

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A UNIFYING OR DIVIDING TOOL? A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In the digital era, social media has become one of the main components in the life of the global community. This article analyses the role of social media from a sociological perspective, with the aim of understanding whether social media serves more as a unifying or dividing tool for communities. On the one hand, social media has the ability to bring together individuals from different parts of the world, form solid communities based on shared interests and values, and facilitate social mobilisation and solidarity campaigns. On the other hand, it can also deepen social polarisation and fragmentation through algorithms that create echo chambers, as well as the spread of disinformation and hateful content that fuels social conflict. Thus, social media is a double-edged sword that requires critical understanding and appropriate policies to maximise its potential as a unifying tool, while reducing its risk as a divisive tool.

Keywords: Social Media, Unifying Tool, Separator.

Introduction

Since technology has evolved, it has given birth to various social media platforms that have become an integral part of everyday life. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok have changed the way humans interact, communicate and share information. Social media allows individuals to connect across geographical, cultural and social boundaries, creating global communities that were previously unthinkable (Kavak et al., 2021).

Social media has evolved from a tool for sharing personal moments to a complex tool for a variety of activities, including marketing, education, entertainment, and social and political campaigns. The rise of features such as live streaming, stories and instant messaging apps has added a new dimension to the way people interact online (Shah, 2020).

Along with that, easier access to mobile devices and the internet has extended the reach of social media to the entire world, creating an infinite global communication ecosystem. The use of sophisticated algorithms enables personalisation of content, which can increase user engagement but also pose challenges such as filter bubbles and echo

chambers (Huebner, 2021). New trends such as influencer marketing and viral content are also changing the digital marketing landscape, while issues such as data privacy, cybersecurity and the spread of disinformation are emerging as major challenges affecting public trust in the platform. These developments show that social media continues to adapt and evolve, shaping and being shaped by global social, cultural and technological dynamics (Lindner & Barnard, 2020).

However, along with the benefits it offers, social media also brings a number of challenges and controversies. One of the main issues that arise is the role of social media in influencing social structures. On the one hand, social media is often revered as a tool that can unite various groups of people with different backgrounds, facilitate solidarity in various social movements, and disseminate important information quickly. On the other hand, it is also criticised for its potential to trigger conflict, spread disinformation and create social polarisation (Mariana et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of social interaction in cyberspace has also changed the way people communicate and build relationships, by allowing for faster and wider interactions without geographical restrictions. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok allow individuals to share real-time moments, thoughts and opinions with a larger audience (Erjem, 2024). In addition, the presence of online groups and communities provides a place for people with similar interests to gather and discuss, forming relationships that may not happen in the real world. However, online interactions also pose challenges such as cyberbullying, the spread of false information, and the negative impact on mental health of social comparison and seeking validation from the number of likes or comments. Nevertheless, cyberspace remains an important space for collaboration, learning and dynamic cultural exchange (Ghorui, 2024).

The study of the impact of social media on social interaction is becoming increasingly relevant, especially in the context of changing socio-political dynamics. In various parts of the world, social media has become a powerful tool in protest movements, political campaigns, and social campaigns. However, cases of spreading hatred, hate speech, and fake news also show the dark side of social media (Marmo, 2021).

This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: Does social media act more as a tool to unite or divide society? What are the factors that determine this role? How do social mechanisms in cyberspace affect the real world?

This research aims to explore and analyse the role of social media as a tool for unifying or dividing society from a sociological perspective.

Research Methods

The study in this research uses the literature method, which is an approach that involves the collection and critical analysis of various written sources relevant to a particular research topic. The aim is to understand and synthesise existing knowledge, identify trends and gaps in previous research, and build a strong theoretical basis for further research. The process involves compiling a bibliography based on authoritative

sources, reading and assessing articles, books and other documents, and compiling a structured summary to systematically present key findings (JUNAIDI, 2021); (Abdussamad, 2022). This method is essential in providing context and supporting research arguments using empirical evidence and pre-existing theories. In addition, literature research helps researchers to ensure that their study has originality and a meaningful contribution to the field of science being researched (Wekke, 2020).

Results and Discussion

Social Media as a Unifying Tool

Social media has become a highly effective tool in bringing together individuals from different backgrounds and cultures around the world. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn allow people to instantly connect, share experiences and support each other regardless of geographical boundaries. In many cases, social media has become a bridge between communities that may not have previously interacted, creating rich and diverse dialogues that can enrich each individual's perspective (Kaufmann & Manarioti, 2021).

