MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political participation of Afghan Youths on Facebook: A case study of Northeastern Afghanistan

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Abstract: The main goal of the study was to investigate the political participation of Afghan youths on Facebook. It explored their frequency of Facebook use as well as the impact of gender, age, and employment status on Afghan youths’ political participation and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. An online survey questionnaire was used to collect data. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics, T-test, and One-Way ANOVA test were employed to answer the research questions. The findings showed that Afghan youths did not actively participate in political activities on Facebook although they spent at least half an hour on Facebook every day. They were engaged in low-cost and low-risk political activities, e.g., following Afghan politicians. Likewise, their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections was superficial; they were engaged in electoral activities on Facebook that required low efforts and commitment, e.g., following presidential candidates. Moreover, the gender, age, and employment status of the participants did not have any significant impact on their frequency of Facebook use, political participation, and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook.

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PUBLIC STATEMENT INTEREST
Social networking sites (SNs) have played a crucial role in the globe. They have been utilized for a wide range of purposes including politics. This research investigated Afghan youths’ political participation on Facebook. It also studied how often Afghan youths used Facebook on a daily basis. It attempted to determine the impact of the participants’ gender, age, and employment status on their responses. The results of the study revealed that Afghan youths frequently used Facebook on a daily basis. However, they did not participate in high-risk and high-cost political activities on Facebook; they were engaged in political activities that required low efforts. Moreover, their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections was low-risk and low-cost; they did not involve in activities that required efforts and commitment. The participants’ gender, age, and employment status did not affect their frequency of Facebook use, political participation, and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook.
1. Introduction
Social media has played a significant role in promoting communication among people and assisted in the creation of collective identity. They have become a crucial part of modern political activity around the globe. They have paved the way for the involvement and participation of individuals in public processes. Politicians and citizens use a wide variety of online platforms, e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to speak about politics and engage in various political activities. Political parties and their followers have used social media to convey their agenda and programs to the citizens and persuade them to join the parties. Presidential candidates have utilized social media to manage their public image in communications with their followers and journalists (Seungahn & Gregory, 2013; Sutkutė, 2016).

Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) are the most popular platforms for people to communicate with one another. They provide the opportunity for more activism and movements in societies. The use of social networking sites has been rapidly increasing in particular among youths (Mahmud & Amin, 2017). They help people maintain their preexisting social networks and connect with other people based on their values, interests, religious, and political beliefs (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). They act as a platform for youths to interact with one another virtually on which they send messages, talk to family and friends, upload photos, share ideas, give comments, and carry out a wide range of other activities (Pempek et al., 2009).

Social networking Sites (SNS) have also played a key role in providing information about political events, organizations, and parties (Emruli & Baća, 2011). Internet users with political interests can post their political ideas, join political groups and parties, follow politicians, share political videos or ads, post political comments, and can do many other political activities on SNSs (Yang and DeHart, 2016). For example, Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 73% of adult Internet users got their political information online in the 2010 midterm elections of the United States, and 35% of SNSs users visited these websites to get their political information/news or involved in the elections campaign (Smith, 2011). SNSs have enabled people to engage in political activities. According to Quintelier and Vissers (2008), youths are the most active users of social networking sites, and online political activities encourage them to attend political events.

Afghanistan has made significant progress in terms of access to the Internet. Only did 1.1% of the population have access to the Internet in 2006. The number of Internet users rose to 17.6% in 2019. The highest rate of Internet use was reported in big cities, e.g., Kabul. Around 14.4% of Afghans used the Internet to get their news and information. However, gender disparity is evident. Over 23% of the men used the Internet as the main source of news and information while only 5.6% of the women did so. There is a significant difference between people living in urban and rural areas. The Asia Foundation survey showed that respondents in urban areas (31%) used the Internet more than those in rural areas (9%) as their major source of news and information. Furthermore, most of the respondents (70.6%) used the Internet for social networking sites especially Facebook. Male respondents (72.3%) used the Internet for Facebook more than female respondents (64.1%) did. Furthermore, people in urban areas (73.5%) used the Internet for Facebook more than those in rural areas (67.6%) (Akseer et al., 2019).

The Asia Foundation survey (Akseer et al., 2019) found that more people in big cities, e.g., Kabul had access to the Internet than people in rural areas did. Little or no access to electricity, the high price of the Internet data, and shutting down mobile companies (the main providers of Internet
services) at dark by the Taliban have slowed down Afghans’ access to the Internet in particular to those living in rural areas (Karimi, 2020; Mohammadi, 2018). It means that Afghans in big cities have more access to online resources than those in rural areas. Furthermore, Afghans in big cities have more access to educational resources since most libraries, learning centers, cultural centers, bookstores, and think tanks are based in big cities. Studies have shown that access to online resources particularly political information result in more political participation (e.g., Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Feezell et al., 2009; Pap et al., 2018; Vaccari et al., 2015).

