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## **Polarization in Social Media: An Emotion-Symbolic Work Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter examines the interconnection between emotions, values and institutions in the growing polarization of public discourse, especially within social media environments. We argue that polarization, which involves the emotional manipulation of discourse and the construction of oppositional value identities, challenges managerial decision making. Drawing on theories of emotions, values, and symbols, particularly Randall Collins' interaction ritual chain theory and the concept of emotional-symbolic work, we identify three main ways in which emotion-symbolic work shapes polarization: by shaping how authority claims are negotiated through the crafting of

symbols; by enabling strategic interactions aimed at influencing meaning; and by promoting small-group cohesion through the circulation of symbols. This chapter contributes to the study of the micro-foundations of emotions and provides a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of emotional energy and its dynamics that lead to polarization.

Keywords: polarization, emotion-symbolic work, emotions, values

## INTRODUCTION

Polarization of public discourse (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018) has become a critical issue for managers and organizational scholars. It involves deep divisions in opinions, values, or beliefs between major societal and political groups, characterized by the clustering and radicalization of opposing viewpoints, often fueled by strong emotional responses such as fear, anger, and moral outrage (Nguyen, Mayer and Veit, 2022; Suhay, 2015). These divisions reflect moral and identitarian conflicts, expressed through the opposition of "Us" versus "Them" (McCoy et al., 2018), and are amplified by trends involving growing distrust of factual and scientific information.

Polarization poses a significant threat not only to democratic institutions—undermining trust in their integrity and in the deliberative processes essential for decision-making—but also to businesses and managerial decisions. Polarization creates a challenging environment for addressing social, environmental, and governance issues. In a polarized context, managers face increasing pressure to take explicit stances on ethical or sustainability-related issues, often leaving them caught between conflicting and mutually exclusive expectations of diverse stakeholders (cf. Dhanesh, 2024; Selling and de Bakker, 2025; Weber et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2020). This is important because in polarizing context managers would reduce their investments in polarized

issues such as climate change and diversity and therefore retarding for example Net Zero objectives and increasing discrimination. It also affects managers capacity to engage in constructive ways with their stakeholders and therefore reach common and better solutions.

Social media play a central role in organizing this environment. These platforms have become a key part of the institutional context in which organizations operate, shaping how information circulates and how public discourses and decision-making processes unfold (Haevey et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2019). Social media enables managers to engage directly with diverse stakeholders, fostering real-time interaction and relationship building beyond traditional communication channels. It also functions as a platform for brand visibility and reputation management, where narratives can be both constructed and contested (Castells, 2009). Moreover, social media provides firms with data-driven insights into consumer behavior and public sentiment, informing strategic decision-making.

Research on polarization and emotions has so far been concentrated in psychology (e.g., Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Lewandowsky and van der Linden, 2021) and information systems (e.g., Kim et al., 2019; Kim and Chen, 2024). Psychologists study why people accept and disseminate fake news (Domenico et al., 2021), while information systems scholars investigate how technology accelerates the spread of such information. Central to these mechanisms are the algorithmic filtering systems used by digital media platforms, which narrow users' exposure to information in "filter bubbles" (Kitchens et al., 2020) and amplify disinformation (Bennett and Livingston, 2020).

In management, recent research has started to look at how social media contribute to these patterns by amplifying discourse to unprecedented levels (Schoeneborn et al., 2024). Scholars have also studied how social media affordances contribute to algorithmic distortions through

information overload, opacity, and the spread of disinformation that alter managerial decisions (Etter and Albu, 2021). Polarization has also been explored in relation to fake news, mass manipulation, and disinformation (e.g., Haevey et al., 2020; Joaquim et al. 2024; Leong et al., 2019), including in the context of generative AI tools (Illia et al., 2023), reflecting growing concern about the erosion of trust and democratic stability in business (Jungherr, 2023; Castello et al. 2025).

