



A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN PAKISTAN THROUGH X DISCOURSE OF IMRAN KHAN

Neelam Farrukh Afridi
neelamf6790@gmail.com

MPhil Scholar, Department of English Linguistics &
Literature, Riphah International University, Islamabad,
Pakistan

Dr. Farooq Ahmad
faruqmalik101@gmail.com

Sr. Lecturer, Department of English Linguistics &
Literature, Riphah International University, Islamabad,
Pakistan.

Abstract

This study critically examines the role of social media in shaping political polarization during the premier tenure of Imran Khan from 2018 to 2022 with a focus on the impact of polarization on the X users in Pakistan. As social media platforms increasingly construct political communication, its role in reinforcing ideological divides in Pakistan remains underexplored. The primary objectives of the study are to indicate the linguistic and rhetorical elements in Imran Khan's X discourse that construct political polarization and to analyse how these elements align with broader political party strategies to shape public perception. Ideology Square model of Teun A. van Dijk has been used as a theoretical framework to explore the linguistic choices and rhetorical strategies of political leaders and their supporters to emphasize and reinforce in-group positive features and out-group negative attributes. The findings of the study highlight a consistent emotionally charged rhetorical elements, strategic omission and ideological framing, which collectively deepen social division and reinforce digital echo chambers. The X-posts of Imran Khan's political discourse are performative, shaping public opinion and amplifying adversarial attitudes. Furthermore, X users interaction highlights that political leaders' digital narratives significantly influence public discourse and identity construction.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Digital Media, Ideological Square, Political Communication, Political polarization, X Discourse.*

Corresponding Author: Neelam Farrukh Afridi (MPhil Scholar,
Department of English Linguistics & Literature, Riphah International University,
Islamabad, Pakistan). Email: neelamf6790@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Digital media has significantly reshaped political communication process, by offering new opportunities to express opinions and participation in democratic debate. In Pakistan, this shift has been profound. Youth bulge of the country uses social media a lot to construct their identity and participation in political discourse. Among these digital media platform, X (Twitter) has emerged an important platform political discussion, notably during the premiership tenure of Imran Khan (2018-2022). However, alongside increased engagement lies a growing concern; the rise of political polarization fostered by ideological driven narratives disseminated through social media. X platform was used extensively for constructing public perceptions, rally political support, and marginalize opponent voices. This change with political polarization has coincided in the country, characterized by the ideological echo chambers and adversarial public engagement. The study mainly focuses on analyzing the X-discourse of Imran Khan during his premiership to understand how political polarization was linguistically constructed and amplified. Through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and employing Teun A. van Dijk's ideological square, the study investigates linguistics strategies employed to focus on positive self-representation while negative portraying political opponents. The idea of "us versus them" is one of the key parts of this study. It further helps to show the public sentiment is manipulated and ideological divisions are entrenched.

Despite the proliferation of digital political communication, limited study has critically investigated how such media discourse contribute to polarization in Pakistan. The absence of analytical focus on the language strategies employed by political leaders on social media hinders a deeper understanding of political manipulation and identity formation. The study addresses the current gap by exploring how Imran Khan X discourse (2018-2022) reflects and reinforces ideological divides. Further the study is significant as it looks at the dimension that has not been studied much in the country. The researcher is analyzing selective tweets and public responses towards these X discourse narratives. Furthermore, the main objective of the study is to understand the Imran Khan's X discourse contribution to the widening of ideological gaps with Pakistani society, fostering digital tribalism and disrupting constructive political discourse. Finally, the study offers insights not only into the linguistic strategies used by political leadership but also public response

toward these rhetorical devices. The study contributes to broader discussion on political communication, digital polarization, and the role of social media in constructing contemporary political realities in developing democracies like Pakistan.

