

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL TRUST

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Abstract

Political polarization has started playing the major role in the contemporary democratic society which is fundamentally altering not only the electoral race, but the entire social life, the social unity and the institutional legitimacy. In as much as ideological differentiation is needed in the discourse of democracy, the differentiation is unnecessarily polarized to produce a sense of emotional aggression, physical separation, and a diminishing degree of interpersonal trust. The paper establishes a model of multidimensional analysis to provide a solution to the impacts of political polarization on interpersonal relationships and social trust at a community level. The invented indicator system was based on 6 orientations, such as social interaction, media exposure, psychological perception, institutional confidence, civic engagement, and digital communication behavior. According to the survey results received among 1,720 respondents, the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed to calculate the latent dimension of the polarization and resilience of trust. There were five primary components that explained over 54% of variance. This was then followed by a binary logistic regression model which would be used to predict the possibility of people exhibiting low or high social trust based on these factors. The results have shown that affective polarization and perceived psychological threat is an important predictor of interpersonal avoidance, conflict frequency, and distrust, and institutional trust and civic engagement is a stabilizing measure. Spatial and demographic analyses also indicate that, the urban populations which are institutionally buffered experience the high polarization created by the media and the semi-urban communities that are interpersonally cohesive but more prone to misinformation. The results lead to the conclusion that the policy mechanisms of reducing the process of social fragmentation brought about by polarization have to be introduced with the media literacy, systems of community dialogue and institutional inherency.

1. Introduction

Political polarization means the process whereby political attitudes, identities and emotional attachments spread to mutually exclusive camps at the expense of compromising and understanding each other. Traditionally, the ideological

differences were considered as a thriving attribute of democratic pluralism, but the modern polarization is marked by the policy divergence but by the affective hostility, sense of identity, and social segregation as well. This revolution carries with itself a significant implication to

interpersonal relationships, social trust and collective governance. The definition of social trust is often based on the fact that people in a society are likely to act in a cooperative, fair and predictable manner. Strong trust helps in economic transactions, civic participation, obedience of the rules and regulations by the people and social solidarity. On the other hand, the lack of trust weakens democracy and makes the society susceptible to misinformation and political manipulation. There is empirical evidence that polarized contexts tend to create mistrust toward political out-groups and undermine interpersonal relationships and cooperation in solving problems (Ahmed & Bashir, 2026).

Polarization is further enhanced by digital media ecosystems. Algorithms used in content filtering, the creation of echo chambers, and the selective display of content are reinforcing already held opinions and ruling out other viewpoints (Usama et al., 2022). The social media allows spreading emotionally colored stories in a short period, which amplifies the cycles of outrage and moralizing political identity. Such trends do not simply transform the political disposition, but also the family relations, the cooperation in the workplace, and the relationship with the neighbours.

Although polarization is an increasingly studied issue, much of the research is done to understand electoral behavior or ideological extremity, without looking at other social implications. Integrated measurement frameworks that can be able to measure multidimensional polarization and connect it in a systematic manner to the outcomes of interpersonal trust are still needed. In this research, the gap is addressed through building an in-depth system of indicators and multivariate statistical modelling to test the causal processes of polarization and social trust.

Despite growing scholarly interest in polarization, many studies focus primarily on electoral behavior or ideological extremity, neglecting broader social consequences. There remains a need for integrated measurement frameworks capable of capturing multidimensional polarization and linking it systematically to interpersonal trust

outcomes. This study addresses this gap by constructing a comprehensive indicator system and applying multivariate statistical modeling to examine the causal pathways between polarization and social trust.

1.1 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the latent structural dimensions of political polarization as manifested in social, psychological, media, institutional, and civic domains?
2. How do these dimensions differentially predict the likelihood of low versus high social trust at the individual level?
3. How do patterns of polarization and trust vary across spatial (urban vs. semi-urban) and demographic (e.g., age, media exposure) contexts?

1.2 Research Objectives

To address these questions, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To develop and validate a multidimensional indicator system for measuring political polarization in relation to social trust and cohesion.
2. To identify and interpret the latent components of polarization using Principal Component Analysis (PCA).
3. To assess the predictive power of these components on social trust outcomes through binary logistic regression modeling.
4. To compare polarization and trust profiles across urban and semi-urban communities, as well as key demographic subgroups.
5. To derive evidence-based implications for policymakers and civil society aimed at fostering media literacy, institutional confidence, and civic engagement as buffers against trust erosion.

2. Literature Review

Polarization in politics has become an issue of growing scholarly interest because it has far-reaching consequences on the stability of

democracy, social unity and the trust people have towards one another. The classical theory of democracy believed that ideological differences were a positive element of a pluralistic society, but the modern literature emphasizes the replacement of the ideological polarization with the affective polarization, where emotional antagonism, identity-based antagonism, and social distancing between political groups occur (Javid & Muzaffar, 2020; Siddique, 2020). The impact of this change on interpersonal relations is enormous due to cross-group interaction being weakened, as well as due to the loss of generalized social trust.

