



Emotions, social media, and politics: a scoping review

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Abstract

Social media features emotionally laden political discussions among citizens. In recent years, scholars have dedicated attention to the role of emotions in these environments, while being confronted with challenges that come with conceptualizing and operationalizing emotions. We take stock of quantitative citizen-level research by conducting a scoping review of 189 research articles (including 204 empirical studies) in communication and political science published between 2013 and 2024. We find a dominance of experiments and cross-sectional surveys. Studies primarily focus on the United States and Europe. Research often fails to connect to established theories of emotions and faces shortcomings in the conceptualization of emotions. Measurement approaches rely heavily on self-reports and text analysis, each with notable limitations. Based on our findings, we identify key needs for future research: stronger grounding in theories of emotions, clearer definitions of emotions, more rigorous approaches to measuring emotions, greater attention to positive emotions, and inclusion of visual-based platforms.

Keywords emotion, social media, politics, scoping review, quantitative methodology

“Why social media makes us so angry, and what you can do about it” (Fleming, 2020). “Does social media leave you feeling angry? That might be intentional” (NPR, 2022). Headlines like these reflect increasing concern about the emotional effects of social media. Throughout the past decade, there has been debate over the role of social media in fueling anger, the ways algorithms favor emotionally laden political content, and how digital platforms make citizens affectively polarized. Emotional dynamics on social media have generated growing interest in political communication research. Particularly, research has examined (a) the consequences of emotionally charged political content on social media for the users (e.g., Lee et al., 2024) and (b) the emotional responses that users develop upon encountering political content (e.g., Hasell et al., 2025).

The emotional dimension of politics is crucial, as citizens may base their political decisions on emotions rather than factual information (e.g., Dai, 2025; Westen, 2007). Emotions thus play an essential role in individuals’ political behaviors. For example, meta-analyses show links between emotions such as anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm with (self-reported) political information search (Funck & Lau, 2024) and anger and enthusiasm with political learning (Graf et al., 2024). Although politics was affective before the emergence of social media, scholars argue that distinct characteristics of social media amplify emotions (Klinger et al., 2023). Social media enables immediate user reactions with no time or space constraints. This allows politicians and other actors to react to events at a faster speed and without gatekeeping

mechanisms (e.g., Klinger et al., 2023). At the same time, ordinary citizens can also respond and disseminate political and oftentimes emotional content (e.g., Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022). Social media users thus not only consume political content, but they also actively participate in the creation and circulation of this content (e.g., Halversen & Weeks, 2023). Studies have shown that emotional social media content generates more engagement (e.g., Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Klinger et al., 2023). Moreover, platform infrastructures increasingly support visual formats (e.g., images, videos), which are particularly effective in conveying emotion (e.g., Kim et al., 2024). Finally, algorithmic recommendations are responsive to users’ emotions, communicating affect to individuals (Hilbert et al., 2018).

To move the field forward, it is important to take a step back and assess the current state of the literature. To meet this aim, we conducted a scoping review that maps emotions research in the context of social media and politics. To understand the literature on citizens’ responses and the operationalization of emotions, this scoping review focuses on quantitative research on emotions, politics, and social media, including studies with citizen-level outcomes.

The aim of scoping reviews is to (a) identify and map the body of literature, (b) clarify concepts and definitions in the literature, (c) examine research conducts, and (d) identify and analyze gaps in knowledge (Munn et al., 2018). To this end, a systematization of empirical studies of emotions in the growing research on social media and politics is lacking. As for any emerging research areas, a rapid rise in scholarship poses conceptual and

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methodological challenges. In this scoping review, we use emotions as an umbrella concept (Lynggaard, 2019) to encompass a wide range of affective phenomena, including affect, discrete emotions (e.g., anger), and affective polarization. In practical terms, the studies on social media and politics involving an affective component (affect and/or emotion) were included. Further, research in this area is heterogeneous regarding the studied emotions as well as political foci. We therefore adopted a broad understanding of political attitudes and behaviors that are relevant to democracy (based on Lorenz-Spreen et al. [2023]).

A comprehensive overview of emotions in this research area is crucial so that future studies can address the conceptual and methodological pitfalls of existing quantitative research. Thus, our review informs the research in manifold ways. First, the review outlines the theoretical approaches undertaken in research on social media, emotions, and politics. Second, it systematizes conceptualizations and operationalizations of emotions in this line of research. Third, it presents the methodological approaches pursued thus far and describes sampling methods and sample characteristics. Fourth, it provides an overview of the topical research areas in which emotions have been most prominently studied thus far.

Objectives of the study

Theoretical approaches

For a large proportion of developments of theory and scholarship of political science (and political communication thereof), the role of emotions as catalysts of political behavior was overlooked (Funck & Lau, 2024). However, over the course of studying political behaviors, particularly in the past decades, scholars have highlighted the role of emotions in politics (Gadarian & Brader, 2023). Accordingly, scholars have developed theories that put emotions in the spotlight.

One of the most widely applied theories for studying the consequences of emotions for political attitudes and behavior is affective intelligence theory (AIT; Marcus et al., 2000). The basic premise of AIT suggests that individuals utilize emotions to help manage attention to political information (Marcus et al., 2000, 2011). AIT puts forward that one's "emotions help govern a reliance on political habits or, alternatively, deliberation and attention to new political information" (Marcus et al., 2011, p. 323). Another widely applied framework is appraisal theories (Lazarus, 1991). Appraisal theories broadly suggest that an individual's evaluation (appraisal) of events or situations elicits emotions (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2002). Another theory applied in the intergroup context (e.g., where animosity between ingroups and outgroups is studied) is intergroup emotions theory (IET; Mackie et al., 2000). IET focuses on emotions created by belonging to social groups (Mackie et al., 2000). Other theories have received some attention as well (for an overview, see Gadarian & Brader, 2023). The question, however, is to what extent this theorizing has been applied to the context of social media. By systematically analyzing which theoretical approaches build the foundation of emotions research on social media and politics, we can identify the lenses through which emotions are empirically studied in this literature:

RQ1: What are the applied theoretical approaches?