1.1. Significance of the Study

The study contributes significantly to the growing body of literature on social media communication and political polarization in Pakistan, particularly through X discourse. By analyzing the X discourse of Imran (2018-2022), the research shed light on the linguistic patterns and political narrative strategies contribute to shape public opinions, reinforcing ideological construction and societal division. Furthermore, the study constructs political identities in an already fragmented society such as Pakistan. X (formerly Twitter) serves as a powerful social media tool for political elites to bypass traditional media platform and engage directly with the country's public. The study explores how Imran Khan employing rhetorical discourse on X to influence citizens, mobilize public support and deepened social divides. Through the lens of CDA, this research unpacks the implicit power dynamic, persuasive strategies, and ideological framing embedded in social media (X-discourse) communication. This study is important as it provides valuable insights for media scholars, political analysts and policy maker seeking to understand the evolving relationship between politics and social media platform in the Global South. Furthermore, it offers practical insights for digital discourse literacy initiative and democratic resilience by indicating the role of social media discourse in exacerbating polarization. Finally, it not only provides a localized understanding of political polarization but also contribute to broader global discussion on political process, populism, social media influence, and democratic backsliding in digitally connected world sphere.

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To identify the linguistic and rhetorical elements, portray in Imran Khan X post (2018-2022) that contribute to political polarization among young X users in Pakistan.
2. To analyze the themes and persuasive tactics used in Imran Khan's X discourse in the broader context of political party strategies to influence public opinion.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What linguistic and rhetorical elements in Imran Khan's X posts that contribute to political polarization among young X users in Pakistan?

2. What themes and persuasive tactics are utilized in Imran Khan X posts, and how do they align with political ideology of PTI?

2. Literature Review

Political polarization is increasingly recognized as a global phenomenon exacerbated by digital media, especially on social media platform such X (formerly Twitter). In the context of Pakistan, the political discourse on X during Imran Khan premiership tenure (2018-2022) presents a fertile ground for investigating that how language and digital media interact to reinforce ideological divides. Theoretical grounding for this study is Teun A. van Dijk's ideological square. It posits the political discourse operates by focusing on positive attributes of the in-group such as a political leader's party, while downplaying its negatives for out-group such as opponent parties. This rhetorical lens has been widely applied to investigate media discourse, especially in political discourse settings.

Research from western context, a study by Conover et al. (2011) highlighted that political communication on social media trends to reinforce echo chambers and identity partisanship. Tweets and retweets often occur within ideological aligned political groups, which limiting exposure to diverse political viewpoints. Conover et al. study's analysis of US congressional tweets indicated clear partisan clustering in Tweeters' retweet networks. Although some degree of ideological crossover occurs through mentions, the overall effect reinforces political leader's party narratives and hostility toward opposition party. However, research in the context of Pakistan, the study conducted by Masroor et al. (2019) and Butool & Tehseem (2022) investigated the role of social media platform in political communication and polarization. Masroor et al. employed Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze Pakistani political elites construct ideological narratives through Twitter. The study utilized van Dijk's ideological square strategies, integrating literary devices such as hyperbole, irony, and omission, to construct support and discredit opposition. Similarly, study of Butool & Tehseem analyzed political tweets during the 2020 Gilgit Baltistan elections and found that social media was instrumental in constructing institutional identities and political legitimacy through media discourse.

Echo chambers and filter bubbles were first introduced by Pariser (2011) and later in-depth explored by Colleoni et al. (2014), have become particularly relevant in examining online platforms political discourse. These phenomena show that individual consume and reinforce similar ideologies through algorithmically curated digital content and resulting in ideological silos. In the country of Pakistan, where digital media content

usage among youth is high, such dynamics are likely to intensify political polarization, especially when mixed with emotionally charged rhetorical elements.

Additionally, empirical studies shed light on how young generation of the country influenced by political discourse on social media platforms. According to a study conducted by Farooz (2003) found that university going students of Pakistan engaging with political polarized content on Twitter, reported increased hostility towards oppositions' viewpoints and reduced willingness to participate in civic discourse. The findings are consistent with global patterns and underscore the importance of studying digital and social media discourse in young generation which dominated political spaces. Studies of Simon (2023) and Tsang & Rojas (2020) examined sensational touch in political tweet made by U.S. political leaders, reveals that emotionally charged rhetoric tends to be more widely shared and influential. Their findings suggest that tone and rhetorical choices significantly shape public opinions, a pattern observable in Imran Khan's X posts as well. During Imran Khan premiership tenure, he frequently used emotionally charge rhetoric, often invoking national prides, religious sentiments, and many a time anti-corruption themes to mobilize public support and marginalize rivals.

