

## INSTAGRAM AS A POLITICAL SPHERE: EXAMINING POLARIZATION AMONG PAKISTANI USERS

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### Abstract

This study explores political polarization among Pakistani Instagram users as influenced by exposure to political content, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature, which has largely prioritized platforms such as Facebook and Twitter while overlooking the unique visual and algorithmic communication context of Instagram. As Instagram continues to grow rapidly among Pakistani youth, it has become increasingly important to examine its role in shaping political attitudes. The study employed a cross-sectional survey of 150 Pakistani Instagram users. Pearson correlation and simple linear regression were used to analyze the data. The findings reveal that exposure to political content on Instagram has a strong and statistically significant positive association with political polarization. Moreover, such exposure is a significant predictor of both perceived societal polarization and personal affective hostility toward opposing political groups. By providing platform-specific empirical evidence on the polarizing effects of Instagram, this study highlights the importance of digital media literacy programs and the need for greater regulatory attention to algorithmic content curation on visual social media platforms. The results contribute to the existing body of Pakistani literature and underscore the necessity of investing in digital media literacy initiatives while placing increased regulatory emphasis on how such platforms curate content.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years, social media has transformed the very nature of the way individuals discuss politics, obtain information, and form their political opinions (Afyare & Orey, 2025). The difference between it and the older types of media is that it is interactive. Users are not passive recipients of information but rather engage in activities such as sharing, responding to, and producing political content on their own. This shift in passive consumption to active digital

engagement has accelerated political communication and decentralized it, as well as turning it more into a user-led process than one that is mediated by traditional gatekeepers. This has seen platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook becoming key venues of political narrative creation, contests, and dissemination, influencing not only citizen behavior but even election results (Oparaugo, 2021).

Instagram is one of those platforms that has made a unique niche in political communication. In

contrast to text-intensive platforms, Instagram is a platform that thrives on visual storytelling, and a study has demonstrated that political content that includes personal moments, emotional content, and behind-the-scene shots of political leaders always receive much more responses compared to formal, policy-related posts (Peng, 2020). The main goal of users to follow political figures is to be informed, and the social and relationship features of the platform also contribute significantly to keeping people active (Parmelee & Roman, 2019). This combination of information and emotion is what makes Instagram a particularly powerful and possibly influential political communications space.

Instagram has gained popularity very quickly in Pakistan, attracting an approximate of 22.4 million users by 2025, with the majority being aged 18-34 years old (DataReportal, 2025; NapoleonCat, 2025). This high rate of youth participation is no coincidence. It represents a wider phenomenon of the changing nature of the interaction between politics and younger Pakistanis. Social media is not just a form of entertainment for this generation. It has emerged as one of the main avenues where political awareness is created, opinions are created, and civic voices are heard.

This is particularly important in the present political situation in Pakistan which has become highly tense and polarized. The competition between PTI and PML-N has since transcended the level of policy disagreement and turned into profound emotional and social rifts, which are exhibited publicly on social media (Ali, 2021; Maqsood et al., 2024). This space is especially popular with young users who share content, engage in political discussions, and support their parties (Ahmad et al., 2024; Farooq & Karamat, 2016). In this regard, Instagram, at once, serves as a venue of civic participation and a battleground where political loyalties are strengthened, and inter-group tensions are intensified (Rehmat & Manzoor, 2023).

## 1.2 Key Concepts

### 1.2.1 Political Content

Political content in the context of this study refers to all material posted on Instagram that addresses issues of governance, political actors, parties, public policy, and electoral competition. It includes posts, reels, stories, and associated content such as text to accompany images, videos, and audio that promote political narratives, build support for particular actors, or dispute or discredit rival positions and narratives. More specifically, this study focusses upon Instagram-based content that contributes to the framing of political issues, the construction of ways of thinking about politics, or the development of motivation to take part in politics or support any form it adopts, whether it be a candidate, a political group, or a type or type of government. (Bano et al., 2021; Rehmat & Manzoor, 2023).

### 1.2.2 Political Polarization

Political polarization is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but can be studied and thought of as the combination of two, closely related and interconnected dimensions of political polarization, i.e. the perceived polarization and affective polarization. The perceived polarization represents the degree to which people believe that society around them has become more polarized. This includes recognition that those who are supported by PTI and PMLN have grown increasingly hostile towards each other, and the political discourse has become more extreme over time (Iyengar et al., 2019). The second dimension is affective polarization, which transcends the perception and goes into the sphere of feeling. It embodies the lack of trust, dislike, avoidance and moral opposition individuals have towards the supporters of opposing political parties at a personal level (Iyengar et al., 2012). Combined, these two dimensions enable the study to not only understand the perception of Pakistanis regarding the state of political division within their society but also understand how they themselves feel about those on the other side of the divide.

