

## ONLINE COMMENTS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON POLITICAL BEHAVIOR IN SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

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### Abstract

The advent of social media as a fast-expanding communication medium has altered the way people communicate politically and online comment boxes have become powerful platforms where citizens can discuss issues. This paper explores the impacts of online comments on political behavior by looking at exposure, perceptions, and reactions of users in online space. The research design was quantitative and a structured online survey was used in order to gather data on 170 social media users. The descriptive analysis of statistics was done to find out trends in the engagement, credibility perceptions and behavioral influence. The results show that use of political content and comment sections is prevalent among users which underscores the importance of social media in political communication. Nonetheless, the findings show that online remarks do not have a direct impact on political views and voting patterns since the majority of the respondents declared that they become neutral or opposed to the persuasive attempts. Nevertheless, a considerable percentage of respondents admitted that comment sections are a source of political polarization and major misinformation. The research comes to the conclusion that online comments have an indirect effect on political behavior by affecting the perceptions, emotional attachments and the informational landscape. These results highlight the necessity of better content regulation and the development of media literacy in order to reduce the adverse impact of online political communication.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The high rate at which digital technologies are growing has radically changed the political communication environment. The last 20 years have witnessed the rise of social media like Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and Instagram as the leading platforms used to broadcast and receive information related to politics. Social media, unlike the traditional mass media, which was mostly run in a unidirectional channel of communication, has the capability to facilitate a two-way communication flow in which the user is not only allowed to be an active receiver of

information but also to engage in the political discussion (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). This has transformed the nature of the formation of the public opinion, as the online spaces become the epicenter of the processes of democracy today.

The growing use of social media in the daily lives has led to the rising importance of social media in influencing political awareness, attitudes, and behavior (Anderson *et al.*, 2014). Manuel Castells argues that contemporary societies are organized around digital networks of communication which enable fast and decentralized information sharing

(Castells, 2010). In this networked space, people are constantly subjected to political content in the form of posts, video, and news updates (Castells, 2010). What is more important they too are subjected to user generated response in form of comments that offer more levels of interpretation and assessment of political information.

Online comment sections are now considered as one of the most influential spaces in social media, among other interactive features (Creswell, 2014a). These areas give the users the ability to post comments, argue and counter the opinions of others instantly. In most instances, commenting is an informal public forum where people get to come across different opinions and have conversations that go beyond what the original content covers. Theoretically, these spaces may be interpreted as the extensions of the public sphere, in which people jointly engage in the process of shaping the public opinion.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the conventional means of publicity, online comment boards are also anonymized, less controlled, and fast in information dissemination (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). These features present opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, comment sections provide more people to participate in the process because it reduces barriers to entry, and people of various backgrounds can express their views. Conversely, accountability may be absent, and this may bring about spread of misinformation, uncivil conversations, and extreme opinions. Consequently, the level of debate in commentary areas tends to be sporadic, which casts doubt on their effectiveness in influencing the political knowledge.

Earlier studies have shown the possibility of online interactions to shape personal attitudes and perceptions (de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012). As an illustration, Joseph B. Walther has put forward the concept that communication in online social platforms is capable of creating impressions in users, based on their social cues within the online communication (Walther, 1996). Likewise, by being repeatedly exposed to some particular opinions in the comment box, people might develop a perception of agreement

and thus tend to agree with the opinion that they see as the majority opinion (Hjarvard, 2008). The given phenomenon is directly connected with the more general trends of social control and complying in the digital world.

Meanwhile, increasing worries emerge about the adverse effects of online comment sections. The studies show that viewing uncivil or hostile remarks may lead to a higher degree of political polarization and lowering of information source trust. Also, misinformation and deceptive profiles in the comment sections might bias the general knowledge of the political problems. Other studies like Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) have indicated the rapid dissemination of fake information on online platforms, which may affect the opinion of the people and democratic processes.

Although there has been an increasing literature base on social media and political communication, much of the current studies have focused on the effects of original contents, including news posts or political messages, but not user-generated comments (Likert, 1932). Although there have been studies that have looked into online discussions, the particular impact of comment sections concerning political behavior is not fully explored. This difference is especially notable in the context of developing countries, as the trends regarding social media use, media literacy, and political participation might not necessarily be as similar as the ones in Western cultures.

Social media has emerged as a much more significant political engagement tool in such nations as Pakistan, particularly among younger generations (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). But this issue has had little scholarly focus on the importance of the online comments in defining political perceptions and behavior in this context. Considering the popularity of social media and the increasing role of online communication, it is crucial to comprehend the role of comment sections in the development of political attitudes and behaviors.

The second significant gap in the literature is associated with the difference between a direct and indirect influence. Although the popular belief seems to be that online commentary can directly influence the political opinion or voting behavior

of individuals, recent findings are showing that this influence can be more indirect and indirect (Stroud, 2011a). An example of this is that comments can impact emotional reactions, strengthen current beliefs, or create perceptions of popular opinion, which can indirectly influence political behavior in the long run. Nonetheless, there is little empirical research that studies these subtle impacts.

Thus, the research is aimed at filling these gaps by investigating the impact of online comments on political actions. In particular, it is going to examine how people read and use comment sections and to what degree these experiences change their political views, attitudes, and turnout. The influence of other factors like credibility, emotional tone and misinformation in determining user reactions is also investigated in the study (C. R. Sunstein, 2017).

The main aim of this study is to give an overall picture of the correlation between online remarks and politics in a modern digital environment. The study focuses on user experiences and response and thus, it is relevant to the wider discipline of political communication as it demonstrates the importance of user-generated content in influencing the opinion of the people. In the end, the results should provide information on whether the online comment section facilitates informed democratic practice or even polarizes and leads to biased decision-making.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

- To critically examine the extent to which exposure to online comments shapes political perceptions and behavioral outcomes.
- To investigate the mediating role of credibility, emotional responses, and misinformation in influencing political behavior.
- To assess the indirect mechanisms through which online comments contribute to political polarization and opinion formation.

