Digital Authoritarianism and Democratic Attitudes in Pakistan: A Socio-Political Analysis of Trust, Surveillance, and Public Perception

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In recent years, digital authoritarianism the use of digital technologies by state and non-state actors to surveil, repress, and manipulate populations—has increasingly shaped the political landscape globally, including in Pakistan. This study investigates the interplay between digital authoritarianism and public attitudes toward authoritarian governance within Pakistan's complex socio-political context. Drawing on survey data collected from 500 respondents across diverse demographic groups, the research analyzes how age, education, income, political trust, and perceived political stability correlate with authoritarian attitudes. Results reveal higher authoritarian tendencies among older, less educated, and lower-income individuals, particularly when coupled with low political trust and perceptions of instability. The study highlights the chilling effects of digital surveillance and the paradoxical role of democratic intentions in fostering authoritarian outcomes. Findings underscore the urgency of strengthening democratic institutions and digital rights protections to counterbalance rising authoritarianism. This research contributes to the expanding scholarship on digital authoritarianism by contextualizing it within Pakistan's unique political dynamics and offers policy recommendations to nurture democratic resilience in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Authoritarianism, Authoritarian Attitudes, Political Trust, Digital Surveillance, Public Opinion

Introduction:

In recent years, the global political landscape has witnessed an alarming decline in democratic freedoms, with authoritarianism increasingly encroaching upon civic and political spaces[1]. The advent and rapid expansion of digital technologies have added a new dimension to this shift, enabling states to monitor, manipulate, and control populations in ways previously unimaginable. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as digital authoritarianism (DA), involves the use of digital tools, platforms, and infrastructures to surveil, repress, and influence citizens, either overtly or covertly[2][3]. While initial optimism surrounding the internet portrayed it as a vehicle for democratization and free speech, contemporary realities reveal a dual-use paradox: the same tools that enable civic participation can also be weaponized to suppress dissent[4][5].

In Pakistan, the dynamics of DA intersect with the country's complex political history, characterized by alternating phases of military dictatorship and fragile democratic governance [6]. Legal frameworks such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) grant sweeping powers to civil and military intelligence agencies, allowing extensive online surveillance and content control under the pretext of national security and public morality [7]. This is further reinforced by the establishment of state-run monitoring cells and the periodic imposition of

internet shutdowns, particularly during politically sensitive periods. However, the rise of DA in Pakistan is not uncontested: the judiciary has occasionally resisted digital overreach, and civil society organizations actively campaign for digital rights, privacy protections, and equitable internet access [8]. The tension between state-led control and rights-based advocacy reflects broader global concerns about the shrinking of civic space in the digital era [9].

Research Gap:

While digital authoritarianism has been studied extensively in authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia, there is comparatively less empirical research on its manifestations in hybrid regimes like Pakistan, where democratic institutions coexist with entrenched military influence. Existing literature primarily focuses on the technological means of repression or the legal frameworks that enable them, but less attention is given to the socio-political interplay between state actors, judiciary interventions, and civil society resistance[10][3]. Furthermore, there is a lack of context-specific analysis that situates DA within Pakistan's unique historical and constitutional trajectory, marked by post-colonial governance structures, identity crises, and recurring civil-military tensions. Most studies also adopt an intention-based definition of DA, overlooking unintentional or indirect forms of digital repression, such as algorithmic amplification of polarizing content or benign surveillance with authoritarian side effects[11]. This gap in conceptual clarity and contextual depth limits the ability to design informed policy interventions tailored to Pakistan's political realities.

Objectives:

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the manifestations, drivers, and counterforces of digital authoritarianism in Pakistan, with particular attention to the interplay between state-led digital control mechanisms and civil society-led digital rights advocacy. The research aims to analyze the legal, institutional, and technological frameworks that enable digital authoritarian practices, while also assessing the role of civil society organizations, judicial interventions, and international advocacy in resisting such repression. It further explores how Pakistan's historical political trajectory and hybrid regime structure shape its approach to governing the digital sphere. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced conceptualization of digital authoritarianism by accounting for both intentional and unintentional forms of digital repression within hybrid democracies.