Conceptualization of emotions

There is no clear scholarly consensus on the definition of emotions. However, according to a widely used conceptualization, emotions can be understood as individuals' reactions to stimuli or changes in the environment (e.g., Lazarus, 1991). The reaction (i.e., emotion) consists of complex physiological and psychological processes (Gadarian & Brader, 2023). Emotion can be described as a mental state that is short-lived and intense (Nabi, 1999). Scholars suggest that affect and emotions operate in interaction, whereby "emotions are episodic realization of affect" (Von Scheve & Slaby, 2019, p. 46). Marcus et al. (2000) argue that affective response is accompanied by cognitive assessment and discrete emotions (e.g., anger or fear). Literature in the context of politics offers different understandings of emotions (Gadarian & Brader, 2023). Whereas dimensional approaches consider the role of specific (discrete) emotions, valence approaches view affective processes along the binary dimension of positive versus negative (Gadarian & Brader, 2023). A specific area of study that uses a valence approach in the treatment of affect is affective polarization (Gadarian & Brader, 2023). Iyengar et al. (2012) build on the idea of affect as partisan identity and define affective polarization from a social identity perspective as the tendency "to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively" (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 691). "The foundation of the concept is positive and negative affect," and affective polarization consists of two components: "positive in-group affect and negative out-group affect" (Iyengar & Wagner, 2025, pp. 37–38). Iyengar et al. (2019) also argue that affective polarization differs substantially from ideological divide. Although early work on affective polarization paid little attention to psychological theories of emotions (Iyengar et al., 2012), the concept of affective polarization is built on theories of partisanship as social identity, which have drawn on intergroup emotions theory (Huddy et al., 2015; see Bakker & Lelkes, 2024). Given the theoretical relevance of the affective dimensions in affective polarization, we also included studies on affective polarization in this scoping review. We thus analyze the definitions and explore:

RQ2: How are emotions defined?

Role of emotions in research designs

Emotions may influence political processes in various ways. Political social media content can elicit different emotional responses (e.g., Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Lee and Suk, 2025) and some political topics may create stronger emotional responses than others (e.g., Gerbaudo et al., 2023). Emotionality of political content on social media can alter political attitudes or behaviors (e.g., Klinger et al., 2023). The emotional state that citizens have while they are on social media may affect how they process or share misinformation (e.g., Freiling et al., 2023). Emotions (e.g., anger) may also increase attention to misinformation, depending on how relevant the issue is deemed (e.g., Lee et al., 2024). As there are various research questions explored in this context and many ways in which emotions influence politics, we systematize the literature to showcase the role of emotions in the research designs:

RQ3: What is the role of emotions (i.e., independent variable, moderator, mediator, dependent variable) in research designs?

Operationalization of emotions

There are different ways to measure emotions. These include forced exposure to stimuli designed to evoke a specific emotion, emotion-induction techniques that, for example, ask participants to write about a time when they experienced a specific emotion, and emotional experience ratings, which are typically used in surveys (Funck & Lau, 2024). Emotions can also be measured with physiological measures. Regarding analyzing text or (audio)visuals, emotions can be coded manually or using computational approaches. It is crucial to get an overview of which operational approaches are predominant and which are underrepresented:

RQ4: How are emotions measured?

Methods and sampling

To identify gaps in the literature, it is essential to understand the methodological approaches. A variety of quantitative methods have been applied to investigate similar research questions. For example, individuals' emotional reactions to political social media content have been investigated with observational methods, often relying on surveys (e.g., Cheng et al., 2024) and content analyses (e.g., Kluknavská et al., 2025) or interventional methods, such as lab or online experiments (e.g., Doroshenko & Tu, 2023). However, emotions may be operationalized very differently depending on the method at hand. To draw comparisons between the studies and cumulate knowledge, we need to understand which methods are used to study these research questions.

Moreover, for instance, cross-sectional surveys fall short of providing insights into causal mechanisms. Further, what we know about political communication phenomena often stems from Western countries (e.g., Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). We, therefore, explore the applied methodology, sampling approaches, and the characteristics of the samples:

RQ5: What are the methodological approaches employed?

RQ6: What are the sampling procedures and sample characteristics?

Topical areas of research

It is relevant to map the topical areas in which emotions have been studied within the research on social media and politics to better identify knowledge gaps. Emotions are central to various aspects of politics. As we employed a broad understanding of political attitudes and behaviors central to democratic functioning (see Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023), the specific topical areas are also potentially diverse. It is evident from the literature that research on digital media and politics spans a range of outcomes, including polarization, political participation, populism,

misinformation, and hate (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). To get an overview of the topical areas of the sampled literature, we analyzed the main scope of the research articles:

RQ7: Which topical areas are studied?

Method

Literature identification

The review was conducted and reported in line with the guidelines of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). To identify relevant articles, the literature search was conducted using the Web of Science (WoS). The goal of the literature search was to identify research articles that focus on emotions, social media, and politics. The search strategy was designed based on prior research and to meet this goal. Specifically, at least one term related to (a) social media, (b) emotions, and (c) politics/democracy had to appear in the respective title, abstract, or keywords. Thus, the search string consists of three components. To ensure comparability, we built our search string on prior reviews and/or meta-analyses. Specifically, the part of the search string on social media included general terms such as "social media" and "social network" as well as specific, popular social media platforms, and was adapted from Bühner et al. (2024). The part on emotions included general terms on emotion and affect, such as "emotion" and "affective," as well as specified discrete emotions, and was adapted from the meta-analyses by Lench et al. (2011) and Graf et al. (2024). The part of the search string on politics/democracy was based on Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023), reflecting a wide variety of political attitudes and behaviors relevant to democratic principles and functioning of democracies. Thus, the search string includes political variables grounded in relevant concepts identified in the literature and important to democracies, such as a well-informed public, exposure to diverse opinions, discrimination, polarization, and political extremes (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). The full search string is shown in Table S1. Additionally, the search string specified constraints for studies published in English and publication type (article, proceeding paper, or early access). We restricted the search to include WoS categories of communication and political science.

