r/AITA Polarization and Popularity

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Contents

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##################)
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### Date: 2022/04/06
### Purpose: Analyze AITA posts and comments
##################)
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1 Introduction: Is Polarization Popular on AITA?

I examined the top comments from top AITA subreddit posts from 2018-2019 to explore whether popular posts are associated with more engaged and polarized comments section.

AITA is a subreddit seeking to give access to crowdsourced social judgement to clarify those sticky situations where we aren't quiiite sure if we're being an A-hole.

The analysis is comprised of two main steps:

- Determining if more intense and balanced posts are more popular
- Determining if more polarizing posts more popular

We also determine basic descriptive facts about the top posts, which were used to inform and check the data cleaning process. These are reported in the appendix.

This analysis is largely inconclusive and more rigorous analysis is neccesary to fully unpack the role of polarization in determining post popularity. However, we do establish some preliminary evidence that intense and polarizing posts are more popular on r/AITA. To summarize our results at the highest level:

- Post intensity is somewhat correlated with post score, but not with the number of comments.
- Post balance is not very correlated with either score or number of comments
- Post comment polarization is correlated with both post score and number of comments
- Post voting polarization is not correlated with score, but is correlated with the number of comments.

Eventually, we seek to extend this analysis by exploring how post characteristics (e.g. age of poster, family vs relationship content) may impact community responses to determine which biases manifest in this social judgement context. Such an analysis would build off the analysis in Alice Wu 2019 (here: https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/alicewu/files/wu_ejr_paper_2019.pdf) and Ferrer et al 2020 (here: https://arxiv.org/pdf/2008.02754.pdf).

2 Post Intensity, Balance and Popularity

We now turn to the relationship between post intensity and popularity. We expect that more intense posts are likely to be more popular since many forum posters don't engage unless moved emotionally. Post intensity measures the emotional impact of a post, so we expect more intense posts to correspond to more engaging posts.

We also consider whether balanced or unbalanced posts are more popular. On the one hand, balanced posts are likely to be more moderate in tone and thereby less engaging. On the other hand, unbalanced posts may be alienating or unambiguous, rendering them uninteresting.

```
## Intensity and Popularity ----
```

2.1 Intensity and Popularity

We measure intensity, as described above, based on the share of words in a post that correspond to emotional responses in the NRC emotion lexicon.

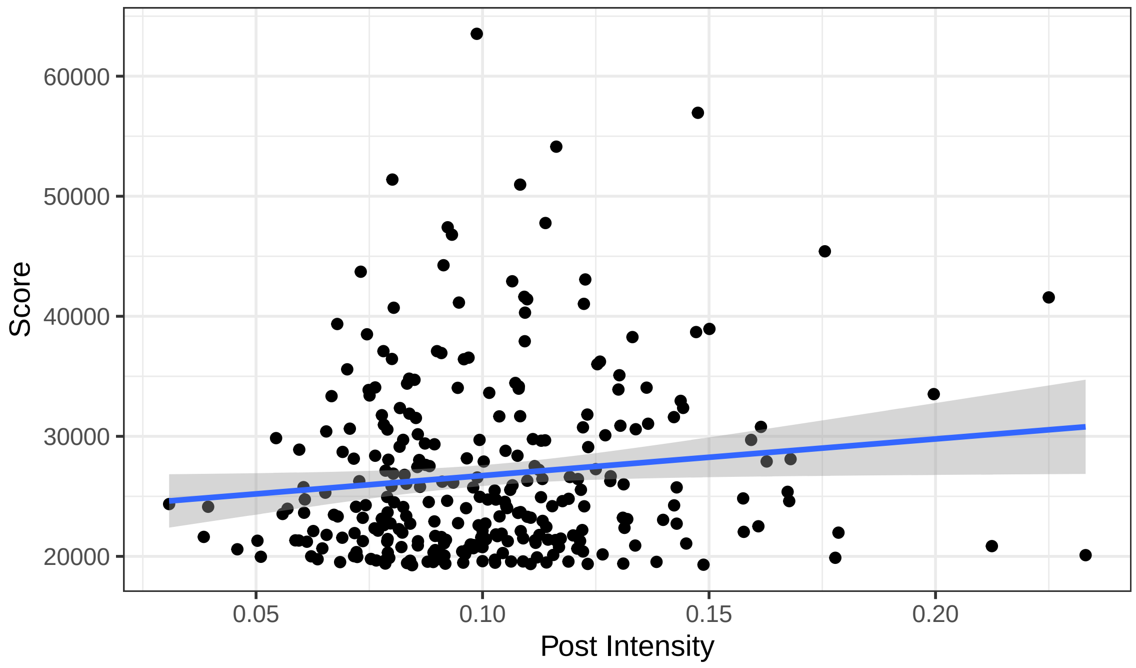
We run a regression of post score on intensity, and find some correlation but no obvious trend. Similarly, post comments appear mostly unrelated to post intensity. As a result, the role of intensity and score remains inconclusive.

One interesting takeaway is that the least intense posts (intensity<=0.06) are all low score/comments, while the some of the highest intensity posts have high scores and many commments (intensity>=0.15). Additionally, almost all the very high score/comment posts are in the middle intenstiy range.

Perhaps there is some negative engagement response associated with overly bland or intense posts, though with the current lack of correlation it's hard to say.

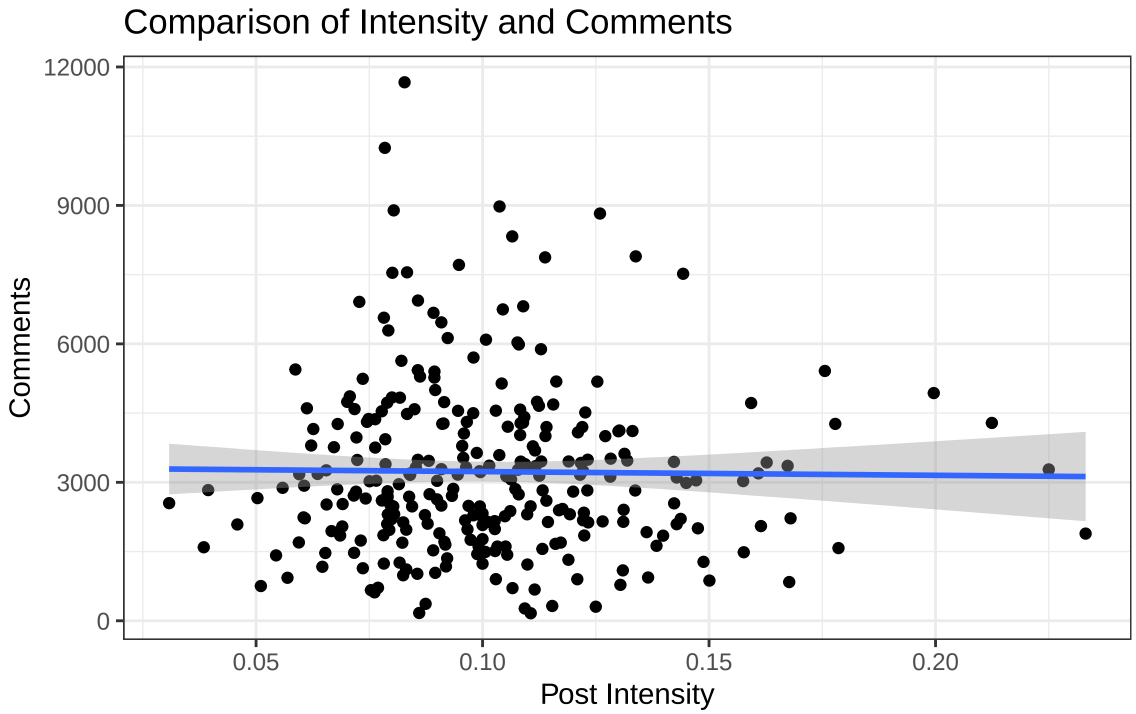
Further analysis with a larger sample size and evaluation of specific emotions may give more insight into the relationship of emotional intensity and post popularity.