The main purpose of this research is to examine the political participation of Afghan youths on Facebook. It also investigates their frequency of Facebook use. Moreover, it attempts to determine the impact of gender, age, and employment status of Afghan youths on their political participation and engagement in 2019 presidential elections on Facebook.

2. Literature review
Political participation is defined as the participation of citizens of a country in activities that may influence political outcomes such as government structure, policies, and selection of authorities (Himmelboim et al., 2012; Norris, 2001; Salman & Soad, 2015). It can take a wide range of forms such as voting for presidential candidates or MPs, campaigning for candidates, attending the referendum, joining political parties, attending election rallies, protesting for or against the government policies and decisions. People engaged in such activities probably expect that their participation may affect decision makers in their government (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2008). Furthermore, the Internet has enabled people to carry out online political activities such as sending messages to politicians or government authorities through email or SNSs, making donations to certain candidates, visiting campaign websites, sharing campaign ads on SNSs, reading and criticizing presidential candidates’ programs and policies, and publishing political views in newspapers online (Gibson et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2005; Zukin et al., 2006).

Social networking sites (SNSs) have been widely used for political engagement and participation around the world. Among other roles, they have served as a platform for people to exchange and discuss their political views, to organize meetings and protests, and give out information about them to the public. They have also served as a platform for many individuals to promote socially and politically. Different Groups have used them for various purposes. Activists have used them to organize and give out information to the public about protests against policies and decisions of governments. Political parties have utilized SNSs to articulate their agenda and programs to the public and persuade them to join the parties. The general public has used SNSs to get their news and receive information about elections and learn about the agenda and programs of presidential candidates. For instance, around 35% of the Americans (aged 18–29) received their information about the 2016 presidential elections through social networking sites (Gottfried et al., 2016). Furthermore, SNSs have helped increase the participation of people in elections. For example, Facebook reported that it had helped more than 2 million Americans to register to vote in the 2016 presidential elections (Nieva, 2016).

Social media activism has been criticized and it has come to be known as slactivism. It has also been called Hashtag activism, token activism, and armchair activism (Augenbran, 2011; Feldman, 2017; Gladwell, 2010). Slactivism refers to online participation requiring low efforts and commitments. In other words, it is a willingness to show relatively costless support to a political cause on SNSs without committing to devote significant efforts to it (Fatkin & Lansdown, 2015; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Morozov, 2009). Lee and Hsieh (2013) defined slactivism as online activism whose cost and risk are low. Clicktivism is another term used interchangeably with slactivism, which implies that SNSs users can click “like,” “share,” or “retweet” buttons to show their support for a political cause and they feel that they are indeed helping it (Cammoerts, 2015; Fatkin & Lansdown, 2015; Smith et al., 2019; Sutkute, 2016).
The proponents of slacktivism argue that social media activism is not effective for social change and they just make individuals feel good by giving them the feeling that they are engaged in political activities. Augenbran (2011) asserts that SNSs are hugely useful instruments, but they cannot offer an environment where people build trust, hear each other’s concerns, come to a joint conclusion, and convince one another to participate in political activities, e.g., protest to bring changes to their community. Likewise, Gladwell (2010) stated that real political activism could not take place on SNSs. He believes that “the platforms of social media are built around weak ties.” For example, people can follow individuals on Twitter whom they do not know or have never met. People can have thousands of friends on Facebook, and they do not know the majority of them. These ties rarely result in high-cost and high-risk activism. Gladwell further asserts that “Social networks are effective at increasing participation-by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires.” Feldman (2017) considers slacktivism dangerous since it satisfies a need to act without doing anything good. According to Feldman, individuals lose their motivation to do more once their need to act is satisfied. He believes that Facebook can help organize people, but it can substitute real action. For example, liking a post on Facebook helps people feel good about themselves and look good in others’ eyes, but it leads to less need to involve in more real and practical actions. Morozov (2009), Funnell (2017), Willingham (2018), and Gallucci (2018) are among other authors who have criticized online activism and argue that slacktivism cannot result in any practical political changes in society.

