IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL POLARISATION IN PAKISTAN

Iqra Siddique, Faizan Riaz,
Syed Hassan Ahmad & Noureen Akhtar

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL POLARISATION IN PAKISTAN

Iqra Siddique, Faizan Riaz,
Syed Hassan Ahmad & Noureen Akhtar

IPRI Islamabad Policy
Research Institute
Research | Innovation | Dialogue | Policy

Note:
IPRI holds the right to accept or reject any manuscript at any stage from being published.

The Institute has a zero tolerance plagiarism policy.

Printed by

IPRI Islamabad Policy
Research Institute
Research | Innovation | Dialogue | Policy

Acknowledgements

Contents

Executive Summary

This study examines the role of social media in influencing political polarisation in Pakistan, focusing on how platforms like X, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube shape public political discourse. The study reveals positive as well as negative correlations between social media platforms and political polarisation, highlighting the complexities of this relationship. From 2017 to 2025, the number of social media users in Pakistan grew from 31 million to 66.9 million, providing a broad base for analysing the political impact of these platforms. Using Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient, the research assessed responses from participants who rated their agreement with the statement, i.e. "Social media has made the political sphere in Pakistan more polarised," on a five-point Likert scale. Additionally, participants evaluated the reliability of political content across different social media platforms.

Results indicated that X had a small but statistically significant positive correlation, suggesting that higher trust in X's political content is associated with stronger perceptions of polarisation. TikTok showed a negative but statistically significant correlation, indicating that higher ratings of its political content are linked to lower perceived polarisation. This suggests that those who trust TikTok's political content are less likely to consider it as a source of political polarisation. WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram showed weak or no correlation between political content's ratings and perceived polarisation, with none of the relationships being statistically significant. This highlights how different platforms uniquely influence polarisation. The study also highlights the creation of echo chambers through social media algorithms, which amplify users' biases by filtering information that aligns with their existing beliefs. This process is exacerbated by political events and misinformation, which further polarises public opinion. The research hypothesis was partially validated through the research findings, indicating a linkage between political polarisation and the increased use of social media.

To mitigate social media's polarising effects, the study recommends enhancing digital media literacy, regulating the spread of misinformation, promoting inclusive discourse, and encouraging critical engagement with content to disrupt echo chambers. In conclusion, the research underscores the dual role of social media in political engagement and polarisation in Pakistan. By understanding and addressing these dynamics, stakeholders can foster a more informed and cohesive political environment.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for engagement and expression, allowing users to share opinions, shape narratives, and connect with wider audiences. In recent years, the global surge in social media usage has transformed the digital landscape, fostering new modes of communication and political discourse. Pakistan has witnessed a similar exponential rise in social media adoption, reshaping how individuals interact, consume information, and participate in public debates. This growing digital presence has significant implications for political engagement, polarisation, and the broader socio-political fabric of the country.

As of February 2025, the number of social media users in Pakistan stood at 66.9 million, comprising 26.4 per cent of the total population. Social media provides an efficient platform for the rapid exchange of opinions and ideas, which–in return, leads to dialogue and debates that may be polarising.[1] There are many social media platforms used by the people in Pakistan. At the beginning of 2025, 22.1 per cent of Pakistan's population had access to YouTube while X, formerly knows as Twitter, was used by 2 per cent of the population.[2] From 2017 to 2022, internet penetration also increased from 35.2 million users to 82.90 million users in Pakistan.[3] The latest data from February 2025 shows that internet penetration in Pakistan is approximately 45.6 per cent with around 116 million internet users.[4] In the 12 months to January 2025, the number of internet users in Pakistan increased by 1.7 million.[5]

---

[1] 'Digital 2025: Pakistan', DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 3 March 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-pakistan.
[2] 'Digital 2025'.
[3] 'Digital 2022: Pakistan', DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 16, 2022, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-pakistan.
[4] 'Digital 2025'.
[5] 'Digital 2025'.

According to a special report on the use of social media in Pakistan, published by *the Express Tribune*, the average social media users in Pakistan are literate, urban, young and affluent people who have a greater influence on the political processes than the rest of the population.[6] The increased number of internet and social media users has led to the formal hiring of Public Relations (PR) firms, social media influencers, media interns, and activists by different political parties to promote their narratives. This propaganda warfare has a spill-over effect on the ordinary users and general public who are caught up in the conflict, ultimately leading to what is now labelled 'Political Polarisation.'

Social media platforms create echo chambers* and filter bubbles,** where users engage with like-minded people based on their online activities. The content is only shared with people that complement and reinforce their biases. This prevents interaction with diverse users that might differ in ideas and content; hence, creating isolated blocs among the users based on their interests and biases.[7] There is a proclivity amongst the like-minded groups of social media users to coalesce in the shape of a community of echo-chambers reflecting and amplifying the original biases of their constituent echo-chambers. They also engage in uncivil discussions that heighten polarisation. In the case of Pakistan, social media has had an impact on the polarisation of discourse of political parties and their supporters too.[8]

---

* An environment or ecosystem in which participants encounter beliefs that amplify or reinforce their pre-existing beliefs by communication and repetition inside a closed system and insulated from rebuttal.

** An algorithmic bias that skews or limits the information an individual user sees on the internet. The bias is caused by the weighted algorithms that search engines, social media sites and marketers use to personalise user experience.

[6] 'Young, Urban, Affluent: A Profile of the Average Social Media User,' *The Express Tribune,* September 23, 2012, https://tribune.com.pk/story/441325/young-urban-affluent-a-profile-of-the-average-social-media-user.

[7] Ludovic Terren and Rosa Borge-Bravo, "Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Systematic Review of Literature," Review of Communication Research 9 (2021): 99–118.

Social media, while playing a significant role in contemporary communication, primarily exacerbates the pre-existing cleavages and rancour as a result of which users do not engage in rational debates. Popularity-based algorithms*** can be used to spread misinformation and propaganda through engagement-oriented content which gets more traction compared to the normal content. Recent global debates by scholars on the issue of unbridled use of social media has revealed that uncivil discussions and rancorous debates directly fuel political polarisation. However, some researchers also argue that socioeconomic factors in Pakistan i.e., literacy, internet penetration, and load-shedding limit the impact of new media in the political domain as is otherwise perceived.[9] This study attempts to examine the impact of social media on the political polarisation in Pakistan.

Hypothesis
Increased use of social media platforms in Pakistan leads to increased political polarisation.

Limitations of the Study
The study does not include the illiterate and rural segment of the society. Participants of this study had basic knowledge of social media and could read and understand English. Surveys and interviews conducted for this study used English as the medium. Surveys were distributed as Google forms so only people with access to a Google account could fill in the form.

Significance of the Study
The main significance of the study lies in quantification of a psycho-social phenomenon like polarisation which is difficult to quantify and measure through use of qualitative method alone. Another significance is to tap into

---

*** A collection of algorithms used to recommend items to users based on information taken from the users.

[8] Shaza Arif, "Social Media and Politics in Pakistan," *Pakistan Today,* May 16, 2022, https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/05/16/social-media-and-politics-in-pakistan/.

[9] "Digital 2022: Pakistan," DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 16, 2022, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-pakistan.

the public pulse/opinion indigenously to find out the link between political polarisation and increased use of social media.

Research Methodology

The study is an exploratory research attempting to find out the impact of social media on political polarisation by employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools and techniques of research. Besides reviewing existing literature on the topic, surveys and interviews were conducted. A stratified random sampling technique was used to conduct surveys across all provinces and administrative units. A total of 1000 respondents participated in the survey with the average participant being a university student. For the quantitative analysis of this study, Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient Model was used. Given the ordinal nature of the data, Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was employed to assess the strength and direction of association between the perceived influence of social media and the participants' views on political polarisation. This non-parametric test is considered suitable for ordinal data. This test is a statistical analysis method that does not require the assumption of a normal distribution, making it ideal for the types of variables included in this study. For the qualitative research, interviews with experts were also conducted who had a command over the usage of social media and its technicalities.

Chapter 2
Political Polarisation in Pakistan

Political polarisation in Pakistan is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors, predating the rise of social media. Long-standing ethnic, religious, and economic disparities, coupled with civil-military imbalances, regional inequalities, and dynastic politics, have significantly shaped political attitudes and divisions. Traditionally, media outlets such as television, radio, and newspapers played a crucial role in influencing public opinion. However, with the advent of social media, political discourse has become more dynamic yet increasingly polarised. Online platforms serve as major sources of information and spaces for political engagement, often intensifying divisions through conflicting narratives. Emilia Palonen's work highlights how polarisation fosters an 'us versus them' dynamic, a phenomenon also evident in Pakistan's digital landscape. Scholars like Sehrish and Saima[10], and Ali Khan et al. in their respective work illustrate how digital platforms are reshaping political behaviour, deepening divisions, and influencing public perceptions in Pakistan's evolving political landscape.

Political Polarisation

Political polarisation occurs when people reject information that opposes their ideological and often one-sided beliefs. Authors, like Roderik Rekker, argue that people tend to disregard information that contradicts their partisan or ideological identity.[11] To disregard opposing beliefs in political discourse is known as political polarisation. This happens when "facts" on major national or public issues presented by one political party are out-rightly

---

[10] Sehrish Rehmat, and Samia Manzoor, "Impact Of Political Polarisation Through Social Media On The Youth Of Pakistan." *Journal of Law & Social Studies (JLSS)* 5, no. 4: 663-673https://www.advancelrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Vol-5-No.-4-7.pdf

[11] Roderik Rekker, "The Nature and Origins of Political Polarisation over Science." Public Understanding of Science 30, no. 4 (February 17, 2021): 352–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662521989193

rejected by the voters of another political party. Scholars define this political polarisation as "divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes, particularly within the context of political parties. It embodies the tension between binary political ideologies and partisan identities, leading to a situation where attitudes towards political issues, policies, and figures are sharply divided along party lines."[12] This divide pushes people to extreme political views, making it harder to have balanced discussions.

Political scientist, Emilia Palonen, maintains that political polarisation is a political tool that has been defined to establish clear boundaries between '*us*' and '*them*' and to stake out communities perceived as moral orders.[13] She further explains that "*polarisation is a situation in which two groups create each other through demarcation of the frontier between them. The dominant political frontier creates a point of identification and confrontation in the political system, where consensus is found only within the political camps themselves.*"[14] This division creates deep identification within groups while fostering confrontation and limiting consensus across political lines.

The process of political polarisation is often viewed as a negative social development because it creates a camp-viewing mentality among the masses where one party views opposing political forces as a mortal threat to its political survival. The expression of this view manifests itself by questioning the legitimacy of the policies of opposition. Existing research on the topic indicates that the political polarisation process begins from elite political leadership and traverses through a top-down model to grass root levels leaving very little or no space for common people to have any room for

---

[12] European Center for Populism Studies. "Political Polarisation," ECPS. Accessed Jan 1 2024, https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/political-polarisation/
[13] Palonen, Emilia. "Political polarisation and populism in contemporary Hungary." *Parliamentary Affairs* 62, no. 2 (2009): 318-334.
[14] Emilia Palonen…

diversity of opinion or consensus.[15] It spreads from political leaders to the public, leaving limited space for diverse views or agreement.

Political polarisation is not a phenomenon limited to developing countries like Pakistan. This fact is well established through various studies by global organisations like the World Bank. One such study, titled "Polarisation and Populism" through empirical data established the presence of "significant *political polarisation*" in many European and Central Asian (ECA) nations. According to the study, "*Increasing numbers of voters appear to be moving away from centrist positions, abandoning long-held political commitments, and losing faith in established parties and to some extent institutions.*" [16] Hence, political polarisation is not specific to Pakistan; it reflects people's awareness of their political stance, but it also limits their ability to welcome views that contradict their own.

