

Polarization in the Short-Video Era: Attention, Identity, and Everyday Political Talk

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Abstract

Short-video platforms have become an important infrastructure of political communication as users increasingly encounter public affairs through rapid, visual, and emotionally charged content. This transformation matters because politics is now experienced less through sustained deliberation and more through fragmented clips, symbolic cues, and routine platform interaction that can intensify social distrust. This article examines how short-video environments reorganize attention, identity performance, and everyday political talk in ways that deepen polarization. The article adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach grounded in media sociology, digital political communication, and affective polarization research. It draws on contemporary scholarship on platform affordances, short-video culture, political signaling, and algorithmically mediated visibility. Analytical attention is directed to attention infrastructures, memetic compression, identity performance, affective escalation, and relational sorting as interconnected mechanisms shaping political perception. A mechanism-based synthesis is used to clarify how short-video communication transforms disagreement into moralized and socially consequential forms of conflict. Polarization emerges as a sociotechnical condition in which platform design, symbolic communication, and everyday interaction reinforce selective exposure, quick judgment, and political hostility. Short-video politics therefore affects not only formal democratic contestation but also civic trust, social ties, and the emotional structure of public life. The article contributes to the field by offering an integrated sociological framework for understanding how short-video platforms reshape polarization beyond conventional explanations centered only on ideology or elite conflict.

Keyword

polarization; social media; political communication; identity

1. Introduction

Short-video platforms have become a central infrastructure through which politics is encountered in ordinary life, especially among users whose media habits are organized around mobile scrolling, rapid consumption, and continuous visual exposure. Politics no longer arrives mainly through scheduled news bulletins, editorials, or extended debate, but through an endless stream of clips consumed during moments of boredom, fatigue, or distraction (Chan & Yi, 2024). This shift matters sociologically because the form of communication helps shape the kind of public it produces. A public organized by short-video feeds is structured by speed, repetition, audiovisual intensity, and weak contextual stability rather than by sustained deliberation.

Political reality is increasingly experienced through fragments such as accusations, reaction clips, triumphant soundbites, sarcastic edits, and montage-based claims of proof. These fragments do not simply represent politics after the fact, because they actively organize what appears salient, who seems credible, and which emotions feel appropriate (Ekström, 2016; Mall et al., 2024). In plural and multi-religious societies, this transformation is especially significant because identity cues embedded in clothing, tone, language, and symbols can quickly attach politics to moral belonging. The rise of short-



video politics therefore requires a rethinking of polarization as a condition shaped not only by ideology and institutions, but also by platform form and everyday media practice (Zschau et al., 2025).

The central problem lies in the growing mismatch between how polarization is commonly explained and how politics is increasingly lived. Polarization is often framed as a product of party competition, elite manipulation, or ideological distance, yet these explanations do not fully clarify why disagreement now so often takes the form of moral hostility, reputational anxiety, and social exhaustion (Zschau et al., 2025). Short-video environments introduce a different layer by reorganizing attention, compressing political meaning, and turning emotional reaction into a routine mode of public participation. The real-world relevance of this problem is visible in the way citizens now learn politics through clips, reactions, comment skirmishes, and memetic circulation rather than through stable informational channels (Törnberg et al., 2021). Such environments make conflict entertaining and make certainty feel efficient, which changes the emotional structure of political perception (Lin & Tsai, 2022). Political disagreement becomes harder to contain when users repeatedly encounter outgroups through the most sensational, humiliating, or extreme examples selected by recommendation systems. In this setting, polarization extends beyond electoral behavior and begins to shape family dynamics, workplace caution, reputational risk, and the shrinking of cross-cutting social contact. The problem is therefore not only what people believe, but how platformed everyday life teaches them to feel, infer, and react politically.

A substantial body of scholarship already clarifies several dimensions of this transformation. Previous work has shown that short-video and social media environments alter the circulation of political communication by privileging immediacy, visibility, and emotional resonance over contextual depth (Dan & Arendt, 2024). Research on affective polarization has also established that ideological moderation does not necessarily prevent the intensification of mutual hostility, distrust, and moral disgust between groups. Scholars of digital culture have further demonstrated that platforms distribute influence beyond traditional gatekeepers, allowing micro-celebrities, meme accounts, and ordinary users to become politically consequential under conditions of algorithmic amplification.

