Social Media Use and Political Polarization: the Mediating Role of Political Engagement and Political Loyalty

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Abstract

This study examines how usage of social media influence political polarization. Using data from the students of different public and private universities of Lahore, this study investigates the association between usage of social media and political polarization and proposes that political engagement and political loyalty can be potential mediators between the relationship of social media usage and political polarization (issue based, leadership based, and party based). Correlation research design was used to collect the data. A sample of 350 students were taken through purposive sampling technique. Smart Partial least square 3.2.7 has been used to analyze and test the conceptual model. Findings show that usage of social media has significant direct effect on political engagement and political loyalty. In addition to this, social media usage is a significant predictor of political polarization. Results further show that indirect effect of social media usage on polarization was mediated by political engagement and party loyalty. We observed that more usage of social media helps the participants to engage in politics and identify themselves with a certain political party. This study has highlighted the role of social media in motivating the users towards political participation. This high-level users' participation on social networking sites is creating ideological divergence. The implications of these findings have been discussed in detail.

Keywords: social media, political loyalty, political engagement, political polarization, Smart partial least square.

1. Introduction

The potential of social media for promotion of political information and ideology have received popularity and scholarly attention at international level. It was expected that social media usage could play a role in strengthening the democracy by providing a public sphere where individuals have free and equal access to political debates and discourses (Coleman, 2003; Mitra, 2001; Stromer-Galley, Muhlberger, 2009). On the other hand, critics believe that uncivil discussion and anonymity leading the social media users towards acrimonious debates (Dahlberg, 2001). These online discussions increasing political disagreement, intergroup hostility, and political polarization (Davis, 2009, Mutz, 2006). According to the scholars, recent political debates going beyond the exchange of ideas and information (Brooks, Geer, 2007; Sobieraj, Berry, 2011). This incivility of online discussions, heated debates, and showing disrespect to opposing views and political party is an extreme form of political polarization.

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Political polarization due to its negative consequences is becoming a cause of academic debate. People draw boundaries when they have strong associations and affiliation with a certain political party or group (Iyengar et al., 2012). Such an association creates conflicts with outgroup people and produce empathy for in-group people. People who have extreme political ideology avoid those people who support opposite viewpoint and prevent themselves having routine discussion. As a result, these extreme viewpoints on politics raising the concerns regarding political polarization among scholars.

Advancement of technology and changing media environment has also contributed towards political polarization. This rapid rise of technology gave birth to new media which provided the citizens an opportunity to connect and share information with millions of people, that were not possible in previous governments which established before 2010 in Pakistan. According to C.R. Sunstein (Sunstein, 2017) social networking sites and partisan news media are major drivers which are making people less tolerant and more political biased. The foundation of this argument is that social networking sites are providing selective exposure to people because people are following those pages, celebrities and sources which are in line with their existing political thoughts and avoid those messages who have different arguments. Some scholars argue that excessive exposure to those messages which supports someone's own views and beliefs increase the person confidence in those views and this attitude also take that person away from the balanced point (Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2010).

Previous studies were specifically more concerned about social media space division on the basis of party lines, and they were less focused on causal effects on social media (Boxell et al., 2017). These studies show the mixed results regarding the effects of social media on political polarization. Several studies found that social media is polarized, and it has very thin line of platforms division (Bakshy et al., 2015, Conover et al., 2011; Hong, Kim, 2016; Kim, 2011; Lee et al., 2014; Shin, Thorson, 2017; Yardi, Boyd, 2010).

Political conversations and comments on social media are significantly affecting the user political knowledge, participation, and behavior (McLeod et al., 1999). People's political attitude, opinion and behavior are the results of a dynamic process of media use where social media discussions are as important as we give importance to offline discussion.

