

**RESEARCH PAPER****Evaluating the Role of Social Networking Sites in Political Polarization among University Students****¹Saba Sultana*, ² Aaima Batool and ³ Muhammad Ibrahim**

1. Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication and Media, University of Narowal, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Visiting Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication and Media, University of Narowal, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Student (BS), Department of Mass Communication and Media University of Narowal, Narowal, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author

saba.sultana@uon.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Social media now surrounds our everyday lives. It gives us, as people, a chance to communicate with others, share our stories, and keep up with the latest news. This study explores the impact of social networking sites, in political polarization among university students of Narowal. The research aims to understand how social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, shape perceptions, beliefs, and how their usage patterns relate to political engagement and polarization by implying social identity theory and uses and gratification theory. Study employed purposive sampling procedure to examine the role of social networking sites in political polarization among university students. The sample comprised of (N = 400) both male (N = 200) and female (N = 200) university students. Findings reveals that they engage significantly with political content on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. These platforms are used to stay informed about political events and voice their beliefs, enhancing awareness of political dynamics and connecting individuals with political personalities. The study highlights the importance of social media in shaping political engagement and awareness among university students, emphasizing its potential to contribute to inform and active political discourse. In conclusion, the research emphasizes the significant role of Facebook and Twitter in shaping political engagement and awareness among university students of Narowal. These platforms are not merely sources of information but also platforms for political expression and interaction.

Keywords:

Facebook, Political Beliefs, Political Perceptions, Political Polarization, Social Networking Sites, Twitter, Usage Pattern of Social Media

Introduction

Social media platforms revolutionize communication, enabling instant knowledge sharing and global interaction. They foster relationships, aid social support, and promote well-being (Muzaffar, et. al. 2019; Hampton et. al. 2016). Social media has significantly influenced public opinion and collective action by allowing individuals to express their opinions, engage in public debate, and participate in various social and political activities (Bail et al., 2018).

Moreover, Political discourse and political engagement are influenced by young people, who dominate the publishing, sharing, and following of opinions on social and political issues through online spaces and social media (Vroeman, 2017). Social media usage positively impacts people's social capital and civic participation habits, supporting democratic processes and building social capital, according to a study based on U.S. national data (Jung & Valenzuela, 2012).

Social Media and Political Polarization

However, social capital, civic engagement, and political participation are positively correlated with social media use among citizens. Online involvement is more strongly correlated with social media use than offline engagement. Policymakers and practitioners can use this information to design and implement campaigns encouraging citizen engagement through social media (Scoria et al., 2015). Furthermore, social media exposure influences political interest and activity among different age groups, highlighting age-related disparities. Increased participation in internet politics could lead to increased political interest among young people, potentially promoting a more evenly distributed political engagement (Holt et al., 2013).

Political polarization, fueled by social media discourse, has significantly increased in the US over the past few decades, arguing that the ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans has reduced support (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). Political polarization, a prevalent issue in western democracies is influenced by social identification and group-based emotions (Huddy et al., 2015).

Political polarization has a variety of negative outcomes that can be harmful to society. It causes a rise in political discord, a fall in institutional trust, and a hindrance to policy-making (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). People are more likely to run into echo chambers and filter bubbles when political discourse grows more divisive, where they mostly connect with other people who share their opinions and reinforce those (Flaxman et al. 2016). Facebook and Twitter have become significant platforms for political discussions, leading to the rise of political division, as exposure to politically homogenous content reinforces previous opinions (Barberá et al., 2015).

The study revealed that exposure to diverse political opinions on Facebook, despite its supposed reduction, actually reinforces and exacerbates polarization, as users tend to engage less with opposing views and reinforce their own beliefs (Bail et al., 2018). Twitter's political discourse during the Korean presidential election revealed a prevalent polarization, with users engaging more with like-minded individuals and reinforcing their beliefs.

This division of political discourse highlights the need for strategies to promote inclusive and constructive discussions on social media (Hong & Kim, 2016). However, Political polarization is influenced by selective exposure and echo chambers, with media's influence being complex and multifaceted, necessitating further research and solutions to mitigate its harmful effects (Kubin & Sikorski, 2021).