Screening

The search strategy yielded 657 records and was performed on September 2, 2024. The records were screened for inclusion based on the titles and abstracts (see Figure 1 for the PRISMA flow chart detailing the steps of literature identification and screening). To meet the aim of the scoping review, the records were excluded if they (a) were non-empirical/non-original research (i.e., research protocols, meta-analyses, and reviews), (b) none of the empirical studies within the research articles was quantitative, (c) were not in the context of social media (e.g., studies that refer to one's social network but not online social networking sites), (d) were in non-political sphere/non-political research, (e) did not include affect/emotion in the research design, (f) did not include the citizens-level

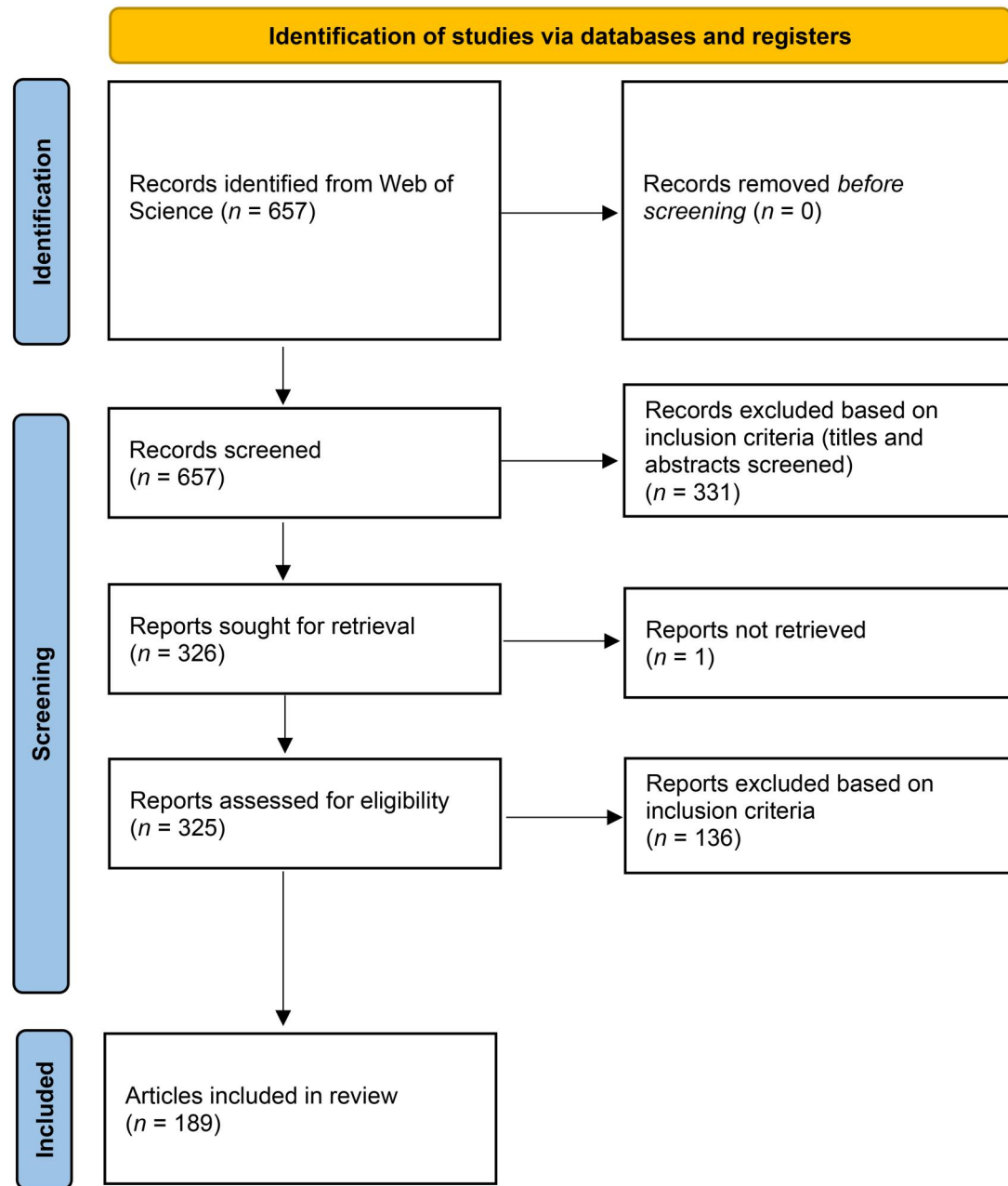


Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram for all stages of the literature search. Based on the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram template (Page et al., 2021).

in the research design (e.g., content analysis of emotional appeals in elite communication), or (g) were not in English. For the exclusion criteria, two coders coded a total of 657 articles based on titles and abstracts. Based on this screening, 331 records were excluded. Prior to coding for exclusion, coders were trained in three rounds. Between rounds, disagreement was discussed. The third round yielded sufficient interrater agreement for the exclusion criteria, with Krippendorff's α being .90 ($n = 65$).

Overall, 326 records were included, and 325 were retrieved (one record was unavailable). During the coding phase, an additional 137 records were excluded because they did not fulfill the exclusion criteria. Thus, in total, 189 records were identified as relevant, coded, and analyzed (see the list of included studies at: <https://osf.io/csaz9/>).

Coding

The coding process included quantitative and qualitative categories, following previous reviews (e.g., Schäfer, 2023). The categories, descriptions, and reliability results are described in Table S2. The codebook is available on the OSF: <https://osf.io/csaz9/>. The coding of quantitative categories was done by applying predefined codes developed based on the initial screening of studies, and to correspond to the research questions. Since some research articles included more than one empirical study, categories were coded at the article or study level. Each empirical study of the articles was coded separately. For the qualitative categories, coders copied the relevant text content from the articles. This applied to all qualitative categories except for the main scope of the study, in which coders briefly summarized the scope of the coded article. In addition, to

examine the main scope of the articles, we analyzed the keywords of the articles.

