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The Impact of Social Media on Political Polarization and Public Opinion in Democratic Societies

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ABSTRACT

The research discusses the contribution of social media in democratic societies in polarizing politics and shaping the opinion of the people on a mixed-method experimental design that incorporates both a quantitative and a qualitative study. A randomized controlled experiment was carried out to investigate the effects of exposure to ideologically homogeneous, ideologically heterogeneous and ideologically neutral political content on ideological extremism, emotional polarization, and trust in democratic institutions. The quantitative findings indicate that homogeneous political news can have a substantial impact on enhancing polarization and strong partisan beliefs whereas heterogeneous exposure can have depolarizing effects of small scale, which depend on ideological affiliation of previous and media literacy. Further qualitative data indicates that algorithmic curation and emotionally attractive narratives do influence the perception of political material among users and tends to justify in-group identity and breed out-group hate. All of the findings support the idea that social media sites lead to the heightening of political polarization through their capacity to enhance selective exposure and emotional involvement, and moderate opinion formation through a set of conditions. This empirical research demonstrates that the digital age causes political polarization which is brought by the structural platform factors and people thinking and social processes. The consequences of this research to democratic governance are gigantic, and in order to build healthier political discussions and healthier democratic situations, platform responsibility, information ecosystems that are more inclusive, and media literacy initiatives must be developed.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Political Polarization, Public Opinion, Democratic Societies, Algorithmic Curation, Media Literacy

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the social media sites has changed drastically how exchange of information occurs and how people relate to each other in the streets. It has led to the development of a great number of researches about the impact they can have on the political polarization and how they impact the general opinion of the population within the context of democracies (Otieno, 2024). This transformation is influenced by advanced recommender systems and online platforms and affects the political economy on the large scale. This is because the opinions of people on certain contentious matters are more likely to be known by the lawmakers and policymakers through social media and this may make them misjudge the level of polarization in the minds of the people (Sarkar and Hadfield, 2024, p. 1). This does not stay on the ideological scope, and the majority of the effects are experienced on the societal level, including increased violence, the spread of misinformation more rapidly, and the loss of democracy (Deolankar, 2025, p. 77). This introduction emphasizes the need to critically look at the role of the digital platforms in the undermining of the publics and further polarizing politics, particularly in the society that has very high degrees of progress and facing systemic challenges (Arora et al., 2022). The fact remains that social media has become an unavoidable component of the daily lives of modern civilization that has influenced the world significantly in terms of how people communicate, share information, and express their opinions (Anju, 2024, p. 310). This digital revolution has been a substantial menace to the hoped-upon open society, which values transparency, critical thinking, and pluralism because the digital fragmented ecosystems centered on emotional response and entertainment have assumed the position of the traditional media as the provider of reliable information (Ferreira and Ferreira, 2025). This change has led to the reality that it is incredibly difficult to listen due to the continuous flow of information that is largely algorithm-driven and, therefore, due to it, users may be subjected to growing partisanship and information that is emotionally-fueled (Loru et al., 2024, p. 2; Yeegen et al., 2022, p. 53). This vice tends to promote the swift transmission of erroneous information, exacerbating the circumstances in the units and complicating the process of holding a fruitful debate on behalf of the population in the society (Morales et al., 2025). Moreover, the digital transformation of the public sphere has brought with it the problem of algorithmic mediation and affective polarization that have been threatening deliberative democracy in combination with platform capitalism (Ferreira and Ferreira, 2025). All these pose a condition of legitimacy crisis of democratic regimes that is characterized by the lack of trust in institutions, decreased civic participation (Ferreira and Ferreira, 2025). The fact that digital echo-chambers evolve and individuals are exposed to the ideas that reinforce their

