

Virtual Encounters, Real Impact? How Social Media Affordances Foster Intergroup Contact

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Abstract

This paper examines how social media affordances can facilitate positive intergroup contact to enhance social cohesion in democratic societies. Using social media affordance, we analyzed 30 empirical studies published between 2012 and 2025 that investigated intergroup contact through social media platforms. Our findings reveal that 27 studies documented improved intergroup attitudes across diverse contexts spanning ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation divisions. However, the analysis exposes significant untapped potential: while some affordances dominated the research, others received little attention despite their alignment with optimal contact conditions. We demonstrate social media's capacity to transcend traditional barriers to intergroup encounter while revealing substantial opportunities for future platform design. This implies that thoughtfully leveraged social media affordances could enable scalable interventions for strengthening inclusion principles.

Keywords: Social media affordances, intergroup contact, intergroup relations, social cohesion.

1. Introduction

Democratic values and social cohesion fundamentally depend on positive intergroup relations—the quality of interactions and attitudes between members of different ethnic, religious, cultural, and other social groups (Manca, 2014). Making communication channels accessible and affordable to broad populations, digital technologies have fundamentally influenced democracies and societal cohesion (Weinhardt et al., 2024), creating new forms for individuals from different social groups to encounter one another, beyond temporal, geographical, and social boundaries (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006).

However, social media's impact on society and social cohesion represents a double-edged sword, with platforms offering avenues for connection while also creating paths for division and fragmentation (Stieglitz & Ross, 2022). For example, the spread of

misinformation (Bezzaoui et al., 2022; Neylan, 2021), conspiracy theories (Li et al., 2024), hate speech (Slivko & Andres, 2021), and the manipulation of public opinion by social bots (Ross et al., 2019) in social media poses a significant threat to democracy and social cohesion. The underlying design of social media platforms often encourages emotional engagement and uses algorithmic filters, which can hinder constructive encounters between groups (Weinhardt et al., 2024). This raises fundamental questions about how digital technologies should be designed to reflect, rather than undermine, democratic values.

Based on Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which states that interaction between members of different social groups can improve intergroup relations, the digital environment of social media provides a space for such interaction that may extend beyond traditional face-to-face contact. Intergroup contact on social media represents an emerging field that examines how platforms can facilitate positive interactions between members of different social groups. Employing Karahanna et al.'s (2018) social media affordances perspective to understand how social media can be utilized to drive intergroup contact, this literature review investigates the following question:

How are social media affordances utilized to facilitate positive intergroup contact?

The review proceeds by establishing a comprehensive theoretical foundation of intergroup contact and social media affordances in Section 2. Subsequently, Section 3 outlines the research methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, which are analyzed and critically evaluated in Section 5. This section identifies the affordances utilized in intergroup contact on social media and the untapped potential within the research domain. The section concludes with an examination of the broader implications for democratic values and social cohesion.

Lastly, the review discusses limitations and suggests specific directions for future research.¹

2. Background

2.1. Intergroup Contact Theory

In his work on the nature of prejudice, Allport (1954) hypothesized that direct, face-to-face intergroup contact between individuals of opposing ethnic groups could reduce prejudice if the following four conditions were met: (1) equal status, (2) common goals, (3) cooperation, and (4) support from authorities. In a subsequent literature review of over 515 studies conducted in offline intergroup settings, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) expanded on Allport's contact hypotheses, formulating intergroup contact theory. This theory posits that direct intergroup contact reduces prejudice across various social contexts. Despite a striking body of evidence, contact theory remains underutilized in practice due to barriers to offline contact between groups, including practical implementation, initial fears about encountering an unknown group, and limitations in generalizability (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). They argue that the internet has the potential to overcome these barriers to offline intergroup contact.

Contemporary research identified five forms of indirect, not face-to-face intergroup contact. *Electronic contact* involves digital communication between individuals from different social groups through text-based channels (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012). *Extended contact* occurs when individuals learn about contact between their perceived in-group members and out-group members (Wright et al., 1997). *Imaginary contact* refers to envisioning interactions with out-group members (Crisp & Turner, 2009). *Parasocial contact* describes one-way emotional connections with out-group members through media consumption, adapted from relationships people form with traditional media personalities (Schiappa et al., 2005). Finally, *vicarious contact* involves observing intergroup interactions, either in person or through media (Mazziotta et al., 2011).