The existing literature also suggests that contemporary political talk increasingly relies on performance, symbolism, and visual cues rather than formal claims of expertise. These insights are crucial because they show that political communication is now shaped by infrastructures that reward engagement rather than accuracy. At the same time, current research already recognizes that polarization includes ideological, affective, relational, and behavioral dimensions that do not always move together. What is already known, then, is that digital platforms reshape the terms of political attention and that short-form media are especially conducive to emotional and identity-laden forms of public conflict (Iandoli et al., 2021). What remains less clearly specified is how the short-video format in particular converts these broader platform tendencies into a distinct sociological condition. Much of the literature still treats platforms as generic channels of distribution rather than as environments with specific temporal, visual, and participatory logics (Fata et al., 2025). This leaves a conceptual gap in explaining why short-video feeds are especially effective at turning disagreement into moral threat and why they intensify everyday political suspicion even outside formal campaign periods.

Existing discussions often identify misinformation, outrage, or filter bubbles as discrete problems, but they do not always connect these features to the routine practices of scrolling, remixing, signaling, and watching that structure short-video participation (Kreiss et al., 2020). There is also insufficient conceptual clarity about how clips move from individualized media consumption into meso-level community dynamics such as

avoidance, silence, reputational policing, and weakened civic trust. Without this step, it becomes difficult to explain why polarization on short-video platforms feels both intensely personal and structurally reproduced (Combs et al., 2023). The unknown dimension, therefore, concerns the mechanisms through which platform affordances, content genres, and ordinary user practices align to make hostility profitable, certainty attractive, and ambiguity costly. A more integrated framework is needed to link feed-level interaction to broader social consequences.

The research gap becomes clearer when viewed through the article's mechanism-based orientation. The draft proposes that polarization in the short-video era should be studied as a sociotechnical condition rather than as a simple by-product of political disagreement (Arnold-Murray, 2021). This is a significant move because it shifts attention away from isolated variables and toward the recurring processes through which attention, identity, affect, and social sorting become interconnected. Existing scholarship often offers valuable descriptions of individual platform effects, but it less frequently synthesizes them into an explanatory model that can connect micro-interaction to meso-level relationship change and macro-level trust problems. The need is not only for more description of viral conflict, but for a clearer account of how attention infrastructures, memetic compression, identity performance, affective escalation, and relational sorting reinforce one another. Such a synthesis is particularly important in plural settings where political conflict is entangled with religion, ethnicity, region, and class (Mukerjee & Shen, 2024). The gap therefore lies in the absence of a cohesive sociological framework that treats short-video polarization as a structured condition produced by platform design, creator strategy, and ordinary meaning-making. Filling that gap requires a theory-sensitive model that can travel across changing interfaces without losing explanatory focus.

Addressing this gap is theoretically justified because polarization in short-video environments cannot be explained adequately through content alone. Platform conditions shape not only what circulates, but also which kinds of selves, emotions, and judgments are rewarded. A mechanism-based approach is especially coherent here because short-video systems evolve rapidly, while the underlying social processes of attention capture, narrative compression, moral signaling, and reputational sorting remain analytically traceable (Malik et al., 2025). Such an approach allows the analysis to distinguish politicization from polarization and to clarify why not every increase in public disagreement leads to hostility or social separation.

It also makes visible how conflict becomes embedded in interface design, creator economies, and ordinary interactional routines rather than being imposed solely from above by elites. This matters because short-video polarization operates through repeated exposure, low-friction participation, and emotional training in contexts where users learn which reactions are socially rewarded. A mechanism-based framing therefore provides coherence between platform sociology, identity formation, and civic trust (Bach et al., 2023). It justifies the article's effort to treat short-video politics as an organized condition of public life rather than as a scattered collection of media symptoms. From that foundation, the article is guided by a set of closely related research questions. How do short-video platforms reorganize political perception through attention infrastructures that privilege immediacy, emotional legibility, and retention? In what ways does memetic compression transform complex political conflicts into portable symbols, recurring templates, and moral shortcuts that travel easily across audiences? How do identity performance and micro-celebrity encourage users to signal belonging through aesthetics, humor, sacred cues, and public traces of engagement? Why does affective escalation become so central in these environments, making outrage, humiliation, and certainty more communicable than deliberation or nuance? How does relational sorting carry