Some studies showed that SNSs had little or even negative effects on political participation. For example, Baumgartner and Morris (2010) studied the political uses of social networking sites by young adults in the US 2008 presidential primaries. They reported that SNSs had little impact on political knowledge, engagement, or participation of young adults although they recognized them as a possible source of news. Similarly, Valenzuela et al. (2009) investigated whether SNSs in particular Facebook had a contribution to youths’ political participation. They concluded that SNSs had little effect on the youth’s political participation. They further argued that these platforms were not the most effective means to tackle the political disengagement of youths. Boulianne (2009) and Christensen (2011) reported that online engagement did not have a significant impact on individuals’ offline engagement. In another study, Ancu and Cozma (2009) studied why the public visited MySpace profiles of both Democratic and Republican candidates in the US 2008 primary elections. They found out that the main reason for the public to visit MySpace was to interact with other like-minded people, which was negatively related to involvement in the campaign. Theocharis and Lowe (2016) investigated how Facebook affected reported political participation. They conducted an experiment in which they recruited Greek youths who did not have a Facebook account. The participants were required to create and maintain the account for a year. They examined the influence of maintaining a Facebook account on their political participation after 6 months. They reported that Facebook had negative impacts on reports of online and offline political participation.

On the other hand, the critiques of slacktivism assert that social media activism has a significant impact on individuals’ political participation. According to Kahn and Kellner (2004) and Karpf (2012), social media are useful tools that can be utilized to bring together a group and use it to put pressure on governments when needed. Vaccari et al. (2015) argue that exposure to political content on social media can lead to more offline participation. Bode (2012) argues that political engagement on social media can make individuals actively participate in offline political activities. According to Vie (2014), slacktivist activities, e.g., changing one’s profile picture, liking, sharing, or retweeting can create a more supportive political environment in particular for marginalized groups and gradually contribute to political action. Jones (2015) concluded that slacktivism can sometimes lead to high-cost and high-risk political activities. Lee and Hsieh (2013) studied how slacktivist activities, e.g., signing an online petition influenced a civic action later. They design an online experiment based on moral balancing and consistency effects to examine whether signing an online petition increased their contribution to a charity. They reported that participants who signed the online petition were more likely to donate money to a related charity, and the
participants who did not sign a petition were more likely to donate their participation payment to an unrelated charity. They concluded that involvement in low-cost and low-risk online activities can lead to offline civic actions.

Vaccari et al. (2015) studied the relationship between lower- and higher-threshold political activities among Italian Twitter users. They found that the participants were more likely to reach out to politicians, campaign for political parties and candidates on SNSs, and participate in offline political activities if they acquired more political information and participated in political discussions on SNSs. They suggested that lower forms of political engagement on SNSs were strongly associated with higher forms of political engagement. Yung and Leung (2014) reported that Facebook played numerous roles in the Hong Kong political arena. It served as an information carrier, channel for promotion, mobilizing tool, and a space for people with similar political views to meet and exchange ideas. Chan (2016) reported that prodemocracy protest organizers in 2014 used SNSs in particular Facebook to explain their agenda and give out mobilization information to the public. Around 100,000 protesters used Facebook to post messages, photos, and footages from the protests. The yellow umbrella, which became iconic in the protests, was used by thousands of Facebook users as their profile picture as a way to express their support for the protests.

Feezell et al. (2009) investigated the quality of political group discussion on SNSs and the impacts of online group membership on political engagement. They measured them by political knowledge and political participation with respect to the US 2008 election. They found out that political engagement on SNSs was effective in increasing offline political participation. However, it did not have any significant impact on the level of political knowledge. Moghanizadeh (2013) investigated the role of social media in particular SNSs in the birth of the Green Movement in Iran in post-2009 elections. The results of the 2009 presidential elections in Iran became disputed and Iranian ordinary citizens protested against the election results. The government restricted political discussions on conventional media through censorship and filtering. Iranians used social networking sites, i.e., Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to discuss the results of the elections, disseminate, and exchange information about the Green Movement. They played a key role in the creation of the Green Movement in Iran through the dissemination of information and news. The Iranian government, realizing the role of SNSs in mobilizing Iranians, started to restrict access to SNSs.

Apuke and Tunca (2018) investigated the role of SNSs in electoral processes and campaigns particularly in the Nigerian 2015 presidential elections. They reported that SNSs were utilized for a political campaign, “electioneering crusades” and voters’ mobilization. The findings also showed that SNSs played a crucial and deciding role in the 2015 elections. They increased the youths’ political awareness and consciousness, which helped the opposition party to win the 2015 elections.

Ali et al. (2013) studied the impact of Facebook in Pakistan. They reported that Facebook was used to disseminate information including political information, to organize protests, to advocate for social change, and to facilitate political discussion. Moreover, politicians and political parties used Facebook to introduce their agenda and policies to Pakistanis especially youths, who made up 70% of the Pakistan population in 2014, and most of whom used social media. Similarly, Meti et al. (2015) studied the role of social media in political mobilization in India. They found out that politicians used social media especially SNSs to promote their agenda, to mobilize, and to invite people to discuss issues of public interest. Moreover, they reported that SNSs provided the opportunity for Indian politicians and political parties to interact with their supporters in a way that they were not able to do in the past. Indian ordinary citizens used SNSs to get their news, to campaign for their favorite candidate, to share their political views, and to read the agenda and programs of political parties and the candidates.