While institutional theorists have examined narratives, rhetoric, and framing processes and their influence in the manipulation of institutional discourses (Green and Li, 2011; Philips, Lawrence and Hardy, 2004), and others have studied how emotions influence framing processes (Moisander, Hirsto and Fahy, 2016; Zietsma and Toubiana, 2018), less attention has been given to how these dynamics relate specifically to polarization, especially in the context of social and environmental issues on social media. This chapter addresses this gap by drawing on the sociology of emotions and research on values to study the micro-dynamics underpinning polarization. We focus on how framing processes intersect with emotional energy and moral positioning. To develop this perspective, we draw on the sociology of emotions—particularly Randall Collins’ interaction ritual chain theory (Collins, 2004)—and the concept of emotional symbolic work (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019).

We argue that emotional energy and related emotion-symbolic work are central to understanding how polarized frames are articulated and amplified. First, we explain the role of emotional energy in shaping public discourse and negotiating authority claims, particularly through the use of symbolic references to credible institutions, such as science, by actors such as fake news providers. Second, we examine how emotionally charged symbols circulate on social media and how the emotional energy generated through interaction rituals helps explain disinformation, complementing explanations that focus on algorithmic facilitation and distortion.

Third, we show that emotion-symbolic work provides a useful lens for understanding the formation of echo chambers, reinforcing group identification and exclusive moral and emotional alignment. Understanding how polarization works can help managers to understand how public opinion is formed and therefore take better decisions.

We present a framework that highlights the interplay among moral, emotional, and symbolic work. We identify three ways in which emotion-symbolic work contributes to polarization: first, by influencing how authority claims are negotiated through the crafting of symbols; second, by structuring strategic interactions aimed at influencing meaning; and third, by reinforcing small-group cohesion through the dissemination of these symbols. The framework illustrates how polarizing actors challenge existing frames, redirect them toward new interpretations, and promote commitment to selective narratives while discouraging synthesis. We argue that these processes of frame amplification develop through repeated cycles of interaction embedded in institutional mechanisms, such as algorithms, and shaped by existing emotional and moral structures. Furthermore, we emphasize the dual role of symbols in both stabilizing meaning and ritualizing discourse, as well as in promoting symbolic closure of debates that lead to polarization. Our study contributes to the micro-foundations of emotional, moral and symbolic work by providing an explanation of the mechanisms that promote polarization, which reflects the confrontation of divergent identities and moral positions. We extend existing research on emotions, values and institutions by showing how emotional energy and symbolic work shape broader institutional dynamics, including polarization.

## **POLARIZATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

Polarization has been defined as “a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, and people increasingly perceive and describe

politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’” (McCoy et al., 2018: 18). These polarization dynamics are further intensified by current tendencies, including the erosion of trust in traditional fact-based information and rising skepticism, even toward established scientific knowledge (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019; Meyer and Quattrone, 2021). A defining feature of this phenomenon is the manipulation of frames and the promotion of "fake news" (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019; Joaquim et al., 2024), which are disseminated widely through digital platforms. This manipulation undermines the ability of individuals to distinguish between credible, fact-based news sources and misleading or deceptive ones. Moreover, it deepens identity-based divides, with these frames often used to advance political agendas and value-based conflicts.

Polarization is not only a threat to democratic societies but also poses a fundamental challenge for businesses (Schoeneborn et al., 2024). In brief, five key arguments underscore why polarization is central to business and management theorists’ concerns. First, it generates social and political unrest which might affect most businesses, especially those present in high streets which might see their operations altered by demonstrations and riots. Second, polarization impacts strategic positioning on sustainability issues, such as climate change or inequality policies, forcing businesses to navigate contentious and divisive debates (McCoy, et al. 2018). Businesses experience strong political pressures in different countries which force them to re-align reporting, narratives and ultimately initiatives. Third, it influences communication strategies: decisions about how to position the organization or brand on social or environmental issues increasingly become politically charged and can have significant financial repercussions (Schoeneborn et al. 2024). Fourth, polarization complicates coordination efforts on global challenges with unprecedented impact, such as climate change (George et al., 2016; Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2022). Finally, and

equally importantly, social media platforms have been directly linked to the rise of polarization (Kreiss and McGregor, 2024)