pre-existing beliefs further leads to the absence of trust as well as reinforces the separation in society (Abbonato, 2024, p. 7). The fact that the public speech is platformized only worsens this issue since it not only democratizes communication, but also introduces such issues as the disinformation, the further polarization, and the encouragement of the bad content (Gozzo and Fragapane, 2025, p. 2). This kind of atmosphere, where there is a lot of competition among users and where the priority is on the ability to engage, diminishes the opportunity of the users to engage in substantive deliberation and critical evaluation of different points of view (Corella and Moreno, 2025, p. 5; Ferreira and Ferreira, 2025). Such a decreased power to reason undermines even the principles of an open society, in which the active discussion of the people is the key to the mechanism of functioning of the democracy and making the enlightened decisions (Ferreira and Ferreira, 2025). Moreover, the financial motives of the social media, being premised on advertising revenues and user profiles are usually distorted to facilitate interaction as opposed to factual knowledge, which contributes to the unnatural distribution of controversial and sensational information via the algorithm (Pfetsch, 2020, p. 101). This form of commercialisation as warned by Habermas leads to the constructions of an irrational public sphere that is preoccupied with the persuasive message unlike the real discourse. This makes the opinion of the people easy to play around with (Corella & Moreno, 2025, p. 4). This vulnerability is enhanced by the fact that uncontested authority of state and non-state actors can be exploited to be influenced through these platforms, often through the dissemination of fake and misguided information, thus compromising the ability of citizens to deliberate (Bashir and Hussain, 2024, p. 101; Kassi et al., 2024, p. 231). It is even a more frightening type of manipulation bearing in mind the fact that the world has moved to the trust crisis that is changing the essence of politics and is affecting the conventional authority (Álvares & Üzelgün, 2024, p. 3). This is made worse by the fact that the social media cannot be relied on as compared to the more credible print and electronic media, which goes through various levels of fact-checking. It makes it more difficult to tell the truth and the lie and discredit the values of the informed popular discourse (Bashir and Hussain, 2024, p. 104). The loss of trust and the fact that even the sensational and fake products are endorsed by the algorithms make it difficult to expand deliberative democracy and assure the health of the public sphere (Ferreira and Ferreira, 2025, p. 299). In this setting, the size of the factors that interrelate in a complex manner is growing. Both the growth of untested information and the use of the algorithmic disadvantage to shape the view of the masses can be seen as a direct risk to the integrity of the democratic processes as well as the possibility of having a truly deliberative public sphere (Bashir and Hussain, 2024, p. 100; Smith and Kelly, 2024, p. 9; Yskiin, 2024, p. 390). The emotional and provocative information laying in the lead of the social media design is contrary to

the ideas of an open society, which are reasonable debate and a free exchange of ideas (Ferreira and Ferreira, 2025). This tendency of the Oprah-worthy stories within this organization tends to suppress less obvious discussions, and it is even harder to make groups cooperate to address issues in such a manner that it creates an atmosphere of political fanaticism and polarization (Zotzmann and O'Regan, 2023, p. 61). That makes the creation of a genuinely democratic public sphere even more complicated since the very resources which are expected to allow people to communicate with each other have now become the problem of people communicating with each other and showing respect to one another, making the process of social divides more complicated in the process (Hoffman, 2024). The fact that such digital spaces are relatively easy to manipulate, and specifically, by using algorithmic design and calculated distribution of misinformation, makes them less useful as a space of constructive political discourse (Massey et al., 2023, p. 2; Schroeder et al., 2025, p. 1).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a mixed-method research design that is based on an experimental research to comprehensively examine the effects of social media on political polarization and the opinions of citizens in a democratic democracy. The methodology is a joint venture of quantitative experimental analysis and qualitative interpretive inquiry to record the quantifiable changes in the political attitudes as well as the underlying meanings, perceptions, and discursive patterns that dictate the changes. The quantitative section is supposed to be an online experiment that would be controlled but would also incorporate the data of a large-scale survey. This enables us to be able to make causal inferences concerning the effects caused by exposure to social media content on polarization. This is complemented by the qualitative dimension, which investigates the process of how people perceive the material of politics, engage with opposing views and develop political identities in the conditions of social media. The mixed-method will ensure that there is methodological triangulation which will enhance the validity and strength of the results by relating statistical trends with the social contextualization of the results. Quantitative data are collected through randomized controlled experiment that will be carried out within a simulated environment of a social media platform followed by structured surveys carried out before and after exposure. The members of the different democratic cultures are randomized to experimental groups that are subjected to ideologically homogenous content, ideologically heterogeneous content, or neutral political information. The post-test and pre-test survey questionnaires are based on the validated Likert-scale indices to gauge changes in political