While Information Systems research has studied intergroup contact theory across diverse digital contexts, from video games designed to reduce immigrant stereotypes (Chen et al., 2022) and combat sexism in multiplayer environments (Kordyaka et al., 2019, 2022), to virtual influencers for reducing interethnic intolerance (Levkov et al., 2023), political information systems encouraging societal discourse

(Benke et al., 2025), and organizational contexts examining IT employee identification (Wang et al., 2022), the investigation of intergroup contact through social media platforms remains untouched. This research gap is particularly significant given the prevalence of social media and its unique ability to facilitate various forms of indirect intergroup contact.

2.2. Social Media Affordances

Affordances were defined as the actionable possibilities offered by an environment to an individual (Gibson, 1979). Later, the concept of affordances was adopted to study technological change, acknowledging the materiality of technology and human interpretation of technological artifacts (Hutchby, 2001). Thus, affordances can be considered "the relation between an artefact and a goal-oriented actor or actors" (Strong et al., 2014, p. 69).

Karahanna et al.'s (2018) posit that individuals are motivated to use certain social media features, such as "liking," "browsing," or "chatting", to satisfy psychological needs. These features can be categorized into twelve social media affordances (Karahanna et al., 2018). Egocentric affordances, that focus on oneself, include *self-presentation*, which enables users to post personal information; *content sharing*, which involves posting content unrelated to oneself; and *interactivity*, which permits users to navigate virtual environments. Allocentric affordances, those that involve other individuals, include *presence signaling*, where users indicate their availability; *relationship formation*, which allows forming connections; *group management*, meaning the administration of groups and communities; *browsing others' content*, meaning viewing and perceiving others' content; *meta-voicing*, meaning reacting to that content; *communication* with other users; *collaboration*, which facilitates working together; *competition*, which enables engaging in competitive activities; and *sourcing*, which allows creating or fulfilling requests for resources (Karahanna et al., 2018).

Research has demonstrated how different affordances on social media can cultivate political polarization through mechanisms of interpersonal tension and political identity salience (Tanyel & Windeler, 2021), facilitate the formation of conspiracy theories through communal processes that threaten democratic discourse (Li et al., 2024), and enable social movements ranging from women's activism campaigns like #MeToo (Macharia & Collier, 2022) to broader social justice initiatives through various types of

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affordances including coalesced, shared, collective, and connective capabilities (Mahapatra, 2023; Mohammed & Nemati, 2022). Given the dual potential of social media of fragmenting and connecting society, this approach shall examine the mechanisms through which social media facilitate intergroup contact. Understanding which affordances enable intergroup contact, and how their utilization leads to improved intergroup relations, provides crucial insights for optimizing social media’s potential to enhance social cohesion and democratic values.

3. Methodology

We conducted a systematic literature review in April 2025 following established IS research guidelines (Paré et al., 2015; vom Brocke et al., 2015). Our objective was to identify peer-reviewed research at the intersection of intergroup contact and social media. Three comprehensive academic databases were selected to ensure both disciplinary specificity and interdisciplinary breadth: the AIS Electronic Library (AISeL), Google Scholar, and Scopus.

We began with a broad keyword search in AISeL, focusing on the term “intergroup contact”, which yielded 21 results. To broaden coverage and capture conceptual variations, we conducted an “all-in-title” search in Google Scholar using a refined search string:

*(“intergroup contact” OR “imagined contact” OR
“extended contact” OR “vicarious contact” OR
“electronic contact” OR “parasocial contact”)
AND*

*(“social media” OR “social network” OR sns OR osn
OR facebook OR twitter OR instagram OR tiktok OR
twitch OR whatsapp OR youtube OR snapchat OR
linkedin OR reddit OR wechat OR weibo)*

This query retrieved 26 articles. Additionally, we searched Scopus using the same search string across titles, abstracts, and keywords, yielding 140 records. From the Scopus set, we removed 7 book chapters, 3 reviews, 1 erratum, 1 note, 1 non-English publication, and 8 publications from MDPI due to concerns about quality control, reducing the set to 119 articles.

In total, the three databases yielded 166 potentially relevant publications. After removing 22 duplicates, we screened 144 unique records based on their titles and abstracts. This process resulted in 36 articles. In a full-text review of those 36 articles, we excluded 5 for a lack of focus on relevant indirect intergroup contact and 4 for not being within a social media context. After full-text screening, 26 articles were identified as meeting all inclusion criteria. To ensure completeness, we conducted a manual forward and backward search,

which added 2 additional relevant articles, each, resulting in a final corpus of 30 articles. In alignment with PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), this multi-stage procedure is illustrated in Figure 1.