Comparison of Intensity and Score



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                               lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                 score
##
## (Intercept)     23,678.3*** (1,558.8)
## intensity        30,513.7* (14,754.3)
## _______________ _____________________
## S.E. type                         IID
## Observations                      285
## R2                            0.01489
## Adj. R2                       0.01141
```



Comparison of Intensity and Comments

Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                            lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:       num_comments
##
## (Intercept)     3,312.6*** (384.6)
## intensity         -804.5 (3,640.5)
## _______________ __________________
## S.E. type                      IID
## Observations                   285
## R2                         0.00017
## Adj. R2                   -0.00336
```

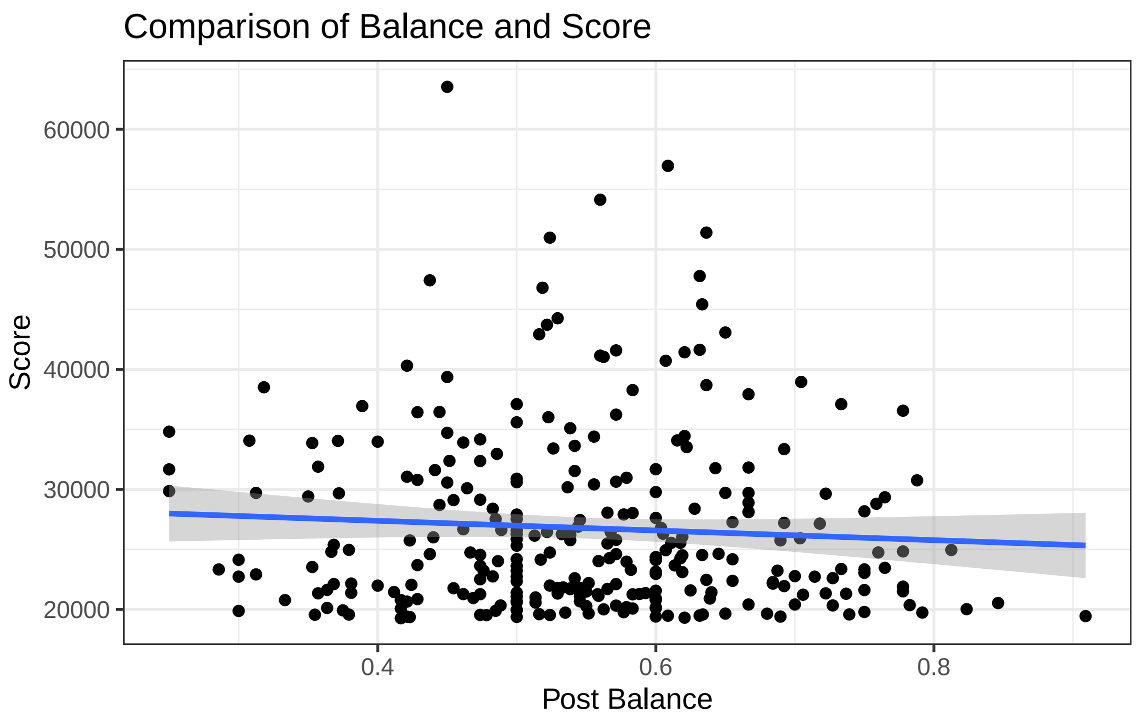
2.2 Balance and Popularity

We measure balance, as described above, based on the share of words in a post that correspond to a valance response in the NRC emotion lexicon.

We run a regression of post score on balance, and find some correlation but no obvious trend. Similarly, post comments appear mostly unrelated to post balance. As a result, the role of balance and score remains inconclusive.

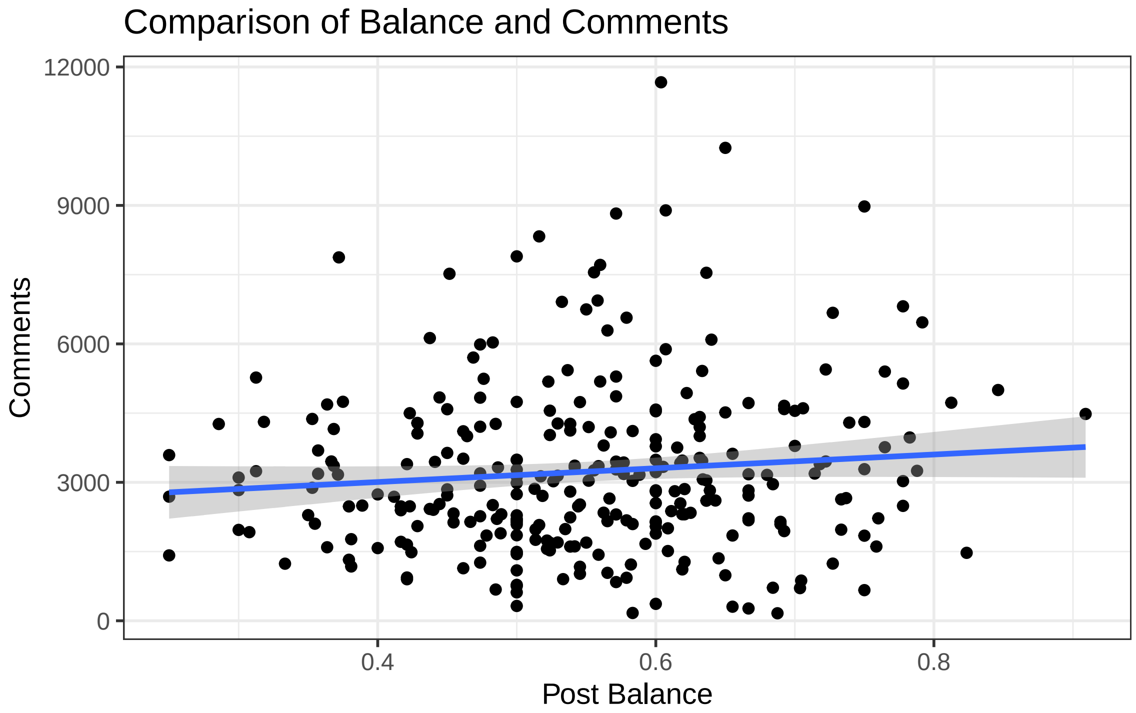
One interesting takeaway is that almost all the most positive posts have low scores, while very negative posts have more positive scores. Additionally, nearly all the highest scored/most commented as well as the least commented posts are in the middle range of balance.

Further analysis with a larger sample size may give more insight into the relationship of emotional balance and post popularity.


Comparison of Balance and Score

Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                                   lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                     score
##
## (Intercept)     28,991.0*** (2,062.5)
## balance            -4,034.0 (3,658.4)
## _______________ _____________________
## S.E. type                         IID
## Observations                      285
## R2                            0.00428
## Adj. R2                       0.00076
```


Comparison of Balance and Comments

Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                              lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:         num_comments
##
## (Intercept)      2,410.5*** (503.8)
## balance            1,490.6. (893.6)
## ________________ __________________
## S.E. type                       IID
## Observations                    285
## R2                          0.00974
## Adj. R2                     0.00624
```

3 Polarization and Popularity

We now turn to the relationship between polarization and popularity. We expect that more polarizing posts are likely to be more popular since many forum posters don't engage unless moved emotionally. Comment polarization measures the emotional impact of a post, so we expect more polarization to correspond to more engaging posts.