Two coders coded the articles after training. To assess the reliability of quantitative categories, randomly selected records were coded until sufficient reliability was achieved. After the first round, several categories fell below sufficient reliability. Thus, we made small adjustments to the codebook, discussed inconsistencies among the coders, and repeated the reliability. The second round of the reliability yielded sufficient reliability for 28 out of 30 categories (Krippendorff's $\alpha \geq .79$; articles $n = 40$; 17 articles were excluded based on inclusion criteria; thus, out of those 40 randomly selected articles, 23 articles were fully coded; empirical studies within the coded articles $n = 24$; see Table S2). As two categories (both with high class imbalance; determining the number of relevant empirical studies within the article and election context) fell below a sufficient reliability threshold, they were additionally coded in a third reliability round after the coders discussed inconsistencies. Reliability was

sufficient for the two categories in this third round of reliability coding (for both categories, Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.00$; relevant articles $n = 18$; empirical studies within the coded articles $n = 23$). After this, the full sample was coded by the two trained coders.

Results

In total, we analyzed 189 research articles, consisting of 204 quantitative empirical studies. Table 1 presents an overview of the quantitative results. Looking at years of publication, we see an increasing number of studies on emotions, social media, and politics over time, with a noticeable spike in recent years.

Theoretical approaches

Answering RQ1, most articles did not specify any affect or emotions theory in the theory part (72%, $n = 137$). Of the studies that

Table 1 Quantitative results.

Category	Occurrence
Article level	
Publication year	2024 ^a (22%, $n = 41$), 2023 (28%, $n = 53$), 2022 (18%, $n = 34$), 2021 (12%, $n = 22$), 2020 (10%, $n = 18$), 2019 (3%, $n = 6$), 2018 (2%, $n = 4$), 2017 (3%, $n = 5$), 2016 (2%, $n = 3$), 2015 (1%, $n = 1$), 2014 (1%, $n = 1$), 2013 (1%, $n = 1$)
Study level	
Emotions in research design ^b	Independent variable (30%, $n = 62$), dependent variable (62%, $n = 127$), mediator (20%, $n = 40$), moderator (3%, $n = 7$), non-directed hypotheses/research questions (15%, $n = 31$)
Measurement of emotions ^b	Self-reports (54%, $n = 145$), text analysis (39%, $n = 105$), experimental manipulation of emotions (4%, $n = 10$), image analysis (1%, $n = 3$), multiple measurement within one study (1%, $n = 3$), physiological measures (0%, $n = 1$)
Election context specified	Study conducted in the election context (29%, $n = 59$), study conducted outside the election context (71%, $n = 145$)
Social media platform ^b	Facebook (40%, $n = 82$), Twitter (33%, $n = 68$), social media in general i.e., platform not specified (25%, $n = 51$), Instagram (7%, $n = 14$), YouTube (6%, $n = 13$), WhatsApp (4%, $n = 8$), TikTok (3%, $n = 7$), Reddit (3%, $n = 7$), Sina Weibo (3%, $n = 6$), WeChat (2%, $n = 4$), LinkedIn (1%, $n = 3$), Telegram (1%, $n = 2$), Tumblr (1%, $n = 2$), Pinterest (1%, $n = 2$), Snapchat (0%, $n = 1$), QQ (0%, $n = 1$), Xing (0%, $n = 1$), VKontakte (0%, $n = 1$), Odnoklassniki (0%, $n = 1$), BeReal (0%, $n = 1$), Twitch (0%, $n = 1$), Truth Social (0%, $n = 1$), Parler (0%, $n = 1$), Gab (0%, $n = 1$), Gettr (0%, $n = 1$)
Method of studies	Experiments (24%, $n = 48$), cross-sectional surveys (19%, $n = 39$), fully manual content analysis (16%, $n = 32$), content analysis applying a dictionary approach (14%, $n = 28$), content analysis applying supervised machine learning approach (12%, $n = 25$), longitudinal surveys (12%, $n = 24$), quasi-experiments (1%, $n = 2$), content analysis using dictionary combined with machine learning approach (1%, $n = 2$), social network analysis (1%, $n = 2$), eye-tracking (0%, $n = 1$), experience sampling (0%, $n = 1$)
Sampling procedure (human participants, $n = 115$)	Online access panels using quota-based sampling (48%, $n = 55$), crowdsourcing sampling (e.g., MTurk) (17%, $n = 20$), student samples (11%, $n = 13$), probability sampling (10%, $n = 12$), other type of convenience (6%, $n = 7$), online access panels without specified sampling strategy (5%, $n = 6$), no information about sampling (2%, $n = 2$)
Sampling procedure (content analysis, $n = 89$)	Account-based sampling (51%, $n = 45$), hashtag/keyword based sampling (46%, $n = 41$), combined approach: account-based with hashtag/keyword-based sampling (2%, $n = 2$), specified time frame and random sampling (1%, $n = 1$)
Country of data collection ^b	United States (36%, $n = 74$), Europe (34%, $n = 70$), Asia (19%, $n = 39$), Americas (excluding the United States, 12%, $n = 24$), Africa (2%, $n = 4$), Oceania (2%, $n = 4$)

Note. Results are based on 189 research articles and 204 empirical studies within articles.

^a Articles published until September 2, 2024 were coded because the search was performed on that day.

^b Multiple options were possible to select within this category.

referred to an emotions theory, (cognitive) appraisal theories (e.g., Lazarus, 1991) (11% of all articles, $n=21$) and AIT (Marcus et al., 2000) (10%, $n=19$) were most prominent. Some other emotions theories were referred to, of which more than one or two times cited were functional theories of emotion (e.g., Nabi, 1999) (2%, $n=4$) and IET (Mackie et al., 2000) (2%, $n=3$). A few studies simply referred to affect or affective theories in general (2%, $n=4$).