### 1.2.3 Exposure

The exposure in this research is the number of times users are exposed to political content on Instagram whether they are seeking it or not. This involves actively searching for political content and content that is party-specific and passively stumbling upon party-specific posts, hashtags, or recommended content on feeds, reels, or the explore page. Although in the literature exposure is defined broadly as the mere opportunity to be exposed to such content (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Thorson & Wells, 2016), this paper sees exposure as a saleable construct that indicates the number of times users are exposed to PTI and PML-N-related content on the platform, whereby its association with political polarization can be more accurately determined.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

The increasing presence of Instagram in the political life of Pakistan is a topic that can lead to an essential and urgent question is the platform that assists individuals to be better educated and civically active or is it silently polarizing the already existing divisions. The issue is in large part because of the algorithm of Instagram.

Instead of showing users a wide selection of political views, the platform is more likely to promote content that is similar to what they have already favored (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). In the long run, this forms some sort of an echo chamber, the setting in which individuals are constantly bombarded with one-sided political information that solidifies their initial beliefs and makes them feel that the opposition is extreme, unreliable, or even dangerous (Muñoz, Díez, & Bellogin, 2024). The outcome may be a progressive escalation of perceived social divide as well as individual affective aggression towards political adversaries.

At that, the connection between social media and polarization is not as simple. There is a growing amount of evidence that social media also may promote political awareness, expand civic engagement, and provide users with a variety of perspectives and, especially, young people (Boulianne, 2020; Ali, 2021). The large-scale meta-analysis conducted by Boulianne (2020) revealed

that there was a positive correlation between the use of social media and political participation, but the magnitude of this correlation varied significantly based on the platform and situation. This indicates that the impacts of social media are dependent on the context wherein it is utilized, as opposed to being inherently negative or positive. The situation in Pakistan is especially complicated. The political environment has become extremely polarized in recent years, particularly after the political turmoil of 2022 and the further polarization of the confrontation between PTI and PML-N (Rehmat & Manzoor, 2023; Maqsood & Zafar, 2022). There is no neutral ground to the social media content in this charged environment. It is created, distributed, and consumed among users who are already emotionally engaged in political results. Bail et al. (2018) in their work that is still one of the most referred to on the subject matter proved that their mere exposure to conflicting political opinions on social media may counterintuitively lead individuals to the side of their own opinion instead of understanding each other. This result is especially applicable in Pakistan where politics has a strong connection to emotion and group allegiance. Instagram could so be used as a two-fold tool, on the one hand keeping people informed and connected, and on the other hand encouraging the feeling of division and inter-group hostility. Although the extent of international research on the topic of social media and polarization is increasing, none of the studies have concentrated on the effects of exposure to political material on Instagram on perceived and affective polarization in Pakistani users. The current study fills that gap.

### 1.4 Research Objectives

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which Pakistani users are exposed to political content on Instagram.
2. To analyze the relationship between Instagram political content exposure and political polarization, covering both its perceived and affective dimensions, among Pakistani users.
3. To assess the impact of Instagram political content exposure on political polarization through regression analysis.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Social Media and Political Polarization in Pakistan

The connection that exists between social media and political behavior in Pakistan has been increasing scholarly interest, and the studies on this topic persistently indicate a dual and somewhat opposite, role. On the one hand, social media has increased access to political information and provided new opportunities in the form of civic engagement to citizens who have so far been out of reach to formal political platforms (Boulianne, 2020). Conversely, the same platforms have also been discovered to increase ideological and emotive rifts especially among younger users who spend a lot of time on partisan content online (Maqsood et al., 2024; Ashraf et al., 2025).

