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Freedom of Expression in Digital Age: An Analysis of Twitter in Context of Pak-China Relationship

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Abstract: *This article is aimed to provide an analysis regarding the freedom of expression on Twitter in the digital age. Freedom of expression in the digital age is the capability of an individual through which they are able to express their beliefs, thoughts, ideas and emotions on various issues via different social media platforms that are free from governmental censorship. These freedoms play a significant role, as now, each individual can have his/her own perspectives and school of thoughts; and can live his/her life as per own choice. The present study is a discourse analysis of the Pak-China relations debate as top trend hashtags on Twitter in 2020. The data was collected through Mozdeh Big Data Software. The top twenty tweets with the highest likes in seven trending hashtags have been studied as per Searle's Speech Act Analysis. The study shows that how Twitter as a social media platform provides a forum of free debate for everyone.*

Key Words: Freedom of Expression, Twitter, Digital Age, Pak-China, Speech Act Analysis

Introduction

Freedom of speech is one of the basic human rights that are being constrained in the cover of different standards of morality, ethics, national interest and other factors. According to [Malik \(2019\)](#), the use of social networking sites has increased and created a massive launch towards freedom of speech. The increased usage of social networking sites has provided a platform to create online debates and discussions that are leading society towards a major change of freedom of expression ([Rainie et al., 2017](#)). Having open access to social networking sites has also provided countless opportunities for social media users for illuminating and stimulating their personalities

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and identifying their roles and responsibilities in this regard. The development of virtual entities is becoming common as compared to real-world entities ([Khalid, 2014](#)).

A new public sphere has been developed in the form of social media, and more people are utilizing the digital presence to produce their emotions and to debate various matters of personal, national and international level on the internet. In the light of digital presence on social media, Twitter has gained very high popularity in this domain, and various people are now present on the portal to share their expressions of freedom ([Bruns & Highfield, 2015](#)).

Despite being surrounded by other countries, Pakistan's geographical location has its importance that cannot be denied. Regarding Pakistan relationship with the neighbouring countries, it has been observed that China is most important as a regional power and a friendly neighbour of Pakistan. Here, according to [Newman \(2018\)](#), the issues might be common; however, the interests of these nations are entirely different.

The present study has aimed to highlight the involvement and penetration of the people on the social media platform "Twitter" regarding common issues within China and Pakistan. The study of Hintz (2016) has reflected that Twitter is one of the most commonly used social networking sites and has been offering a range of features to be used. It has been identified that the use of these websites is easily accessible and is also very much affordable for the common people to use. Therefore, it is getting common and is widely spread all around the world. As discussed in the study of [Rainie et al. \(2017\)](#), the use of Twitter has become common by the year 2008. Moreover, the use of Twitter became common with discussions based on politics and other related current issues that are coming up.

A strong and constant force of technology is considered as the driving force of social change, and more people are accepting the social media debates as the vital part of life that is putting up a different perspective for the mass people. A great number of people are now making perspective based on the technological innovation and social media presence that is affecting the human minds ([Bau et al., 2014](#)). Debate on the trending issues on social media is affecting the thinking process of the people that could lead to the changing behaviour and actions. However, the study aims to find if social media debates are an opportunity for freedom of expression regarding international issues and foreign relations. The underlying assumptions of social media are that it is affecting the way of life, and the thinking process is getting affected by the debates regarding politics and any other aspect ([Nicholson et al., 2016](#)). Social relationship building, information on trending topics, million tweets are the basic elements that are provided by the platform known as Twitter ([Kwak et al., 2010](#)).

The study of [Oberst et al. \(2017\)](#) has highlighted that it is important to identify the sentiments and roles of the general public and the opinions carried out by the government of Pakistan. The researcher has also identified the differences in this regard and has highlighted the differences and points of concern of different people who are there on different social media platforms. The researcher has assessed the freedom for discussing the related public speeches. The discussion of

these issues might be sensitive and can also create massive issues for the people due to the reason of having legal actions and gaining legal notices.

China is one of the most technologically advanced countries, and it has no competition when it comes to trade. It has also benefited Pakistan a lot through military, economic and technical aid. The country has one of the finest engineers and technicians who have been a part of many projects of the government of Pakistan (Zeb, 2012). On the other hand, Pakistan has been firm when supporting China on Xinjiang, Tibet and other various human right issues. China and the United States have been facing serious issues amongst them (Kataria & Naveed, 2014). The relations between both countries started when Pakistan recognized the People's Republic of China in 1949. Relations between both countries got stronger with the passage of time (Lawrance, 2013). Both countries have been supporting each other on various international platforms like China India war in 1962 (Baig, 2018). Around 60 million dollars were offered to Pakistan by the Chinese government along with military equipment, which included tanks and other aircraft (Lee, 2017).

