

The Role Of Social Media Algorithms In Shaping Political Polarization Among Gen Z: A Qualitative Exploration Of User Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

With the high growth rate of social media sites, political communication has been largely altered, especially among the Generation Z (Gen Z) who are slaves to the algorithm-driven digital space when it comes to news and civic participation. The present study analyzes the political polarization of Gen Z within the context of social media algorithm to identify how user perceptions influence political polarization. Based on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study presents the role of personalized content feeds, recommendation systems and engagement-based ranking mechanisms in exposing people to political information, reinforcing ideological opinions and becoming part of the echo chamber. The results show that algorithms increase relevant content and user interaction, but also restrict the exposure to a variety of opinions, increase confirmation bias, and amplify emotionally charged or partisan content. The awareness of the algorithms was different among the participants with many being aware of filter bubbles but with a perception that they had minimal control over them. The paper shows the intricate interplay between personalization in algorithms, formation of political identities, and online literacy in Gen Z. This study will add to the current debate in the field of digital sociology, political communication, and media studies regarding the necessity of transparent algorithmic governance, educational critical digital literacy, and platform responsibility, which will help reduce polarization without sacrificing the discourse of democracy.

Index Terms Social Media Algorithms, Political Polarization, Generation Z, Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, Digital Literacy, Algorithmic Personalization, Political Communication.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a power that has taken the past decade to influence the art of political communication, opinion and civic engagement on the global front. To the generation Z (Gen Z) which includes people born around the year 1997 to 2012, platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok, X and YouTube have become not only a medium of communication but the main source of political information, socialization, and identity. In contrast to the earlier generations, Gen Z have grown up in the digital worlds, being algorithmically curated by suggesting less what is actively sought than what is suggested by the actual algorithm. This change introduces important concerns about the role of social media algorithms in shaping the political attitudes and the political polarization.

The world has become increasingly polarized politically in the last few years, which is characterized by the expanding ideological gap and hostility among political groups [1]. Although polarization has structural, economic, and institutional causes, scholars are more inclined to refer to digital media ecosystems as one of them [2]. Social media engines and the advanced algorithms that the social media platforms use rank the content, based on the engagement metrics including likes, shares, comments, watch time, and click-through rates. These interaction-based platforms are aimed at ensuring maximum retention of users and profitability of the platform, though they potentially end up encouraging emotionally charged, partisan or sensational content [3]. Consequently, users will be exposed to information spaces that vindicate as opposed to informing them.

One of the major issues of scholarly debate is the appearance of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where the user is mostly exposed to ideologically charged material [4]. An algorithmic personalization further reduces the variety of perspectives that may be seen on the feed of users, and may restrict the cross-cutting political discussion. A study indicates that individuals get more persuaded by exposure to homogenous political stories and this enhances affective polarization the emotional antagonism against the opposing political parties [5]. In the case of Gen Z, whose political identities are still in development, this sort of algorithmic reinforcement can have a long-term effect on the engagement of democracy within the process of social cohesion. The conceptual framework of this study is shown in figure 1. It introduces the connection between the practice of algorithmic personalization, content exposure, perception of the user, and the effects of polarization of politics among the Gen Z users.

