

## From Clicks to Conflicts: The Impact of Social Media Narratives on Political Polarization

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### Abstract

**Background:** Social media has turned out to be one of the most influential dynamics in modifying the political discourse and general opinion in Pakistan. Despite increasing the accessibility of political news and political participation, such platforms have also increased biased narratives, misinformation, and the choice of selective exposure, hence promoting political polarization.

**Objective:** The current qualitative research study focuses on (1) mechanisms of how people get political information on social media platforms, (2) the role of biased narratives in the shaping of political attitudes, and (3) the impact of digital political polarization on social relations.

**Methodology:** The study relies on the Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory to explain these findings through interviews carried out on sixteen semi-structured participants who engage in active or passive consumption of political content on Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

**Findings:** Findings show that social media are an agenda-setter because they give priority to some political topics in user feeds. Interviewees observed that such content is frequently biased with implications of such framing strategies that enhance the reiteration of partisan views. There was also selective exposure because most participants only listened to the content that reaffirmed their prior political ideologies, thus forming echo chambers that further polarized them. Others considered social media space as a friendly area of connection and some people said that the internet made online political disagreements add to the breakdown of connections offline. It seemed that awareness of misinformation was widespread, and interviewees often checked the news with their peers, family, or even international media.

**Conclusion:** All of these findings together undermine the assumption that social media is a two-edged sword that, on the one hand, allows people to become relatively easily accessible to political discussion, and, on the other, fuels divisiveness and mistrust. The theoretical perspectives that Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory provide are sufficient to explain the process of political polarization in Pakistan's Digital space. Increased media literacy, ethically responsible journalism, and political content regulation, thus, become instrumental efforts to address the issue of polarization and lead toward healthier democratic practices.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background of the Study

Social media, however, did not always used to be a major platform of politically oriented discussions: only in the past ten years has it been switching to this role, leaving behind the audience of informal interpersonal communication. With the spread of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, political narratives were spread at a faster pace, and as a result, influenced the views of individuals as well as aligned them with ideological frameworks (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Safdar, et al., 2025; Safdar et al., 2015; Safdar et al., 2015a). In Pakistan, especially, the growth of online politicking, online activism, and politically charged content, including factual journalism, fake news, and propagandistic content, has been demonstrated.

Political polarization has been augmented by the selective exposure and the entrenchment of pre-existing belief systems that are reinforced by increasing algorithmically curated content distribution (Spohr, 2017; Shabir et al., 2015; Safdar and Abbasi, 2020; Safdar et al., 2018). Evidence supporting this theory is that empirical investigations show that users are increasingly relegated to so-called echo chambers, environments where they maintain little exposure to opposing views and consequent polarization of ideas (Bail et al., 2018). In Pakistan, social media discourses are not just a reflection of existing political discrimination, but they also propagate and build it, which in most cases, leads to increased intolerance and fighting (Mehran & Iqbal, 2023; Shabir et al., 2015a; Shabir et al., 2015b).

The convergence pattern of geographic boundaries is evidenced when looking at the digital communication platforms. Lee et al. (2022) state that the dissemination of social media and messaging content in the United States is linked positively with affective polarization. Meanwhile, countries like India and the Philippines, in Asia, have seen politically flavoured memes and other viral content take the role of ideological persuasive techniques (Garcia & Luces, 2019; Pathak, 2023). All these observations lead to the conclusion that, despite the undoubted expansion of political involvement due to social media, it also creates the fertile soil in which misinformation and extremism can develop (Langraw & Zaman, 2023).

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Regardless of the historical prominence of political rhetoric, modern analytics indicate that the speed, geographical distance, and emotional appeal of social-media stories have elevated the level of political polarization to an unprecedented level (Levin et al., 2021). In the Pakistani case, where the partisan affiliation is deeply rooted in cultural and social identities, the online debate often transforms into the offline hostility that can be manifested in the form of harassment and defamation and can go as far as direct violence (Riasat et al., 2025). Although there is an increasing literature on the relationship between social media and political participation, there remains a gap in the literature in the form of theoretical research that focuses on rich qualitative research on the experiences and perceptions of Pakistani social-media users on such polarizing discourse. The task of filling this gap needs empirical research that goes beyond statistical correlations and questions the human aspect of polarization, clarifying how powerful stories are received, interpreted, and performed. As a result, the present study employs in-depth interviews as a comprehensive qualitative tool to create rich data, allowing for an understanding of how social media contributes to the strengthening of political leanings and fosters division.