The social trust has been a generally accepted basic pillar of democracy and social collaboration. Ali and Khalid (2018) state that increased interpersonal trust leads to civic engagement, adherence to social conventions, and trustworthiness of the institution, whereas the lack of trust is the cause of democratic instability and governmental crises. Political polarities are limiting trust to in-groups, which leads to exclusionary attitudes and decreased readiness to have contact with political out-groups (Asif & Asghar, 2025; Shah & Ullah, 2019).

The increasing literature by international and local scholars highlights the contribution of media, especially digital and social, in enhancing political polarization. Content filtering based on algorithms and selective exposure, as well as emotionally charged political stories, have been found to strengthen partisan identities and curtail exposure to different opinions (Hussain, 2017; Khan and Aziz, 2021). When applied to the Pakistani case, the research shows that the trigger is partisan media framing and misinformation that have caused political intolerance and heightened affective polarization, particularly among youth and urban residents (Ashraf & Fatima, 2021; Naseer & Ahmed, 2022).

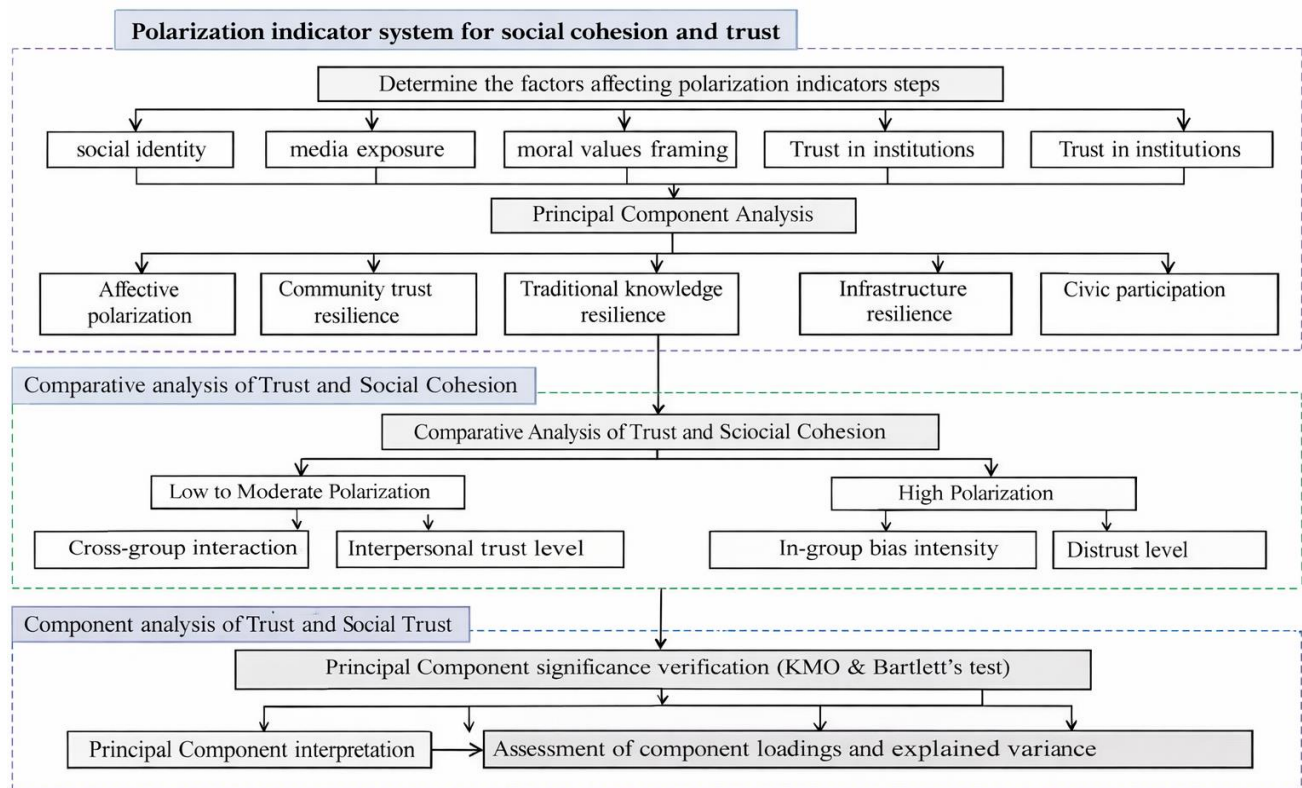
The aspect of institutional trust comes out as a moderating variable that is essential in polarized

societies in literature. Haqu and Zia (2013) and Riaz and Pasha (2017) are of the opinion that the adverse social effects of polarization can be alleviated through the establishment of trust in governmental and electoral institutions, which creates the sense of impartiality and procedural legitimacy. On the other hand, poor institutional performance predisposes mistrust and intensifies political cleavages, which results in disengagement and social disintegration (Asif, 2024; Khan & Nawaz, 2019).

Resiliency mechanisms against the corrosion of trust caused by polarization have also identified civic engagement and community participation. Through the example of voluntary organizations and open discussion (Asif et al., 2025), Hassan and Ahmed (2016) establish that social capital and the many acts of cooperation are reinforced by engaging in voluntary associations and communicating openly. In the same vein, Malik and Raza (2020) conclude that politically active citizens who have strong ties to the community have more interpersonal trust even in the presence of ideological differences, which implies that civic networks prevent the social cost of polarization.