Conceptualization of emotions

Coders extracted all conceptualizations of affect/emotion in general or the specific affect/emotion studied in respective articles. The qualitative analysis provides insights into the nature of these definitions, examining RQ2. The first observation is that affect and emotion seem to be imprecisely defined, lacking theoretical depth. In some studies, affect or emotions in general were defined in addition to defining the specific affective concept or emotion that was studied. However, oftentimes, only the studied emotion (e.g., anger) or affective concept (e.g., affective polarization) was defined without providing a broader conceptualization of emotions. These definitions were heterogeneous, depending on the affect or emotion at hand. Some studies did not conceptualize the studied emotion or affect at all.

A substantial share of definitions refers to discrete emotions. Specifically, the most referred discrete emotion is anger or outrage (36% of definitions mention anger/outrage, $n=68$) and fear (26%, $n=50$). Moreover, 17% of definitions mention anxiety ($n=32$), 6% enthusiasm ($n=12$), 6% hope ($n=11$), 5% happiness ($n=9$), and 2% worry ($n=4$). What is noteworthy is the larger proportion of scholarly interest in negative emotions than in positive ones. Furthermore, while mentioning the respective discrete emotion, however, many fail to define what exactly is understood under this emotion. A share of studies focuses on what *causes* the discrete emotion rather than what emotion really *is*. For instance, some studies define anger or fear simply as emotions of negative valence, focusing on the explanation of when this emotion arises or is triggered (e.g., Xu et al., 2023a) or with what it associates (e.g., Lee et al., 2024).

Regarding specific affective concepts, one prominent and recurring definition is the definition of affective polarization. Many studies relied on the definition by Iyengar et al. (2012), conceptualizing affective polarization as a (dis)like that individuals have toward those with different views or opposing partisans, or animosity between citizens (e.g., Chan & Yi, 2024). However, the definition of affective polarization in the studies often lacked the conceptualization of affect. Some studies referred to the importance of affect or centrality of emotion in the concept of affective polarization (e.g., Neyazi et al., 2025; Nordbrandt, 2023), but did not specifically define what affect or emotion is.

Role of emotions in research designs

Based on the hypotheses or research questions specified in the studies, we coded the role of emotions in research designs. Addressing RQ3, in the research designs of the sampled studies, emotions were specified mostly as dependent variables (62% of coded studies, $n=127$), followed by independent variables (30%, $n=62$) and mediators (20%, $n=40$). Operationalization

of emotions as moderators was rare (3%, $n=7$). If it was not possible to determine the role of emotions, emotions were coded as part of non-directed hypotheses/research questions (15%, $n=31$).

Operationalization of emotions

Concerning RQ4, primarily, emotions were measured using self-reports (54%, $n=145$) or via text analysis (39%, $n=105$). Experimental manipulation of emotions was less often used (4%, $n=10$). The use of physiological measures was rare ($n=1$).

The qualitative analysis revealed four key observations. First, many content analyses of social media users' emotional engagement used emoji analysis to measure emotional expression. Emoji analysis looks at social media reaction buttons, including "Love," "Care," "Wow," "Haha," "Sad," and "Angry" (e.g., Kluknavská et al., 2025). This measure was often labeled as "emotional reaction" (e.g., Humprecht et al., 2024) or "affective engagement" (e.g., Zhou et al., 2024), although the validity remains unclear.

Second, many content analyses measured emotions with dictionary approaches (e.g., Xu et al., 2023b). Studies with dictionary approaches used a wide set of non-validated dictionaries, which underscores the heterogeneity in measuring emotions. For instance, some content analyses measuring emotional valence measured it with sentiment analysis using three categories that include positive, negative, or neutral sentiment/tonal (e.g., Schlette et al., 2025). Beyond that, dictionary approaches that aim to capture the complexity of emotions have been criticized because of validity concerns (see van Atteveldt et al., 2021).

Third, looking at the measurement of discrete emotions, we see that many studies employing self-reported measurements measured fear, anxiety, and worry (e.g., Kim, 2025) or anger and disgust as one-dimensional (e.g., Sun et al., 2022). Self-report scales also often used single- or two-item scales (e.g., Cheng et al., 2024). Notably, there are very few studies involving self-reports that measured several discrete emotions in a multi-dimensional manner with multi-item scales.

Fourth, as affective polarization was one of the most prominently measured concepts, we zoom in on these self-report measures. Affective polarization was mostly measured with a feeling thermometer based on Iyengar et al. (2012), measuring how "cold/unfavorable" or "warm/favorable" the respondents felt toward the group (e.g., Neyazi et al., 2025). Another prominent measure was asking about sympathy toward political parties and utilizing the Affective Polarization Index (Wagner, 2021), in which a similar level of sympathy toward all parties indicates low levels of polarized attitudes (e.g., Nordbrandt, 2023). Pointing to the missing affect in affective polarization, some studies asked respondents about their attitudes and not about their affective evaluation (e.g., Lee, 2022).

Methodological approaches

Answering RQ5, 56% of the studies involved human participants ($n=115$) and 44% analyzed content ($n=89$). Of all studies, the applied approaches including human participants were experiments (24% of all methodology, $n=48$), cross-sectional surveys (19%, $n=39$), longitudinal surveys (12%, $n=24$), quasi-experiments (1%,

$n=2$), eye-tracking ($n=1$), and experience sampling ($n=1$). Regarding the analyzed content, the methodology included fully manual content analysis (16% of all methodology, $n=32$), content analysis applying a dictionary approach (14%, $n=28$), content analysis applying a supervised machine learning approach (12%, $n=25$), and content analysis using dictionary combined with machine learning approach (1%, $n=2$). Social network analysis was rarely used (1%, $n=2$).