The current study explores the relationship between social media use and political polarization by taking a sample of university students from different universities of Lahore collected between March 2019 and April 2019. In past few years, major changes in technology and Pakistan government political leadership have shifted offline discussions of youngsters to online discussions. In this study, we assessed the role of political engagement and party loyalty as a mediator between the relationship of social media usage and political polarization. Previous studies have investigated that social media usage has direct links with political engagement, but it was not considered as potential mediator. In addition to this, the role of political loyalty as a pathway to political polarization has not been explored before. The results of this study provide a reason that how social media is affecting the political mindset and ideology of present generation. Moreover, this study provides an insight into the concept of political polarization (based on issues, party, and leadership). As the study is using non-US centric data, therefore the study broadens the scope and discussion of political participation in local context.

Considering the recent concern over online discussions and mass ideological polarization, this empirical paper argued that social media usage is indirectly affecting the political polarization through the political engagement and party loyalty. Previously, most of the studies has worked on political polarization in terms of political positions that weather participants are politically neutral or moderate partisans. In this study, we operationalized the political polarization in terms of party, issues, and leadership. Because now the younger generation is divided on the basis of issues and leadership (Slater, 2007; Stroud, 2010).

Social Media and Political Polarization. Social media adoption has become an unequivocal trend which has been increased every year (Pousher, 2016). If we talk about other countries in Asia, it was explored that the adoption of social media has been increasing significantly in Asian countries (Mak et al., 2014). S. Choi and H. Park (Choi, Park, 2014) gave a reason behind this adoption and discussed that this increase in using Social Networking sites (SNSs) was credited to the abundance of free Wifi spots and fast internet speed in the country. In the previous literature, it was largely assumed that selective exposure is a major contributor of political polarization among media users (Stroud, 2010; Kim, 2015; Arceneaux et al., 2012). But these studies were more

focused on the amount of information filtering (selective exposure) rather than a complete exposure of social media. C.R. Sunstein (Susntein, 2009) argued that the disagreements on politics can exacerbate polarization because it can create a divide in the members' opinion who participates in the political discussion.

Social Media, Political Engagement, and Party Loyalty. Political engagement is defined as an individual attitude, interest or feeling towards political matters or issues (Barrett, Brunton-Smith, 2014). Party loyalty is defined as the strength of association or identification of an individual with a political party or partisan group (Westfall et al., 2015).

Since its inception, the social media has been credited to provide a platform where the users can share and discuss their political ideas despite of not having the election environment in their community. A study found a strong correlation between the use of social media and the increase in the political awareness among the users that further cultivated into the offline participation (Ahmad et al., 2019). Moreover, the political parties use social media to market their manifesto and activities to aware the new voters as well as to keep the loyalty of their supporters (Dabula, 2016).

A Case of Pakistan Politics. The current Pakistan political landscape has been divided into pro Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and anti PTI ideological spectrum. It also points to ponder that the political parties in Pakistani are usually referred to as one man or one family. Nowadays, there is an ideological rift between the pro government and anti-government supporters. Pro-government supporters believe that there is only a solution to the current poor economic condition of Pakistan and that is to eradicate corruption and they found sending the political leaders behind the bars who allegedly involved in corruption scandals in their previous tenures. These supporters even ignore warnings of the international bodies to do something magical to get the economy of the country on track. The recent wave of inflation in Pakistan is also being associated with the wrongdoings of the previous governments by the pro-governmental supports. On the other side, the anti-government supporters allegedly blame the establishment and (sometimes even) judiciary to support the present prime minister of Pakistan named Imran Khan comes into power. The latter also criticized the government's policy of sending almost every politician of Pakistan behind the bar on the name of accountability against corruption. The rift has become worse and worse day by day between these kinds of people having different ideologies.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on political identity theory and self-categorization theory. The theory argued that intergroup conflict increases the differences among the perceptions of different categories. These perceptions accentuate the importance of group identity (Tajfel, Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985). This group identity can create the positive attitude towards in-group and negative attitude towards out-group member. When people use social media, they discuss their opinion and thoughts with online community which engages them socially and politically. This political engagement on social media become a cause of positive and negative attitude towards those people who have different opinion. Similarly, social media provide a chance to interact with people who have similar identity with a party. By reading the posts, comments of their party leaders and major influential, people offline political loyalty converted into online loyalty. This loyalty makes those people polarized because they only align themselves with those people who have similar opinion. Based on these theories, the mediating role of political engagement and political loyalty is being examined between social media use and polarized political view.