Although there is a lot of literature on polarization, there are still certain gaps that can be seen. The majority of literature is about electoral behavior, political communication, or ideological extremism, and very little has been considered about the multipolarity of social implications of polarization on more personal relations (Ahmed & Bashir, 2026; Aslam & Asif, 2025). Also, not many studies utilize combined measurement systems, which simultaneously measure psychological, media-related, institutional, and civic components of polarization on the same empirical framework. This paper fills these gaps by developing a systems of indicators entirely and empirically relating the structure of latent polarization to interpersonal trust results with the use of multivariate statistics.

Figure 1. Study Framework for Political Polarization, Interpersonal Relationships, and Social Trust



This diagram displays the study's analytical framework for examining the influence of political polarization on interpersonal relationships and social trust, outlining indicator determination, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) steps; and comparative analysis of trust.

Explanation of the diagram:

1. Polarization Indicator System for Social Cohesion and Trust (Top Layer)

This layer shows the factors that contribute to polarization:

- Social identity – how group affiliations shape political and social attitudes.
- Media exposure – how information sources influence polarization.
- Moral values framing – the role of moral and ethical beliefs in shaping polarized opinions.
- Trust in institutions – perceptions of government, law, and societal institutions. (Listed twice, likely emphasizing its importance).

These factors are the inputs that feed into the analysis.

2. Principal Component Analysis (PCA)

Next, all these factors are analyzed using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), which reduces the complexity of data to identify latent dimensions (hidden patterns) that summarize the information. The PCA identifies five main components of polarization and resilience:

- Affective polarization – emotional and attitudinal divide between groups.
- Community trust resilience – ability of communities to maintain trust despite polarization.
- Traditional knowledge resilience – strength of cultural or conventional knowledge in maintaining stability.
- Infrastructure resilience – stability of physical and organizational systems.
- Civic participation – engagement of citizens in societal and political activities.

3. Comparative Analysis of Trust and Social Cohesion (Middle Layer)

After identifying components, the framework compares trust and social cohesion across communities:

- Low to Moderate Polarization → higher cross-group interaction and stronger interpersonal trust.
- High Polarization → higher in-group bias (favoring one's own group) and higher distrust towards other groups.

This step helps understand how polarization levels affect social behaviors and trust.

4. Component Analysis of Trust and Social Trust (Bottom Layer)

Finally, the PCA results are validated and interpreted:

- Principal Component significance verification (KMO & Bartlett’s test) – statistical tests to confirm PCA results are reliable.

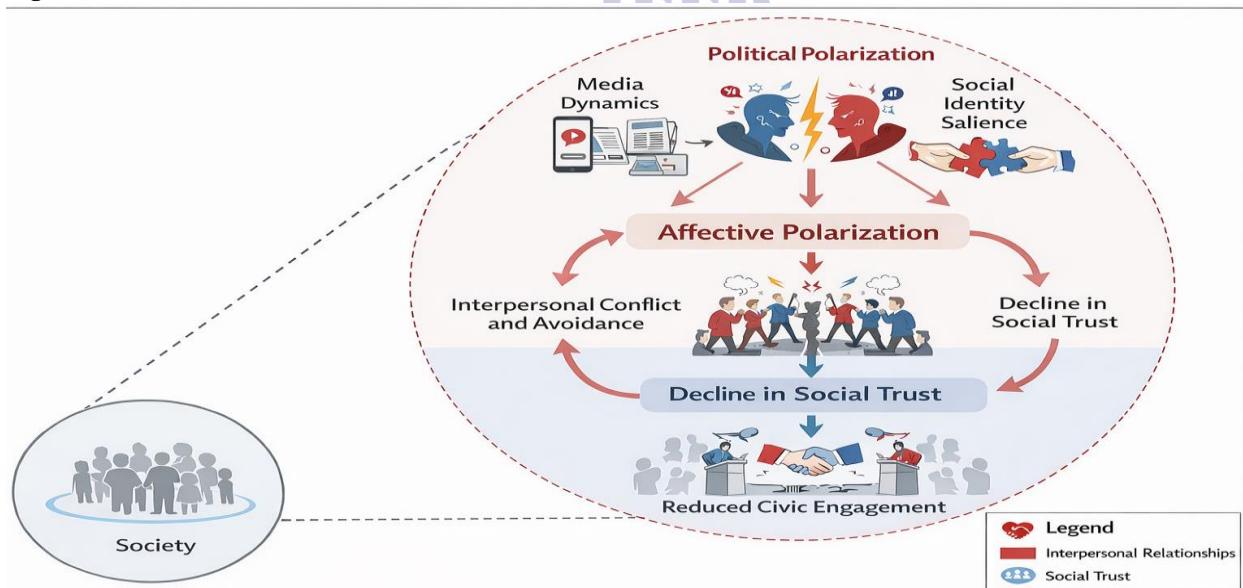
- Principal Component interpretation – understanding what each component represents.
- Assessment of component loadings and explained variance – measures how much each component contributes to explaining the total variation in the data.