## 1.3 Research Objectives

- Examine how social media narratives affect political polarization between Pakistani users.
- Explore the role of misinformation, Selective exposure, and echo chambers in shaping political biases.
- Examine how users observe and respond to opposite political narratives online.

## 1.4 Research Questions

- How do Pakistani social media users observe the impact of online political narratives on their political views?
- What role do misinformation and selective exposure play in reinforcing political polarization?
- How do individuals respond to exposure to opposing political perspectives on social media?

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

This paper adds to the emerging literature on the role of social media and its effect on political polarization by focusing on the case of Pakistan, where a relatively high political participation level is combined with a record rate of digital adoption. Its results will be used by policymakers, media regulators, and civil society organizations to realize the psychological and societal process of how polarization is established in the digital age. Also, by referring to first-hand accounts, the study is going to outline possible avenues that can be used to minimize the divisive nature of online discourse, including facilitating media literacy and exposure to differing opinions (Osmundsen et al., 2021).

## 2. Literature Review

The issue of political polarization has become one of the most significant socio-political issues of the digital age, where social media plays a critical role in exacerbating and enhancing political disparities. Polarization has been studied on an international scale, and results have shown that the nature of social media drives selective exposure and supports beliefs already held and generates an environment to promote people to expose themselves to like-minded opinions (Levin et al., 2021; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The algorithms of engagement programmed into these platforms are prone to favour emotionally charged, partisan messages, at the cost of the rational and meditative ones, hence fuelling the perceived severity of political disputes (Spohr, 2017; Bail et al., 2018).

Polarization is also institutionalized in such ecosystems through misinformation. Studies also demonstrate that false information, which is consistent with the political identity held by an individual, easily convinces and passes through, making the misleading stories more widespread and influential (Ribeiro et al., 2017; Osmundsen et al., 2021). According to Langraw and Zaman (2023), the psychological consequences of fake news do not become visible only with the immediate consumption of false news, but they form long-term attitudes and beliefs. There exists the third-person effect as well, which complicates the situation and refers to the tendency of the user to not recognize each other as vulnerable to misinformation but rather think of other people as susceptible to misinformation, creating a sense of ethical superiority and social separation (Yang and Tian, 2021).

The correlation between social media and political polarization has been researched in different contexts around the world, exposing both global and local trends. Indicatively, Hong and Kim (2016) noted that political polarization on Twitter leads to the grouping of like-minded members, whereas Lee (2016) pointed out that the severity of polarization on Twitter is sensitive to political events and news cycles. In the United States and Japan, Lee et al. (2022) established that both social media and private messaging services caused affective polarization, meaning that it is not limited to the usual exposure in the public sphere. Likewise, Banks et al. (2021) demonstrated that perceptions can be manipulated, and ideological boundaries can become stronger due to the framing effects and selective exposure in the digital feeds.

The aspect of cultural and regional contexts in determining the manifestation of polarization is of special relevance. Garcia and Luces (2019) have reported how political memes made in the Philippines act both as instruments of satire and means of ideological reinforcement when young adults express political ideologies through memes, simultaneously facilitating partisanship. Pathak (2023) studied the role of regulated social media platforms on the perceptions of users in India and concluded that policy fixes can adjust, as opposed to eradicate, the grounds of polarization in online discussion.

The past few years in Pakistan have seen the heightened polarization of politics on social media as the combination of a high level of political participation, partisan news creatorship, and the spread of viral-digital narratives has come together (Maqsood et al., 2024). According to the results of research by Riasat et al. (2025), disinformation campaigns can be listed among the strongest contributors to political bias, as partisan organizations can utilize channels, such as Twitter (X) and Facebook, the usage of which can allow them to promote the narrative that is more beneficial to their agenda. Mehran and Iqbal (2023) also noted that online political conversation can easily be translated to intolerance, hostility, and harassment, and broken boundaries between online and offline hostility. This is in line with the previous research findings by Muzaffar et al. (2019, 2020), which found that social media is an important instrument of political awareness and mobilization, especially during election times. Such was the case with the 2018 Pakistani general elections, where the use of social media campaigns was used to mobilize youth voters and further divide the partisan lines at the same time.