A significant process driving this divide is selective exposure, the inclination of users to prefer content that aligns with their predetermined viewpoints while shying away from information that contradicts them (Stroud, 2011). Over time this process contributes to the emerging of echo chambers, spaces where a person typically engage exclusively with people with similar thoughts, which over time reinforces its partisan identify and lessens its acceptance of views that contradict them (Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011). Research on social media use in Pakistan has provided some evidence for the existence of growing affective polarization, particularly among youth, wherein political disagreement becomes more emotionally hostility and negative stereotyping of others who hold political views that don't align with their own (Iyengar et al., 2019; Rehmat & Manzoor, 2023). However this dynamic is pronounced particularly in the context of Pakistan since the political rivalry between the PMLN and the PTI has led to online spaces becoming a battleground not only for promoting one's own narrative, but of actively delegitimize and attacking the other, leading to an increase of societal divisions beyond what exists in offline spaces (Maqsood & Zafar, 2022; Ali, 2021). Bail et al. (2018) have found that being exposed on social media to opposing political views can in fact deepen polarization instead of diminishing it, which is particularly relevant in the context of the

emotionally charged social media environment in Pakistan. However, social media is both a tool for political awareness and for political fragmentation, and to understand which function dominates may require careful empirical investigation (Boulianne, 2020; Bail et al., 2018).

### 2.2 Political Content on social media with a special emphasis on Instagram

Political content on social media includes a broad array of posts, videos, memes, hashtags, and comment threads that articulate political views, endorse political figures, or criticize opposing parties (Safdar & Eman, 2025). The unique aspect of much political content on social media is its design logic. Rather than emphasizing detailed analysis or balanced information, political content is often crafted for emotional resonance and rapid propagation. It is more likely to elicit intense emotions than thoughtful consideration (Brady et al., 2017).

Instagram is notable for its central place in this dynamic. As a visually oriented platform, it hosts political content primarily in the form of memes, brief reels, commentary by influencer accounts, and through trending hashtags. This format forces political content to simplify intricate political issues into emotionally resonant, easily shareable narratives (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). This simplification is not simply a stylistic choice but a structural one. Instagram's architecture rewards emotional impact: posts that provoke outrage, enthusiasm, or tribal loyalty receive more attention than those that offer balanced or nuanced content (Bucher, 2018). Political figures and party-affiliated accounts have learned this lesson and increasingly use Instagram to shape public opinion and mobilize supporters through content designed to be visually striking and emotionally charged rather than substantively informative (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Peng, 2020).

In Pakistan, this dynamic is especially notable because the youth population makes up the dominant group of Instagram users and is highly engaged with political content through sharing and commenting as well as sharing and participating in hashtag-driven conversations (DataReportal, 2025; Rehmat & Manzoor, 2023).

The platform's engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, further boost the visibility of political posts, fostering feedback loops in which emotionally charged content spreads the fastest and reaches the widest audience (Bucher, 2018). Consequently, the political content on Instagram is not just passively consumed, but rather actively circulated to reinforce established political attitudes and strengthen partisan divisions (Bail et al., 2018).

### **2.3 Selective Exposure, Echo Chambers, and Algorithmic Influence**

The most theoretically relevant concept in the understanding of how social media influences political attitudes is selective exposure, which is the propensity to search for information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and to avoid information contradicting those beliefs (Stroud, 2011). Although this trend existed earlier than digital media, social media sites have facilitated it much more effectively, and users have had greater freedom to exert control over their information spaces than before, and are now able to create feeds that either validate their existing worldviews or challenge them (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

The algorithm further amplifies these dynamics by tailoring content delivery to individual engagement patterns. As users increasingly engage with a specific type of political content, Instagram's algorithm reinforces the visibility of similar content, progressively closing off opportunities for exposure and creating ever-narrowing circles of political perspective (Bucher, 2018). This gives rise to echo chambers, environments in which users are repeatedly exposed for a prolonged time to politically homogeneous content, and filter bubbles, in which exposure to diverse political perspectives is mitigated through algorithmically driven curatorial processes (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). Flaxman et al. (2016) found that algorithmic recommendation systems foster ideological consistency over time, decreasing the prospects that users will experience truly diverse political perspectives, even where such perspectives are accessible to them on the platform.

It should be remembered though that the bulk of the empirical evidence that led to such conclusions has been produced in Western and specifically American situations. An unverified empirical question is how much these dynamics affect the same groups of Pakistani Instagram users who have to navigate a different political culture and media space. The present research is aimed to fill that gap as it will look into the relationship between algorithmically mediated exposure to political information on Instagram and political polarization in the context of the Pakistani setting in particular.

### **2.4 Agenda Setting, Framing, and Affective Polarization**

Two foundational Theories of media influence provide important conceptual grounding for understanding how Instagram exposure may shape political attitudes. Agenda-setting theory, originally developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), proposes that media do not tell people what to think but do exercise considerable influence over what people think about, directing public attention toward certain issues while others recede from view. Framing theory extends that logic by examining not just which issues receive attention but how those issues are presented, arguing that the way information is packaged and contextualized shapes how audiences interpret and respond to it (Entman, 1993).