Furthermore, the presence of misinformation and disinformation, particularly during contentious event in the country such as elections, political parties protest, and court ruling of political elites, has played a vital role in polarizing political debate. A study by Lasser et al. (2022) noted that fake news is disproportionally shared by partisan actors, thereby amplifying ideological divides. This phenomenon is particularly significant with reference to Pakistan, where political elite frequently accuse each other of spreading misinformation to manipulate public perception. Past studies shown that general relationship between social media and political discourse, only few researchers have explicitly examined the tweet of Imran Khan by employing Critical Discourse Analysis to understand polarization. The current study addresses this gap by providing a focused analysis of Imran khan's X discourse, its ideological underpinning and its social consequences.

Thus, the current literature review underscores that political discourse and social media platform particularly X is shaped by broader ideological frameworks, rhetorical strategies, and technological affordances. The Pakistan context provide unique dimensions, integrating volatile political climate, high rate of young generation engagement, and contemporary culture of digital activism.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate political polarization in Pakistan as reflected through the X (formerly Twitter) discourse of Imran Khan from 2018 to 2022. CDA provides that theoretical and methodological tools required to examine the way language is used to construct and reinforce ideological divides in political communication. The research data collection consists of purposive sampling of Imran Khan's official X account (@ImranKhanPTI) posts during his premiership tenure (2018-2022). The X posts are selected across significant political events during this period of time such as country's general election, opposition parties' protests, foreign policies announcements, and other democratic controversies. Additionally, these X posts were selected based on their discourse relevance to themes of national identity, opponents' rhetoric, populist framing, and political polarization. The data collection process was made through manual archiving and social media scraping instruments while ensuring the preservation of tweet metadata, such as publication dates and public engagement metrics such as retweet and reply. Moreover, the data collection selection ensured portrayal across the study period and political milestones.

The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Teun A. van Dijk (1998) ideological square, which provide a cognitive frame for examining different group ideologies are discursively constructed and polarized.

Teun A. van Dijk outlines ideological square in four key strategies are as followed:

Table 1: van Dijk's ideological Square

Us	Them
Emphasize Positive	De-emphasize Positive
De-emphasize Negative	Emphasize Negative

- a. Emphasizing positive information about the ingroup (Us)
- b. De-emphasizing on their negative actions
- c. Emphasizing negative information about outgroup (Them)
- d. De-emphasizing on their positive attributes

These ideological square strategies are significant in political discourse, where identity construction and othering are central. This framework application to Imran Khan's X discourse (2018-2022), critically investigates the political polarization is

linguistically encoded. Furthermore, van Dijk ideological square is essential in interpreting implicit meaning, discursive strategies, and the sociopolitical implication embedded within social media, particularly in X-discourse, communication.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis is made on the ideological square of Teun A. van Dijk, which serve as the primary analytical framework to investigate X discourse of Imran Khan (2018-2022) during his premiership tenure. The X posts are analyzed based on the ideological square four dimensions such as, emphasizing positive about in-group, de-emphasizing their negative, emphasizing negative about out-group, and de-emphasizing out-group positives.

The analysis starts with Imran Khan's post from June 12, 2019, where he denounces corrupt political leaders and criticizes societal tolerance for such elites. Terms such as "*money launderers*" and catchy phrases like "*damaged our nation & impoverished our people*" clearly highlight the negative aspects of the out-group. Throughout Imran Khan X-discourse by aligning corruption with economic suffering of ordinary citizens of the country, he frames his political rivals implicitly the PML-N and PPP as politically and morally bankrupt and unpatriotic. This rhetorical move not only delegitimizes the opposition but also strengthens the perception of his own political party as the moral and reformist force. Khan's statement, "*now seeking refuge behind 'democracy'*" shows that the democratic framework is being manipulated by corrupt political elites. In the above statement the use of quotation mark around '*democracy*' implies a distorted version of democratic practices and values, which Imran Khan contends the opponent hides behind to avoid accountability system. Such linguistic choices illustrate van Dijk's ideological square where negative attributes of the out-group are emphasized, and positive traits are denied.

