Journal of Social & Organizational Matters
Vol 4 No 2 (2025): 477-494

Social Media Trolling and Political Polarization: A Qualitative Study of Pakistani Youth

Saman Riaz*[1], Ayesha Ashfaq[2]

[1]*PhD Scholar, School of Communication Studies, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan & Lecturer Media & Communication Studies, COMSATS Islamabad Lahore Campus), Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

[2]Chairperson & Associate Professor, Department of Media & Development Communication, School of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding author: samanriaz16@yahoo.com

Keywords: *Social Media, Trolling, Partisan Identity, Political Polarization, Online Disinhibition Effect*

DOI No:
https://doi.org/10.56976/jsom.v4i2.271

This study explores how social media trolling connects with political engagement and partisan identity among young people in Pakistan. By using the theoretical guidelines of the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE), the research examines how online behaviors particularly trolling both reflect and reinforce political identity. This research is based on eighteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with politically active or socially engaged youth of different universities of Lahore. Through thematic analysis of their responses several key patterns emerged: trolling often acts as online misbehavior; it becomes a way for young people to express strong political emotions, assert identity, and show loyalty to their political party. Key patterns that emerged include partisan identity-based trolling, the formation of echo chambers, trolling and emotional release, and the online disinhibition effect. The findings indicated that trolling in this context appears to serve as a social and political tool and the broader implications for digital media literacy.

1. Introduction

Political polarization is the term for a society's growing division between various political groupings or ideologies (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Prior, 2013a; Dimant, 2024). It happens when people and groups adopt more radical and inflexible beliefs, which discourages cooperation and common ground between various demographic segments (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Ciordia, 2021). Different ways, such as in policy discussions, election decisions, and public discourse, can show this polarization. It may lead to increased antagonism, a reduced capacity for negotiation, and a more competitive political climate (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Judge et al., 2023). Kubin and his colleagues investigated the ways social media has contributed to political polarization. They found that social media users only exposed to content and opinion that hits to their pre-existing ideas and disrupt to meaningful debates called as "echo chambers and trolls" (Kubin et al., 2021). To disturb, provoke, or confuse others, a person who intentionally engages in provocative, disruptive, or inflammatory behavior is referred to as a "troll" (Kirman et al., 2012; March & Marrington, 2019). Few researchers defined trolling as the act of purposefully provoking, harassing or insulting someone who holds opposing political views on internet venues (Forestal, 2017; Ortiz, 2020).

Social media platforms became essential for political engagement since the mid-2010s, particularly from the 2013 general elections and the events that followed. Facebook pages, Twitter trends, and WhatsApp groups quickly replaced traditional political methods like rallies, door-to-door canvassing, and brochures as ways to mobilize support (Sehrish & Samia Manzoor, 2023). Sadiq (2021) stated that social media has become widely used over the last few years due to cellphones and low-cost data plans, making sites like Facebook, X(Twitter), and YouTube, the main forums for political discourse (Sadiq, 2021). As a powerful tool for political discussion, social media has evolved to enable individuals and groups to voice their viewpoints (Braun et al., 2011; Shirazi, 2013). Social media has contributed to heightened political polarization by enabling the recruitment of like-minded groups and the widespread dissemination of messages (Nordbrandt, 2021; Tucker et al., 2018). Political polarization has become a major concern in Pakistan too (Ishaque et al., 2022). Nadeem and Mumtaz (2024) found that online debates about high-profile political events (no- confidence motion, arrest of PTI leader, general elections) often split youth into opposing groups, suggesting social media "likely created a polarized youth" (Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2024). Durning the Panam League movement, almost all the political parties in Pakistan have used social media platforms for personal assaults on rival political parties' recourse to underhanded attacks on opposition leaders and their families, overloading social media with such stuff (Jahangir, 2018; Younus et al., 2014).

After the 2013 general election, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) emerged as the leading party and formed the government. Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister of Pakistan for the third time. Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) gained prominence during this period, positioning itself as a major opposition force. Khan led anti-government protests and criticism against corruption and electoral rigging. The period after the

2013-2017 elections in Pakistan was characterized by a mix of political instability, economic challenges, security concerns, and significant developments in infrastructure and foreign relations, particularly with China (Abdulla et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2023).

The period following the 2018 elections in Pakistan was marked by efforts to address economic challenges, combat corruption, improve security, and pursue diplomatic initiatives aimed at promoting regional stability and economic development (Akram, 2023). In 2018, The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by Imran Khan, emerged as the single largest party in the National Assembly and formed the government. Imran Khan became the Prime Minister of Pakistan. In the mid of 2021, tensions between Khan and the military surfaced, when Khan attempted to appoint his preferred candidate as the new ISI chief. The army opposed this decision, prompting Khan to eventually retract. However, tensions persisted, leading to Khan's removal from power via a no-confidence motion in April 2022. It is widely believed that the military played a role in his ousting. Following his removal, Imran Khan launched a campaign against the military, organizing rallies and delivering speeches criticizing its involvement in Pakistani politics.