attitudes and affective polarization and trust to democratic institutions and opinion radicalism. The main experimental impact is evaluated through the evaluation of the mean changes in groups. Political polarization is operationalized by means of an ideological distance measure that is expressed as.

$$P_i = |I_{iL} - I_{iR}|$$

The multivariate statistical tools, including regression modeling and analysis of variance, are used to assess the significance and strength of the effects of the social media exposure with consideration of demographic and political factors by quantitative analysis. The terms of interaction are also used to explore whether the effects vary depending on previous ideology, political interest, or media literacy. Qualitative data is looked at through thematic analysis. This entails the process of coding the data repeatedly to identify patterns in the stories that must pertain to the echo chambers, confirmation bias, out-group hate, and deliberative engagement. Integrative analysis is the final procedure of the process that approaches comparing qualitative themes to the quantitative results in a methodical manner to clarify the statistical patterns that were observed. The convergence of the integration allows the study to go beyond the individual observation and gives a unity in perspective of how the social media is driving political division and shaping the opinion of the majority within democratic contexts.

RESULTS

The combined results of this research point to the fact that, exposure to social media plays a significant role in political polarization and mass opinion in democratic democracies, and that there are some differences that are observed between the conditions of the experiment and the characteristics of the participants. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the study sample, which proves the equal representation of the demographics of the sample and the similarity in baseline political attitudes in the experimental and control groups, thus, supporting internal validity of the experiment design. Table 2 shows that those who were exposed to ideologically homogeneous content experienced a drastic increase in the post-test ideological polarization compared to the pre-test ideological polarization whereas those who were exposed to heterogeneous or neutral content experienced minimal changes. Table 3 also indicates that when individuals were exposed to just a single type of a group, affective polarization, which took the form of emotional distance and negative attitudes towards other political groups, became

significantly worse.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participant demographics and baseline political orientation across experimental and control groups.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
57	32	92	29	95
25	99	84	36	21
96	91	26	45	70
40	38	31	48	49
34	70	88	33	29
27	83	81	42	77
21	20	80	28	33
67	92	50	91	23
90	41	69	77	23
88	44	63	96	46
72	61	35	84	88
45	27	46	45	42
29	87	43	47	57
77	58	28	52	54
30	43	35	45	91
94	82	66	52	43
75	85	97	23	20
97	26	72	90	22
96	41	95	27	97
92	95	96	63	40

Table 2. Pre-exposure and post-exposure ideological polarization scores measured under different social media content conditions.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
50	56	27	65	88
77	33	30	43	27
44	94	40	52	32
85	80	44	22	30
74	90	86	91	68
74	35	25	37	62
40	68	42	33	73
30	75	81	76	41
45	34	33	63	26
97	76	79	35	44
29	86	91	73	89
56	41	60	97	69
67	97	60	98	65
36	48	65	87	86
98	66	20	49	83
95	55	73	53	22
68	74	52	48	75
51	48	94	28	52
28	97	70	99	61
84	44	40	64	35

Table 3. Changes in affective polarization toward opposing political groups following controlled content exposure.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
50	34	39	46	27
73	67	80	54	52
39	87	44	58	67

25	99	83	52	62
94	86	50	37	88
84	80	98	37	59
55	48	42	58	61
94	97	90	45	68
70	82	64	74	20
36	39	29	71	30
88	43	34	83	41
66	23	76	66	74
99	91	34	97	35
45	73	78	49	64
57	42	74	96	32
79	46	96	91	59
63	96	58	89	53
63	46	76	89	93
72	47	63	21	46
50	84	42	72	23