We conducted systematic thematic coding of utilized social media affordances within the five forms of indirect intergroup contact (electronic, parasocial, extended, vicarious, and imagined contact), mapping them to Karahanna et al.’s (2018) twelve social media affordances across our identified results, with two researchers achieving Cohen’s $\kappa = .90$ intercoder reliability, resolving discrepancies through discussion.

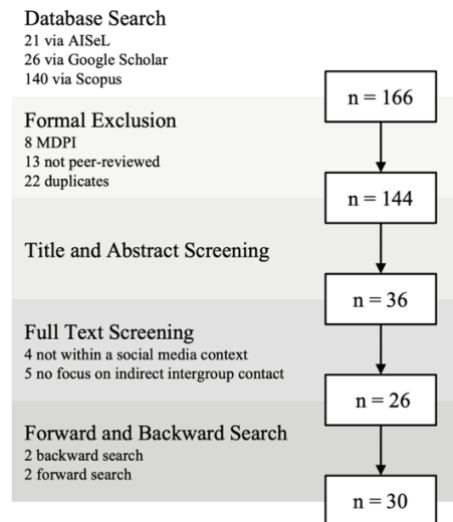


Figure 1. Literature search and selection procedure according to preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA).

4. Results

The systematic literature review identified 30 relevant empirical articles that investigate intergroup contact through social media. The corpus represents a diverse body of research spanning multiple intergroup contexts and methodological approaches. Across the majority of studies (27), researchers documented improved intergroup relations, reducing prejudice (Chib & Shi, 2018; Schumann et al., 2012; Lotun et al., 2022), increasing empathy (Li et al., 2023; Rodríguez-De-Dios & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024), improving outgroup attitudes (Barker, 2012; Kioumi & Gardikiotis, 2023; Žeželj et al., 2017), and enhancing willingness for future contact (Barker, 2012; Kim & Harwood, 2020). However, three exceptions emerged where intergroup contact produced negative outcomes, leading to intensified polarization (Dajer & Reilly, 2021), increased negative language use (Zhang et al., 2019), and heightened anxiety with reduced empathy and worsened attitudes (Zhang et al., 2024).

4.1. Temporal and Disciplinary Landscape

The identified studies published between 2012 and 2025 demonstrate steady growth in research interest over the past decade. Schumann et al. (2012) and Barker (2012) were the first to establish foundational knowledge about Facebook's potential for intergroup contact. Research momentum then continued with two articles in each of 2015 and 2017. From 2018 to 2021, there was increased scholarly attention, with three articles being published consecutively every year. The field then experienced remarkable growth in 2023 and 2024, with 4 and 6 articles being published respectively, before another article was published at the beginning of 2025.

Thus far, the literature demonstrates disciplinary foundations within communication science and psychology, with 14 and 13 articles published in these disciplines, respectively. Additional contributions emerge from human-computer interaction (3), linguistics (1), information science (1), and natural sciences (1). Of the articles, almost all (27) were published in journals, while three were presented at conferences.

4.2. Sample Composition and Methodological Approaches

The sample composition reveals a significant bias toward majority group perspectives, with 20 studies focusing exclusively on the experiences and attitudes of majority group participants toward minority outgroups. This includes studies examining American attitudes toward Chinese immigrants (Kim and Harwood, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023, 2024), European majority views of migrants and ethnic minorities (Schwab and Greitemeyer, 2015; Žeželj et al., 2017), and heterosexual attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals (Wu et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2020). Mixed-group studies (8), where both groups' perspectives were examined within the same investigation, include cross-national studies such as Kioumi and Gardikiotis (2023) studying Greek-German interactions, South-North Indian dynamics (Majumdar et al., 2024), and political division studies like Dajer and Reilly (2021). Only two studies focused exclusively on minority group experiences: Chib and Shi (2018) examining Chinese sojourners' perspectives in Singapore and Mancini and Imperato (2024) studying bicultural and multicultural Reddit users' intercultural sensitivity.

The further methodological landscape reveals a preference for quantitative approaches, with surveys representing the most common method (15). Survey research includes large-scale investigations such as Ahmed et al. (2021) with 1,036 participants, Wu et al.