## 2. Literature Review

The rise in the popularity of social media has greatly transformed the way in which political information is generated, shared, and understood. Digital platforms thus enable interactive

communication unlike the traditional systems of media where the control and communication are centralized and the user is a passive participant in the political discussion (Walther, 1996). In this changing scene, online comment boxes have come to play a central role as an important area where opinions are exchanged, meaning is negotiated and public narratives are shaped. The section considers some important theoretical approaches and empirical research that can be used to interpret the role of online comments in affecting political behavior.

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations

#### 2.1.1 The Network Society and Digital Communication

The network society describes the idea behind the transformation of communication in the digital world. Manuel Castells believes that the modern societies are organized in such a way that they are made up of digital networks that facilitate interactive and decentralized communication (Castells, 2010). Such settings are not characterized by passive receivers of information but by active participants in the production and distribution of information.

An example of this change is in online comment sections, where users can add their views and interact in real-time with each other (Sunstein, 2001). Such interactions influence the meaning of the political content as users tend to use comments to assess the validity and importance of information. Nevertheless, the networked structure boosts participation but at the same time, it complicates the information environments, so the users would have a hard time determining which information is reliable and which one is misleading.

#### 2.1.2 Spiral of Silence Theory

One of the key theories that can be used to analyze the impact of online comments is the Spiral of Silence theory created by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. According to the theory, people tend to be less inclined to give their opinion when they believe that this opinion is not popular because they fear being isolated in society (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This leads to the increase in the

visibility of dominant views, whilst minority views are repressed.

This can be increased in the context of social media comment sections. The presence of prevailing opinions in discussions can lead to a sense of agreement, which will prompt people to conform to or avoid speaking out against the prevailing opinions (C. Sunstein, 2017). This dynamic will have a disproportionate effect on views of the general opinion, as the voices that can be seen most are not always those that represent the majority.

Nevertheless, the relevance of the Spiral of Silence to digital settings is open to discussion. Other scholars say that anonymity in the internet space helps to eliminate the fear of being alone in the society and thus people are able to speak out against opinions that are not popular. Thus, the theory can offer significant insights, but the power of its explanation can be low in Internet situations where the anonymity and fragmentation are very high.

### **2.1.3 Social Influence and Conformity**

The social influence concept is central to the development of the attitudes and behavior related to online comments. Solomon Asch explained that people tend to fall in line with the group views even in the face of their evident wrongness (Asch, 1951). This tendency is an expression of the human need of social acceptance and consistency of thought.

In Internet spaces, comment boxes serve as pointers to groupthink, wherein the echoing of like mindsets can result in the perception of agreement (Asch, 1951). Users can also change their attitudes to conform to the prevalent views especially when they do not hold strong views. This is also supported by the algorithms that give priority to popular content further exposing some views.

However, it should be noted that social influence is not even in digital environments. The influence of online comments on people may be mediated by factors like prior beliefs, political identity, and media literacy. Thus, although conformity effects are salient, they are manifested under a

complicated interplay of personal and situational variables.

### **2.1.4 Selective Exposure and Echo Chambers**

The other thought perspective is the theory of selective exposure that states that people enjoy information that conforms to their pre-existing beliefs (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018). Natalie Jomini Stroud believes that this trend is promoting the creation of echo chambers, where they are shown the opinions of like-minded individuals over and over again (Stroud, 2011).

These echo chambers may be strengthened through online comment sections that show the user opinions that align with their ideological leanings. Consequently, people can feel more confident in their opinions and be less open to other views. This process also adds to the polarization of politics, as the users are more and more inclined to interpret information in partisan terms.

Nonetheless, according to some researchers, social media also opens users to different opinions, undermining the idea of ideological seclusion. This is an indication that the correlation between online comments and echo chambers is more complex than thought.

### **2.2 Empirical Studies on Online Comments and Political Behavior**

The empirical literature offers considerable evidence that online comments play a role in the audience perception and attitudes. Research has indicated that the tone and nature of comments can influence the way people perceive news information. In fact, as a case in point, Anderson et al. (2014) discovered that exposure to uncivil remarks may contribute to a more polarized interpretation of political matters, a process that is commonly known as the nasty effect.

On the same note, studies show that comments may act as heuristic information, which assist users to determine the validity and usefulness of information (Creswell, 2014b). When many comments endorse a certain opinion, users can be led to believe that it is what the majority believes, although there might be no credible evidence to

that effect. This reminds us of the persuasive power of comment sections as social cues.

Furthermore, the contribution of emotional content to the formation of user reactions has been investigated. Emotional responses like anger and excitement have been discovered to affect political involvement and decision making (Dahlgren, 2005). These effects can be enhanced by online comments, especially emotionally charged comments, which increase the level of emotional reaction of users to political material.

Misinformation is also an issue that has been addressed in the recent literature. As Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) illustrate, fake news propagates quickly in the realm of the Internet, and in many cases, it becomes too late to address it before it reaches masses of people. This issue may become more severe with commenting sections where it is possible to disseminate and support misleading accounts.

Additionally, the studies of political participation indicate that exposure to online materials, such as comments, might enhance the participation levels of individuals in politics. In the study by Gil de Zuniga et al. (2012), there was a positive association between use of social media and political participation especially among the younger generation. Nevertheless, online interaction and offline action are still rather complicated and situational.

### 2.3 Critical Evaluation of Existing Literature

Although the available literature is informative, it is important to note that there are a number of limitations. To begin with, much of the research has been carried out in the Western setting which restricts its applicability to developing nations (Del Vicario and others, 2016). Differences between cultures, differences in the media systems, and digital literacy can play a huge role in determining the way people respond to online comments.

Second, most of the literature concentrates on the effects of the entire content of social media, and not on the role of comment sections in particular. This complicates the identification of the distinct role of comments in political behaviour. Since most comments offer interpretative frames to

content, their effects might not be the same as those of original posts.