While polarization may be a good measure of emotional engagement, other explanations may exist. For example, non-polarized posts from particularly humorous or outlandish posts may also excel on the platform. This analysis seeks to determine whether polarization is indeed associated with popularity on AITA, which gives some indication into whether the most engaging posts are divisive.

We measure polarization in two ways: comment polarization of comments and voting breakdowns of comments.

```
## Comment Polarization ----
```

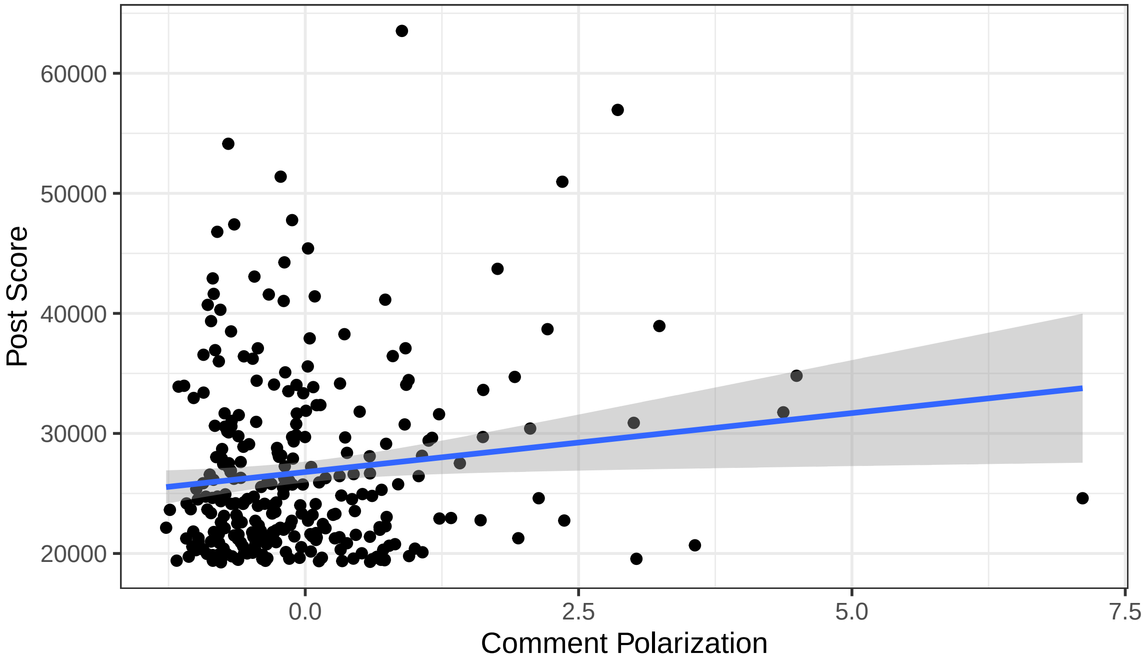
3.1 Comment Polarization and Popularity

We construct a normalized index of polarization for each post based on intensity and balance of its comments. A post is highly polarized if there are many intense comments that disagree in terms of balance. We capture this Polarization using standard deviation of the product of intensity and polarization.

We see some association between Polarization and score. However, repeating the same analysis with number of comments at the measure of popularity indicates that more comments are negatively associated with polarization. This suggests that comments are a confounder for the effect of Polarization on popularity. Conditioning on comments, we see that Polarization is strongly associated with higher scores.

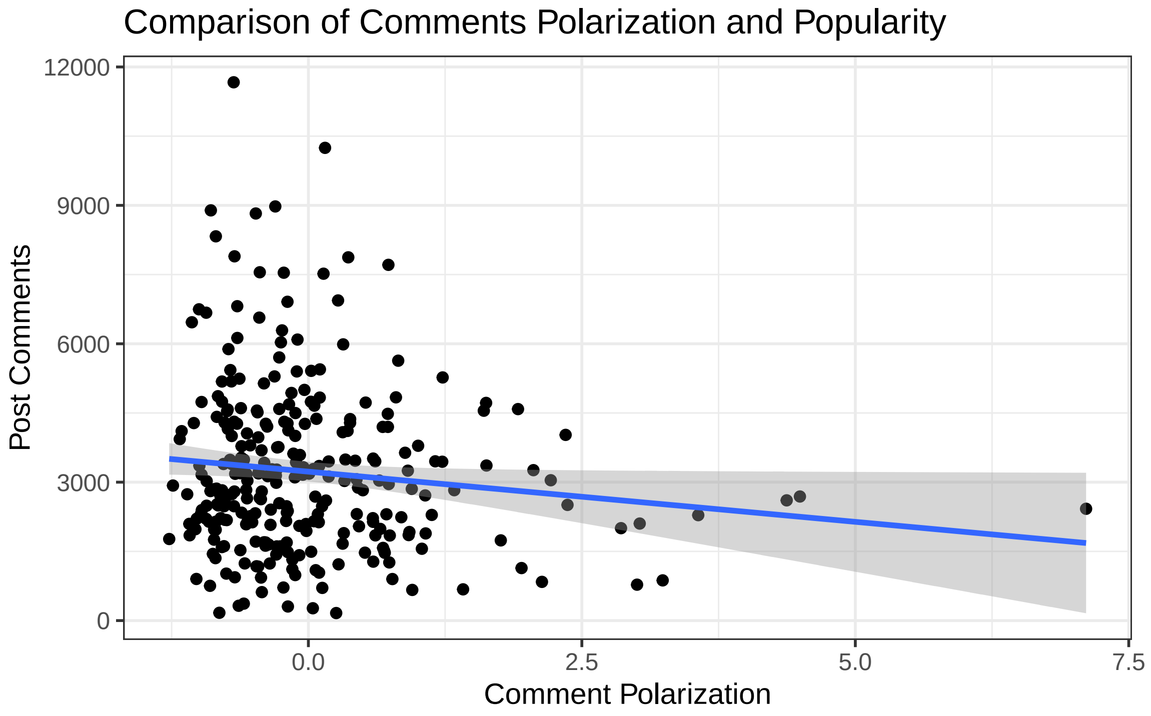
Since standard deviation may be affected by outliers and sample sizes we try two robustness checks: removing the top/bottom 5% of polarizing comments and using IQR instead of standard deviation. These don't impact the results. See the appendix for the estimates.