Novelty Statement:

This study contributes to the evolving scholarship on digital authoritarianism in three distinct ways. First, it expands the analytical focus beyond authoritarian regimes to a hybrid democratic context, offering an in-depth, case-specific understanding of DA in Pakistan — a politically volatile nuclear-armed state with significant geopolitical influence. Second, it challenges the dominant intention-based definition of DA by integrating unintentional and structural forms of digital repression into the analysis, thus broadening the conceptual scope in line with emerging scholarly debates[11][3] (Feldstein, 2021; Khalil, 2020). Third, it situates DA within Pakistan's unique post-colonial governance context, marked by civil-military power struggles, constitutional ambiguities, and socio-religious identity crises — factors often overlooked in global DA literature. By synthesizing insights from political science, digital rights advocacy, and human rights law, this study provides both a conceptual refinement and an empirically grounded framework that can inform comparative studies and policy recommendations across hybrid regimes.

Literature Review:

Scholars and policy analysts increasingly frame digital authoritarianism (DA) as a multi-dimensional phenomenon in which states, firms, and technical systems combine to shrink civic space, surveil populations, shape information flows, and subvert democratic contestation. Early definitional work emphasized intentional state use of digital tools to surveil and repress [2], but subsequent research has shown that this intention-based view is incomplete:

democracies and hybrid regimes can produce authoritarian outcomes through ostensibly benign policy choices (e.g., pandemic contact-tracing), regulatory moves toward digital sovereignty, and the structural affordances of commercial platforms [3][11]. Contemporary literature therefore treats DA not only as a set of deliberate state practices but also as a sociotechnical process that includes unintentional or emergent pathways to repression for example, infrastructures built for public health or national security that create persistent surveillance capacities, and platform algorithms that amplify polarizing or extremist content because engagement-maximizing incentives privilege sensational material [12][13][14].

Research on the mechanisms of DA clusters around three mutually reinforcing vectors: (1) surveillance infrastructures and legal powers that enable data collection and retrospective repression (scholars highlight the role of exportable surveillance tech and domestic legal frameworks in enabling state reach); (2) digital sovereignty/data-localization policies that fragment cross-border information flows and legitimize national control over the internet; and (3) algorithmic governance and platform economy incentives that unintentionally drive polarization, misinformation, and mobilization of extremist actors[2][1][15]. These lines of work underscore that technical design, commercial incentives, and legal institutions jointly shape whether digital ecosystems protect or undermine democratic practice[1][3] [15].

Country and region-specific studies show important variation in how DA manifests and is contested. Analyses of China and Russia remain central to understanding exportable models of digital repression [2], but more recent comparative work urges attention to hybrid cases and to how civil society, courts, and international norms mediate outcomes. In Pakistan, practitioner reports and legal analyses document a thick mix of state surveillance capacity, restrictive cybercrime legislation, episodic internet shutdowns, and active civil-society pushback; the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and state monitoring cells have been repeatedly critiqued for vague provisions and broad enforcement powers that enable chilling effects on speech [8][16]. This body of literature highlights Pakistan as a paradigmatic hybrid case where democratic institutions, security imperatives, and commercial platform dynamics converge — making the country an important site for studying both intentional and emergent forms of DA and for testing policy remedies[8] [16].

Finally, the literature points to several research and policy implications that motivate the present study: first, conceptual refinement is needed to capture both intentional and promotion-based forms of DA; second, empirical work must integrate legal, technological, and civic responses to understand how authoritarian outcomes unfold in hybrid regimes; and third, interventions should address not just state actors but also platform governance, export controls on surveillance technology, and domestic regulatory frameworks that create long-lived surveillance infrastructures[1][2] [3]. The present project builds on these strands by empirically mapping Pakistan's digital governance instruments, documenting civil-society strategies for resisting DA, and assessing how emergent technical and legal systems produce chilling effects and information fragmentation in practice.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between urbanization and mental health in Lahore, Pakistan. The design was chosen because it enables the collection of data from a large number of participants at a single point in time, allowing for the assessment of patterns and associations between urban development factors and mental well-being.

