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Social Media, Opinion Polarization, and Social Cohesion: A Literature Review of the Impact of Digital Technology on Society

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between social media, opinion polarization, and social cohesion in contemporary digital society. Using an integrative literature review, the study synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical findings concerning digital communication, selective exposure, echo chambers, algorithmic recommendations, and intergroup relationships. The findings indicate that social media can reinforce existing beliefs and intensify polarization, particularly when online interactions involve emotional content and strong group identities. However, exposure to opposing viewpoints does not necessarily reduce polarization, while differences in opinion do not automatically weaken social cohesion. The consequences of digital communication depend on information quality, interpersonal trust, and broader social conditions. By integrating selective exposure theory and social capital theory, this study proposes a conceptual framework linking digital communication, opinion polarization, and social cohesion. The findings highlight the importance of digital literacy, constructive dialogue, and inclusive social relationships in maintaining cohesion amid increasing diversity of public opinion.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji hubungan antara media sosial, polarisasi opini, dan kohesi sosial dalam kehidupan masyarakat digital. Menggunakan pendekatan integrative literature review, penelitian ini menyintesis berbagai perspektif teoretis dan temuan empiris mengenai komunikasi digital, paparan informasi selektif, ruang gema, rekomendasi algoritmik, dan hubungan antarkelompok. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa media sosial dapat memperkuat keyakinan yang sudah terbentuk dan meningkatkan polarisasi, terutama ketika interaksi digital melibatkan konten emosional dan identitas kelompok yang kuat. Namun, paparan terhadap pandangan berbeda tidak selalu mengurangi polarisasi, sementara perbedaan pendapat juga tidak otomatis melemahkan kohesi sosial. Dampak komunikasi digital bergantung pada kualitas informasi, kepercayaan antindividu, dan kondisi sosial yang melatarbelakanginya. Melalui integrasi teori paparan selektif dan teori modal sosial, penelitian ini mengusulkan kerangka konseptual yang menghubungkan komunikasi digital, polarisasi opini, dan kohesi sosial. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya literasi digital, dialog konstruktif, dan hubungan sosial yang inklusif untuk menjaga kohesi masyarakat di tengah keberagaman pandangan.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has fundamentally changed how people communicate, access information, and participate in social life. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X have become important spaces for exchanging opinions, discussing public issues, and building relationships beyond geographical boundaries. Unlike traditional mass media, where information is largely distributed through established institutions, social media allows individuals to produce, distribute, and respond to information directly. This transformation has created new opportunities for public participation and collective action. However, it has also raised concerns about how digital interactions influence public opinion, interpersonal trust, and relationships between different social groups. The central issue is no longer simply whether technology improves communication, but whether the growing intensity of digital communication

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contributes to greater social understanding or reinforces divisions within society.

The influence of social media becomes particularly visible in discussions involving politics, public policy, religion, and other sensitive social issues. Digital platforms allow individuals to express opinions and participate in debates that previously received limited public attention. Nevertheless, greater opportunities for expression do not necessarily produce more constructive communication. A survey conducted by Pew Research Center involving 10,287 adult internet users in the United States in March 2024 found that 59% of X users considered following politics or political issues a reason for using the platform, compared with 36% of TikTok users and 26% of Facebook and Instagram users (McClain et al., 2024). These differences indicate that social media platforms serve distinct communication purposes and expose users to different forms of public discussion. Consequently, the relationship between social media and opinion formation cannot be understood without considering platform characteristics, user motivations, and the nature of information circulating within digital environments.

One of the most widely discussed consequences of social media is opinion polarization, a condition in which differences in attitudes or beliefs become increasingly pronounced and may develop into stronger divisions between social groups. Polarization is not necessarily problematic when it reflects legitimate differences of opinion within a democratic society. Disagreement can encourage critical thinking, public accountability, and participation in collective decision-making. Problems arise when disagreement develops into hostility, distrust, or unwillingness to recognize the legitimacy of opposing perspectives. In digital environments, these tendencies may become more visible because users can rapidly respond to controversial issues, share emotionally charged content, and interact with communities that reinforce their existing beliefs. Thus, understanding polarization requires distinguishing ordinary differences of opinion from forms of social antagonism that weaken relationships between individuals and groups.

Research suggests that social media may contribute to polarization through interconnected psychological, social, and technological mechanisms. Hart et al. (2022) explain that social media can shape polarization through partisan selection, message characteristics, and platform design. Individuals may prefer information consistent with their existing beliefs, while emotionally engaging or identity-relevant messages can influence how they perceive opposing groups. At the same time, digital platforms organize information through recommendation systems and patterns of user interaction. These mechanisms may influence which perspectives become more visible and how frequently users encounter disagreement. However, it would be misleading to assume that technology alone creates polarization. Political identities, social relationships, institutional trust, and existing societal conflicts also influence how people interpret and respond to online information.

