

Effect of Social Media and Belief in Fake News on Political Polarization

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ABSTRACT

The research has studied the effect of social media and belief in fake news on political polarization. The data were collected via questionnaire from the 396 respondents by using multi stage sampling. For the purpose of the analysis, the linear regression was applied. The statistical analysis has also showed that exposure to social media and belief in fake news have effect on political polarization. The study has recommended to the policy makers and all stakeholders to take steps to set up more fact-check mechanism and awareness among the people to minimize the negative effects of exposure to social media and fake news on political polarization to reduce its negatives influence in the society.

Keywords: Social Media, Belief in Fake News, Political Polarization, Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The term “media” or “communications” is not 200 years old but it was started with the symbolic use of material culture in the Old Stone Age. Social groups exist in the society because members of the group have share same values and beliefs (Rimskii, 2010). Available scholarship on social media defines this term in different context while scholars have not yet made a consensus over the concrete and uniform definition of this evolving medium. Many scholars have termed the medium of social media as “those that facilitate online communication, networking as well as collaboration”, (Russo, Watkins, Kelly, & Chan, 2008). In many cases the term social media are referred to utilize specific platforms i.e. Facebook and X (formally known as Twitter) to represent modes of interaction (Howard & Parks, 2012). A set of internet based applications known as social media (Damota & Uniniversity, 2019). A large number of citizens can easily access to information about political debates and matters of public importance via different social media platforms (Neumann, Kelm, & Dohle, 2021).

According to the The University of Maine Report (2025), around 4.8 billion people use social media worldwide, representing around 60 per cent of the population across the world and 92 per cent of all net users. Pakistan, experienced internet for the first time in 1995 when various Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were distributed to different cities of the country and by mid-2000, the number of Pakistani users had grown to 500,000–700,000, or nearly 0.5 percent of the population (Wolcott & Goodman, 2000). The official website of Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) reported about 189 million mobile phone users, 129 million broadband subscribers while 126 million mobile broadband subscribers in Pakistan. According to Global Social Media Statistics (2026), around 32.2 per cent of the entire population use different types of social media platforms in Pakistan. This places the country into a good position of being digitally literate in competition with the developed countries. Social media facilitates political participation and it is a positive side as social media are being considered as a forum to promote diversity, tolerance and democracy (Coleman, 2003). The new digital environment has the ability to limit exposure to attitude-challenging content, which is linked with partial views (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Some studies show that more exposure to social media may incite political polarization (Bail et al., 2018). Heavy

exposure to content which strongly backing a person's stance take away that person from the alternative opinion (Prior, 2013).

Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau (2015) partially agreed with this point of view and stated that evidence is mixed about effect of social media on political polarization. Many parts of the world from the United States (US) to Asia, are facing challenge of political polarization (Hawdon, Ranganathan, Leman, Bookhultz, & Mitra, 2020). Democracy is largely based on a well-informed society, and healthy debates but if people are exclusively exposed to certain information that reinforces their past beliefs, democracy will suffer (Sunstein, 2002). Therefore, the arrival of social media has raised the concern of media scholars to study the effects of social media on political polarization to reduce its negative effects to improve democracy. Therefore, this study has examined the direct effects of exposure to social media on political polarization. The objectives of this study is to probe the effects of social media on political polarization. The study is very significant because it provides a framework for the future research, guidelines for the policy makers, and citizens how to aware the society from the negative effects of social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scope of the current research is to study only the effects of exposure to social media and belief in fake news on political polarization. Social media are referred to utilize specific platforms like Facebook and X (formally known as Twitter) to represent modes of interaction (Howard & Parks, 2012). Some suggest that a set of internet based applications known as social media (Damota & Uniniversity, 2019). The study conducted by Jones-Jang and Chung (2022) has also taken Exposure to Social Media as an independent variable. Exposure to social media means liking, commenting, and sharing political content on social media (Burns, 2008; Nordbrandt, 2021). Social media is also being viewed as a factor for polarization (Törnberg, 2022). Social media have the ability to form echo chamber (Jones-Jang & Chung, 2024) and the echo chambers on social media decreases the acceptance for opposite point of views (Tappin & McKay, 2019). Social media has the ability to expose people to selective content, and prevent them from different point of views (Prior, 2013). Selective exposure to certain mediums is a key factor to incite polarization (Stroud, 2010). The study found positive relations between social media and polarization in Czech (Macková, Novotná, Čejková, & Hrbková, 2024). The study found social media add to political polarization in the countries like Japan and the United States (US) (Lee, Rojas, & Yamamoto, 2022). A body of literature termed the social media as key drivers to pave ways for exposure to diverse and opposite point of views (Barberá et al., 2015).