China has also been the largest investor in Pakistan. Gwadar deep seaport, which is seen to be a game-changer for Pakistan's economy, also has a lot of contribution from China (Rahman, 2010). However, the location is equally important for China as well, as Gwadar port will provide access to China navy's submarines. (Zeb, 2012; Irshad, 2015). This is an important factor due to which the Chinese government have spent millions of dollars for China Pakistan economic corridor, which is also known as CPEC. Whereas Pakistan will benefit from better roads and infrastructure along with having a port on a prime location that will increase its trade (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015).

Coronavirus had come up as a major health crisis for China by the end of 2019. The country not only suffered in the field of health but also had a great impact on its economic sector as many countries closed their borders and stopped their trade with China (Fan et al., 2019). However, China was not the only country that suffered from the loss as slowly the virus spread all across the world, including Pakistan. Both countries have been supportive of each other in this tough time. Pakistan had helped China with pooling medical supplies along with moral support through all mediums (Tribune, 2020).

Following these two research questions related to the topic were studied in this research.

RQ 1: How the issues and discussion on Pak-China relations change with the change of medium?

RQ 2: Does social media provide a platform for freedom of expression?

Research Methodology

As the research is based on the social context to assess the freedom of expression on Twitter, therefore as per the study of Shanthi et al. (2017), in every social context, discourse analysis is the appropriate method used to study the natural occurrence of the language. The data was collected through purposive sampling. In this research, Twitter trends (hashtags) related to China was

studied. For qualitative analysis, Discourse analysis was done by using Speech Act Theory. Twitter trends were studied at five levels of Searle’s Taxonomy Assertive, Directive, Commissive, Expressive, Declarative.

Assertive

Searle says, “The point or purpose of the members of the assertive class is to commit the speaker to something’s being the case” (Searle, 1979, p. 12). The assertive can be identified as real or fake. These are discursive actions in light of the fact that the speaker needs the listener to acknowledge that the speaker accepts what he is saying about the world, and thus the speaker enacts a demonstration of discourse—for example, claiming, complaining or stating something.

Directives

which the speaker attaches to get the listener to do something. They can be subtle, such as asking or ordering.

Commissive

The purpose of these demonstrations of discourse is to present the speaker with some strategy for the future. Models are promising and advertising.

Expressive

They express the speaker's mental disposition in relation to the situation that illocution suggests. Models express gratitude, compliments and apologies.

Declaratives

When effectively reproduced, these discursive demonstrations achieve correspondence between reality and propositional content. A conversation is an action like “You are fired” or “I resign”. Such expressions are often included “hereby” to emphasize this influence.

In order to conduct the discourse analysis on China and Pakistan, these hashtags are utilized to collect tweets; #pakchina, #pakchinafriendship, #China_is_terrorist, #China_kills_Muslims, #StandWithUyghur, #coronavirusoutbreak, #CPEC.

The data on these hashtags were collected for the top twenty re-tweeted tweets through Mozdeh Big Data Software. A total of 140 tweets were analyzed, as shown in Table 1. The Twitter ID of the account handler has been kept confidential because of ethical values, and these tweets will be analyzed only based on the tweet statements.

Data Analysis

Table 1. Speech Act Analysis of Pak-China tweets

Category	No. of Tweets	%Age
Assertive	42	30
Directive	42	30

Commissive	28	20
Expressive	14	10
Declarative	14	10
Total	140	100

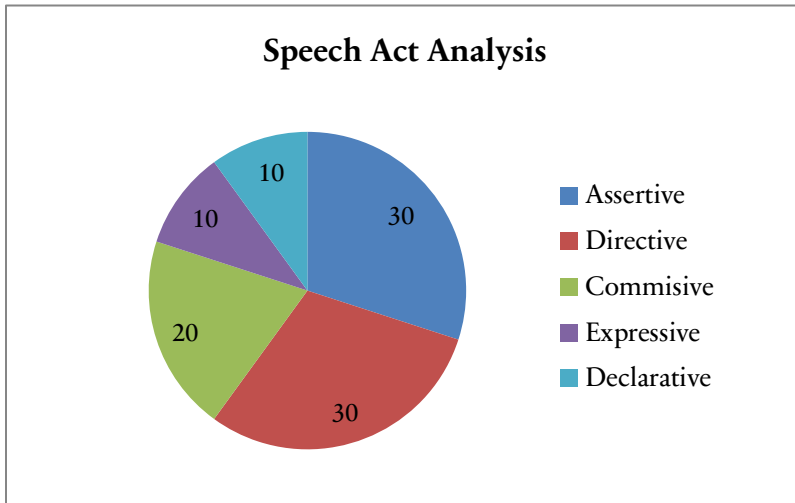


Figure 1: Speech Act Analysis of Pak Chia tweets

Fig 1 shows that 30% of tweets about Pak China were Assertive, 30% directive, 20 % Commissive and Expressive and Declarative were 10% each. It means that Twitter is providing a platform for its users to express their feelings as they want.