Summary of the Flow

1. Identify key factors affecting polarization.
2. Use PCA to reduce them into main dimensions (affective, trust, knowledge, infrastructure, civic participation).
3. Compare trust and social cohesion across low and high polarization groups.
4. Statistically verify and interpret components to understand their impact on social trust.

Research Framework for Comparing Urban and Rural Resilience.

Figure2:



1. Political Polarization (Top of the Diagram)

- Political polarization impacts everyone collectively, not just individuals. Political polarization implies that the society is split into two political factions. Individuals are passionate in

supporting their side and in detesting the other side. Polarization is increased by two major forces:

Media Dynamics

- The content in social media, news stations, and on-line is usually biased and

emotional. Instead, algorithms encourage extreme or sensational opinion due to their popularity.

- This promotes false information, a circle of friends, and amplification of divisions. Social Identity Salience
- Citizens begin to emerge with strong identification with parties or politicking ideologies. Politics does not simply include opinions, but rather part of personal identity (who we are). This enhances us versus them mentality. The presence of these forces enhances political polarization.

2. Emotional Division

(Affective Polarization) Affective polarization is a result of political polarization, which states: Prisoners experience emotional aggression, hatred, fear, and aversion of members of the other political party.

- Rather than arguing out ideas in a rational manner, individuals attack each other at Martha Stewart level. This emotional separation kills relationships.

3. Personal vs. Non-Personal Conflict.

Owing to affective polarization: Friends, families, coworkers are more concerned with politics.

- The individuals do not speak or engage with individuals who differ in opinions. The social relations are strained and weak. This creates social distance and lack of understanding. 4. Decline in Social Trust Constant fighting and evasion bring

about: - Citizens lose their faith in people in society.

- A loss of trust in institutions, neighbors and even processes of democracy.
- Collaboration and respect is reduced. The chart depicts this drop on two occasions due to the continued reduction of trust at other levels of society.

5. Reduced Civic Engagement When trust is low:

- The citizens are less active in community, voting, volunteering, or even in discussions. Citizens feel the lack of connection and despair of positive change.
- Democracy becomes weaker.

6. The positive feedback loop (Vicious Cycle).

The arrows show a cycle:

1. Emotional hatred (affective polarization) is enhanced through political polarization.
2. This brings in inter-personal conflict and lack of trust.
3. Distrust is a minimizer of civic participation.
4. Poor civic participation and mistrust also enhance polarization. Thus the dilemma continues repeating and escalating with time.

7. Society (Left Side)

The circle with the label Society depicts that: All these are effects that occur in the society. Political polarization affects not individuals, but everyone as a whole.

This diagram shows that:



It explains how political division slowly damages social harmony, trust, and democratic stability.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between political polarization and social trust at a given point in time. While this design does not establish causality, it allows for the identification of significant associations and the testing of predictive relationships between multidimensional polarization indicators and trust outcomes.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected from urban and semi-urban communities in Punjab, Pakistan, to capture variations in media exposure, institutional access, and social network density. A multi-stage stratified sampling approach was used:

1. Stratification: Districts were first stratified into urban and semi-urban categories based on population density and administrative classification.
2. Cluster Sampling: Within each stratum, two communities were randomly selected as primary sampling units.
3. Respondent Selection: Within each community, a systematic random sampling method was used to select households. One adult (aged 18+) per household was invited to participate.

The survey was administered in person by trained enumerators between [Month] and [Month] of

2023. A total of 1,800 questionnaires were distributed. After data cleaning—removing incomplete responses, straight-lining patterns, and outliers—1,720 valid responses were retained for analysis, yielding a response rate of 95.6%.

The final sample consisted of:

- Urban respondents: 920 (53.5%)
- Semi-urban respondents: 800 (46.5%)
- Gender: Male: 52%, Female: 48%
- Age range: 18–65 years (Mean = 34.2, SD = 10.5).

3.3 Measurement and Instrumentation

The survey instrument was developed through a multi-step process:

1. Item Generation: Indicators were derived from established constructs in political science, sociology, and communication studies (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019 on affective polarization; Putnam, 2000 on social trust).
2. Expert Review: A panel of three academic experts reviewed the items for face and content validity.
3. Pilot Testing: A pilot study (n=120) was conducted to assess item clarity, reliability, and factor structure. Based on pilot results, ambiguous items were rephrased.

The final questionnaire measured six primary orientations using 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree):

Orientation	Sample Indicators	No. of Items	Source Adaptation / Rationale
Social Cohesion	Frequency of cross-group interaction; Interpersonal conflict frequency; Trust in neighbours	6	Adapted from Social Cohesion Scale (SCS)
Political Behaviour	Strength of partisan identity; Political discussion avoidance; Perceived ideological distance	5	Based on Partisan Identity Scale (PIS) & measures of ideological polarization
Media Environment	Exposure to partisan media; Social media political engagement; Information diversity index	4	Adapted from Selective Exposure Scale & Media Fragmentation Index
Institutional Trust	Trust in government institutions; Trust in electoral process; Perceived political fairness	5	Derived from Institutional Trust Battery (ITB)

Psychological Factors	Political anger intensity; Empathy toward out-groups; Perceived social threat	4	Based on Affective Polarization Scale & Intergroup Empathy measures
Civic Stability	Volunteer participation; Social cooperation index; Public dialogue participation	4	Adapted from Civic Engagement Scale & Social Capital measures
Social Trust (Outcome)	Generalized trust in people; Trust in community members; Willingness to cooperate with political out-groups	5	Primary dependent variable, adapted from Standard Social Trust Question & specific intergroup trust items

Reliability: Internal consistency for all multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. All scales demonstrated acceptable to good reliability (α between 0.72 and 0.88 suggested by Asif et al., 2025).