(2018) examining 980 social media users, but also smaller samples of 160 participants in Schwab et al. (2019). Experimental designs follow closely (11), encompassing controlled investigations such as Chib and Shi (2018) exposing 331 participants to a campaign on Weibo and Kim and Harwood (2020) manipulating language proficiency with 126 participants. Remaining studies employed trace data analysis (2), with Zhang et al. (2019) analyzing 90,098 forum posts, a case study methodology (1) in Dajer and Reilly (2021) providing comparative analysis, and ethnographic approaches (1) with Schumann et al. (2012) conducting in-depth Facebook observation of 900 users.

4.3. Intergroup Contexts

The geographic distribution reveals both global reach and regional concentrations. The United States (10) dominates the research landscape. Asia represents the second major research location with participants from Israel (4), Singapore (2), China (1), India (1), and Iran (1). Europe also accounts for significant research activity with studies from Germany (2), Greece (1), Spain (1), Italy (1), Austria (1), UK (1) and Northern Ireland (1), as well as Serbia (1), Croatia (1), and Cyprus (2). Latin America is represented solely by Colombia (1). 5 more studies adopted a global approach, recruiting participants internationally to examine cross-cultural phenomena.

Ethnic and national intergroup relations dominate the research landscape (14), reflecting both historical precedent in intergroup contact research and contemporary global challenges related to immigration, nationalism, and ethnic conflict. Asian contexts feature Ahmed et al. (2021) and Chib and Shi (2018), both examining Singaporean-Chinese relations. Kim and Harwood (2020) and Zhang et al. (2023, 2024) investigate American-Chinese relations, with Zhang et al. (2024) documenting the impact of COVID-19 on anti-Asian sentiment in American social media responses. European contexts include Kioumi and Gardikiotis (2023) studying German-Greek interactions during economic crisis, and Žeželj et al. (2017) examining post-conflict societies in the Balkans. Middle Eastern contexts appear in Schwab et al. (2019) studying Iranian-Israeli Facebook connections despite high political tensions. Additional ethnic contexts include Majumdar et al. (2024) examining South-North Indian regional divisions, Li et al. (2023) investigating American attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees, Barker (2012) studying US racial outgroup contact.

Religious intergroup contact represents another research focus (4), primarily examining Islamic-Jewish relations in high-conflict contexts (e.g., Lissitsa, 2017; Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2018, 2019). Alsebaei (2021)

broadened the scope by studying Islamic-non-Islamic interactions and their effects on reducing Islamophobia in American contexts. Intergroup contact research on groups of varying sexual orientation (4) examines various aspects of heterosexual-LGBTQIA+ contact, including Matsick et al. (2020), Pagano et al. (2024), and Wu et al. (2018). Gender identity (3) intergroup contact includes a focus on transgender experiences (e.g., Jolley et al., 2025; Neubaum et al., 2020; Rodríguez-De-Dios & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024). Disability and mental health contexts (3) include Lotun et al. (2022), Lu and Li (2024), and Neubaum et al. (2020). Political intergroup contact (1) appears in Dajer and Reilly (2021), examining supporters and opponents of FARC peace negotiations in Colombia and Brexit referendum positions in Northern Ireland. Zhang et al. (2019) uniquely examined sports team affiliations through NBA fan communities.

4.4. Social Media Platform Utilization

The analysis of how social media affordances enable different forms of intergroup contact reveals distinct patterns in the utilization of platform features. Building on Karahanna et al.'s (2018) social media affordances, our findings examine the importance of specific affordances for facilitating specific types of intergroup encounters on social media.

4.4.1. Affordances Enabling Electronic Contact.

Electronic contact is the most studied form (20). It uses a variety of affordances to facilitate interaction between group members through computer-mediated communication channels. The affordance of browsing others' content is the foundation of electronic contact studies. Browsing heterogeneous content networks mitigated anti-Arab sentiment during the pandemic (Ahmed et al., 2021) and social distances for former Soviet Union immigrants in Israel (Lissitsa, 2017).

Meta-voicing affordances are crucial for transforming passive browsing into active engagement. Reacting to Ukrainian refugee content predicted empathy and perceived threat (Li et al., 2023). It increased anxiety toward ethnic Chinese during the pandemic (Zhang et al., 2024), with the quality of meta-voicing interactions mattering more than quantity and significantly predicting improved attitudes (Kioumi & Gardikiotis, 2023).