As a result, in April 2022, a no-confidence motion led to the removal of Imran Khan as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The opposition parties accused Imran Khan's government of poor governance, political victimization of opponents, and the mismanagement of the economy and foreign policy. A coalition of political parties in Pakistan was formed and named as Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM); formed the government and announced Shahbaz Sharif as the Prime Minister of Pakistan (Imran et al., 2023). After this no-confidence motion; the political situation in Pakistan remains fluid, with Imran Khan's party, PTI, continuing to protest the new government or PDM. After the 2014 elections in Pakistan social media emerged as a powerful tool for political communication and mobilization, it contributed to heightened political polarization, the spread of misinformation, and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions. During the period from 2014 to 2023, political parties in Pakistan extensively utilized social media as a key component of their communication, engaging with voters, organizing grassroots activism and mobilization strategies. Debates surrounding electoral misconduct in the 2018 elections persist. Various impartial observers have commented on the credibility of the results, with the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), a leading electoral watchdog, noting that the 2018 general elections in Pakistan exhibited "greater transparency in certain aspects" compared to previous polls. Political trolling on social media has become a problem in Pakistan. It is widely seen that the use of hate speech, propaganda, and fake news on social media platforms has a substantial impact on the country's political outcomes (Mir et al., 2022).

Digital political polarization, or the growing divide in political views between groups, appears to have become worse during the current digital age. Young followers of various parties often engage in conflict in online forums, and public narratives frequently deviate alongside party lines (Khan et al., 2023). Social media in Pakistan frequently resembles a virtual battlefield where abuse, propaganda, and counter- propaganda are common. In conclusion, political trolling on social media is a developing issue in Pakistan that has major consequences for democracy. To

prevent the spread of misinformation, propaganda, and hate speech on social media, this problem must be addressed. Youth is selected as the population for this study because they have become the important player of political communication in Pakistan's ever-changing political situation. According to the studies, 64% of Pakistan's population is under 30, making it a youthful nation that has seen a significant change in the way political discourse is conducted (Shakeel, 2018).

This research study aims to identify the gaps by asking: (1). How do Pakistani youth perceive or engage in political trolling on social media? (2). What connections exist between political polarization and group identity? (3). What role does online disinhibition play in shaping the political behavior of youth? This research conducted semi-structured interviews with Pakistani youths and analyzed the transcripts for themes related to social online disinhibition effect (ODE).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and Political Trolling

Political trolling on social media platforms, particularly on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) has become a significantly increased and become an issue, affecting users' perceptions and behaviors (Wagner, 2022). It helps to polarize people and make it more challenging to establish ideological divides by promoting false information and the entrenchment of political ideologies (J. Tucker et al., 2018). It has been demonstrated that political trolling hurt's public opinion and political polarization, causing misinformation and declining civil debate.

In recent years, political trolling through social media has been increasing in Asia. According to Udupa's research from 2019, Indian political parties and their supporters frequently used social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp to humiliate, to disrespect, to disseminate false information, and to polarize the public on false issues regarding their opponent groups. She claimed that during election years, political trolling was especially common in India (Udupa, 2019). In Turkey, social media have also played significant role to rise the political trolls. Political players have discovered that social media platforms are powerful instruments for discrediting opponents, disseminating propaganda, and influencing public opinion due to the country's widespread use of these platforms (Prier, 2017). The use of fake accounts or "bots" to disseminate misleading information and the power of online conversation is one of the most prevalent types of political trolling via social platforms in Turkey (Bulut et al., 2017). Disinformation and the dissemination of conspiracies are another kind of political trolling on social media in Turkey. This frequently takes the shape of unfounded allegations against opposition politicians, critics of the government, or other people thought to pose a threat to the ruling party (Baloğlu, 2021). Saviaga and his colleagues (2018) expressed that the 2016 presidential election in the United States experienced a lot of political trolling among candidates. They discussed how Republican and Democratic followers of various political parties engaged in trolling on Facebook and Twitter to disrespect their opponents and spread fake information about their rivals (Flores-Saviaga et al., 2018). Additionally, few studies mentioned that the Russian agencies has been charged with utilizing social media trolls to manipulate the 2016 US presidential election and

disseminate false information or play a role in building public ideology (Asprem, 2020; Flores-Saviaga et al., 2018b). The Russian government has been charged with spreading propaganda and false material or information on social media by using fictitious accounts to mold public opinion (Francois & Lin, 2021; Golovchenko et al., 2020; Linvill et al., 2019).

Political trolling has also become a significant problem in Brazil, where supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro use social media to degrade opposition figures and disseminate unrealistic information. Political trolling plays a role in weakening democratic institutions in any country, there has been a connection between trolling and a bigger campaign to disseminate false information and toxify the public minds (Ozawa et al., 2023; Santini et al., 2021).

However, social media has also been linked or criticized due to its negative effects on society. The anonymity and lack of accountability on social media platforms have made it a breeding ground for hate speech and trolling, with many individuals using it to spread false information and propaganda (Dhiman, 2023; Samuel & Buchanan, 2020). Instead of all this, social media platforms offer opportunities for open and inclusive dialogue, they are also increasingly being used to abuse others such as hate speech, cyberbullying, trolling, online harassment, doxing and more (Kiritchenko et al., 2021; Turculeţ, 2014).