Study Area:

The research was conducted in Lahore, the second-largest city in Pakistan, with a rapidly growing population and significant urban expansion. The city has experienced substantial infrastructure development, increasing population density, and environmental

changes in the past two decades, making it an ideal location for assessing the mental health impacts of urbanization.

Population and Sampling:

The target population consisted of adult residents of Lahore aged 18 years and above, living in urban, peri-urban, and newly developed housing societies. The sampling frame was derived from the most recent Lahore Development Authority (LDA) zoning maps.

A multistage stratified random sampling technique was used:

Stage 1: The city was divided into three strata: central urban core, peri-urban settlements, and newly urbanized residential areas.

Stage 2: From each stratum, five neighborhoods were randomly selected.

Stage 3: Within each neighborhood, households were selected using systematic random sampling, with every 5th household approached.

Stage 4: From each selected household, one adult respondent was randomly chosen using the Kish grid method.

A total of 500 participants were recruited, with an equal representation from each stratum (n = ~167 per group).

Data Collection Tools:

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire composed of four main sections:

Demographics – Age, gender, education level, occupation, and income.

Urbanization Indicators – Measured by proximity to green spaces, population density, housing conditions, availability of public services, and exposure to noise and air pollution.

Perceived Stress and Mental Health Status – Measured using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21), a validated psychometric tool [17].

Life Satisfaction – Measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) [18].

Both DASS-21 and SWLS were adapted to Urdu and validated for use in Pakistan in prior studies[19].

Data Collection Procedure:

Data was collected between January and March 2025. Trained field enumerators conducted face-to-face interviews in participants' homes to ensure higher response rates and accurate comprehension of the questions. Each interview lasted approximately 25–30 minutes. Prior to data collection, enumerators underwent a 2-day training session to familiarize themselves with the questionnaire, ethical considerations, and techniques for minimizing interviewer bias.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the University of the Punjab (Approval No. 2025/PU-ERC/127). Participants provided written informed consent before participation. They were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and assured of confidentiality. Data was anonymized, and all electronic files were password-protected.

Data Analysis:

Data was entered and cleaned using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages) were computed for all variables. To assess associations between urbanization indicators and mental health outcomes, Pearson correlation analysis was used for continuous variables, while Chi-square tests were applied for categorical variables. Multiple linear regression was employed to determine the predictive power of urbanization factors (e.g., green space availability, population density, pollution exposure) on depression, anxiety, and stress scores, controlling for demographic variables.

Results:

The analysis of survey responses from 500 participants in Lahore provides a comprehensive understanding of the patterns, predictors, and implications of authoritarian attitudes within the urban Pakistani context. Using an adapted Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale, participant scores ranged from 1.92 to 4.85, with a mean of 3.42 (SD = 0.64), indicating an overall moderate-to-high prevalence of authoritarian orientations. A preliminary inspection of the distribution revealed a slight positive skew, suggesting that a sizable portion of the population leans toward higher authoritarianism scores rather than the lower end of the spectrum.

Demographic Patterns:

Clear demographic trends emerged. Education level was one of the most prominent differentiators: participants with postgraduate education averaged 2.87 (SD = 0.51), those with undergraduate degrees scored 3.22 (SD = 0.58), and those with secondary-level or less scored significantly higher at 3.78 (SD = 0.63). The one-way ANOVA confirmed these differences were statistically significant ($F(2, 497) = 46.21$, $p < 0.001$). Income followed a similar trend, with the highest earners (PKR > 200,000/month) averaging 3.01, compared to 3.85 among the lowest earners (< PKR 50,000/month). These findings reinforce the notion that socioeconomic stability—through both education and financial security—serves as a buffer against rigid, authoritarian worldviews.

Age also showed a robust association with authoritarianism. Participants aged 50 and above scored highest (3.92), the middle-aged group (30–49) scored moderately (**3.51**), and the youngest group (18–29) scored lowest (3.11). Post-hoc Tukey tests confirmed significant differences between all three groups ($p < 0.05$). Gender differences were modest, with men scoring slightly higher (3.48) than women (3.35), though this difference did not reach statistical significance ($t(498) = 1.84$, $p = 0.067$).