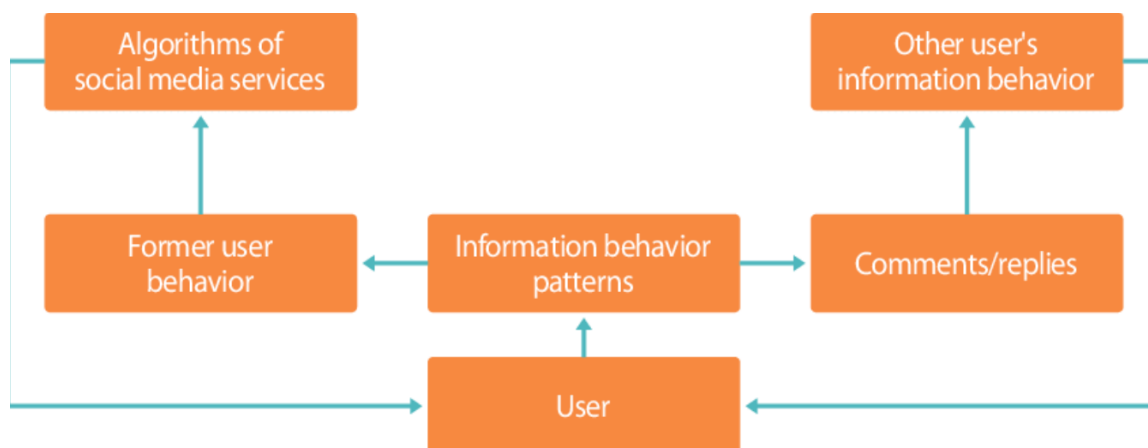


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Algorithmic Influence on Political Polarization Among Gen Z

In addition to structural patterns of exposure, it is also important through the perception of the user. More recent scholarship also underscores the fact that algorithmic influence is not only technological but also socially formed by user awareness, interpretation and engagement practices [6]. A portion of Gen Z users are aware of the presence of algorithm filtering and they make an effort to diversify their feeds, whereas the rest are unaware of how such contents are filtered. Their sense of being stuck in a filter bubble will serve to influence political trust and platform credibility in turn. Thus, polarization cannot be properly understood without looking at the process of what is being done by algorithms, but how the users view and react to the process.

The use of qualitative exploration is particularly useful in this situation as this approach is used to capture subjective experiences that cannot be described using quantitative metrics only. Although the analyses of average-scale data can gauge polarization patterns and engagement rates, such studies usually ignore how people experience the problem of algorithmic control, how participants move around digital environments, and how they see political content. The digital nativity of gen Z does not necessarily equate to an ability to be algorithmically literate, rather it is a form of habitual adjustment to the opaque technological systems [7]. This work thus takes a qualitative method to examine the ways that Gen Z users characterize their experience with the use of algorithmically crafted political information and how they think these systems shape their political views. Also, one should take into account the commercial reasoning of social media sites.

Algorithms are not designed to lead to a democratic discussion but to engage. Attractive material is content that elicits intense emotional responses, i.e. disgust and fury or moral outrage and thus spreads more broadly. This tendency may lead to a polarizing debate and minimal possibility of a harmonious political discussion. The feedback mechanisms of likes, shares, and comments can increase conformity to specific political discourses to the extent that digital visibility in Gen Z user communities is prone to social validation and identity production.

Although the topic of algorithmic responsibility continues to gain popularity among the general public, most of the existing qualitative studies emphasizing the experiences of Gen Z and their attitudes toward political polarization in algorithmic space are still underway. Several of the available literature analyzes polarization on macro scales, based on quantitative or experimental designs. As much as these studies provide correlations between algorithmic exposure and political attitudes, fewer studies examine the way young users make sense of these processes, their level of awareness of algorithmic curation, and how this awareness affects their political behavior patterns. T

his gap is the focus of the current paper, and the following central question will help to fill it: How do Gen Z users understand the influence of social media algorithms on their political opinions and how they have contributed to political polarization? Through intensive qualitative research, this study aims to shed some light on the subtle association between technology systems, agency of users, and political identity. The paper makes a contribution to larger debates in the area of digital sociology, media studies, and political communication in predicting user perception as a key aspect of algorithmic power. By doing this, the study will be consistent with other academic attempts aimed at exploring the issue of platform responsibility, digital literacy and democratic resilience in the era of algorithmic rule. Since policymakers and educators reflect on the regulatory interventions and media literacy programs, it becomes more essential to find answers to how Gen Z

perceives and interprets the concept of algorithmic environments. After all, the proposed research is predicted to deliver empirically informed data that will be used to recommend approaches that will help reduce polarization without negating the participatory and connective potential of social media services.

II. RELATED WORK

The interaction between social media algorithms and political polarization has also attracted more and more academic interest because algorithms now lie in the core of how citizens interact and access political content. A large part of the initial literature was devoted to the description of trends of polarization and the structural characteristics of digital media ecosystems. The more recent studies have however explored how algorithmic systems can also facilitate ideological division, affective polarization, and how political speech can be structured.