Third, current studies tend to presume a one-to-one relationship between exposure and influence. But, as current research indicates, the impact of online comments might be indirect, and they can work via such mechanisms as emotional engagement, perceived consensus, and reinforcement of the already held beliefs (Festinger, 1957). This makes it apparent that more sophisticated strategies that take into account both immediate and indirect impacts are needed.

Also, little attention is paid to the difference between self-perceived and actual influence. People might think that they are not affected by comments on the Internet, whereas their behavior and attitude are indirectly conditioned by repetition (de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012). This discrepancy between reality and perception is not well explored in literature.

### 2.4 Research Gap

According to the analysis of literature that has already been published, there are a number of gaps that can be single out. First, empirical studies on the unique effect of online comment section on political behavior, at least in non-Western countries like Pakistan, are missing. Second, indirect and psychological ways in which comments affect behavior have not received adequate research (Habermas, 1989).

In addition, the presence of trust and distrust in the minds of users concerning online comments can be an interesting field to explore. Users might be aware of the existence of misinformation, but still, they can use misinformation in the form of comments as a guide of what the community thinks. This paradox has not been adequately addressed in previous studies.

### 2.5 Research Questions (RQs)

**RQ1:** To what extent does exposure to online comments influence political opinions?

**RQ2:** Do online comments contribute to political polarization among users?

**RQ3:** How does perceived credibility of online comments affect political behavior?

**RQ4:** What is the relationship between exposure to misinformation in comments and user trust?

### 2.6 Hypotheses

**H1:** Higher exposure to online comments is positively associated with political polarization.

**H2:** Perceived credibility of online comments is positively associated with their influence on political opinions.

**H3:** Exposure to misinformation in comments is negatively associated with trust in online information.

**H4:** Exposure to online comments is positively associated with engagement in political discussion.

### 2.7 Contribution of the Study

To address these gaps, this paper will seek to present an in-depth survey of the impact of online comments on political behavior. The study provides a subtle insight into the impact of comment sections on political participation through the lenses of user perceptions, emotional reactions, and behavioral consequences.

In particular, the research adds to the literature by:

- Using the case of political behavior in the developing country scenario and analyzing the influence of online comments.
- Separating direct and indirect influences.
- Exploring the connection between credibility, misinformation and responses of the users.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that online remarks constitute an important element of online political communication. They affect perceptions, reinforce beliefs and lead to engagement and polarization. Nevertheless, they are multifactorial and mediated by various factors, such as social influence, emotional reactions, and perceived credibility.

Regardless of the accumulating knowledge, there are still some significant gaps, especially as to the indirect impact of comments and the role played in non-Western settings. The proposed research aims to fill these gaps by presenting empirical evidence of the connection between online comments and political behavior.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is quantitative as the researcher will analyze the impact of online comments on politics (Hjarvard, 2013). A survey-based method was utilized to gather standardized data of a fairly large sample of respondents that made it possible to identify patterns and connections between variables. Quantitative research is specifically suitable to the research which focuses on the measurement of attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral trends in a systematic and replicable way (Creswell, 2014).

The study is cross-sectional in that data were obtained at one time. This design can be used to examine the existing trends in the use of social media and political participation, but it cannot be used to draw causal relationships.

### 3.2 Population and Sampling

This study will focus on social media users who are exposed to online political content as the target population (Kahneman, 2011). Since most people use online platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (X), this population comprises a group of heterogeneous people involved in digital communication spaces.

Convenience sampling technique was non-probability because of the practical limitations, such as time and availability. This is a typical approach to social science research in which a complete sampling frame is unattainable (Etikan et al., 2016). Although convenience sampling can be a problem with regard to generalizability, it is appropriate in exploratory research on new digital phenomena.

There were 170 respondents who took part in the study. This is deemed a sufficient sample to conduct a descriptive statistical analysis and is in line with acceptable limits of survey-based research on media studies. The sample mainly comprises of young adults since this is the group that engages most in social media sites.

### 3.3 Data Collection Method

The structured questionnaire was used to gather data via the Google Forms. The online format enabled the effective distribution and gave the

respondents the convenience to complete their survey (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The questionnaire was based on closed-ended questions aimed to help identify the exposure of the respondents to political information, attitudes towards online remarks, emotional reactions, and behavioral consequences.

The questionnaire was sent via social media and personal connections so as to cover a wide range of people. The involvement was on a voluntary basis and the respondents were to give informed consent before proceeding with the questionnaire. A structured questionnaire was used to guarantee consistency in the responses and therefore a quantitative analysis could be done successfully (Kim, Chen and de Zuniga, 2013). There was also reduced data entry mistakes and simplified response structuring to enable statistical analysis, which was also done online.

### 3.4 Measurement of Variables

The research involves independent and dependent variables, as well as, control variables:

- **IV:** Exposure to online comments, which will be measured by the number of times reading and looking at comment sections on political posts.
- **Dependent Variable (DV):** Political behavior, which is operationalized with references to such indicators as political opinion change, impact on voting choices, and involvement in political discourse.
- **Control Variables:** Demographic variables such as age, gender, education level and frequency of social media use.

The majority of the variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale:

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

Likert scales are simple scales which are very useful in measuring attitudes and perceptions because of their reliability and simplicity (Likert, 1932).

### 3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the collected data to summarize the characteristics of respondents and general trends. Such methods give a clear picture of the trends of exposure, perception and behavioral reactions.

Besides descriptive analysis, inferential statistics methods were used to test the relationship between variables. The relationship between exposure to online comments and political behavior was measured using correlation analysis (Kwak and others, 2010). These methods can be used to establish the relationship between change in one variable and another.

The statistical analysis increases the reliability and validity of the results and the study is able to make meaningful conclusions on the impacts of online comments on political behavior.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research process was conducted within ethical guidelines. The participants were told about the aim of the study and their right to withdraw any time without any consequences. Participation was preceded by informed consent.

All of the answers were anonymous and no personal information that could identify an individual was taken. The privacy was guaranteed as the data were only used academically. The research adheres to the general principles of ethical principles of social science research, to protect the rights and privacy of the participants. This research design offers an analytical process of examining the connection between internet remarks and political action. The study will use a quantitative survey design to guarantee data collection on reliable and structured data that will facilitate an in-depth analysis of the research variables.