Another issue that scholars have looked at is how exposure to counter-political views may ironically make polarization worse instead of uniting people. The results collected by Bail et al. (2018) have shown that encounters with conflicting opinions in social media usually have an effect of affecting opinions through solidifying positions held by people since they understand counter-arguments in partisan ways. Guess et al. (2019) have expressed methodological issues with the validity of self-reports on social media political activity, indicating that such an activity cannot be fully reflected as a result of monitoring activity in social media. Yang et al. (2016) added their voices to this debate when they addressed agenda-setting dynamics using the context of social media as having the capacity to push political attention quickly without necessarily having to engage a subject on the level of policy discussion.

Although other experts have studied the possibility of people sorting themselves by reading about depolarization with certain conditions (Kobayashi, 2020), the predominance of opinions indicates that the existing digital world is more likely to become polarized than united. The arrangement of platforms, the psychology of the individual users, and the strategic use of the content by political figures converge to form an ecosystem in which clicks usually result in conflicts. Pakistani reality is an excellent example of such a tendency, as polarized narratives not only determine political life in the online sphere but also have an impact on political life and the construction of discourses in the real world (Understanding the Impact of Social Media on Political Polarization, 2024).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This research paper will be framed using well-defined media theories that explicate how social media discourses contribute to polarization in politics. This study has three frameworks, which are: *Agenda-Setting Theory*, *Framing Theory*, and *Selective Exposure Theory*. Altogether, they provide an in-depth insight into the process of creation, representation, and the consumption of content in ways that strengthen political differences.

According to *Agenda-Setting Theory*, the media does not necessarily inform people as to how to think; it can inform people as to what to think. Social media in the digital age has widened this ability and has allowed traditional media companies and individual users alike to establish the political agenda by creating viral content, propagating hashtags, and constant exposure to narrative (Yang et al., 2016). According to Bail et al. (2018), divisive political themes are frequently placed as the top priority of agenda-setting since they are more engaging. Maqsood and Riasat et al. (2024, 2025) in Pakistan identify centralized attention cycles formed online by political actors that strategically publicize specific issues with the tendency of creating polarization among individuals.

*Framing Theory* builds on the idea of agenda setting by including how the media not only picks the issues that it wants to bring to the forefront, but also how it presents them as well. Frames influence the interpretation process that includes the focus on selected parts of a narrative and the neglect of others, causing the determination of the legitimacy and morality of political stances (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The article by Lee et al. (2022) demonstrates that such processes as emotionally laden framing in politics, which prevailed on social media, bolster affective polarization because they

frame opponents as threatening instead of political opponents. Mehran and Iqbal (2023) note that it is common to present political leaders and their respective followers in immoral terms in the Pakistani digital arena, thereby intensifying animosity among them.

The *Selective Exposure Theory* can be applied to explain audience involvement in the polarization process, and according to it, people search and consume information that intends to support their ideologies and ignore the information that confronts them (Spohr, 2017). On social media, this process is enhanced with algorithmic curation, which ranks the content according to previous interaction, forming so-called echo chambers where people mainly see similar points of view (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Langraw and Zaman (2023) believe that not only does this environment reinforce political biases, but they are also supported by misinformation that appeals to group identities. Riasat et al. (2025) in Pakistan record the existence of political echo chambers due to selective exposure, which means that different stories are circulating within networks that lack ideological diversity, and communication between groups becomes more exceptional.

The combination of the three theories enables this work to consider polarization as a compound process. Agenda-setting describes the tendency of some political topics to prevail in an online setting, framing theory explains how various contextualization clues are constructed into these narratives, and selective exposure theory explains how audience consumption patterns further separate political groups into ideological units. Taken together, the mentioned frameworks offer a solid analytical filter to observe the interview data, which allows identifying the mechanisms through which the “clicks” on politically driven narratives turn into conflicts in the social and political realm of Pakistan.

## 4. Methodology

This chapter is a description of the methodology adopted in researching the role of social media narratives in creating political polarization in Pakistan. This study uses a qualitative research design that will enable it to develop a rich and textured understanding of what the participants experience, feel, and understand about political discourse that they encounter online through digital spaces. The research objectives and questions have been used to inform the methodological framework in the sense that the design, data collection, and data analysis exercises are consistent, orderly, and can be able to answer the essence of the study, which is to establish how trends in online political narratives add to the divide of political differences.