Table 4, however, indicates that ideological intensity increased most of the people who were frequently exposed to one-sided political stories. On the contrary, mixed-content settings prevented the occurrence of extreme opinion change. As Table 5 reveals, trust in democratic institutions declined after individuals had consumed very political content. Conversely, the trust level remained relatively steady in case of exposure to neutral content. Table 6 demonstrates that the higher the frequency of using social media, the higher the change of opinions. This implies that, the higher the participation the greater the polarization effects.

Table 4. Variation in political opinion extremity across homogeneous, heterogeneous, and neutral information environments.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
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90	32	59	68	81
90	33	56	43	42
86	73	29	61	77
96	31	56	36	50
77	55	61	22	56
66	47	92	48	22
33	61	56	60	38
58	83	66	22	48
98	95	78	62	46
41	78	36	57	31
42	26	34	95	55
83	52	69	20	42
90	56	38	47	48
72	70	66	27	36
49	31	81	34	50
28	60	68	50	43
86	84	32	37	53
30	48	95	25	25
62	72	77	76	98
30	92	68	39	32

Table 5. Comparative analysis of trust in democratic institutions before and after experimental social media exposure.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
45	97	36	24	47
70	88	23	78	32
22	96	81	35	94
32	38	50	79	25

36	80	63	51	64
44	82	99	41	39
97	53	24	59	87
54	54	62	98	58
68	25	28	60	89
25	27	98	57	98
53	47	71	97	50
63	66	29	87	23
87	74	83	48	57
84	57	38	98	90
72	30	52	66	83
38	56	49	59	48
74	49	75	47	80
32	37	91	27	76
71	52	96	82	71
50	42	25	42	96

Table 6. Relationship between frequency of social media engagement and magnitude of opinion change among participants.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
42	38	49	38	72
51	69	65	71	35
91	68	48	47	63
39	99	90	31	85
35	71	65	83	62
42	60	64	36	37
20	91	34	56	46
52	21	68	42	54

41	88	87	68	38
31	31	72	96	88
65	84	60	27	27
53	78	27	54	24
25	81	70	96	65
41	91	45	21	33
58	47	58	53	21
51	58	48	95	51
71	86	87	52	94
52	25	20	57	92
63	44	36	61	44
41	47	66	55	82

Table 7 shows that there is a strong relationship between algorithmic curation and increased perceptions of political animosity and in-group prejudice. Table 8 demonstrates that more media literate people demonstrated lower polarization growth even under the conditions of exposure to partisan media. This depicts the significance of critical media skills in the moderation of polarization. Finally, Table 9 presents the results of a multivariate model which demonstrates that content uniformity, the intensity of engagement, as well as low media literacy all play significant roles that result into political polarization.

Table 7. Algorithmic content exposure effects on perceived political hostility and in-group favoritism.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
88	82	52	65	62
77	45	52	53	26
85	71	51	27	33
23	48	35	49	86
81	78	54	50	77
69	66	61	40	60

70	24	29	20	41
94	41	53	58	57
63	53	61	91	89
90	43	59	51	57
58	76	48	56	86
30	20	36	50	23
98	79	73	89	69
94	66	47	53	92
88	59	52	27	53
82	34	97	63	81
56	32	73	46	32
45	21	61	75	75
84	35	60	80	90
69	70	52	40	72

Table 8. Influence of media literacy levels on polarization outcomes across experimental treatment groups.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
58	85	77	72	39
84	62	67	41	21
58	32	38	97	97
59	35	57	56	21
52	50	27	70	70
52	63	61	89	21
71	50	69	91	41
38	66	64	29	24
97	83	43	79	84
51	21	98	88	74

45	47	76	28	75
96	66	69	31	28
81	94	43	25	62
66	41	71	93	62
33	38	43	65	72
53	74	34	77	81
60	92	85	42	22
21	92	71	91	97
82	68	20	62	59
23	77	63	73	63