Communication affordances allow for direct messaging. Direct communication through social media with Muslims, moderated by interpersonal attraction, significantly reduced Islamophobia (Alsebaei, 2021). Communication quality predicted intercultural sensitivity among multicultural users (Mancini & Imperato, 2024), and negative connotated

communication between Israeli Jews and Arab Muslims undesirable intergroup outcomes (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2018).

Relationship formation affordances facilitate group connections. Even in cases of political hostility connections between two opposing groups predicted improved intergroup attitudes (Schwab et al., 2019; Žeželj et al., 2017) and adding value in addition to face-to-face contact (Žeželj et al., 2017).

Self-presentation and content-sharing capabilities support electronic contact by providing content to interact with. Presenting oneself positively and getting accommodating reactions from friends can improve attitudes towards those out-group individuals (Zhang et al., 2023). Kioumi and Gardikiotis (2023) argue that posting about personal experiences has similar effects. Furthermore, group management tools, when managed effectively, reduce prejudice over time (Schuman et al., 2012).

4.4.2. Affordances Enabling Parasocial Contact.

Parasocial contact (15) relies on two key affordances that enable one-way emotional connections. Browsing others' content provides a way to consume outgroup members' narratives without reciprocal interaction., like watching YouTube videos of creators discussing borderline personality disorder to reduce prejudice through parasocial bonds (Lotun et al., 2022), and browsing transgender TikTok creators increasing perspective-taking and reducing conspiracy beliefs (Jolley et al., 2025).

The counterpart are self-presentation affordances as outgroup members share authentic narratives, with transgender YouTubers' self-presentation through personal narratives was highly effective for prejudice reduction mediated via narrative transportation and empathy (Rodríguez-De-Dios & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024). Neubaum et al. (2020) showed how Facebook profiles displaying daily experiences of stigmatized individuals improved attitudes when participants perceived themselves as similar to the profile owner. Moreover, Matsick et al. (2020) further demonstrated that LGBTQ individuals' use of rainbow filters as self-presentation increased feelings of closeness and support intentions.

Some parasocial contact studies incorporated meta-voicing affordances to measure engagement depth. Lu and Li (2024) found that Instagram posts revealing dual stigmas (sexual minority and mental health conditions) influenced attitudes through perceived competence. Content sharing occasionally supported parasocial contact as manipulated Facebook posts in terms of language proficiency affected identification and future contact desire (Kim & Harwood, 2020).

4.4.3. Affordances Enabling Extended Contact.

Studies on extended contact (6) primarily leverage affordances that highlight cross-group relationships on social media platforms, increasing positive interaction expectancies (Barker, 2012) and reducing Islamophobia (Alsebaei, 2021).

Browsing others' content enables the observation of these cross-group relationships, mitigating future xenophobic attitude (Ahmed et al., 2021). Schwab and Greitemeyer (2015a) used browsing of friendships through evaluative conditioning, but failed to establish effects across multiple experiments, implying that meaningful observations of relationships matter more than mere exposure.

Meta-voicing, reacting to content, supports extended contact by making cross-group relationships visible. Zhang et al. (2023) found that positive reactions from ingroups to outgroups influenced participants' attitudes, highlighting how visible support for cross-group interaction may create normative pressure.

4.4.4. Affordances Enabling Vicarious Contact.

Vicarious contact studies (7) rely on affordances that enable observation of intergroup interactions. Browsing others' content is the primary mechanism for witnessing these exchanges. Observing social media intergroup expressions improved attitudes through perceived interaction quality (Kioumi & Gardikiotis, 2023), and an increase in empathy and a decrease of intergroup anxiety (Zhang et al., 2024).

Meta-voicing affordances make intergroup interactions visible, with Facebook campaign interactions between Iranians and Israelis affecting prejudice through vicarious contact (Schwab et al., 2019). Also, Ahmed et al. (2021) found that the quality of observed heterogeneous discussions matters more than the quantity for reducing stereotypes.

Several studies combined vicarious with other contact forms, using self-presentation and content sharing to create observable interactions. Karayianni and Psaltis (2023) analyzed how Cypriot leaders' Twitter exchanges created vicarious contact that led to an intergroup identity.

4.4.5. Affordances Enabling Imagined Contact.

Despite social media's potential, imaginary contact (2) received minimal attention. A Weibo campaign to encourage Chinese migrant workers to imagine contact scenarios yielded desirable intergroup outcomes (Chib & Shi., 2018). The campaign's imaginative exercises proved more effective than face-to-face contact for reducing perceived discrimination by the minority. Imagining contact with gay celebrities based on parasocial contact mediated stigma reduction (Wu et al., 2018).