### 4.1 Research Design

The *qualitative approach* is considered to be most suitable due to the nature of the study, which is exploratory. As opposed to quantitative designs, which focus on generalizability and statistical measurement, qualitative methods are more concerned with depth of understanding as a way to represent the complexity of lived experiences of individuals (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The main method of data collection in this study is specifically the in-depth semi-structured interviews that are going to be used. *Semi-structured interview* is such a technique that enables both continuity because all the respondents wish to discuss the major focal points of the study, and the possibility to provide their insights and detail their life experiences.

The specific selection of the approach is justified by the earlier studies of political polarization and media influence, which highlight the importance of the qualitative inquiry in unravelling the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural online politics of opinion formation (Riasat et al., 2025; Maqsood et al., 2024). Moreover, the in-depth interviews would be especially ideal in gathering the effects of the range and dynamic nature of effects like the content curation algorithms, propagation of misinformation, and the framing effects on the perception of users.

### 4.2 Population and Sampling Strategy

The sample of the study includes active social media users in Pakistan and people who consume political materials on social media. The sampling methodology is based on the purposive sampling scheme, which is a non-probability strategy whereby participants will be chosen purposefully as they fit in particular inclusion criteria that are applicable to the research questions. In the given case, the inclusion criteria are the following:

- The respondent needs to be an active user of social media, consuming political stories as part of Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube applications.
- It is necessary that the participant regularly or periodically observes the growth of politics in Pakistan through social media.
- The respondent can have any educational background because both the literate and illiterate take active participation in online political debates.
- The age of the participant is not limited, and younger, middle-aged, and older users can be included.
- The respondent can belong to any occupational category, such as university and college students, working professionals, unemployed individuals, and anyone working in some informal sectors.

The sample size of the study consists of 16 participants, all of whom represent a diverse range of socio-economic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. This variability ensures that the outputs will reflect a wide range of opinions about political polarization, rather than being limited to a single group of individuals. The inclusion of both educated as well as non-educated users is important: the political content in social media ranges beyond literacy lines and usually has been conveyed through video and memes, among other visual media formats that do not present any advanced literacy requirement.

### 4.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data, and this took around 40 to 60 minutes per interview. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or video/audio-linked interviews, depending on their time and availability of the participants. This flexibility made it accessible to people in various geographical locations as well as individuals in every occupation. The theoretical framework of the study was used to construct the interview guide, and which would contain factors of the Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory. The guide was organized by themes:

- **Political Content Exposure:** How frequently do you do it, what sources are you using, and on what channels do you like to use it most?
- **Narrative Engagement:** The Type of narratives and the tone of the narratives reaching the participants are some of the acts of political exposure to the narratives.
- **Perceived Influence:** Participants' perception of how such narratives have shaped their political views.
- **Interaction with Opposing Views:** Reactions and coping strategies when exposed to differing political opinions.
- **Role of Misinformation:** Experiences with fake news and its perceived impact on political trust and relationships.

Probing questions were possible as a consequence of the semi-structured nature, which made it possible to clarify the meanings of some aspects, as well as to explore unexpected but interesting themes. The interviews were done using the language more familiar to the participants, either Urdu, English, or a combination thereof, so that they would be comfortable enough to give a natural response. Interviews were taped with the consent of the participants and transcribed later, followed by analysis.

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

The research has carried out thematic analysis as explained by Braun and Clarke, and the steps are as follows:

- **Familiarization:** The reception of recordings, reading transcripts over and over, and stating the first impression.
- **Generating Initial Codes:** Assessing labels to relevant phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that capture key ideas.
- **Searching for Themes:** Grouping codes into broader themes, such as “echo chambers,” “moral framing,” “perceived bias,” and “political hostility”.
- **Themes Review:** refining, combining, dropping themes so that all themes properly reflect the data set.
- **Naming and Defining Themes:** Just to express in words the scope and nature of each theme.
- **Production of Reports:** synthesis of the themes into a coherent narrative addressing the research questions directly.

NVivo software was thought to be used in organizing and coding the data, but manual coding was eventually used to enable the researcher to be more involved in the material. Theoretical concepts of the agenda-setting, framing, and selective exposure perspectives were used throughout the analysis to explain the process of constructing, spreading, and internalizing political narratives.