In recent years, political trolling on social media has been emerged as a new concept in Pakistan too. Political parties in Pakistan have increasingly used various social media platforms for trolling. This has resulted in Pakistani society becoming divided into two main groups: one is referred to as the pro-Tehreek-e-Insaf group, and the other is labelled as the pro-establishment group, according to these trolls. This research study explored the perspectives of the youth regarding political trolling on social media. Specifically, it will examine how do Pakistani youth perceive or engage in political trolling on social media?

2.1 Political Polarization in the Age of Social Media

Social media sites and online news platforms are the major sources that are making people politically biased and politically intolerant or play a role in political polarization (Prior, 2013b; Stroud, 2010). Studies identified there is a fragile line among social media platforms which play more of a role in the polarization process (Spohr, 2017; Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Arceneaux et al., (2013) studied that the rise of news platforms or talk shows can polarize political attitudes and motivate individuals to counterarguments. Social Media platforms provide selective exposure to people because people follow only those pages or groups that align with their political thoughts and avoid contradictory content. This kind of favorable content increases the person's confidence and builds a strong political attitude (Lee et al., 2014; Sunstein, 2017).

The process by which public opinion splits and shifts towards extremes is known as political polarization, and it frequently takes the form of a "us versus them" mentality amongst various political groups. Political polarization is defined as the partisan and ideological identity of the citizens (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008). Social media political polarization draws boundaries among people with strong affiliations with a certain political party or group. Such strong

affiliations create conflict with opposite viewpoints people and raise concerns in political debates (Iyengar et al., 2012). Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) contributed to political polarization by creating echo chambers. Bail et al., (2018) identified that people who have opposing political opinion on socials may not be useless but counterproductive for political groups. According to scholars, social media may be increasing polarization by fostering echo chambers and filter bubbles that support users' preconceived ideas (Hartmann et al., 2024; Mahmoudi et al., 2024; Sunstein, 2018). Within these online enclaves, individuals are frequently exposed only to homogeneous viewpoints, while dissenting opinions are filtered out or attacked, leading to group reinforcement of partisan beliefs (Grömping, 2014). In the context of Pakistan, a developing democracy with a history of ideological and ethnic cleavages, polarization is not new but social media may be amplifying it in a unique way (Ali et al., 2022).

Political polarization in Pakistan has been significantly influenced by the rise of social media (Farooz, 2023; Rehmat & Manzoor, n.d.). In this contemporary socialized worls, social media platforms have become battlegrounds where political supporters from different parties engage in spreading hate speech and defaming political leaders. This environment has fostered a culture of extreme viewpoints, particularly among Pakistani youth, who are promoting divisive ideologies (Javed & Javed, 2023). Social media political campaigns are designed to mislead the public rather than inform them, often based on rumors and fearmongering, exacerbating polarization. Now, locating accurate information for the public is becoming a big challenge. This political polarization has created significant social and political divisions within society (Cover et al., 2022; Marcos-García et al., 2021; Weber et al., 2021). Political actors often use social platforms for communication with public specially youth. However, many political actors are often conscious of and avoid challenging questions and critical comments, potentially due to fear of negative consequences (Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Kelm, 2021).

In the polarized political landscape of Pakistan, where party loyalty is strong, filter bubbles discourage cross-ideological dialogue. Politically aligned groups on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp reinforce partisan ideologies, deepening divisions (Cheema et al., 2019). Political parties and influencers use Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) or TikTok like platforms to disseminate selective information that supports their narratives or discredits opposing political parties. These social platforms serve as common avenues for spreading misinformation, political conspiracies, and political sensationalized content (Cadayday et al., 2024). This is particularly observed during elections, high-profile political events, or major policy debates, when misinformation spreads quickly influence public opinion and polarizes groups (Thinnakkakath, 2025). Social media tends to reflect and reinforce existing political divisions in society rather than encouraging harmony. Thusa the above discussion helped them to analyze what connections exist between political polarization and group identity?

2.2 Political Trolling and Online Disinhibition Effect

Suler (2004) proposed the online disinhibition effect (ODE). He stated that people often express themselves more openly, violently, or inappropriately online than they would in person, a

phenomenon known as the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) (Suler, 2004). Suler describes how people are encouraged to act in ways they wouldn't in real life because of the anonymity and invisibility that comes with using the internet. Suler studied that young people feel empowered to voice radical viewpoints, harass others, or react violently to trolling content. Because online engagement is dissociative, people can distance themselves from the consequences of their behavior, which exacerbates the polarization process. Young people who use social media frequently may find that this online environment influences the formation of their political identities, undermines their faith in democratic procedures, and drives them in the direction of radical ideologies (Bennett, 2012; Jost et al., 2018). This research also identified what role online disinhibition plays in shaping the political behavior of youth?