Social media is a relatively new phenomenon in Pakistan as an active political discourse space in Pakistan's polity. Existing scholarship sheds some light on social media's role in the political choices of young Pakistani minds. Scholars Sehrish and Saima in their work explain how Pakistani youth are engaging in political discourse using social media platforms.[17] They explored the social media behaviour of young Pakistanis in the context of party allegiance, confidence in political leadership and their reason for choosing social media as a tool of communication. In their study, young participants "*claimed that they follow the official social media accounts of several political parties in order to feel more intimately connected to the party and to stay informed.*" [18] Overall, the authors highlight the growing

---

[15] European Center for Populism Studies.

[16] "Polarisation and Populism," The World Bank Group, 2016. DOI: 10.1596/978-1-4648-1009-1 http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/494811479976405381/pdf/Polarisation-and-populism.pdf

[17] Sehrish Rehmat, and Samia Manzoor, "Impact Of Political Polarisation Through Social Media On The Youth Of Pakistan." *Journal of Law & Social Studies (JLSS)* 5, no. 4: 663-673https://www.advancelrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Vol-5-No.-4-7.pdf

[18] Sehrish, and Samia…

influence of social media as a tool for political engagement among Pakistani youth, shaping their party allegiance and political awareness.

Ali Khan et al. in their work declared Pakistan a diverse and politically vibrant country offering a compelling case study to investigate the impact of social media on political polarisation. Khan studied how individuals' behaviour had evolved in their interaction with political ideologies amid the rapid growth of social media in Pakistan in recent years.[19] He carried out a two-stage study to explore the impact of echo chambers on fostering extreme viewpoints and the potential for misinformation to spread rapidly in these digital spaces.

Existing scholarship contains plenty of work done on political polarisation in Pakistan. Farhat, Awais, and Faran have discussed the impact of social media on political polarisation in their work.[20] The authors conducted their research on university students from the city of Lahore. They explored the correlation between political polarisation and social media by addressing the main research question "How does social media usage influence political engagement and loyalty, which in turn may lead to polarisation based on issues, leadership, and party affiliation?" The authors established the role of social media in driving political participation and ideological divergence among users.[21] These studies deepen the understanding regarding social media's impact on political engagement and ideological divides.

---

[19] Ali Khan, Imran Rafique, and Ameena Nasim. 2023. "Social Media and Political Polarisation in Pakistan," Global Digital & Print Media Review, VI (I): 242-253 doi:31703/gdpmr.2023(VII).19, https://doi.org/10.31703/gdpmr.2023(VI-I).19

[20] Farahat Ali, Muhammad Awais, and Muhammad Faran, "Social media use and political polarisation: The mediating role of political engagement and political loyalty." *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 34-45. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352522964_Social_Media_Use_and_Political_Polarisation_the_Mediating_Role_of_Political_Engagement_and_Political_Loyalty

[21] Farhat, M.Awais, and M. Faran…

The advent of social media has intensified existing divisions by fostering ideological echo chambers and amplifying partisan narratives. Aforementioned studies highlight how digital platforms have reshaped political engagement, particularly among the youth, reinforcing political allegiances and influencing public perceptions. The growing influence of social media in political discourse underscores its role in both political mobilisation and polarisation, reflecting broader societal divides that continue to shape Pakistan's evolving political landscape.

Use of Social Media in Mobilising People in Pakistan

Social media platforms serve as effective tools for mass communication and mobilisation, playing a pivotal role in advocacy efforts. Whether scrutinising political campaigns, advocacy activities, or coordinating such endeavours, social media consistently demonstrates its significant impact.[22] The networking functionalities inherent in social media platforms, make these exceptionally adept at disseminating information within a population about forthcoming actions and demonstrations. The interactive nature of social media facilitates interest groups in forming communities and engaging in direct, personalised, and cost-effective conversations with their supporters. This applies to a wide range of interest groups, encompassing not only traditional examples such as trade unions and business associations but also non-governmental organisations (NGOs), think tanks, hospitals, universities, and public authorities.[23]

In Pakistan, social media has also functioned as a communication platform, disseminating information about protest campaigns and other social movements, thus fulfilling a mobilising role. A significant instance occurred in 2007-2008 when Pakistani lawyers and journalists spearheaded a pro-democracy movement to protest the state of emergency declared by the

---

[22] John G McNutt, 'Web 2.0 Tools for Policy Research and Advocacy', *Journal of Policy Practice* 7, no. 1 (2008): 81–85.

[23] Amber Van der Graaf, Simon Otjes, and Anne Rasmussen, "Weapon of the Weak? The Social Media Landscape of Interest Groups," *European Journal of Communication* 31, no. 2 (2016): 120–35

country's President, Pervez Musharraf. With the government ordering the shutdown of numerous private television channels, social media assumed a pivotal role. It did not only fill the resulting information vacuum by disseminating news but also alerted Pakistanis about flash mobs, planning meetings, and other movement-related events.[24] Similarly, in 2014, the opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), strategically utilised social media to orchestrate protest marches across various cities of Pakistan, specifically addressing alleged electoral corruption.[25] PTI vigorously promoted the Azaadi (Freedom) March, encouraging protestors to actively share rally details using the hashtag #azadimarch to circumvent government censorship of their activities. This innovative strategy attracted the participation of thousands of party supporters, marking an unprecedented display of political dissent.[26]

Social media has also played a pivotal role in amplifying the voices of women, transgender individuals, and marginalised communities, who have marched annually since 2018 in March to advocate for women's rights and to challenge the patriarchy and systemic oppression. By leveraging social media, participants can disseminate their narratives to the masses, circumventing traditional media gatekeeping and asserting greater control over how their message is presented. The above highlights the indispensable role of social media in coordinating, organising, and executing collective action activities with the potential to drive positive societal change.[27]

---

[24] Michael Kugelman, "Social media in Pakistan: catalyst for communication, not change." *Oslo: Norwegian Peace Building Resource Centre. Retrieved on February* 30 (2012): 2014.

[25] Ramsha Jahangir, "Life in PTI's Social Media Bubble", *Dawn*, August 20, 2020. https://www.dawn.com/news/1574529

[26] Fatima Aziz, 'Performing Citizenship: Freedom March Selfies by Pakistani Instagrammers', *Selfie Citizenship*, 2017, 21–28.

[27] Noor Haider, "Aurat March's social media strategy," *TechShaw,* March 03, 2022. https://techshaw.com/aurat-marchs-social-media-strategy/

Another notable instance of social media mobilisation is demonstrated by the now-proscribed *Pashtun Tahaffuz* (Protection) Movement (PTM). Despite the mainstream media in Pakistan largely avoiding coverage of the movement, PTM succeeded in drawing a significant number to its rallies. This success was attributed to the effective dissemination of news by the group's leaders, who used Facebook Live to stream their rallies.[28]

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for mass communication and mobilisation, significantly shaping advocacy efforts and political activism. Its networking and interactive functionalities enable interest groups, political parties, and marginalised communities to disseminate information, coordinate actions, and engage directly with their supporters. In Pakistan, social media has played a crucial role in mobilising protest movements, from the 2007-2008 pro-democracy demonstrations to PTI's 2014 electoral protests and the annual Aurat March advocating for women's rights. It has also allowed movements like the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement to bypass traditional media restrictions and reach a wider audience. These instances underscore the transformative role of social media in shaping political discourse, activism, and collective action in Pakistan.

---

[28] Qamar Jafri, *The Pashtun Protection Movement (PTM) in Pakistan*. International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021.

Chapter 3
Internet Penetration and Use of
Social Media in Pakistan

Pakistan has witnessed a significant rise in internet and social media usage, driven by increased mobile connectivity and digital engagement. Social media platforms have become an integral part of communication, political discourse, and business activities. However, access remains uneven, with urban centres dominating digital usage while rural areas struggle with limited connectivity. Gender disparity in mobile ownership, slow internet speeds, and frequent power outages further hinder digital inclusion. Despite these challenges, the growing number of users across platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok reflects the evolving digital landscape of Pakistan.

Internet penetration has increased in Pakistan over the last few years; however, the speed of the internet, load shedding, and unaffordability make internet usage less effective. The majority of Pakistan's population still lives in rural centres with limited internet access. Among the urban centres, Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi have the most numbers of internet users, hence, also the social media users. This study collected 1000 responses through surveys from all four provinces and three administrative units in Pakistan, nonetheless, due to uneven internet distribution and higher population density, a large segment of responses came from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) (Piechart I).

Pie chart I: Percentage of Responses
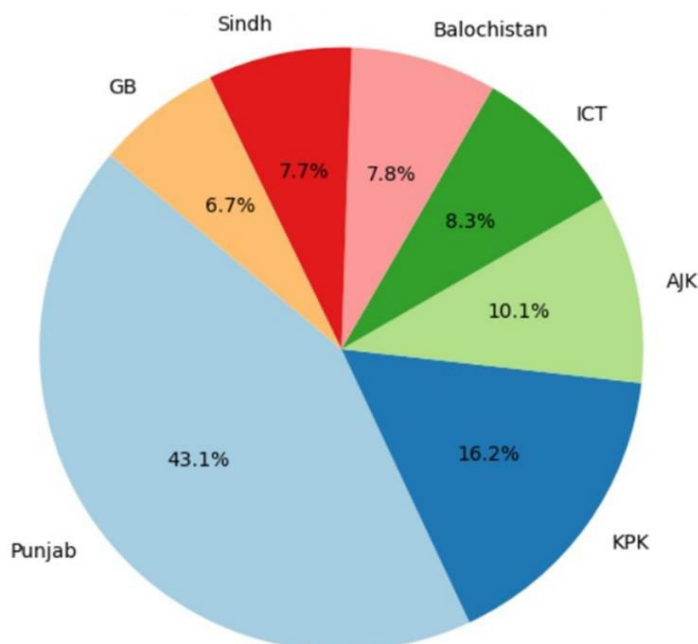
Internet services started in Pakistan in the early 1990s. Now nearly 80 per cent of the population has access to mobile phones and over 50 per cent have broadband access.[29] According to DataReportal—a platform that generates annual reports on online activities across the Globe—there were 116 million internet users in Pakistan till February 2025.[30] Social media users in Pakistan comprise 26.4 percent of the total population which means that 66.9 million people in Pakistan use social media.[31] Out of a total of 190 million cellular phone connections, not all have internet and 4G access as some phones only support voice and SMS services.[32] Of all internet users, 57.6 per cent use

---

[29] 'Telecom Indicators | PTA', accessed 28 January 2024, https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/
telecom-indicators.
[30] 'Digital 2025'.
[31] 'Digital 2025'.
[32] 'Digital 2025'.

social media. While 70 per cent of social media users use mobiles to access social media apps, 30 per cent use web sources. Between January 2024 and 2025, the number of social media users in Pakistan decreased from 71.1 million[33] to 66.9 million.[34]

Internet and social media users in Pakistan are concentrated in urban centres while 62 per cent of the population still resides in rural areas, as per the latest census.[35] Majority of the social media users are between the ages of 18 and 25. Males have greater access to mobile phones and Internet. Of the 66.9 million social media users in Pakistan, 29.6 per cent are female and 70.4 per cent are male, as of February 2025.[36] As of August 2024, the number of households with Internet access stands at 16.87 million in Pakistan and the number is expected to grow linearly in the years to come (Graph-I). [37]