The concept of the echo chamber provides an important explanation for how digital communication may reinforce existing opinions. Echo chambers emerge when individuals primarily interact with people or information sources that share similar perspectives, limiting opportunities to encounter alternative interpretations. Cinelli et al. (2021), in a comparative analysis involving more than 100 million pieces of content across Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Gab, identified substantial differences in patterns of information diffusion and ideological segregation. Their findings indicate that interactions among like-minded users were particularly prominent on Facebook and Twitter, while platform differences influenced the extent of information segregation. This evidence suggests that social media platforms do not necessarily produce identical polarization dynamics. Rather, their effects depend on the interaction between technological architecture, user behavior, and the social issues being discussed.

Nevertheless, exposure to opposing opinions does not automatically reduce polarization. Bail et al. (2018) conducted a field experiment in which American Twitter users were exposed to messages from political figures and organizations representing opposing ideological positions. The study found that Republican participants exposed to liberal messages subsequently expressed more conservative attitudes, while changes among Democratic participants were smaller and statistically insignificant. Although these findings cannot be generalized to all social media users or political contexts, they challenge the assumption that simply increasing exposure to different viewpoints will necessarily promote tolerance. The social meaning of disagreement, the identity of information sources, and the emotional responses generated by political messages may be as important as the diversity of information itself.

These developments raise broader questions about social cohesion, which concerns the relationships, trust, sense of belonging, and willingness to cooperate that allow individuals and groups to function within a shared society. Social cohesion does not require everyone to hold identical opinions. Instead, it depends

partly on whether differences can be managed without undermining mutual respect and collective relationships. Social media may strengthen cohesion by connecting geographically separated communities, facilitating mutual assistance, and supporting collective responses to social problems. However, it may also weaken cohesion when online interactions intensify prejudice, spread misleading information, or encourage hostility toward particular groups. Therefore, the relationship between digital technology and social cohesion should be understood as potentially constructive and disruptive rather than inherently positive or negative.

The distinction between online disagreement and social fragmentation is particularly important. A highly active public debate may appear polarized because competing opinions are expressed openly, even when participants continue to respect one another and cooperate in everyday life. Conversely, a digital community may display relatively little visible disagreement because dissenting voices are excluded or discouraged. In such circumstances, apparent agreement does not necessarily indicate stronger social cohesion. This suggests that the consequences of social media should not be evaluated solely through the frequency of controversial discussions or the intensity of online interactions. More meaningful indicators include interpersonal trust, attitudes toward different groups, willingness to engage in dialogue, and the capacity to maintain social relationships despite disagreement.

Public perceptions also reveal the contradictory position of social media in contemporary society. Pew Research Center (2024) reported that 64% of American adults believed social media had a mostly negative effect on the direction of their country, while only 10% perceived its impact as mostly positive. However, a separate Pew Research Center analysis covering 27 countries found that majorities in most surveyed countries considered social media beneficial for democracy (Gubbala & Austin, 2024). These findings should not be treated as directly comparable measures because they examine different populations and questions. Nevertheless, they illustrate that public assessments of social media depend on social context and the outcomes being evaluated. Digital platforms may be perceived as beneficial for participation and access to information while simultaneously generating concerns about conflict, misinformation, and declining public trust.

In socially diverse countries such as Indonesia, these issues have particular relevance. Differences in religion, ethnicity, political preferences, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic conditions form part of everyday social life. Digital platforms create opportunities for individuals from different backgrounds to communicate, but they also provide spaces where existing tensions may become more visible or intensified. During political contests or debates surrounding public policies, online discussions can rapidly extend beyond individual opinions and become associated with broader group identities. However, the existence of online conflict should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of declining social cohesion across Indonesian society. Such conclusions require empirical consideration of offline relationships, institutional trust, community interaction, and the extent to which digital disagreements influence everyday social behavior.

Existing research has provided important explanations of the relationship between social media and polarization, particularly through the concepts of selective exposure, echo chambers, partisan identity, and algorithmic information distribution (Bail et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2022). Nevertheless, much of this discussion emphasizes political attitudes or information behavior, while the broader implications for social cohesion are not always examined within the same analytical framework. This creates a conceptual gap between understanding how polarization develops in digital environments and explaining whether such polarization affects interpersonal trust, social cooperation, and relationships across different communities. Furthermore, findings obtained from particular platforms or political settings cannot automatically be generalized to other societies. An integrated review is therefore needed to distinguish the technological and social mechanisms associated with polarization from the conditions under which digital communication may strengthen or weaken social cohesion.