H1: Social media use will be a significant predictor of political polarization.

H2: Social media use will be a significant predictor of Political engagement.

H3: Social media use will be a significant predictor of Political loyalty.

H4: Political engagement will mediate the association between social media use and political polarization (issue based, leadership-based and party-based).

H5: Political loyalty is a mediating factor in the association between social media use and political polarization (issue based, leadership based, and party based).

2. Material and methods

Research Design. The current study used the correlation model because this design is useful when we study the behavior pattern and causes of those behavior (Cohen et al., 2007; McMillan, Schumacher, 2006). Keeping in mind the nature of correlation research, the purpose of the present is to measure the effect of Independent variable (social media usage) on dependent variable (political polarization) in the presence of mediation variables (political engagement and party loyalty).

Data and Analytic Sample. We collected the date from the students at different universities of Lahore (University of Education, University of the Punjab, Lahore College for Women University, Beacon House National University, University of Lahore, University of Central Punjab). The researcher employed the purposive sampling technique to collect the data from 400 respondents. We removed the 30 questionnaire who have missing values or were not properly filled. Moreover, 20 questions were removed because student filled them inattentively. In remaining, 350 university respondents 170 were females (48.57 %) and 180 (51.42 %) were male students. The age of these respondents falls between the range of 20 to 28 years with a mean value of 23.05 years (SD=2.33). All of participants were a regular user of smartphone and social networking sites. Participants daily use of internet was measured in the descriptive part of the study and the results showed that 25 participants spent 2 hours a day on the internet (7.14 %), 160 participants spent 2-3 hours a day on the internet (45.71 %), 85 participants spent 4-5 hours a day on the internet (24.29 %), while 80 participants spent more than 5 hours a day on the internet (22.86 %). In addition to this, participants purpose of using social media was measured in descriptive part. The results showed that primary purpose of using social media among university students was communication (n=140, 40 %), information and news (n=80, 22.86 %), educational (n=60, 17.14 %), and entertainment purposes (n=70, 20 %).

Data collection procedure. Data was collected from the respondents after taking their content. Consent forms were signed by the students before filling the questionnaire. In addition to this, the researcher took the special permission from different university teachers and questionnaire were filled by mass communication students during their lectures. Students pay more attention when the questionnaires had assigned them during their class. Only those participants were taken in the class who were voluntarily willing to fill the survey. Participants were briefed that their data remained confidential and anonymous.

Measures. The five-item social media use scale was developed with the help of an existing study (Lee, 2016) to assess the political communication through social media. Respondents were asked to tell the frequency of their social media use by utilizing the 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1=not at all to 5= very frequently. The researcher asked the following questions from the respondents: (1) how frequently they get public affairs or political information via social media, 5) whether they follow news about people from political parties, movement activists, or public affairs commentators through social media. The original scale reliability was $\alpha = .70$. For present study, social media use scale reliability was $\alpha = .79$.