Social media platforms, operated by some of the most profitable private business organizations globally, shape the socio-technological infrastructure through which stakeholders and organizations interact. In recent years, the once-optimistic expectations that social media platforms would enhance debate and foster constructive engagement (Castells, 2001, Castelló and López-Berzosa, 2023) have given way to a more pessimistic perspective (Fortuna and Nunes, 2018; Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Far from serving as forums for inclusive and informed discussions on public issues (Castells, 2009), social media platforms have increasingly been characterized as sources of misinformation and contributors to the deterioration of the public sphere (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). For instance, Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2020) argue that social media have created a marketplace for fake news and content manipulation, significantly shaping individual perceptions across various domains, including politics, corporate reputation, science, and government actions (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). The concentration of ownership among a few dominant tech companies raises critical questions about their influence not only in markets (Jacobides and Lianos, 2021) but also on public discourse and democratic processes (Habermas, 2022). The structural and functional dynamics of social media have contributed to the erosion of political culture and the polarization of public discourse (Schoeneborn et al., 2024). This polarization reduces societal complexities to stark “us versus them” dichotomies, hindering consensus-building on critical global challenges such as climate change. Moreover, it undermines trust in democratic processes and political institutions, posing a serious threat to societal cohesion and effective governance.

Despite a growing interest among organization scholars in the issue of polarization, much of the focus has been on how actors within and around organizations negotiate meanings related to societal issues (e.g., Crane and Glozer, 2016; Schoeneborn et al., 2024; Schoeneborn et al., 2020; Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013) in digital media platforms institutional environments (Maltseva et al., 2019). The rapidly evolving communicative landscape, characterized by increasing polarization, highlights the urgent need for further research into the micro-dynamics of constructing, manipulating, and amplifying public discourses.

We argue that understanding the polarization of public discourse requires a closer examination of the micro-processes that underpin manipulation and amplification. Drawing on the sociology of emotions, we propose a framework that offers a novel perspective on the relationship between framing processes, emotions, values and institutions. Central to this framework are two key concepts: framing, which refers to how issues are presented and interpreted, and emotional energy, which reinforces frames and intensifies polarization.

## **FRAMING AND THE MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC DISCOURSES**

Institutional theory research has previously analyzed the amplification of discourses and its manipulation, focusing on how organizations negotiate meanings among various stakeholders. While the amplification of public discourses has typically been studied at field level, it has recently faced criticism for neglecting the possibility that microlevel pressures can, at times, be more important than macrolevel pressures (Cardinale, 2018; Smets et al., 2012; Tracey, 2016). Public discourses are enacted through actor's collective interpretations of systems of meaning (Armstrong, 2005), i.e., frames, that are communicative representations of these systems of meaning (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014), and provide comprehensibility to new values and practices (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). A framing perspective

does not assume actors rely solely on externally available institutional “templates,” such as logics (Lounsbury, 2007) or archetypes (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). Instead, it adopts an endogenous and persuasive approach to institutional change (Friedland and Alford, 1991, Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003), emphasizing how individual agency shapes a group’s perception of reality. Framing, therefore, involves shaping reality to create and diffuse meaning within public discourses.

Research on the framing of public discourses has traditionally taken a top-down perspective on influence, privileging the intentions and actions of the speaker over those of the listener, while neglecting framing and meaning construction as a joint activity (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014; Gray et al., 2015). Micro-level work on frame amplification examines interactions between actors (Gray et al., 2015), where collective constructions of meaning is negotiated in political battles (Kaplan, 2008) over meaning in which institutional change is bounded (Stryker 1994, Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003). In these negotiations, resonance occurs through “blending” (Giorgi, 2017) cognitive concepts or interests from different stakeholders (Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Balogun et al., 2011; Reinecke and Ansari, 2015) to ensure the new frame is accepted and facilitates novel practices (Etzion and Ferraro, 2010).

However, when addressing large audiences, frameworks of resonance and blended frames have been proven less effective. Blended frames may drive cognitive familiarity (Giorgi, 2017) but are less efficient in recreating the identity necessary for action and change (Lok, 2010, Coll et al., 2011, Giorgi, 2017). Increasingly, it is argued that cognitive political battles alone may not drive change (Jasper and Goodwin, 2011), as they can result in diluted and ineffective frames while overlooking some of the motivational aspects in institutional change (Voronov and Vince, 2012). As Jasper (1998: 413) puts it, “emotions ... [are] rarely discussed, although it is apparently what

gets people to actually do something.” Paying attention to how emotions operate may uncover hidden mechanism beneath cognitive processes that have thus far been taken for granted (Jasper and Goodwin, 2011).