Against this background, this study aims to examine the influence of social media on opinion polarization and social cohesion through an integrative literature review. Specifically, it explores how digital communication, selective exposure, algorithmic information distribution, and online group interactions contribute to opinion formation and social relationships. The study also considers the circumstances under which social media facilitates public participation and constructive dialogue or reinforces social division and distrust. Its main contribution lies in integrating technological, psychological, and sociological perspectives to explain why increased digital connectivity does not necessarily produce stronger social cohesion. By examining both the opportunities and risks associated with social media, this review seeks to develop a more balanced conceptual understanding of digital technology's role in shaping contemporary society.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Social Media and Digital Communication

Social media has transformed communication from a predominantly one-way process into an interactive environment where individuals can create, distribute, and respond to information. These platforms facilitate public participation, community formation, and the exchange of diverse perspectives. However, digital communication is not entirely shaped by individual preferences. Platform algorithms, recommendation systems, and patterns of user engagement influence which information becomes visible and how discussions develop. According to Hart et al. (2022), social media can shape political polarization through selective exposure, message characteristics, and platform design. These mechanisms suggest that digital technology functions not merely as a communication channel but also as an environment that influences how individuals encounter, interpret, and respond to social information. Nevertheless, its consequences depend on the interaction between technological features, user behavior, and existing social conditions.

2.2. Opinion Polarization and Echo Chambers

Opinion polarization refers to the growing distance between individuals or groups holding different attitudes, beliefs, or political preferences. Although disagreement is a normal feature of social life, polarization becomes socially problematic when differences develop into hostility, distrust, and rejection of opposing perspectives. One mechanism frequently associated with this process is the echo chamber, in which individuals predominantly encounter information and interactions that reinforce their existing views. Cinelli et al. (2021) demonstrated that information segregation and interactions among like-minded users vary across social media platforms. However, exposure to different viewpoints does not necessarily reduce polarization. Bail et al. (2018) found that exposure to opposing political messages could intensify ideological attitudes among certain participants. These findings indicate that polarization cannot be explained solely by limited information diversity. Group identity, emotional responses, and the social context of communication also influence whether disagreement encourages understanding or strengthens division.

2.3. Social Cohesion in Digital Society

Social cohesion concerns the capacity of individuals and groups to maintain trust, social relationships, a sense of belonging, and willingness to cooperate despite differences. From the perspective of social capital theory, Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding social capital, which strengthens relationships within relatively similar groups, and bridging social capital, which connects people across different social backgrounds. This distinction is particularly relevant to digital society. Social media can strengthen bonding relationships by facilitating communication among individuals with shared identities and interests. However, stronger connections within a particular community do not automatically improve relationships with other groups. When digital interactions primarily reinforce internal solidarity while encouraging negative perceptions of outsiders, broader social cohesion may become vulnerable. Conversely, social media can support bridging relationships when it facilitates meaningful interaction, mutual understanding, and cooperation across social boundaries. Therefore, its contribution to social cohesion depends not simply on the number of digital connections but on the quality and inclusiveness of those relationships.

2.4. Theoretical Integration and Research Gap

The relationship between social media, opinion polarization, and social cohesion can be understood by integrating selective exposure theory and social capital theory. Selective exposure helps explain why individuals may prefer information consistent with their existing beliefs, while social capital theory provides a framework for examining how digital interactions influence relationships within and between social groups. Existing studies have extensively investigated online polarization, echo chambers, and exposure to opposing opinions (Bail et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2022). However, these findings do not automatically establish whether polarization produces lasting changes in interpersonal trust, cooperation, or broader social cohesion. This study therefore proposes an integrative conceptual perspective in which social media influences opinion polarization through information exposure and group interactions, while polarization may subsequently affect social cohesion. Digital literacy, communication quality, and social context are considered potential conditions shaping these relationships. The framework is intended to guide conceptual synthesis rather than establish causal effects that have not been empirically tested.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an integrative literature review to examine the relationships between social media, opinion polarization, and social cohesion. This approach allows the integration of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from different research traditions to develop a broader understanding of complex social phenomena (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). The review focuses on how digital communication influences opinion formation, interactions between social groups, and the maintenance of social relationships. Rather than estimating causal effects, the study aims to identify recurring patterns, competing explanations, and conceptual gaps in the existing literature.

3.2. Literature Search and Selection

Relevant literature is identified through academic databases and scholarly search platforms, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The search focuses primarily on publications from 2015 to 2026, while earlier foundational studies are considered when theoretically relevant. Search terms include social media, opinion polarization, political polarization, echo chambers, selective exposure, social cohesion, social capital, and digital communication, used individually and in Boolean combinations. Publications are selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, theoretical contribution, and methodological clarity. Priority is given to peer-reviewed journal articles, complemented by authoritative research reports and foundational academic books. Studies that do not directly address digital communication, polarization, or social relationships are excluded from the synthesis.