Afghans have used various SNSs for different purposes. ATR Consulting (2014) reported that the most widely used social media platforms were Facebook, Google, YouTube, and Twitter in
Afghanistan. Afghans used social media for a number of purposes, and connection with family and friends was reported to be the most common use of social media. However, around 25% of the participants stated that they used SNSs for political purposes, e.g., conveying a political message and mobilizing people. Furthermore, the study reported that SNSs played a positive role in the presidential election campaign of 2014. SNSs users posted and shared political information and campaign related activities on SNSs, and they showed their support and campaigned for their favorite presidential candidates on SNSs. The study also reported the negative role of social media in the 2014 presidential election, e.g., spreading fake news and fueling conflict.

Altai Consulting (2017) investigated social media use in Afghanistan. The findings showed that most of social media users were young and educated. Facebook was reported to be the most widely used SNSs in Afghanistan followed by messaging applications, e.g., Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp. Ten percent of the participants reported that they used Twitter, and Twitter was perceived to target a higher-level audience. Moreover, Twitter was rated more trustworthy than any other SNSs in Afghanistan. The study also found that the Afghans used SNSs primarily for private communication and SNSs users were aware of the content related to current issues, but it was rarely used as a platform for mobilizing people for a particular cause. The content on social media was mostly related to government, politics, elections, and security. However, engagement on SNSs was reported to be superficial and it was mainly driven by likes that required the lowest degree of effort by SNSs users.

2.1. Problem statement
Social media in particular SNSs is widely used in Afghanistan, and it has played a crucial role in the life of the Afghans. They use SNSs for various reasons, e.g., connection with family and friends, sharing photos and their life experiences, and getting the news. Studies have explored the use of social media in Afghanistan before, but their scope was largely broad. This study is different from other studies about social media use in Afghanistan since it solely focuses on political participation and their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on social networking sites in particular Facebook. Unfortunately, no research has been carried out to explore the political participation of Afghan youths on Facebook. This study is an attempt to eliminate the gap in the literature in the context of Afghanistan and makes a contribution to the growing body of literature on social networking sites. Furthermore, it offers insights for social media studies on a number of variables including gender, age, and employment status.

2.2. Purpose of the study
The major goal of the research is to investigate the political participation of Afghan youths on Facebook. It also studies their frequency of Facebook. Furthermore, it explores the impact of the participants' gender, age, and employment status on their responses. The study addresses the following questions.

1. How often do Afghan youths use Facebook on a daily basis?
2. To what extent are Afghan youths politically active on Facebook?
3. To what extent were Afghan youths engaged in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences in the responses of participants by their gender, age, and employment status?

3. Methodology
3.1. Context of the study
Afghanistan has gone through numerous conflicts for almost four decades. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001 when a US-led attack to Afghanistan toppled the regime. They imposed their own interpretation of Sharia (Islamic rulings) in Afghanistan. They neglected
public and social services and enforced prohibitions on behaviors they deemed not to be Islamic. Girls and women were barred from attending school let alone university, and they were required to wear chadori (head-to-toe burqa). The Taliban banned television and music, and they lashed or jailed men whose beards were deemed to be short. No political parties were operating in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. The public was banned from almost all political acts. They did not have any role in the election of their government officials and government policies. They had no choice but to accept officials appointed by the Taliban central government. They did not have the right to criticize or protest Taliban government policies. They were gravely punished if they voiced their concerns. A large percentage of the population in particular women left illiterate and driven into poverty. Minority groups were persecuted and a large number of educated people were forced to flee the country (HRW, 2017; Maizland & Laub, 2014; Roof, 2014).

Afghans have gained a wide variety of political rights and have been engaged in various political acts since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. They have elected the Afghan president, members of the Afghan parliament, and provincial councils. They have the right to criticize government officials and protest government policies. They can freely express their ideas and thoughts and even they can challenge senior government officials in public discussions and debates, which is unprecedented in the region. Women returned to public life and they have actively participated in political activities in the country. For instance, more than 35% of the voters in the 2014 presidential elections were women. They have the right to run for the highest office in the country. Afghanistan’s independent media, which was totally dismantled during the Soviet occupation and the Taliban regime, was reborn and played a crucial role in the country. There are more than 75 private TV and radio stations as well as hundreds of print and online outlets through which Afghans have expressed their political thoughts and ideas freely (Ibrahim & Mussarat, 2014; Lemmon, 2014; USAID, 2019).