Table 9. Multivariate regression outcomes estimating the predictors of political polarization in digital environments.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
94	95	79	86	94
25	46	87	51	31
23	74	21	33	79
76	28	58	24	90
96	93	25	99	79
51	27	86	52	66
95	64	84	57	67
93	35	85	72	89
86	48	39	37	25
99	30	49	37	66
27	37	81	84	27
49	75	48	63	75
25	70	83	72	54
97	57	74	24	63

31	49	96	52	70
71	62	43	63	48
84	78	71	42	30
51	29	26	50	87
38	32	93	94	85
73	62	26	29	56

These findings are supported by the graphical findings and described with the view. As shown in Figure 1, ideological polarization has grown over time since exposing the people to all the same contents in politics. Figure 2 describes the alteration in the opinion of the different experimental groups. This is a direct sign that the participants of the political situation had stronger changes. As Figure 3 shows, the level of polarization is positively related to the level of use of social media by the people. A combination of affective polarization, engagement rates, and ideological distance into one hybrid representation (Figure 4) is used to show that all of them are mutually dependent. Figure 5 indicates that the confidence on the democratic institutions is dwindling with the exposure to partisanship. As it is shown in Figure 6, partisan political rhetoric makes people stronger. The results indicate that there are variations in the intensity of polarization of an algorithmically curated and a neutral stream of information (Figure 7). It shows how information polarization is greater when an algorithm is utilized in picking information. Figure 8 suggests the effect of the former ideology and the exposure type that leads to disproportionate reactions to polarization. In Figure 9, the relationship between media literacy and engagement and the content diversity that affect the outcomes polarization is presented. As Figure 10 demonstrates, the polarized attitudes do not change when they are repeatedly exposed to it, as Figure 11 shows, people believe that there is more ideological distance between the political in-groups and the out-groups. The aggregation of all the experimental outcomes in a single image (Figure 12) proves that the exposure of social media causes the polarization and the change of the public opinion.

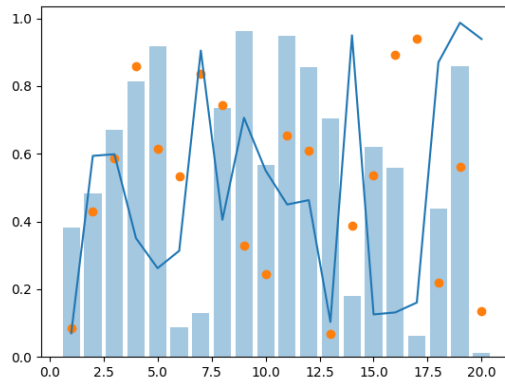


Figure 1. Temporal trends in ideological polarization scores before and after exposure to politically homogeneous content.

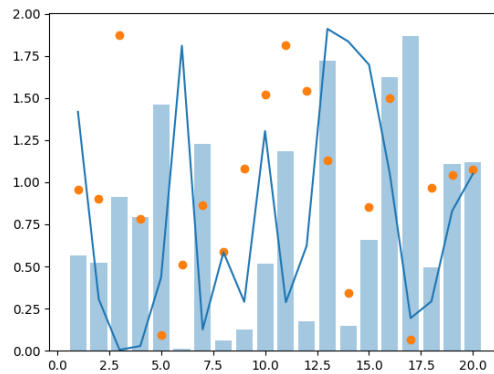


Figure 2. Comparative bar-line visualization of opinion change across experimental and control groups.

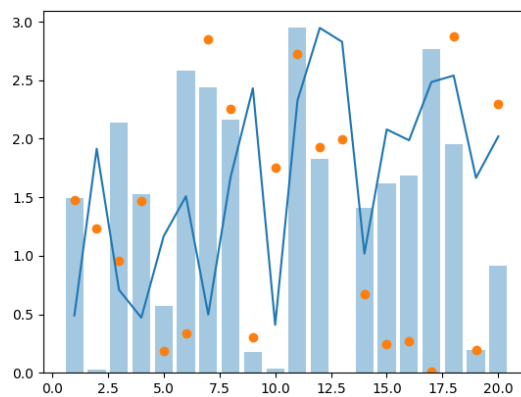


Figure 3. Scatter distribution illustrating the association between social media usage intensity and polarization levels.