## **EMOTIONS, IDENTIFICATION AND AGENCY**

Emotions motivate and inspire us (Massa et al., 2017), animating and shaping our actions and interpretations, and bonding us to social groups and structures (Turner and Stets, 2005). We see emotions as individually experienced but culturally conditioned. Emotions can be understood as “intersubjective, as residing in transpersonal exchanges that are double embedded in systems of relationships and in institutionalized systems of meanings” (Lok et al., 2017, p. 46).

As such, emotions are closely linked to identification, which includes a sense of “oneness” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) or “sameness” with a collective. The more a person identifies with a collective, the more the group’s values, norms, and interests become incorporated into the person’s self-concept (Van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006). We identify with social groups, norms, logics, practices, and beliefs when we (emotionally) value and treasure them (Wright, Zammuto and Liesch, 2017). Changing our social groups, beliefs, norms, or practices is akin to changing ourselves (Zietsma and Toubiana, 2018), while acting in accordance with them feels right and satisfying (Friedland, 2018). Conversely, threats to our identity stimulate emotional responses (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

Recent work has also highlighted the agentic potential associated with emotions (Voronov and Vince, 2012), illustrating how they drive both individual and collective action. Emotions fuel efforts to effect change through social innovation (Cartel, Boxenbaum and Aggeri, 2019), where emotional energy drives people to challenge existing systems and work toward more equitable

alternatives (Barberá-Tomás et al. 2019). At the same time, emotions play a central role in efforts to maintain status quo arrangements (Wright et al., 2017), as they can reinforce existing power structures, creating emotional attachments that stabilize current arrangements and resist calls for transformation.

Emotions are also important indicators of what is salient to people (Voronov and Vince, 2012). This salience is intimately connected with framing (Snow and Benford 1988). The importance of understanding emotions within framing processes has been pointed out by Giorgi (2017), who suggests that resonance is composed of cognitive elements, based on an appeal to the audiences' beliefs and understandings, and emotional elements, based on an appeal to audiences' feelings and passions. Scholars have examined how emotions help create or strengthen new frames and the effects of different emotions, both individually and in combination. Massa et al. (2017: 489), for instance, found that the positive emotions of "reverence, elation and awe" contributed to audience members' evangelism about Ontario wine. Compassion for others' suffering has been identified in other research as a key motive for taking action to alleviate their pain (Grimes et al., 2013), and social movement research has documented the energetic potential of moral outrage (Etchanchu et al., 2021).

Less research has focused on the mobilization of negative emotions. One exception is Delmestri and Goodrick (2016: 239), who found that people tended to look away, engaging in denial of ethical dilemmas related to the production and consumption of animal products rather than acknowledging "an implicit moral reproach." Similarly, Tracey (2016), in a study of the persuasion and conversion processes of Alpha Christians, found that instilling guilt was a central strategy. However, this approach sometimes alienated individuals who felt manipulated. In contrast, Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019) highlight the mobilizing potential of negative emotions: by

presenting personal responsibility for plastic pollution as key to stimulating personal enactment, they argued that those who experienced grief and empathy were more likely to be moved to action.

The literature has also shown how emotions can be intentionally directed to stimulate agency. Ruebottom and Auster (2018) describe how a social enterprise used highly emotive narratives and musical experiences to encourage youth to become change agents, while Gill and Burrow (2018) show how fear is used to sustain chefs' adherence to haute cuisine practices. In both cases, identification, agency, and emotions are closely connected: individuals enact the beliefs and values of the groups with which they identify because they are emotionally invested in them. Threats to those beliefs and values can trigger changes in group identification and belief systems (Fan and Zietsma, 2017; Ruebottom and Auster, 2018).

The manipulation or transformation of a frame, and its further amplification, requires resonance with the target audience. Gray et al. (2015), building on Collins (2004), argue that resonance can lead to frame amplification. Resonance, in this context, "involves the arousal of emotional energy during interaction rituals" (Gray et al., 2015: 122). Emotions, when converted into emotional energy, motivate individuals to align with groups that share a common frame. Repeated interactions reinforce shared beliefs and values, eventually supporting institutional arrangements (Dacin et al., 2010; Weber et al., 2008). Since emotions foster social connection among actors and thus support the creation and amplification of new systems of beliefs, understanding how these connections are formed through emotional energy is important for analyzing polarization.