Facebook, Twitter and Political Engagement

In the current digital era, social media platforms have developed into essential instruments for participation. They provide people and organizations with the tools to interact, connect, and communicate with a global audience on a scale that was previously unimaginable. By erasing geographical boundaries and enabling real-time interactions and exchanges, social media has radically altered how individuals connect with information, ideas, and one another. It has democratized discourse access by enabling people to voice their thoughts, and engage in political debates. Additionally, social media promotes direct connections between people, organizations, and public figures, building community and offering chances for cooperation, criticism, and interaction. Online political groups can enhance citizens' political engagement. Political campaigns can mobilize supporters through these groups, but administrators should focus on creating high-quality discussion opportunities. Policymakers should consider these benefits (Conroy et al., 2012).

However, Facebook use for news is linked to lower political awareness, but increased interest and engagement can be attributed to following political figures or organizations. Frequent political conversations and politically active friends expose users to more political information (Muzaffar, 2016; David et al., 2019). Additionally, online political groups can predict offline political activity, serving similar civic roles as offline organizations (Ahmed, et. al 2015; Feezell et al., 2009).

Today, Twitter, a prominent platform in political discourse, has revolutionized political conversations by allowing direct communication between politicians. Despite challenges like misinformation and echo chambers, Twitter continues to shape the digital age of political communication. Moreover, Twitter significantly boosts political engagement by motivating users to gather information, mobilize, and express opinions. Objectives for mobilization and public expression mediate this engagement, which increases participation in political processes (Park, 2013). Twitter, a popular social media platform, offers students a unique opportunity to engage in political discourse on national and global levels. This research highlights the importance of incorporating technology in classrooms to foster civic activity and adapt to the technological advancements of the media world. By incorporating Twitter, students can express their political beliefs and contribute to civic education (Journell et al., 2013).

Twitter has emerged as a prominent platform for political engagement, revolutionizing how individuals and organizations participate in political discourse. Its unique characteristics, such as real-time updates, and hashtag-driven conversations, have made it a preferred medium for politicians, activists, and citizens to express their views, share information, and mobilize support. Twitter enables direct communication between political leaders allowing immediate and unfiltered interactions. It has also become a vital tool for political campaigns, enabling candidates to disseminate their messages, engage with general public (Muzaffar, 2020). The use of Twitter for political engagement has expanded the reach and accessibility of political conversations, facilitating the formation of virtual communities and providing a platform for neglected voices to be heard. However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges associated with Twitter, such as the potential for misinformation, echo chambers, and the amplification of extreme viewpoints. Nonetheless, the impact of Twitter on political engagement must be addressed as it continues to shape the landscape of political communication and citizen participation in the digital age.

Today, Twitter resources are a valuable tool for political candidates to engage with people In 2011 Spanish General Election, Rubalcaba and Rajoy used Twitter differently, with Rajoy frequently engaging with followers and Rubalcaba mainly advertising his offline activities. However, a personal style of campaigning based on everyday speech is required for effective use of Twitter (Zamora-Medina & ZurutuzaMuñoz, 2019).

Social Media and Youth

Social media has become a crucial tool for educating youth, providing a virtual space for sharing knowledge, staying updated on trends, accessing educational resources, and collaborating on academic projects. However, excessive use can lead to reduced attention span and misinformation spread. Therefore, educated youth must balance social media's benefits with a critical approach to ensure they effectively utilize it. However, Digital media platforms enable youth to participate in civic activities and political discussions, shaping their attitudes and behaviors. However, demographic factors and power dynamics can influence engagement levels. Researchers use a mixed-methods approach to understand how online platforms and social media transform traditional political participation (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012).

Furthermore, the impact of social media platforms on Kenyan youth's political and civic participation. Through qualitative interviews and focus group discussions, the

research reveals that platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable access to information, political discussions, and activism. However, challenges like digital inequalities and misinformation need to be addressed for inclusive civic engagement (Kamau, 2016).