3.3. Data Analysis and Conceptual Synthesis

The selected literature is analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach informed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis is organized around three interconnected themes: digital communication and information exposure, mechanisms of opinion polarization, and implications for social cohesion. Findings are compared to identify similarities, contradictions, and contextual differences across studies. Selective exposure theory and social capital theory provide the principal analytical perspectives for interpreting these themes. The synthesis subsequently develops a conceptual framework connecting social media, opinion polarization, and social cohesion, while considering digital literacy, communication quality, and social context as potential influencing conditions. The resulting framework represents an interpretation of existing literature rather than an empirically validated causal model.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Social Media and the Transformation of Public Opinion

The literature indicates that social media has fundamentally changed the processes through which public opinion is formed, expressed, and circulated. Unlike traditional communication systems, digital platforms allow individuals to participate directly in public discussions, distribute information, and respond to competing perspectives. This transformation has expanded opportunities for civic participation, particularly among individuals and communities that previously had limited access to public communication channels. However, greater participation does not necessarily result in more balanced public discussion. Social media environments are shaped by interactions between individual preferences, social networks, and technological systems that determine which information receives attention. Consequently, public opinion in digital society is influenced not only by the availability of information but also by the conditions under which information becomes visible, credible, and socially meaningful. Hart et al. (2022) identify selective exposure, message characteristics, and platform design as important mechanisms through which social media can influence political polarization. Individuals tend to engage with information that is consistent with their existing attitudes, particularly when public issues are closely connected to political or social identities. Digital platforms can reinforce these tendencies by facilitating repeated interactions with familiar sources and communities. Nevertheless, this process should not be interpreted as evidence that social media users are entirely isolated from alternative viewpoints. Individuals may encounter diverse perspectives through news, interpersonal relationships, and discussions outside their preferred digital communities. The critical issue is therefore not simply whether users encounter opposing opinions, but how they interpret those opinions and whether digital interactions encourage reflection or defensive responses.

A systematic review by Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) provides a broader perspective on these developments. Examining worldwide causal and correlational evidence concerning digital media and democracy, the authors identified both beneficial and adverse associations. Digital media was linked to opportunities for political participation and information access, but also to concerns involving political polarization, declining trust, and other democratic challenges. Importantly, the findings varied across political and institutional contexts, indicating that the consequences of digital communication cannot be explained through a single universal relationship. This distinction is important because the expansion of digital participation may strengthen democratic engagement while simultaneously creating environments in which social disagreements become more intense. Taken together, these studies suggest that social media should be understood as a communication environment that can both facilitate public participation and reshape the dynamics of social disagreement. Its influence is not determined solely by the number of users or the intensity of online activity. Instead, the quality of information, diversity of social interactions, and broader institutional context influence whether digital communication contributes to informed discussion or reinforces existing divisions. This interpretation challenges technological determinism and places greater emphasis on the relationship between digital systems and the social conditions in which they operate.

4.2. Echo Chambers, Selective Exposure, and the Mechanisms of Opinion Polarization

One of the most frequently discussed explanations for opinion polarization is the formation of echo chambers, where individuals predominantly encounter information and social interactions that reinforce their existing beliefs. Cinelli et al. (2021) examined information diffusion across Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Gab and identified differences in the extent of ideological segregation and interaction among like-minded users. Their findings demonstrate that echo chambers are not uniform across platforms. Different communication structures and interaction patterns may produce different levels of information segregation. This suggests that platform characteristics matter, although the existence of an echo chamber does not by itself establish that exposure to similar opinions causes individuals to become more polarized. Further evidence comes from Nyhan et al. (2023), who examined information exposure among American Facebook users and conducted a field experiment involving 23,377 participants during the 2020 United States presidential election. Their descriptive analysis found that the median user received approximately 50.4% of their Facebook content from politically like-minded sources, compared with 14.7% from sources representing opposing political orientations. However, when exposure to like-minded content was experimentally reduced by approximately one-third, the intervention produced no measurable changes in several political attitude indicators, including affective polarization and ideological extremity. These findings challenge the assumption that reducing exposure to similar opinions will necessarily produce more moderate political attitudes. They also demonstrate the importance of distinguishing the composition of information exposure from its psychological and social consequences. The findings of Bail et al. (2018) further complicate this relationship. Through a field experiment involving American Twitter users, the researchers found that exposure to opposing political messages increased conservative attitudes among Republican participants, while changes among Democratic participants were not statistically significant. This result suggests that exposure to different viewpoints can sometimes reinforce rather than weaken existing beliefs. When opposing information is perceived as threatening to group identity, individuals may respond defensively and become more committed to their original positions. Consequently, information diversity should not automatically be equated with constructive dialogue.

These studies reveal an important distinction between ideological polarization and affective polarization. Ideological polarization concerns differences in political beliefs or policy preferences, whereas affective polarization refers to negative feelings, distrust, or hostility toward opposing groups. The two forms of polarization may be related, but they are not identical. Individuals can strongly disagree about public policies while maintaining mutual respect and willingness to cooperate. Conversely, hostility between groups may intensify even when their substantive policy differences are relatively limited. From the perspective of social cohesion, affective polarization is particularly important because it directly concerns the quality of relationships between social groups. The evidence therefore suggests that opinion polarization emerges from interactions among selective exposure, social identity, emotional responses, and digital communication structures. Although social media can reinforce existing attitudes, the available findings do not justify treating platform algorithms as the sole cause of polarization. A more convincing explanation recognizes that digital communication operates within societies already characterized by political competition, group identities, and differences in social experience. The contribution of social media may lie in amplifying, reorganizing, or

making these divisions more visible rather than creating them independently.