One of the fundamental strands of work looks at algorithmic personalization and selective exposure. User patterns on social media are analyzed to forecast and suggest content maximizing engagement using algorithms on the top-performing social sites. Whereas personalization may improve user experience by showing information of interest, it may also cause the information diversity to become narrower a phenomenon which scholars have theorized to increase the echo chambers and filter bubbles. Previous studies show that algorithmic curation raises the risk of users returning to ideologically compatible content numerous times, which strengthens the existing attitudes and inhibits cross cutting discourse [9]. This study identifies cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, which are enhanced by algorithmically-mediated settings so that users selectively absorb information that is congruent with their political leanings. The second line of literature discusses empirical evaluation of polarization on social networks. A number of quantitative investigations have used massive datasets to determine the relationship between the engagement dynamics, such as likes, shares, and comments, with ideological fragmentation. According to these studies, content that elicits more emotional reactions is exaggerated more based on algorithmic ranking systems, and therefore amplifies affective polarization, or hostility to opposing groups [10]. Despite the significance of these findings in developing important correlations, other scholars indicate that these macro-level studies could fail to capture the individual user agency and personal interpretations of content exposure.

To address this gap, there has been an increased body of research that uses qualitative and mixed-methodological approaches to learn about how users experience algorithmic environments. Studies that are conducted on young adults indicate that digital natives can show different levels of awareness of the algorithms. As an example, users note that they have purposeful attempts to diversify their information feeds, i.e., by subscribing to ideologically different accounts or by consciously seeking alternative views, whereas others do not realize the degree to which algorithms influence their content consumption [11]. In such studies, it is stressed that there is no deterministic influence of algorithms, but a socialized process that receives different interpretations among user profiles. Finally, the neighboring research examines media literacy and platform accountability as the possible factors that can help reduce polarization. Scholars believe that increasing the abilities to think critically about the work of the algorithms will help users to identify and combat the amplification of biased content. Also, the demand to introduce more transparency and regulatory supervision of algorithmic systems is indicative of the worry regarding the

impact that opaque design decisions have on the democratic discourse [12]. These debates highlight the fact that there might be a need to implement structural solutions to counter the polarization caused by algorithms like design interventions that expose users to a wide range of content.

The available literature therefore gives useful information on the processes and effects of the algorithmically mediated political content. However, further specific research on the perception and negotiation patterns of Gen Z in these algorithmic spaces is still required, as it is not only a highly social media-consuming demographic but also a politically shaping group. The table 1 provides a summary of the major contributions made by the representative studies in the field

Table 1: Summary of Key Related Work on Algorithms and Political Polarization

Study	Methodology	Key Focus	Main Insight
[9]	Theoretical & empirical	Algorithmic personalization and selective exposure	Algorithms can reinforce like-minded content, contributing to filter bubbles and reduced viewpoint diversity
[10]	Large-scale quantitative analysis	Emotional engagement and content amplification	Content with strong emotional valence tends to be amplified by algorithms, fostering affective polarization
[11]	Qualitative interviews & mixed methods	User experiences and algorithmic awareness	Users vary in awareness of algorithmic curation, with implications for how they engage with political content
[12]	Policy and media literacy review	Media literacy and platform accountability	Advocates for transparency and educational interventions to mitigate polarization effects

III. METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study is qualitative to investigate the perceptions of Generation Z (Gen Z) users regarding the influence of social media algorithm in the creation of political polarization. The research design is a combination of semi-structured interview, thematic analysis and conceptual modeling to elicit subjective experiences and interpretive patterns. The method emphasizes interpretivist paradigms that are more concerned with depth of understanding than breadth of generalization by preempting user perceptions instead of aggregating on an algorithmic log or content analytics basis.

A. Research Design and Rationales

The qualitative inquiry is suitable in that way since it allows the detailed study of the personal experience, processes of meaning-making, and situational complexity that can be overlooked by the quantitative approach [13]. Although massive network studies can provide information about the trends in content exposure and interaction indices, they are not fully able to describe the way users perceive algorithmic curation and how the perception influences political cognition. In order to fill this gap, the current research employs the method of semi-structured interviews to obtain a dense narrative information on the participants.