This study examines the role of social networking sites, specifically Facebook and Twitter, in political polarization among university students of Narowal. By investigating the perceptions, public beliefs, and usage patterns of these platforms among university students, the study aims to gain insights into how social networking sites shape political discourse. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social networking sites on the political engagement of university students of Narowal, ultimately aiming to inform strategies and interventions that promote more informed, inclusive, and balanced political discussions on these platforms.

The increasing influence of social networking sites, specifically Facebook and Twitter, has raised concerns about their potential role in political polarization among university students of Narowal. While these platforms offer opportunities for information sharing and political engagement, their impact on shaping perceptions, public beliefs, and usage patterns among university students still needs to be studied. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the role of social networking sites in shaping the perceptions and public beliefs of university students of Narowal and explore their usage patterns. Understanding these dynamics will contribute to a better understanding of the potential effects of social networking sites on political polarization among university students of Narowal and inform strategies to promote informed and balanced political discourse on these platforms.

Literature Review

Nevryuev and Gagarina (2020) investigated that individuals tend to stick to their positions more when exposed to groups with opposing opinions. They found that collective judgements are more risky and polarized when familiar with group affiliations. This polarization is more noticeable during significant events. Strandberg et al. (2019) found that deliberative norms can reduce or eliminate group polarization in like-minded groups, while free discussions in groups without norms can lead to polarization.

Alderton and Frey (1983) examined that group members' viewpoints became more entrenched when they supported their initial stance and less entrenched when they disagreed with the arguments, indicating a correlation between group responses. Boyd's (2023) study on group epistemology reveals that group polarization in online groups is influenced by consensus and agreement values, while those valuing critical thinking and open-mindedness develop balanced viewpoints. Structural factors like group size and moderator presence also influence polarization. Educating group members towards critical thinking is crucial.

Roux and Sobel (2015) explored group polarization, where groups tend to take more radical positions due to insufficient information availability in decision-making situations. Proietti (2017) explored group-induced attitude polarization, examining the fundamentals of information updating and exchange that lead to polarization and bipolarization effects in group conversations.

Furthermore, Osmundsen et al.'s (2021) study explores the psychological motivations behind sharing fake political news on Twitter, focusing on polarization. The research found that people are more likely to spread fake news that supports their political philosophy, highlighting the influence of pre-existing beliefs and prioritizing political allegiance over factual accuracy. The study suggests that improved media literacy and critical thinking abilities can help prevent the spread of false information and mitigate the negative consequences of political polarization. Moreover, Dash et al. (2022) investigated that influential Twitter users during political crises contribute to polarization of public

discourse. They adopt extreme positions, engage in rhetoric that divides public opinion, and amplify their political ideologies. They often form echo chambers, reinforcing their biases and inhibiting constructive dialogue.

However, Halida (2020) found that political bias significantly predicts belief in disinformation, highlighting the importance of media literacy, critical thinking, and digital accountability in countering disinformation during the 2019 Indonesian presidential election. Osmundsen et al. (2020) found that polarization is the primary psychological factor driving false political news spread on Twitter. People with solid identities spread false information to demonstrate party allegiance and reinforce their ideas, rather than ignorance or lack of awareness. Moreover, Faris et al. (2017) found that online media, particularly social media, was increasingly used during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election to spread propaganda and false information, with right-wing media ecosystems being more susceptible.

Tucker et al. (2018) summarized scholarly research on the link between social media use, political polarization, and "disinformation" online, suggesting it may be easier to alter people's attitudes. They emphasized the need for more qualitative, experimental, and mixed-method studies to understand user interactions with bot behavior and the individuals responsible for spreading false information. Moreover, Valenzuela et al. (2019) found that social media use, political engagement, and the spread of false information are interconnected. Over 75% of respondents were aware of at least four incorrect statements, indicating significant exposure to disinformation. The study used a two-wave panel survey in Chile to test their theoretical model, revealing that social media's effects on spreading false information are linked to political engagement.