Graph-I: Number of households with Internet Access

Most recent update: Aug 2024

Sources: Statista Market Insights , ITU - International Telecommunication Union

---
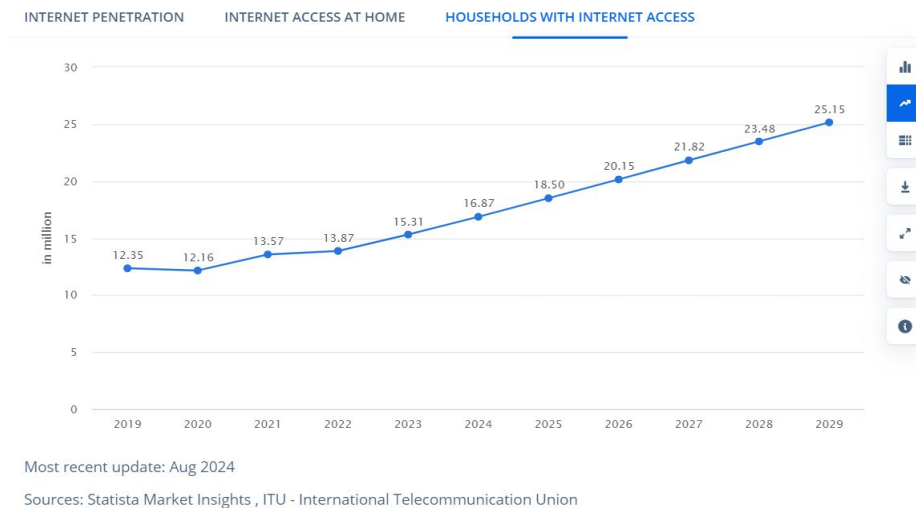
[33] 'Digital 2024: Pakistan', DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 23 February 2024, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-pakistan...
[34] 'Digital 2025'.
[35] 'Digital 2024'...
[36] 'Digital 2025'.
[37] 'Digital & Connectivity Indicators - Pakistan | Forecast', Statista, accessed October 14, 2024, https://www.statista.com/outlook/co/digital-connectivity-indicators/pakistan.

In early 2025, Facebook had 49.5 million users in Pakistan. This means that nearly 20 per cent of Pakistan's population uses Facebook. While Facebook is popular, YouTube has a large number of users in Pakistan. Advertising resources from Google indicate that YouTube has 55.9 million users in Pakistan.[38] Instagram has 18.8 million users from Pakistan which is equivalent to 7.4 per cent of the total population at the start of the year 2025. During the past year, Instagram users in Pakistan grew by 1.5 million. TikTok has a relatively high percentage of user base in Pakistan. Advertising resources indicate that Tiktok has 66.9 million users aged 18 years and above.[39] 26 per cent of Pakistan's total population uses TikTok. Between January 2023 and 2024, TikTok users in Pakistan increased by 38 million, a huge 229 per cent increase in one year.[40]

LinkedIn audience in Pakistan is equivalent to 6 per cent of the total population. 12 per cent of the total internet users in Pakistan use LinkedIn. Snapchat has 37.5 million users while X has 1.99 million users of the total population in Pakistan.[41]. In January 2024, X had 4.50 million users in Pakistan.[42] This data shows that between 2024 and 2025, X lost over 2.51 million users from Pakistan. YouTube and X are the two social media platforms in Pakistan that saw a decrease in users during the said year. Almost all of the other social media platforms saw an increase in users from Pakistan during this time. Internet penetration, speed, and efficiency of the internet increased during the past year while the number of social media users decreased as indicated above.

Pakistan unfortunately does not internationally enjoy a high-rated reputation in terms of internet access, digital democracy, and e-governance. According

---

[38] 'Digital 2025'.
[39] 'Digital 2025'.
[40] 'Digital 2024…'
[41] 'Digital 2025'.
[42] 'Digital 2024…'

to a report titled "Pakistan's Internet Landscape 2022," a large segment of the population lacked access to the Internet and telecom services.[43] Those who had access to Internet suffered a lack of consistency in services and slow speed. Users had difficulty staying online because of load-shedding and blackouts. In terms of the availability of the Internet, its affordability, readiness and relevance, Pakistan ranks low even amongst the countries of Asia—according to the Inclusive Internet Index of 2022 cited by Dawn.[44]

The gender gap related to the access of mobile phones and internet is noted to be a major issue. When it comes to the gender gap in mobile ownership and access to the internet, Pakistan has the widest gap. The number of internet-related crimes is on the increase in Pakistan.[45] The government's effort to curb malpractices on social media through blackouts has also inflicted damage on business and marketing activities on social media.[46]

While Pakistan has witnessed a surge in internet and a decrease in social media usage, challenges like slow speeds, frequent outages, and affordability issues persist, particularly in rural areas. Urban centres dominate internet usage, with platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok experiencing significant growth. Pakistan's standing in internet access and digital governance lags behind other Asian nations, highlighting the need for infrastructure improvements and inclusivity measures to fully realise the potential of digital technologies for national development.

---

[43] "Internet Landscape of Pakistan 2022," Bytes for All, Pakistan, accessed 11 May 2024, https://www.bytesforall.pk/publication/internet-landscape-pakistan-2022.

[44] 'Pakistan Remains among World's Worst Performers in Terms of Internet Access, Digital Governance: Report', *DAWN.COM*, May 8, 2023, https://www.dawn.com/news/1751606.

[45] Dawn.com.

[46] 'Twitter Factor: Twitter Ban Hits Businesses, News in Pakistan | *Arab News PK*', March 8, 2024, https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2473201/pakistan.

Chapter 4
Relationship between Social Media and Political Polarisation

Social media allows users to share their opinions and disseminate those to a broader audience eliciting instantaneous response which promotes heated discussions, and rapid exchange of information. This rapid exchange may not always be productive and positive. With a greater influx of information, people become more opinionated and social media gives them the platform to voice their opinions, unencumbered by the social strictures of face-to-face communications. Engagement in the political debates on social media reflects an increased involvement of people in political processes. The dissemination of disinformation through social media results in the creation of echo chambers of like-minded content which the algorithms further amplify to promote groupthink and concomitant polarisation. The ease of exchange of views through social media therefore does not always result in amity, but rather promotes acrimony because of entrenched positions of communicating actors inhabiting contending thoughts, referred to as echo chambers by some scholars.

Through algorithms, social media users are exposed to content based on their previous activity, which aligns with their preferences and ideas. This reinforces their bias and subjectivity. Since social media allows anyone to share content freely, verifying the accuracy of information across platforms becomes challenging. Content on social media is personalised to the preference of individual users, thus, users are exposed to selective content. This promotes rigidity in opinions in the absence of alternative opinions and facts. Posts that evoke emotional reactions and repartee are more likely to get traction. The more the user engagement on a post the more visibility it gets. This increases the traction of the content that incites anger and outrage. Out of the 1006 respondents for the survey of this research over 62 per cent agreed that social media has made politics in Pakistan more polarised (Bar Chart-I).

Bar Chart-I: Social Media has made Political Sphere in Pakistan more Polarised
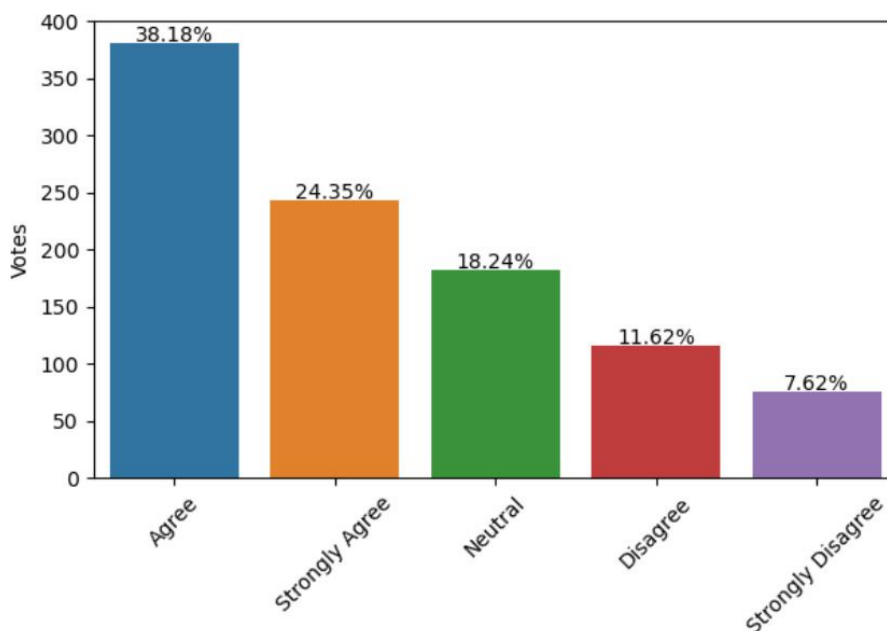
Political coalitions and election campaigns lead to a surfeit of shared political messages on social media. Political actors have a network of followers on social media that generate and share content to compete rival actors.[47] This intense competition influences social media users who are consciously and subconsciously being influenced by the content they consume online. Respondents agree that their political beliefs have changed in the past five years (Bar Chart-II) but they do not necessarily agree that this shift has come about due to social media (Bar Chart-III). However, these respondents agree that they use social media frequently (Bar Chart-IV).

---

[47] Asfandyar Mir, Tamar Mitts, and Paul Staniland, 'Political Coalitions and Social Media: Evidence from Pakistan', *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 4 (2023): 1337–56.