Sampling procedure and sample characteristics

RQ6 examined the applied sampling procedures and sample characteristics. In the studies that included human respondents, participants were mostly recruited via online access panels using quota-based sampling (48%, $n=55$), followed by crowdsourcing samples (e.g., MTurk) (17%, $n=20$), student samples (11%, $n=13$), and probability sampling (10%, $n=12$). Fewer studies utilized other convenience samples (e.g., invitations on social media) (6%, $n=7$), online access panels without specifying the sampling strategy (5%, $n=6$), or did not provide information about sampling (2%, $n=2$). In content analysis, the most common sampling approaches were account-based (51%, $n=45$) or hashtag/keyword-based sampling (46%, $n=41$). Fewer studies combined an account-based approach together with hashtag/keyword-based sampling (2%, $n=2$) or sampled based on a specified time frame and analyzed a random sample of this content (1%, $n=1$).

Examining whether the studies were conducted in an election context, 29% of the studies were in the election context ($n=59$), whereas 71% were not ($n=145$). While survey and experimental research typically specified the exact location of data collection, content analytic research of user-generated content occasionally mentioned only a language or context of collected data (e.g., social media data). These cases were coded as “not specified” ($n=66$). Looking into the specified countries of data collection in the sampled literature, 126 studies (62%) were conducted in a single-country context, while 12 studies (6%) were in a multi-country setting. We used the R package “countrycode” to convert the coded ISO-based country codes to unique countries and map them to regions (Arel-Bundock et al., 2018). Studies have included samples from 56 different countries, but predominantly, from the United States (36% of all coded studies, $n=74$), followed by European countries (34%, $n=70$). Fewer samples were from Asia (19%, $n=39$), the Americas (excluding the United States; 12%, $n=24$), Africa (2%, $n=4$), and Oceania (2%, $n=4$). Table S3 shows the list of countries of data collections.

Regarding the studied social media, most studies investigated Facebook (40% of all coded studies, $n=82$) and Twitter (33%, $n=68$), or did not specify a platform (i.e., social media in general; 25%, $n=51$). Less research has been dedicated to social media platforms known to be more visual, including Instagram (7%, $n=14$), YouTube (6%, $n=13$), and TikTok (3%, $n=7$). Investigation of instant messaging apps, including WhatsApp (4%, $n=8$) or WeChat (2%, $n=4$), was also rare. A full list of social media platforms is in Table 1.

Most studies that specified the investigated social media platform focused on one platform (80% of the studies that specified the platform, $n=125$), while 32 studies examined more than one platform within a single study (20%).

The data also showed that content analyses primarily examined Twitter (49% of all content analysis, $n=43$) or Facebook content (34% of the content analysis, $n=34$), while there exists very little content analysis on other social media platforms. Experimental studies mainly studied Facebook (44% of experiments, $n=21$), Twitter (21% of experiments, $n=10$), or unspecified social media (19% of experiments, $n=9$). Most survey studies (cross-sectional and longitudinal) investigated platform-unspecific social media use (65% of surveys, $n=41$) or Facebook (38% of the surveys, $n=24$).

Topical areas of research

To explore the main topical areas of research (RQ7), we relied on two approaches. First, based on keywords of the articles, we see affective polarization (24 keywords in total), COVID-19 (16 keywords), incivility (13 keywords), and misinformation (12 keywords) as prominent contexts. We also see that these keywords mostly appeared in studies published in recent years. Generally, the most popular keywords were social media (84 keywords) and Twitter (26 keywords). The 10 most popular keywords and their frequency distribution between years of publication can be found in Table 2.

Second, the qualitative analysis of the studies’ scope reveals similar patterns. A prevalent proportion of studies focused on the affective polarization of social media users. Many studies examined crises—predominantly COVID-19 but also terrorism, mass shootings, riots, and climate change. Most dominantly, the articles in the COVID-19 context investigated misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories. Disinformation and related topics were also generally prominent outside the COVID-19 context. Some studies explored incivility and online hate, while others examined elite communication, populism, and user engagement with such content.

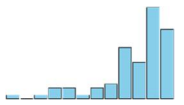
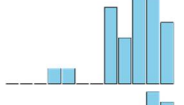
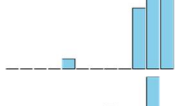
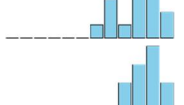
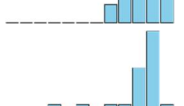
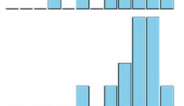
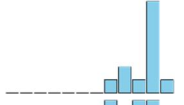
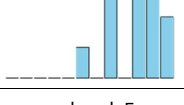
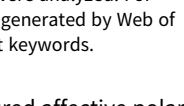
Additional analysis

Given ambiguity in the literature as to whether affective polarization is conceptualized and operationalized in affective or emotional terms, we report additional results, first, while excluding studies that measured affective polarization ($n=166$ empirical studies), and second, focusing only on studies that measured affective polarization ($n=38$ empirical studies).¹ While these results are presented in Supplementary Appendix B, here we highlight the most notable changes compared to the original analysis.

First, looking at studies while excluding affective polarization, the results largely represented the patterns observed in the original analysis (see Table S4 for an overview of the quantitative results). At the article level, we see—similar to the original analysis—that 69% of these articles did not indicate an emotions theory, 12% specified a (cognitive) appraisal theory ($n=19$), and 11% referred to AIT ($n=17$). Furthermore, the number of studies that specified emotion as the dependent variable decreased ($n=95$) but still constitutes over half of the operationalizations of the coded studies (57%). We also observed a decrease in studies involving human participants: 50% of studies included human participants, and 50% analyzed content.

¹ We thank the reviewer for this suggestion.

Table 2 Top keywords of research articles.

Keyword	Count	Frequency between 2013 and 2024
Social media	84	
Twitter	26	
Affective polarization	24	
Facebook	20	
Emotions	18	
Covid-19	16	
Anger	13	
Incivility	13	
Misinformation	12	
Political communication	12	

Note. Keywords as provided by authors to publishers were analyzed. For records without author-provided keywords, keywords generated by Web of Science were analyzed. Two records remained without keywords.