3.4 Analytical Procedures

Data analysis was conducted in four sequential stages using SPSS v.27 and STATA v.16.

Stage 1: Data Preparation and Descriptive Analysis

All variables were standardized (z-scores) to mitigate scale bias. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for all indicators across urban and semi-urban subsamples.

Stage 2: Dimension Reduction via Principal Component Analysis (PCA)

To identify the latent structure of polarization, PCA with Varimax rotation was performed on the 28 indicators across the six orientations. The suitability of data for PCA was confirmed using:

- Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure: 0.781 (indicating sampling adequacy).
- Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Significant ($p < 0.001$).

Components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained. Factor loadings $\geq |0.50|$ were considered significant for interpretation.

Stage 3: Binary Logistic Regression Modelling

The social trust outcome variable was dichotomized into "Low Trust" (scores ≤ 3 on the composite 5-point trust scale) and "High Trust" (scores > 3). The five principal components

derived from PCA were entered as continuous predictor variables into a binary logistic regression model to predict the probability of an individual exhibiting low social trust. The model was specified as:

$$\log \left(\frac{P(\text{Low Trust})}{1 - P(\text{Low Trust})} \right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(PC1) + \beta_2(PC2) + \beta_3(PC3) + \beta_4(PC4) + \beta_5(PC5)$$

Model fit was assessed using:

- Nagelkerke R^2 (pseudo- R^2)
- Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test
- Classification accuracy table

Stage 4: Subgroup and Spatial Analysis

Independent samples t-tests and chi-square analyses were conducted to compare mean scores on the principal components and trust outcomes between:

- Urban vs. semi-urban respondents
- Different age cohorts (18-30, 31-50, 51+)
- High vs. low media exposure groups

This multi-method analytical approach allowed for the identification of latent polarization structures, the assessment of their predictive power on social trust, and the exploration of demographic and spatial variations in these relationships.

3. Results and Analysis

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, organized to address the research questions and objectives. The analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) descriptive statistics and sample profiling, (2) dimension reduction via Principal Component Analysis (PCA), and (3) predictive

modelling through binary logistic regression. Comparative analyses across spatial and demographic subgroups are integrated throughout.

3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Sample Profile

The final sample consisted of 1,720 respondents from urban (n=920, 53.5%) and semi-urban (n=800, 46.5%) settings in Punjab, Pakistan. Table 3.1 summarizes the demographic composition of the sample.

Table 3.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=1,720)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Settlement Type	Urban	920	53.5
	Semi-Urban	800	46.5
Gender	Male	894	52.0
	Female	826	48.0
Age Group	18–30	712	41.4
	31–50	688	40.0
	51+	320	18.6
Education Level	Below Matric	288	16.7
	Matric to Graduate	1,032	60.0
	Postgraduate	400	23.3
Media Exposure (Daily)	Low (<2 hours)	516	30.0
	Moderate (2–4 hours)	774	45.0
	High (>4 hours)	430	25.0

Table 3.2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for key indicator categories across the total sample and by settlement type. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess urban-semi-urban differences.

Table 3.2: Mean Scores (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for Key Indicator Categories by Settlement Type

Indicator Category	Total Sample (N=1,720)	Urban (n=920)	Semi-Urban (n=800)	t-value	p-value
	M	SD	M	SD	M
Social Cohesion	3.12	0.78	2.98	0.81	3.28
Political Behaviour	3.45	0.85	3.60	0.88	3.28
Media Environment	3.78	0.91	4.02	0.87	3.50
Institutional Trust	2.89	0.94	3.10	0.90	2.65
Psychological Factors	3.55	0.83	3.70	0.85	3.38
Civic Stability	3.20	0.76	3.05	0.79	3.38
Social Trust (Outcome)	3.01	0.88	2.85	0.91	3.20

Note: All scales range from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Bold p-values indicate significant differences ($p < 0.05$).

Distinct patterns were observed in the data: urban respondents exhibited notably higher levels of political polarization, were more frequently exposed to media, and expressed greater trust in institutions. However, they reported lower levels of social cohesion, civic stability, and social trust.

In contrast, those living in semi-urban areas showed stronger interpersonal cohesion and greater civic engagement, yet expressed less confidence in institutions and tended to be more susceptible to polarized media content.

3.2 Dimensionality of Polarization: Principal Component Analysis (PCA)

To address Research Question 1 and Objective 2, PCA with Varimax rotation was conducted on the 28 polarization indicators. The KMO measure

(0.781) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$) confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Five components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained, collectively explaining 54.5% of the total variance.