Bar Chart-II: Significant Change in Political Beliefs over the past 5 Years
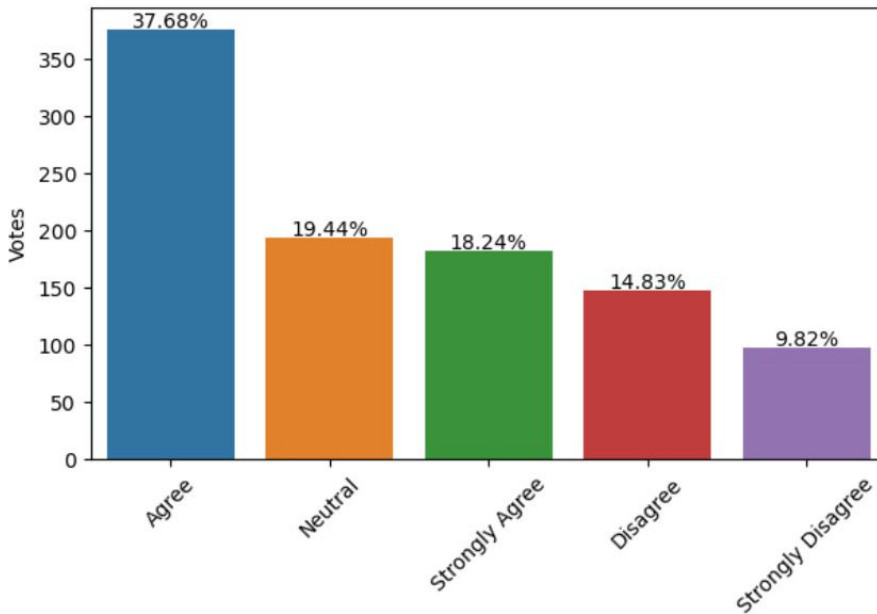
Bar Chart-III: Respondents on the Influence of Social Media Posts on their Political Views
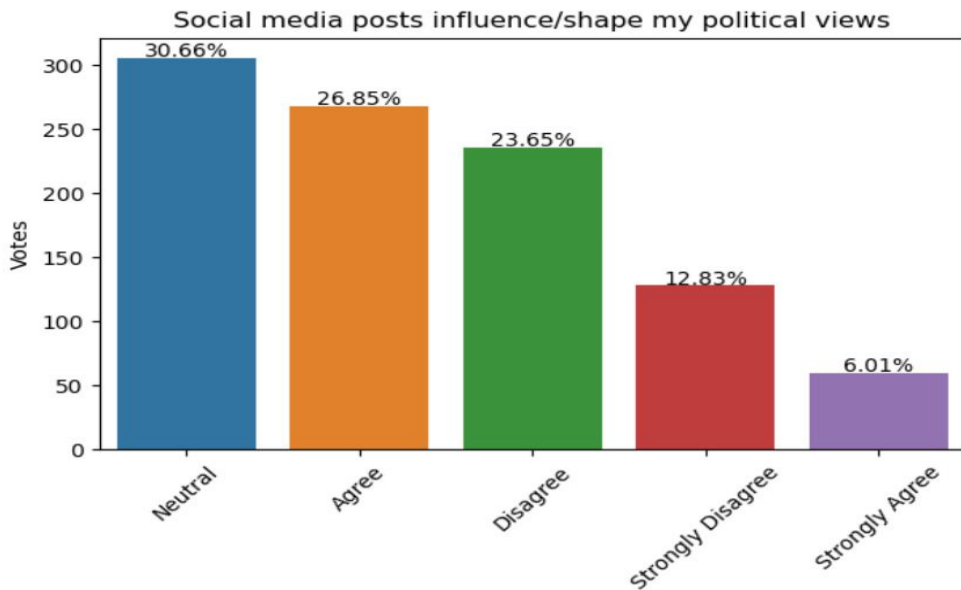
Bar Chart-IV: Respondents on using Social Media Frequently
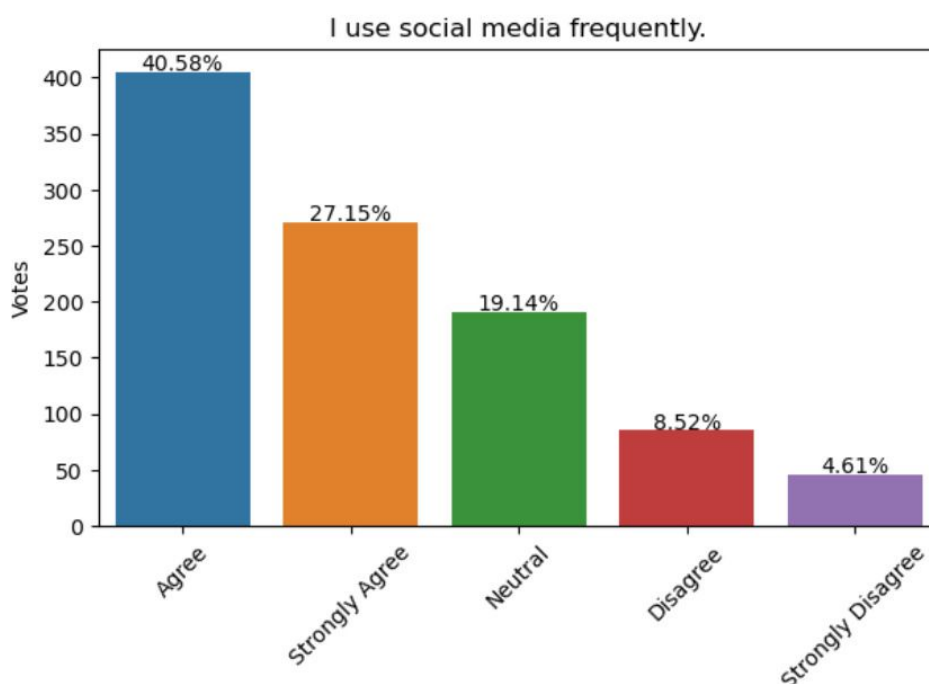
Opinion of Communication Experts

According to Iqra Ashraf, former Director of Strategic Communication at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the correlation between social media and political polarisation is complex and multi-faceted, reflecting both the democratising potential and the divisive nature of online platforms. Social media has undeniably democratised access to information and participation in political discourse, offering a level playing field where individuals from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic strata can voice their opinions and engage in activism. Unlike traditional media channels, social media platforms have fewer barriers to entry, allowing virtually anyone with internet access to share their perspectives, mobilise support for causes, and participate in public debates. This increased accessibility and ease of use

have empowered marginalised groups, amplified voices that were previously unheard, and fostered greater civic engagement.[48]

She further added that alongside these democratising effects, social media has also contributed to the polarisation of political opinions. The algorithms and design features of many social media platforms are engineered to maximise user engagement. They often prioritise content that elicits strong emotional reactions or aligns with users' pre-existing beliefs. This can lead to the formation of echo chambers, where individuals are exposed primarily to information and viewpoints that reinforce their own ideological biases. As a result, users may become more insulated within their online communities, less exposed to diverse perspectives, and more prone to radicalisation or polarisation. Moreover, the viral spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media further exacerbates political polarisation. False or misleading information can easily go viral, shaping public perceptions, influencing electoral outcomes, and deepening societal divisions.[49]

While Ashraf echoed a more textual aspect of the correlation between social media and political polarisation, Talha ul Huda, a digital media producer, opined that political polarisation always existed in Pakistan. Social media only mirrored it and, in many ways, furthered it but the cause of polarisation has mostly been organic—derived from the actual nature of the politics. He stated that "social media acts as a catalyst in political polarisation. Political polarisation is always based on some organic incident or event or movement. In this age of digital democracy, people have more access to social media every day and this is a new medium. So, it has facilitated to expand political sentiment, both negative and positive."[50]

---

[48] Iqra Ashraf, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan, Online Interview, 3 April 2024.
[49] Ashraf...
[50] Talha ul Huda, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan, Team Interview, March 20, 2024.

According to Huda, it is the video medium that has the most impact in forming people's political opinions. He added that continuous scrolling through shorts and reels on social media makes parts of an individual's peripheral memory. All this data being consumed keeps piling up in the subconscious mind and plays a very useful role in developing mass consciousness. "If one were to use social media to create resentment about an issue or a person that is previously loved, one cannot do it with a few posts on social media…One needs to bombard small fragments of information that stick to a certain periphery and that makeup one's entire canvas of things that one consumes."[51] Repeated content on a similar topic can generate any desired sentiment. So, social media has obviously given a lot of fuel to the fire. Establishing a direct correlation between social media and political polarisation in the sense that social media is the reason for social and political polarisation is not viable. Social media has only acted as a very effective catalyst for political polarisation.[52]

Ammar Jaffri, former Additional Director General FIA and founder of E Pakistan, sees political polarisation as an outcome of various factors. This includes deliberate efforts by the establishment or government, societal impressions created by events, and actions by countries that may not align with the interests of their people. Social media plays a significant role in exacerbating this polarisation, with the means of communication evolving from print media to electronic media and now to AI-driven platforms. The emergence of AI in social media poses potential dangers, as it can manipulate situations beyond human comprehension. Despite these challenges, there is an acknowledgement of the undeniable correlation between social media and political polarisation, prompting the need to carefully navigate its use while framing issues and shaping narratives. [53]

---

[51] Huda...
[52] Huda...
[53] Ammar Jaffri, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan, Team Interview, March 20, 2024.

Hussain Nadim, an expert on data analytics and digital technologies, opined that a comparison between a tech infrastructure and a social phenomenon is not viable. According to him, "Social media is a decentralised information technology infrastructure while political polarisation is a social phenomenon. The only correlation that exists is that of technology being used as a new infrastructure for social and political change. Depending on how social media is used, it could either enhance political polarisation or reverse it." [54]

Associate Professor of Media Studies at Bahria University, Shabir Hussain, sees political polarisation on social media in association with the use of social media for political purposes. In his opinion, it is the use of social media for political ends that leads to political polarisation. Social media provides users with the option to like and share content which they prefer. Users tend to disseminate content of their liking, in turn, endorsing their opinions. When certain groups with opposing likes and dislikes come face to face on social media, polarisation occurs as social media has the ability to reinforce individual opinions. Anonymity and a sense of unaccountability on social media further encourage people to express their views on social media fearlessly while facilitating polarisation.[55]

The fusion of social media and political polarisation presents an intriguing picture. While social platforms have democratised access to information and political discourse, they have also fuelled ideological divisions. The traversing of this landscape demands a balanced approach, acknowledging both the potential for positive change and the risks of deepening societal rifts.

---

[54] Hussain Nadim, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan, Online Interview, April 2, 2024.
[55] Shabir Hussain, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan, Online Interview, 31 March 2024.

Chapter 5
Social Media and Political Polarisation in Pakistan: A Quantitative Analysis

In order to understand the impact of social media on political polarisation, surveys were conducted across Pakistan to gather input, especially from the young generation. Over a thousand respondents participated in the survey by responding to questions about their political perceptions, use of social media, and polarisation thereof. In the succeeding paragraphs, the results of the quantitative analysis of the collected data are discussed:

- **Analysing the Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Polarisation in Pakistan**

Dependent Variable: Political Polarisation
Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statement: "Social media has made the political sphere in Pakistan more polarised." 62.53 per cent (38.18% agree, 24.35% strongly agree) expressed their assent that social media has made political domain more polarised. Responses were collected on a five-point Likert scale, which was coded as follows:

- Strongly Disagree: 1
- Disagree: 2
- Neutral: 3
- Agree: 4
- Strongly Agree: 5

Independent Variables
Participants rated their perception of the reliability and influence of several social media platforms for providing political insights (Group Bar Chart-I). The platforms included:
- X

- Whatsapp
- Instagram
- Tiktok
- Facebook
- Youtube

Responses were collected on a five-point scale, indicating the quality or reliability of political content on these platforms, coded as:

- Very Bad: 1
- Bad: 2
- Neutral: 3
- Good: 4
- Very Good: 5

Group Bar Chart-I: Respondents' Rating of Various Social Media Platforms for Political Insights