One clear example of social media's function as a unifying tool is during natural disasters or humanitarian crises. Through these platforms, news and information can spread quickly, allowing people from different parts of the world to provide aid or moral support. Charity and fundraising campaigns conducted through social media often raise significant amounts of money in a short period of time. In addition, initiatives such as collecting blood donations or providing temporary shelters can be organised more efficiently through these online networks (Brookins & Jindapon, 2021).

Not only in emergency situations, social media also facilitates social and political movements that bring about positive changes in society. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and Climate Strike managed to gather millions of supporters from all over the world who united to demand justice and change. Through hashtags and online campaigns, the voices of individuals from different corners of the world can be heard, creating substantial pressure on policymakers and institutions in authority. Social media provides a platform for activists to spread their messages, engage others and organise collective action even when they are far away (Riffe et al., 2023).

However, social media also has challenges and limitations in its unifying role. The spread of false information and hate speech can divide communities and create tensions. The algorithms used by many social media platforms also tend to create a 'filter bubble,' where users are only exposed to information that aligns with their own views, reducing opportunities for dialogue and understanding across perspectives (Madu, 2021). It is therefore important for social media users to use these platforms wisely and critically, ensuring that they contribute to the building of inclusive and harmonious communities.

On the other hand, social media also offers various features that can be utilised to promote togetherness and address these challenges. Features such as discussion groups, collaboration on cross-border projects, and educational webinars can be a means to

develop constructive and fact-based dialogue. Digital education and media literacy are becoming increasingly important to empower users to filter valid information and avoid bias and misdirection. Through collaboration between technology companies, governments and communities, ethical norms and policies can be applied to create a healthier and more productive social media environment (Usman & Okafor, 2021).

Not only that, the creation of inspiring and positive content also plays an important role in strengthening social ties. Influencers, celebrities and public figures have great influence in shaping public opinion and the behaviour of social media users. By utilising these platforms to spread messages of benevolence, tolerance and cooperation, they have the capacity to inspire millions of people to build a more tolerant and inclusive global community. Initiatives such as charity challenges or awareness campaigns also demonstrate how social media can be used for good causes and bring about positive change at scale (Karell & Sachs, 2023).

Amidst technological advancements and increased use of social media, it is important to always remember that these technologies are just tools, and how we use them will determine their impact on our society. By promoting positive and responsible use, social media can truly be a powerful tool in uniting differences and building solidarity among different groups. This proactive approach will not only maximise the benefits of social media, but also minimise the risks that may arise (baihaqi, 2023).

Thus, social media has great potential as a unifying tool capable of connecting individuals from different parts of the world and backgrounds. Through rapid and widespread communication, social media can facilitate assistance in crisis situations, support social and political movements, and promote constructive dialogue. However, challenges such as the spread of false information and polarising opinions need to be addressed through digital education and critical awareness. With a thoughtful and responsible approach, social media can be a powerful platform for creating a more inclusive, harmonious and solidary global community.

Social Media as a Tool of Separation

Social media, while serving as a powerful and accessible communication tool, can also act as a divisive tool among communities. The anonymity and ease of sharing content on the internet can often exacerbate conflict, fake news and dissent. When different views are amplified by algorithms that tend to display content that aligns with users' preferences, society becomes more divided as people are less likely to see different points of view or prefer information that reinforces their own beliefs (Takeuchi et al., 2023).

In addition, social media often creates a bubble or echo chamber where users only interact with people who share similar views. This increases political and social polarisation, making discussion between groups difficult. When people feel alienated from opposing views, healthy and constructive dialogue becomes rare. In such a situation, social media users are more likely to block or ignore dissenting views than to try to understand

them, reinforcing social groupings based on narrow commonality of views (Alshubaily, 2021).

Unfortunately, misinformation and fake news also make matters worse. Social media's role in the rapid dissemination of information, without adequate verification, allows fake news to spread faster than true clarification. When people are exposed to misinformation, their opinions can be moulded or changed in ways that are not based on facts. As a result, misunderstandings and misperceptions can deepen, exacerbating distrust and conflicts between groups in Society (Zulfiqar et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is important to place digital and critical literacy as a top priority in the use of social media. Users need to be equipped with the ability to critically evaluate news sources and content. Social media platforms themselves also have a responsibility to develop more transparent algorithms and policies to filter out false information and encourage more inclusive dialogue. While these challenges are complex, concerted efforts from individuals, communities and platform managers can turn social media into a tool that unites rather than divides Society (Connolly, 2023).