#### 4.5 Ethical Considerations

The research was carried out in terms of ethical integrity. The research objectives and procedures were explained to the participants, as well as their rights. Verbal and written informed consent were granted, wherein it was made clear that their cooperation was voluntary. The right to anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms for all participants, and any information they provided was to be distinguished and not included in transcripts or reports. A sense of data security was achieved through saving recordings and transcripts in an encrypted form, which was only open to the researcher. Since the theme of the study was politically sensitive, further caution was grown so as to avoid the possibility of participants fearing persecution in sharing their opinions.

#### 4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

Since the qualitative design is not statistically generalizing, it provides rich meaning of individual perspectives. The fact that the sample size is only 16 participants is a relatively small number, which implies that the results are only applicable to a specific context and are not necessarily representative of all the Pakistani users of social media. Additionally, the use of self-reported experience may imply the risk of recall bias or selective reporting by Guess et al. (2019) in similar studies. Despite that, the exclusive demographic mix of the sample increases the quality and universality of the derived insights.

### 5. Findings

The chapter reports the results of the in-depth interviews with sixteen participants on their interaction with social media, their exposure to politically-oriented content, their attitude to political campaigns, trust in information on the Internet, and the effect that this engagement produces on personal views and relations. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes, which will depict the functioning of political communication and polarization in social media within Pakistan.

#### 5.1 Theme 1: Patterns of Social Media Usage and Exposure to Political Content

The respondents described various modes of social media consumption, including entertainment, seeking information, and interaction with news and politics. Social networks like Instagram,

YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook were mentioned several times. One participant indicated:

*“I have employed and use social media daily as a source of entertainment and as a mode of getting information” (Participant 3).*

Another referred to the frequency of use:

*This is because I engage in social media daily to interact with others, as an information tool, news, and even online shopping (Participant 14).*

Participants who indicated it as the main source of their news updates argued that social media is their preferred source of news (or news updates). Some argued that it was their sole source of news updates. Others revealed that they used it more casually. For instance:

*“I tend to utilize WhatsApp 3 to 4 times to view messages and status, YouTube 2 to 3 times to view dramas, news channels, and shorts only” (Participant 2).*

Political content was exposed to passively and actively. Some of them said they had seen politics in their feed without seeking it out, but that, during major events, they deliberately sought it out.

*“My feed is primarily a major source of political content to me due to my following news pages and journalists” (Participant 9).*  
*“There are even times when political content appears in my feed, and I occasionally seek it out after others have mentioned it to me” (Participant 3).*

The fact that algorithms, peer sharing, and self-directed searching influenced the political exposure of the participants demonstrates that all these factors contribute to the participants' political exposure.

## 5.2 Theme 2: Perceptions of Political Campaigns and Partisan Content

Respondents have repeatedly noted that social media is heavily used by political parties to conduct campaign activity. Most often, PTI and PML-N were mentioned, and some pointed at certain campaign strategies.

*“Yes, they both do it, PTI and PML-N propagate their agendas through social media” (Participant 3).*  
*“Yes, I’ve observed that many parties are conducting social media campaigns, e.g., PML-N video messages” (Participant 9).*  
*“I believe that every political party goes into social media these days to advertise their ideas, mostly PTI and Noon League members” (Participant 14).*

A majority of participants, however, believed that political material on the Internet was biased and partisan and hardly balanced or impartial.

*“Social media is all biased. They all discuss their interests as there is no censorship” (Participant 3).*  
*“One-sided, not balanced, people present the ideas in their favor and even cut videos on social media” (Participant 14).*  
*“The political content is largely biased and tends to favor either side since parties concentrate on their agenda” (Participant 9).*

Such a sense of bias speaks to participants aware of the selective framing and echo chamber of political actors on the internet.

## 5.3 Theme 3: Trust, Misinformation, and Verification Practices

The participants depict a high level of distrust of political information on social media. Most raised the concern that it was inaccurate due to misinformation and regulation.

*“No, I do not necessarily trust political news and opinions on social media since nothing is censored there” (Participant 3).*

*“No, not everything that is in the news is accurate” (Participant 2).*

*“In the online world, there is a high speed of misinformation propagation” (Participant 9).*

In response to this, mistrust participants used cross-checking with family, friends, and traditional media as verification practices.