On Instagram, both processes function in a manner that is especially conducive to the phenomena of affective polarization. Political actors and influencers regularly frame the other parties and their supporters in moralized and emotionally charged terms, depict political disagreement not as a disagreement of opinion but as a conflict between good and evil, the trustworthy and the corrupt, the patriotic and the traitorous (Hameleers et al., 2021). Such framed depictions do more than inform. They activate affective responses that deepen attachment to one's own political group while exacerbating a feeling of hostility toward the other side (Iyengar et al., 2019). Studies have found that repeated exposure to such negatively framed political content deepens in-group loyalty and the

resentment toward the outside groups over time, which potentially suggested the cumulative effect of Instagram use in politically polarizing environments as a gradual intensification of affective polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Rehmat & Manzoor, 2023).

These mechanisms proposed above bear direct relevance to the current study. If Instagram's visual and algorithmic characteristics systematically expose Pakistani users to emotionally framed, partisan political content, and if such exposure accumulates over time in ways that align with the mechanisms of agenda-setting and framing, then an increase in the exposure of Instagram users to such content should be expected to predict a rise in the levels of both perceived division in the society at large and hostile emotions against the opposing political group in personal terms. And this is precisely the relationship that this study sets out to examine empirically.

### 2.5 Literature Gap

Although research on social media and political behavior has grown substantially in recent years, Instagram has remained relatively less scrutinized as a site of focused empirical attention and area of study, especially in the Pakistani context. A substantial amount of the literature, for instance, either treats social media in an undifferentiated sense or focuses on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, while Instagram, as a uniquely different communication environment, has been insufficiently examined (Boulianne, 2020; Rehmat & Manzoor, 2023).

This is an important gap given that in many of its key attributes, Instagram functions differently from text-oriented platforms. Its emphasis on visual storytelling, short-form video, memes, and influential content creation forms a political communication ecosystem unlike any other, deserving targeted empirical attention (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019).

Pakistan itself constitutes an additional and equally crucial gap in the existing body of scholarship. The small number of scholars who have engaged with digital political behavior in Pakistan have largely focused on Facebook and Twitter, with Instagram's dynamic role in the lives

of young users given scant empirical attention (Ali, 2021; Maqsood & Zafar, 2022). This is a significant oversight given the extent to which Instagram has evolved into one of the most popular platforms for political engagement and consumption among Pakistani youth, a demographic that has emerged as a crucial force in the country's political landscape. Beyond the platform-and context-specific gaps, there is a methodological gap that is worth noting. Much of the previous literature in this field has adopted qualitative approaches or descriptive analysis, which, while valuable for conceptual insight, means that it is more challenging to quantify relationships between variables and draw conclusions based on statistical information (Boulianne, 2020; Ali, 2021).

By targeting Instagram specifically as a unique platform, placing the study in the contextual backdrop of Pakistan's polarized political landscape, or using only correlation and regression analysis to assess the degree of relation between exposure to political content and the extent of polarization, this study would contribute only imprecisely, with limited empirical support, and without any political context. In this way, the present study meets all three gaps. This would contribute a more accurate, empirically grounded, and contextually specific insight into the ways social media influences political attitudes among Pakistani residents.

### 2.6 Hypotheses

**H1:** There is a statistically significant positive relationship between exposure to political content on Instagram and political polarization among Pakistani users.

**H0:** There is no statistically significant positive relationship between exposure to political content on Instagram and political polarization among Pakistani users.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The research design for this study was quantitative. This study would look at the relationship between exposure to political and political polarization in Instagram. The quantitative approach seemed

most suitable because it is more helpful to measure variables and test hypothesized relationships in a systematic and statistically significant way, as well as the results are replicable and can be generalized to others from the same population (Creswell, 2014). Within this approach, a cross-sectional survey method was adopted, where data were collected from participants at a single point in time. This method is commonly used in the fields of contact and political behavior, as it enables researchers to efficiently collect data among a large number of participants and conduct meaningful statistical analysis of relationships between various variables (Bryman, 2016).

### 3.2 Sampling and Participants

The target population for this study comprised Pakistani Instagram users, with an emphasis on digitally active young people who are likely to be exposed to political content on the platform. This choice was due to the fact that the demographic that uses Instagram in Pakistan is predominantly young, with youth groups being one of the most politically active groups on the application (DataReportal, 2025). Out of 150 responders to the questionnaire, respondents were selected through the use of convenience sampling, where participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). The use of convenience sampling is limited by the sample, with research results not being generalizable to the wider population, but it is commonly used in exploratory social media research, as probability sampling is not an option (Bryman, 2016).