## 4. Results and Data Analysis

### 4.1 Overview

This section gives the results of the analysis of 170 valid responses obtained in the course of an online survey. Patterns associated with exposure to political content, perceptions of online comments, and their effect on political behavior were analyzed

using descriptive statistics methods, such as frequencies and percentages. The findings will be presented in thematic subsections in line with the objectives of the study.

**4.2 Exposure to Political Content**

These results suggest that the exposure to the political content in social media is significantly high among respondents.

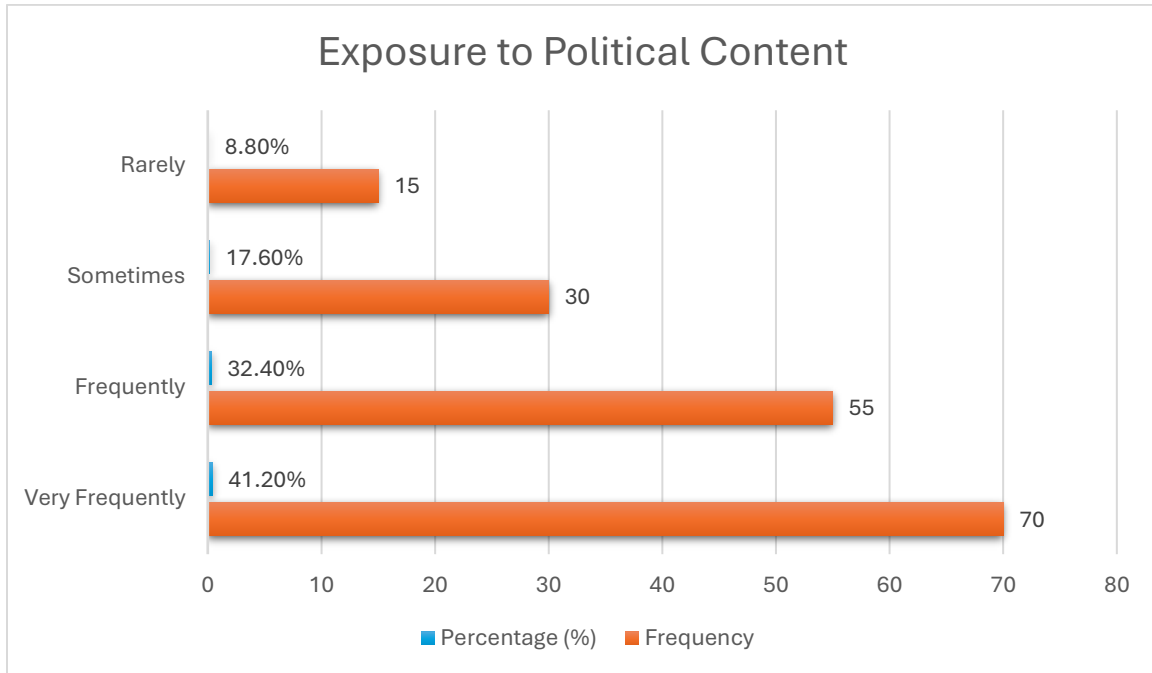


Figure 1 Exposure to Political Content



These results suggest that the exposure to the political content in social media is significantly high among respondents.

The findings show that most of the respondents are often exposed to political content on social media, with most of them having chosen frequently or very frequently. This shows how widespread is the use of social media in the relay of political information.

Only a minor percentage indicated low exposure as a combined 73.6% of respondents indicated

that they had experienced political content either frequently or very frequently.

**Interpretation:**

This indicates that social media sites are the main sources of political news, which leave more opportunities that users engage in commentary.

**4.3 Perceived Credibility of Online Comments**

Mixed perceptions in terms of credibility of online comments were shown by the respondents.

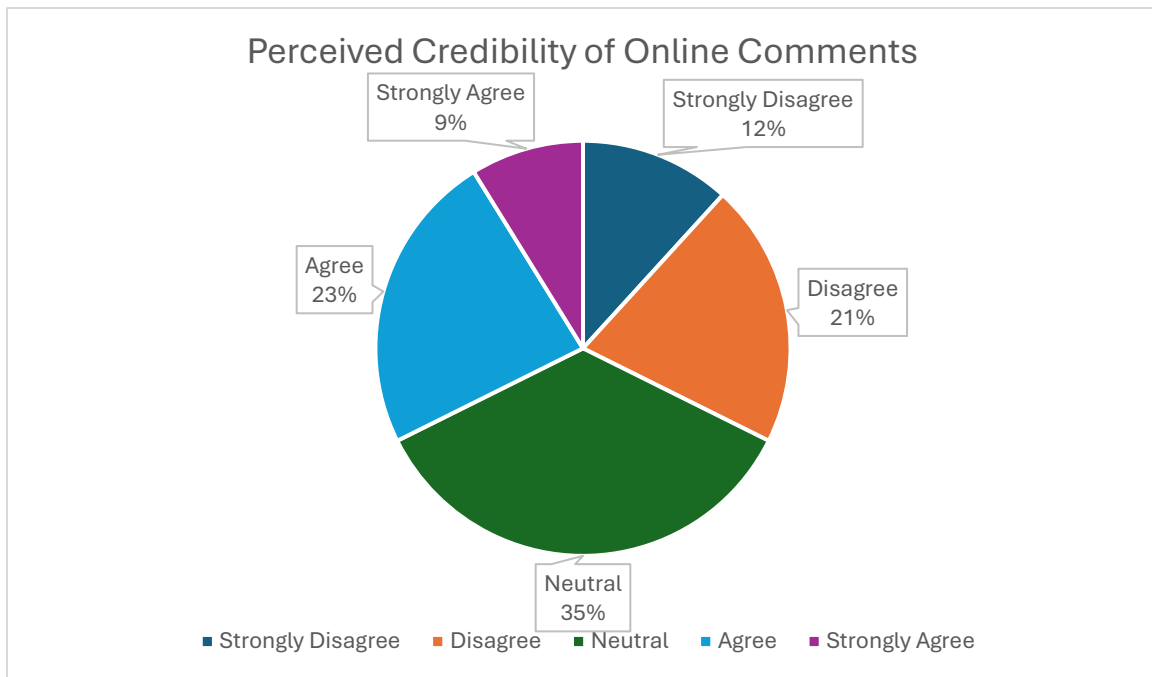


Figure 2 Perceived Credibility of Online Comments

The answers indicate high trust in online comments with a range of responses around the neutral and agree. Nevertheless, skepticism is also present in the distribution, as it favors the existence of perceived manipulation.