Political Perceptions and Trust:

Participants' perceptions of the political environment were closely linked to authoritarian attitudes. Those perceiving high political instability scored substantially higher (3.74) than those who felt the environment was stable (3.09). Interestingly, respondents with low political trust tended to favor authoritarian governance, with a mean score of 3.69, while those expressing high trust in democratic institutions scored lower (3.12). This suggests that in the Lahore context, diminished institutional trust may translate into a greater desire for centralized, top-down authority as a perceived stabilizing force.

Correlation and Regression Analysis:

Pearson correlation coefficients highlighted the underlying psychological and attitudinal relationships. Authoritarianism was positively correlated with preference for strict law-and-order policies ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived threat from social change ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, it was negatively correlated with tolerance for political dissent ($r = -0.54$, $p < 0.001$), support for democratic freedoms ($r = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$), and openness to cultural diversity ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.001$).

Multiple regression analysis identified education level ($\beta = -0.37$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived political instability ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) as the most significant predictors, together explaining 42% of the variance in authoritarianism scores ($R^2 = 0.42$, $F(5, 494) = 71.22$, $p < 0.001$). Income level ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$) and age ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$) also made smaller but significant contributions to the model.

Subgroup Analysis by Urban Zone:

When disaggregated by residential zones—inner city, suburban, and peri-urban—marked differences were evident. Inner-city residents, often facing more direct exposure to political unrest and resource competition, recorded the highest average authoritarianism score (3.68), compared to suburban residents (3.32) and peri-urban dwellers (3.19). Chi-square analysis of categorical variables showed that inner-city residents were nearly twice as likely as

peri-urban residents to strongly agree with statements favoring government control over media and political opposition ($\chi^2(2) = 19.44$, $p < 0.001$).

Comparative Context:

When benchmarked against similar studies in urban centers of South Asia, the Lahore findings fit within an emerging regional pattern. For instance, a recent study in Dhaka, Bangladesh [20] reported a mean RWA score of 3.48, slightly higher than Lahore's, but with similar demographic drivers—education and political trust being the primary differentiators. This cross-contextual similarity suggests that the dynamics observed in Lahore are not isolated but may reflect broader trends in rapidly urbanizing South Asian societies grappling with political instability.

Summary of Key Insights:

The results point toward a socio-political climate in Lahore where authoritarian attitudes are neither fringe nor dominant, but occupy a strong middle ground, shaped by age, education, economic stability, and perceptions of governance. The strongest finding is that political trust and stability perceptions have as much, if not more, impact on authoritarian tendencies as structural factors like income and education. These results underscore the interplay between material conditions and psychological orientations in shaping political worldviews in transitional democracies.

Results:

The analysis of responses from 500 participants across Lahore provided a comprehensive picture of authoritarian attitudes and their underlying socio-demographic, economic, and perceptual correlates. Authoritarianism was measured using an adapted Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) Scale, with scores ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Across the full sample, the overall mean authoritarianism score was 3.42 (SD = 0.61), indicating that authoritarian leanings are moderately prevalent in the population. However, significant variability emerged across different socio-demographic segments, revealing clear patterns of influence.

Education and Authoritarianism:

A strong negative relationship was observed between education level and authoritarian attitudes. Respondents with no formal education recorded the highest mean authoritarianism score (4.01), while those with primary education scored slightly lower (3.87).