### 3.3 Data collection Procedure

Data were gathered by means of a structured self-administrations questionnaire, built with the assistance of Google Forms, which was selected because of its accessibility and ease of distribution, as well as the fact that the majority of the target population are likely to be easily reachable due to their digitally active nature. The survey link was distributed via WhatsApp. The questionnaire consisted of three sections; the first section acquired demographic information such, gender, age group, education level, occupation, area of

residence, daily use of Instagram, and a self-reported level of political interest. The second section asked respondents about the extent to which they are exposed to political content on Instagram, and the final section assessed the level of political polarization of each respondent.

### 3.4 Measurement the Variables

Both variables for this study were measured using existing scales from the research literature, which were adapted slightly to the Pakistani Instagram context.

#### 3.4.1 Instagram Political Content Exposure (IV)

Instagram political content exposure was measured with an adapted version of the Social Media Political Participation. Scale developed by Theocharis et al. (2021), which reported good internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). The scale items were modified to focus specifically the frequency of exposure to political content on Instagram. This included party specific posts, Reel and Trending Hashtags & Algorithmically Recommend Content on the platform related to PTI & PML-N. Responses were recorded on the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Rarely) to 5 (Very Often), with higher scores indicate a greater frequency of exposure to political content on Instagram.

#### 3.4.2 Political polarization (DV)

Political polarization was measured with an adapted version of the Affective polarization scale developed by Iyengar et al. (2012), which reported strong reliability of the scale in original form ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ). The scale was modified according to the Pakistani political context, and it was structured to capture two interrelated dimensions of polarization. The first one, perceived polarization, assessed the respondents' awareness of increasing societal divisions between PTI and PML-N supporters, including their perceptions of increasing hostility and extremism in the broader political environment. The second one, affective polarization, measured personal emotional responses of respondents towards supporters of opposing political parties, such as feelings of trust, avoidance and moral opposition. Responses were recorded on the five-point Likert scale ranging

from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), Higher score indicate greater levels of Political Polarization.

3.5 Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed in advance, and participation in the questionnaire was completely voluntary. All responses are kept strictly confidential for academic purposes only.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 150)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	62 (41.3%)
	Female	85 (56.7%)
	Prefer not to say	3 (2.0%)
Age Group	18–24 years	120 (80.0%)
	25–34 years	13 (8.7%)
	35–44 years	9 (6.0%)
	45+	8 (5.3%)
	Education Level	Intermediate
	Bachelor’s	110 (73.3%)
	Master’s	12 (8.0%)
	Above Master’s	9 (6.0%)
Occupation	Student	114 (76.0%)
	Business	10 (6.7%)
	Professional	22 (14.7%)
	Housewife	4 (2.6%)
Area of Residence	Rural	32 (21.3%)
	Urban	118 (78.7%)

The demographic profile indicates a slightly higher percentage of female respondents (56.7%) as compared to the male respondents (41.3%), while a small proportion (2.0%) prefers not to disclose their gender. Most of the people who answered (80%) are between the ages of 18-24, which means that the sample is mostly young. Only a small number of people are older. Most of the people who took part in the study (73.3%) have a bachelor's degree, followed by Intermediate (12.7%), Master's (8.0%), and Above Master's

(6.0%). This shows that the sample is mostly educated. Most of the people (76%) are students, and the rest are professionals, businesspeople, and housewives. The sample is primarily from urban areas (78.7%), while only (21.3%) of respondents are from rural areas. This means that urban areas are better represented. These findings reveal that the sample is composed chiefly of young, educated, urban, and student consumers of digital media, making it appropriate to study digital media’s role in shaping political behavior.

Table 2: Frequency of Daily Instagram Use (N = 150)

Frequency of Instagram Use	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Less than 1 hour per day	17	11.3%
1–2 hours per day	24	16.0%
2–3 hours per day	36	24.0%
3–4 hours per day	28	18.7%
More than 4 hours per day	45	30.0%

Table 2 shows how much the respondents used Instagram. The majority of respondents (88.7%) used it for more than an hour a day, and (30%) of them used it for more than four hours a day, which shows that the group of respondents was very

active on social media. This means that most of the people who answered the survey get a substantial amount of their media consumption from Instagram.