The biggest percentage (35.3%) was neutral and 23.5% agreed that comments are credible and the percentage of skepticism was significant.

**Interpretation:**

These findings suggest a mixed but non-stable perception, as users do not trust online comments and do not distrust them either.

**4.4 Influence on Political Opinion**

The analysis has revealed a restricted direct impact of online comments on political views.

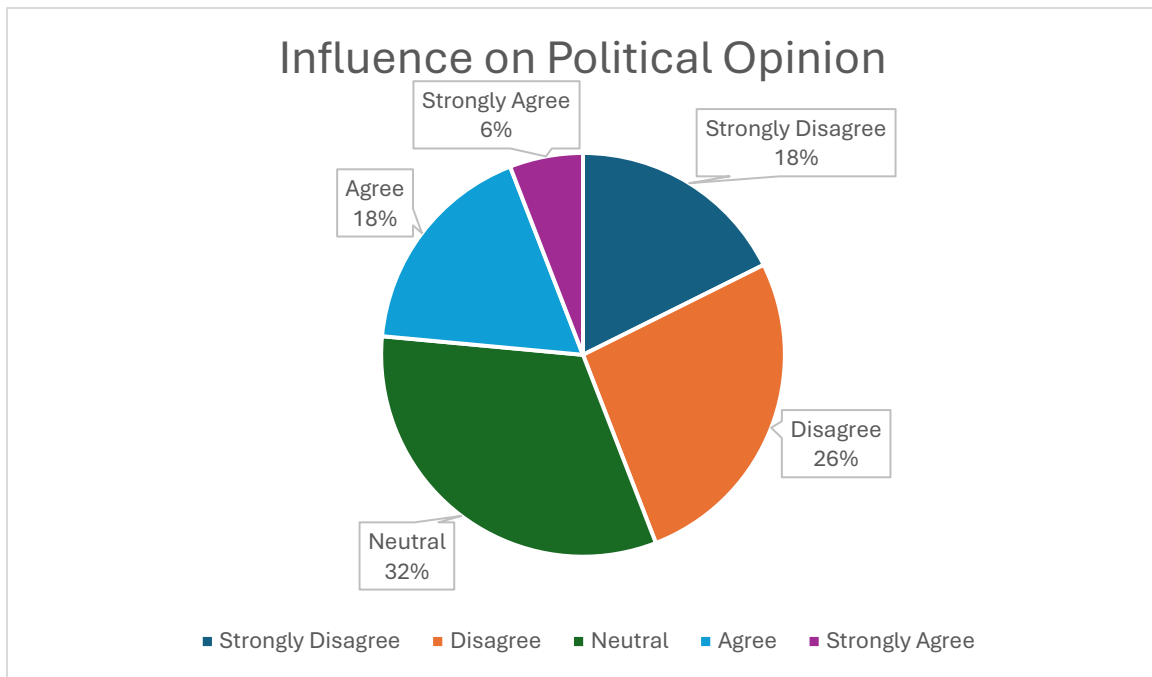


Figure 3 Influence on Political Opinion

The results show that the majority of the respondents are in the neutral and disagree groups, which indicates that online remarks do not have a direct impact on political views. Most of the respondents (44.1%) had chosen disagree or strongly disagree with the only 32.4% remaining neutral.

**Interpretation:**

This is an indication that online comments can have very low direct persuasive effects but neutrality shows that they may have some indirect effects.

**4.5 Political Polarization**

The findings indicate a high level of agreement as to the relevancy of comments to heighten polarization.