Afghanistan has also made significant progress with regard to literacy rate and access to education since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. It was estimated that only 27% of the Afghan men and 5.6% of the Afghan women were literate in 2001 (Afghanistan, 2001). According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the current literacy rate is at 43% in Afghanistan. The literacy rate for youths stands at 65%. However, there still exist significant gender disparities in education. The literacy rate for men is 55% while it is 29.8% for women (UIL, 2020). Furthermore, it is estimated that over 9 million children including over 3.5 million girls are enrolled in Afghan schools. It is also estimated that around 300,000 students including 100,000 women are enrolled in public and private universities in Afghanistan (USAID, 2020).

Several reasons account for the gender disparity in education in the country. The conservatism of the Afghan society and cultural norms limit girls’ access to education. Many men and women particularly in rural parts of the country still believe that women are for the kitchen and raising children, and men are the family breadwinners. In other words, they deny the public life for women. Furthermore, many families fear that nobody will marry their daughters if they break the established norms—girls doing the housework and not leaving the house. Therefore, many parents do not allow their daughters to go to school or university. Consequently, it has led to a lack of public support for equal access to education for women. For instance, Sadat et al. (2015) reported that the number of Afghans who strongly believed that women should have equal access to educational opportunities dropped from 58.5% in 2006 to 37.8% in 2015. The Taliban has banned girls from attending schools in the areas under their control. They have burned down many female schools in different parts of the country since their fall in 2001, and they have threatened families to death, who let their daughters go to school or university. Other reasons are insecurity, inadequate facilities, and distance to a school or a university (Aturupane, 2013; Roof, 2014).

However, the current situation of Afghanistan is very fragile although the international community has provided massive military, economic, and political assistance in the last two decades.
Since its ouster, the Taliban has maintained its insurgency against the US-led coalition and the Afghan government. The Taliban has continued to take territory in the country. They have carried out a large number of terror attacks in Afghanistan and has killed thousands of Afghan soldiers and civilians. Violence is on the rise, and civilian casualties take place on a daily basis. Criminal activities have caused fears among citizens even in the most peaceful cities in the country (Maizland & Laub, 2014; Thier & Worden, 2017).

The United States and the Taliban signed a peace deal in early 2020 after more than 10 rounds of negotiations between them, which resulted in a complete reduction of the Taliban’s violence against the American assets and interests in Afghanistan. However, their violence against the Afghan government and the public significantly increased since then. The US-Taliban agreement contained five main provisions one of which was intra-Afghan peace talks since the Taliban rejected direct peace negotiations with the Afghan government (ACLED, 2020). Many Afghans fear that a US-Taliban deal could result in erosion of hard-won rights and freedom in particular women’s rights because the Taliban has changed little since 2001 and they still seek to reestablish an Islamic government based on their own strict interpretation of Sharia in Afghanistan.

3.2. Participants
The participants of the study were 422 youths including 156 females living in four cities (Baghlan, Faizabad, Kunduz and Taliquan) in Northeastern Afghanistan whose population was estimated to be fewer than 400,000 people in 2019 (Afghanistan, n.d.). They were between 18 and 30 years old. The reason for choosing 18 as the lower limit of age was the fact that the legal age to vote in Afghanistan was 18 at the time of the study. Around 55% of the participants were between 18 and 24 years old and 45% were between 25 and 30 years old. A large number of the participants were university students (66%) followed by respondents with a full-time job (25%).

3.3. Data collection instrument
A thorough review of the literature was carried out in order to design the questionnaire. The questionnaire items were adopted from the studies carried out by Masiha et al. (2018), Mahmud and Amin (2017), Alami (2017), Muntean (2015), and Kamiloğlu and Erdoğan (2014). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part sought the participants’ demographic information, i.e., gender, age, education and employment status, and elicited information about their frequency of Facebook use on a daily basis. The second part consisted of 12 items aimed to seek the participants’ responses on their political participation on Facebook. The last part is composed of 15 items that sought the participants’ responses about their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. The participants were required to indicate to what extent they used Facebook for political activities stated by the 27 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = very frequently). The author translated the questionnaire into Dari (the lingua franca of Afghanistan) since English is a foreign language and most of the population cannot speak English.

3.4. Data collection procedure
The author began data collection 3 weeks after the presidential elections in Afghanistan, which was held on 28 September 2019. Google Form was used to design the survey questionnaire. The link of the questionnaire along with an invitation letter was shared on social networking sites, i.e., Facebook and Twitter. It was shared on four Facebook groups with hundreds of members from Northeastern Afghanistan. The letter explained the purpose of the study and the conditions for participating in the study. The participants were required to express their consent by ticking a box containing “I agree to participate in the study” before completing the questionnaire. They were required to read the instructions and complete the questionnaire. The survey questionnaire was available for a period of two weeks, between 13th and 27th of October. The participants were informed about the close of the questionnaire on 27th of October, and they were also made sure of the confidentiality of their responses.
3.5. Data analysis
The author downloaded the data from Google form in Excel spread-sheet after the questionnaire was closed. The data were numerically coded and imported to SPSS version 26.0 for analysis. The data were closely examined to make sure the participants completed the questionnaire appropriately although all the items in the questionnaire were created as mandatory. Descriptive statistics were employed to determine the frequency, the mean, and the standard deviation of the data. The independent sample T-test was carried out to explore the differences between two groups of the participants, i.e., gender and age. Furthermore, the One-Way ANOVA test was run to determine the differences between more than two groups of the participants, i.e., employment status.