4.4.6. Patterns and Gaps in Affordance Utilization.

The results reveal a clear preference in affordance utilization across contact types, with browsing others' content being utilized in 27 of 30 studies. This passive consumption affordance enables users to encounter outgroup content with minimal risk or commitment, addressing intergroup anxiety in direct face-to-face contact. Content sharing (17) and self-presentation (12) affordances constitute the counterpart of browsing, as the necessity for personal or third-party content. Relationship formation (12) ties as the third most common affordance. Meta-voicing (7) and communication (4), as more active affordances, are less utilized. Group management (1) appears in only a single study (Schumann et al., 2012). Five affordances received no attention in intergroup contact research: interactivity, presence signaling, collaboration, competition, and sourcing.

Table 1. Distribution of social media affordance utilization across intergroup contact types in empirical studies (N=30).

	EL	PS	IM	EX	VI
Self-presentaiton	6	9	1	3	3
Content Sharing	13	8	1	5	6
Interactivity	0	0	0	0	0
Presence Signaling	0	0	0	0	0
Relationship Formation	10	3	1	4	3
Group Management	1	0	0	5	1
Browsing Others' Content	18	14	2	3	6
Meta-voicing	6	3	0	2	2
Communication	4	1	0	0	1
Collaboration	0	0	0	0	0
Competition	0	0	0	0	0
Sourcing	0	0	0	0	0

Note: EL = Electronic Contact, PS = Parasocial Contact, IM = Imagined Contact, EX = Extended Contact, VI = Vicarious Contact. Numbers indicate the frequency of affordance utilization within each contact type across the reviewed studies.

5. Discussion

This systematic literature review of 30 empirical studies on intergroup contact on social media demonstrates social media's effectiveness as a scalable intervention for improving intergroup relations and the untapped potential of social media for facilitating intergroup encounters. In a time of increasing polarization, this evidence offers potential solutions to counter divisive trends. With mostly desirable intergroup outcomes, 27 studies show improvements in terms of reducing prejudice, increasing empathy and

improving attitudes, establishing social media platforms as spaces for intergroup encounters that promote social cohesion in diverse societies. However, the analysis through the lens of social media affordances by Karahanna et al. (2018) also shows that the current academic landscape in terms of the theoretical possibilities of social media platforms offers significant untapped potential. This suggests that researchers have barely begun to explore the possibilities of social media in this regard, and that in reality, the effects of intergroup contact on social media may be far more powerful.

Evidence from various cross-group contexts, ranging from post-conflict societies in the Balkans, anti-Asian sentiment during the pandemic, religious divisions in the Middle East, and LGBTQ+ acceptance globally, demonstrates the effectiveness of social media-mediated intergroup contact. Particularly noteworthy are studies examining the Ukrainian refugee context (Li et al., 2023) and anti-Asian sentiment during the pandemic (Zhang et al., 2024), which suggest that social media's potential to facilitate intergroup relationships is increasingly recognized in academia, particularly following global events that have raised awareness of societal cohesion. These findings support Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna's (2006) assertion that the internet has the potential to overcome the limitations of face-to-face contact by effectively facilitating contact between groups in the digital space. However, three studies reporting negative or mixed effects underscore the importance of carefully considering the context, quality, and implementation of intergroup contact on social media to achieve desirable intergroup outcomes.

5.1. Affordances Utilization

Looking at the use of affordances, a clear focus on specific affordances emerges. The dominance of browsing others' content and the associated dissemination of content from oneself or others reflects both the accessibility of passive consumption and the researchers' focus on low-risk forms of contact. While this facilitation successfully addresses intergroup anxiety, a major barrier to face-to-face contact, its overrepresentation suggests a missed opportunity to utilize more engaging and committed forms of interaction.

The absence of interactivity, presence signaling, collaboration, competition, and sourcing represents a gap between theoretical potential and empirical investigation. While remaining underexplored, these affordances align directly with Allport's (1954) optimal contact conditions: equal status, common goals, cooperation, and authoritarian support. Collaboration affordances could facilitate joint problem-solving

between groups, creating common goals and cooperative interdependence. Virtual environments that enable rich interactivity could simulate shared experiences, building empathy and understanding beyond what text-based communication allows. When structured appropriately, competition affordances could channel intergroup dynamics into constructive challenges.