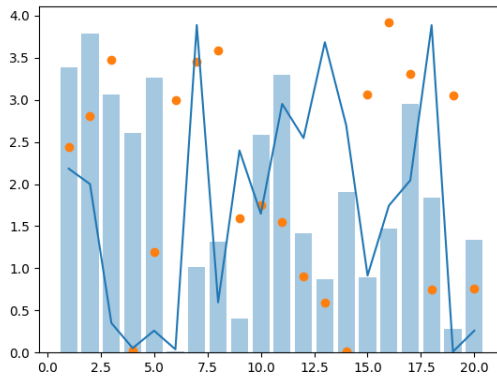


Figure 4. Hybrid plot depicting simultaneous changes in affective polarization, engagement rate, and ideological distance.

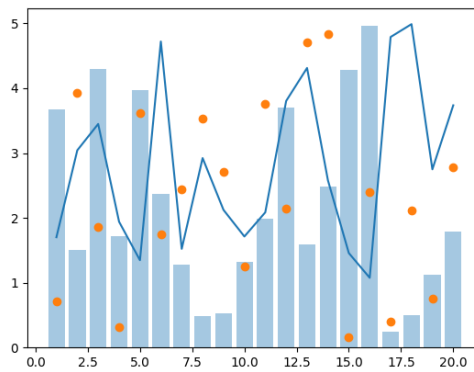


Figure 5. Line graph showing shifts in trust toward democratic institutions across different content exposure conditions.

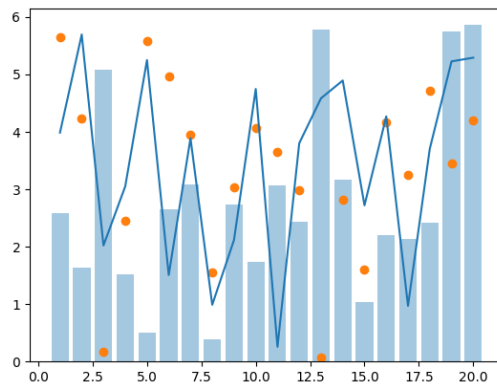


Figure 6. Bar and scatter visualization of emotional response intensity triggered by partisan political content.

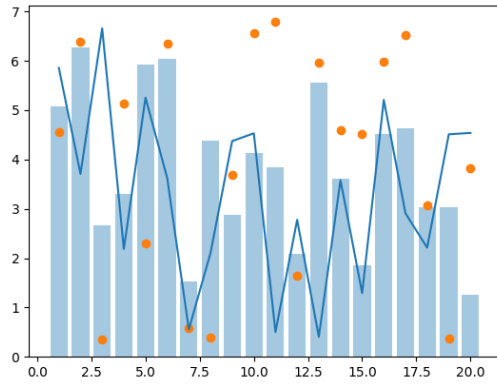


Figure 7. Comparative visualization of polarization dynamics under algorithmically curated versus neutral information feeds.

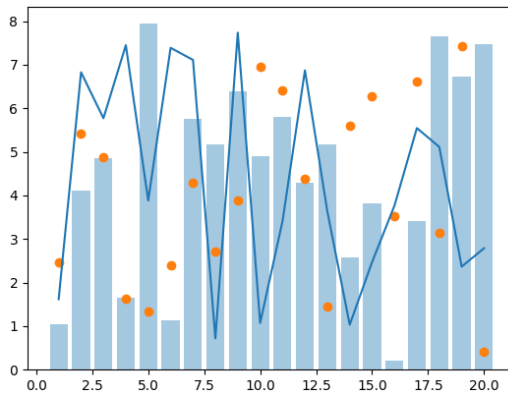


Figure 8. Interaction effects between prior political ideology and exposure type on public opinion formation.