Comparison of Comments Polarization and Popularity



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                                  lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                    score
##
## (Intercept)        26,783.7*** (441.0)
## polarization_index      982.3* (438.3)
## __________________ ___________________
## S.E. type                            IID
## Observations                         285
## R2                               0.01744
## Adj. R2                          0.01397
```



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

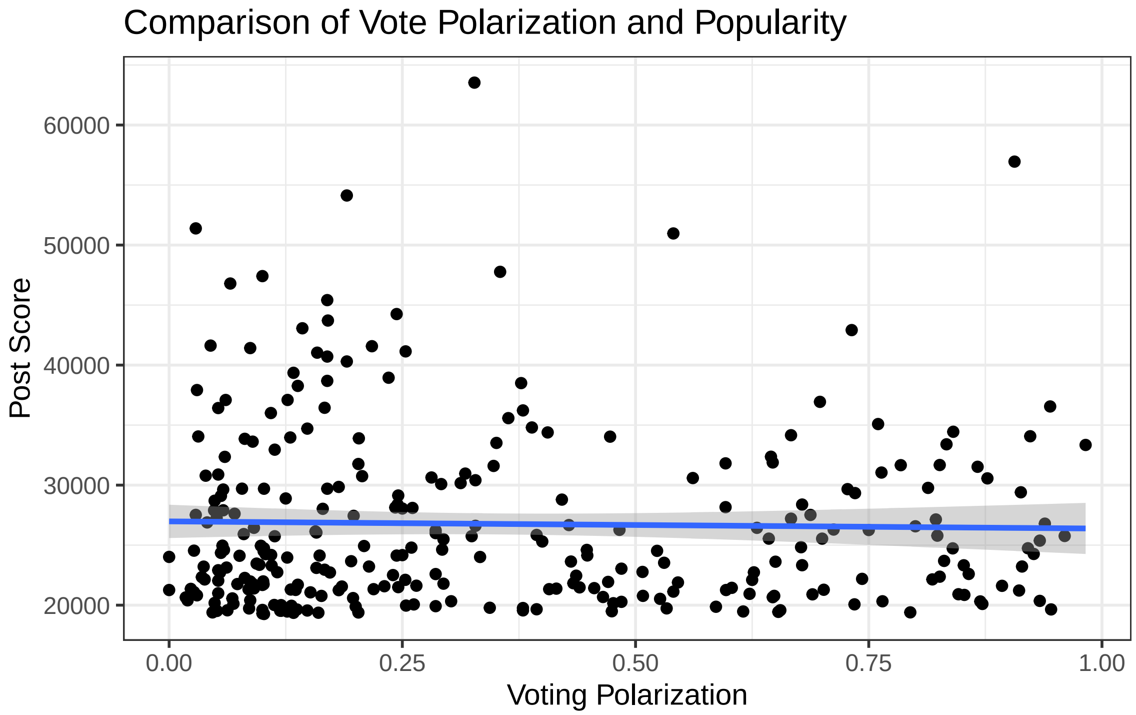
```
##                               lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:          num_comments
##
## (Intercept)        3,228.1*** (108.2)
## polarization_index    -217.6* (107.5)
## __________________ __________________
## S.E. type                         IID
## Observations                      285
## R2                            0.01426
## Adj. R2                       0.01078
```

```
##                                lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                  score
##
## (Intercept)        23,653.8*** (873.8)
## polarization_index   1,193.2** (429.5)
## num_comments        0.9696*** (0.2358)
## __________________ ___________________
## S.E. type                          IID
## Observations                       285
## R2                             0.07303
## Adj. R2                        0.06645
```

3.2 Voting Polarization and Popularity

We construct an index of polarization for each post based on the share of votes that are NTA or YTA. A post is highly polarized if the share of YTA votes is near 50%, and is not polarized if the share of YTA votes is near 100 or 0 percent. This is rescaled to a 0-1 scale with 0 being low polarization and 1 being high polarization.

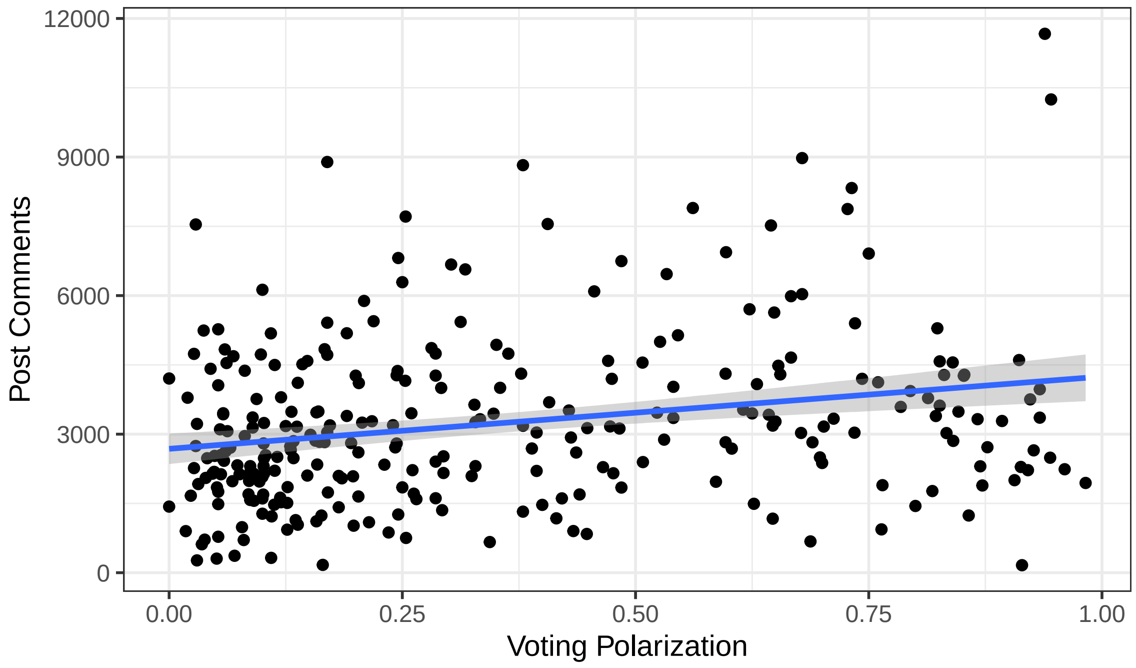
We see no clear association between polarization and score. However, we observe that more comments are positively associated with voting polarization. When including comments as a control, there remains no clear associate between voting polarization and score.


Comparison of Vote Polarization and Popularity

Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                                 lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                   score
##
## (Intercept)       26,980.0*** (705.1)
## vote_polarization    -598.6 (1,560.0)
## _________________ ___________________
## S.E. type                          IID
## Observations                       285
## R2                             0.00052
## Adj. R2                       -0.00301
```

Comparison of Comments Polarization and Popularity



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                              lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:         num_comments
##
## (Intercept)       2,682.7*** (167.5)
## vote_polarization 1,563.7*** (370.7)
## _________________ __________________
## S.E. type                         IID
## Observations                      285
## R2                            0.05916
## Adj. R2                       0.05583
```