4. Results

4.1. Frequency of Facebook use
Descriptive statistics were run to answer the first research question, “how often do Afghan youths use Facebook on a daily basis?” The results show that the participants used Facebook to a various extent every day. As Table 1 shows, 37% of the participants reported that they used Facebook for at least half an hour every day. Around 49% of the participants used Facebook between 1 and 1.5 hours every day. Moreover, 14% of the Afghan youths used Facebook 2 and more than 2 hours every day. Thus, it is concluded that Afghan youths spend on average 2–3 hours of their time on Facebook every day.

4.2. Political participation on Facebook
Descriptive statistics were run to answer the second research question, “to what extent are Afghan youths politically active on Facebook?” The overall mean score of the participants’ responses for each statement was calculated. Following Afghan politicians has received the highest mean score 3.02 (SD = 1.413) followed by reading about national political issues with mean score of 2.82 (SD = 1.356) and reading about local political issues with a mean score of 2.76 (SD = 1.299). Texting about public issues and discussing them on Facebook received a mean score of 2.73 (SD = 1.251) and 2.53 (SD = 1.224), respectively. Sharing the policy of a party and supporting it through Facebook posts have received the lowest mean scores (Table 2). This analysis indicates that Afghan youths’ political participation is passive. That is, it is limited to political activities that do not require more efforts and commitments.

4.3. Engagement in 2019 presidential elections on Facebook
Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to answer the third research question “To what extent were Afghan youths engaged in 2019 presidential elections on Facebook?” The mean score of the participants’ responses for each statement was calculated. As Table 3 demonstrates, following one or more presidential candidates received the highest mean score of 3.15 (SD = 1.397) followed by reading presidential candidates’ agendas with a mean score of 2.83 (SD = 1.373). Moreover, commenting on presidential candidates and their followers’ posts on Facebook received a mean score of 2.19 (SD = 1.166) and 2.11 (SD = 1.064), respectively. The mean score of the responses to 11 other items is less than 2.0. Thus, it is concluded that Afghan youths were not very engaged in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. Their involvement was limited mainly to activities such as following presidential elections and reading their programs on Facebook, which are considered as low-level activities in online political activism.

4.4. Participants’ demographic profile
The author discusses the influence of the participants’ demographic profile, i.e., gender, age, and employment status on their frequency of Facebook use, political participation, and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook.

4.4.1. Political participation and gender
Descriptive statistics and independent samples T-test were conducted to determine the impact of the participants’ gender on their frequency of Facebook use on a daily basis, their political
| Valid  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| 30 minutes | 156       | 37.0    | 37.0          | 37.0                |
| 1 hour | 110       | 26.1    | 26.1          | 63.0                |
| 1.5 hours | 96        | 22.7    | 22.7          | 85.8                |
| 2 hours | 37        | 8.8     | 8.8           | 94.5                |
| 3 hours | 15        | 3.6     | 3.6           | 98.1                |
| 3+ hours | 8         | 1.9     | 1.9           | 100.0               |
| Total   | 422       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                     |
participation and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. As Table 4 shows, the difference in the mean score of female and male participants is 0.04, which does not indicate a significant impact. Moreover, the result of the T-test (Table 5) shows that the p-value (0.767) is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Furthermore, the result of the T-test for all the 27 statements seeking the participants' political participation and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook demonstrate that the p-value is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Thus, it is concluded that the participants' gender does not have any significant impact on their frequency of Facebook use, political participation and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook.

4.4.2. Political participation and age
The result of descriptive statistics reveals that the difference in the mean score of age group (18–24) and age group (25–30) is 0.06 (Table 6). It does not indicate a significant difference. In addition, independent sample T-test was run to further explore the differences between age groups. The result (Table 7) shows that the p-value (0.625) is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Moreover, a T-test was carried out to understand whether the age of the participants impacted