3. Research Methodology

The qualitative research method: semi- structured interviews are used to get the in-depth insight of Pakistani youth regarding social media political trolling and polarization behavior. The sample of this study is youth aged from 18 to 29 and driven in gender and political affiliation. Sample: 18 participants aged 18 to 29, diverse in gender, region, and political affiliation. This sample is selected through snowball sampling techniques from universities of Lahore (Punjab University, Superior University, COMSATS University) and social media. The interview is conducted in Urdu and English via WhatsApp or Zoom. The duration of each interview is 30- 45 minutes and was recorded with consent. The interview guide topics included social media usage, political affiliation, experience with social media trolling, response towards trolling (via comment, post etc.) and thoughts about the political opponent's ideology. To analyze the interviews, thematic analysis is conducted. Codes and themes are developed through emerging data and online disinhibition effect model.

4. Findings

An analysis of the interviews based on the four interrelated themes in how trolling and social identity affect youth political discourse: Partisan Identity, Echo Chambers, Trolling as Emotional Release, and Behavioral Disinhibition. Each theme is described below with illustrative quotes (translated to English). The findings show a pattern: social media trolling is largely used to reinforce in-group unity and attack out-groups, consistent with online disinhibition effect.

1. **Partisan Identity:** Partisan identity is considered as the as a socio-political support. Most of the participants described their political affiliation and identity emotionally, frequently comparing party loyalty with loved ones. For example, one respondent said, *"Supporting [PTI] is part of who I am. It's not just politics; it's identity."* This attachment made participants sensitive to criticism of their party, often interpreting it as a personal attack. Participants became sensitive towards the criticism of their party because of this commitment and taking it personally. Almost all the participants agreed they show favoritism towards their own political party and antagonistic towards their rival groups. A student stated that *"Everyone is biased or show favoritism in their personal life; so, there*

is no harm in being politically affiliated". One student stated that *"On campus I have to be polite politically, but in my personal space I do not give any margin to my opponents"*. Such answers showed that youth see partisan bias as a normal or justified phenomena. Several participants stated that they feel pride in defending their political party. Few students (PTI supporters) stated that *"If anyone tries to troll my leader, I jump in like a warrior and protecting my leader. I feel he or she targeted my loved ones or attack on my personal identity".* Many participants stated that "*they had unfriended or blocked people on social media simply for expressing the slightest sympathy toward an opposing party*". Notably, respondents frequently provided justifications for their antagonistic behavior. One of the female interviewees, told: "*I commented on someone's post on Facebook regarding the working of Nawaz Sharif government, and I received inbox messages accusing me of being immoral just because they saw my post. It was also said that I should be from the XYZ political party, and it was strange."* This indicates how the trolls mix with social issues and political affiliations and attack the person accordingly. The phrase "there's no harm in bias" kept coming up. Participants stated that they enforced severe online in-group limits because they believed that members of the out-group were unacceptable or unreliable.

2. **Echo Chambers:** Many respondents deliberately controlled their social media accounts to stay away from opposing viewpoints. Those who favored opposing parties were blocked or unfollowed. The moral justification for trolling was to protect the in-group from false information or defamation. "They constantly lie about our leader," one young person clarified. It's only fair if I troll them. It's a justification of social media aggression. Many of the youth interviewees just avoid confrontation, they remain in like-minded groups (*unfriending others with differing viewpoints as we observed*) or they post passively without interacting to avoid the crowd of trolls. Avoidance also manifests in joining private or closed groups where the membership is homogenous and moderated. For instance, some of the participants in the interviews noted *"they have political conversation in closed WhatsApp or Facebook groups of close friends and steer clear of public pages".* This provides a secure haven without the trolls but also may create an echo chamber. Another avoidance mechanism also highlighted during conversation which is emotional disengagement: *"I stopped posting about any political matters in public," a participant revealed, "even when I strongly believed it. It's just not worth the backlash."* One of the interviewees described moderation of a university WhatsApp group as follows: "When it got too heated, I step in and say, let's stick to the facts or let's switch topics. Sometimes it helps, sometimes not." Another described posting fact-based clarifications on trending threads without hurting people to bring in some sense.

3. **Trolling As emotional Release:** Social media trolling is the common way for participants to express their pleasure, rage, or dissatisfaction. They were able to behave differently online than they would have outside due to the assumed anonymity and absence of

consequence. One member acknowledged, *"I say things online that I would never say in person"*. One participant stated that *"When I troll, I feel like I'm fighting back,"*. One participant explained, *"Every time I log in on X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook after some major political news or development, I see people insulting or abusing each other as 'patwari' or 'youthia' (mocking or slang for PML-N and PTI followers respectively)"*. And I found it as *"a continuous fighting and abuse."* Youth themselves perceive that trolling contributes to polarization. In interviews, researchers asked directly if social media fights are dividing between people? Many agreed. One said, *"I have seen friendships ruined because of political trolling. Two friends in my university group, one kept sharing stuff supporting the government, the other would mock him and post memes. It became so bad they don't talk in real life now."* Another interviewee mentioned family WhatsApp groups breaking down: *"During the 2022 vote of no confidence drama, my family WhatsApp was a war zone. Uncles and cousins trolling each other with political jokes. Eventually, some left the group because it got too insulting."* The crucial insight is that trolling acts as a group identity amplifier. Many participants behaved as though omitting trolling would be disloyal. One respondent put it plainly: *"If I don't respond to a troll, my friends would think I'm weak."* These stories show real-world relational consequences of online polarization. Some participants mentioned preferring to hang out or socialize with like-minded individuals, as it's easier when talking.