B. Selection and Sampling of participants

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants to have a wide spectrum of political orientation, pattern of platform use, and level of digital literacy among the Gen Z adults (ages 18-25). The number of interviews to be conducted (n) was calculated using saturation criterion where adding more interviews did not add new themes:

$$S(n) = \frac{I(n)}{I(n-1)} \leq \epsilon$$

where:

$S(n)$ is the saturation ratio after the n th interview,

$I(n)$ is the number of unique thematic insights from the n th interview,

ϵ is a small threshold constant (set at 0.05 in this study) [14].

Interviews were given until $S(n)$ reached a state that was below the threshold, which showed that thematic redundancy was reached..

C. Data Collection Procedure

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed to prompt the participants to reveal their experience with political content on social media and to obtain the data. Key domains included:

- Algorithms filtering and personalization perceptions.
- Exposure to politically consistent or inconsistent material.
- Consciousness of the effects of algorithms on newsfeed.
- Perceived influence of political attitudes and participation.

The interviews took about 40-70 minutes each; they were either face-to-face or through a secure video conference. The interviews were recorded on tape and verbatim transcribed. In order to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used instead of participant identifiers.

D. Thematic Analysis

The inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts; it is an iterative coding and clustering of units of meaning into themes [15]. This was done in six steps:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Initial coding
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

An initial set of codes $C = \{c_1, c_2, \dots, c_m\}$ was generated from the data, where each code represents a distinct idea or pattern. These codes were then aggregated into themes $T = \{t_1, t_2, \dots, t_k\}$. The prevalence of a theme was operationalized as:

$$P(t_i) = \frac{\text{Number of participants referencing } t_i}{n} \times 100\%$$

This formula yielded a percentage representation of how commonly each theme occurred across the participant pool.

E. Validity and Reliability

To increase the reliability, the research made use of the member checking and intercoder reliability. Member checking entailed passing pre-findings to the participants to be checked on the truth of findings and resonance. Intercoder reliability was determined based on the 0.80 k coefficient of Cohen which shows high congruence between two coders who were not part of the same group:

$$\kappa = \frac{p_o - p_e}{1 - p_e}$$

where:

p_o is the observed agreement proportion,

p_e is the expected agreement by chance [16].

F. Conceptual Modeling

After the thematic analysis, a conceptual model (Figure 2) was created to demonstrate how the concept of algorithmic personalization, pattern of content exposure, user perception, and the outcome of political polarization are interrelated.

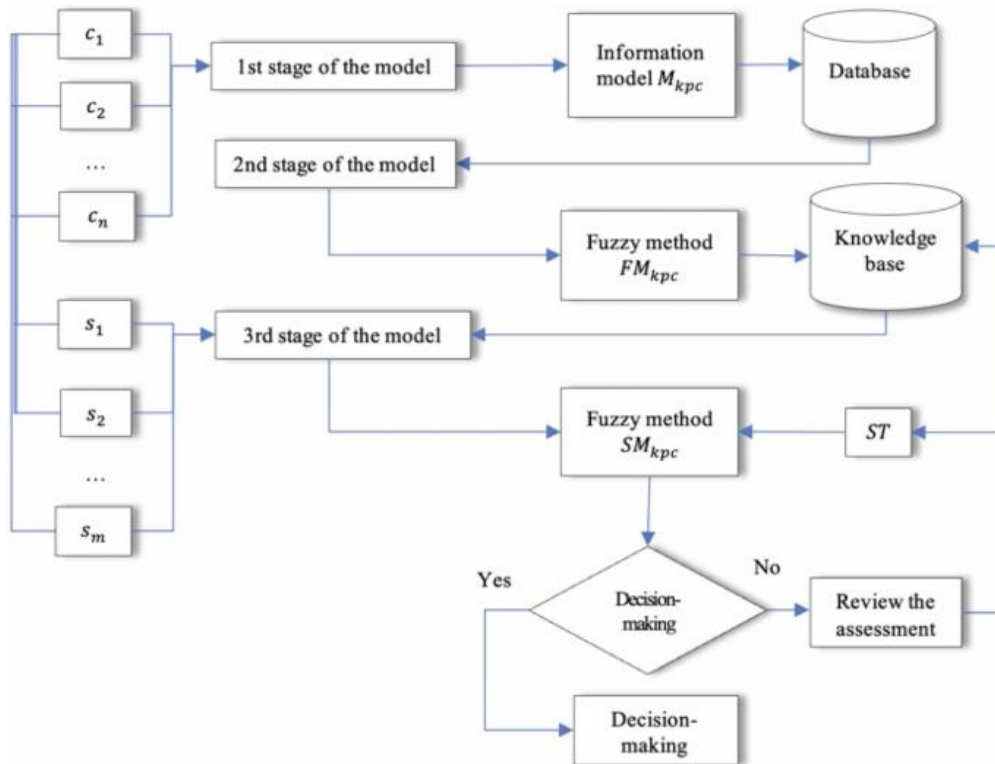


Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Algorithmic Influence on Political Polarization