Second, a closer look at studies that measured affective polarization offers interesting insights (see Table S5 for an overview of the quantitative results). Among the subsample of studies that measured affective polarization as a dependent variable, 91% of articles did not refer to a specific affect or emotions theory. We did not consider references to seminal work on affective polarization (e.g., [Iyengar et al., 2012](#)) as sufficient, given that they have been described as "not substantively engag[ing] with psychological theories of emotions" ([Bakker & Lelkes, 2024](#), p. 421). Most studies specified affective polarization as a dependent variable (84%, $n=32$). Moreover, affective polarization was mostly measured using self-reports (87%, $n=40$), studies were primarily based on samples involving human participants (84%, $n=32$), and using cross-sectional (37%, $n=14$) and longitudinal surveys (26%, $n=10$). A notable change compared to the original analysis is also a larger proportion of studies conducted in the election context (42%, $n=16$). Interestingly, while 17 samples were from the US, equally many samples stemmed from Asia. 16 samples

were from European countries. Finally, around half of these studies did not specify any specific social media platform; that is, they measured social media in general (47%, $n=18$), a substantially larger proportion than in the original analysis.

Discussion

The goal of the scoping review was to provide a systematic overview of emotions research on social media and politics. Particularly, we aimed to systematize the role of emotions in the literature on social media users' reactions to emotionally charged political content on social media, as well as individuals' emotional reactions to political content. Due to the focus on media reception research and to provide insights into the measurement of emotions, we synthesized quantitative studies in communication and political science. Against this aim, we analyzed 189 research articles, including 204 unique empirical studies within those articles.

Political communication researchers have acknowledged the relevance of emotions in recent years. This is commendatory, as emotions are crucial for individuals' political attitudes and behaviors. However, what we know about emotions from quantitative studies in the context of social media and politics is (at least partially) based on conceptualizations, operationalizations, and theoretical as well as methodological approaches that have their well-known shortcomings (e.g., [Allen et al., 2022](#); [Erba et al., 2018](#); [van Atteveldt et al., 2021](#)).

When looking at the theoretical approaches of these studies, we see that, surprisingly, most studies fail to connect to established theories of emotion. Even though, generally, political science research on emotions typically strongly relies on AIT (e.g., [Funck & Lau, 2024](#)), we find that this is not the case in the context of social media and politics. Our findings show that most studies do not rely on any affect or emotions theory. Only a few studies build on AIT and/or appraisal theories. Although the relevance of emotions has often been acknowledged, oftentimes the studies on social media and politics appear to use emotions as an "add-on," a rather minor part of the research design, while other aspects are typically the main focus. What is needed, then, is empirical research that is solidly grounded in theories of emotions and puts emotions at the center. Additionally, theory work, accounting for factors such as social media affordances, specific types of social media use, and specific (discrete) emotions is warranted in the future.

Moreover, when considering the articles measuring affective polarization in particular, we found that most of these studies (91%) did not connect to any affect or emotion theories either. Due to theoretical considerations of affective polarization as a concept that is inherently affective ([Bakker & Lelkes, 2024](#); [Huddy et al., 2015](#); [Iyengar & Wagner, 2025](#); [Iyengar et al., 2012](#)), we included these studies in the review. However, the theoretical underpinnings of the concept require further future attention. Much of this research has been built on political theories (and social identity), and as shown in this review and by other scholars, it neglects affect and emotions and related theorizing ([Bakker & Lelkes, 2024](#)). As a consequence, as [Bakker and Lelkes \(2024\)](#) argue, "we do not clearly understand the affective component of polarization" (p. 431). For example, [Scherer \(2024\)](#)

advocates for stronger consideration of appraisal theories of emotion, including appraisal bias and emotion dispositions, in research on affective polarization. Thus, further theoretical advancement is needed to bridge the affective gap in this research area.

Concerning conceptualizations, emotions are often vaguely defined (if at all), and these conceptualizations lack theoretical sophistication. Many definitions fail to define what is understood under the term emotions or the specific emotion, instead focusing on the causes of an emotional reaction rather than the definition of it. We also see that the definitions often refer to negative discrete emotions and rarely to positive emotions. This finding, coupled with many studies in crisis contexts, suggests that research examining the positive aspects and empowering potential of emotions and social media is scarce. Put differently, it can be argued that social media mobilizes and empowers citizens, whereby emotions may help to build a sense of collective identity and motivate participation. Nevertheless, literature predominantly focuses on negative emotions, particularly in crisis contexts. Thus, in the context of social media, studying positive discrete emotions and the potentially mobilizing power of emotions for social movements or causes is an avenue that needs closer investigation in the future (see [van Zomeren, 2021](#)).

We also found that a large share of definitions that were identified in the sampled literature defined affective polarization. The definition of affective polarization, however, often fails to conceptualize the affective component of the concept. Here, more careful conceptualization ([Bakker & Lelkes, 2024](#)) and nuanced considerations of how affect and emotion operate in polarized or polarizing interactions ([Esau et al., 2025](#)) are warranted.

This review also emphasizes several operational and methodological shortcomings. We found that emotions are mostly measured with self-reports or text analysis. Regarding self-reports, many studies conflate several discrete emotions in one measure or lack multi-dimensional multi-item scales. However, single-item measures may fail to capture emotional breadth ([Allen et al., 2022](#)). Future research should assess several discrete emotions within a study (instead of solely measuring e.g., anger) and their potentially differential effects (see [Myers & Tingley, 2016](#)) and employ more advanced scales. For instance, to more comprehensively capture the interpretation of an individual's emotional state, it may be more suitable to use several items that incorporate a range of related terms ([Allen et al., 2022](#)). It is important to keep in mind, however, that self-reports involve respondents' assessment of emotional state rather than felt state. Supplementary to that, studies should employ physiological measures (e.g., skin conductance, facial electromyography, electroencephalography) that are better suited to capture emotions (see [Bakker et al., 2021](#)), as these were nearly absent in existing studies.