Perceived Political Polarization. Perceived Political Polarization is defined as the extent to which an individual differentiate himself from other individuals or social groups based on ideology and political issue (Levendusky, Malhotra, 2015). The perceived political polarization scale was adapted from E. Matsuno (Matsuno, 2013) study. The perceived political polarization was measured on the basis of leadership, party and the basis of issues. To measure the political polarization on the basis of leadership, the political leaders of three major political parties were considered which includes Imran Khan, Shahbaz Sharif, Bilawal Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari. The name of Nawaz Sharif was excluded because after the decision of Supreme court, he was holding no party position. Political polarization on the basis of political party was measured by asking the respondents about their opinion about three major political parties. Six issues were selected which were related to government spending on education and health, defense spending, economic crises, job's insecurities, helping minorities, and corruption issue. Leadership and party polarization subscale was measured on the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1= Extremely Conservative to 5= Extremely Liberal. On the other hand, issue based political polarization was measured on the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. For the current study, the reliabilities of perceived political polarization subscales were good ($\alpha_{Leadership=}.84$, $\alpha_{Party=}.83$, $\alpha_{Issue=}.81$).

Political Engagement. Political engagement is defined as an individual attitude, interest or feeling towards political matters or issues (Barrett, Brunton-Smith, 2014). The political engagement scale was developed by C. Lee, J. Shin, A. Hong study (Lee et al., 2018) to measure the civic participation. The respondents were asked to indicate their agreement and disagreement with the item of scale. The scale consists of seven items which includes (1) I regularly read news about politics, (7) I vote. The scale was measured on 5-point liker scale and responses were ranged between 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. One item in the scale was reverse coded.

The original scale showed Cronbach value of the seven items was .79. For the current study, political engagement scale displayed adequate reliability α = .85.

Party Loyalty. Party loyalty is defined as the strength of association or identification of an individual with a political party or partisan group (Westfall et al., 2015). Party loyalty was measured through the Identification with Psychological Group (IDPG) scale developed by a previous study (Mael, Tetrick, 1992). The original scale consists of 10-items while we used the modified version of this scale which was used in the previous studies (Bankert et al., 2016) study. They adapted the scale and created the three new items and used the five-items of the original scale. Moreover, they reworded the scale items from "this group" to "this party". Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statements regarding loyalty to their favorite political party to whom they support. The scale was based on 8-items and all the questions were arranged on five-point Likert scale. The present study scale reliability was α = .87.

3. Discussion

The current study explored the association of social media usage with political polarization among the university students of Lahore. Previous studies were more concerned about the status of political polarization on social media (Levendusky, Malhotra, 2016; Prior, 2013; Yang et al., 2016) but this study deals with the effects of social media usage on perceived political polarization occurring at party, leadership, and issue level. In addition to this, previous studies found that social media use was negatively related with a person political view (Song et al., 2020; van Erkel, Van Aelst, 2020; Weeks et al., 2017). In other words, social media use can change a person views from being neutral to liberal and conservative.

In direct effects, we found that social media usage was a significant predictor of political engagement and indirectly effecting perceived political polarization through this mediator. These findings are also inconsistent with previous findings that user of social media use this platform for sharing political content, news, engage in discussion with their friends and family member, share videos and pictures of their voting and political participation in rallies (Boulianne, 2015; Johnson et al., 2020; Koiranen et al., 2020; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Urman, 2020; Valenzuela, Somma, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2019). This kind of political engagement leads the users towards extreme political views when they discuss their views in online and offline platforms.

It is considered that high political engagement warrants a health democracy because people participate in political discussion, come out to vote, enhance their political knowledge through debates, and discuss political issues with other people which ultimately helps the people to understand the system, institutions, and society. Our study results show that increased political awareness and knowledge moves the people away from each other when those people have different opinion, and these findings are similar to other studies (Bennett, Iyengar, 2008; Sunstein, 2009).

Party loyalty affects an individual processing and behavioral attitude towards a political party. Results shows that social media is a strong predictor of political loyalty and political loyalty is a strong predictor of political polarization. These results are complementary to previous studies that high party identification or people with greater partisan strength are more likely to participate in rallies, donating money and influencing others to vote for their party (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Dalton, 2016; Koiranen et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

Moreover, our study found that social media is directly and indirectly effecting the political polarization, this may be because a number of younger people are joining the social media who are less political tolerant than their elders (Arshad, Khurram, 2020; Davis, 2009; Hahn et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2020; Sobieraj, Berry, 2011; Van Bavel et al., 2021). Furthermore, in Pakistan, social media is a platform where anyone can express his opinion and there is no strict control regarding the criticism on political parties and leaders. One group troll the other group if their political leaders or political party do something or say something bizarre. When interpersonal political talk in general has become polarized, so it is possible that social media political talk also become political polarizing.