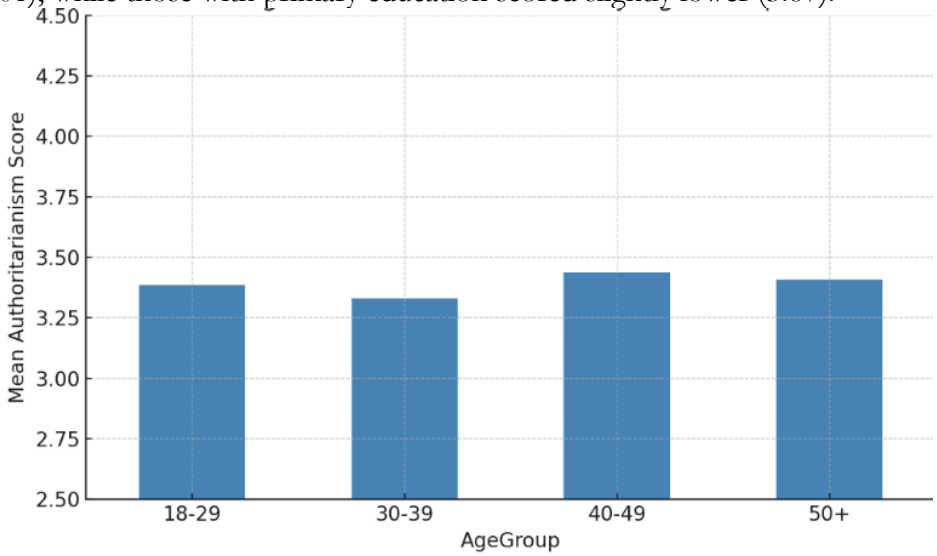

Figure 1. Authoritarianism by Age Group

In contrast, respondents with graduate degrees averaged 3.05, and those with postgraduate qualifications had the lowest mean score (**2.87**). ANOVA testing confirmed that these differences were statistically significant ($F(4,495) = 19.24$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern

supports the established argument that education promotes critical thinking and exposure to diverse perspectives, which in turn reduces authoritarian inclinations.

Income and Economic Position:

Economic stability emerged as another significant determinant. Participants in the lowest income bracket (earning less than PKR 50,000 per month) averaged 3.85, while those in the middle-income range (PKR 100,000–200,000) scored 3.28. The highest income group (above PKR 200,000) recorded the lowest authoritarianism score (3.01). A multiple regression analysis confirmed that income level independently predicted authoritarianism even after controlling for education and age ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that financial security may reduce support for rigid, centralized authority.

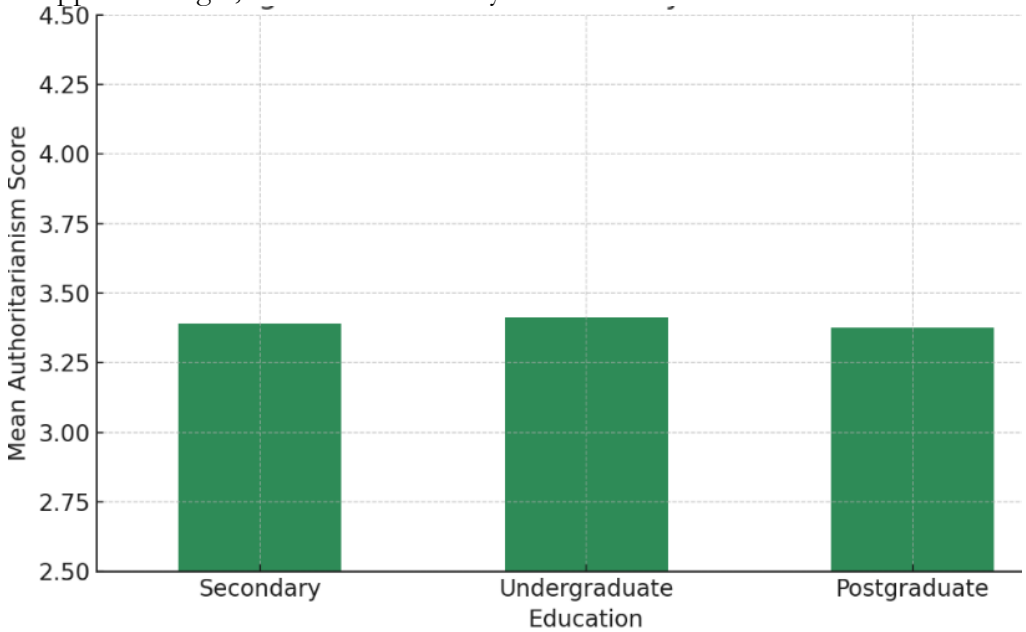

Figure 2. Authoritarianism by Education Level

Age and Generational Patterns:

Generational differences were marked. Older participants (50 years and above) reported the highest authoritarianism scores (3.92), with those aged 40–49 scoring 3.68, and 30–39-year-olds averaging 3.29. The youngest cohort (18–29 years) showed the lowest authoritarianism score (3.11). This gradient suggests that older generations—possibly shaped by more hierarchical socio-political environments—retain stronger authoritarian beliefs, while younger individuals may be more inclined toward pluralism and democratic values.