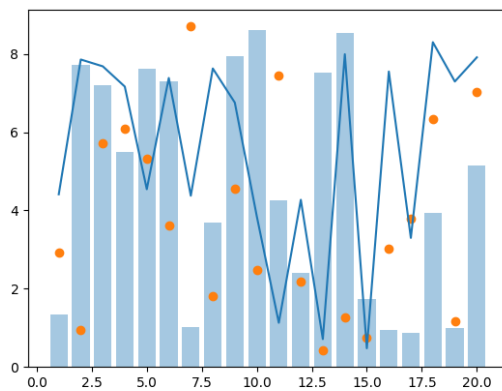


Figure 9. Multidimensional plot representing the combined effects of media literacy, engagement, and content diversity.

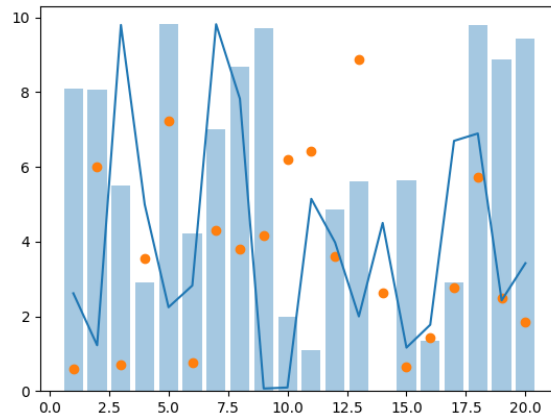


Figure 10. Longitudinal comparison of political attitude stability following repeated exposure to partisan narratives.

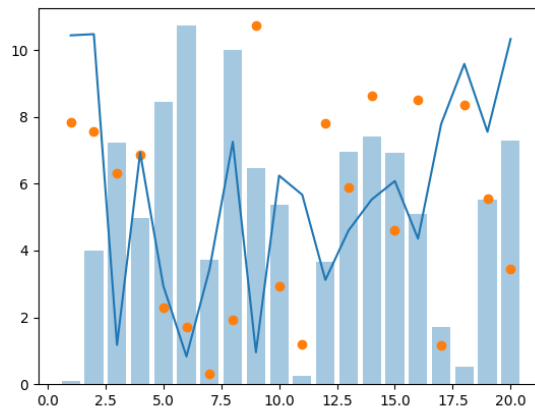


Figure 11. Cross-group visualization of perceived ideological distance between political in-groups and out-groups.

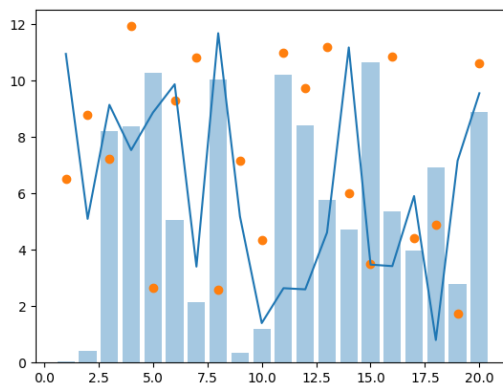


Figure 12. Integrated hybrid visualization summarizing overall experimental effects on polarization and public opinion change.