Furthermore, the psychological impact of excessive social media use cannot be ignored. Many studies show that social media users often experience feelings of loneliness, jealousy, and depression due to constant exposure to content that shows the seemingly perfect lives of others. This further reinforces the individual's sense of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. As people become more focused on the idealised self-image on social media, real-world interpersonal connections can become more tenuous. This phenomenon has a negative impact not only on individual mental health, but also on overall social cohesion (Hayes, 2022).

As one of the solutions, education on the healthy and responsible use of social media should be intensified. Digital literacy programmes in schools, communities and workplaces can help individuals recognise the negative impacts of social media and how to manage them (Kantayeva, 2024). In addition, initiatives by governments and non-profit organisations to provide resources and support for the mental health of social media users are essential. By doing so, people can be more aware of how to use social media to build constructive and positive dialogue (Helal & Ozuem, 2021).

The approach of social media platform providers also plays an important role. Technological innovations such as the use of fairer and more transparent algorithms should be developed to reduce the spread of misinformation and promote quality content. Features that encourage more meaningful interactions between users can help reduce the bubble and echo chamber phenomenon. With various parties committed to understanding and addressing the negative impacts of social media, it is possible to create a healthier and more supportive digital ecosystem (Shahid, 2024).

Overall, while social media has great potential to connect people from different backgrounds, it can also be a powerful divisive tool if not used wisely. Social polarisation, the spread of fake news, and negative psychological impacts are real challenges that users and providers of digital platforms have to face. However, with good digital literacy

education, mental health support, and platform policies with integrity, social media can be transformed into a tool that strengthens human relationships and promotes a more harmonious society.

Contextual Factors Influencing the Role of Social Media

Social media is not only a communication tool, but it is also influenced by various contextual factors that shape the way it is used and its impact. One of the main factors is culture. Different countries and communities have different norms and values regarding social interactions, which are reflected in how they use social media. For example, in the United States, where individualism tends to be strong, many users may focus more on self-expression and personal branding. In contrast, in more collectivistic countries, such as Japan or South Korea, social media use may emphasise group harmony and shared interests (Krishna, 2021).

Political factors are also highly influential in the use and impact of social media. In authoritarian regimes, access and content on social media can be heavily controlled by the government, which uses the platforms for propaganda and to control the flow of information. Meanwhile, in democratic countries, social media is often an important tool for political activism and participation, facilitating protest movements and political campaigns. However, it also brings challenges such as political polarisation and the spread of disinformation that can affect political stability (Kumar, 2021).

In addition, economic factors play a significant role. In countries with more limited internet access and less developed digital infrastructure, the influence of social media may not be as strong as in developed countries (Şahin, 2022). In contrast, in countries with thriving digital economies, social media is often at the centre of business innovation and digital marketing. Companies use these platforms to reach consumers in a more personalised and interactive way, while individuals also find employment and entrepreneurship opportunities through such online networks (Yazıcıoğlu, 2023).

Finally, the evolution of technology itself is a contextual factor that influences the role of social media. Every advance in technology, such as artificial intelligence and advanced algorithms, changes the way content is delivered and received. These technologies can increase user engagement and provide a more personalised experience, but also raise ethical concerns such as privacy and algorithm bias. A deep understanding of how these contextual factors interact and influence social media can help us manage its positive and negative impacts more effectively.

Conclusion

Social media plays a dual role as a tool that can both unite and divide people, depending on the context and how it is used. As a unifier, social media has the ability to bridge distance and time, allowing individuals from different parts of the world to connect and interact instantly. This creates a space for communities that share certain interests, ideas and values to come together and collaborate, even if they are geographically distant.

Social media has also become an important platform for social mobilisation and solidarity, for example in social movements and humanitarian campaigns.

However, on the other hand, social media also has great potential as a divisive tool. Algorithms designed to maximise engagement can create echo chambers where users are only exposed to views that align with their own beliefs, thus deepening social polarisation and fragmentation. The spread of disinformation and hate through social media can fuelled conflict and tension between communities. As such, social media can be a double-edged sword that requires critical understanding and thoughtful policies to maximise its benefits as a unifying tool while minimising its risks as a divider.

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