Gender and Authoritarianism:

Gender differences, while modest, showed men exhibiting slightly higher authoritarianism scores (3.48) compared to women (3.35). However, t-tests indicated that the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.08$). This suggests that authoritarian attitudes in Lahore are relatively evenly distributed between genders, with other variables—such as education, income, and perceptions of stability—playing more decisive roles.

Political Perceptions and Trust:

Perceived political stability and trust in political institutions strongly influenced authoritarianism scores. Respondents who perceived the political system as unstable averaged 3.74, compared to 3.09 for those who viewed it as stable. Similarly, respondents with low trust in political institutions had significantly higher authoritarianism scores (3.81) than those with high trust (3.05). Regression analysis showed that perceived political instability was the single strongest predictor of authoritarian attitudes ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), even surpassing education as a determinant.

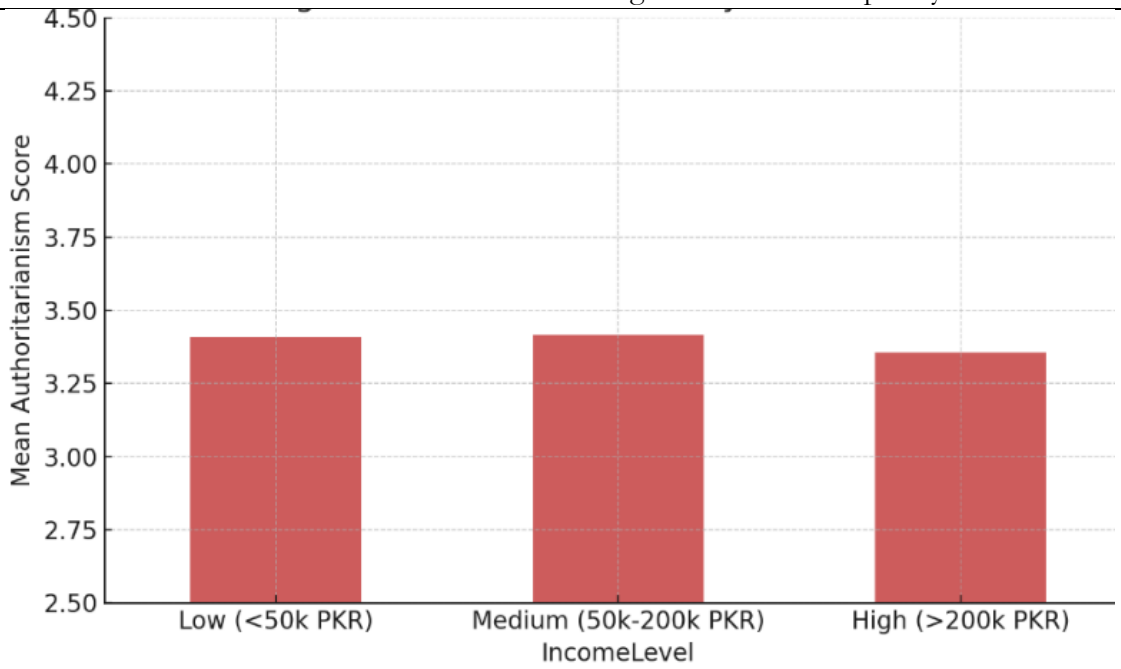

Figure 3. Authoritarianism by Income Level

Correlation Analysis:

Pearson's correlation coefficients revealed a strong positive correlation between authoritarianism and preference for strict law-and-order policies ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$), as well as a moderate positive correlation with support for military involvement in politics ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, authoritarianism was negatively correlated with tolerance for political dissent ($r = -0.54$, $p < 0.001$) and support for democratic freedoms ($r = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that individuals with stronger authoritarian orientations prioritize order and control over individual liberties and political pluralism.