**Table 3: Level of Political Interest among Respondents (N = 150)**

Political Interest Level	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Low	54	36.0%
Medium	74	49.3%
High	22	14.7%

Table 3 indicates that (49.3%) of the people who answered said they were moderately interested in politics, while 36% said they were not very interested. Only a small number (14.7%) said they

were very interested in politics. This observation suggests that while respondents are generally aware of political affairs, their level has to a moderate rather than a high degree.

**4.2 Exposure to Political Content on Instagram (Independent Variable)**

**Table 4: Exposure to Political Content on Instagram (N = 150)**

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I see PTI/PML-N posts in my Instagram feed while scrolling	9 (6.0%)	20 (13.3%)	47 (31.3%)	63 (42.0%)	11 (7.3%)
Political reels/stories appear in Instagram suggestions	7 (4.7%)	28 (18.7%)	54 (36.0%)	56 (37.3%)	5 (3.3%)
#PTI/#PMLN hashtags appear without searching	7 (4.7%)	42 (28.0%)	53 (35.3%)	43 (28.7%)	5 (3.3%)
Friends share Pakistani political content I view	14 (9.3%)	37 (24.7%)	42 (27.3%)	50 (33.3%)	8 (5.3%)
Political clips appear in Explore during non-political browsing	12 (8.0%)	34 (22.7%)	45 (30.0%)	53 (35.3%)	6 (4.0%)

Table 4 shows that people who responded to the survey stated that they were exposed to some accidental political content while using Instagram. The most people who (Agree + Strongly Agree = 49.3%) are for the direct feed exposure, followed by the algorithm-based timeline content exposure (41.3%) and the exposure through suggested reels and stories (40.6%). The Explore page exposure (39.3%) and social sharing through friends (38.6%) scores show relatively high levels of agreement. This suggests that Instagram's

recommendation algorithms and social networks do have a big impact on what political content users can see on the platform. The neutral responses are usually a little higher for all items. This means that different user groups are exposed to incidental content at different levels of intensity. The results indicate that Instagram frequently exposes political content to users who are not actively searching for it, showcasing its significance as a channel for passive consumption of political information in the Pakistani context.

## 4.3 Political Polarization among Respondents

Table 5: Political Polarization among Respondents (N = 150)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pakistan's parties (PTI vs PML-N) are more divided than 5 years ago	2 (1.3%)	15 (10.0%)	49 (32.7%)	60 (40.0%)	24 (16.0%)
Social media has made politics in Pakistan more extreme	0 (0.0%)	6 (4.0%)	36 (24.0%)	68 (45.3%)	40 (26.7%)
People in Pakistan increasingly dislike supporters of opposing political parties	2 (1.3%)	10 (6.7%)	38 (25.3%)	66 (44.0%)	34 (22.7%)
Politics in Pakistan has become divided into "us versus them"	1 (0.7%)	4 (2.7%)	45 (30.0%)	69 (46.0%)	31 (20.7%)
I find it difficult to respect views of opposing party supporters	10 (6.7%)	41 (27.3%)	45 (30.0%)	37 (24.7%)	17 (11.3%)
I avoid political discussions with opposing party supporters	5 (3.3%)	29 (19.3%)	34 (22.7%)	49 (32.7%)	33 (22.0%)
I trust media that supports my preferred political party more than others	12 (8%)	41 (27.3%)	67 (44.7%)	23 (15.3%)	7 (4.7%)

Table 5 indicates that perceived political polarization has an average value among the respondents. Majority consensus was also high among societal-level variables 72.0% had agreed or strongly agreed that social media has increased political extremism in Pakistan, 66.7% saw increasing inter-party enmity, and 66.7% agreed with the us versus them orientation of Pakistani politics. It was also confirmed by 56.0% of the respondents that there has been an increased division of parties in the last five years. On behavioral level, 54.7% said they avoided discussing politics with opposing party supporters implying that the affective polarization has real-life implications on interpersonal political interaction. Conversely, emotional intolerance at the personal level yielded more divergent outcomes, with only 36.0% saying that they had trouble respecting the

opinion of those who supported the opposing party, suggesting that larger proportions of society held views of a society-level division than individuals' antagonism. It is important to note that the strongest support of partisan media trust was among all items, with only 20.0% of the respondents indicating their trust in party-aligned media more than others, and 44.7%, staying neutral. This observation should be noted when discussing the polarization picture at large since it may indicate that the perceived social division is moderate through high, though partisan media allegiance at a personal level is not well-developed in the given sample.