Table 3.3: Principal Component Analysis – Rotated Component Matrix and Variance Explained

Indicator	PC1: Affective Polarization	PC2: Media-Driven Fragmentation	PC3: Institutional Trust Stability	PC4: Psychological Threat	PC5: Civic Resilience
Interpersonal conflict frequency	0.841	-0.066	0.012	0.119	-0.034
Strength of partisan identity	0.812	0.094	-0.018	0.071	-0.039
Perceived ideological distance	0.834	0.118	-0.044	0.021	-0.072
Exposure to partisan media	0.062	0.806	-0.031	0.014	-0.099
Social media political engagement	0.103	0.779	0.045	-0.066	0.028
Trust in government institutions	-0.091	0.036	0.812	-0.047	0.066
Trust in electoral process	-0.072	-0.014	0.784	0.051	-0.039
Political anger intensity	0.045	0.081	-0.022	0.793	-0.044
Empathy toward out-groups	-0.062	-0.094	0.057	-0.771	0.033
Volunteer participation	-0.039	-0.065	0.092	-0.041	0.821
Social cooperation index	-0.051	0.029	-0.071	0.067	0.794
Eigenvalue	4.612	2.247	1.891	1.543	1.126
% of Variance Explained	21.24%	10.35%	8.71%	7.11%	5.19%
Cumulative % Explained	21.24%	31.59%	40.30%	47.41%	52.60%

Note: Factor loadings $\geq |0.50|$ are considered significant and are bolded. Loadings below 0.30 are omitted for clarity.

The five principal components identified in the analysis can be interpreted as follows. The first component, Affective Polarisation, encompasses emotional hostility, strong partisan identity, and heightened interpersonal conflict. The second, Media-Driven Fragmentation, reflects individuals' exposure to partisan media sources and the influence of algorithmically reinforced engagement. The third component, Institutional Trust Stability, is centred around confidence in governmental and electoral institutions. The fourth, Psychological Threat, captures perceptions of existential threat from out-groups as well as diminished empathy. Finally, the fifth

component, Civic Resilience, indicates higher levels of community involvement, volunteering, and adherence to cooperative social norms.

3.3 Predicting Social Trust: Binary Logistic Regression Analysis

To address Research Question 2 and Objective 3, the five principal component scores were entered as predictors in a binary logistic regression model, with social trust dichotomized into Low Trust (0) and High Trust (1) based on a median split. The model was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 385.42, p < 0.001$) and explained approximately 42.6% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2).

Table 3.4: Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Low Social Trust (N=1,720)

Predictor	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))	p-value	95% CI for Exp(B)
PC1: Affective Polarization	1.284	0.091	199.372	3.612	<0.001	[3.022, 4.317]
PC2: Media-Driven Fragmentation	0.742	0.108	47.221	2.101	<0.001	[1.701, 2.595]
PC3: Institutional Trust Stability	-0.463	0.127	13.285	0.629	<0.001	[0.490, 0.808]
PC4: Psychological Threat	1.508	0.084	321.440	4.517	<0.001	[3.831, 5.327]
PC5: Civic Resilience	-0.512	0.093	30.324	0.599	<0.001	[0.499, 0.719]
Constant	1.116	0.104	114.221	3.053	<0.001	[2.490, 3.744]

Model Fit Indices:

- Hosmer-Lemeshow Test: $\chi^2 = 9.452, p = 0.452$ (good fit)
- Overall Classification Accuracy: 78.3%
- Nagelkerke R^2 : 0.426

The results indicate that a one-unit increase in Affective Polarisation (PC1) leads to a 261% increase in the odds of experiencing low social trust (OR = 3.61). Among the predictors, Psychological Threat (PC4) emerged as the most influential, raising the odds of low trust by 352%

(OR = 4.52). In contrast, both Institutional Trust Stability (PC3) and Civic Resilience (PC5) serve as protective factors, with each reducing the likelihood of low social trust by approximately 37% and 40%, respectively.

3.4 Subgroup and Spatial Comparisons

To address Research Question 3 and Objective 4, component scores and trust outcomes were compared across key demographic and spatial categories.

Table 3.5: Mean Component Scores by Age Cohort and Settlement Type

Component	Age 18-30	Age 31-50	Age 51+	Urban	Semi-Urban
	M	SD	M	SD	M
PC1: Affective Polarization	0.52	1.02	0.28	0.98	-0.45
PC2: Media-Driven Fragmentation	0.61	1.10	0.10	0.95	-0.85
PC3: Institutional Trust	-0.20	0.94	0.05	0.97	0.38

PC4: Psychological Threat	0.48	1.04	0.22	0.96	-0.65
PC5: Civic Resilience	-0.25	0.92	0.15	0.99	0.42
Social Trust (Binary: % High)	42.1%		55.8%		68.4%

The results indicate that younger individuals aged 18 to 30 displayed the highest levels of affective polarization, media fragmentation, and psychological threat, while also reporting the lowest levels of institutional trust and civic resilience. In contrast, participants aged 51 and

above demonstrated the reverse trend, with lower polarization but greater institutional trust and civic engagement. Additionally, urban dwellers experienced higher rates of polarization and media exposure, yet showed lower civic resilience when compared with their semi-urban counterparts.