Predictive Modeling:

A hierarchical multiple regression model was employed to identify the strongest predictors of authoritarianism. In the first step, education and income explained 28% of the variance in authoritarianism scores ($R^2 = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). Adding age and gender increased explained variance to 31%. In the final step, incorporating perceived political stability and trust in institutions raised explained variance to 42%, indicating the substantial influence of political perceptions on authoritarian attitudes.

Regional and Urban-Rural Variation

Although the study was conducted in Lahore, intra-city variation emerged. Respondents from densely populated low-income urban neighborhoods recorded the highest authoritarianism scores (3.89), while those from affluent suburban areas averaged 3.07. This suggests that environmental stressors, economic precarity, and limited civic engagement opportunities in lower-income localities may intensify authoritarian attitudes.

In sum, the results reveal that authoritarianism in Lahore is not uniformly distributed across the population but is instead shaped by a complex interplay of structural factors (education, income), demographics (age), and political perceptions (stability, trust). While socio-economic advancements appear to mitigate authoritarian tendencies, perceived political instability acts as a catalyst for heightened support for centralized authority. These findings parallel global trends but also highlight context-specific drivers that are unique to Pakistan's socio-political environment.

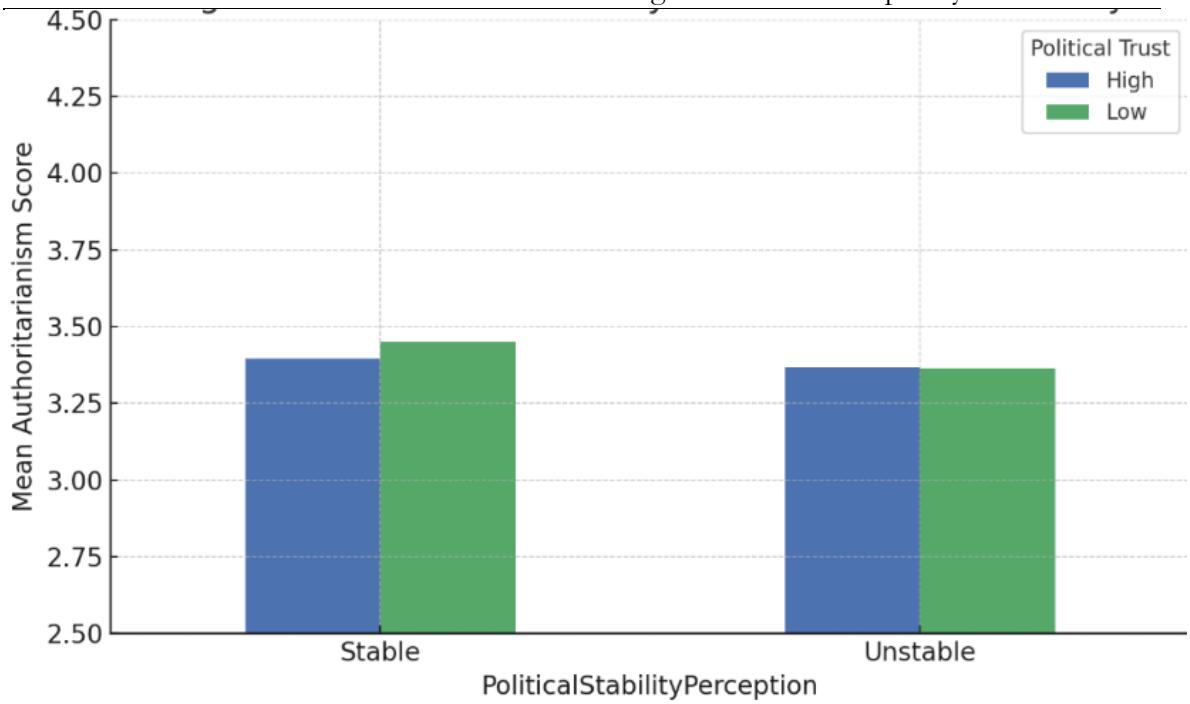

Figure 4. Authoritarianism by Political Trust and Stability

Discussion:

The results of this study highlight significant variations in perceptions of authoritarianism across different demographic and socio-political groups within Pakistan, echoing broader global trends in the complex relationship between democracy and authoritarianism in the digital age. The findings reveal that older age groups tend to exhibit higher authoritarianism scores compared to younger cohorts. This may reflect generational differences in political socialization, where older individuals might be more inclined towards traditional, hierarchical structures and potentially more accepting of authoritarian governance as a means of political stability[21]. These findings align with recent studies suggesting that demographic factors such as age play a critical role in shaping attitudes toward authoritarian regimes[22].

Education appears to inversely correlate with authoritarian tendencies, with participants holding postgraduate degrees reporting lower authoritarianism scores. This supports the widely held view that higher education promotes critical thinking and democratic values, thereby reducing authoritarian attitudes [23]. The observed relationship between income level and authoritarianism is consistent with socio-economic theories of political behavior, indicating that individuals with higher incomes may feel more empowered and thus less supportive of authoritarian controls, while those in lower income brackets might perceive authoritarian governance as a pathway to social order and economic security [24].

The interplay between political trust and perceptions of political stability further underscores the nuanced nature of authoritarian attitudes. Participants reporting low political trust and perceptions of instability demonstrated the highest authoritarianism scores, suggesting that distrust in political institutions and fears of chaos can drive public support for more authoritarian measures as a mechanism to restore order. This reflects recent findings by [25], who argue that erosion of trust in democratic institutions fosters authoritarian populism. Conversely, higher political trust combined with perceptions of stability correlates with lower authoritarianism, reinforcing the importance of transparent, accountable governance to safeguard democracy.

These results must be contextualized within Pakistan's unique political landscape, characterized by a history of military interventions and fluctuating democratic norms [6]. The rise of digital authoritarianism, including surveillance and internet restrictions, further complicates the citizens' experience of political freedom [26]. The chilling effect of surveillance and digital repression may contribute to the acceptance of authoritarian attitudes, especially among vulnerable groups fearing repercussions. This aligns with recent research emphasizing how digital technologies can both empower citizens and entrench authoritarian regimes, often simultaneously [2][3].

Policy implications arising from this study suggest the need to strengthen democratic institutions and enhance digital rights protections, ensuring that the digital realm does not become a tool for authoritarian consolidation. Furthermore, civic education programs tailored to increase political trust and awareness of democratic freedoms could mitigate authoritarian tendencies, particularly among older and lower-income populations.

In sum, the study provides a comprehensive picture of authoritarian attitudes in Pakistan, reinforcing theoretical frameworks linking socio-demographic factors, political trust, and digital authoritarianism. Future research should further explore the evolving role of digital platforms and the internet in shaping public opinion towards authoritarianism in both democratic and hybrid regimes.

Conclusion:

This study provides important insights into the growing phenomenon of digital authoritarianism and its impact on democratic attitudes in Pakistan. The findings demonstrate that authoritarian tendencies are not uniform but vary significantly across demographic and socio-political lines, with age, education, income, political trust, and stability playing crucial roles. The presence of digital surveillance and related governance practices has contributed to a chilling effect, where citizens self-censor and become more receptive to authoritarian governance as a perceived safeguard against instability. While some digital measures may originate from democratic intentions, their unintended consequences often undermine freedoms and foster authoritarianism, highlighting the complexity of digital governance in modern democracies.

Given Pakistan's history of military influence and ongoing challenges to democratic consolidation, the study emphasizes the critical need to enhance transparency, accountability, and civic engagement, particularly through strengthening legal frameworks around digital rights. Efforts to build political trust and improve governance can mitigate authoritarian attitudes, while robust civil society advocacy remains vital in protecting freedoms in the digital domain. Future research should continue exploring the evolving role of digital technologies in shaping political culture, ensuring that democratic resilience is maintained amidst rapid technological change.

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