There are three suggested directions for future research. First, we need to understand the political engagement through social media. This political engagement is a result of deliberate and open-minded discussions or it is because that social media is providing different view to their users. Second, findings related to party loyalty may provide an opportunity to think from different perspectives. People are choosing a party which are in line with their political thoughts because

they are exposing themselves with their favorite political parties manifestoes, actions and messages through social media platform. Political polarization in a society has a positive side because gap in political ideologies helps the society in political choices (Abramowitz, Saunders, 2008). Third, the future can take control of those variables which are particularly are associated with political polarization. Political interest, political tolerance and gender are strong predictor of political polarization. Future studies should consider these variables as a set of control variables.

This study has few limitations. First, we took the social media use in terms of political messages and this measure may not differentiate between low and heavy user of social media. Moreover, use of different social media platform is also not take into account. As the sample has been obtained from different universities undergraduate and graduate students, so the findings of this study are not generalizable to whole population.

4. Results

Structural equation model (SEM) using Partial least squares (PLS), especially Smart PLS v. 3.2.7 (Ringle et al., 2015), was employed to estimate the measurement (outer model) and the structural model (inner model) for the parallel mediating role of political engagement and political loyalty between social media use and political polarization. PLS has numerous strengths that made it more appropriate for the current study, including its less stringent statistical assumptions, and its ability to estimate complex models such as parallel mediating effects (Astrachan et al., 2014). A 5000 bootstrapped sample was generated for standard errors and t-statistics to estimate the statistical significance of structural model for path coefficients.

Evaluation of Measurement (outer) Model. To determine the psychometric properties of the measurement tools, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to assess reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measures. As shown in table 1, all the alpha coefficients, composite reliability (CR) estimates and average variance extracted (AVE) values were greater than the criteria of 0.7, 0.7 and 0.50 respectively (Henseler et al., 2016).

To assess convergent validity, factor loadings of scales items on their respective constructs were examined. All items' loadings were above the minimum threshold value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010). The percentage of variance explained of factors social media use, political engagement, leadership-based polarization, party-based polarization, and issue-based polarization were 55, 53, 53, 52, 50 and 52, respectively. Whereas both reliability coefficients i.e., Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were ranging from 79 to 90.

Table 1. Psychometric Properties of Social Media Use, Political Engagement, Leadership Based Polarization, Party Based Polarization, and Issue Based Polarization

Variables	K	λ Range	α	CR	AVE
Social Media Use	5	0.70-0.80	0.79	0.86	0.55
Political Engagement	7	0.56-0.82	0.85	0.89	0.53
Political Loyalty	8	0.67-0.78	0.87	0.90	0.53
Leadership Based Polarization	7	0.58-0.79	0.84	0.88	0.52
Party Based Polarization	7	0.61-0.78	0.83	0.88	0.50
Issue Based Polarization	6	0.56-0.82	0.81	0.87	0.52

Note. k = number of items, CR = composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted, λ (lambda) = standardized factor loading α = Cronbach's alpha

Discriminant validity was tested in two different ways (Henseler et al., 2016; Voorhees et al., 2016). First, the square root of average variance extracted AVE values for each scale was greater than the construct's respective correlation (maximum shared variance MSV) with all other factors (Fornell, Larcker, 1981) (see Table 2). Third, we used the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (Henseler et al., 2015). In this vein, all values were below the more conservative threshold value of 0.85 (Clark, Watson 1995; Kline, 2011) (see Table 3). Together, the above results provided evidence for convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation among Factors