The underutilization of group management affordances is particularly concerning, as they have the potential to provide institutional support and the authority to optimize contact outcomes. Another gap lies in sourcing affordances, which could facilitate mutual aid and resource exchange between groups, building practical interdependence. Though absent from current research, presence signaling could humanize outgroup members by displaying their real-time activities, availability, and daily rhythms.

The affordances found in the three cases of undesirable intergroup effects contributed predominantly to desirable intergroup effects in the other studies. Therefore, these affordances themselves cannot be considered responsible for the negative effects. Rather, in all three studies, the focus was on the specific contexts in which participants came together on social media, which inherently emphasized division and prevented participants from establishing common ground.

5.2. Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this work systematically organizes a fragmented field of research by providing a comprehensive synthesis of social media-mediated intergroup contact studies. Our analysis reveals how Karahanna et al.'s (2018) social media affordances perspective can be leveraged to understand positive social outcomes, offering a crucial counterbalance to social media's dark side. While extensive research has documented how social media affordances cultivate political polarization, conspiracy theories, hate speech, and manipulation of public opinion, our findings demonstrate these same affordances can facilitate meaningful intergroup connections that strengthen intergroup relation and social cohesion.

By integrating intergroup contact theory with social media affordances research, we demonstrate how the five forms of indirect intergroup contact—electronic, extended, imaginary, parasocial, and vicarious—can be systematically enabled through specific combinations of social media affordances. This integration advances social inclusion research by introducing a technological component that reveals how digital platforms can be strategically designed to promote positive intergroup

relations rather than division. Our framework provides a theoretical foundation for understanding which affordances enable successful intergroup contact and how their utilization translates into improved intergroup relations.

For practitioners, these findings offer actionable insights for multiple stakeholders working to enhance social cohesion and democratic values. Social media platforms can strategically design features that promote positive intergroup contact by prioritizing content facilitating meaningful cross-group discussions and creating moderated spaces for diverse groups to engage safely. The evidence that browsing others' content, content sharing, and relationship formation affordances consistently enable positive intergroup contact provides concrete guidance for platform design decisions that balance engagement with social responsibility.

In democratic societies, majority attitudes toward minority groups carry profound implications for policy formation and legislative outcomes, as democratic processes enable numerical majorities to implement laws and policies that can significantly advantage or disadvantage minority populations. Our findings suggest that social media interventions targeting majority group attitudes could have cascading effects on policy outcomes, institutional practices, and societal treatment of minority groups, extending far beyond individual-level attitude change. Regulatory agencies can leverage these insights to develop evidence-based policies encouraging platforms to facilitate positive intergroup contact while supporting research that informs best practices for democratic discourse online. Users themselves can proactively seek out-group contacts and customize their social media settings to prioritize diverse content, contributing to more inclusive digital environments that strengthen rather than fragment social cohesion.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Certain limitations exist in the current research landscape, highlighting the need for future research. First, we need to understand the contact between groups on social media in non-Western contexts and in the Global South, where digital infrastructures, norms, and conflicts may be different. Furthermore, while focusing on majority perspectives is necessary from a democratic point of view, co-designing projects with marginalized groups can ensure that SMIC interventions do not reproduce existing inequalities or blind spots.

Secondly, recommendation systems, content curation algorithms, and network effects on social media platforms play a major role in what content we encounter in reality and how we experience it. The lack

of research addressing algorithmic effects is a gap that should be taken into account by future research.

Third, most studies capture immediate or short-term effects. Longitudinal studies that follow participants over months or years can shed light on whether digital contact causes lasting or temporary changes in attitudes. Additionally, the field could benefit from design science research that goes beyond documenting effects and develops and tests novel platform features explicitly designed for underutilized affordances in social media-mediated intergroup contact.

Finally, future research can address dark patterns and affordances that hinder desirable interaction between groups. Inclusive spaces require understanding how specific features may foster conflict, how anonymity affects the quality of contact, and how to prevent harassment and hate speech during contact.

6. Conclusion

At a time when digital technologies are increasingly shaping the encounter of social groups, their cohesion, and thus the democratic values on which a society is founded, the ability of social media to foster positive intergroup relations is both a pressing challenge and an opportunity. Rather than viewing social media as a site of decay and division, we propose that it can be reconceptualized as an architecture of inclusion that enables rich encounters between groups. When used with care and intention, intergroup contact on social media has the potential not only to reduce prejudice but also to strengthen the social fabric on which democracies depend.

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