*“I would always check on other sources of information” (Participant 3).*

*“I go to the perceptions of acquaintances or relatives” (Participant 2).*

*“I look at the source, make a cross-check with trusted sources of news, and sometimes even talk with other trusted souls before I believe it” (Participant 9).*

*“I discuss it with my peers and family so that I can get more information, or I watch the news on television, and I confirm what I hear there” (Participant 14).*

The results indicate that, although social media forms an extreme extent to which political information enters, participants tend not to engage with content at face value but mix it with offline trust circles and mass media to create a triangulation effect.

#### **5.4 Theme 4: Impact on Personal Beliefs and Political Attitudes**

Some of the respondents admitted that their political views and consciousness had been formed through social media. One brought to mind the effect of PTI's online mobilization:

*“The previous social media campaign of Imran Khan influenced my views strongly, though those were the times when it happened and not at the present” (Participant 3).*

Some pointed out that the exposure on social media had strengthened their convictions about the necessity of being transparent or inspired them to dig a little deeper:

*“The use of social media has reinforced my beliefs, including the need to have a transparent political scene” (Participant 9).*

*“The political content may impact my thought process regarding some of the topics and motivate me to do further research” (Participant 9).*

Meanwhile, certain participants reflected the lowest individual effect and considered themselves rather watchers than participants:

*“I haven't. I believe I am a witness at most of the time” (Participant 14).*

*“No, I do not have a very big interest in politics” (Participant 3).*

It means that political influence differs, but social media, nevertheless, have an important role in framing problems, causing contemplation, and strengthening previously held attitudes.

#### **5.5 Theme 5: Effects on Relationships, Discussions, and Polarization**

The interviews produced contrasting points of view regarding the art of political participation in social media. Some respondents disavowed involvement in online arguments expressly:

*“No, I did not have any arguments or political content conflicts” (Participant 3).*

*“I have not experienced these circumstances, but I have witnessed people attacking one another as a result of parties” (Participant 14).*

*“No, I do not quarrel, but I have seen it happen with other people on numerous occasions” (Participant 9).*

*“Other people commented on noticing high tensions: In Pakistan, they tend to distance people more due to hatred towards other parties; they take it personally” (Participant 9).*

*“It is not the medium but the individuals; people do not want to be corrected and only want others to nod to their opinions; therefore, discussions alienate individuals further” (Participant 14).*

Besides, the interviewees have reported on the consequences of offline relationships. One of the respondents reported a recent case:

*“Friendship and family relations can be influenced because of the political discussions on social media. I recall the last political dialogue between my friends” (Participant 9).*

*“I have heard such news that there were people who killed their cousins or brothers due to clashes in political parties” (Participant 14).*

However, some of the respondents associated social media activity with positive dialogue when performed with the respectful measures:

*“Political discourse is developed through political discussion, which, in one way or another, is of importance in the present world” (Participant 3).*

*“People can be united with their help” (Participant 2).*

Collectively, the results show that social media enables active political discussion, but it also increases polarization, emotional hostility, as well as heightened tension in interpersonal relationships.

## 6. Discussion

This current study identified the use of social media to influence political polarization in Pakistan through in-depth interviews with sixteen participants. The study was based on the theoretical premises of Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory and attempted to define how political content on social media shapes perspectives, actions, and interactions among individuals. The results reveal that social media has a complex effect on political interest, exposure to politically biased messaging, opinion development, and polarization, validating and deepening what prior studies already showed (Riasat, Hussain, & Rasheed, 2025; Maqsood et al., 2024).

The participants reported having frequent usage of social media regularly, mostly to fetch news updates and be in touch with peers. They mostly used Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube, which are similar to the tendencies amongst Pakistani youth, wherein digital-based platforms are the leading source of information when it comes to politics (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Safdar, 2020; Mehran & Iqbal, 2023). The results also indicate that the political contents are often presented passively in the feeds of the users owing to the accounts and pages followed by individuals, but some actively seek political information on important occasions. This falls in line with the Agenda-Setting Theory that proposes that the media shapes not only what individuals think about, but also what issues are regarded as salient (Yang, Chen, Maity, & Ferrara, 2016; Pathak, 2023). In the Pakistani context, algorithmic codes on social media increase the appearance of politically conveyed information, highlighting issues that are of high interest to political players and media houses.