But, the digital media also provides a fertile ground for problematic content as many factors including false information prevalence could facilitate the relationship between exposure to social media and political polarization (Kim & Kim, 2019). The term fake news is commonly acknowledged and has found its mean into both public and scientific debates since the 2016 presidential elections in the United States as presence of false political content is one of the main debate in political communication (Lazer et al., 2018). It focuses on two interconnected phenomena: misinformation and disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The term fake news refers to produced disinformation, false information, hoaxes, and mockery appearing to present true information about different events, which are spread primarily via social media in the society (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The circulation of false content is one of the main debate in political communication (Lazer et al., 2018). Social media has aided the distribution of online problematic content (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) which has become a pressing concern due to its negative impact on public opinions (Au, Ho, & Chiu, 2022). Posting various types of false content on social media is a common tactic to incite polarization (Konieczny, 2022). According to the Azzimonti and Fernandes (2023) false information on social media have the capacity to increase political polarization. Online false content has resulted in political polarization (Au et al., 2022). A major influence of misleading content is polarization (Bakshy et

al., 2015). The damage in such environment is democracy (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and therefore, it is necessary to study the relationship between belief in fake news and political polarization in the society.

Political polarization means a gap on various political affairs among political parties (Enders & Armaly, 2019). The members of parties also distance themselves from opposition parties (Kearney, 2019). The term political polarization can be defined as people tendency to interact in a positive way with likeminded citizens and in a negative manner with masses having different ideologies (Jones-Jang & Chung, 2022). Polarization is a worldwide issue and the trend has further raised quickly since 90s in the United States (US) and many other parts of the world (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2020). Political polarization refers to individuals' feelings about opposition political parties (Coles & Saleem, 2021). People tendency to interact in a positive way with likeminded citizens and in a negative manner with the people having different views (Jones-Jang & Chung, 2024). Political polarization means differences between the main political parties and extreme similarity within political party (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Lelkes and Westwood (2017) noted that polarization is linked with several negative democratic outcomes, including intergroup prejudice and intolerance. The rising levels of political polarization have also been linked with various consequences including end of constructive political talk, and inter-group cooperation and the declined of willingness to accept defeat in elections (Reiljan, 2020) something that observed aftermath of the 2020 US presidential polls after Donald Trump's defeat (Nordbrandt, 2023). Some level of political polarization is also binged considered as useful to the democratic society: give these voters with pure options, as well as stimulates political interactions (Mutz, 2002). Several studies have been conducted at local and international level over the effects of exposure to social media and belief in fake news on political polarization. This study has filled the gap identified by current literature to study the phenomena in different context to test the arguments about the direct effects of exposure to social media and belief in fake news in the local context.

Hypothesis

H₁: The predictor: the exposure to social media, has positive and significant relationship with political polarization.

H₂: The predictor: belief in fake news has positive and significant relationship with political polarization.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and collection of data

For the purpose of the current research study, a survey was organized to collect the data from some selected sectors of Islamabad. The study employed the Yamane formula to compute the sample size for the research investigation. According to the 2023 population census carried out by PBS, the total population of Islamabad is 2, 363, 863 with 1,247, 693 males and 1,115,900 females (PBS, 2023). According to this formula, a sample size of 399.9 is an appropriate and representative sample for the purpose of the current study. The survey population includes residents of several residential sectors of federal capital Islamabad. So the total sample of the current study is 400 respondents. The researcher for the purpose of the current study has opted for multi-stage sampling technique for the collection of data in order to test the hypotheses. Out of total 400 distributed questionnaires, 396 questionnaires were received from the respondents.

Variables and Measurement

According to a report published by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism extensively used platforms of social media are X (formally known as twitter), Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok. For the purpose of this study social media means X (formally known as twitter), Facebook, TikTok and Instagram. Exposure to social media was operationalized as liking, commenting, and sharing political content on social media (Burns, 2008; Nordbrandt, 2021). The current study also followed Burns (2008) and Nordbrandt (2021) and operationalized the exposure to social media as liking, commenting, and sharing political content on different social media platforms.

The term fake news also refers to produced disinformation, false information, hoaxes, and mockery appearing to present true information about different events, which are spread primarily via social media in the society (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). For the purpose of the current study, belief in fake news has been operationalized as belief on misleading and unverified information, false content and twisted news stories.

Political Polarization means a gap on various political affairs among political parties (Enders and Armaly, 2019). For the purpose of the current study, political polarization has also been operationalized to various types of attitudes and can be expressed in various kinds verbal expression, political choices, engagement patterns.

For the measurement of data, a 5-point likert scale has been used in order to conduct the current study to know the effects of social media on political polarization. The respondents have been asked to pick only one point among five points from 1 to 5 (where 1 denotes “Strongly Disagree, and 5 denotes “Strongly Agree”). The 5 point likert scale was also used by Dubois and Blank (2018) and Reuter et.al, (2019) in their studies for the measurement of data.