Speech Act Analysis

Among 140 tweets, the following ten tweets have been added in detailed Speech Act Analysis on the basis of most-liked tweets by the users.

1. @BarrettWilson6 @TPostMillennial Take a hike in China. #China_is_terrorist it's ti@e for payback Zi. You've killed 1,500,000 people.

Speech Act Type: Assertive

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is concluding its remarks about China for killing 1,500,000 people and suggesting it to be careful or be ready for the payback. This tweet can be included in the directives or expressive speech act as well, but the researcher has analyzed it only on the basis of the statement context. Therefore, this tweet is categorized as the assertives speech act. Meanwhile, it is a true sentence as China has established some concentration camps in its Xinjiang region where the Uyghur Muslims from different ethnicities are detained.

2. world human must stand up and say NO to china #ChinaVirus #CCP_is_terrorist #ChinaMustPay #coronavirus #COVID19 #china #usa #England #uk #taiwan #japan #indian #india #canada #australia #france #NewZealand #sweden #Germany #Europe #Swiss #CzechRepublic #kongeriketNorge #Denmark

Speech Act Type: Directives

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is suggesting boycotting China. One of the major reason for agitation against china rose because of the COVID-19 pandemic. After the spread of the virus, the whole world, particularly Americans, started to use this slogan to boycott china for blaming it for the pandemic.

3. This is real; we must put a stop to the persecution that our Uyghur brothers and sisters face by the communist dictatorial regime of China. #UyghurGenocide #CCP_is_terrorist #UyghurLivesMatter

Speech Act Type: Commissives

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is asking its listeners to stop china from killing the Uyghurs in China. This tweet is categorized as the commissives because the tweeter is asking for the boycott of china or compelling china to stop its persecution of the people of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. It was reported in 2018 that the Chinese government detained millions of Uyghurs. In addition to this, it was also reported that the people from Turkic, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz Muslims, Christians and several foreign citizens, particularly from Kazakhstan, were detained in the secretive internment camps that were formed in the whole region.

4. My big fear is China will just abandon its #muslim prisoners to die. I would not put this past the Chinese government. I really wouldn't. <https://t.co/8VfHH0MG3f> #Xinjiang #UighurMuslims #china_kills_muslims

Speech Act Type: Expressives

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is showing his feelings about the Muslims living in China. This tweet is categorized as expressive because the tweeter is showing his thoughts of fear about the Muslims living in china. Such tweets on social media, particularly on Twitter, were tweeted because of the detention camps formed by the Chinese government and detaining most of the individuals from the Muslim community. The international community observed these detention camps as the “re-education centers”. Therefore, the tweeter thinks that the Muslim community is targeted by the Chinese government, and they are kept in detention centres for dying.

5. #CPEC will not only change the fortune of #PakChina but will also bring prosperity to t whole region, which has been suffering from poverty, hunger and illiteracy for so many

decades We are playing our roles for the success of #CPEC in our capacities @AsimSBajwa

Speech Act Type: Declarative

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is showing his feelings about the CPEC Project initiated by China-Pakistan. This tweet is categorized as the Assertive because the tweeter is suggesting the benefits of the CPEC Project and its positive impacts on Pakistan's economic growth, which is now 62 billion US dollars of worth investment in Pakistan by the Chinese government and investors. (TRT world Magazine 2021)

6. Peaceful protest for supporting Uyghurs who share the same tyranny #CCP with Hong Kong turns into violence by #HKPolice Finger vs Gun Which side is more violent ? Say NO to #HKPoliceBrutality #StandWithHongKong #StandWithUyghur #SOSHK #FightForFreedom #HongKongProtests

Speech Act Type: Directives

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is showing his feelings about the Muslims living in China. This tweet is categorized as the directive because the tweeter is asking about suggestions about the violent protests in Hong Kong. In this tweet, the tweeter has compared the situations of Uyghurs with Hong Kong as the detention camps were formed by the Chinese government and detaining most of the individuals from the Muslim community. The international community observed these detention camps as the "re-education centers". Therefore, the tweeter thinks that the Muslim community is targeted by the Chinese government, and they are kept in the detention center for dying. In the same way, the Chinese Police changed the peaceful protests of Hong Kong into violent protests by using Guns on them.

7. We love each other because we are one #Pakistan #China #CPEC #PakChinaFriendShip

Speech Act Type: Assertiveness

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is showing his feelings about the CPEC Project initiated by China-Pakistan. This tweet is categorized as Assertive because the tweeter is suggesting that China and Pakistan are with each other. The relations between China and Pakistan has always remained cordial, but it was further developed by the initiative of the CPEC Project by China in 2013 and its positive impacts on Pakistan's economic growth, which is now 62 billion US dollars of worth investment in Pakistan by the Chinese government and investors.