Rate the following social media platforms for political insights
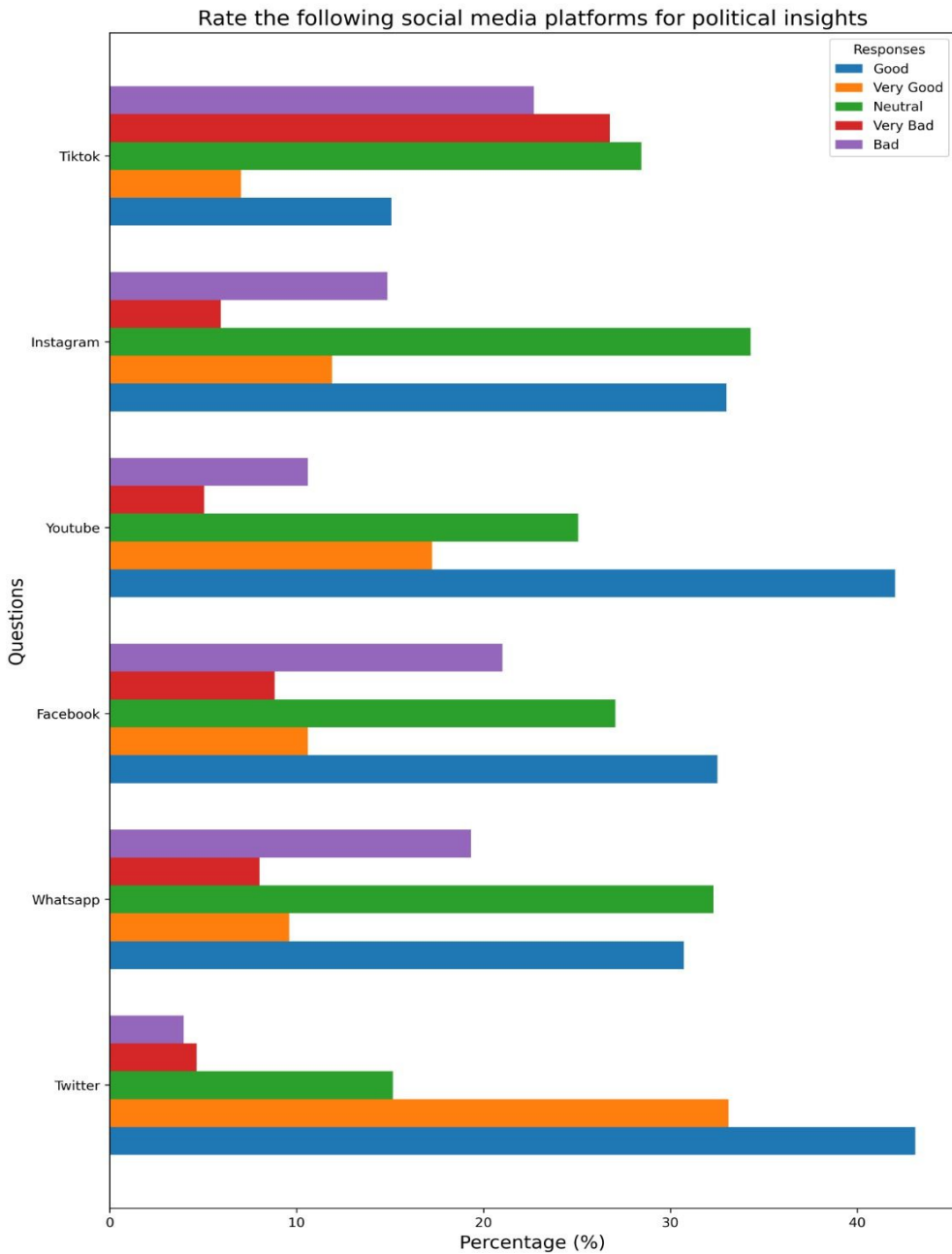
Data Encoding

All survey responses were encoded as ordinal data. Ordinal data is a type of statistical data that has a clear order or ranking, however, the ranks are not equal, and the order is known but not the exact gap between them. This encoding facilitates the statistical analysis of ranked responses, preserving the ordered nature of the Likert scale used in the survey.

Statistical Analysis

Model Used: Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient

Given the ordinal nature of the data, Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was employed to assess the strength and direction of association between the influence of social media platforms and on political polarisation.

This non-parametric test is suitable for ordinal data and does not require the assumption of a normal distribution, making it ideal for the types of variables included in this study.

Model Equation

Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was employed to assess the relationships between the dependent variable and each independent variable. The correlation coefficient i.e. rho (ρ) was calculated using the formula:

$$\rho = 1 - \frac{6 \sum_{i=1}^{n} d_i^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}$$

where:
- n is the number of observations.
- di is the difference between the ranks of the two variables for the i-th observation. The i-th observation refers to a specific data point in the dataset.

To determine the **statistical significance** of the observed correlations, we calculated the P-values. For large sample sizes, we approximated the P-values using the t-distribution with the following equation:

$$t = \rho\sqrt{\frac{n-2}{1-\rho^2}}$$

with degrees of freedom:

$$df = n - 2$$

The P-values were obtained by comparing the t-statistic to the t-distribution with degrees of freedom. Statistical significance was set at p<0.05p

Calculation

For each social media platform, the correlation coefficient (rho- ρ) and the corresponding P-value were calculated to determine the relationship with the dependent variable; ρ indicates the strength and direction of relationship between two ranked variables while P-value determines whether the correlation is statistically significant.

- A positive rho value indicates a positive relationship, suggesting that higher ratings of a platform's political content are associated with stronger agreement that social media has polarised the political sphere.
- A negative rho value indicates a negative relationship, where higher ratings are associated with less agreement on political polarisation.
- P-values less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant, suggesting strong evidence against the null hypothesis of no association.
- The closer the coefficient is to 1 or -1, the stronger the association. Coefficients closer to 0 indicate a weaker association.

Table 1: Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficients and P-values for Social Media Platforms and Perceptions of Political Polarisation

Social Media Platform	Spearman's Rho (ρ)	P-value
X	0.144	0.00000483
Whatsapp	-0.054	0.090
Facebook	-0.010	0.743
Youtube	0.007	0.838
Instagram	-0.037	0.240
Tiktok	-0.079	0.013

Results Interpretation

The output from Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient provides both the correlation coefficients and the corresponding P-values for each social media platform in relation to the dependent variable "Political Polarisation".

- **X:** A small positive correlation between the ratings for X and the perception of polarisation, which is statistically significant.
- **Whatsapp:** A very weak negative correlation and not statistically significant.
- **Facebook:** Almost no correlation and not statistically significant.
- **Youtube:** A Very weak correlation and not statistically significant.
- **Instagram**: A weak negative correlation and not statistically significant.
- **TikTok**: A weak negative correlation and statistically significant.

Findings

- X shows a small but statistically significant positive correlation, suggesting that users who rate X higher for political insights also tend to agree more that social media has polarised the political sphere in Pakistan.

- Tiktok shows a weak negative correlation that is statistically significant, suggesting that higher ratings for Tiktok are associated with less agreement that social media has polarised the political sphere.

- Youtube has a rho value very close to zero which shows that there is almost no correlation between YouTube's political content ratings and perceptions of political polarisation.

- The other platforms (Whatsapp, Facebook, and Instagram) show no significant correlations, indicating that the ratings for these platforms do not have a significant association with perceptions of political polarisation.

Given these results, further analysis might focus on understanding why X and TikTok show significant correlations, albeit in opposite directions, and whether there are specific attributes or usage patterns on these platforms that could explain these findings. This analysis might also benefit from incorporating additional variables or contexts that could affect these perceptions.

- **Exploring the Impact of Social Media Behaviours on Perceptions of Political Polarisation in Pakistan**

Dependent Variable
Political Polarisation This variable was quantified through participants' agreement with the statement, "Social media has made the political sphere in Pakistan more polarised." Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale.

Independent Variables

Respondents were asked to rate the following statements (as shown in the Group Bar Chart- II) concerning their conduct and behaviour while using social media.

Group Bar Chart-II: Respondents' Perspective on the Influence of Social Media on Political Views, Intolerance, and Engagement
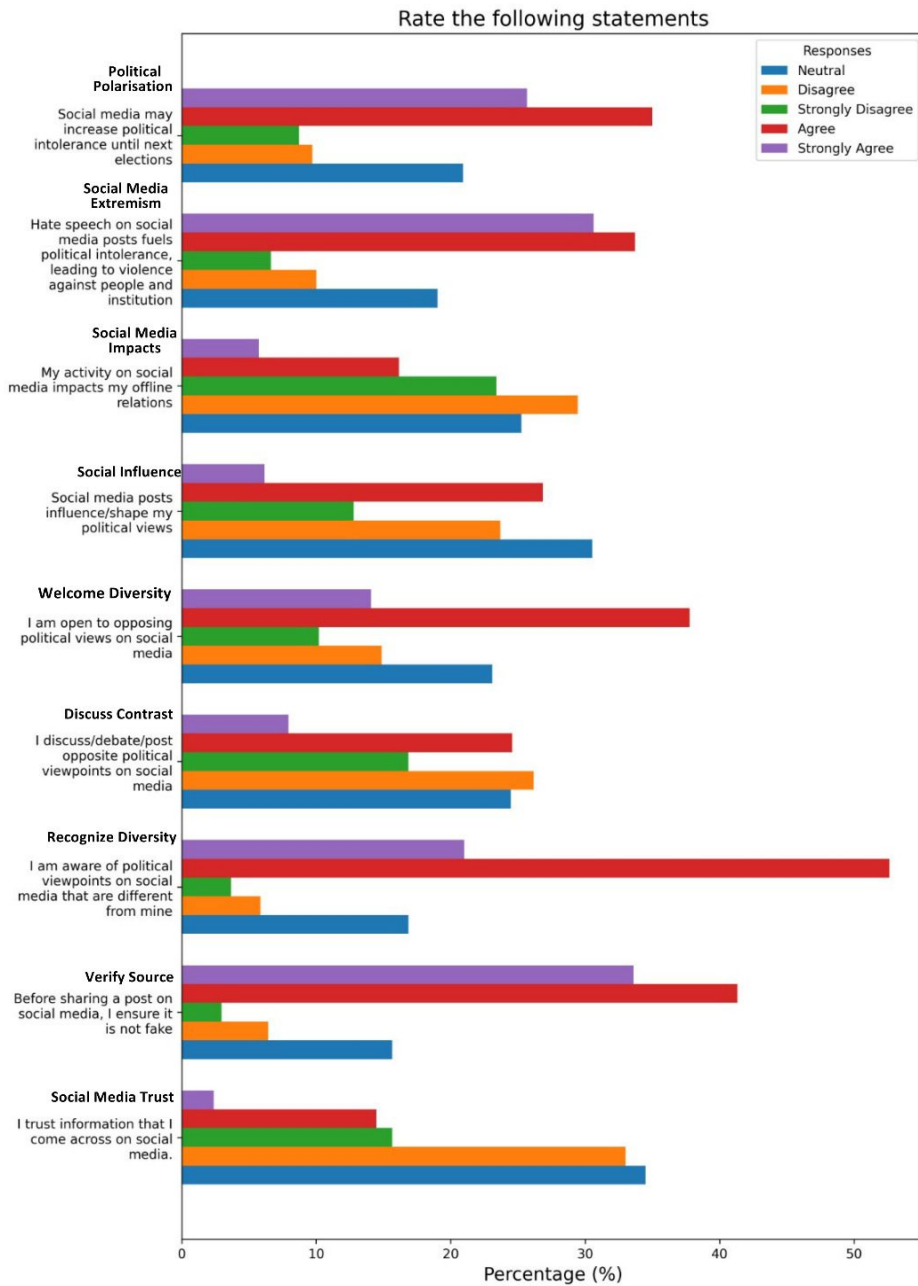
Each variable assessed specific aspects of social media behaviour and perception, with responses also captured on a five-point Likert scale:

- **Social Media Trust:** Trust in the accuracy of information found on social media.
- **Verify Source:** Habit of verifying the authenticity of information before sharing on social media.
- **Recognize Diversity:** Awareness of diverse political viewpoints on social media.
- **Discuss Contrast:** Engagement in discussing or posting about opposing political viewpoints.
- **Welcome Diversity:** Openness to opposing political views on social media.
- **Social Influence:** Influence of social media on shaping personal political views.
- **Social Media Impacts:** Impact of social media activity on offline relationships.
- **Social Media Extremism:** Perception of how hate speech on social media fuels political intolerance and leads to violence.
- **Political Polarisation:** Belief that social media may increase political intolerance until the next elections.