DATA ANALYSIS

In the current study, linear regression model was used to find the direct effect of independent variables i.e. exposure to social media and belief in fake news on dependent variable i.e. political polarization. Similarly, linear regression model has been used in order to confirm the research hypotheses through SPSS. Cronbach’s alpha has been utilized in order to confirm the reliability of each variable’s items related to exposure to social media, belief in fake news and political polarization. The benchmark value for the reliability of data is 0.70 or above. The reliability of exposure to social media is 0.731, and political polarization is 0.702 and belief in fake news is 0.747, confirming that the data with respect to each variable received during the survey are highly reliable, which prove the validity of each items with respect to predictors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Direct effect of predictors exposure to social media and belief in fake news on political polarization

Table 1: Direct Effects of Predictors

	Unstandardize d Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Significance		Effects
Predictors	(β)	(Beta)	t-value	p-value	
Exposure to social media	0.262	0.202	4.18	0.001	Positive & Significant
Belief in Fake News	0.108	0.152	3.74	0.001	Positive & Significant
			DV's Variation due IVs		Overall Model Fitness
			R-value		F-value
			0.643		46.67
Note: n= 396 & Dependent variable: Political polarization					

Table 1 shows that the predictor exposure to social media has positive and significant effect over political polarization ($\beta=0.262$ & $P= 0.001$). The results of the statistical analysis stated that exposure to social media has a positive and significant effect on the political polarization, therefore the prediction of H_1 about exposure to social media was supported which indicated that exposure to social media has positive and significant effect on the political polarization.

The above table shows that the predictor Belief in Fake News has positive and significant effect on political polarization ($\beta=0.108$ & $P= 0.001$). The findings of the statistical analysis indicated that belief on fake news has a positive and significant relationship with political polarization, therefore the prediction of H_2 about belief on fake news was also supported which stated that belief in fake news has positive and significant effect on the political polarization.

DISCUSSION

Social media is being viewed as a medium in order to empower public but also brought various challenges in the current digital and social media environment in the forms of belief in fake news. This new situation is being exploited by many actors in the society to pave ways for the formation of echo chambers with the support of selective exposure, which with the belief in fake news provide a fertile environment and atmosphere to incite political polarization in the society. In such a complex digital environment, the exposure to social media, and belief in fake news are vital factors in the process to understand the phenomena of political polarization in a democratic set up. The findings of the current study substantiate that the respondents which have excessive exposure to different platforms of social media would have more political polarization as compared to those who have less exposure to social media. The results of the current study were supported by the study conducted by Gruzd and Roy (2014), they found that heavy exposure to different platforms of social media provoke political polarization. The research study also provides the direct effects of predictors with political polarization. Moreover, the statistical findings were supported by the literature while statistical findings also showed similarities and differences with the literature. The

empirical findings of this study suggest that exposure to social media has significant and positive effect on the political polarization in the context of Pakistan. The results are consistent with the study conducted by (Banks et al.,2021), who found that exposure to social media has the potential to polarize people.

The empirical analysis of this study indicated that belief in fake news has significant and positive effect on the political polarization in our local setting. The results are consistent with the study conducted by (Deinla et. al, 2022), they argued that there is chance of deeper polarization in Philippines as fake news reinforce individuals' beliefs and disengage them from seeking authentic information.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary objective of the current study was to determine the effect of exposure to social media and belief in fake news on political polarization in the context of Pakistan. In order to achieve the research investigation's objectives and find the answer of each research's quarries an adapted questionnaire was used as method of data collection. The data were tested through SPSS-version 23 software. The sample size of the research analysis was three hundred ninety-six. The hypothesis of this empirical study was tested through linear regression model. The findings of this study identify that exposure to social media and belief in fake news have effect on political polarization in Pakistan when respondents engaged in political talks on the social media platforms. The empirical results of this study has recommend that the linkage between exposure to social media, belief in fake news and political polarization. Fake news on social media has negative consequences for a democratic society, which is very alarming for a citizen who lives in the current digital age.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study has also recommended several practical implications for the policy makers, industry and citizens of the country to deal the challenges of exposure to social media especially problematic content like fake news, disinformation and misinformation. The current study has recommended to the policy makers to amend the existing laws in order to deal challenges of fake news on social media in order to minimize the negative consequences of it especially like political polarization in the society. The study has also recommended to the policy makers to set up parents' and youth councils to deal issues of fake news on social media to reduce its negative effects. The study has also suggested to the policy makers to take steps and measures to educate youth especially teenage to minimize its negative effect on fake news. The policy makers should take steps to convince the major social media platforms to improve their own mechanism to discourage problematic content like fake news. The study has recommended to the regulators to take measures to create awareness among the public especially youth to deal the challenges especially belief in fake news. The study has also recommended the regulators and media outlets to take steps to develop more fact-check forums to timely dispel fake news to avoid confusion. The study has suggested to the public to confirm news from authentic news outlets instead of relying on unauthentic social media posts. The study has recommended the public to see different political developments through logic rather than emotions. Citizens may also help stop problematic content by being open to alternative channels or outlets, instead of staying in the echo chamber.

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