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Social Media Use	13.92	4.67	0.74	0.47	0.25	0.01	0.16	0.08
2. Political Engagement	21.06	6.00		0.73	0.48	0.28	0.57	0.35
3. Political Loyalty	24.40	7.19			0.73	0.35	0.50	0.34
4. Leadership Based Polarization	20.25	5.61				0.72	0.57	0.66
5. Party Based Polarization	20.95	5.44					0.71	0.48
6. Issue Based Polarization	16.11	3.73						0.72

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio HTMT Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Social Media Use		0.55	0.29	0.12	0.2	0.17
2. Political Engagement			0.55	0.32	0.67	0.41
3. Political Loyalty				0.4	0.58	0.4
4. Leadership Based Polarization					0.69	0.78
5. Party Based Polarization						0.57
6. Issue Based Polarization						

Evaluation of Structural (inner) Model. For the evaluation of the structural model, direct and indirect effect i.e., mediation, of the paths were calculated, see Table 4 and Table 5 respectively.

Table 4. Direct Effects of Social Media Use, Political Engagement, Political Loyalty and Political Polarization

Direct effects	Coeff.	Standard Deviation	T-Statistics	P-Values
Social Media Use ➔ Political Engagement	0.47	0.05	10.49	0.000
Social Media Use ➔ Political Loyalty	0.25	0.05	4.64	0.000
Social Media Use ➔ Issue Based Polarization	-0.12	0.06	2.02	0.044
Social Media Use ➔ Leadership based Polarization	-0.17	0.06	2.78	0.006
Social Media Use ➔ Party Based Polarization	-0.15	0.06	2.49	0.013
Political Engagement ➔ Issue Based Polarization	0.22	0.06	3.84	0.000
Political Engagement ➔ Leadership based Polarization	0.29	0.06	5.02	0.000
Political Engagement ➔ Party Based Polarization	0.30	0.06	5.06	0.000
Political Loyalty ➔ Issue Based Polarization	0.30	0.06	4.85	0.000
Political Loyalty ➔ Leadership based Polarization	0.21	0.06	3.33	0.001
Political Loyalty ➔ Party Based Polarization	0.50	0.06	8.48	0.000

Note. Coeff. = standardized regression coefficient

The results of direct effect showed that social media use was found to be a significant positive predictor of political engagement and political loyalty. While it was found to be a significant negative predictor of and political polarization (issue based, leadership based, and party based). Whereas political engagement and political loyalty were found to be significant positive predictors of political polarization (issue based, leadership based, and party based). Thus, H1, H2 and H3 were supported.

Table 5. Indirect Effects of Political Engagement and Loyalty between Social Media Use and Political Polarization

Mediators	Issue Based Polarization		Leadership based Polarization		Party Based Polarization	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Political Engagement	0.14***	0.03	0.10***	0.03	0.23***	0.03
Political Loyalty	0.05**	0.02	0.07***	0.02	0.07***	0.02