```
##                               lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                 score
##
## (Intercept)       24,373.9*** (948.8)
## vote_polarization  -2,117.7 (1,567.6)
## num_comments       0.9715*** (0.2438)
## _________________ ___________________
## S.E. type                          IID
## Observations                       285
## R2                             0.05378
## Adj. R2                        0.04707
```

4 Appendix

4.1 Basic Descriptive Facts

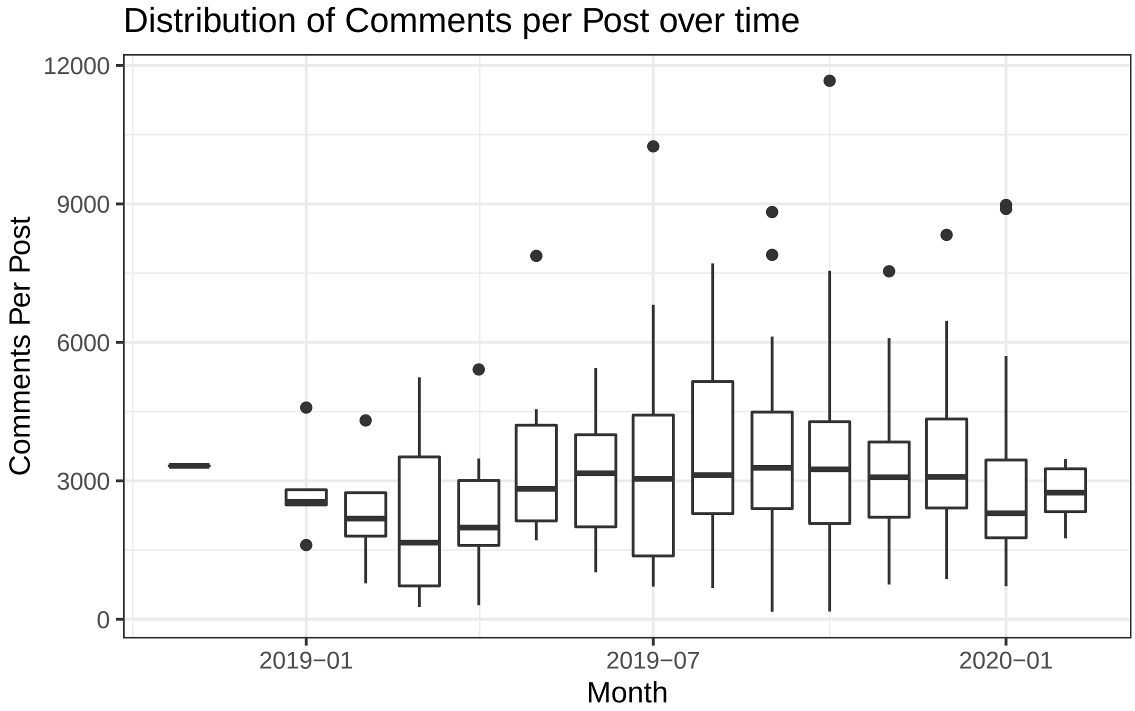
We want to explore the overall distributions of the key variables in this analysis, and confirm that the data adhere to our expectations. We focus this analysis on comments/replies, score, intensity, and balance.

- Comments/replies refers to the number of comments or replies that a given post or comment receives.
- Score refers to the net upvotes a post or comment receives.
- Intensity is the ratio of the sum of words from 8 emotions to total words in a given post or comment. The values are calculated based on matching the words in the post or comment to the NRC dictionary (Saif Mohammad's NRC Emotion lexicon, see http://saifmohammad.com/WebPages/NRC-Emotion-Lexicon.htm). A post with a higher intensity has more emotionally laden words.