4. **Online Disinhibition Effect:** Participants reported losing emotional control and self-control when participating in online political conversations. Frequently, trolling behaviors were accompanied by feelings of superiority, dissatisfaction and fearlessness. A strong mindset exists amongst the youth that most of the trolling isn't random but planned or organized. During the interviews, most of the interviewee used term "troll army" (media discourses or narratives). Individuals from various political affiliations each blamed the opposition for possession of troll armies:

   - The young PTI followers generally used to say that "Noon league (PML-N) has employed dozens of paid trolls; they always tweet or used hashtags #(anti-PTI slogan).
   - On the other, PTI opponents often cited "*PTI's social media team is so toxic, they won't spare anyone who disagrees with Khan."*

Some interviewees referred to the role of the establishment (army/ISI) when it comes to trolling. They stated, "*We all know that some of the trolls aren't just party die-hards, some of them have a sort of an agenda from above, like to discredit some political activists."* This is consistent with third-party reports of the security establishment's role in surveillance or shaping social media discourse. For the youth, it means that the battle space of the internet is traffic with actors' supporters, sock puppets, maybe some bots, and possibly state-linked agents, all creating propaganda and abuse. These feelings exacerbated polarization and decreased openness to political conversation identify with their political parties, viewing the partisan identity as their identity.

Figure No 1: Word Cloud

o or

And this identity leads them towards in-group likeness and dislike of the opponent or out-groups. This likeness often results in blocking or unfriending the out-group's views on social media with a baseless justification that they are protecting themselves from misinformation or false content. Many youngsters avoid face-to-face public political discussions to escape backlash; they prefer passive or closed-group political posting and fostering echo chambers. Through youth discussions, researchers found that trolling serves as an emotional trigger, allowing youth to express feelings they might suppress offline, thereby intensifying polarization and damaging real-life relationships. Online disinhibition effects lower the self-control, encouraging the aggressive behavior fueled by perceived superiority and fearlessness. Many participants commonly believe that trolling is organized by the fake bots linked to political parties and even state actors, further deepening the polarization and reducing openness to dialogue. Overall, social media trolling reinforces group unity and out-group hostility, exacerbating political division among youth.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research paper explored the various sides of trolling behavior among youth in political contexts of Pakistan, including partisan identity, trolling as an emotional release, social motivations for trolling, behavioral traits, trolling armies, and the role of misinformation in justifying trolling. However, from the above shared findings none of the quoted or described participant views explicitly mention or analyze the concept of 'echo chambers.' There is no direct reference to how youth might be insulated within ideologically homogeneous online environments or how such echo chambers influence their political attitudes or behaviors.

This study findings demonstrated that social media trolling among Pakistani youth is linked to the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and partisan identity. Trolling serves as an emotionally driven, psychologically disinhibited expression of political affiliation. Social media platforms have

become primary sites of political interaction. All four themes support the notion that youth use social media trolling as a tool to maintain and support political affiliation or ideology. Youth are readily dehumanized or humiliated the political opponents and treat partisanship as a default of loyalty. This reflects partisan identity that people one's in-group is highlighted positively, and rival groups are criticized.

Youths reported self-segregating on online platforms, which likely strengthened their social identity. Echo chambers prevent people from challenging their in-group beliefs because they rarely encounter evidence that contradicts their attitudes. This supports that identity is set by in-group validation. The hated remarks or anger and personal attacks observed align with group-based attacks and provoke a strong effect on behavioral components. People take it out personally, and it triggered an emotional defense.

As ODE points out, any prominent group working or slabel can become a topic of discussion. Trolling takes use of the fact that political identity in Pakistan is frequently intertwined with religious or ethnic identity. The findings support the theoretical model of the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE). Social media platforms allow Pakistani youth to express political ideology, beliefs and emotions in more openly and unfiltered ways than offline or face to face meetings. Trolling was often identified as a sense of spreading hate, arrogance, propaganda and emotional catharsis. Online disinhibitions promote the toxic environment and cause emotional polarization among youth and promote hate or dehumanization among political rivals.

These qualitative insights also aligned with the existing literature. As social media promoted partisan conflict and made non- issues prominent and appear more polarized to audiences (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Social media political discourse was found as an endless battlefield and more highlighted the us- versus- them thinking (Lawson, 2014). Stated that famous political parties' events were polarized, trolled on social media platforms and propagated specific ideology (Cantini et al., 2022).

In conclusion, trolling emerged not as a random or irrational act, but as a patterned behavior conditioned by the political leaders and online likeness, partisan group link, and emotional catharsis. Thus, reducing trolling may require changing perceptions of group norms, not just technical fixes. Another implication is that interventions should target group identity frames. For example, emphasizing shared identity (Pakistani nationality) rather than partisan identity could reduce the urge to troll. Youths saw each other first as citizens rather than rivals, the in-group/out-group divide might soften.