Table 2

Spearman's Correlation Matrix of Social Media Behaviours and Perceptions of Political Polarisation

Spearman's rho value

Variable	Social Media Trust	Verify Source	Recognize Diversity	Discuss Contrast	Welcome Diversity	Social Influence	Political Polarisation	Social Media Impacts	Social Media Extremism	Political Polarisation
Social Media Trust	1.000	-0.015	-0.044	0.174	0.076	0.332	-0.023	0.242	-0.063	-0.077
Verify Source	-0.015	1.000	0.584	0.123	0.262	0.055	0.228	-0.048	0.346	0.306
Recognize Diversity	-0.044	0.584	1.000	0.191	0.411	0.150	0.237	-0.016	0.431	0.355
Discuss Contrast	0.174	0.123	0.191	1.000	0.485	0.331	0.055	0.334	0.081	0.077
Welcome Diversity	0.076	0.262	0.411	0.485	1.000	0.284	0.174	0.187	0.291	0.257
Social Influence	0.332	0.055	0.150	0.331	0.284	1.000	0.140	0.417	0.178	0.220
Political Polarisation	-0.023	0.228	0.237	0.055	0.174	0.140	1.000	0.019	0.374	0.432
Social Media Impacts	0.242	-0.048	-0.016	0.334	0.187	0.417	0.019	1.000	0.062	0.063

Social Media Extremism	-0.063	0.346	0.431	0.081	0.291	0.178	0.374	0.062	1.000	0.650
Political Polarisation	-0.077	0.306	0.355	0.077	0.257	0.220	0.432	0.063	0.650	1.000

Table 3: Spearman's Correlation P-values for Social Media Behaviours and Perceptions of Political Polarisation

Spearman's Correlation P-values

	Political Polarisation	Social Media Trust	Verify Source	Recognize Diversity	Discuss Contrast	Welcome Diversity	Social Influence	Social Media Impacts	Social Media Extremism	Political Polarisation
Political Polarisation	-	0.458	0.0	0.0	0.084	0.0	0.000009	0.545	0.0	0.0
Social Media Trust	0.458	-	0.646	0.165	0.0	0.017	0.0	0.0	0.047	0.014
Verify Source	0.0	0.646	-	0.0	0.0001	0.0	0.081	0.132	0.0	0.0
Recognize Diversity	0.0	0.165	0.0	-	0.0	0.0	0.000002	0.617	0.0	0.0
Discuss Contrast	0.084	0.0	0.0001	0.0	-	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.011	0.014

Welcome Diversity	0.0	0.017	0.0	0.0	0.0	-	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Social Influence	0.000009	0.0	0.081	0.000002	0.0	0.0	-	0.0	0.0	0.0
Social Media Impacts	0.545	0.0	0.132	0.617	0.0	0.0	0.0	-	0.052	0.045
Social Media Extremism	0.0	0.047	0.0	0.0	0.011	0.0	0.0	0.052	-	0.0
Political Polarisation	0.0	0.014	0.0	0.0	0.014	0.0	0.0	0.045	0.0	-

Results Interpretation

- **Verify Source and Recognise Diversity** ($\rho = 0.584$, $p < 0.001$): Individuals diligent about verifying information tend to be more aware of diverse political viewpoints. This strong positive correlation suggests a conscientious approach to consuming and engaging with content on social media. This indicates a methodical and thoughtful interaction with information.

- **Discuss Contrast and Welcome Diversity** ($\rho = 0.484$, $p < 0.001$): People actively engaging in discussions or debates about political viewpoints also demonstrate openness to considering opposing views. This significant correlation highlights proactive engagement in political discourse, fostering a culture of dialogue and understanding.

- **Social Media and Political Polarisation** ($\rho = 0.432$, $p < 0.001$): A strong positive correlation underscores that perceptions of social media's role in causing societal divisions are closely linked with concerns about its potential to exacerbate political intolerance especially as elections approach. This relationship is statistically significant, suggesting a profound impact of social media on political polarisation.

- **Political Polarisation and Extremist Content on SM** ($\rho = 0.374$, $p < 0.001$): Concerns about social media's divisive effects are strongly correlated with perceptions of hate speech on these platforms as significant drivers of political intolerance and violence. This indicates that those worried about polarisation are also sensitive to the extreme manifestations of discord online.

- **Social Influence and Social Media Impacts** ($\rho = 0.417$, $p < 0.001$): Reflects a significant connection between how social media shapes political views and its broader impacts on personal and offline relationships, suggesting that engagement on social media platforms translates into tangible effects in real-world interactions.

- **Welcome Diversity and Recognise Diversity** ($\rho = 0.411$, $p < 0.001$): Those open to opposing views are also more likely to be aware of them,

showing a coherent and comprehensive approach to managing and appreciating diverse opinions.

These correlations elucidate how users perceive the role of social media in shaping political and social dynamics. Strong correlations involving political polarisation and extremism are particularly critical as they suggest that concerns about social media's divisive impact are intertwined with broader societal issues. These insights could be instrumental for policymakers, social media platforms, and community leaders aiming to mitigate these effects. The strong statistical backing (low P-values) for these findings underscores the urgency and reliability of these concerns, pointing towards a need for strategies that address both the perception and reality of social media's role in political polarisation. Based on the interpretation of the survey, findings have been deduced as under:

Findings
- Social media behaviour is closely linked to political polarisation and its societal impact.
- Individuals who crosscheck information and consider diverse viewpoints are more open to understanding different political opinions.
- Those who actively discuss contrasting ideas tend to be more welcoming of opposing opinions, fostering healthier political dialogue.
- Many people believe social media contributes to societal divisions, especially through hate speech and extreme content.
- Social media can also promote understanding of diverse viewpoints, depending on how it is used.
- While social media has the potential to unite people, it can also exacerbate divisions if misused.

- **The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Ideologies and Perceptions of Polarisation in Pakistan**

Dependent Variable

Political Polarisation Participants rated their agreement with the statement, "Social media has made the political sphere in Pakistan more polarised," using a five-point Likert scale.

Independent Variables The questions asked from the respondents (shown in Group Bar Chart-III) explored aspects of political trust, intentions, ideologies, and social media usage, with responses also measured on a five-point Likert scale.

- **Political Trust:** Trust in the accuracy of information from other political parties.
- **Cross-Party Intentions**: Belief that members of opposing political parties have good intentions.
- **Superior Ideology:** Perception that one's political ideology/beliefs are superior to others.
- **Changed Beliefs:** The degree to which one's political beliefs have changed over the past five years.
- **Polarisation in Pakistan:** Belief that the political sphere in Pakistan has become more polarised in the past five years.
- **Active User**: Frequency of social media use.

Group Bar Chart-III: Respondents' Perspective on Polarisation, Political Ideologies, and Social Media Behaviours
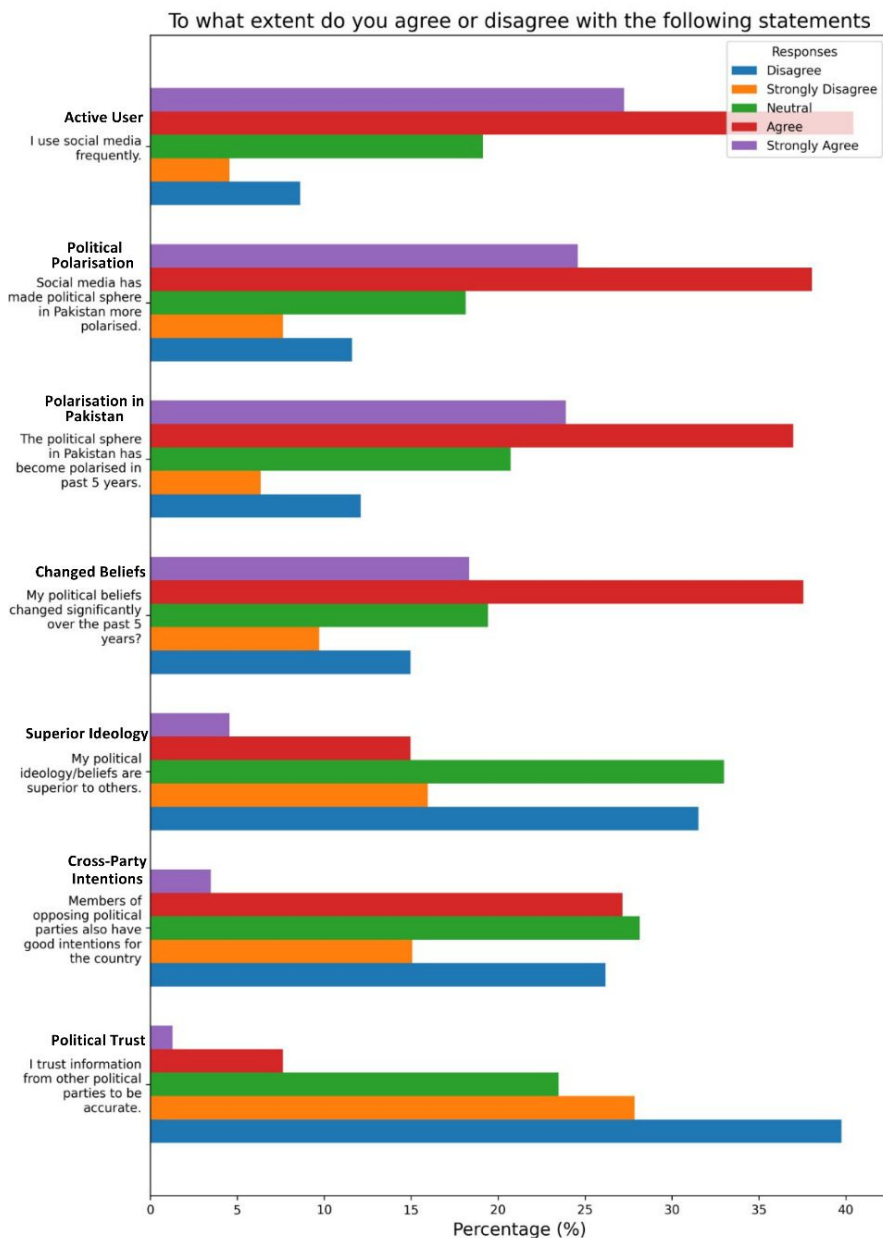
Table 4: Spearman's Correlation Matrix of Social Media's Influence on Political Ideologies and Polarisation in Pakistan

Spearman's Correlation Matrix rho values

Variables	Political Polarization	Political Trust	Cross-Party Intentions	Superior Ideology	Changed Beliefs	Polarisation in Pakistan (last 5 yrs)	Active User
Political Polarisation	1.000	0.062	0.177	0.081	0.344	0.634	0.401
Political Trust	0.062	1.000	0.377	0.162	0.006	0.051	-0.043
Cross-Party Intentions	0.177	0.377	1.000	0.053	0.092	0.193	0.082
Superior Ideology	0.081	0.162	0.053	1.000	0.081	0.056	0.117
Changed Beliefs	0.344	0.006	0.092	0.081	1.000	0.421	0.359
Polarisation in Pakistan (last 5 yrs)	0.634	0.051	0.193	0.056	0.421	1.000	0.398
Active User	0.401	-0.043	0.082	0.117	0.359	0.398	1.000

Table 5: P-values for Spearman's Correlation of Social Media Behaviours and Perceptions of Political Polarisation

Spearman's Correlation Matrix P Values

Variables	Political Polarisation	Political Trust	Cross-party Intentions	Superior Ideology	Changed Beliefs	Polarisation in Pakistan (last 5 yrs)	Active User
Political Polarisation	-	0.0495	1.75e-08	0.0103	3.6e-29	1.78e-113	7.32e-40
Political Trust	0.0495	-	5.06e-35	2.58e-07	0.842	0.108	0.177
Cross-Party Intentions	1.75e-08	5.06e-35	-	0.0912	0.00363	8.53e-10	0.00984
Superior Ideology	0.0103	2.58e-07	0.0912	-	0.0103	0.0755	0.000215
Changed Beliefs	3.6e-29	0.842	0.00363	0.0103	-	3.32e-44	1.11e-31
Polarisation in Pakistan (last 5 yrs)	1.78e-113	0.108	8.53e-10	0.0755	3.32e-44	-	3.59e-39
Active User	7.32e-40	0.177	0.00984	0.000215	1.11e-31	3.59e-39	

Results Interpretation

Below is a detailed interpretation focusing on significant relationships concerning the variable "Political Polarisation", along with broader implications of other significant correlations in this dataset:

- **Political Polarisation and Social Media ($\rho = 0.634$, $p < 0.001$):** A strong positive correlation suggests that perceptions of increased political polarisation in Pakistan over the past five years are closely linked with the belief that social media has contributed to this polarisation.