Collins (1990; 2004) provides the conceptual vocabulary and identifies the elements that constitute emotional energy. However, his approach remains a general model, or a "general process of interaction" (Collins, 1990: 34), in which emotions are primarily understood as the energy that

sustains social bonds. As Collins (1990) acknowledges, this perspective offers limited insight into the agentic construction of new meanings and into how emotions intersect with cognition in the constitution of social norms to challenge, change, or amplify frames. This limitation is particularly important in the context of emergent frames and new arenas of framing, such as digital platforms, where rituals are still taking shape and social norms are under construction (Bartley 2007). It is equally important for understanding the intentional construction of new or alternative meanings, as in the circulation of fake news and disinformation. The next section addresses the role of symbols and identification in the dynamics of emotional energy.

### **SYMBOLS AND IDENTIFICATION WITH NASCENT COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN INTERACTION RITUALS**

Collins (2004) explains the amplification of frames through emotional energy, focusing on interaction rituals in which a group of people have a “mutual focus of attention” on specific “persons, objects or ideas” (Collins, 2004: 33), evoking shared “transient emotions” such as grief, joy or hate. Through experiencing these emotions collectively, individuals develop “emotional energy,” involving shared senses of solidarity and morality:

*“The emotions that are ingredients of the IR (interaction rituals) are transient; the outcome however is a long-term emotion, the feelings of attachment to the group that was assembled at that time. Thus in the funeral ritual the short term emotion was sadness, but the main “ritual work” of the funeral was producing (or restoring) group solidarity. The emotional ingredients of a party may be friendliness or humor; the long-term result is the feeling of status group membership. I refer to these long-term outcomes as ‘emotional energy’... Emotional energy is a morally suffused energy; it makes the individual feel not only good, but exalted, with the sense of doing what is most important and most valuable ... this feeling*

*of emotional energy has a powerful motivating effect upon the individual” (Collins, 2004: 108-109).*

The persons, objects or ideas, or more generally, “things” (as Collins 2004: 37 called them), that evoke transient emotions become symbols, charged with emotional significance. Collins’ concept of a symbol builds on Durkheim’s notion of “sacred objects”, associated with moral standards (Collins, 2004: 236). In his “processual model for the construction of symbols” (2004: 32), such “things” are transformed into symbols in “first-order interactions”, where shared transient emotions generate emotional energy (Collins, 2004).

These charged symbols can be deployed in later interaction rituals with individuals not present in the original setting (second-order interactions) and may acquire totemic significance within the group, influencing internal reflections (third-order interactions). “Emotional energy is stored in batteries: one component of which is the symbol, and the other pole of which is the individual. Participation in a ritual gives the individual a special kind of energy ... emotional energy” (Collins, 2004: 38). Symbols charged with emotional energy motivate individuals to pursue “what they consider a morally proper path” (Collins, 2004: 42), shared across participants in the ritual. Visual symbols are a particularly important category, as discussed below.

### **Visual Symbols**

Collins’ theory, like organization research, adopts a broad conception of symbols, allowing analysis of a wide range of symbolic elements (or “things”), from smoking (cigarettes and pipes, Collins, 2004) to sexual interaction (human bodies, Collins, 2004). Visual symbols are particularly important because they evoke strong emotional responses and convey meaning, leaving “a memorable impression of the essence of the message” (Meyer et al, 2013: 494). Organizations

leverage them to influence broad audiences, especially in volatile online contexts (Morozov, 2009), enhancing credibility by presenting familiar objects in new, emotionally charged ways.

Collins' theory thus offers a foundation for understanding how organizations use symbols and emotional cues to cultivate identification with, and enactment of, nascent collective identities. Emotion work, in this view, involves the agentic effort to generate emotional energy among stakeholders through ritual interaction. This energy motivates alignment with the moral standards (Collins, 2004) of the emerging collective identity and fosters a sense of belonging.

Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019) term this “emotion-symbolic work,” describing purposeful efforts to manipulate cultural elements (particularly symbols) in order to create emotional energy during ritual interactions. This involves using visual and verbal cues to elicit negative feelings (moral shocks) and transforming them into energy that propels engagement, bridging the tension between attracting attention and avoiding alienation (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Emotional transformation connects the symbol to three key components: the cause or object of concern, the collective identity of the target audience, and the organization orchestrating the message. These connections shape the emotional energy and drive action.

### **AN EMOTION-SYMBOLIC WORK FRAMEWORK TO POLARIZATION**

We argue that an emotion-symbolic work framework enhances the analysis of current trends in the manipulation of public discourses and the resulting polarization influencing managerial decisions. Figure 1 presents a framework of emotion-symbolic work and its role in polarization. This framework contains three main elements.

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First, it helps explain how the manipulation of frames occurs and how this manipulation relates to the negotiation of authority claims around contentious issues such as climate change or inequality. Emotion-symbolic work, as described by Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019), highlights how symbols are used not only to mobilize negative emotional energy around a cause—such as plastic pollution in their case—but also to legitimize organizations by positioning them as bearers of the truth. The closer an organization aligns with a symbol representing a plausible truth, the more it is perceived as a trustworthy authority. Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019) showed how one organization presented itself as a bearer of truth about plastic pollution by emphasizing its role in creating the symbol, signalling proximity to the issue. The creation of the symbol and the associated claim to authority enabled the organization to mobilize positive energy for societal action. Once established, these symbols are repeatedly referenced to reinforce the organization’s legitimacy. Thus, crafting symbols and constructing legitimacy around them are crucial strategies through which organizations position themselves as authoritative actors in the political struggle over meaning and the diffusion of frames.

Second, understanding the emotional energy generated through interaction rituals during strategic meaning-making deepens insight into amplification processes and the emergence of polarization. This dissemination perspective extends beyond previous studies on algorithmic facilitation and distortion (e.g. Hansen et al., 2011) by focusing on the micro-level processes through which emotional energy is created. We extend the concept of emotional energy formation to online environments, where users continually interact not only through text but also via images, symbols, and evaluative systems (such as likes).

Building on Collins (2005), we distinguish three levels of interactions. In first-order interactions, elements are transformed into symbols accessible to others. On social media, users

compete to create these symbols, which are no longer solely the domain of elites but are co-constructed by the broader user base, reshaping the collective discourse. These symbols then compete for popularity. In second-order interactions, symbols are shared with others and contribute to building a new frame; sharing becomes part of the process through which users actively co-create and reinforce collective meaning. In third-order interactions, symbols acquire a totemic quality. On social media, a symbol becomes totemic not only when widely shared but when it shapes the conversation itself. Users engage not only with the symbol but also with the meta-discussion about its meaning and impact. For example, a viral video of someone sniffing glue may become a symbol of the dangers of drug use for children. Sharing the video generates emotional energy and encourages further participation, also fostering identification, as users align with or oppose the symbol. Divisions may emerge in the conversation, with some users supporting the symbol and others criticizing it.

A striking feature of this dynamic is that cycles of interaction often polarize the debate. This is not just due to affordances of the technology—where simple interactions such as liking, disliking, the use of emoticons and the speed of interaction contribute to virality (Hansen et al. 2011)—but also because the totemization of symbols produces conversational closure, reducing opportunities for deliberation and fostering echo chambers. The MAGA hat (“Make America Great Again”) in the United States exemplifies the totemization of a symbol that has contributed to societal polarization. Originally a campaign slogan for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the hat quickly evolved into more than a political symbol. Supporters used it to express patriotism and opposition of perceived liberal elites, while opponents viewed it as a symbol of racism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism. Its repeated use, becoming central to interaction, enhanced its totemic power. This symbolic power sparked public confrontations, media

controversies, and school bans, turning it into a lightning rod for the broader societal conflicts over nationalism, race and identity.