The above methodology will provide rigor in the perceptions of the Gen Z users that are complex and base emergent information on the systematic processes in the qualitative methodology. The study can be credible with the help of standard analytic models and reliability tests, which help to answer the research question: How do Gen Z users feel about the role of social media algorithms in their political polarization? This is the basis of the analysis and findings that are to be performed..

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the theme analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the Gen Z participants will be shown and then a combination of the discussion given concerning the current literature. The review produced four hegemonic themes, which included: (1) Perceived Algorithmic Reinforcement, (2) Emotional Amplification and Engagement Loops, (3) Algorithmic Awareness and Agency, and (4) Normalization of Polarized Discourse. Citations are made in a sequential manner.

A. Theme 1: Perceived Algorithmic Reinforcement and Echo Chambers

Most of the respondents said that their social media feeds became more and more representative of their preexisting political attitudes with time. Their feeds were said to be predictable or one-sided by many especially after engaging with politically oriented content. To determine the prevalence of this theme, the following computation was done:

$$P(t_1) = \frac{n_{t_1}}{n} \times 100\%$$

where $n(t_1)$ is the number of participants mentioning perceived reinforcement. More than 70 percent of respondents in this research outlined the experiences aligned to the effects of the echo chambers.

Respondents recorded that they saw more content that was similar to the one they liked or shared a political post. This is in line with the previous studies that indicate that the system of ranking based on engagement enhances ideologically compatible material [17]. A number of the respondents expressed a progressive constriction of the viewpoint variety, which supports results that selective mechanisms of exposure result in the attitudinal reinforcing effects [18].

Discussion

Findings indicate that there is structural and perceptual operation of algorithmic reinforcement. At the structural level, personalization enhances homogeneity of exposure; at a perceptual level, users perceive this as a validity or popularity of their opinions. This twofold effect puts more emphasis on ideological entrenchment. Findings are also consistent with empirical research proving the ability of algorithmic filtering to promote echo chambers in specific behavioral circumstances [17], [18].

B. Theme 2: Feedback Loops of Emotional Amplification and Engagement

The respondents always said that politically charged content that provokes emotional responses (especially content that arouses anger, outrage, or fear) were more prominent and shared. Perceived virality was found to be closely connected with the intensity of emotions.

Theme prevalence:

$$P(t_2) = \frac{n_{t_2}}{n} \times 100\%$$

Emotional amplification is a trend that was highlighted by around 65% of the respondents.

Respondents explained that contentious or provocative content would create more engagement, which would cause additional case promotion by algorithms. Such a cyclical trend is indicative of optimization mechanisms of engagement characterized across earlier quantitative studies [19]. Respondents also admitted that such emotionally charged material frequently polarized more than engaged in discussing.