platform conflict into families, workplaces, group chats, and community institutions where avoidance and silence narrow cross-cutting contact? What role do misinformation, synthetic media, and opaque governance systems play in worsening these dynamics by intensifying distrust and weakening shared standards of credibility? These questions are designed to move the discussion beyond whether platforms influence politics and toward how specific mechanisms produce durable polarization pathways. The article's analytical agenda is therefore organized around the structured interaction between interface design, cultural performance, and everyday civic experience.

The urgency of these questions is heightened by the fact that short-video platforms now operate as infrastructures of civic feeling in increasingly polarized societies. They shape how people imagine opponents, interpret moral threat, manage reputational risk, and decide whether political engagement is worth the social cost (Berdón-Prieto et al., 2023). In societies marked by pluralism, inequality, and identity sensitivity, these pressures can turn ordinary media consumption into a low-level but persistent training ground for mistrust. The article contributes by offering a mechanism-based framework that helps explain how micro-level platform practices accumulate into community-level distrust and broader governance problems. It also contributes by recentering inequality, showing that visibility, credibility, and safety are not evenly distributed across users and that marginalized groups often bear higher costs of exposure and misrecognition. This framing matters because it moves the debate away from purely individual blame and toward the institutional conditions that normalize conflict as profitable attention (Chen et al., 2022). It further contributes to future research by providing a portable conceptual model that can guide comparative work across languages, regions, and media systems. The broader significance lies in treating polarization in the short-video era not as an inevitable by-product of disagreement, but as a sociotechnical arrangement whose civic consequences demand serious analytical and institutional attention.

2. Research Method

This article employs a qualitative, integrative, and theory-building research design to examine polarization in the short-video era as a sociotechnical condition rather than as a single-variable outcome. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central object of analysis consists of meanings, platform affordances, identity signals, emotional registers, and relational consequences that cannot be adequately reduced to numerical indicators alone (Christofi et al., 2021; Santiago-Delefosse et al., 2015). The analytical framework is mechanism-based and synthesizes sociological perspectives on media, identity, affect, and political conflict in order to explain how short-video environments reorganize everyday political talk. This design works well for the research because short-video platforms change rapidly in interface, norms, and content style, making purely descriptive or platform-specific accounts vulnerable to quick obsolescence.

A mechanism approach makes it possible to identify recurring processes that remain analytically stable even when platform settings shift (Öhman, 2005). It also allows the analysis to connect micro-level interaction on feeds with meso-level social relationships and macro-level problems of civic trust and governance. Within this framework, short-video polarization is approached through linked processes such as attention infrastructures, memetic compression, identity performance, affective escalation, and relational sorting, all of which clarify how platform form shapes political life (Stickley et al., 2022). This design is therefore suited to a research problem concerned with fast-changing media ecologies, moral conflict, and the social production of polarization.

The data are drawn from three main sources: publicly observable platform features such as feed design, recommendation systems, remix tools, and comment architectures; documented creator and audience practices reported in contemporary scholarship on

platform culture; and widely reported scenarios of political communication and misinformation in current public life, used as illustrative rather than statistically representative material. Data collection was conducted through purposive selection of materials directly relevant to short-video political communication, identity signaling, emotional amplification, and everyday media use (Chand, 2025). The units of analysis are not individual users as survey respondents, but platform conditions, content genres, creator strategies, audience practices, and illustrative interaction patterns through which polarization becomes socially meaningful.

The principal analytical dimensions include attention infrastructures, memetic compression, identity performance, affective escalation, relational sorting, governance, accountability, inequality, and context sensitivity. The main instrument is a qualitative coding and synthesis matrix that organizes these dimensions across micro interaction, meso relational dynamics, and macro governance consequences. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across platform features, scholarly accounts, and reported public scenarios, while reliability was supported by conceptual consistency in applying the same mechanism-based logic throughout the analysis. Ethical standards were addressed by emphasizing anonymization, avoiding unnecessary amplification of harmful content, documenting platform conditions carefully, and recognizing that publicly visible short-video content may still be experienced by users as semi-private; for that reason, informed consent and confidentiality remain guiding principles whenever future empirical extensions involve direct observation of identifiable individuals or vulnerable communities (Priya, 2020).