Note. Coeff. = standardized regression coefficient

The results of the indirect effect showed that political engagement and political loyalty was found to be significant mediators between social media use and political polarization (issue based, leadership based, and party based). Thus H4 and H5 were supported.
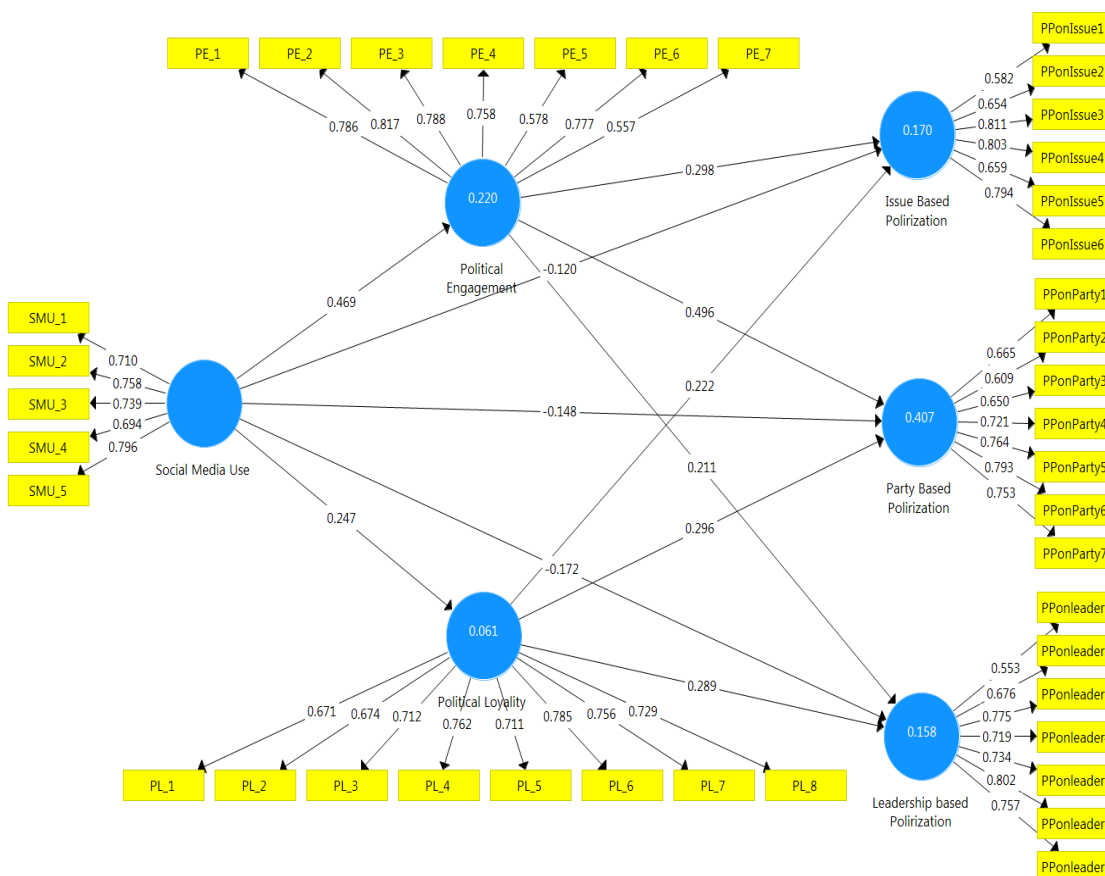

Fig. 1. Structural Model

5. Conclusion

With the emergence of new media, political attitude and behavior of an individual has become a new debated topic among the scholars. From many years, scholars are trying to understand the new changing that caused a change in political behavior. The focus of the researcher has been shifted from internet to social media websites. Number of scholars often points out the social media as a reason for changing nature of political attitude and political polarization among youngster due to their selective exposure to different messages. However, there is a limited research is available that tells how different mediating variables (political engagement and party loyalty) is affecting the political polarization. Therefore, we conducted a study to empirically test the association between social media use and political polarization by taking a sample of undergraduate and graduate students from different universities of Lahore. In this study, we tested the direct and indirect effect of social media use on political polarization.

The finding of the current study suggest that social media plays a significant role in engaging citizens and leading them towards political polarization. We also found that social media is also increasing the party loyalty of its users thereby indirectly creating political bias towards out-group. Thus, these results are an evidence that political engagement and party loyalty produced by social media is a significant factor which is leading the users towards political polarization. As new media has different platforms through which people consumes news and discuss political issues, so it would be difficult to treat this platform uniformly. It is possible that Facebook and Twitter are more related to political engagement than other social media types currently available to youngsters (Lee, Myer, 2016). Therefore, more research is required to understand that how social media is increasing political polarization through party loyalty and political engagement.

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