| No. | Statement                                                                 | N   | Mean | SD   |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|------|
| 1   | I invite people to different political activities on Facebook.            | 422 | 1.87 | 1.065|
| 2   | I share the policy of a particular party on Facebook.                    | 422 | 1.56 | 1.013|
| 3   | I support a political party through my posts on Facebook.                | 422 | 1.59 | 1.037|
| 4   | I post texts about public issues on Facebook.                            | 422 | 2.73 | 1.251|
| 5   | I post videos about political issues on Facebook.                        | 422 | 1.92 | 1.111|
| 6   | I post pictures about political issues on Facebook.                      | 422 | 1.78 | 1.209|
| 7   | I discuss various public issues on Facebook.                             | 422 | 2.53 | 1.224|
| 8   | I discuss political issues with my friends through Facebook.            | 422 | 1.67 | 1.048|
| 9   | I express my political opinions through Facebook.                        | 422 | 1.41 | 1.017|
| 10  | I read about local political issues on Facebook.                         | 422 | 2.76 | 1.299|
| 11  | I read about national political issues on Facebook.                      | 422 | 2.82 | 1.356|
| 12  | I follow Afghan politicians on Facebook.                                 | 422 | 3.02 | 1.413|

Valid N (listwise) 422
| No. | Statement                                                                 | N   | Mean | SD  |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|-----|
| 1   | I followed one or more presidential candidates on Facebook.               | 422 | 3.15 | 1.397 |
| 2   | I shared campaign-related updates on Facebook.                            | 422 | 1.56 | 0.984 |
| 3   | I campaigned for a particular presidential candidate on Facebook.         | 422 | 1.43 | 0.939 |
| 4   | I shared the ads of a particular presidential candidate on Facebook.      | 422 | 1.41 | 0.864 |
| 5   | I encouraged other Facebook users to vote in presidential elections.      | 422 | 1.67 | 1.063 |
| 6   | I discouraged other Facebook users to vote in presidential elections     | 422 | 1.30 | 0.725 |
| 7   | I motivated Facebook users to vote to a presidential candidate.           | 422 | 1.70 | 1.201 |
| 8   | I demotivated other Facebook users to vote to a particular presidential candidate. | 422 | 1.48 | 1.019 |
| 9   | I commented on presidential candidates' posts on Facebook.                | 422 | 2.11 | 1.064 |
| 10  | I commented on posts of presidential candidates' followers on Facebook.  | 422 | 2.19 | 1.166 |
| 11  | I read presidential candidates' agendas on Facebook.                      | 422 | 2.83 | 1.373 |
| 12  | I criticized presidential candidates' agendas on Facebook.                | 422 | 1.95 | 1.204 |
| 13  | I asked presidential candidates questions through Facebook.               | 422 | 1.65 | 1.083 |
| 14  | I asked questions in presidential debates through Facebook.               | 422 | 1.47 | 0.895 |

(Continued)
their political participation and their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. The result showed that the p-value of the participants’ responses to all the 27 statements, which elicited the participants’ political participation and their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook, was greater than the alpha level (0.05). It, therefore, is concluded that there are not any statistically significant differences between age groups.

4.4.3. Political participation and employment status
As Table 8 indicates, the mean score of self-employed respondents is the highest 3.57 (SD = 0.787) followed by unemployed ones with a mean score of 3.39(SD = 1.264). The participants with the part-time job have the lowest mean score of 2.69(SD = 1.009). One-Way ANOVA test was carried out to further explore the differences in responses of the participants by their employment status. The result (Table 9) shows that the p-value (0.091) is greater than the alpha
Table 7. Independent Samples T-test of participants’ Facebook use by age

| Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances | t-test for Equality of Means | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                        | F | Sig. | t  | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed                | .005 | .945 | .489 | 420 | .625 | .059 | -.179 | .297 |
| Equal variances not assumed            | .488 | 4.00437 | .626 | 400 | .059 | -.179 | .298 |
Table 8. Participants’ frequency of Facebook use by their employment status

| Employment Status | N  | Mean | Std. deviation | Std. error |
|-------------------|----|------|----------------|------------|
| Student           | 236| 3.25 | 1.322          | .086       |
| full-time         | 105| 3.22 | 1.083          | .106       |
| part-time         | 36 | 2.69 | 1.009          | .168       |
| self-employed     | 7  | 3.57 | .787           | .297       |
| Unemployed        | 38 | 3.39 | 1.264          | .205       |
| Total             | 422| 3.22 | 1.236          | .060       |

Table 9. ANOVA test

|                | Sum of squares | df | Mean square | F     | Sig.  |
|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|-------|
| Between Groups | 12.237         | 4  | 3.059       | 2.021 | .091  |
| Within Groups  | 631.140        | 417| 1.514       |       |       |
| Total          | 643.377        | 421|             |       |       |

level (0.05). Furthermore, the results of the One-Way ANOVA test show that the p-value of the responses for all the 27 statements seeking the participants’ political participation and their involvement in the 2019 presidential elections was greater than the alpha level (0.05). Thus, it is concluded that the participants’ employment status did not have any impact on their frequency of Facebook use, political participation, and their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook.