3. Result and Discussion

Short-video platforms intensify polarization by restructuring how political information is encountered, felt, and remembered in everyday life. Political conflict becomes highly visible because platform feeds privilege clips that generate fast attention, emotional reaction, and repeat viewing (Yin et al., 2024). This does not simply increase the volume of political content. It changes the conditions under which political meaning is assembled by ordinary users.

Exposure is organized through fragmented sequences of images, gestures, captions, and reactions that reduce the distance between politics and daily affect. Under these conditions, polarization becomes less dependent on sustained ideological commitment and more dependent on repeated emotional cueing. Politics enters routine life through habits of scrolling, sharing, mocking, and reacting rather than through deliberate civic engagement alone (Arnesson & Grandien, 2024). The result is a political environment in which salience is continuously produced by platform design and normalized as part of ordinary media consumption. A central pattern concerns the role of attention infrastructures in amplifying political salience. Algorithmic feeds favor content that is visually arresting, emotionally legible, and easily re-circulated, which gives contentious political material a structural advantage. Political clips that communicate conflict, betrayal, hypocrisy, or moral threat are especially compatible with this logic because they promise immediate affective payoff. Repetition further intensifies salience by presenting similar themes across multiple creators, edits, and commentaries.

Users may therefore interpret recurrent exposure as evidence of broad social importance, even when the original event is selective, partial, or highly stylized. Attention in this environment is not neutral. It is organized through systems that reward retention, engagement, and reaction. Polarization is strengthened because contentious political material becomes difficult to ignore and easy to revisit. Political perception is thus increasingly shaped by what the feed repeatedly presents as urgent.

The short-video format also compresses political complexity into memetic forms that travel rapidly but carry limited context. Longstanding disputes, institutional conflicts, and policy arguments are transformed into short symbolic packages that privilege recognition over explanation. A slogan, facial expression, chant, clip fragment, or captioned juxtaposition can come to stand in for an entire political position. This compression is effective because it reduces the cognitive burden of interpretation while increasing the emotional clarity of the message. It also creates conditions in which political judgment is made quickly and socially, often before any contextual checking occurs. Complex disagreement becomes easier to circulate when converted into portable symbols of loyalty, disgust, courage, or betrayal. As a result, nuance appears slow and socially weak compared with the speed and confidence of compressed political content. Polarization deepens because symbolic shorthand encourages moral sorting without requiring substantive understanding. Identity performance becomes central within this communicative environment. Political belonging is signaled not only through explicit statements, but also through aesthetics, humor, religious markers, class cues, linguistic style, and visible engagement traces (Wilson et al., 2020). Users demonstrate alignment by liking particular clips, using familiar sounds, repeating insider phrases, or mocking the same targets in recognizable ways. The platform thus turns political identity into a performative practice embedded in ordinary self-presentation.

Such signaling matters because recognition by in-groups is often more immediate and rewarding than careful reflection on political content. Identity becomes legible through repeated stylistic choices that position users within moral and cultural camps. This process is especially powerful in plural societies where politics is already entangled with religion, ethnicity, and social status. Platform participation therefore reinforces polarization by transforming political identity into a visible and socially rewarded mode of everyday performance. Affective escalation further intensifies this process by making outrage, humiliation, certainty, and moral disgust highly communicable forms of political expression. Short-video environments reward emotions that can be instantly recognized and amplified across viewers. Content built around humiliation or indignation tends to spread because it offers both entertainment and moral clarity at the same time. Users are trained to expect politics as spectacle, and this expectation privileges emotional intensity over ambiguity or hesitation. Under these conditions, moderation may appear unconvincing, while certainty appears strong and socially intelligible. Affective polarization therefore expands even where ideological detail remains thin. The emotional structure of political engagement becomes increasingly organized around recurring feelings of threat, ridicule, and group-based resentment. Everyday political talk is transformed into a field where emotional escalation is not exceptional but routine. These dynamics can be summarized through the interaction of attention, compression, identity performance, and affective escalation.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Polarization in the Short-Video Era