Moreover, Barbera (2020) explored the link between social media, echo chambers, and political polarization. It suggests that digital technology and social media are escalating political division. The research suggests that social media platforms may create echo chambers, exposing users to news supporting their political views and leading to a more divided society. Lee (2016) explores the impact of social media on political polarization, particularly during the 2014 umbrella movement in Hong Kong. The study found that social media was significantly associated with radical political sentiments, affecting both political leanings and public opinion. The research suggests that polarization is not solely influenced by social media. Furthermore, Calice et al. (2021) explored the algorithmic news bias, highlighting how algorithms influence news consumption, public discourse, and bias perception. They suggest remedies like transparency, content suggestions, and fact-checking systems to promote an educated, inclusive digital age, preventing political polarization and diminished media trust.

However, Levy (2021) examined that Facebook exposure to pro-attitudinal news leads to more polarized attitudes and behaviors, while counter-attitudinal information has no significant effect. The research suggests that selective exposure to news on social media platforms can drive these effects. The study supports a view of the media's impact on public opinion, highlighting the potential for affective polarization. Furthermore, Lim (2020) explores the relationship between political ideology and social media algorithms. The study argues that social media algorithms are crucial for communication, community building, and information sharing, particularly in politics. The algorithms are designed to improve targeted advertising and are biased towards intense binary emotive gestures. Kubin and Sikorski (2021) explored that media influences political division, with pro-attitude media. The research calls for further research on the media's depolarizing effects and suggests that newsroom personnel should be educated on preventing media coverage from escalating division. This will help identify effective ways to bridge political divides.

Hypotheses

- H1: Whether or not social networking sites significantly influence Narowal university students' perceptions and public beliefs about politics.
- H2: Whether or not Narowal university students' use of social networking sites significantly contributes to political polarization.

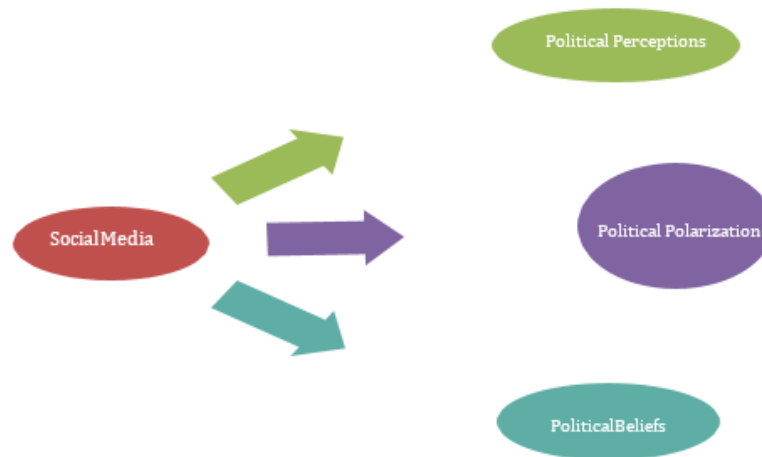


Figure 1: Hypotheses of the study

Theoretical Framework

Theories aim to provide an understanding of how or why things work the way they do. They explain patterns or regularities in a given field of study and provide a framework for organizing and interpreting data.

The Social Identity Theory, which Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed in the 1970s, contends that people's affiliation with various social groups shapes their sense of self. The theory consists of three central tenets: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification. Social identity theory may be used to understand how Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites influence political polarization among university students. Moreover, The Social Identity Theory suggests that categorizing our social environment helps organize and simplify our surroundings. We belong to groups and seek to profit from them (Abrams & Hogg, 1988).

Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler, in the 1970s, developed the Uses and Gratification Theory, which suggests people use media to fulfill four primary needs: information, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment. The theory assumes that individuals deliberately choose media to satisfy their wants and desires and suggests that they can make informed decisions about their media consumption. This theory can be applied to understanding the usage and gratifications of social networking sites. This theory emphasizes that people actively choose and use media outlets according to their requirements and motives.

Moreover, the uses and gratification theory reveals demographic differences in social media usage and gratification patterns, providing a useful framework for understanding consumer behavior on social networking sites (Park & Shin, 2010). The Uses and Gratification Theory explores how social networking sites serve various purposes, including information gathering, collaboration, socializing, self-expression, and strategizing, providing quick feedback and similar relational and socialization benefits as face-to-face communication (Eginli & Tas, 2018).