Similarly, another post, dated November 20, 2022, showcases Imran Khan emphasizing the in-group's economic achievements, highlighting the economy as "*signs of a robust recovery*." The linguistic choice of "*robust recovery*" implies not only economic improvement but also shows competence, positioning his government activities as capable successful. This narrative strategy construction fits van Dijk's first dimension, emphasizing on positive information about in-group. The framing of this narrative also suggests that Imran Khan's PTI government was leading Pakistan towards prosperity despite internal sabotage from the opponent political elites. The Imran Khan's X-posts also utilizes discursive strategy omission, for example, there is evident an avoidance of discussing governmental shortcomings during Covid-19 pandemic or addressing ventilator

shortages. Instead, the discourse redirects blame to the opposition for policies such as lockdowns, described as action that “*destroy lives and livelihood.*” This portrays the van Dijk’s frame third dimension of de-emphasizing negative information about the in-group, which shift accountability away from the ruling party.

Literary devices such as hyperbole and rhetorical questions are also prominent in Imran Khan’s X-posts. In one instance, he states, “*Where are plunderers of public wealth given such special treatment?*” This rhetorical question incites public indignation, framing political oppositions as criminals who do unjust to their public and enjoy privilege. The narrative crafts a binary opposition between the righteous self and the corrupt others, reinforcing in-group solidarity and out-group criticism. Furthermore, analysis of the X-discourse shows that even the potentially positive actions of the out-group are constructed negatively. For example, any conciliatory and constructive effort by the opponents is interpreted as self-serving and misleading. Imran Khan’s post language patterns such as “*desperation to get an NRO*” deny any public serving intention behind their actions. Such as statements aligns with van Dijk’s fourth dimension of ideological square which focuses on de-emphasizing the positive about the out-group actions.

Critically, the linguistic tools extend beyond basic framing and into more complicated discourse mechanisms such as presupposition and implication. For instance, when Imran Khan indicates through X-posts that all the opponent elites are inherently corrupt, it demotivates alternative interpretations and fosters a polarized worldview. This framing is not only discrediting the opposition (out-group) but also to leave no room for neutral discourse. X-users interact with such posts mirror and often amplify the same ideological narrative patterns. These in-group supporters utilize the language of the leader, often engaging in moralistic denunciation of the opposition and promoting their political figure as a savior of the political system. Furthermore, these interactions highlight that political leaders’ X-discourse serves as ideological blueprint for public narrative construction, guiding how followers interpret and participate in the broader political discourse.

This discursive echo chamber reinforces ideological boundaries. The public reactions, retweets comments, and hashtags display commitment to the in-group’s values whereas aggressively refusing any out-group perspectives. These public responses often use literary and emotionally charged linguistic patterns such as, metaphor and analogies, which shows not only ideological alignment but also emotional investment. The consequences of this communicational model is the creation of digital echo chambers. These spaces amplifying in-group narratives while aggressively rejecting the out-group viewpoints. This exclusionary discourse construct leads to hardened political position, lack

of empathy, and even dehumanizing the ideological oppositions. The research analysis of opposition X posts further identifies the personalization of critique as another discursive strategy. PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto phrases such as “*selected Prime Minister*” and similarly the use of alter spelling such as “*corruPTion*” exemplify the linguistic pattern and creativity to personalize and target criticism, making it more impactful and memorable.

Finally, the study analysis of Imran Khan’s X discourse concludes that these discursive, ranging from linguistic choice to framing and omission, are not accidental but strategic. Political elites in their X discourse consciously employ these tools to legitimize the actions of (us), delegitimize (them), and manipulate the public perception. These linguistic use in the X (formerly Twitter) discourse, therefore, is not merely descriptive but performative, which actively construct ideological narratives and exacerbating social divisions.