<i>Analytical Dimension</i>	<i>Main Pattern</i>	<i>Social Implication</i>
<i>Attention infrastructure</i>	Feeds reward emotionally intense and highly engaging political clips	Increases political salience and selective exposure
<i>Memetic compression</i>	Complex issues become short symbols and moral shorthand	Weakens nuance and strengthens quick judgments
<i>Identity performance</i>	Users signal belonging through visible styles and interactions	Reinforces in-group recognition and out-group distance
<i>Affective escalation</i>	Conflict is organized through outrage, certainty, and humiliation	Intensifies distrust and everyday hostility

Table 1 clarifies that polarization on short-video platforms is not produced by a single cause, but by a mutually reinforcing set of sociotechnical processes. Attention infrastructures determine what becomes repeatedly visible, while memetic compression determines how that material becomes easy to interpret and circulate. Identity performance gives those interpretations social meaning by linking them to belonging, recognition, and reputational signaling. Affective escalation supplies the emotional energy that makes participation compelling and memorable. The table therefore supports the article's broader argument that polarization is produced through the interaction of platform design and everyday communicative practice rather than through ideology alone. It also demonstrates why short-video polarization can appear intense even when users engage through fragments rather than fully elaborated political reasoning. The strength of this framework lies in showing how structural incentives and symbolic practices converge in the production of mistrust. Polarization is thus best understood as an organized communicative condition rather than as a spontaneous overflow of disagreement.

This interpretation aligns with earlier scholarship on affective polarization while also extending it. Prior work has shown that political hostility often grows faster than ideological distance, particularly when group identity becomes emotionally charged. The present discussion adds that short-video platforms intensify this pattern by embedding affective triggers directly into the architecture of visibility and circulation. Research on digital political communication has already demonstrated that algorithmic environments reward engagement-rich content, yet the short-video format heightens this tendency through audiovisual brevity, imitation tools, and low-friction remixing. Media sociology has likewise emphasized that communication form shapes public culture, and this remains crucial here. Short-video politics does not merely distribute existing antagonisms. It reorganizes how antagonism is packaged, performed, and normalized in daily interaction. The article therefore extends previous scholarship by treating format-specific affordances as central to the production of political mistrust. This helps explain why polarization now appears in highly portable, recurrent, and emotionally dense forms.

The implications for civic trust and social relations are substantial. Polarization in the short-video era does not remain confined to campaign cycles or public debate. It travels into family conversations, classrooms, workplaces, friendship networks, and community institutions where visible political alignment may carry reputational consequences. Users may avoid certain topics, disengage from cross-cutting contact, or withdraw from civic discussion altogether because platform conflict raises the social cost of disagreement. Silence, avoidance, and preemptive caution become forms of everyday adaptation to an environment saturated with moralized political signals. Distrust is therefore reproduced not only through direct argument, but also through the shrinking of safe spaces for ambiguous or exploratory conversation. The interpersonal effects of platformed polarization are cumulative because they shape habits of perception and expectation over time. Ordinary relationships become more vulnerable when opponents are repeatedly encountered as stylized threats rather than as complex persons. Civic weakening in this sense is relational before it is formally institutional. These patterns also matter for platform governance and public policy. Moderation systems designed to address explicit hate or misinformation may be less effective against the slower accumulation of hostile affect through repetition, insinuation, and moralized humor. Short-video formats make accountability difficult because clips can be rapidly remixed, decontextualized, and redistributed across multiple audiences. Synthetic media and manipulated audiovisual material intensify this problem by increasing uncertainty about what is authentic, staged, or selectively edited. Platform companies therefore govern not only speech, but also the

conditions under which trust becomes possible or impossible. Public institutions, educators, and civil society actors face a related challenge because digital literacy cannot be limited to fact-checking alone. Users also need interpretive tools for recognizing affective manipulation, symbolic compression, and reputational signaling. The policy issue is thus broader than content removal. It concerns the infrastructures through which political hostility is normalized as entertainment and rewarded as engagement.