4.3. Algorithmic Communication, Misinformation, and Emotional Engagement

Algorithmic recommendation systems have become central to discussions about the social consequences of digital technology. These systems influence the visibility and ordering of information based on platform-specific objectives and signals of user engagement. As a result, users may encounter information through a combination of personal choices, social connections, and automated recommendations. However, the relationship between algorithmic communication and polarization is more complex than the assumption that algorithms consistently promote extreme content. Guess et al. (2023) examined the effects of Facebook and Instagram feed algorithms during the 2020 United States presidential election. In their experiment, participants were assigned to chronological feeds instead of the platforms' default algorithmic feeds. The intervention substantially changed user activity and the types of information encountered. However, it did not significantly alter affective polarization, issue polarization, or several other political attitudes during the study period. These findings indicate that modifying information distribution can change users' immediate digital experiences without necessarily transforming their underlying beliefs. They also suggest that interventions targeting platform design should be evaluated according to specific outcomes rather than assuming that changes in content exposure will automatically produce broader social improvements. Another concern involves the circulation of misinformation. Vosoughi et al. (2018) analyzed approximately 126,000 verified true and false news stories distributed on Twitter between 2006 and 2017. Their study found that false information spread farther, faster, more deeply, and more broadly than truthful information, particularly in the case of political news. The researchers also identified novelty and emotional responses as possible explanations for differences in information diffusion. These findings illustrate how the structure of online communication can create conditions in which misleading information receives substantial attention. Nevertheless, the rapid circulation of false information should not be interpreted as direct evidence that every exposed individual changes their beliefs or becomes more hostile toward others.

The implications for opinion polarization become more significant when misinformation interacts with existing social identities. Information that confirms negative assumptions about an opposing group may reinforce distrust, even when its factual accuracy is questionable. Repeated exposure to emotionally charged narratives can also influence how individuals interpret subsequent information. However, the relationship between misinformation and polarization is not necessarily linear. Some users may reject misleading content, seek verification, or engage in corrective discussion. Others may interpret fact-checking itself through existing political loyalties. These differences suggest that misinformation operates through social and psychological mechanisms rather than producing uniform effects across audiences. A critical implication of this literature is that technological interventions alone are unlikely to resolve all problems associated with digital polarization. Reducing misleading content, increasing transparency, and improving recommendation systems may help create healthier information environments. However, their effectiveness also depends on users' ability to evaluate information, their willingness to engage with opposing perspectives, and the credibility of institutions providing corrective information. Digital governance should therefore address both the technological conditions of information circulation and the social processes through which information becomes accepted or rejected.

4.4. Opinion Polarization and Its Implications for Social Cohesion

Social cohesion represents a broader social outcome than political agreement. It concerns the capacity of individuals and groups to maintain trust, a sense of belonging, and willingness to cooperate despite differences in beliefs, identities, and interests. From the perspective of social capital theory, Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding social capital, which strengthens relationships within groups, and bridging social capital, which connects individuals across social boundaries. This distinction provides an important foundation for understanding the consequences of social media. Digital platforms can strengthen solidarity within communities while producing different outcomes for relationships between communities. Social media may contribute positively to cohesion by facilitating communication among geographically separated individuals, supporting community organizations, and enabling collective responses to social problems. Online networks can help individuals exchange information, mobilize assistance, and maintain relationships that would otherwise be difficult to sustain. However, stronger internal connections do not necessarily translate into greater trust

toward outsiders. When group solidarity becomes closely associated with negative perceptions of other communities, bonding relationships may coexist with weakening bridging relationships. This creates a situation in which digital communication strengthens cohesion within particular groups while potentially increasing fragmentation across society.