- Balance is the ratio of the positive valance value to the sum of the positive and negative valance values. Again, the values are derived from the NRC dictionary. A balanced post will have a balance of 0.5, indicating that there are as many positive words as there are negative words.

4.1.1 Overall

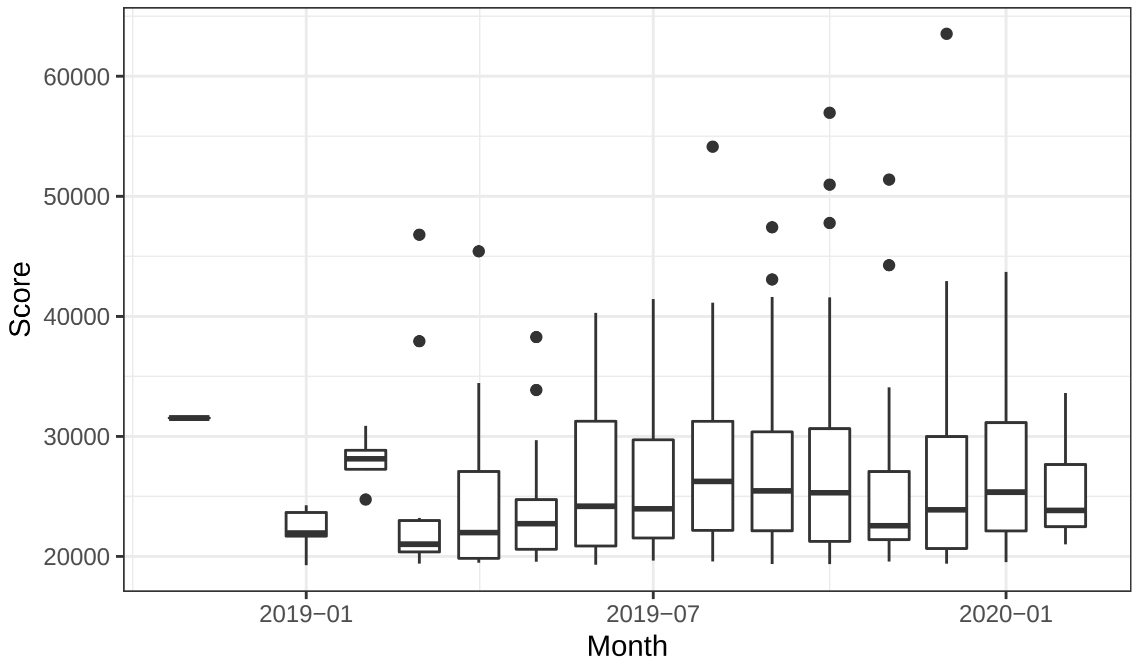
First, we consider the data posts overall by checking if censoring over time is a big driver of comment counts or score. The following plots indicate that censoring isn't a driving issue.

We also note that the vast majority of top posts are "Not the A-hole."



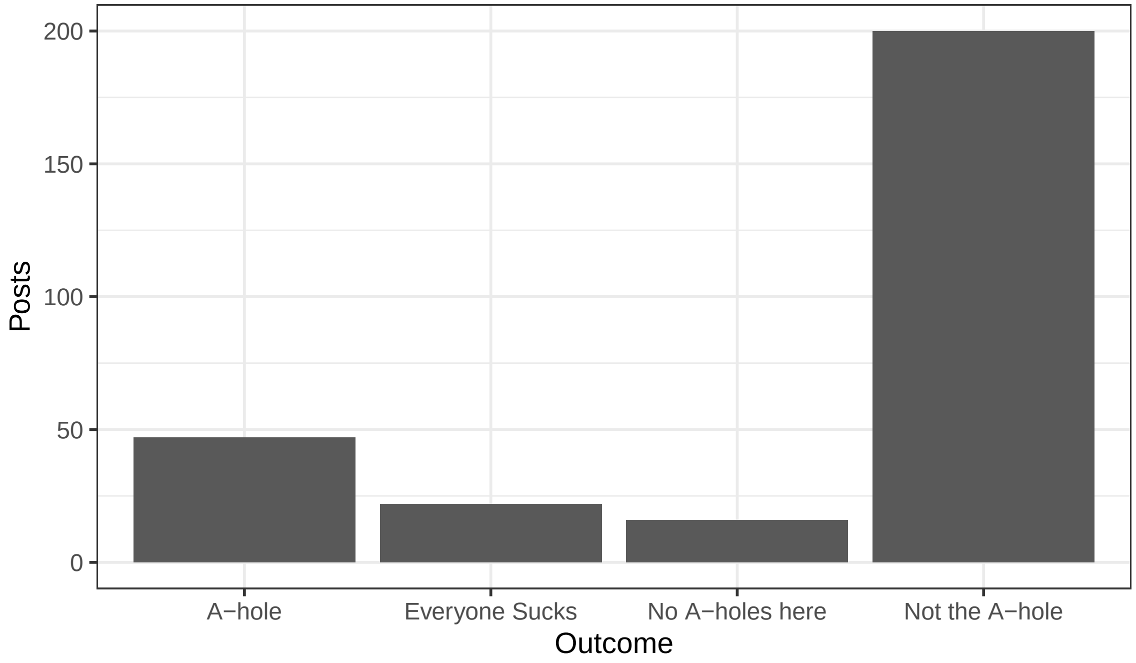
Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

Distribution of Score over time



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

Distribution of Outcome Votes

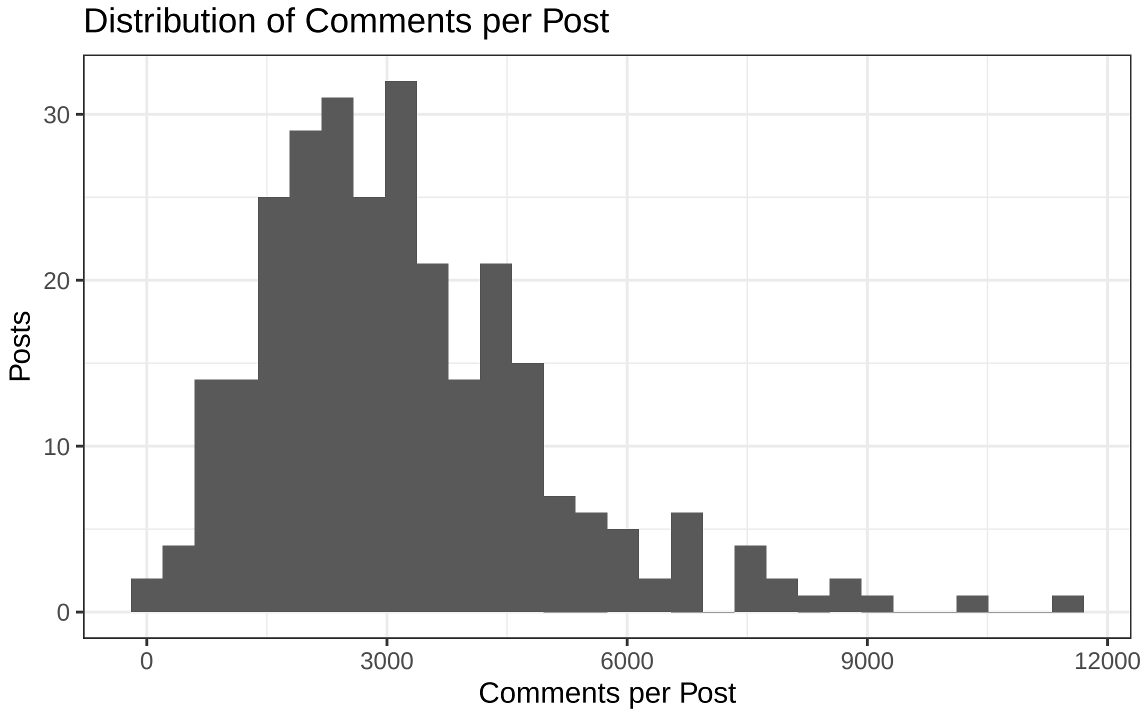


Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

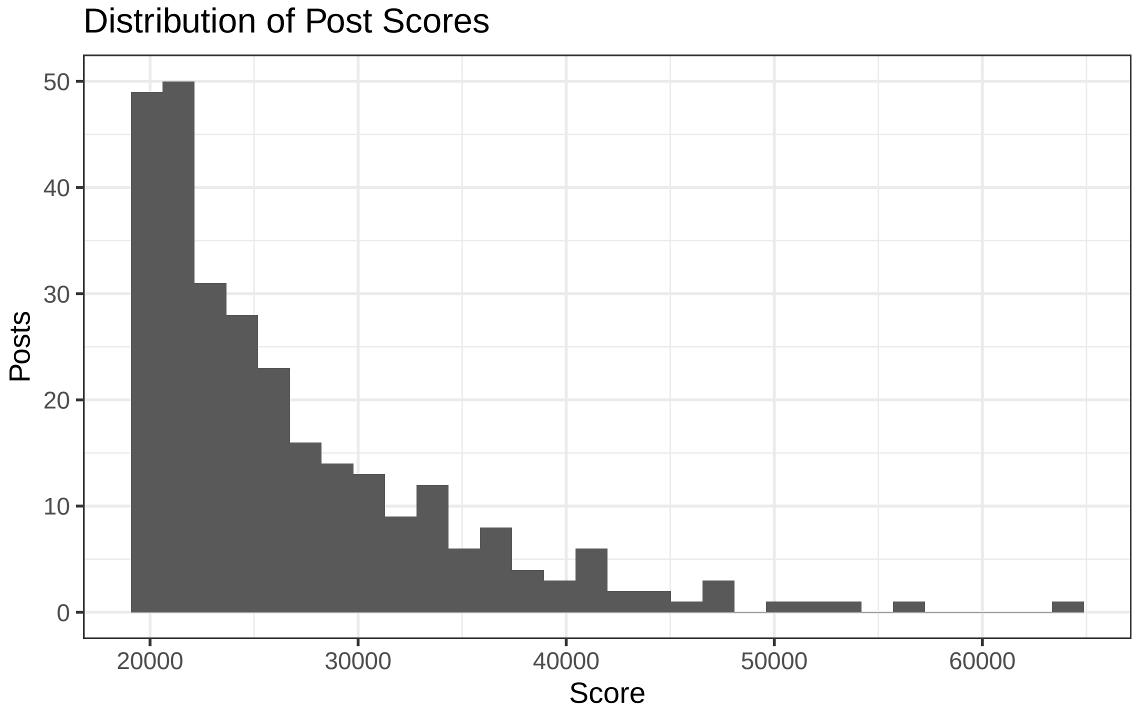
4.1.2 Distributions of key variables in Posts

We consider the distributions of post comments, score, intensity and balance to identify outliers or observations that should be dropped.

We don't see anything unusual among the non-deleted posts.



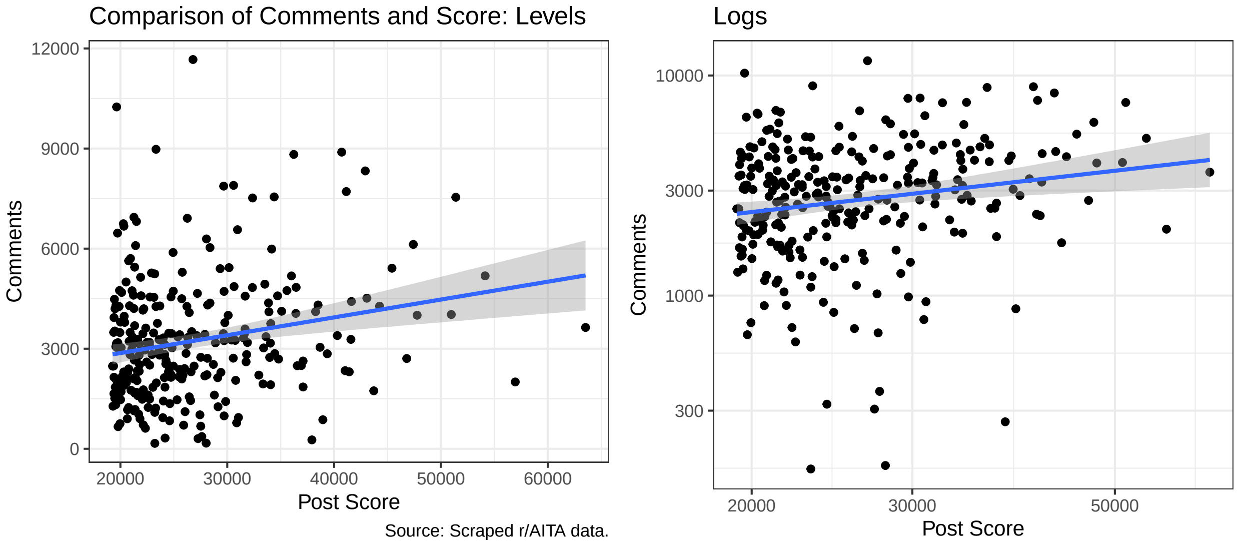
Source: Scraped r/AITA data.



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

Having checked the marginal distributions of comments and score, we also want to consider the joint distribution.