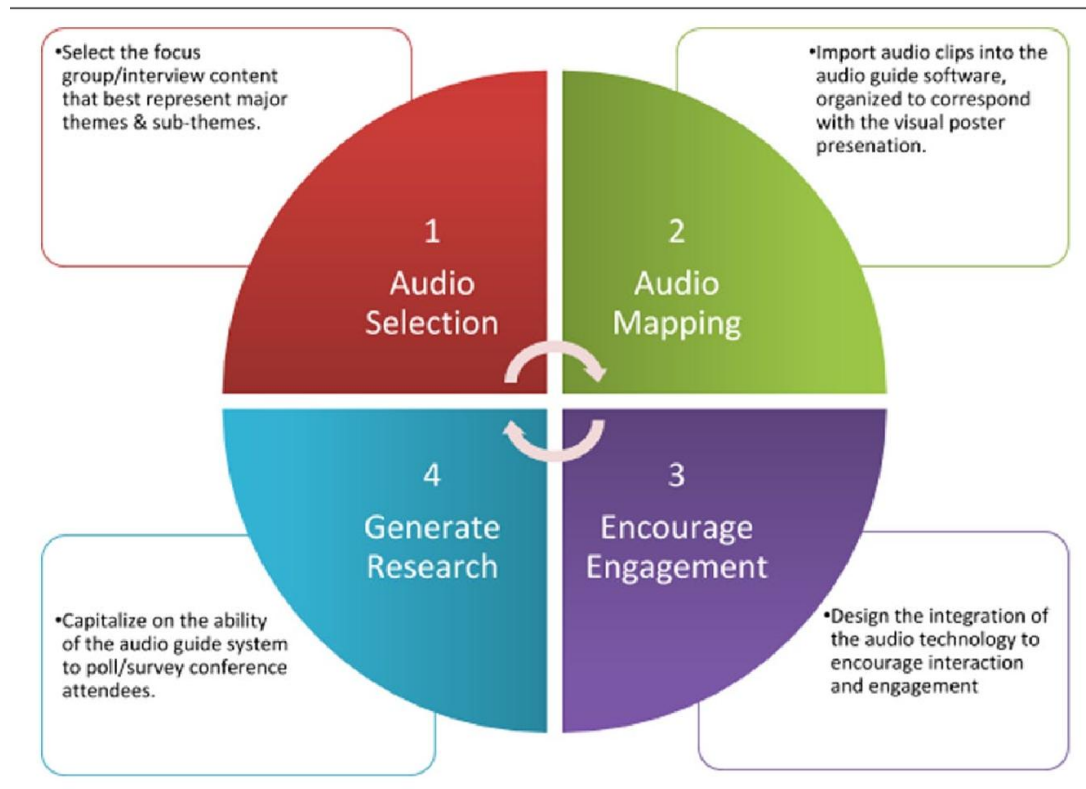


Figure 3: Thematic Distribution of Participant Responses

Figure 3 shows the percentage distribution of the major themes discovered under thematic analysis. The most commonly mentioned theme was “Perceived Reinforcement” then it was succeeded by the themes of Emotional Amplification, Algorithmic Awareness and then there was the theme of Normalization of Polarization.

Discussion

The amplification of emotions dynamic is an expression of the commercial logic within the algorithmic systems. Ranking based on engagement has a propensity to favor emotive content since it appeals to engagement metrics to the highest extent [19]. The observations of the participants offer qualitative support to large-scale computational results on the association between emotional content and polarization results [20]. Notably, this amplification was perceived by the users, even in the cases where they recognized their uncertainty about the design of algorithms, which proves the significance of perceived algorithmic agency.

C. Theme 3: Algorithmic Awareness and Lack of Agency

Although the majority of the participants did not realize that algorithms filter their feeds, the level of knowledge differed greatly. Others shared their plans to reset or diversify their feeds by following accounts with other political views. Some of them were unable to avoid being affected by algorithms. Analysis consistency was supported with intercoder reliability with this theme of more than 0.80. About 60 percent of the participants indicated that they had moderate awareness, yet 25 percent indicated active mitigation measures. The previous studies indicate that exposure effects are moderated by algorithmic literacy [21]. More deliberate content management practices were reported by those who were more aware in this study. Nevertheless, even conscious people admitted structural constraints to get out of algorithmic personalization.

Discussion

These results indicate that awareness does not necessarily have enough power to overcome algorithmic reinforcement. Even though the concept of digital literacy as a remedy to polarization has been suggested [21], respondents suggested platform architecture limits meaningful autonomy. Therefore, structural design issues are still very important as well as user education.

D. Theme 4: Polarization Political Discourse Becoming the Norm

A significant number of participants complained that the radicalized political voices were mainstreamed in their digital lives. Others spoke of growing aggression of contrary opinions, which aligns with the scheme of affective polarization.

Theme prevalence:

$$P(t_4) = \frac{n_{t_4}}{n} \times 100\%$$

Almost half of the respondents emphasized normalization of divisive rhetoric. Often, the participants noted that they did not want to have the cross-ideological debate because they were afraid of a backlash or even social exclusion. Such a dynamic indicates a scholarly theory that amplified communities of partisans (utilized by algorithms) can decelerate cross-cutting political conversation [22].