Material and Methods

This research study implied a quantitative survey approach to investigate the impact of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter on political polarization among university students of Narowal. Moreover, Study employed purposive sampling procedure to examine the role of social networking sites in political polarization among university students. A structured questionnaire was distributed among students to gather insights into opinions, beliefs, and usage patterns, contributing to understanding the complex relationship between social media and political polarization. The sample comprised of (N = 400) both male (N = 200) and female (N = 200) university students.

Descriptive statistics was employed to summarize participants' perceptions and usage patterns, while inferential statistics like correlation and regression analysis investigated relationships between variables.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

		Political_ Perceptions	Political_ Beliefs	Political_ Polarization	social_media_u sage
N	Valid	400	400	400	400
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.5396	3.3210	2.9989	3.0925
Median		3.6667	3.4000	3.0000	3.2500
Mode		3.67	3.40	3.00	3.50
Std. Deviation		.69951	.70598	.75993	1.07031

The table presents statistics for four variables: "Political Perceptions," "Political Beliefs," "Political Polarization," and "Social Media Usage." Each variable has 400 valid responses with no missing data. The mean values indicate that, on average, participants rated their "Political Perceptions" at 3.5396, "Political Beliefs" at 3.3210, "Political Polarization" at 2.9989, and "Social Media Usage" at 3.0925. The median values are similar, with "Political Perceptions" at 3.6667, "Political Beliefs" at 3.4000, "Political Polarization" at 3.0000, and "Social Media Usage" at 3.2500. The mode values correspond closely to the median values, with "Political Perceptions" at 3.67, "Political Beliefs" at 3.40, "Political Polarization" at 3.00, and "Social Media Usage" at 3.50. The standard deviations suggest variability within each variable, with "Political Perceptions" having a standard deviation of 0.69951, "Political Beliefs" at 0.70598, "Political Polarization" at 0.75993, and "Social Media Usage" at 1.07031. These statistics provide a quantitative overview of the participants' ratings and variability in their political perceptions, beliefs, polarization, and social media usage within the study context.

Table 2
Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.881	29

The provided table displays reliability statistics for the given data, specifically using Cronbach's Alpha to measure internal consistency reliability. The calculated Cronbach's Alpha value is .881, This high Cronbach's Alpha value suggests a strong internal consistency among the items in the dataset, indicating that the things are reliable in measuring a consistent construct. The value of .881 exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of .7 for adequate reliability, suggesting that the items are highly dedicated to capturing the intended construct. This indicates that the data collected for this study is likely to be consistent and dependable, enhancing the overall reliability of the measurements.

Table 3
Summary of correlation analyses

Predictor	Dependent	R	P value	Relationship
Social Media	Political Perception	0.136	0.006	Positive
Usage	Political Beliefs	0.218	0.000	Positive
	Political Polarization	0.436	0.000	Strong Positive

The table 3 shows correlations between Social Media Usage and Political Perception, Political Beliefs, and Political Polarization. Positive relationships are observed: a weak correlation ($r=0.136$, $p=0.006$) with Political Perception, a moderate one ($r=0.218$, $p=0.000$) with Political Beliefs and a strong positive correlation ($r=0.436$, $p=0.000$) with Political Polarization. All correlations are statistically significant.

Table 4
Summary of Regression Analyses

Predictor	Dependent	R	P value	R Square	Relationship
Social Media	Political Perception	0.136	0.006	0.018	Positive
Usage	Political Beliefs	0.218	0.000	0.048	Positive
	Political Polarization	0.436	0.000	.190	Strong Positive

The regression analysis reveals compelling insights into the relationships between predictor variables and their impact on the dependent variables. Social Media Usage displays a significant but modest positive relationship with Political Perception ($r=0.136$, $p=0.006$, R Square=0.018), indicating that the use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter may have a limited influence on shaping political perceptions among university students of Narowal. Similarly, for Political Beliefs, there's a stronger positive association ($r=0.218$, $p=0.000$, R Square=0.048), suggesting that these platforms may play a more prominent role in shaping political beliefs. Intriguingly, the most noteworthy finding emerges with Political Polarization, where Social Media Usage exhibits a strong positive correlation ($r=0.436$, $p=0.000$, R Square=0.190). This implies that the usage patterns of social networking sites, particularly Facebook and Twitter, are strongly associated with the degree of political polarization among university students of Narowal. These results emphasize the importance of these platforms in influencing not only individual perceptions and beliefs but also contributing significantly to political polarization dynamics.