- **Active User and Political Polarisation ($\rho = 0.401$, $p < 0.001$):** Indicates that frequent users of social media are more likely to perceive that it has polarised the political sphere. This may reflect greater exposure to divisive content.

- **Changed Beliefs and Political Polarisation ($\rho = 0.344$, $p < 0.001$):** This suggests that individuals who have experienced significant changes in their political beliefs over the past five years are more likely to feel that social media has contributed to polarisation.

- **Cross-Party Intentions and Political Polarisation ($\rho = 0.177$, $p < 0.01$):** A moderate correlation showing that those who perceive cross-party members as having good intentions are somewhat likely to believe that social media has increased polarisation. This could reflect nuanced views on political interactions both online and offline.

- **Political Trust and Cross-Party Intentions ($\rho = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$):** This significant positive correlation implies that higher trust in political information from rivals correlates with a positive view of opposing party intentions, which could indicate a more cooperative and less adversarial political outlook among those respondents.

- **Changed Beliefs and Polarisation in Pakistan ($\rho = 0.421$, $p < 0.001$):** Indicates that those who report significant changes in their political beliefs are also more likely to perceive an increase in polarisation in the

    past 5 years, suggesting a dynamic political identity that is sensitive to broader societal trends.

- **Active User and Polarisation in Pakistan ($\rho = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$):** Frequent social media users also tend to perceive greater political polarisation during the past 5 years, likely reflecting the impact of regular exposure to diverse and potentially contentious political content on social media platforms.

Findings
- Social media contributes significantly to political polarisation due to increased exposure to divisive content on social media.
- The connection between changing political beliefs and polarisation suggests that current events and media consumption patterns have a significant impact on individual political ideologies.
- The relationships between political trust, cross-party engagement, and social media usage indicate that digital platforms can foster a more informed and respectful political discourse.

Conclusion

The quantitative analysis highlights connections between political polarisation and various social media behaviours and beliefs. Participants that believe political polarisation in Pakistan is rising also tend to believe that it is social media that has played a significant role in this shift. Those respondents who actively used social media also believe that social media plays a role in shaping political perceptions since they are exposed to divisive content. Moreover, a large section of the respondents agreed that their political beliefs have changed in the past five years. The same respondents also believe that social media and polarisation have a stronger link.

Interestingly, people who trust political information on social media tend to have a positive view of opposing parties' intentions, suggesting that trust may promote a more cooperative political outlook. The study also reveals

that social media's influence on polarisation, changes in political beliefs, and trust in political information reflect the divisive impact of digital platforms. These insights suggest a need for strategies to reduce polarisation while fostering informed and respectful political discussions online.

Chapter 6
Political Polarisation on Social Media: Key Drivers and Future Outlook

Social media has become a key platform in Pakistani politics, enabling political parties to engage with voters and provide timely insights into their positions on socio-economic matters and other national issues. A large number of Pakistani youth is using social media to get information from the official social media handles of their respective party leaders, increasing their social media dependence. Both positive and negative aspects of this politicisation of social media have been evidenced. On one hand, this has increased political awareness among the masses and has increased local participation in the political processes—which is essential to strengthen democracy in the country—while on the other hand, social media has become a powerful catalyst for the rise of online political activism in the country.

Drivers of Political Polarisation on Social Media

Experts have noted that "social media is increasing the political participation, and greater access to information, however, it is also accompanied by the rapid spread of misinformation, online threats, harassment, and hate speeches." [56] Social media platforms like X and YouTube have provided new avenues for political discourse, significantly amplifying existing political sentiments and biases. The algorithms used by these platforms often create echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to content that endorses their existing beliefs. In the opinion of an American social psychologist and professor of Ethical Leadership, Jonathan Haidt, social media makes it difficult for organisations and society to maintain unity because it amplifies ideological divides. The fragmented

---

[56] Rajper, Muhammad Shahbaz. "The Politicisation of Social Media in Pakistan." *Pakistan Today*, July 27, 2023. https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/07/27/the-politicisation-of-social-media-in-pakistan

online communities erode institutional trust and impact the mental health of the young generation.[57]

Steven Brill, an American lawyer, in his book *The Death of Truth* published in 2024, emphasises the need for accountability and transparency in how social media platforms operate. He recommends legal provisions to ensure that the platforms are not entirely shielded from liability for harmful or defamatory user-generated content. Moreover, the author suggests regulations requiring platforms to take responsibility for combating misinformation, hate speech, and fake news.[58]

Based on the interviews with experts on social media, below are some of the identified drivers of political polarisation on the social media landscape in Pakistan.

Social Media Algorithms

Social media algorithms, in the age of Web 3.0, where AI is playing a key role in deciding what content the user will be exposed to, are acting as critical drivers of political polarisation. These algorithms, imitating the behaviour of users' recent choices and likes, often create echo chambers where users are mostly shown content that aligns with their existing beliefs.[59] According to social media expert Talha ul Huda, this behaviour leads to a phenomenon known as confirmation bias where a user is not only deprived of diverse political views but is becoming a victim of fake news

---

[57] *Jonathan Haidt: How Social Media Has Fragmented Everything and Made It Harder to Run and Staff Orgs*, 2022, loc. 11:20-11:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVxmfUPlPaQ.

[58] Steven Brill, *The Death of Truth: How Social Media and the Internet Gave Snake Oil Salesmen and Demagogues the Weapons They Needed to Destroy Trust and Polarize the World--And What We Can Do* (New York: Knopf, 2024).

[59] MAIEI. "Social Media Polarisation Reflects Shifting Political Alliances in Pakistan." Montreal AI Ethics Institute, January 18, 2024. https://montrealethics.ai/social-media-polarisation-reflects-shifting-political-alliances-in-pakistan

that social media algorithms pull from the feeds of other users in the social media network of an individual.[60]

Along the same lines, Professor Haidt underscores that social media forms echo chambers which compel people to limit their interaction to the like-minded individuals.[61] This leads to formation of filter bubbles that intensifies societal divisions and reduces constructive dialogue across different perspectives. Haidt contends that social media platforms influence human psychology by using algorithms that maximise user engagement with the help of addictive features, such as, infinite scrolling, notifications, and the relentless pursuit of likes, validation, and instant gratification.[62]

Social media's influence on political polarisation can be seen through its ability to amplify biases. Echo chambers and filter bubbles are created by algorithms that prioritise content similar to what users have previously engaged with, thus reinforcing their existing biases. This selective exposure is a fundamental aspect of human psychology, where users seek out information that confirms their beliefs.

Political Incidents
Alongside social media algorithms and limited digital media literacy, political events have also fuelled rising political polarisation in Pakistan, enabling the spread of misinformation, the manipulation of public opinion, and the targeting of national institutions for political gain. Algorithms and AI do not work in a vacuum. Even for fake news about any incident, some elements of that incident need to take place. As mentioned above, social media can contribute to the formation of echo chambers, where users are exposed to manipulated news and selective interpretations of incidents that reinforce their existing beliefs. After certain political events in Pakistan,

---

[60] Huda, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan…
[61] *Jonathan Haidt: Has Social Media Destroyed a Generation?*, 2022, loc. 06:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ocm_75ivYT0.
[62] *Jonathan Haidt*, 2022...

social media has been playing a significant role in political discourse in the country. There has been a visible spike in politically polarised views on social media where not only the opposing political parties are being attacked through fake news and misleading analysis but the country's national security institutions have also become targets of political interests.[63]

National institutions have been maligned, attacked, and disrespected based on fake news and propaganda without any strong evidence. Politicians and political parties use social media as a strategic tool to mobilise support and disseminate their messages. These actors often employ polarising rhetoric to galvanise their followers, using social media to amplify their reach and impact. The content shared on these platforms often originates from deliberate political strategies designed to polarise public opinion.[64] Social media algorithms, political incidents, and lack of digital media literacy are some of the drivers behind this polarised behaviour on social media which must be comprehended to understand the entire process.

Lack of Media Literacy
Media literacy influences political polarisation by shaping individuals' ability to assess information critically. In the age of excessive information exposure through social media, a low media literacy rate, coupled with limited political acumen in the masses acts as a driver for political polarisation. Former Additional Director General of the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA), Ammar Jaffri believes that lack of media literacy handicaps individuals while verifying facts about any incident from a credible source before believing what they view on social media.[65] This leads to a higher likelihood of falling victim to echo chambers and reinforcing polarised beliefs.

---

[63] Jaffri, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan.
[64] Jaffri.
[65] Jaffri...

Social media's role in Pakistani politics is a mixed bag while it improves political awareness it also deepens polarisation. Algorithms and political incidents fuel echo chambers and misinformation, worsened by low media literacy. Addressing this requires promoting critical thinking to navigate towards a more united political landscape.[66]

Future of Political Engagement and Polarisation on Social Media

The future of political engagement and polarisation on social media in Pakistan is contingent on several factors. There is a clear recognition of the current state of political polarisation, with an understanding that it has reached an alarming level. The importance of involving all stakeholders in addressing political polarisation, rather than resorting to censorship or shutdowns is essential.[67] Social media can intensify existing polarisation, but it may not be a source of new divisions. Platforms like YouTube, X, and TikTok do not cause polarisation but amplify existing divisions.

Political engagement and polarisation have escalated significantly in recent years, with politicians and stakeholders resorting to mudslinging on social media platforms. This has led to a breakdown in dialogue among political stakeholders, making it difficult to address polarisation effectively. Nearly 61% (36.97% agreed + 23.85% strongly agreed) of the respondents to the survey agreed that polity in Pakistan has gotten more polarised during the past five years (Bar Chart-V).

---

[66] M.D., CRCP Dr. Zeeshan Ummaid Ali. "Political Polarisation and Killer Role of Social Media," *Pulse,* April 3, 2023. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/political-polarisation-killer-role-social-media-dr-zeeshan.