Campbell (2024) provides relevant evidence concerning the relationship between bridging social capital and affective polarization. Using measures derived from large-scale Facebook friendship networks in the United States, the study found that communities with greater economic bridging tended to exhibit lower affective polarization. The analysis also identified conversations across political differences as a possible mechanism connecting bridging relationships with more favorable intergroup attitudes. Although these findings do not establish that social media itself causes stronger social cohesion, they support the importance of relationships that cross social and economic boundaries. The implication is that the diversity and quality of social connections may be more consequential than the overall volume of digital interaction. This distinction is particularly important when evaluating online conflicts. A highly visible disagreement on social media does not necessarily indicate that social cohesion has deteriorated. Public disagreement may reflect active participation and the willingness of individuals to express different perspectives. Social fragmentation becomes a more serious concern when disagreement develops into persistent hostility, exclusion, declining interpersonal trust, or unwillingness to cooperate. Consequently, the social consequences of polarization should be evaluated through relational indicators rather than the intensity of online debate alone. The relationship between opinion polarization and social cohesion may also operate in both directions. Polarization can weaken trust between groups, but weak bridging relationships and pre-existing social divisions may also make individuals more susceptible to hostile interpretations of opposing opinions. This reciprocal possibility is theoretically important because it challenges a simple causal explanation in which social media first produces polarization and polarization subsequently destroys social cohesion. A more realistic interpretation recognizes that digital communication interacts with existing patterns of social trust, group identity, and institutional relationships. Longitudinal research is needed to determine how these processes influence one another over time.

4.5. Digital Literacy, Communication Quality, and Social Context

The reviewed literature suggests that the consequences of social media depend partly on how individuals interpret information and interact with people holding different opinions. Digital literacy is therefore relevant not merely as the technical ability to operate digital platforms but also as the capacity to evaluate information credibility, recognize misleading narratives, and understand the social consequences of online communication. Individuals who can distinguish factual claims from personal opinions may be better equipped to participate in constructive discussions. However, digital literacy should not be treated as a guaranteed solution to polarization because political identity, emotional attachment, and distrust may influence how even knowledgeable users evaluate information. Communication quality represents another important condition. Exposure to different viewpoints may encourage understanding when interactions involve credible information, mutual respect, and opportunities for meaningful explanation. Conversely, hostile language, ridicule, and identity-based accusations may strengthen defensive reactions. The findings of Bail et al. (2018) demonstrate why exposure alone is insufficient, while the experiments reported by Nyhan et al. (2023) and Guess et al. (2023) show that changes in information environments do not necessarily translate into measurable changes in political attitudes. These studies collectively suggest that the social meaning and interpersonal context of communication deserve greater attention alongside information diversity.

Institutional and cultural contexts further influence these relationships. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) show that the associations between digital media and democratic outcomes vary across countries and political environments. This finding is particularly relevant for multicultural societies, where differences in religion, ethnicity, political identity, and socioeconomic position shape social interaction. In Indonesia, for example, digital communication may intersect with existing forms of community solidarity and political competition. However, findings from American or European studies cannot automatically establish the magnitude or direction of these relationships in Indonesian society. Context-specific evidence is necessary to examine whether online disagreement affects offline trust, community participation, and cooperation across social groups. These considerations suggest that interventions should extend beyond encouraging individuals to consume more diverse information. Media literacy education, constructive dialogue, transparent platform governance, and opportunities for interaction across social boundaries may all contribute to healthier digital

communication. Nevertheless, their effectiveness remains an empirical question. Policies intended to reduce polarization should be evaluated not only according to changes in online engagement but also through indicators of interpersonal trust, tolerance, and sustained cooperation. The objective should not be to eliminate disagreement, but to create conditions in which disagreement can occur without undermining relationships between members of society.

4.6. Integrating Social Media, Opinion Polarization, and Social Cohesion

The preceding analysis supports an integrated conceptual interpretation of the relationship between digital technology and society. Social media provides an environment in which information exposure, algorithmic distribution, and online group interactions shape the communication experiences of users. These processes may influence opinion polarization through selective exposure, emotional engagement, and social identity. Polarization may subsequently affect social cohesion, particularly when differences in opinion develop into hostility or distrust between groups. However, the reviewed evidence does not support the assumption that these relationships are uniformly causal, negative, or consistent across platforms and societies. An important contribution of this synthesis is the distinction between three analytical levels. The first concerns the technological and communicative environment, including platform design, recommendation systems, and patterns of information exposure. The second concerns individual and group responses, particularly ideological polarization, affective polarization, and perceptions of opposing communities. The third concerns broader social relationships, including interpersonal trust, bridging social capital, cooperation, and social cohesion. Separating these levels helps explain why changes in platform exposure do not necessarily produce immediate changes in attitudes and why changes in political attitudes do not automatically indicate corresponding changes in social cohesion. The proposed framework therefore treats opinion polarization as a potential connecting mechanism between social media experiences and social cohesion, rather than as a universally established mediator. Digital literacy, communication quality, and social context are considered possible conditions that shape these relationships. In some circumstances, social media may intensify group divisions through hostile communication and identity reinforcement. In others, it may strengthen bridging relationships by facilitating dialogue, community participation, and cooperation across differences. These competing possibilities should be understood as propositions requiring further empirical investigation.