6. References

Abdulla, H., Kubaisi, A., Shah, F. A., Siddiqui, A. H., & Ahmed, S. (2024). Electoral Politics in Pakistan: Trends, Issues, and the Role of Political Parties. *Remittances Review*, *9*(1),22-36.

Abramowitz, A. I., & Saunders, K. L. (2008). Is Polarization a Myth? *The Journal of Politics*, *70*(2), 542–555. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080493

Akram, S. (2023). Political Instability in Pakistan: An Examination from 2018 to Presesnt. *Harf-o- Sukhan*, *7*(3),115-129.

Ali, F. Z., Sparviero, S., & Pierson, J. (2022). Discursive Participation and Group Polarization on Facebook: The Curious Case of Pakistan's Nationalism and Identity. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*(0), 25-38. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16690

Ali, Q., Qasim, S. U., & Sohail, M. (2023). Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Implications under PML (N) 2013-2018. *Annals of Humans and Social Sciences* , *4*(2).

Arceneaux, K., Johnson, M., & Cryderman, J. (2013). Communication, Persuasion, and the Conditioning Value of Selective Exposure: Like Minds May Unite and Divide but They Mostly Tune Out. *Political Communication*, *30*(2), 213–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.737424

Asprem, E. (2020). The Magical Theory of Politics. *Nova Religio*, *23*(4), 15–42. https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2020.23.4.15

Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. B. F., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *115*(37), 9216–9221. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115

Baldassarri, D., & Bearman, P. (2007). Dynamics of Political Polarization. *American Sociological Review*, *72*(5), 784–811. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200507

Baldassarri, D., & Gelman, A. (2008). Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion. *American Journal of Sociology*, *114*(2), 408–446. https://doi.org/10.1086/590649

Baloğlu, U. (2021). Trolls, pressure, and agenda: The discursive fight on twitter in Turkey. *Media and Communication*, *9*(4), 39–51. https://doi.org/10.17645/MAC.V9I4.4213

Baxter, G., & Marcella, R. (2012). Does Scotland 'like' This? Social Media Use by Political Parties and Candidates in Scotland during the 2010 UK General Election Campaign. *Libri*, *62*(2). https://doi.org/10.1515/libri-2012-0008

Bennett, W. L. (2012). The Personalization of Politics. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *644*(1), 20–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212451428

Braun, J., Practice, T. G.-J., & 2011, undefined. (2011). Hosting the public discourse, hosting the public: When online news and social media converge. *Taylor & Francis*, *5*(4), 383–398. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2011.557560

Bulut, E., Communication, E. Y.-I. J. of, & 2017, undefined. (2017). Mediatized populisms| digital populism: Trolls and political polarization of Twitter in Turkey. *Ijoc.Org*, *11*, 4093–4117. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6702

Cadayday, B. A. R., Jimenez, D. M., & Boiser, S. M. (2024). Role of Social Media in the Political Landscape and Voting Decisions of Gen Zs in the Philippines. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, *VIII*(XII), 720–730. https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8120059

Cantini, R., Marozzo, F., Talia, D., & Trunfio, P. (2022). Analyzing Political Polarization on Social Media by Deleting Bot Spamming. *Big Data and Cognitive Computing*, *6*(1), 3. https://doi.org/10.3390/bdcc6010003

Cheema, A., Chacko, J., & Gul, S. (2019). Mobilising mass anxieties: Fake news and the amplification of socio- political conflict in Pakistan. In J. Gomez & R. Ramcharan (Eds.), *Fake News & Election In Asia* (pp. 17–37).

Ciordia, A. (2021). Less divided after ETA? The evolution of ideological cleavages in the Basque environmental field, 2007–2017. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *26*(2), 217-236.

Cover, R., Haw, A., & Thompson, J. D. (2022). Marginalising the Marginalised: Fake News as a Tool of Populist Power. In *Fake News in Digital Cultures: Technology, Populism and Digital Misinformation* (pp. 93–107). Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80117-876-120221007

Dhiman, Dr. B. (2023). Ethical Issues and Challenges in Social Media: A Current Scenario. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4406610

Dimant, E. (2024). Hate trumps love: The impact of political polarization on social preferences. *Management Science*, *70*(1), 1-31.

Farooz, R. M. (2023). *Use of New Media (Twitter and Facebook) As A Tool for Raising Political Polarization*. Republic of Turkey Istanbul Gelisim University Institute of Graduate Studies.