For both level-level and log-log, comments and score are correlated which is as we might expect. A 1 point increase in score is associated with a 0.05 increase in comments, and a 1 percent increase in score is associated with a 0.47 percent increase in comments.



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

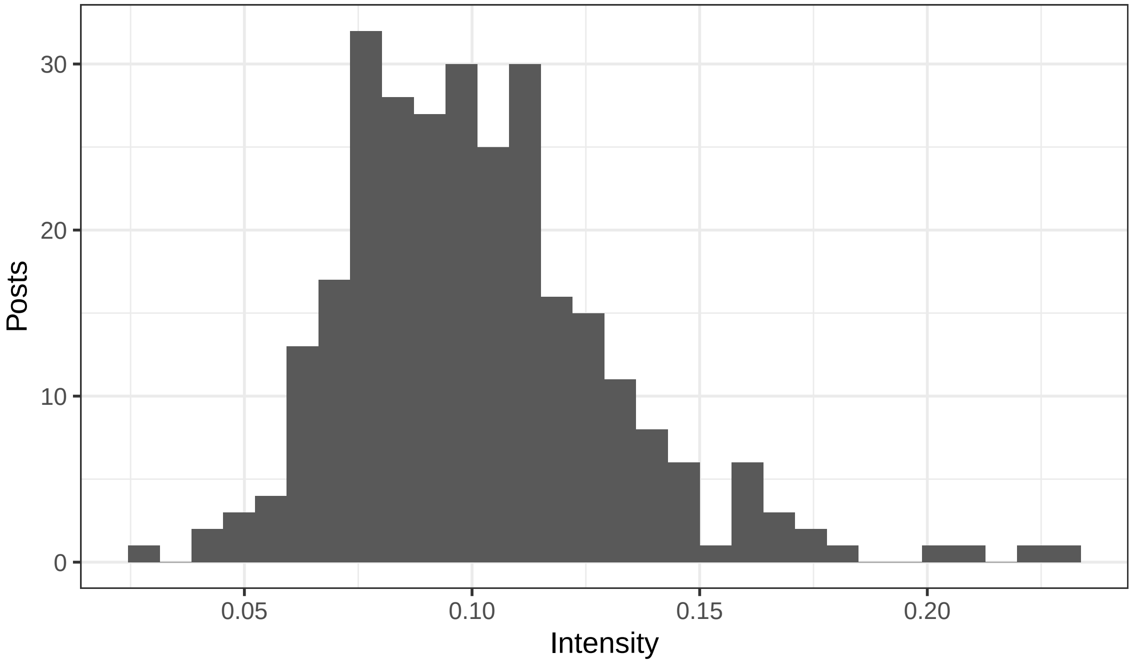
```
##                                 lev_lev           log_log
## Dependent Var.:         num_comments log(num_comments)
##
## (Intercept)     1,799.8*** (394.9)    3.111. (1.581)
## score           0.0535*** (0.0142)
## log(score)                         0.4716** (0.1555)
## _______________ __________________ _________________
## S.E. type                      IID               IID
## Observations                   285               285
## R2                         0.04766           0.03148
## Adj. R2                    0.04429           0.02805
```

Lastly, we want to check the distributions of intensity and balance.

We observe that intensity is somewhat right skewed, so most posts tend to be less intense than the most extreme posts.

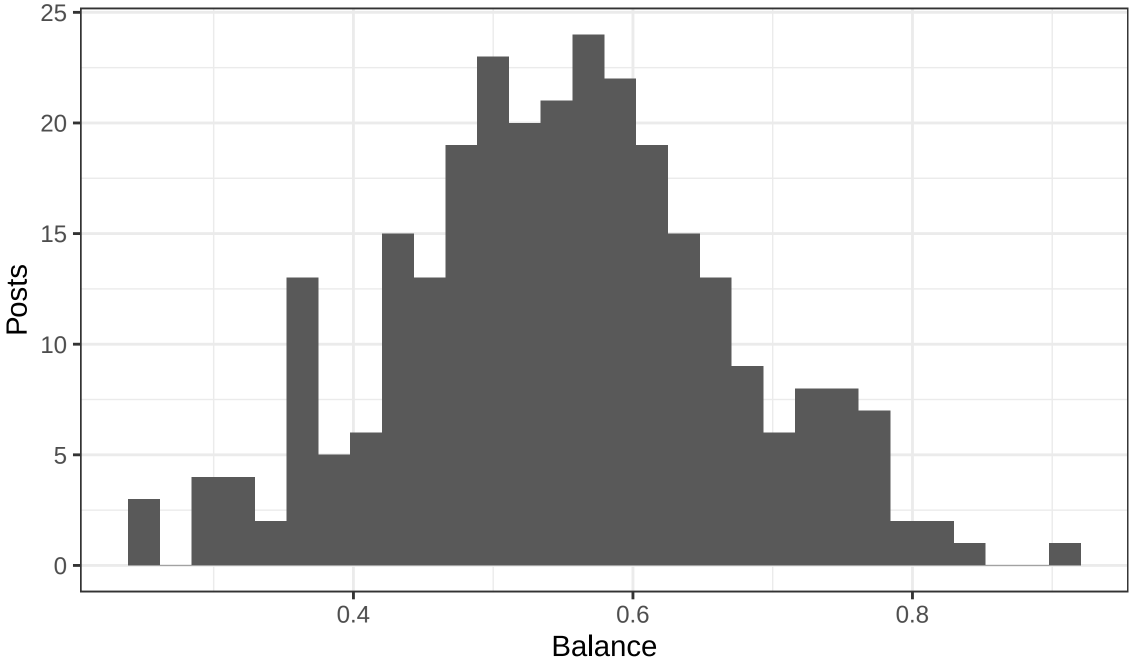
We observe that balance is fairly evenly distributed, but is centered above 0.5. This indicates that balance varies by post, but tends to be a bit more positive than negative.