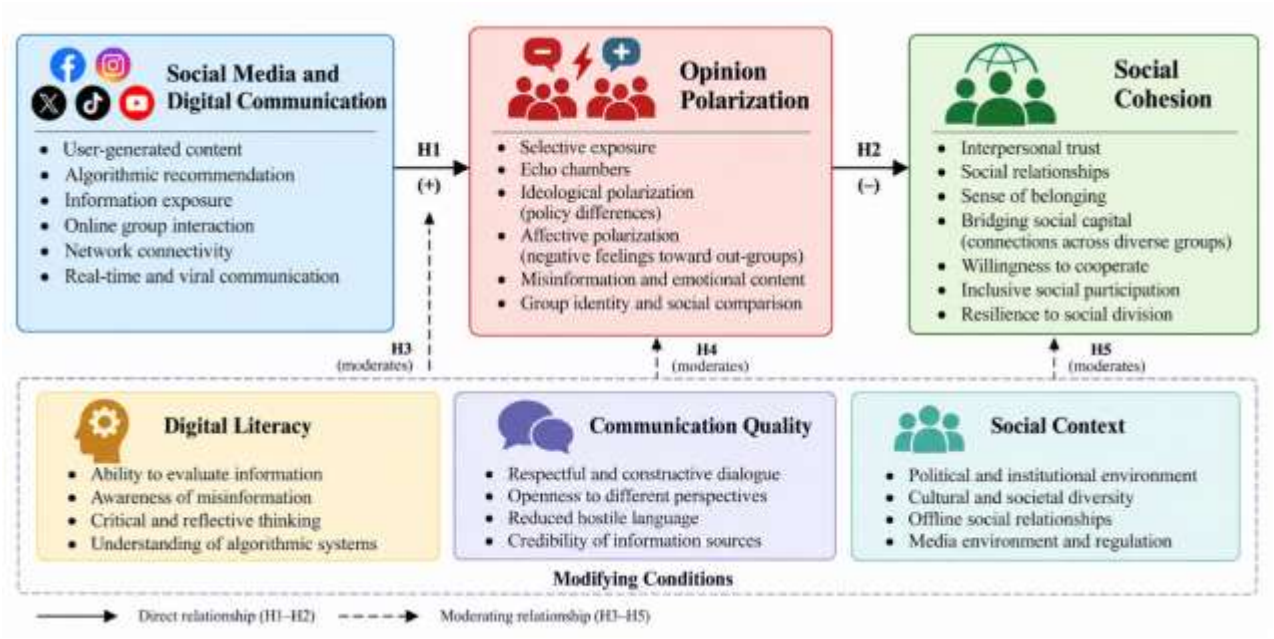


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework

The framework also highlights an important methodological implication. Studies that measure social media exposure, political attitudes, and social cohesion using different indicators may produce apparently inconsistent findings because they examine distinct dimensions of the same broader phenomenon. For example, reduced exposure to politically similar content may change information diversity without altering

affective polarization, while stronger cross-group relationships may be associated with lower hostility even when political disagreements remain substantial. Future research should therefore avoid treating information diversity, ideological moderation, interpersonal trust, and social cohesion as interchangeable outcomes.

4.7. Synthesis of Major Findings and Future Research Directions

Table 1 summarizes the principal findings from the reviewed literature and their implications for understanding the relationship between digital technology and society.

Table 1. Synthesis of Key Findings on Social Media, Opinion Polarization, and Social Cohesion

Research dimension	Principal findings	Supporting literature	Implications
Digital communication and public participation	Social media expands opportunities for participation, but its social effects vary across political and institutional contexts.	Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023); Hart et al. (2022)	Digital participation should be distinguished from constructive public dialogue.
Echo chambers and selective exposure	Like-minded information exposure is common, but reducing it does not necessarily reduce polarization.	Cinelli et al. (2021); Nyhan et al. (2023)	Information exposure and attitude change should be measured separately.
Exposure to opposing opinions	Encountering opposing views can sometimes reinforce existing political attitudes.	Bail et al. (2018)	Information diversity alone may be insufficient to promote tolerance.
Algorithmic communication	Changing feed algorithms alters information exposure and platform activity without necessarily changing political attitudes.	Guess et al. (2023)	Platform interventions require evaluation using clearly defined outcomes.
Misinformation and emotional engagement	False information can spread more rapidly than truthful information, particularly in political contexts.	Vosoughi et al. (2018)	Information integrity and users' interpretive responses are important concerns.
Social capital and intergroup relationships	Bridging relationships are associated with lower affective polarization in the studied context.	Putnam (2000); Campbell (2024)	Social cohesion depends partly on relationships across social boundaries.
Social context and digital literacy	The effects of digital communication are shaped by user characteristics, communication practices, and institutional conditions.	Hart et al. (2022); Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023)	Context-sensitive research and interventions are necessary.