Fiorina, M. P., & Abrams, S. J. (2008). Political Polarization in the American Public. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *11*(1), 563–588. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836

Flores-Saviaga, C., Keegan, B. C., & Savage, S. (2018a). Mobilizing the trump train: Understanding collective action in a political trolling community. *12th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, ICWSM 2018*, 82–91. https://doi.org/10.1609/ICWSM.V12I1.15024

Flores-Saviaga, C., Keegan, B., & Savage, S. (2018b). Mobilizing the Trump Train: Understanding Collective Action in a Political Trolling Community. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v12i1.15024

Forestal, J. (2017). The Architecture of Political Spaces: Trolls, Digital Media, and Deweyan Democracy. *American Political Science Review*, *111*(1), 149–161. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000666

Francois, C., & Lin, H. (2021). The strategic surprise of Russian information operations on social media in 2016 in the United States: mapping a blind spot. *Journal of Cyber Policy*, *6*(1), 9–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2021.1950196

Golovchenko, Y., Buntain, C., Eady, G., Brown, M. A., & Tucker, J. A. (2020). Cross-Platform State Propaganda: Russian Trolls on Twitter and YouTube during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *25*(3), 357–389. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220912682

Grömping, M. (2014). 'Echo Chambers.' *Http://Dx.Doi.Org/10.1177/1326365X14539185*, *24*(1), 39–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/1326365X14539185

Hartmann, D., Wang, S. M., Pohlmann, L., & Berendt, B. (2024). *A Systematic Review of Echo Chamber Research: Comparative Analysis of Conceptualizations, Operationalizations, and Varying Outcomes*. https://arxiv.org/abs/2407.06631v3

Imran, M., Murtiza, G., & Akbar, S. M. (2023). Political Instability In Pakistan: Challenges and Remedies. *South Asian Studies*, *38*(1), 37–52.

Ishaque, W., Mukhtar, M., & Tanvir, R. (2022). Political Polarization and Challenges of National Integration in Pakistan. *ANNALS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PERSPECTIVE*, *3*(1), 153–166. https://doi.org/10.52700/assap.v3i1.185

Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *76*(3), 405–431. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038

Jahangir, R. (2018, July 24). *How political parties manipulate cyberspace for electioneering - Herald*. https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398599

Javed, U., & Javed, U. (2023). The Influence of Social Media Algorithms on Political Polarization and Public Opinion. *Online Media & Society* , *4*(2), 44–52.

Jost, J. T., Barberá, P., Bonneau, R., Langer, M., Metzger, M., Nagler, J., Sterling, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *Political Psychology*, *39*(S1), 85–118. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12478

Judge, M., Kashima, Y., Steg, L., & Dietz, T. (2023). Environmental decision-making in times of polarization. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, *48*(1), 477-503.

Kelm, O. (2021). *Causes and consequences of political actors' and citizens' (social) media perceptions* [Doctoral degree in philosophy]. Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf.

Khan, A., Rafique, I., & Nasim, A. (2023). Social Media and Political Polarization in Pakistan. *Global Digital & Print Media Review*, *VI*(I), 242–253. https://doi.org/10.31703/gdpmr.2023(VI-I).19

Kiritchenko, S., Nejadgholi, I., & Fraser, K. C. (2021). Confronting Abusive Language Online: A Survey from the Ethical and Human Rights Perspective. *Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research*, *71*, 431–478. https://doi.org/10.1613/jair.1.12590

Kirman, B., Lineham, C., & Lawson, S. (2012). Exploring mischief and mayhem in social computing or: How we learned to stop worrying and love the trolls. *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings*, 121–130. https://doi.org/10.1145/2212776.2212790

Kubin, E., International, C. von S.-A. of the, & 2021, undefined. (2021). The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review. *Taylor & FrancisE Kubin, C von SikorskiAnnals of the International Communication Association, 2021•Taylor & Francis*, *45*(3), 188–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070

Lawson, S. (2014). The US military's social media civil war: technology as antagonism in discourses of information-age conflict. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *27*(2), 226–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2012.734787

Lee, J. K., Choi, J., Kim, C., & Kim, Y. (2014). Social Media, Network Heterogeneity, and Opinion Polarization. *Journal of Communication*, *64*(4), 702–722. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12077

Levendusky, M., & Malhotra, N. (2016). Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes? *Political Communication*, *33*(2), 283–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1038455

Linvill, D. L., Boatwright, B. C., Grant, W. J., Warren, P. L., & Walker, J. E. (2019). "THE RUSSIANS ARE HACKING MY BRAIN!" investigating Russia's internet research agency twitter tactics during the 2016 United States presidential campaign. *Elsevier*, *99*, 292–300. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.05.027

Mahmoudi, A., Jemielniak, D., & Ciechanowski, L. (2024). Echo Chambers in Online Social Networks: A Systematic Literature Review. *IEEE Access*, *12*, 9594–9620. https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2024.3353054

March, E., & Marrington, J. (2019). A Qualitative Analysis of Internet Trolling. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *22*(3), 192–197. https://doi.org/10.1089/CYBER.2018.0210

Marcos-García, S., Alonso-Muñoz, L., & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2021). The Influence of the Negative Campaign on Facebook: The Role of Political Actors and Citizens in the Use of Criticism and Political Attack in the 2016 Spanish General Elections. *Social Sciences*, *10*(10), 356. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10100356

Mir, A., Mitts, T., & Staniland, P. (2022). Political Coalitions and Social Media: Evidence from Pakistan. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722001931

Nadeem, K., & Mumtaz, T. (2024). Manipulated Minds: Political and Social Factors Enabling Deepfake Impact in Pakistan. *Regional Lens*, *3*(1), 145–154. https://doi.org/10.62997/rl.2024.31051