[67] Ashraf, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan…

Bar Chart-V: Political Sphere in Pakistan became More Polarised in the Last 5 Years
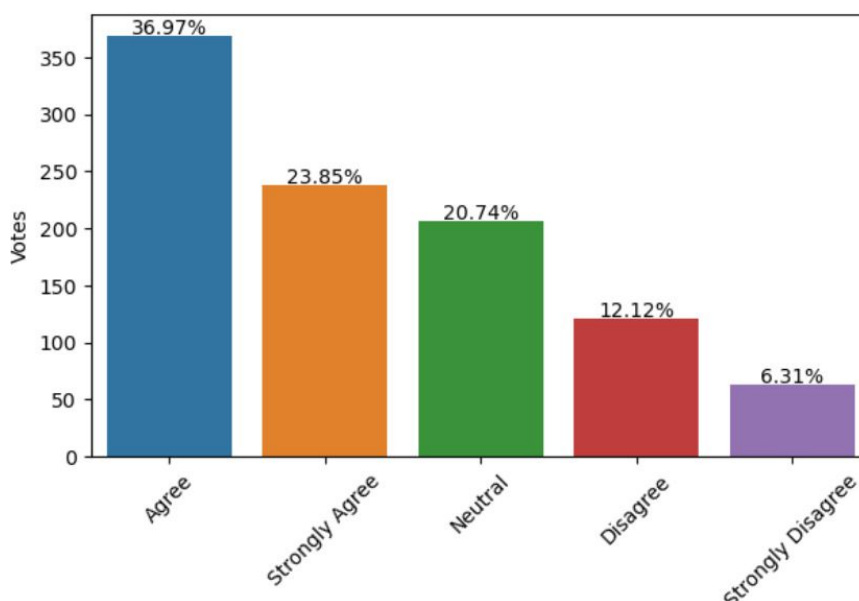

The current level of polarisation has made it difficult to foster social cohesion on many levels. However, the respondents envision a future where people recognise the futility of perpetual conflict and strive for more constructive discourse. While some may doubt the possibility of such a future, all stakeholders need to be involved in the process. Resorting to censorship, as some may suggest, has historically proven ineffective and counterproductive.[68]

When survey respondents were asked whether social media would lead to more intolerance till the next elections (2029), over 18 per cent disagreed (9.72% disagreed + 8.72 strongly disagreed) but the majority agreed that social media may increase political intolerance (Bar Chart-VI).

---

[68] Huda, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan...

**Bar Chart-VI: Social Media may Increase Intolerance till the
Next Elections**
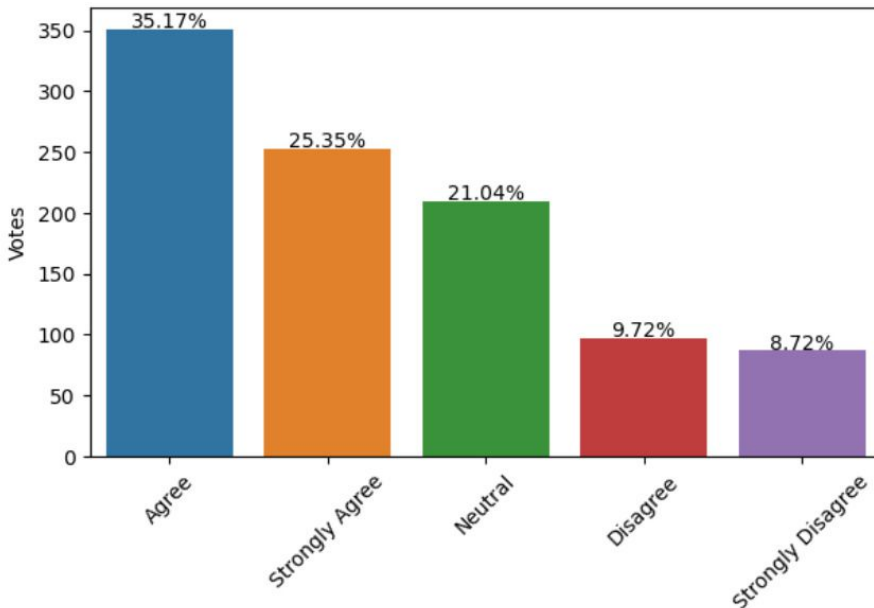
There is a need to engage in more productive discussions at the national level. By stepping back and addressing the underlying issues beyond politics, such as economic instability and social fragmentation, the government can promote a more inclusive and constructive dialogue. Focusing on these broader societal issues can help reduce political polarisation, especially in online discussions. By encouraging the general public to engage in more meaningful conversations, one can work towards a future where polarisation is less prevalent on social media platforms.

Hussain Nadim suggests that the political engagement and polarisation on social media is by and large a reflection of the offline political and social reality. How political engagement and polarisation will play out on social media is entirely linked to how offline political space evolves.[69] "The frequent abductions of political party workers, torture, and tyranny against

---

[69] Nadim, Impact of Social Media on Political Polarisation in Pakistan.

democratic actors at the hands of the state institutions will define what kind of political space emerges offline and what will be reflected on social media, not the other way around."[70]

Addressing political polarisation on social media in Pakistan requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond censorship and reactionary measures. While social media serves as a catalyst for amplifying existing divisions, it does not inherently create them; rather, it reflects broader political and societal realities. The future trajectory of polarisation will depend on how political discourse evolves offline, particularly in response to governance, institutional actions, and broader socio-economic conditions. To foster a more constructive political environment, stakeholders must prioritise meaningful dialogue, address underlying grievances, and promote digital literacy. Encouraging informed and respectful discussions can help mitigate the intensification of polarisation and contribute to a more balanced and inclusive political discourse in both online and offline spaces.

---

[70] Nadim.

Chapter 7
Findings and Recommendations

Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses, the hypothesis that the increased use of social media platforms in Pakistan is leading to increased political polarisation stands partially validated.

Findings

- The study conclusively demonstrates that social media has a complex and multifaceted role in shaping political polarisation in Pakistan. The findings highlight that while platforms like X and TikTok have statistically significant correlations with polarisation, these influence users in distinctly different ways. X has a significant impact on political polarisation because people believe the information on X to be largely true and reliable. On the contrary, due to insufficient reliability on TikTok, the political debates do not enjoy credibility on this platform.
- Social media helps users disseminate a very large volume of information in a short span of time giving virality to polarised opinions and exacerbating the political divides in society.
- It is noteworthy that though social media does not initiate polarisation, it acts as a catalyst to deepen the divides that exist in the society. Over half of the respondents to the survey agreed that social media has made the political sphere more polarised and it is likely to worsen.
- The research brings to light the mechanism of echo chambers facilitated by social media algorithms, which promote content in line with users' pre-existing beliefs, thereby intensifying polarisation. This is particularly concerning in the context of political misinformation, which can spread rapidly and skew public perceptions, further entrenching divided viewpoints.

- In addition to polarising role of algorithms, the use of social media by political actors to broaden their support base and malign their political opponents leads to political polarisation.

Recommendations

Drawing from the qualitative and quantitative data analysis, the following recommendations are offered to address political polarisation on social media in the context of Pakistan:

Promote Digital Media Literacy

- Educate users, especially the younger generation, about responsible social media usage and the recognition of potential pitfalls.
- Digital Media literacy should be ensured by introducing digital literacy in educational curricula and offering specific courses and programmes to the students. Community-based awareness campaigns through public and online platforms should be carried out. People should be able to assess the credibility of online sources and click baits, detect polarising tools of social media like echo chambers and filter bubbles.

Holding Social Media Accountable

- Hold social media companies accountable for their actions and consider measures to limit their influence.
- The government can devise laws to make social media platforms more transparent about their data collection and use policies, moderation tools, and algorithms.
- Alternate social media platforms with less algorithmic amplification should be encouraged.
- The government should implement restrictions on the manner companies use personal data of its users to target them with polarising content. This would limit the reception of hyper-personalised and politically charged content.

Moderate Online Discourse
- Encourage pressure groups, including political, and religious entities to moderate their online discourse to prevent the exacerbation of polarisation.
- A code of conduct for responsible and respectful online behaviour must be devised to be strictly followed by all public office holders.
- Spokespersons of political and religious representatives should be trained in responsible use of social media. These people should be held accountable for using inflammatory language and personal attacks.

Shift Focus to Real-Life Issues
- Redirect online discourse towards real-life issues such as education, mental health, and infrastructure, rather than focusing solely on political affiliations.
- Social media platforms should be encouraged to adjust their algorithms to promote content that deals with social issues instead of prioritising purely political posts.

Foster Inclusive Discourse
- Foster dialogue and promote diverse perspectives to create a more inclusive online environment conducive to civil discourse and mutual understanding. Algorithms prioritising a diverse array of content would discourage echo chambers where users -come across content that reinforces their existing views.
- Users who discuss real-time issues should be rewarded with greater visibility, badges on their profiles, and access to more/new features to motivate their participation in constructive debates.
- Establish platforms for stakeholders to discuss and address important societal issues, fostering constructive dialogue and collaboration.

Establish and Incorporate Fact-Check Mechanisms in Social Media Apps

- SM apps should incorporate AI tools and hire independent fact-checking organisations to verify the content being shared.
- Support independent fact-checking organisations to verify and debunk misinformation on social media. Fact-checking tools should be directly integrated into social media platforms.
- Posts that may potentially contain misinformation should be flagged. SM platforms can work with independent fact-checking organisations like FactCheck.org, Snopes, or local organisations to verify flagged content.
- Users who previously interacted with false content must receive correction notifications once fact-checkers have debunked its inaccuracy. This would spread the share of correct information and encourage responsible online engagement.

Improve Libel Laws

- Libel laws in Pakistan should be strengthened to prosecute cases of online defamation in the court of law.
- To remove cases of trivial nature, only those incidents should be brought before the court in which a serious harm is imminent or has been inflicted.

Indigenous Social Media Platforms

- Plan indigenous social media platforms that could act as an alternative to Facebook, Instagram, X, and WhatsApp to reduce dependence on foreign platforms.
- Chinese help may be sought to create indigenous social media platforms.

Future research could explore the specific factors driving the differing correlations between X and TikTok in relation to political polarisation. A comparative content analysis could examine how political discourse varies across various social media platforms, including the role of influencers, algorithmic recommendations, and engagement patterns. Additionally, studying user behaviour may reveal whether certain demographics are more susceptible to polarisation based on their interaction with political content. External factors such as political events, regulatory frameworks, and cultural trends could also be examined to understand their impact on user engagement with political content. Longitudinal studies tracking these patterns over time would further clarify whether these correlations remain consistent or shift due to evolving platform policies and user dynamics.

Conclusion

The study proposes actionable strategies aimed at reducing the negative impact of social media on public discourse. These include promoting media literacy to help users critically evaluate the information they consume, implementing stricter regulations on social media platforms to curb the spread of misinformation, and encouraging a more inclusive and balanced online discourse. The recommendations suggest that a holistic approach involving the government, educational institutions, tech and social media companies is required to mitigate the negativity of political polarisation on social media. These suggestions aim to empower users, promote responsible online behaviour, and foster a more balanced and constructive discourse.

In essence, while social media platforms provide a dynamic arena for political engagement and expression, their potential to deepen societal divisions cannot be ignored. Moving forward, a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including policymakers, social media companies, judiciary and the public, is essential to harness the benefits of these digital platforms while mitigating their risks. By fostering an environment that promotes critical engagement and open dialogue, Pakistan can hope to achieve a less polarised and more inclusive political landscape.■

About the Authors

Iqra Siddique
Iqra Siddique is an Assistant Research Associate (ARA) at Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI). She previously worked as a Young Development Fellow (YDF) at the Ministry of Planning. She has an MPhil in International Relations from Quaid i Azam University (QAU).

Faizan Riaz
Faizan Riaz is an Assistant Research Associate (ARA) at IPRI with an MPhil in International Relations from QAU, Islamabad. His research focuses on domestic politics, South Asian affairs, and international security studies.

Syed Hassan Ahmad
Syed Hassan Ahmad was a Data Scientist at IPRI. He specializes in machine learning, cloud computing, and big data analytics, leveraging AI to drive innovation and solve complex problems. He is currently working as a Data Engineer at TEO International.

Noureen Akhtar
Noureen Akhtar is a non-resident Researcher at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI). She is pursuing her PhD in International Relations from Quaid i Azam University. She has served as a Policy Consultant in the National Security Division (NSD). She specializes in hybrid warfare—AI, cyber warfare, and cyber politics.