The exposure of participants to political discourses came along with unique reports of biasness. The most common claim that respondents mentioned is the use of social media by political parties and their allies to promote agendas, highlight successes and portray opponents in a bad light. Examples that were stated included slogans and campaign messages, memes, and videos generated and shared throughout the election processes. These observations agree with past studies showing how political parties are using social media strategically to shape community opinion and create select narratives (Muzaffar, Chohdhry, & Afzal, 2019; Garcia & Luces, 2019; Levin, Milner, & Perrings, 2021). The Framing Theory holds that the informational presentation holds considerable influence over how an audience perceives the information and the experience of the social media participants enclosed a lot of the above-stated assumptions: the presentation of information historically casts framing in terms of

partisan loyalty, characterizes persons in political spheres as anti-heroes or villains, simplifies, and further solidifies the held partisan views.

Some trends among the behaviours of the participants revealed: people were inclined to share political messages that matched their already formed attitudes, and numerous people were willing to either check or complement the information presented via a number of other sources, rather than interacting directly with problematic content. Such an orientation corresponds to the Selective Exposure Theory that assumes individuals are seeking affirmative information and avoiding the presentation of the material that contradicts their ideas (Spohr, 2017; Riasat, Hussain, & Rasheed, 2025; Banks et al., 2021). According to the interviews, these practices only affirm the prior attitudes towards politics and, in some instances, fuel the polarization. The participants discussed that a prolonged experience with content that appealed to a specific party increased their political beliefs, and exchanges in the comment sections sometimes caused conflicts or social conflicts. Similar evidence can be found in the research on polarization on social media, where the existence of filter bubbles and echo chambers helps partisan attitudes become solidified (Bail et al., 2018; Yang & Tian, 2021; Kobayashi, 2020).

The current study examines to which misinformation and distrust are rife in social media content. Participants were significantly sceptical of political news due to their views on exaggerated/misleading posts, edited videos as well and biased information. In order to counter these risks, they applied some techniques of verifying the credibility of the news: to cross-check multiple trusted news sources, ask friends or family, to consider the language and presentation of each piece carefully. Such practices are reflective of a broader movement towards the increased perception of the hazards of both fake news and selective framing (Langraw & Zaman, 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Osmundsen et al., 2021). The results align with the international literature that misinformation not only creates a false sense of knowledge but also politically polarizes individuals by reinforcing a partisan bias/selective attention (Guess et al., 2019; Lee, Rojas, & Yamamoto, 2022; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

The current research explains the social consequences of the consumption and creation of political content in interpersonal contexts. Respondents noted that online communication that focuses on politics often causes sharp communication between friends, family members, and business colleagues in case conflicting arguments emerge. Even as some of the participants argued that online civil dialogue can be used to foster understanding between people, the general observation made was that such communication usually isolates people. The results align with the current research on the role of affective polarization as the result of social-media engagement, especially the cases when persons involved interpret the political disagreement as a personal insult (Hong & Kim, 2016; Levin et al., 2021; Maqsood et al., 2024). The information also shows that the rhetorical usage of political memes and emotionally loaded content increases polarization with the help of humour, mocking, and moral judgment, which correlates with Garcia and Luces (2019) on the persuasive effectiveness of political memes to influence opinion forming.

Empirical data have overwhelmingly shown that the role of social media in electoral polarization is disgorged via user behaviour, platform algorithms, and framing of content. Identifying social media as a problem is understood because, despite the possibility of quick access to information and the enhancement of civic participation, the emergence of selective exposure, ideological confirmation, and the confrontation between people are promoted. These dynamics confirm the theoretical expectations and provide context-sensitive information on the Pakistani political arena, which underlines the dual nature of social media as a tool of both engagement and polarization (Riasat, Hussain, & Rasheed, 2025; Maqsood et al., 2024; Lee, 2016).

The evidence highlights the implications of social media usage in Pakistan as one complex arena of political polarization, which is governed by the interconnected agenda-setting, framing, and selective exposure processes. The sheer volume of political material being served to users simultaneously empowers them and places limitations on the users by creating echo chambers and one-sided narratives, and misinformation. Such dynamics point to the necessity of being critically media literate, having clear content moderation postures, and an increase in algorithmic awareness. Future research is needed to assess the effectiveness of interventions to reduce polarization, examine the long-term

effects of prolonged exposure to political social media, and develop cross-cultural comparisons with the intercultural similarities and peculiarities of online political activity, along with its global dynamics (Goyal & Goyal 2023; Banks et al. 2021; Spohr 2017).

