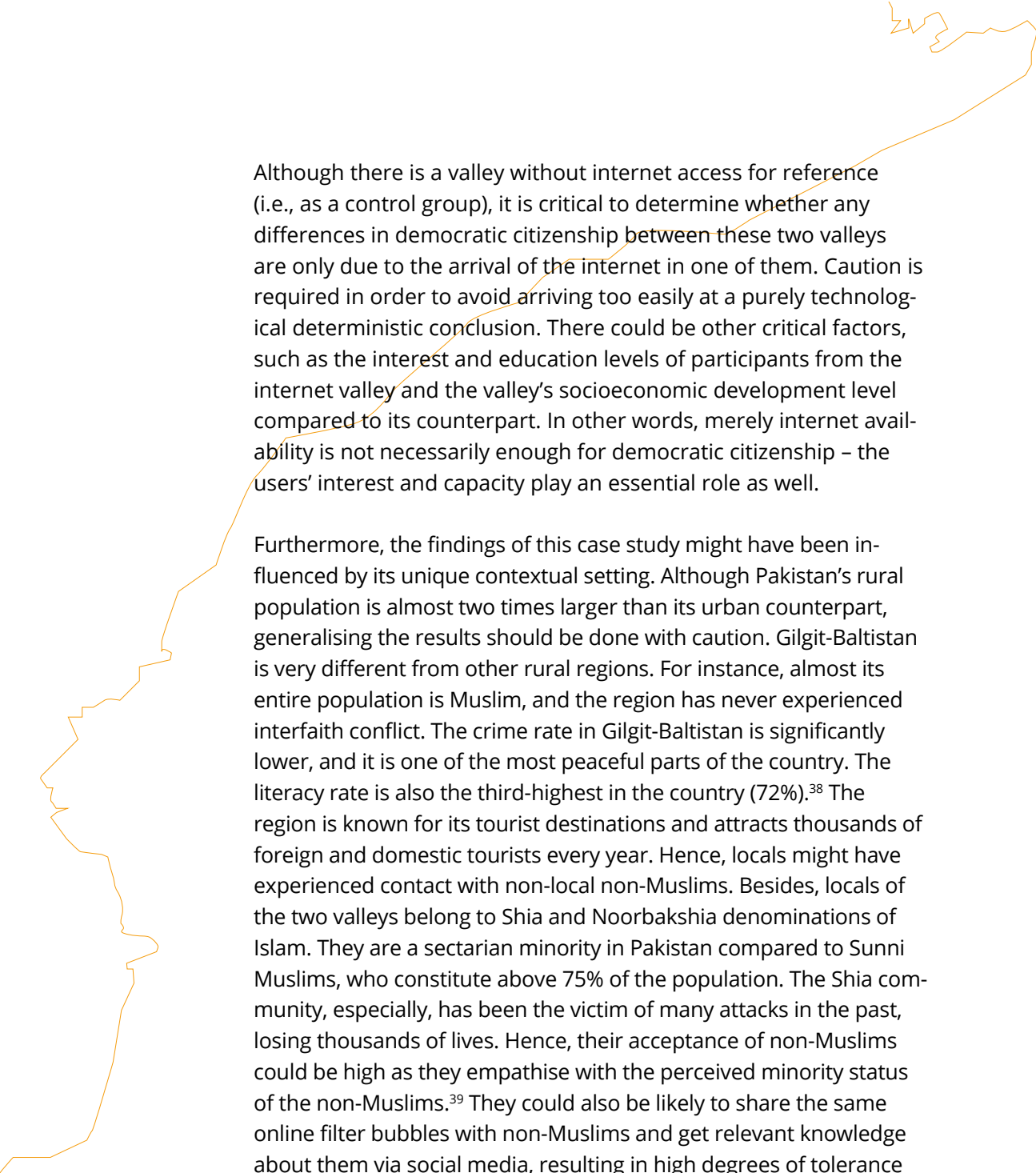
Moreover, since Pakistani religious minorities do not impose any political threat to the religious majority due to their significantly small population size, the digital public sphere is less likely to be polarised on the issues related to them. Hence, the Muslim majority has a greater chance to learn about fellow citizens with differing religious beliefs through the internet and social media platforms, likely resulting in greater tolerance and engagement with the minority communities. However, not all religious minorities share equal social status and similar life experiences in Pakistan. For instance, the case of Pakistani Ahmadiyyas is unique compared to other religious minorities, so focusing individually on each minority group could be interesting to explore in future studies as well.