**4.4 Relationship Between Instagram Political Content Exposure and Political Polarization**

To explore the relationship between exposure to political content on the Instagram platform and political polarity for Pakistani users, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis was conducted. Before beginning the analysis, standard assumptions for the Pearson correlation were checked. In checking the data for normality, linearity, as well as for significant outliers, all assumptions were met.

**Hypotheses**

**H1:** There is a statistically significant positive relationship between exposure to political content on Instagram and political polarization among Pakistani users.

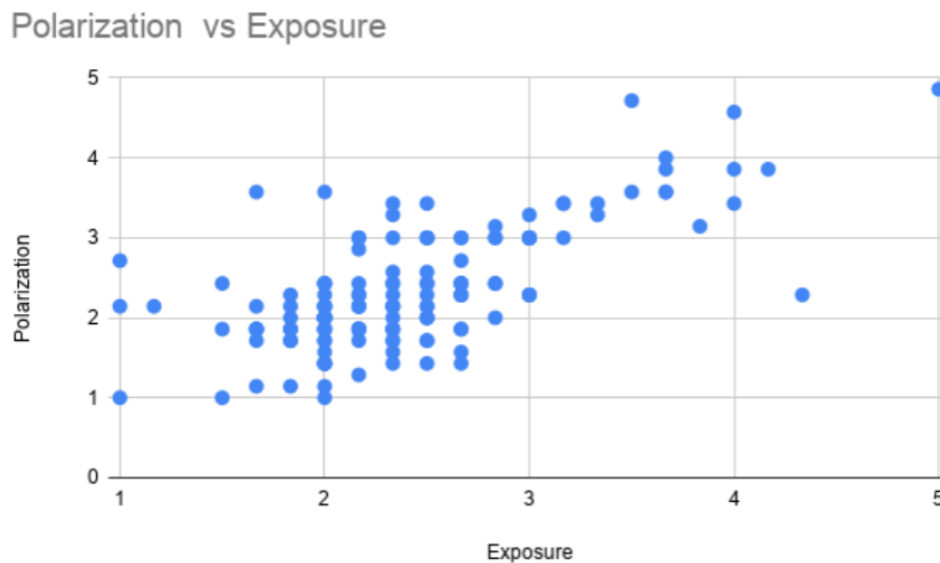
**H0:** There is no statistically significant positive relationship between exposure to political content on Instagram and political polarization among Pakistani users.

**Table 6: Correlation Between Instagram Exposure and Political Polarization**

Variables	N	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. (p-value)
Instagram Political Content Exposure ↔ Political Polarization	150	0.686	< 0.001

Table 6 indicates that there is a significant positive correlation between exposure to political content on Instagram and political polarization among respondents ( $r = 0.686, p < 0.001$ ). The correlation meets the traditional criteria of interpreting effect size coupled with  $r \geq 0.50$  and above as a large effect according to the traditional definition of Cohen (1988), and in this case, the correlation is a strong one since with the rise in exposure to

Instagram political content, the polarization level of political views rises accordingly. The statistical significance of the relationship is at a 0.001 level of significance which is enough to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative possible hypothesis. Such findings affirm that Instagram exposure to political content is strongly and significantly related to political polarization in Pakistani users.



**Figure 1.1: Scatter Plot Showing Relationship Between Instagram Political Content Exposure and Political Polarization**

Figure 1.1 illustrates a clear upward trend indicating that Higher exposure to political contents on Instagram correlated with higher levels of Political polarization. The distribution of

points along the line is not uniform, suggesting a moderately strong positive relationship, which is consistent with our previous correlation results.

**Table 7: Regression Analysis of Instagram Political Content Exposure and Political Polarization (N = 150)**

Predictor	B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	p-value
Instagram Political Content Exposure	0.783	0.686	0.471	< 0.001

Table 7 shows that exposure to political content on Instagram is a statistically significant predictor of political polarization among respondents (B = 0.783,  $\beta$  = 0.686,  $p < 0.001$ ). The standardized beta value is very positive indicating that the greater the exposure, the greater is the political polarization. The model has a moderate power to explain political polarization with (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.471), that explains about 47.1% of the variance. It implies that a moderate amount of variability in political polarization is related to the difference in the exposure of political content on Instagram, and all the rest of the variance is due to other effects not in the model. Generally, the obtained results confirm the existence of the substantial positive correlation of both variables and offer the statistical evidence of the hypothesis of the study.