Most studies focused on Facebook, Twitter, or unspecified social media (i.e., a measure of social media in general). Of the studies that specified the platform, most focused on a single platform. Future research should go beyond measuring a unanimous "social media" category, accounting for variation among platforms ([Hall, 2025](#)). Emotions are even more powerfully conveyed via visuals, potentially leading to different types of engagement or attitude change. More attention is thus needed to study emotions in platforms where visuals are central (e.g.,

TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube). Moreover, when looking only at studies that measured affective polarization, much of this research focuses on unspecified social media as well. Arguably, not all social media platforms may play the same role in affective polarization, and the unique affordances may be differently associated with polarization dynamics.

The most noticeable operational and methodological shortcomings in content analyses relate to the use of dictionary-based approaches and studying "emotional reactions" or "affective engagement" with Facebook emojis. Reliance on dictionaries poses validity concerns (see [van Atteveldt et al., 2021](#)) and often leads to an overly simplistic approach to study emotions (e.g., positive, negative, or neutral sentiment/toner). Emojis as a measure of individuals' actual emotional reactions can also be criticized. Moreover, content analyses primarily analyze text posted on Twitter or Facebook. Focusing primarily on text neglects the central role of (emotional) visuals on social media. Future research should thus employ validated machine learning approaches (see [van Atteveldt et al., 2021](#)) and conduct multi-modal content analyses.

The findings also showed that there are very few experimental manipulations of emotions (4% of the studies). For the field to gain a better understanding of how emotions actually influence political processes in the context of social media, more research that experimentally manipulates emotions would be beneficial. We acknowledge that this is not an easy task, as manipulation of one emotion may unintentionally trigger other related or conflicting emotions (see [Funck & Lau, 2024](#)). Still, this could be done by, for example, utilizing various affect induction procedures (e.g., pictures, film, autobiographical recall; see [Joseph et al., 2020](#)) and by considering the intensity of emotion, context, and individual differences (see [Funck & Lau, 2024](#)).

Altogether, given the applied methodology in the field, there is a need for method validation and multi-method approaches. Most research in this area follows a psychology-oriented conceptualization of emotions as internal states, felt by individuals. However, research in this area often uses observational measures, which may not accurately capture the actual felt emotion. For instance, inferring anger from the analyzed social media text does not necessarily mean that users felt anger. The conclusion of these studies is then, still, an emotional reaction to social media content, for instance, that social media users felt angry as a response. Anger inferred from such text analysis may match the felt anger, but this cannot be directly assumed. This aspect should be critically reflected upon, and method validation is needed. This could be done by adopting a combination of methods, combining text analysis with self-reports and physiological measures to study responses to social media, culminating in method triangulation, or the use of in situ assessments ([Schnauber-Stockmann et al., 2025](#)). This allows for testing the convergence of methods, enhancing validity and reliability.

Furthermore, we analyzed the prevalence of different sampling approaches and sample characteristics. Most samples stem from non-probability sampling and from the US and Europe, questioning the external validity and generalizability of the empirical evidence. This is a finding highlighted in the field more broadly (e.g., [Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021](#)), but re-emphasizes the need for geographically diverse future research.

By looking at topical areas of the studies, we found a predominance of research on affective polarization. COVID-19 also emerged as a prominent context, particularly regarding misinformation related to the pandemic. These findings point to two conclusions. First, emotions research is hyper-focused on affective polarization, although we can also question the prominence of affect in this research area. Second, interest in emotions within this field was accelerated by COVID-19. As a result, our current understanding of emotions and social media in political contexts is largely based on affective polarization literature and the COVID-19 context. Future research should build on these insights but investigate affective phenomena beyond these contexts.

Limitations

The findings should be interpreted keeping the limitations in mind. As is done in scoping reviews, we had to specify the search terms to identify relevant studies. Although we specified various terms and based the search string on prior research, we cannot be sure that this list was complete. Notably, the part on politics/democracy combines terms relevant to politics and functioning of democracies, reflecting a variety of informational phenomena (e.g., misinformation, disinformation, fake news), media exposure patterns (e.g., news exposure, selective exposure, echo chambers), political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., political behavior, political participation, political information, populism, voting), political extremes (e.g., political extremism, radicalization, far-left, far-right), social dynamics and group processes (e.g., left-wing, right-wing, polarization, false consensus), and hate (e.g., hate speech, incivility) (based on [Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023](#)). While the search string is extensive, it is also limited to these phenomena. As such, this approach is more limited, and the results may reflect a more restricted view of politics and democracy. Another limitation concerns the restriction of empirical studies to the field of communication and political science. Thus, in this review, we see how emotions—which are central in these two fields—are studied, but we cannot compare this to other fields. Future research should compare these findings to other disciplines. Moreover, due to the focus on effects research and the measurement of emotions, the scoping review included quantitative studies alone. Thus, our conclusions are based on the quantitative work in this area. Because of the extensive scope of theoretical and empirical approaches in qualitative studies on emotions, it is challenging to distill the core insights from the diverse qualitative studies. Still, further work is needed to identify the synergies between the quantitative and qualitative studies and to account for the in-depth insights. For example, while quantitative (psychological) approaches often understand emotion as an individual experience, another valuable approach is an understanding of emotion as “the relational interpretation of affect experienced in individual bodies,” but one that can become public and collective ([Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019](#), p. 8). Thus, future work should further aim to bridge these two approaches and build upon them. Finally, we considered articles written in English, although there may be relevant studies in other languages.

Conclusion

The scoping review of emotions in research on social media and politics provides a systematic overview of the conceptualization and operationalization of emotions as well as theoretical and methodological approaches used in the quantitative studies of the field. Based on the findings, there is a clear need for research that (a) is more strongly embedded in theories of emotion, (b) accurately defines emotions, (c) takes a positive emotional turn to unveil the role of positive emotions for political attitudes and behaviors, and (d) accounts for visual-based social media platforms. To better understand the significance of emotions in the context of social media and politics, future research should strive for more rigorous approaches to measuring emotions.

Notes

Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *Annals of the International Communication Association* online.

Data availability

Complete search string, list of all studies included to the review, and the codebook are available at <https://osf.io/csaz9/>.

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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