5. Discussion

The study overall findings reaffirm that political debate on X platform is a powerful force in constructing ideological division within the Pakistani society. Through the strategic development of Teun A. van Dijk ideological square lens, Pakistani political elites, especially Imran Khan’s X posts, which has successfully constructed and sustained narratives of “*us vs. them*” dichotomy that is central to political polarization within the country. Digital media, as shown in the analysis portion, does not merely indicate pre-existing political divides but also acts as a catalyst for their rivalry intensification. The linguistic patterns framing, such as use of emotionally charged metaphors and selective omissions, leads to the construction of ideological narratives among the masses. These linguistic cohesive narratives then permeate public consciousness and are internalized by supporters which further contribute to the creation of echo chambers.

One critical aspect of the study highlighted in the discourse shows X facilitates the performance of political identity. Politically associated supporters mirror the discursive strategies of their leaders which reinforcing the language of moral superiority and delegitimization of the opponents. The social media X platform become not just a space for debate but a battleground for ideological and narrative dominance. X users do not only consume political narrative but actively participate in producing these narratives. Furthermore, the research shows that political discourse of X fosters hostility rather than just dialogue. Constructive engagement is rare; instead, the digital discourse is marked by ridicule, rejection, and dehumanization of dissenting opinions. This user’s attitude rigidity indicates the normalization of ideological driven hostility. The lack of respect to

opposition views curtails democratic pluralism, fostering an environment where political competition transforms into aggressive existential conflict.

The personalization of critique, particularly through X linguistic patterns, styles, and hashtags, further intensifies the emotional tenor of discourse. It further transforms political disagreement into moral conflict. This emotionally appealing frame leads to highlight politically polarized digital communities where opponent is not debated but condemned. More significantly, the discussion also focuses on the implication for democratic health in Pakistani society. If political engagement on X discourse continues to follow this polarized language patterns, it risks undermining public trust. Moreover, legislative effectiveness and civic cohesion in the country. Democracy thrives on political dialogue and compromise, both sometime it stifled in polarized digital spaces. Therefore, political polarization observed in Imran Khan's X posts is both a language and system phenomenon. It shaped political elites' rhetorical discourse but sustained by participatory digital media culture. Recognizing this dual process of X discourse is important for developing intervention to promote healthier political discussion in the social media platforms.

6. Conclusion

This research critically investigates the role of Imran Khan's (2018-2022) X discourse in facilitation political polarization in Pakistan. The study utilized van Dijk lens of Ideological Square as an analytical framework. The study highlights how Imran Khan during his premiership tenure uses linguistic strategies to construct politically polarized ideology that are subsequently reinforced by public reactions and narratives. Imran Khan's X discourse was central to the study analysis, underscore consistent language patterns of emphasizing in-group legitimizes while de-legitimizing opposition though emotionally charged linguistic strategies, and morally framed rhetoric. The analysis of the study further highlights the effectiveness of these linguistics strategies that not only construct public opinions but also foster social media echo chambers. The users interact with ideologically insulated communities. These digital echo chambers limited exposure to diverse perspectives, contributing to a rigid political environment hostile to compromise and open dialogue.

The research findings highlight that social media platforms such as X play a dual role such as;

1. Tools for democratic participation, and
2. An enablers of political polarization

Whereas these social media platforms also provide access and immediacy. They encourage rhetorical extremism and identity-based factionalism. The discourse personalization and emotionalization, particularly through viral linguistic features such as hashtags, metaphors, and rhetorical questions, develop these political divides. Eventually, the study concludes that political polarization on X-discourse not merely a byproduct of offline politics but an active, digitally mediated process that transform political discourse into political ideological warfare. This study has significant implications for the quality of democracy in the country, affecting public trust, civic engagement and political pluralism. To mitigate these effects of the X-post made by Imran Khan, future researcher should explore cross-social media platform comparisons, algorithmic influences on political polarization, and the psychological impacts of ideological echo chambers.

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