8. Pakistan has not only become a colony but will also become a #ProvinceOfChina. Inshallah! Long live 'sweet as honey & deep as an ocean' #Pakistan #China Friendship!

#PakistanBecomingChineseColony #PakistanMovingForward #CPEC @CPEC_Official @PakPMO

Speech Act Type: Assertives

This tweet is Assertive because the person who has expressed his feeling is very much confident that on the basis of CPEC, Pakistan will become a part of China. Although Pakistan and China are negating the perception of expansionism of China through CPEC, a segment of the public in Pakistan has a fear that China may take over the sovereignty of Pakistan in the disguise of CPEC. This discourse is totally in contrast to the government stance

9. Chinese companies are coming to Pakistan not just for the sake of business but for establishing long-term contacts at the grass-root level #CPEC #BRI @zlj517 @CathayPak @China_CIIT @WangXianfeng8 @AsimSBajwa @PakAmbChina @zhang_heqing @AmbNong

Speech Act Type: Commissive

This tweet has been analyzed on the basis of the complete statement. This Tweet is Commissive because the tweeter is predicting something for the future. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is expressing himself about the CPEC Project from a positive perspective. This tweet is characterized as the commissive because the tweeter is predicting the future of CPEC that it will not only be beneficial economically only, but it will also create friendship ties at the grass-root level in both countries.

10. I am afraid this Govt has completely stalled #CPEC work, its lifeline for Pakistan. what are you doing @ImranKhanPTI get up and kick the incompetent out

Speech Act Type: Directives

This tweet has been analyzed based on the complete statement. From the tweet, it is clear that the tweeter is showing his concerns about the delay in the CPEC project. This tweet is categorized as the directive because the tweeter is asking the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, to kick out the corrupt and incompetent people from this project.

Discussion

This study answers the research questions in the way that most of the tweets that were collected were related to human rights issues that were committed in China. The issue was not addressed in traditional mainstream media, and no official statement was released on these human rights violations by the Government of Pakistan. The tweeters were from Pakistan, and they shared their opinion about the human rights issues committed by China in Uyghur. However, before the advent of technology and then social media, people were self-centred. From history, we can know that there were very few numbers of revolutions, and they were ignited through print media or

announcements in the cities, but now the riots, revolts, protests or revolutions are increased in number.

Initially, the tweets related to Pakistan and China were analyzed. After the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the top (10) tweets in each category with more than 1K likes were included in the Speech Act analysis. In addition, the results showed that Four (4) tweets were categorized as assertives, Three (3) tweets as directives, Two (2) tweet as expressive and one (1) tweet as commissives.

Freedom of speech and expression is considered to be basic human rights in the present days. In spite of that, freedom of expression on social media is somehow restricted in most of the countries; among them, China is at the top list. China has regulated social networking sites, and the government monitors social media users. In the same way, in recent days, Pakistan has also regulated social networking sites just like traditional and conventional media. These regulations or restrictions are adopted on the basis of hatred speech, morality factors, nationality and several other factors. At the same times, it is also evident that social networking sites have become the foremost reason for the increased level of freedom of speech and expression. According to the statement of [Malik \(2019\)](#), social media debates have caused several changes in society, or it is the major contributor for the social change in the present days. According to [Rainie et al. \(2017\)](#), the number of users of social media has increased, and they are rapidly increasing.

Conclusion

According to Kilgour et al. (2015), social media evolution has developed the digital community, which has performed an important and significant role in giving voice to individuals. A vigorous platform that allows people to express their opinion is “Twitter”, which facilitates the exchange of statements that are equally valuable as a normal conversation. Twitter is considered to be the most significant platform for freedom of expression. In comparison to traditional media, social media does not only disseminate information to the public but also plays an important role in highlighting social wrongdoing and playing a helpful hand in criminal prosecution.

Within the social sciences, much attention is paid to the conceptualization of the role of social networks in contemporary culture ([Boyd, 2010](#)) and the relationship between the offline and online actors, events, social and political change, and institutions ([Briones et al., 2011](#)). At the same times, the empirical evidence has focused on sorting the types of content posted on social media ([Burgess, & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016](#)) and distinguishing between verbose practices used by savages and provocative users ([Castells, 2015](#)). The sociological work also benefits from computerized exploration of huge aggregated information indicators, for example, to track the spread of messages during the time of social unrest and pressures ([Clay, 2011](#)).

Consequently, it is likely that organized digital development is disrupting and reshaping mass communication in various ways, encouraging not only new kinds of attention, banter and co-investment but also additional threats and social instability ([Esu, 2013](#)).

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