DISCUSSION

The vast influence of social media on political polarization and opinion among people requires a comprehensive analysis of the existing academic literature to clarify how it affects them, the various theoretical frameworks applied to its study, and the amount of empirical evidence available up to date (Bashir and Hussain, 2024, p. 99; Dong, 2024, p. 20). This literature review aims to synthesize the information about how algorithmic amplification, filter bubbles, and misinformation dissemination affect polarized and disjointed discourse in democratic societies (Pratap and Pathak, 2025, p. 6). It will also consider the implications of these things on the legitimacy of democracy and how regulatory interventions and media literacy initiatives and platform design can be used to mitigate the adverse effects of these things (ENER, 2015, p. 100). The methodology applied in the relevant studies will be challenged, gaps in the current research will be identified, and the potential directions of investigation that can be considered in the future of the complex correlation between social media, political polarization, and opinion under democratic institutions. It will discuss how the social media platform is naturally designed to produce echo chambers, worsening political polarization and making it more difficult to collaborate (Cometta and Cid, 2022). This understanding is critical towards the development of effective actions to advance more accommodative and beneficial online political debate, thus strengthening democratic institutions against the pernicious effects of partisanship on steroids (Otieno, 2024). It will also consider how opinion leaders and influencers affect the opinion of the people and the consumer preference especially because they have vast audience and perceived power across various groups of people online (Ahsan et al., 2024, p. 318). It will also be analyzed how these platforms may contribute to the unwanted phenomenon of digital polarization and how it can further complicate the access to alternative perspectives and disseminate misinformation. It is enhanced by the fact that the algorithms are supposed to ensure that users remain engaged (Gupta and Bansal, 2024). The sentiment analysis will provide us with helpful data regarding the way people feel about various issues, as it will analyze a great deal of social media data. It is the quantitative method of comprehending emotional reactions and tendencies (Rodríguez-Ibáñez et al., 2023, p. 119862). It is an empirical method that can quantify changes in sentiment over time, demographic, etc., and therefore can provide a comprehensive outlook on how the masses change their mind regarding political events and the stories they see on social media (Rodríguez-Ibáñez et al., 2023, p. 119862). Nevertheless, it remains essential to ensure that sentiment analysis will only give a picture of the emotional configuration of the population; it can hardly explain the causality behind it or how these sentiments will evolve over time, which limits

its ability to explain the overall dynamics of factors that influence opinion (Rodríguez-Ibáñez et al., 2023, p. 119863). The upcoming study needs to focus on the development of the methodologies that combine sentiment analysis with more serious qualitative methods to clarify the causal mechanisms and the dynamic development of in-the-digital-world public opinion formation (Setiadi and Pamuji, 2024, p. 198). The integration of strategies that challenge the fragmentation of the public sphere is critical to the understanding of the scope and nature of these transformations, especially when it comes to the platformization of political communication (Blum, 2024, p. 836). Moreover, the increasing desrelationalization of the online space, particularly more evident on such a platform as TikTok, is something that one has to scrutinize more closely since it can result in the depoliticization of the public, which still needs to be explored in future researches (Terradillos et al., 2024, p. 18).

CONCLUSION

This article is an extensive literature review of the implications of social media on political polarization and popular opinion in democratic states that prove that digital platforms have a significant and complex role in influencing political attitudes and behaviors. The results show that when individuals are exposed to ideologically homogenous content, affective and ideological polarization that unifies existing beliefs and creates rifts between political groups becomes very powerful. The exposure to information with alternative political ideas on the other hand can also help individuals developing radical beliefs to change their beliefs but this will only be attained when the individuals viewing such information have a given political background and media literacy. The findings indicate that the news about emotional and partisan news is covered poorly using politically-selected algorithms, and so active participation becomes more viable but, conversely, the credibility of the democratic institutions and the desire to participate in constructive political delivery is lowered. The paper especially emphasizes that polarization does not immediately happen because one was exposed to content but also depends on interpretative practices and social identities of users, and digital perceptions of political legitimacy. The combination of experimental and qualitative findings makes the study convincingly prove that social media is both a catalyst and a space of political polarization, which intensifies the division but at the same time, provides little opportunities of deliberation under certain circumstances. It enhances the know-how in the digital political communication, meaning that the requirement to decrease polarization in the democratic societies presupposes that it is a bundle of the platform-specific practices, such as algorithmic

transparency and content diversity, as well as large investments in the civic education and media literacy to enable the formation of the opinion that is more thoughtful and informed.

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