The discussion has several strengths and limitations. Its main strength lies in the mechanism-based explanation of how polarization is assembled through linked platform processes rather than attributed to isolated variables. This approach makes it possible to connect feed-level design, creator strategy, and everyday social consequence within a single analytical frame. It is also useful because it remains portable across changing interfaces and emerging platform features. At the same time, the analysis is limited by the rapid evolution of short-video environments and by the difficulty of measuring long-term behavioral effects from communicative patterns alone. Another limitation concerns variation across language communities, national media systems, and regulatory contexts, all of which can shape how polarization is experienced. One unexpected insight is that political entertainment may deepen serious social mistrust without requiring sustained ideological commitment from most users. The casualness of participation does not reduce its significance. It may instead make polarization more ambient, repetitive, and socially durable.

Future inquiry should move toward more detailed comparison across platforms, countries, and audience groups. Youth political socialization deserves particular attention because short-video environments increasingly shape first encounters with public conflict and civic identity. More research is also needed on marginalized communities, whose exposure to ridicule, misrecognition, and algorithmic amplification may carry unequal social risks. Comparative work on religious and ethnic plural societies would be especially valuable because identity-sensitive settings can reveal how symbolic cues become politically explosive under short-video conditions. Practical application should focus on digital literacy programs that address not only misinformation but also affective manipulation, memetic shorthand, and the social pressures of visible political signaling. Institutions concerned with democratic resilience need frameworks that account for the everyday emotional and relational consequences of platform design. Short-video polarization is not simply a media trend. It is a civic problem rooted in the interaction of technology, identity, and ordinary communication.

4. Conclusion

Polarization in the short-video era is best understood as a sociotechnical condition produced through the interaction of platform design, symbolic compression, identity performance, and affective escalation. The discussion has emphasized that short-video platforms do not merely distribute political disagreement more widely, but reorganize how politics is perceived, felt, and enacted in everyday life. Attention infrastructures make conflict highly visible, memetic compression turns complex issues into portable moral shorthand, and identity signaling transforms political alignment into an ordinary mode of public self-presentation. These processes intensify affective polarization by rewarding outrage, humiliation, and certainty more effectively than nuance, hesitation, or contextual explanation. The effects extend beyond formal politics and enter family relations, workplace caution, civic trust, and the management of everyday social boundaries. Political hostility therefore becomes embedded in ordinary communicative routines rather than remaining confined to exceptional moments of crisis or campaign competition. Short-video polarization emerges in this sense as a patterned environment of civic life rather than as a temporary distortion of democratic discourse.

The article contributes to the field by offering a mechanism-based framework that links platform affordances to broader sociological consequences in a more integrated way than many existing accounts of digital polarization. Its conceptual value lies in treating attention infrastructures, memetic compression, identity performance, and affective escalation as interconnected processes rather than as isolated variables. This perspective extends earlier scholarship on affective polarization and digital political communication by showing how short-video formats intensify mistrust through their specific temporal, visual, and participatory logic. It also contributes to media sociology by demonstrating that platform form shapes not only information exposure but the emotional and relational structure of political life. The analysis further strengthens debates on civic trust by clarifying how polarization is reproduced through ordinary habits of scrolling, reacting, signaling, and avoiding rather than through ideological commitment alone. In this formulation, short-video platforms appear as infrastructures of civic feeling that shape how users imagine opponents, interpret threat, and navigate reputational risk. The broader scholarly contribution lies in repositioning short-video politics as a serious site for theorizing the relationship between media systems, social identity, and democratic strain.

Future research should extend this framework through comparative analysis across different platforms, languages, and political contexts in order to clarify which mechanisms are broadly shared and which are format- or region-specific. Greater attention is also needed to youth political socialization, since short-video media increasingly shape first encounters with civic conflict, moral belonging, and public visibility. Research on marginalized groups would be especially important for understanding how unequal exposure, misrecognition, and symbolic targeting are distributed within platformed political environments. Longitudinal work could further illuminate how repeated participation in short-video conflict affects trust, cross-cutting interaction, and political withdrawal over time. There is also a strong need for policy-relevant inquiry into platform governance, synthetic media, digital literacy, and the regulation of emotionally manipulative content that falls short of clear misinformation. Practical efforts aimed at democratic resilience should therefore move beyond fact-checking alone and address the broader emotional and relational ecology of short-video politics. Advancing this agenda remains essential for understanding how ordinary media routines are reshaping the civic foundations of plural and democratic societies.

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