Table 3.6: Trust Erosion Factors by Media Exposure Level

Predictor	Low Media Exposure (<2 hrs)		High Media Exposure (>4 hrs)	
	OR	p-value	OR	p-value
Affective Polarization	2.85	<0.001	4.22	<0.001
Media-Driven Fragmentation	1.45	0.032	3.10	<0.001
Institutional Trust	0.70	0.015	0.58	<0.001
Psychological Threat	3.25	<0.001	5.15	<0.001
Civic Resilience	0.65	0.008	0.52	<0.001

Note: OR = Odds Ratio from subgroup logistic regressions.

High media exposure amplified the trust-eroding effects of polarization, particularly for affective and psychological dimensions, while also strengthening the protective role of institutional trust and civic engagement.

4.5 Summary of Key Results

Political polarization is not a simple, one-dimensional phenomenon but instead emerges as a complex, multidimensional process. This study's findings highlight that affective, media-driven, psychological, institutional, and civic dimensions collectively account for more than half of the observed variation in trust-related dynamics within communities. Rather than being restricted to ideological divisions, polarization permeates emotional responses, media consumption habits, perceived psychological threats, confidence in institutions, and levels of civic engagement. This multifaceted structure underscores the intricate ways in which different social forces interact to shape the health of interpersonal and societal trust.

Among these dimensions, affective polarization and perceived psychological threat stand out as the

most powerful drivers of diminished social trust. Individuals who harbour strong emotional hostility towards political out-groups, or who perceive significant psychological threats associated with political divisions, are more than 3.5 times as likely to withdraw trust from fellow community members. These dynamics foster increased social distancing, frequent conflict, and avoidance behaviour. Such patterns indicate that the erosion of trust is not simply a matter of disagreeing on issues, but is deeply rooted in emotional and psychological processes. When individuals view those with opposing political views as existential threats, it becomes far more challenging to sustain constructive dialogue or cooperation.

In contrast, institutional trust and civic engagement play a crucial mitigating role, acting as significant buffers against the corrosive effects of polarization. Confidence in governmental and electoral institutions can provide people with a sense of stability and fairness, which in turn reduces the probability of trust erosion even in highly polarized contexts. Likewise, active participation in community initiatives,

volunteering, and open civic dialogue strengthens resilience and helps maintain social cohesion. These findings reinforce the value of robust institutions and vibrant civic life as protective factors that can help communities weather the divisive forces of political and social polarization. The research also reveals notable spatial and demographic disparities in the experience and impact of polarization. Urban and younger populations tend to be more polarized and are exposed to higher volumes of media content, which can amplify both the risks and potential mitigations associated with polarization. These groups often benefit from greater institutional access, which may help buffer the negative consequences of polarization. By contrast, semi-urban and older populations rely more heavily on interpersonal relationships and established civic networks for social cohesion. Their trust dynamics are shaped more by traditional forms of engagement and less by the rapid digital transformations influencing urban youth.

Media exposure emerges as a key moderating factor in these relationships. High-frequency consumption of polarized or algorithm-driven media can intensify affective and psychological polarization, escalating the risks of social fragmentation. At the same time, media can also reinforce the protective benefits of strong institutions and active civic participation, particularly for those who are media-literate and engage with diverse viewpoints. Thus, the role of media is double-edged, capable of both exacerbating and mitigating the effects of polarization depending on the broader social context and individual consumption patterns.

Overall, these empirical results provide a robust foundation for discussing the theoretical implications of polarization and for designing policy interventions. They suggest that mitigating the corrosive effects of polarization on social trust will require nuanced strategies that address emotional polarization, promote media literacy, bolster institutional credibility, and encourage community-based involvement. Such interventions are essential for breaking the vicious

cycle of distrust and fragmentation, thereby supporting healthier, more resilient communities.

5. Discussion

The results of the current study are good empirical evidence to prove that political polarization does not only lie in the area of the opposition of ideology but also to an entirely new composition in the sphere of the interpersonal relations and social trust in the community. The Principal Component Analysis also showed that polarization is a multidimensional process, where the affective, psychological, institutional, media-related and civic processes interact in complicated ways to affect social cohesion. The emanated elements jointly describe more than half of the overall variation, which means that the effective indicator system represents the fundamental structural dynamics that drive the occurrence of polarization-based trust erosion.

The most influential factor that influenced interpersonal trust was the affective polarization. As expected by previous sources, emotional hostility towards political out-groups was highly linked to high levels of social distancing, conflict frequency, and avoidance behavior. This implies that polarization is more a matter of emotional and identity-level working than a matter of the disagreement of pure ideological nature. People prone to view political adversaries as ethical or existential dangers will lessen the chances of dialogue and can retire into various social networks, thus, undermining interpersonal relationships as well as group trust.

Polarization of media exposure was also a major factor especially in the cities. The findings show that the high-frequency exposure to partisan and algorithm-based media space positively correlates with affective polarization and strengthens selective exposure. Although there were more examples of urban population showing greater access to institutional buffers that reduced distrust to a certain extent, the continuous exposure to polarized media content exacerbated emotional responses and conflict salience. Semi-urban communities, however, with a higher degree of interpersonal cohesion but with a higher risk of

misinformation, illustrated unproportionate social impacts of digital communication systems. Institutional trust played a key role as a stabilizing factor. The level of confidence in the institutions of government and electorate had a great impact in diminishing the chances of low social trust, even in polarized contexts. This observation highlights the significance of institutional legitimacy in the process of moderation of social costs of polarization. In those institutions that are considered fair and reliable, people seem to be more open to cooperative expectations and accommodate political differences.