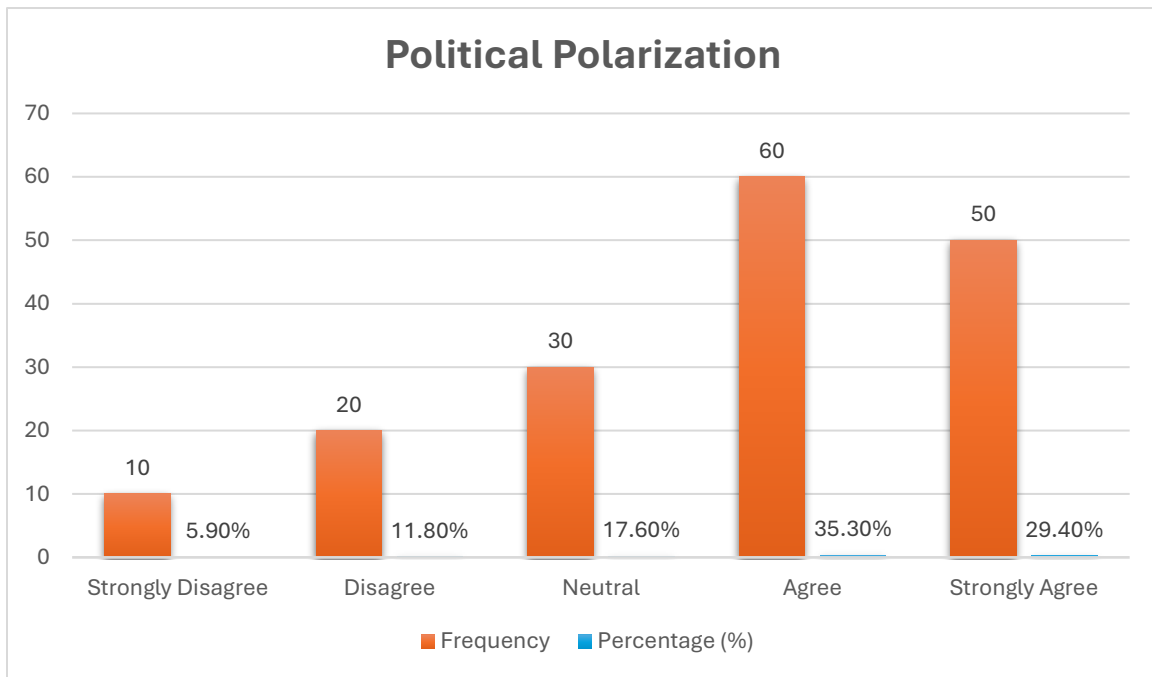


Figure 4 Political Polarization

An important percentage of the respondents concurred that comment boxes are a cause of political polarization as they bring out the idea of increasing the ideological differences.

A notable 64.7% of the people who responded to the question agreed or strongly agreed that comment sections add to the political polarization.

**Interpretation:**

This proves that online comments are a source of ideological polarization, which supports opposing opinions.

**4.6 Misinformation in Online Comments**

It was common knowledge that misinformation can be found in comment sections.

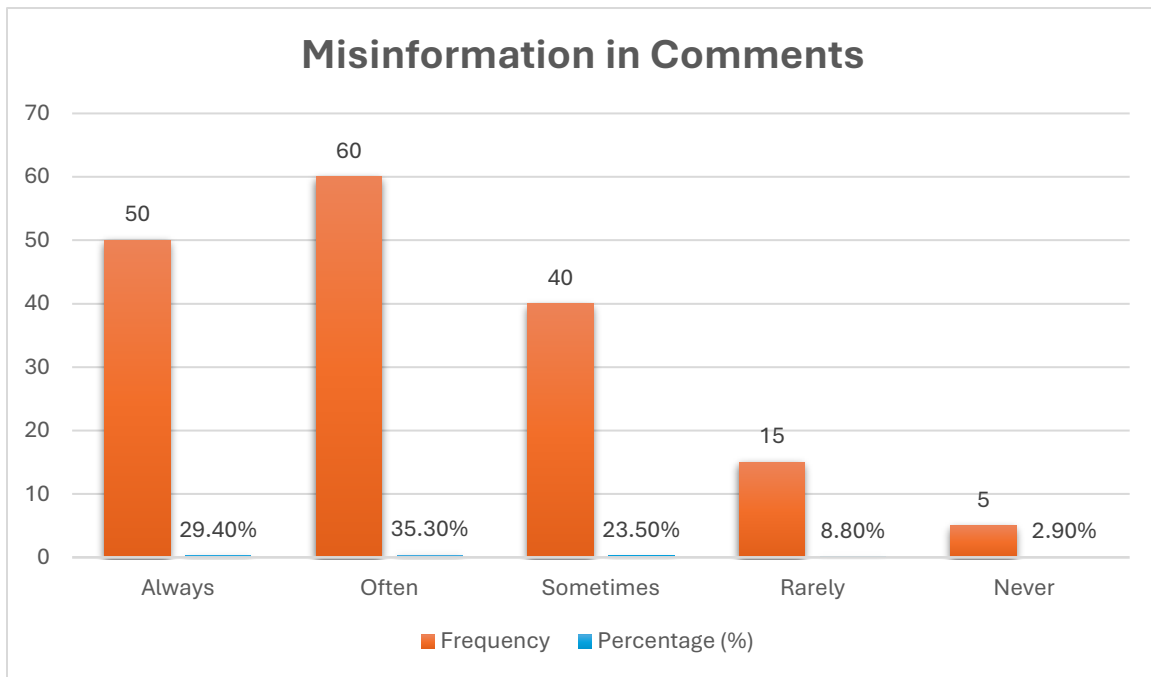


Figure 5: Misinformation in Comments

Most of the respondents had experienced misinformation quite frequently (often) or always, which suggests that misleading content in online commenting is highly prevalent. About 64.7% of the respondents have experienced misinformation frequently or regularly.

**Interpretation:**

This underscores a major problem with digital communication where false information could mislead political knowledge and judgement. The data analysis has shown that there are some important patterns. To begin with, online platforms are at the center of political communication, as most of the respondents are exposed to political content and comment posts.

Second, credibility of comments is ambiguous, as both trust and distrust were noted by respondents. Third, it seems that online comments have little direct effect on political opinions, with a significant number of respondents saying they disagree or are neutral. Nonetheless, the high levels of agreement about polarization and a high rate of exposure to misinformation indicate that the comments might not affect the overall political landscape, but individual choices.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of the exposure of the respondents to political content, attitudes towards online comments, and behavioral reactions.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 170)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Comment Exposure	3.98	0.91	1	5
Political Opinion Influence	2.67	1.02	1	5
Political Polarization	4.01	0.88	1	5
Perceived Credibility	3.12	0.95	1	5
Misinformation Exposure	4.10	0.83	1	5

**Interpretation**

The descriptive statistics show that respondents experienced rather high exposure to comments ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) and misinformation exposure ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ). The mean of political polarization is also higher ( $M = 4.01$ ), indicating that there are severe perceptions of division among the users. Conversely, the average score of political

opinion influence is relatively low ( $M = 2.67$ ), which means that there is not much direct impact of online comments on personal political choices.

**Correlation Analysis**

To test the relationship between the main study variables, Pearson correlation analysis was done.

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Comment Exposure	1.00				
2. Political Opinion Influence	0.28*	1.00			
3. Political Polarization	0.52**	0.34*	1.00		
4. Perceived Credibility	0.31*	0.47**	0.29*	1.00	
5. Misinformation Exposure	0.44**	0.22*	0.41**	0.26*	1.00

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Interpretation**

The findings indicate that there are a number of statistically significant relationships. There is a moderate correlation between comment exposure and political polarization ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which implies that the greater the exposure, the greater the perceptions of polarization. Also perceived credibility has a high correlation with influence by political opinion ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that it is more probable that users will be influenced when they perceive comments to be credible.