## 5. Discussion

The results from our study show that both social identity processes and Instagram algorithmic processes lead to significant positive relationships between exposure to Instagram political content and levels of political polarization among Pakistani users, with Instagram political exposure explained by 47.1% of the variance in polarization scores among Instagram users. These findings suggest that Instagram is an active environment that shapes political attitudes rather than a neutral information sharing platform. A particularly noteworthy pattern in our results is that most respondents indicated relatively low to mild levels of political interest yet still reported exposure to substantial amounts of political content via passive scrolling, algorithmically driven recommendations, and sharing by peers or social circle members. This suggests that the outcomes of political polarization on Instagram are driven by the platform logic rather than deliberate political engagement

consistent with Boczkowski et al. (2018) who argue that algorithmic content systems expose non-news seeking audiences to political content regardless of their intent. These findings are best understood in relation to agenda setting and framing theory. Instagram algorithmic logics lead to repeated elevations in certain political actors and issues, thereby shaping user interest in these topics in ways that amount to a modern form of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While Instagram also regularly packages political content in emotionally charged and conflict oriented formats such as memes and short-form videos, thereby contributing to the framing of political reality in emotionally charged terms that support polarized interpretations (Entman, 1993; Hameleers et al., 2021). Selective exposure and echo chamber dynamics then add a layer to this, as Instagram's personalization system repeatedly narrows users' information landscapes to align with their preferences, reinforcing existing beliefs and reducing exposure to dissenting views (Stroud, 2011; Pariser, 2011; Bail et al., 2018). Another level of explanation is the processes of social identity. The engagement of the political content on Instagram has been found to be a form of identity expression, in-group strength, and out-group hostility in a manner that works synergistically with the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The situation is especially consequential in the highly partisan context of Pakistan, where any affiliation with either PTI or PML-N is highly emotional in nature (Ali, 2021). An interesting subtlety of the results is the difference between apparent and individual polarization. Although the division at the societal level was well confirmed, the level of personal emotional hostility was less pronounced, which makes it likely that Instagram exposure is able to

change the perceptions of societal division more than it is likely to result in changes in deep-seated positions of individual attitudes (Wojcieszak & Price, 2009). In general, these results are in line with the international scholarship on the topic of social media and affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019) and add to the prior studies on Pakistan to achieve platform-specific and regression-based evidence of how Instagram influences the formation of political polarization among young Pakistani population.

### 6. Limitations

While this study offers valuable insight, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the study used a convenience sample, which limits the generalizability of the results since the sample is more representative of young, urban, student-dominated, and thus may not reflect all aspects or the broader population of Instagram users in Pakistan. Second, the cross-sectional design allows us to detect associations among variables but does not allow us to infer causality. We cannot conclude whether exposure to political content drives polarization or whether individuals who are already polarized are more likely and will have a higher probability of trying to seek and access political content (Bail et al., 2018). Furthermore, since both variables were measured as self-report, there is some possibility of response bias as respondents may over or under report exposure or levels of polarization due to social desirability. Lastly and most importantly, we captured exposure through perceived frequency rather than objective data from the social media platform itself, which means that the individual variation in the exposure to the algorithm and the effects that might have on the personal exposure are not entirely captured in the findings. This highlights the need for further research that captures the nuanced effects of social media platforms and their algorithmic recommendations on polarization.

### 7. Conclusion

This research investigated how being exposed to political content, on Instagram, was linked to political polarization among Pakistani Instagram

users. According to the analysis results, the relationship between the two variables is significant thereby with Instagram exposure to political content explaining a moderate degree of variance in polarization scores. Instagram seemed to be influencing political attitudes via passive scrolling, algorithmic suggestions, and shared-by accounts on a regular basis, indicating that the platform-provided exposure instead of explicit political activities might be the primary influence of Instagram on forming political attitudes. Through the lens of agenda-setting, framing, selective exposure and social identity, the findings provide evidence that Instagram can shape political attitudes in several reinforcing ways that the emotionally charged partisan environment in Pakistan and the fact that the hegemonic youth audience in Pakistan is so digitally engaged makes them more pronounced. Interestingly, perceived polarization of the society seems to have been significantly stronger than individual emotional aggressiveness, which indicates that Instagram can influence how one finds divisions more easily than how it can shift ingrained personal attitude. The research fulfills a literature gap where most of the literature had largely ignored Instagram as a political communication platform in the Pakistani context by providing empirical evidence of the platforms depending on the specific platforms in a developing country. Future studies are advised to adopt longitudinal study designs to determine causal direction, sampling based on probability to enhance generalizability, and comparative cross-platform analysis to gain a clearer insight on the distinctive contribution of Instagram to the process of political polarization.

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