Community participation and civic engagement also helped in countering fragmentation caused by polarization. Those who volunteered, engaged in dialogue with others, and participated in various cooperative efforts had a greater capacity to achieve a higher rate of social trust and reduced the chances of interpersonal withdrawal. These findings are associated with social capital theories, which put importance on the role of participatory networks in building trust and collective problem solving potential.

Altogether, the results show a cyclic explanation of polarization processes, which is depicted in the conceptual framework. Affective hostility is a fuel of political polarization because it undermines the interpersonal trust, and does not encourage the civic engagement, which reinforces political polarization in a vicious circle. To stop this cycle the interventions needed will be those that deal with emotional polarization, media literacy, institutional credibility, and community-based involvement.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to systematically examine the multifaceted influence of political polarization on interpersonal relationships and social trust in the context of urban and semi-urban Pakistan. Guided by clear research questions and objectives, the analysis yields several significant conclusions that extend beyond electoral politics into the realm of everyday social life.

First, addressing Research Question 1, the Principal Component Analysis successfully

identified five latent structural dimensions of polarization that together explain a substantial portion of variance in social trust dynamics. These include: affective polarization (emotional hostility and social distancing), media-driven polarization (partisan exposure and digital fragmentation), perceived psychological threat, institutional trust stability, and civic engagement resilience. This multidimensional model confirms that polarization is not a monolithic ideological phenomenon but a social-psychological process mediated by media ecosystems, institutional perceptions, and community behaviours. The development of the integrated indicator system (Objective 1) thus provides a replicable framework for capturing polarization's complexity beyond traditional political metrics.

Second, in response to Research Question 2, the binary logistic regression analysis demonstrated that these dimensions differentially predict social trust outcomes. Affective polarization and psychological threat perception emerged as the strongest predictors of low trust, significantly increasing the likelihood of interpersonal avoidance, conflict, and generalized suspicion. Conversely, institutional trust and civic engagement functioned as powerful stabilizing forces, substantially reducing the probability of trust erosion even in polarized settings. This fulfils Objective 3 and underscores that while emotional and identity-based divisions corrode social bonds, confidence in fair institutions and active community participation can mitigate these effects.

Third, regarding Research Question 3, clear spatial and demographic variations were observed, achieving Objective 4. Urban populations, while exhibiting higher levels of digital polarization and media exposure, benefited from stronger institutional buffers and access to diverse information. In contrast, semi-urban communities demonstrated greater interpersonal cohesion but were more vulnerable to misinformation and rumour networks, highlighting a trade-off between digital saturation and social solidarity. Younger cohorts were more

susceptible to media-driven affective polarization, whereas older respondents displayed higher institutional confidence but lower digital literacy, a finding with important implications for intergenerational dialogue and media education programs.

The study also reaffirms the vicious cycle illustrated in the conceptual framework: polarization fuels emotional hostility, which undermines interpersonal trust, which in turn reduces civic engagement, further entrenching political divisions. Breaking this cycle requires interventions that operate across the identified dimensions.

6.1 Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretically, this research bridges the gap between political behaviour studies and social psychology by demonstrating how political identities become social identities, reshaping non-political interactions and community trust. It also contributes to the literature on digital sociology by illustrating how platform-based communication mediates polarization's social impact differently across urban and semi-urban settings.

From a policy perspective, the findings advocate for multipronged interventions:

1. **Media Literacy and Regulation:** Initiatives should focus on critical digital literacy, especially for youth and semi-urban populations, coupled with transparent algorithmic governance to reduce echo chambers and misinformation spread.
2. **Institutional Strengthening:** Building trust in electoral, judicial, and local governance institutions through transparency, accountability, and inclusive representation is essential to provide a stabilizing counterweight to polarized narratives.
3. **Community-Based Dialogic Platforms:** Encouraging structured civic participation, intergroup contact initiatives, and public deliberation forums can rebuild bridges across partisan divides and reinforce social capital at the community level.
4. **Emotional and Psychological Interventions:** Programs designed to reduce affective polarization, such as narrative-based empathy building and conflict resolution training,

should complement institutional and media-focused measures.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a robust quantitative foundation, its cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to trace the temporal dynamics of polarization and trust. Additionally, expanding the sample to include rural and marginalized communities would enhance generalizability. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic observation, could further illuminate the lived experience of polarization in familial and neighbourhood contexts. Finally, integrating macro-level variables—such as historical political conflict, ethnic composition, and regional governance disparities—would offer a more contextualized understanding of polarization's social consequences.

In closing, political polarization is not merely a political challenge but a social crisis that fragments relationships, erodes trust, and weakens democracy from the ground up. Addressing its social dimensions requires moving beyond electoral reforms toward holistic strategies that foster emotional tolerance, institutional integrity, media responsibility, and vibrant civic participation. Only through such integrated efforts can societies hope to sustain the levels of trust and cooperation essential for democratic resilience and collective well-being.

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