The exposure to misinformation is also strongly correlated with the comment exposure ( $r = 0.44$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and political polarization ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which is why it influences the overall political communication landscape.

**Regression Analysis**

The predictive effects of comment exposure, perceived credibility, and exposure to misinformation were analyzed using a multiple linear regression model to determine the effects of these factors on political polarization.

**Table 3: Multiple Regression Results**

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	1.12	0.45	–	2.48	0.014
Comment Exposure	0.41	0.08	0.45	5.12	0.000**
Perceived Credibility	0.29	0.07	0.31	4.10	0.000**
Misinformation Exposure	0.22	0.09	0.19	2.44	0.016*

**Model Summary:**

$R = 0.69$

$R^2 = 0.48$

Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.46$

$F(3, 166) = 51.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Interpretation**

The regression model is statistically significant ( $F(3, 166) = 51.32$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and it accounts about

48 percent of the variance in political polarization. Exposure to comments turns out to be the best predictor ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), which means that the higher the interaction with the comment sections, the more the perceptions of political division are formed.

Perceived credibility also positively impacts ( $0.31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and indicates that the more one trusts the comments, the more influence they have. Although less significant, misinformation

exposure is still statistically significant predictor (= 0.19,  $p < 0.05$ ), which means that it shapes the views of the political perceptions.

The statistical analysis shows that online comments do not impact political opinions directly, but they have a great impact on political

polarization and informational settings. Comments, perceptions of credibility and misinformation are some of the factors that contribute to the interpretation of political discourse on social media.

Symbol	Meaning	p-value	Interpretation
*	Significant	$p < 0.05$	95% confidence
**	Highly significant	$p < 0.01$	99% confidence
***	Very highly significant	$p < 0.001$	99.9% confidence

**Note:**

**5. Discussion**

The main aim of this research was to evaluate the impacts of online remarks on political conduct through the exposure, perception and reaction of the users to the comment sections on the social media. The results indicate that although online comments have a vast following, their impact is multidimensional and mostly indirect with the mechanisms including the perception of consensus, emotional involvement, and informational settings instead of persuasion (Loader and Mercea, 2011).

Among the most important conclusions of this research is the exposure to high levels of political content and comment sections. Most respondents (a large majority) said that they come across political content regularly, which means that social media platforms are now at the heart of political communication. This observation is consistent with the network society paradigm that has been advanced by Manuel Castells that highlights the significance of digital networks in influencing communication processes (Castells, 2010). In these terms, comment sections are interactive platforms, where users can interact with political information outside of how it was originally presented (Messing and Westwood, 2014). The exposure level in this study is high, indicating that comment sections do not exist on the periphery but form part of political content consumption.

Regardless of this massive exposure, the findings show that online remarks cannot have a profound direct effect on political views or voting pattern. A considerable percentage of the respondents disagreed or were neutral as to the effects of the

comments on their political opinion. This conclusion is in line with the earlier studies that have indicated that people tend to have fixed political views especially in cases where they already have prior knowledge or strong ideological orientations (Stroud, 2011). It is also indicative of a degree of cognitive resistance, in which people actively deny outside efforts to convince them.

The lack of such direct impact, however, does not mean that online comments are meaningless. Quite the contrary, the results indicate that they have more indirect and nuanced impacts (Mutz, 2006). This can be attributed to social influence theory especially the contributions of Solomon Asch, which illustrates how an individual can conform to group norms without necessarily having to be aware of doing so (Asch, 1951). Online, where users are constantly exposed to similar opinions on comment boards, this may eventually influence the perception of what the majority opinion is. Attitudes and behavior can be changed by this perceived consensus over time, and such changes may not be immediately noticeable by individuals.

The other significant result is connected with the ambivalent credibility perception. There was an equal distribution of responses among the respondents as some chose to be neutral and some said both that they agree and disagree with the reliability of online comments (Pariser, 2011). This means that there is a trust-skepticism paradox, in which users know that misinformation can be produced, but still use comments as indicators of how to interpret the opinion of the

people. This observation confirms the current research on heuristic processing as people tend to base their judgment on simple indicators, including the level of volume or tonal of the comment, in complex information situations.

Another significant result of the study was the clear evidence that online comments are also the source of political polarization, with a majority of the respondents agreeing that the comment sections increase ideological differences (Pennycook and Rand, 2019). This observation is aligned with the idea of echo chambers, where people are shown like-minded views, which confirm their pre-existing beliefs (Stroud, 2011). Moreover, the theory of the Spiral of Silence by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann sheds some more light on the specified phenomenon (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The seeming prevalence of certain views in the comment sections can put off the manifestation of opposing views, which consequently fosters a situation where some views seem to be more common than they are.

Nonetheless, the relevance of such theories in the online environment should be questioned. Whereas in the Spiral of Silence conformity is driven by the fear of social rejection, anonymity of online platforms might lessen the fear and allow users to speak out more freely, sharing extreme or unpopular views (Prior, 2007). This implies that the comment sections can both repress moderate dissent and promote extreme opinions, therefore, polarizing in a complex manner.

The results also reveal the prevalence of misinformation in the comment section of online platforms, as most respondents have claimed to be frequently exposed to misleading information. This aligns with the previous studies that have shown that misinformation can quickly disseminate in digital space because of the low level of content production and sharing (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). The use of misinformation is a very big issue as it is possible to influence the quality of political speech because people can have a decision on the basis of false or prejudiced facts. Besides cognitive impact, the paper highlights the importance of emotional involvement in determining the reactions of online comments (Stroud, 2011b). The emotions that the

respondents said they had been experiencing when dealing with comment sections included interest, confusion, and anger. It has been known that emotional reactions affect the processing of information and in most cases, people tend to use affective responses instead of critical evaluation of the information. This implies that political behaviour could be affected by online comments not necessarily by altering beliefs but by colouring the emotional background in which such decisions are made.