The synthesis reveals three important conclusions. First, social media influences the conditions under which people encounter and discuss information, but changes in information exposure do not necessarily produce equivalent changes in political attitudes. Second, opinion polarization should not be understood solely as disagreement. Its implications for society depend particularly on whether differences develop into hostility, distrust, and weakened relationships between groups. Third, social cohesion is influenced by the quality of relationships across social boundaries, suggesting that constructive interaction and bridging social capital deserve greater attention in digital society research. Several research gaps remain. Existing experimental studies provide valuable evidence about short-term changes in platform exposure and political attitudes, but they offer more limited insight into the longer-term consequences for interpersonal trust and community cooperation. Furthermore, the literature does not consistently examine ideological polarization, affective polarization, and social cohesion within the same research design. Cross-national comparisons are also necessary to determine whether findings from particular political environments apply to societies with different cultural and institutional characteristics.

Future studies could address these limitations through longitudinal surveys, comparative case studies, social network analysis, and mixed-method research. Particular attention should be given to whether affective polarization mediates the relationship between digital communication and social cohesion, whether bridging social capital moderates this relationship, and how digital literacy and communication quality influence the outcomes of cross-group interaction. For Indonesia and other culturally diverse societies, research should also investigate the relationship between online political disagreement and offline community relationships. Such evidence would help determine when digital technology reinforces social divisions and when

it contributes to more inclusive forms of social participation. Overall, the literature indicates that social media should neither be treated as the inevitable cause of social fragmentation nor assumed to strengthen social cohesion simply by increasing connectivity. Its consequences emerge from the interaction between technological systems, individual interpretations, group identities, and existing social relationships. The central contribution of this review is therefore to shift the discussion from whether social media produces polarization toward understanding under what conditions digital communication transforms differences of opinion into social hostility or, alternatively, creates opportunities for constructive dialogue and stronger social cohesion.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, SUGGESTION, AND LIMITATIONS

This study concludes that social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and social interactions, although its consequences for opinion polarization and social cohesion are neither uniform nor entirely negative. The literature indicates that selective exposure, algorithmic recommendations, echo chambers, and emotionally charged information can reinforce existing beliefs and intensify divisions between social groups. However, greater exposure to opposing viewpoints does not necessarily reduce polarization, while changes in information distribution do not always produce corresponding changes in political attitudes. These findings suggest that the relationship between social media and polarization depends on the interaction between technological characteristics, individual interpretations, and existing social identities. More importantly, differences in opinion do not automatically weaken social cohesion unless they develop into hostility, distrust, and reduced willingness to cooperate. Therefore, the social consequences of digital technology are determined not simply by the intensity of online communication, but by the quality of interactions and the ability of individuals and communities to maintain constructive relationships despite differences.

The findings provide theoretical, practical, and policy implications for understanding and managing social relationships in digital society. Theoretically, this study integrates selective exposure theory and social capital theory to explain how digital communication may influence opinion polarization and subsequently affect social cohesion. The proposed framework emphasizes that digital literacy, communication quality, and social context may shape these relationships, although their specific effects require empirical validation. From a practical perspective, digital literacy initiatives should extend beyond technical skills to include critical information evaluation, awareness of misinformation, and the ability to engage respectfully with different perspectives. Social media platforms also have an important role in improving information transparency and reducing incentives for harmful interactions. For policymakers, the findings highlight the need to balance freedom of expression with measures that encourage responsible digital communication. Rather than attempting to eliminate disagreement, public policies should strengthen opportunities for constructive dialogue, interpersonal trust, and cooperation across social groups.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. As an integrative literature review, the analysis relies on previously published studies rather than primary empirical data, limiting its ability to establish causal relationships between social media, opinion polarization, and social cohesion. Differences in research designs, platform characteristics, geographical settings, and measurements of polarization also restrict the direct comparability of existing findings. Furthermore, much of the experimental evidence discussed originates from political communication research in the United States, which may not adequately represent digital interactions in societies with different cultural, institutional, and political characteristics. The proposed conceptual framework has not been empirically tested, meaning that the potential roles of digital literacy, communication quality, and social context remain theoretical propositions. In addition, the literature search and selection process requires complete documentation to establish the final research corpus and strengthen methodological transparency. Consequently, the conclusions should be understood as an analytical synthesis rather than definitive evidence of universal causal relationships.

Future research should examine the relationships between social media, opinion polarization, and social cohesion through longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-method approaches that capture both online communication and offline social relationships. Particular attention should be given to distinguishing ideological polarization from affective polarization, as disagreement over public issues may have different social consequences from hostility toward opposing groups. Empirical studies should also investigate whether opinion polarization mediates the relationship between digital communication and social cohesion, and whether digital literacy, communication quality, and bridging social capital influence these relationships. Research involving Indonesia and other culturally diverse societies is especially important to understand

how political identities, cultural differences, and community relationships shape digital interactions. From a practical perspective, educational institutions, policymakers, and digital platforms should collaborate to strengthen critical digital literacy, promote respectful public dialogue, and support interactions across different social groups. These efforts should be evaluated through measurable indicators of interpersonal trust, tolerance, and social cooperation to ensure that digital connectivity contributes to stronger and more inclusive social relationships.

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