In addition, while marginalised groups have been discriminated against and have been victims of violence, digital media has the potential to spread religious harmony in Pakistan.[35] The proliferation of digital media in the country has increased horizontal connectivity across diverse social groups, connecting and opening channels of communication between people of different faiths and geographies. New communication technologies also provide a space for religious minorities to present themselves, allowing ordinary Muslims to receive detailed information about other religions in contrast to the traditional mainstream media in Pakistan, which provides limited coverage to Pakistani religious minorities.[36] As a result of these relationships, the Muslim majority could come forward and speak for non-Muslim minorities. Human rights activists and organisations are active in the digital public sphere, too, spreading awareness among the public.[37] They use these platforms for instant information reception and dissemination on issues like the challenges faced by minorities, which assist in gaining support from the religious majority, as well as to organise campaigns, mobilise people, and network with other activists and organisations. Based on these normative assumptions, one could argue that the acceptance of religious minorities in contemporary Pakistani society is likely to increase, compared to the era before the internet. ◼

35 Hussain, Syed Ali, and B. William Silcock. 2019. "Social Media Campaign to Improve Religious Tolerance." Narratives of Storytelling across Cultures: The Complexities of Intercultural Communication: 217.

36 Rehmat, Adnan. 2019. "Helping minorities find a voice in Pakistani media."

37 Yusuf, Huma, et al. 2013. "Mapping digital media: Pakistan." Open Society Foundations. (https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/mapping-digital-media-pakistan).

Although there is a valley without internet access for reference (i.e., as a control group), it is critical to determine whether any differences in democratic citizenship between these two valleys are only due to the arrival of the internet in one of them. Caution is required in order to avoid arriving too easily at a purely technological deterministic conclusion. There could be other critical factors, such as the interest and education levels of participants from the internet valley and the valley's socioeconomic development level compared to its counterpart. In other words, merely internet availability is not necessarily enough for democratic citizenship – the users' interest and capacity play an essential role as well.

Furthermore, the findings of this case study might have been influenced by its unique contextual setting. Although Pakistan's rural population is almost two times larger than its urban counterpart, generalising the results should be done with caution. Gilgit-Baltistan is very different from other rural regions. For instance, almost its entire population is Muslim, and the region has never experienced interfaith conflict. The crime rate in Gilgit-Baltistan is significantly lower, and it is one of the most peaceful parts of the country. The literacy rate is also the third-highest in the country (72%).[38] The region is known for its tourist destinations and attracts thousands of foreign and domestic tourists every year. Hence, locals might have experienced contact with non-local non-Muslims. Besides, locals of the two valleys belong to Shia and Noorbakshia denominations of Islam. They are a sectarian minority in Pakistan compared to Sunni Muslims, who constitute above 75% of the population. The Shia community, especially, has been the victim of many attacks in the past, losing thousands of lives. Hence, their acceptance of non-Muslims could be high as they empathise with the perceived minority status of the non-Muslims.[39] They could also be likely to share the same online filter bubbles with non-Muslims and get relevant knowledge about them via social media, resulting in high degrees of tolerance and willingness to engage on their behalf. Finally, since this study attempted to mainly focus on the locals' responses regarding Pakistani Hindus and Christians, findings cannot be fully translated towards other religious minority groups, such as Ahmadis, who experience a different set of challenges. ■

38 Rehman, Abdul, Luan Jingdong, and Imran Hussain. 2015. "The province-wise literacy rate in Pakistan and its impact on the economy." Pacific Science Review B: Humanities and Social Sciences 1, 3: 140–144.

39 Kalin, Michael, and Niloufer Siddiqui. 2020. "National identity, religious tolerance, and group conflict: Insights from a survey experiment in Pakistan." Conflict Management and Peace Science 37, 1: 58–82.

IMPLICATIONS

Normatively speaking, access to digital media has multiple democratic implications. Notably, its effect on knowledge, tolerance, and engagement of citizenry can lead towards strengthening the democratic structure of emerging democracies, which have small groups of religious minorities, such as Pakistan. This paper hopes to enhance the ability of organisations and individuals to understand the egalitarian impact of a digitally connected society. Future scholarly collaboration between social scientists and policymakers could be built to develop more nuanced research and policies. For instance, democratic citizenship could be achieved by improving access to internet infrastructure, initiating digital media literacy programmes, online interfaith harmony campaigns, and, most importantly, monitoring the digital public sphere to reduce polarisation between different social groups. It could also help members of civil society to promote social harmony and integrate different religious groups digitally.[40] ∎

40 Hussain, Syed Ali, and B. William Silcock. 2019. "Social Media Campaign to Improve Religious Tolerance."

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Acknowledgments

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