5. Discussion
The use of social networking sites is very popular among Afghan youths and Facebook is the most popular SNS in Afghanistan. This study aimed to investigate the frequency of Facebook use of Afghan youths, their political participation and their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. It also studied whether there were any statistically significant differences between participants by their gender, age, and employment status. The analysis of the data revealed that Afghan youths used Facebook on a daily basis. They used it on average 2–3 hours every day. It supports the findings of the study carried out by ATR Consulting (2014) that reported that most of the social media users in Afghanistan were young people, and Facebook was reported to be the most widely used SNS in Afghanistan. They also reported that around 89% of their participants used Facebook and they logged on Facebook at least two times a day.

The findings also showed that Afghan youths were not actively participating in political activities on Facebook. They were engaged in low-risk and low-cost political activities that required very little or no effort and commitment. Their political activities on Facebook were limited to following Afghan politicians, reading about national and local political issues and posting texts about public issues on Facebook. This finding corroborates the findings of the study by Altai Consulting (2017) that reported that engagement in political activities on social media was superficial. It is also in line with the finding of the study by Ternes et al. (2014) who reported that the majority of their participants were not actively engaged in political activities on Facebook. However, it contradicts the findings of the study carried out by Keating and Melis (2017). Afghan youths sometimes discussed public issues on Facebook, which is considered an active political participation by Robertson et al. (2009). Surprisingly, Afghan youths rarely supported political parties on Facebook. It implies that a small number of Afghan youths have been affiliated with political parties in Afghanistan since 2001. It might be due to the fact that the Afghan population in particular youths do not have a good memory of political parties since they had a key role in the
civil war (1992–1996) in the country in which thousands of Afghans lost their lives and many more were maimed (Dorronsoro, 2007).

Similarly, the results showed that Afghan youths were involved in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook to a very small extent. They were engaged in electoral activities that did not require a great deal of efforts and commitment. Their involvement was limited mainly to following presidential candidates, and reading their agendas and programs on Facebook. Moreover, they commented on the posts of presidential candidates and their followers from time to time. This finding contradicts that of the study conducted by ATR Consulting (2014), which reported that social media including Facebook had a significant impact on the campaign activities in the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan.

One major reason accounts for the low engagement of Afghan youths in the 2019 presidential elections both on SNSs and offline. There was a very high voter turnout in the 2014 presidential elections; around 8 million voters cast their ballot in the 2014 presidential elections. However, the results of the 2014 presidential elections were never announced and instead a national unity government was formed with the intervention of the international community especially the US in which the top two first-round vote-getters shared the power (Byrd, 2015). It resulted in the loss of Afghans’ trust in the electoral processes and electoral offices in Afghanistan. Consequently, they were not engaged in electoral processes and activities both offline and online in particular on Facebook in 2019. For example, the turnout was very low in the 2019 presidential elections. Fewer than 2 million people out of 9 million registered voters cast their ballot in the 2019 presidential elections (Adili, 2020). It can be the reason why Afghan youths were not engaged in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook and their involvement did not go beyond political activities that required the minimum efforts and commitment.

In addition, the findings showed that there were not any statistically significant differences between Afghan youths’ frequency of Facebook use, political participation, and their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook by their gender, age, and employment status. It is similar with the result of the study carried out by Meeswan (2016) and Keating and Melis (2017) who reported that gender did not have any significant impact on the use of the Internet for political participation. The study disproved the common perception that the unemployed Afghan youths spend more time on social media in particular Facebook than those with some type of employment.

6. Conclusion
Facebook is the most popular social networking site in Afghanistan. It has been utilized for various purposes. This research studied frequency of Facebook use and the extent of Afghan youths’ political participation and their engagement in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. Although the participants utilized Facebook for at least half an hour every day, they were not actively participating in political activities on Facebook. Afghan youths were found to be participating in political activities, which are considered low-risk and low-cost activism. Their political activities on Facebook ranged from following Afghan politicians to reading about the national and local political issues to posting texts about public issues. They were not much involved in political activities on Facebook that required a higher level of effort and commitment. Their engagement in political activities on Facebook such as inviting people to political activities, supporting political parties, discussing political issues, and expressing political opinions was found to be below average. Similarly, Afghan youths were not actively engaged in the 2019 presidential elections on Facebook. They were engaged in activities that were considered as low level of electoral activities on Facebook. They followed presidential candidates, read their agendas and sometimes commented on their posts. Their engagement in electoral activities such as campaigning for a particular candidate, encouraging or discouraging Facebook users to vote in elections, and criticizing candidates’ agendas was below average. Furthermore, demographic profiles of the participants, i.e., gender, age, and employment status did not have any significant
impact on their frequency of Facebook use, online political participation, and engagement in the 2019 presidential elections.

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