Nordbrandt, M. (2021). Affective polarization in the digital age: Testing the direction of the relationship between social media and users' feelings for out-group parties. *Journals.Sagepub.Com*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211044393

Ortiz, S. M. (2020). Trolling as a collective form of harassment: An inductive study of how online users understand trolling. *Journals.Sagepub.ComSM OrtizSocial Media+ Society, 2020•journals.Sagepub.Com*, *6*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120928512

Ozawa, J., Woolley, S., … J. S.-S. M., & 2023, undefined. (2023). How Disinformation on WhatsApp Went From Campaign Weapon to Governmental Propaganda in Brazil. *Journals.Sagepub.ComJVS Ozawa, SC Woolley, J Straubhaar, MJ Riedl, K Joseff, J GurskySocial Media+ Society, 2023•journals.Sagepub.Com*, *9*(1), 15-24. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231160632

Prier, J. (2017). Commanding the Trend Social Media as Information Warfare on JSTOR. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, *11*(4), 50–85. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26271634

Prior, M. (2013a). Media and Political Polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *16*(1), 101–127. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242

Prior, M. (2013b). Media and Political Polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *16*(1), 101–127. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242

Rehmat, S., & Mnazoor, S. (n.d.). Imapct of political polarization through social media on the Youth of Pakistan. *Journal of Law & Social Studies*, *5*(4), 663–673.

Sadiq, S. (2021). Social Media And Political Accountability: An Exploratory Analysis Of The Impact Of Facebook And Twitter In Punjab Pakistan. *Etd.Uum.Edu.My*. https://etd.uum.edu.my/9416/1/s900908_01.pdf

Samuel, G., & Buchanan, E. (2020). Guest Editorial: Ethical Issues in Social Media Research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, *15*(1–2), 3–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/1556264619901215

Santini, R. M., Salles, D., & Giulia Tucci. (2021). When machine behavior targets future voters: the use of social bots to test narratives for political campaigns in Brazil. *International Journal of Communication*, *15*, 1220–1223. https://www.academia.edu/download/84412378/3379.pdf

Sehrish, R., & Samia Manzoor. (2023). Impact of Political Polarization Through Social Media On the Youth Of Pakistan. *Journal of Law & Social Studies*, *5*(4), 663–673.

Shakeel, A. (2018). Unleashing the potential of a young Pakistan. In *Human Development Reports*. https://hdr.undp.org/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan#:~:text=Any%20study%20of%20human%20development,increase%20until%20at%20least%202050

Shirazi, F. (2013). Social media and the social movements in the Middle East and North Africa: A critical discourse analysis. *Information Technology and People*, *26*(1), 28–49. https://doi.org/10.1108/09593841311307123

Spohr, D. (2017). Fake news and ideological polarization: Filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media. *Business Information Review*, *34*(3), 150–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382117722446

Stroud, N. J. (2010). Polarization and Partisan Selective Exposure. *Journal of Communication*, *60*(3), 556–576. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01497.x

Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *7*(3), 321–326. https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295

Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *A prison of our own design: divided democracy in the age of social media*. Democratic Audit UK.

Sunstein, C. R. (2018). Republic : Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. *#republic: Divided Democracy in Ihe Age of Social Media*, 1–328. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12344

Thinnakkakath, G. (2025). Fake News, Propaganda, and Other Influences on Elections. In *Impacts of Leakage, Whistleblowing, and the Rise of Propaganda* (pp. 139–158). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-7468-9.ch007

Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature. *Papers.Ssrn.Com*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3144139

Tucker, J., Guess, A., Barbera, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139

Turculeț, M. (2014). Ethical Issues Concerning Online Social Networks. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *149*, 967–972. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.08.317

Wagner, A. (2022). Tolerating the trolls? Gendered perceptions of online harassment of politicians in Canada. *Feminist Media Studies*, *22*(1), 32–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1749691

Weber, T. J., Hydock, C., Ding, W., Gardner, M., Jacob, P., Mandel, N., Sprott, D. E., & Van Steenburg, E. (2021). Political Polarization: Challenges, Opportunities, and Hope for Consumer Welfare, Marketers, and Public Policy. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *40*(2), 184–205. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915621991103

Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010). Dynamic Debates: An Analysis of Group Polarization Over Time on Twitter. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *30*(5), 316–327. https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610380011

Younus, A., Qureshi, M., Saeed, M., … N. T.-P. of the 23rd, & 2014, undefined. (2014). Election trolling: analyzing sentiment in tweets during pakistan elections 2013. *Dl.Acm.OrgA Younus, MA Qureshi, M Saeed, N Touheed, C O'Riordan, G PasiProceedings of the 23rd International Conference on World Wide Web, 2014•dl.Acm.Org*, 411–412. https://doi.org/10.1145/2567948.2577352

Zeib, F. (2021). *Rising Wave of Social Media: A Perspective of Political Awareness, Voting Behavior, Online and Offline Political Participation of University Students in Pakistan* [Philipps-Universitat Marburg]. https://doi.org/10.17192/Z2022.0092