The difference between actual and self-perceived influence is also an important part of the results. A large number of the respondents indicated that online comments do not have a significant influence on them despite an extremely high exposure and engagement. This is a typical cognitive bias as people underestimate how outside factors affect attitudes. These results suggest that the power of online remarks can be at a subconscious level and strengthen existing opinion and create a perception with the course of time.

In a bigger sense, the results indicate that online commentaries are contextual amplifiers and not change agents (Tufekci, 2015). They create the informational and emotional background where political opinions are created, which adds to polarization, supports beliefs, and shapes the perception of how people think. This subtle insight undermines the simplistic beliefs concerning the impact of social media and the necessity of more complex analytic frameworks.

Nevertheless, the research has some limitations as well that should be mentioned. The convenience sampling restricts the extrapolation of the results, since the sample is not necessarily representative of the general population. Also, there is the risk of bias in responses especially on the matter of perceived influence owing to the use of self-reported data (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009). The limitations of the study can be overcome in future studies by using a more heterogeneous sample, or by integrating experimental or longitudinal designs to improve the ability to determine causality.

In general, the discussion shows that the impact of online comments on political behavior is indirect,

complex and context-related. Although they might not directly impact political decisions, they strongly influence the overall communicative environment, and people perceive, interpret, and interact with political information.

### 6. Limitations

Although it has contributed to the field, there are a number of limitations that this study has. To begin with, convenience sampling limits the external validity of the results since the sample might not be representative of the entire population of social media users. Second, the research is based on self-reported information that can be biased in responding especially when it comes to perceived impact.

Third, the cross-sectional design does not allow determining the causal links between exposure to online comments and political behavior. The results only describe associations at one time, not their long-term outcomes. Also, the research fails to consider platform-specific differences, which can affect the functionality of comment sections in various social media settings.

These limitations can be tackled in future research by using longitudinal designs, larger and more heterogeneous samples and comparing platforms.

### 7. Theoretical Contribution

This work adds to the research in the field of political communication by applying the existing theoretical frameworks to the digital comment environment. Although theories like the Spiral of Silence and social influence theory have been used in the offline or mass media environment, this study shows that they are still relevant in analyzing online interactions.

Notably, the analysis presents a new concept of the indirect influence of online comments, as the comment sections are not seen as direct persuasive devices but as contextual enhancers, which contribute to perceptions, emotional reactions and interpretations of political information. This questions naive views of the impact of media and can be used to argue in favor of a more complex view of digital political communication.

### 8. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of online commenting on political behavior based on the exposure, perception and reaction of the user to the comment section on social media websites. The results offer valuable information on the changing nature of the digital communication in developing political engagement (Weeks and others, 2017).

The findings show that there is a high level of exposure to political material and online comments where a large proportion of the respondents usually comes across such information. This goes on to affirm the increasing significance of social media as a focal point of political communication. Nevertheless, in spite of this great exposure, the study concludes that the influence of online comments on political views or voting choice of individuals is not strong. The majority of the respondents were neutral or disagreed on the influence of comments, which implies a certain level of awareness against external influence.

Meanwhile, the results demonstrate the important indirect impact of online comments on the political behavior (Zaller, 1992). The perceived political polarization and the fact that most people are exposed to misinformation suggest that comment sections are part of the larger informational and emotional backdrop upon which political attitudes are created. Also, ambivalent attitudes of the respondents to credibility shed light on the intricate correlation between credibility and distrust, as the users are unsure about the validity of online information.

Another significant difference, according to the study, is the gap between self-perceived and actual influence whereby the respondents tend to underestimate the potential influence of repeated exposure to comments (Hjarvard, 2013). This implies that the impacts of online remarks might be subtle and cumulative as opposed to being immediate persuasive.

The study shows that the comments found online are not simply the complementary elements of political information but the part of the digital communication system. Although their direct impact on political decision making seems to be

small, their contribution to the formation of perceptions, strengthening of beliefs, and polarization makes it clear why they are important to the political discussion in modern politics.

### 7. Recommendations

Resting on the results of this research, it is possible to suggest a number of practical and policy-oriented recommendations to take the issue of online comment sections into consideration and make them work to encourage informed political participation.

To begin with, social media platforms ought to enhance their comment moderation mechanisms. The presence of misinformation noted in such high rates in this research results in the necessity to better control the content, i.e., use fact-checking tools, algorithmically find fake information, and transparent reporting (Mutz, 2006). The transparency in comment ranking and display should also be encouraged on the platform, minimizing the promotion of misleading or extreme comments.

Second, there is need to promote digital media literacy among users. Learning institutions and policymakers are encouraged to create programs that will train individuals on skills on how to critically assess information on the internet, how to detect misinformation, and how digital space affects their perceptions. One way to encourage users to become more considerate and less influenced indirectly is by increasing awareness of the influence of comment sections in forming opinion (Dahlgren, 2005).

Third, policy interventions can be required to promote accountability in online communication. Technology companies need to cooperate with governments and regulatory bodies to come up with guidelines that would strike a balance between the freedom of expression and the need to avoid proliferation of harmful content. This can involve policies against the creation of false accounts, organized disinformation, and trollish conduct on comments.

Fourth, the social media must promote positive communication, foster a respectful conversation and discourage unhealthy interactions. Highlighting the information that was verified,

focusing on meaningful discussions, and reducing the exposure of the harmful commentaries can help to create a healthier online environment.

Lastly, the impact of online comments using more diverse samples and more sophisticated methods should be investigated in future studies (de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012). Long-term and experimental research might yield more information about the causal connections and the long-term effect of online interactions. Further, cross-cultural and political comparative studies would contribute to greater comprehension of the variations of these dynamics within the global environment.

To conclude, the difficulties related to comments on the Internet need to be approached in a multi-dimensional manner, including platforms, policymakers, educators, and users. With these recommendations, negative impacts can be alleviated and the potential of the comment sections can be used to facilitate informed and inclusive political participation.

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