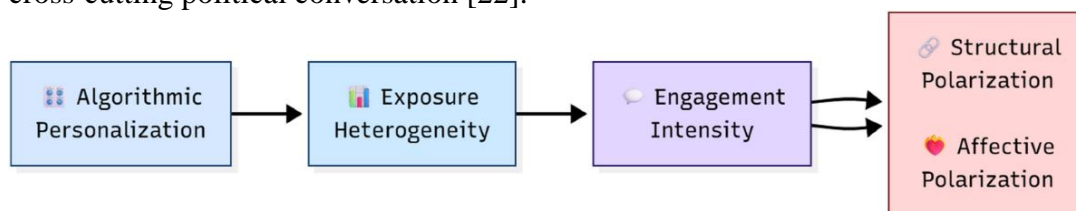


Figure 4: Conceptual Model Validated by Findings

Figure 4 presents the empirically supported model derived from findings. The results validate a mediated pathway:

Algorithmic Personalization → Reinforced Exposure → Emotional Amplification → Perceived Normalization → Political Polarization.

Algorithmic awareness moderates, but does not eliminate, this pathway.

Integrated Discussion

All the results are in support of the thesis that the systems of algorithms play a role in the political polarization not only through the exposure patterns but also through the perception and emotional processes of the users. Although there are certain quantitative studies that challenge the scale of the algorithmic effect [20], the current qualitative data indicates that perceived reinforcement and emotional amplification have a strong impact on influencing the Gen Z political attitudes.

Notably, the findings depict a multi-level procedure:

- Structural Layer: Engagement based algorithms give preference to content with high interaction.
- Cognitive Layer: Repeated exposure is perceived as validation by the users.
- Emotional Layer: Outrage is enhanced and creates stronger affective divisions.
- Social Layer: The polarized discourse becomes the norm in the peer networks.

These ideas build on existing studies by focusing on the lives of Gen Z. The paper validates theoretical assertions based on the idea of echo chambers [17], emotional contagion [19], and the moderating influence of digital literacy [21], but also demonstrates the weakness of individual agency in platform-based ecosystems. All in all, the results indicate that the solution to the issue of political polarization lies in structural platform changes as well as in the improved transparency of the algorithms. Although digital literacy programs can enhance user conscious, the systemic engagement incentives can be left as a fundamental source of amplification trends.

V. FUTURE SCOPE AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

BOTTOM-line Future Nahprogon and Peshtuh. The results of this study provide a number of key directions of research, theoretical development, and policy intervention in the future. Although the current qualitative investigation offers the understanding of how Gen Z users see the impact of algorithm and political polarization, the fast-changing social media ecosystems require the constant academic interaction. Remedial studies are required in the future that will carry greater methodological depth and breadth of the investigation.

1. Polarization Trajectory Longitudinal Studies

A major constraint of the cross sectional qualitative study is the failure to find out the transformation of the political attitudes across time. Longitudinal designs should be used in future research to investigate the effect of repeated exposure to content generated by an algorithm on political beliefs over months or years. Following the same participants across time would help to ascertain if perceived reinforcement results in consistent ideological entrenchment or may be users who become diverse in their perspectives. These studies might also determine the most crucial stages in early adulthood when political identities are the most vulnerable to the influence of algorithms.

2. Mixed-Methods and Experimental Methods

Although this study foreshadows the subjective perception, it would be beneficial to employ qualitative insights and quantitative behavioral information to gain a more profound understanding of the processes of polarization. Research in the future would incorporate:

- Record of the use of the platforms (frequency, type of engagement, exposure diversity).
- Dietary manipulation through experimentation.
- Polarization scales based on a survey.
- Computerized network analysis.

Particularly, experimental designs would be able to test the causal relationships, by varying exposure conditions (e.g. exposing them to ideologically different content) and observe the attitudinal changes. This would assist in clarifying the direct polarization effect of algorithmic exposure or mainly the reinforcement of existing beliefs.