Third, emotion-symbolic work illuminates processes underlying disinformation. Viewing emotional energy as a driver of dissemination shifts focus to the emotional dynamics underpinning the diffusion of symbols. The spread of emotionally charged symbols facilitates the emotional energy that sustains collective solidarity. This solidarity often becomes exclusive to small groups intensely attached to the symbol. In this way, small-group cohesion is reinforced through the emotional responses generated by circulating emotionally loaded symbols. For example, disinformation campaigns often rely on symbols that evoke strong emotions and contrast with scientific messages grounded in data (Bhattacharya et al., 2024). These campaigns appeal to in-group solidarity, where emotional energy arises not only from sharing the symbol but also from the embedded “us vs. them” narrative, as illustrated by Joaquim et al. (2024) in the case of an anti-vaccine campaign led by a group called REGRET in Ireland. In the initial communication campaign, the Health Service Executive (HSE), the institution responsible for public health in Ireland, focused on mobilizing small-group solidarity by repeatedly evoking science as a symbolic totem. Emphasizing the truth of science, however, inadvertently strengthened small-group cohesion on both sides of the debate (REGRET and HSE), increasing polarization and reducing the potential for broader public engagement by the HSE in the vaccination campaign.

## **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In this chapter, we propose a framework based on emotional energy and emotion-symbolic work to help managers to take better decisions and management researchers further explore polarization

on social media and the interplay between emotions, values and institutions. Specifically, we show how key elements of polarization—such as the negotiation of authority, the manipulation of meaning, and the construction of small-group solidarity—relate to emotional energy and emotion-symbolic work. We argue that this framework provides valuable insights into polarization for two main reasons. First, it extends previous analyses of legitimacy by emphasizing the role of emotions and symbols in shaping collective values and identities, which are central both to the amplification of public discourse and to the dynamics of polarization. Second, it moves beyond explanations based solely on social media algorithmic dynamics by emphasizing interactions ritual chains. By illustrating how the creation, ritualization, and totemic transformation of symbols amplify frames, particularly those challenging dominant narratives, such as scientific understandings of climate change or the social relevance of vaccination, our framework provides a richer understanding of polarization and how managers can integrated it in their decision making. Finally, by emphasizing interactions and emotional energy, it clarifies how emotion-symbolic processes contribute to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation campaigns and how they can produce debate closure, thereby reducing opportunities for public deliberation.

An emotion-symbolic perspective on polarization and social media opens several avenues for future research. First, analyzing deliberative processes and the formation of emotional energy that precedes polarization could shed light on mechanisms and processes of institutionalization. If we understand deliberation as a site of ongoing conflict (Mouffe, 2013) and polarization as a particular form of institutional settlement, one could ask: what institutional arrangements and settlements preceded the emergence of polarization?

Second, more research is needed on how emotional energy is transformed and how this process shapes framing dynamics in polarized public discourse. Researchers could examine how

different strategies for generating emotional energy through symbols influence debate closure. Joaquim and Castelló (2024), for example, show how a highly personalized frame, centred on a terminally ill patient, helped overcome vaccine scepticism fuelled by misinformation. Investigating the symbolic vocabularies of disinformation, as well as those that deployed to counteract it, would deepen our understanding of polarization and help organizations and public institutions in designing effective responses.

Third, future studies could examine how symbols are constructed and ritualized within polarized discursive fields. Understanding how symbols are intentionally or unintentionally created on social media (Jenzen et al., 2021) could clarify why certain symbols spread while others do not. This would also help explain the processes behind the formation of conflicting identities and the contested authority claims that surround issues such as climate change and inequality. Comparing scientific symbols with those used in disinformation campaigns could further explain how emotional energy and identification sustain polarization and how they might be reoriented toward coordination on global challenges like climate change.

The specific affordances of social media also deserve greater attention. The ability to collect non-intrusive, naturalistic data and track real-time user interaction (Castelló and Lopez-Berzosa, 2024; Toubiana and Zietsma, 2017) offers rich opportunities to study emotional energy. Micro-level analyses could extend Collins' theory by identifying different forms of energy at various stages of interaction. They could also reveal how real-time reactions to symbols shape emotional dynamics, focusing on the interplay between images, words and emotions (Castelló et al., 2021).

In contexts where identities are under threat and new values reinforce emerging identities, understanding emotional energy is crucial for explaining the dynamics of polarization and for managers to take informed decision about it.

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