## 7. Conclusion

The current exploration examines the complex relationship between social media and political polarization in Pakistan, explaining the experiences of the participants in the digital realm within the frames of Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory. The research makes it clear that social media has become the main vehicle for delivering political news and a platform where people discuss politics and produce and dispute it at the same time. Some data show that the medium, despite providing a unique access to political information, also deepens the existing divisions as it amplifies the biased discourses and promotes the existing selective patterns of engagement.

The empirical data indicate that the study participants turned to the digital platforms in the majority to access political information; these are YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook platforms. Engagement of some users was intentional, and some users came across political content through algorithmic curation and feeds. These trends serve to support the agenda-setting power of social media; social media not only highlights political issues but also determines the issues that capture the greatest level of attention in society. At the same time, the participants were always able to notice that the information they observed contained a biased point of view, whether it advocated a particular political organization or criticized another one. Such observations are supported by the Framing Theory, which further asserts that how news and commentary are framed matters in terms of interpretation by the audience and in enhancing partisan orientation.

The current research confirms that political discourses reported in the media presented on social networks had a great impact on the views and attitudes of the participants involved. The respondents claimed that constant exposure to one-dimensional reporting slowly but certainly altered their attitudes to political matters and the viability of specific politicians or parties. These findings are consistent with the Selective Exposure Theory, and they suggest that, rather than trying to expose users to alternative views, the underlying trend is to provide users with content that reinforces their prior opinions and consequently creates an echo chamber that contributes to political polarization. Besides, even though the availability of uninterrupted political discourse was significantly increased using social media, the users displayed a low level of trust in the credibility of the medium. They regularly triangulated news items with friends, relatives, or scoured through mainstream media, implying a lack of belief and consciousness of false news, such as being published in digital venues.

Another prominent aspect of the results is in regards to the societal consequences of cyberspace political discussion. Respondents indicated that polarization often leaked into their off-screen relationships with disagreements over online content, creating tension with friends and family. These observations show that online polarization does not exist in the virtual world; instead, it has offline observable outcomes that destroy social cohesion. Even though the participants believed that social media is indeed a uniting tool that helps in bringing people together, many of them emphasized its ability to separate when political inclinations are at the forefront.

By following the strictly established research goals, the study managed to outweigh the shapes of social media interaction in search and transmission of political information, record the frequency of biased and unilateral stories, and prove their impact on political attitude and action. It also shed light on the verification tactics that users use when faced with issues of credibility, and revealed that polarizing forces that are evident in Internet situations cross over into physical, offline social settings as well. Overall, each of the research questions was answered, and the general research question about political polarization was completely informed by the findings.

In theory, the paper strengthens the explanatory power of the guiding models. The Prioritization of political themes on online communities backs up Agenda-Setting Theory; Framing Theory can be observed in creating perceptions by omitting information and focusing on stories; and Selective

Exposure Theory is confirmed in appeals to audience desires to read what conforms to their ideas based on prior knowledge. Taken together, these frameworks provide a rich narrative around the ways that social media enhances and exacerbates the extent to which politics is polarized.

The current study provided a number of practical implications. To media workers, it further justifies the need to report with balance and about the ethical utilization of digital platforms. To policy-makers, it highlights the pressing need to censor political content and curb misinformation. On the part of audiences, it requires them to have a stronger media literacy and critical evaluation of political sources of information in the creation of opinion or involvement in debate. Essentially, future research on the topic should elaborate on the existing results by examining larger data sets and utilizing mixed-method designs to explore the algorithmic feedback loops perpetuating polarization on a greater scale. On the whole, this study shows how social media in the Pakistani context works as a two-edged sword: it amplifies access to political information and engages people in it; it also intensifies bias, solidifies selective exposure, and undermines social harmony. Online political polarization not only exists in the digital, shaping the way individuals perceive and experience politics in real-life situations and construct an opinion. Addressing these issues requires a combination of media organizations, regulators, and citizens' efforts so that social media can be used to serve the purpose of the informed debate in politics rather than increase division.

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