Discussion

The study found that university students of Narowal actively use social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, for politics with 38.3% and 24.3% strongly agreeing to stay informed about daily political events.

Moreover, a considerable portion of respondents, 32.9% and 28.1%, respectively, agreed and strongly agreed that they utilize social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, as platforms to voice and amplify their political beliefs. Similarly, 34.0% agreed, and 23.0% strongly agreed that they actively engage with political content on these platforms through sharing, commenting, and liking. This suggests that social media is pivotal in fostering political discourse and interaction. The study uncovered that social media has the potential to stimulate political engagement among the university students. Notably, 40.3% agreed, and 18.0% strongly agreed that their political activities increased due to social media usage. Additionally, 24.9% of respondents were interested in joining Facebook and Twitter to receive political updates and information.

Furthermore, 44.4% agreed, and 20.3% strongly agreed that they gained access to political updates through political pages on social media. Regarding the impact of social media on motivating various political activities, 32.9% agreed, and 24.4% strongly agreed

that the information disseminated through these platforms played a motivational role. However, it's noteworthy that while a significant portion agreed with this sentiment, some respondents did not express strong agreement.

Regarding awareness and understanding of political dynamics, 45.0% agreed, and 18.9% strongly agreed that social media informed them about political activities and the current political system. Similarly, 43.4% agreed, and 19.1% strongly agreed that social media enhanced their understanding of ongoing political issues. These findings reflect the influence of social media in shaping political awareness. Respondents on social media platforms observed a diverse range of political engagements. For instance, 33.7% agreed, and 22.4% strongly agreed that they visited political pages on Facebook. Additionally, 41.0% agreed, and 18.1% strongly agreed that they actively participated in political debates on official political pages. Similarly, 35.7% agreed, and 22.3% strongly agreed that they engaged with Twitter for political discourse.

The findings consistently underscored that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, are influential channels for political engagement among the university students. This demonstrates that social media serves as a bridge between political personalities and the university students. This underscores the role of social media in facilitating the spread of political communication and ideas.

This discussion validates two hypotheses in the research thesis on "Role of Social Networking Sites in Political Polarization among University Students of Narowal." The literature review and data analysis confirm that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, shape political perceptions (38.3%, 24.3%, 32.9%, 28.1%, 34.0%, 23.0%). They also influence public beliefs through false information (45.0%, 18.9%), political updates (43.4%, 19.1). Additionally, social media's role in political engagement (35.7%, 22.3%) and polarization (33.4%, 29.3%) is supported.

Conclusion

This research study explored the link between social networking sites and political polarization among university students of Narowal, integrating data from a literature review to validate hypotheses. As per the first hypothesis, social networking sites significantly influence the perceptions of political issues and public beliefs among university students of Narowal. According to the research by Harel et al. (2020) and Lee (2016) narrated, these platforms can exacerbate polarization as a significant proportion engage with political content.

Moreover, studies by Osmundsen et al. (2020), Faris et al. (2017), and Valenzuela et al. (2019) that focused on the spread of false information through these platforms. By demonstrating that respondents rely on social media for political information, updates, and contacts with political personalities the data analysis validates this relationship and further shapes respondents' opinions and attitudes. In research by Berman and Katona (2020), Levy (2021), and Lim (2020), the second hypothesis, which claims that "the usage patterns of social networking sites among university students of Narowal significantly lead to political polarization," is strongly supported. The data study emphasizes how social media platforms encourage political involvement, interaction, and engagement among university students.

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