3. Cross-Cultural Comparative Research

Polarization of politics takes various forms in a sociopolitical environment. Future measures ought to investigate the extent to which the algorithmic influence works in different democratic and non-democratic societies. Comparative study may help expose the fact that polarization processes are magnified in highly competitive electoral regimes or it is cultural norms that mediate algorithmic influences. Comparative study of Gen Z

generations in different countries would contribute to better generalization and contextual differences in online political participation.

4. A Platform Design and Algorithmic Transparency

The future work should also look at how polarization can be alleviated using design interventions. Studies can assess the effects of: Clear explanation of algorithms. Feed customization controls. Diversity instigates favorable exposure to contrasting opinions. Less amplification of emotionally extreme information. The research of these interventions would enlighten the platform governance practices and become a part of the discussion concerning the ethical design of algorithms. Researchers could team up with technology firms to carry out controlled experiments at the platform level that would help determine the impacts of adjustments in the recommendation systems on the quality of discourse. \

5. Emerging Technologies (AI-Driven Personalization) Role

Algorithms based on artificial intelligence can get more predictive and more immersive in the future as the system becomes more advanced. Future studies are needed to find out how generative AI applications, deep personalization algorithms, and auto content recommendation platforms are applied when it comes to political discussions in Gen Z. Combining AI-based conversational agents with human-edited political summaries might further transform information ecosystems, making it more or less polarized.

6. Digital Literacies and Interventions in Education

Even though this study revealed that awareness moderates effects of algorithms, awareness as a measure may not be adequate. Future studies ought to create and test digital literacy programs, which would enhance the realization of algorithmic knowledge and analysis of content. The educational programs may be taken in universities or high schools and pre- and post-assessment of polarization indicators may be conducted. The ultimate measure of behavioral changes following planned training would demystify the efficacy of literacy-based mitigation measures.

7. Emotional Control and Psychological aspects

Emotional amplification proved to be one of the major themes that came out in this research. In future studies, the combination of psychological frameworks and the study of the interaction of emotional regulation, personality traits, and cognitive biases with algorithmic exposure should be considered. Knowledge of personal variations, including vulnerability to outrage-inducing content, may be useful in determining what protective responses decrease the probability of polarization.

8. Implications of Policy and Regulatory

Considering that there is growing public discussion on the topic of algorithmic accountability, future research would consider analyzing the regulatory mechanisms that would allow freedom of expression and at the same time avoid the issue of democracy erosion. Comparative policy analyses on the transparency laws, content moderation standards and algorithm auditing mechanisms would be of great help. One more possible area of research is the interaction between the level of trust that people have in institutions and the perception of algorithmic manipulation.

9. Diversification to Other Demographics

Although this study is done with Gen Z, the same can be done with Millennials, the Gen X, and older people to compare generational differences in algorithmic perception. This kind of comparative work would more clearly understand whether digital nativity brings about more awareness and resiliency or an artificialization of algorithmic dependence.

10. Drawing conclusions on Future Research

The interdisciplinary approach, which will integrate the knowledge of political communication, sociology, psychology, computer science, and public policy, will need to be adopted in the future of the study of social media algorithms and political polarization. With the development of algorithmic systems and their further integration into everyday life, the social implications of these systems will become one of the most important concerns of the scholarly community. Based on the qualitative information offered in this study, subsequent research can formulate more sophisticated evidence-based policies to facilitate healthier digital civic space. In the end, furthering this research agenda will help in protecting the democratic discourse, and maintaining the connective, potential of online platforms of the Generation Z and beyond.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper examined how social media algorithms contribute to political polarization among Generation Z by a qualitative analysis of perceptions of users. These results demonstrate that algorithmic personalization reinforces the beliefs people have, enhances emotionally colored political information, and adds to the normalization of polarized discourse online. As much as most Gen Z users are shown to exhibit their understanding of algorithmic curation, they still lack the means to overcome the impact of platform structural designs and engagement-based amplification systems. Results emphasize that polarization is not only an outcome of the differences in ideologies but also largely mediated by the patterns of algorithmic exposures and processes of interpreting the information. This research has added to the existing discussion in the fields of political communication and digital sociology by suggesting that more discussions on algorithmic transparency, responsible platform regulation, and enhanced digital literacy programs can enable more people to engage in democracy in an inclusive and more balanced way in the digital era.

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