Distribution of Post Intensity



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

Distribution of Post Balance

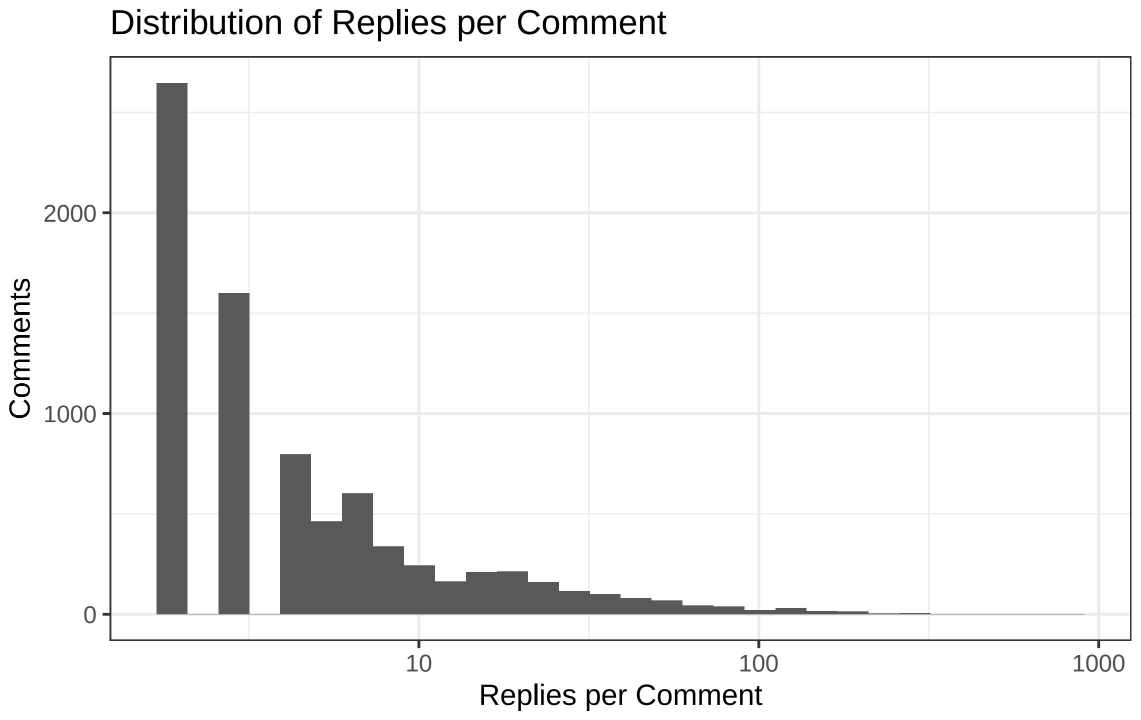


Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

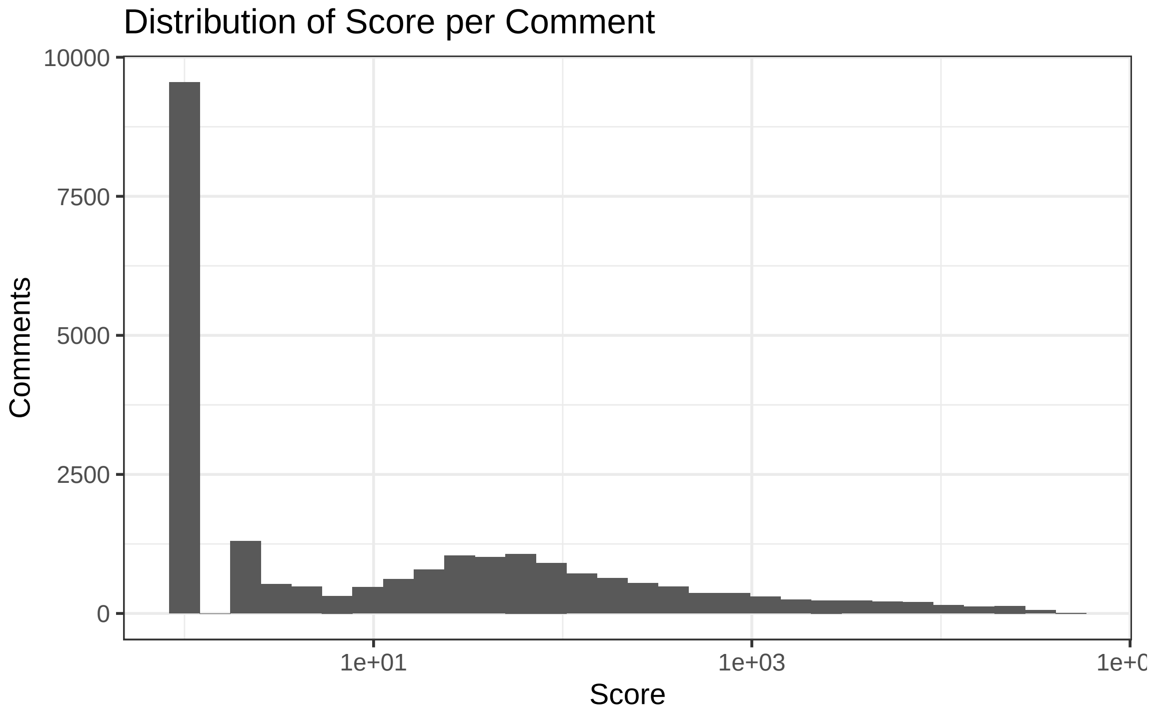
4.1.3 Distributions of key variables in Comments

We consider the distribution of comment replies, score, intensity and balance to identify outliers or observations that should be dropped.

We notice that an enormous share of comments have 1 upvote. Since this may be a self-voted value and is therefore unrelated to a replies impact on other people, we don't consider single upvote comments when investigating comment scores.



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

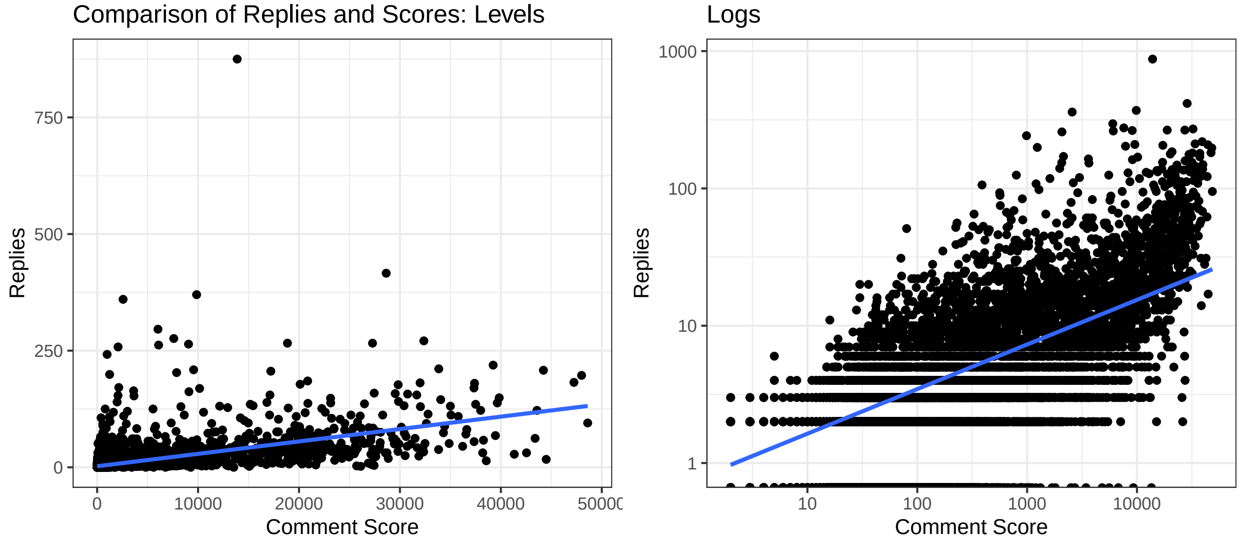


Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

Having checked the marginal distributions of replies and score, we also want to consider the joint distribution.

For both level-level and log-log, replies and score are correlated which is as we might expect. A 1 point increase in score is associated with a 0.003 increase in replies, and a 1 percent increase in score is associated with a 0.32 percent increase in comments.

Including post fixed effects, we observe similar correlations: 0.003 and 0.34 respectively.


Comparison of Replies and Scores: Levels

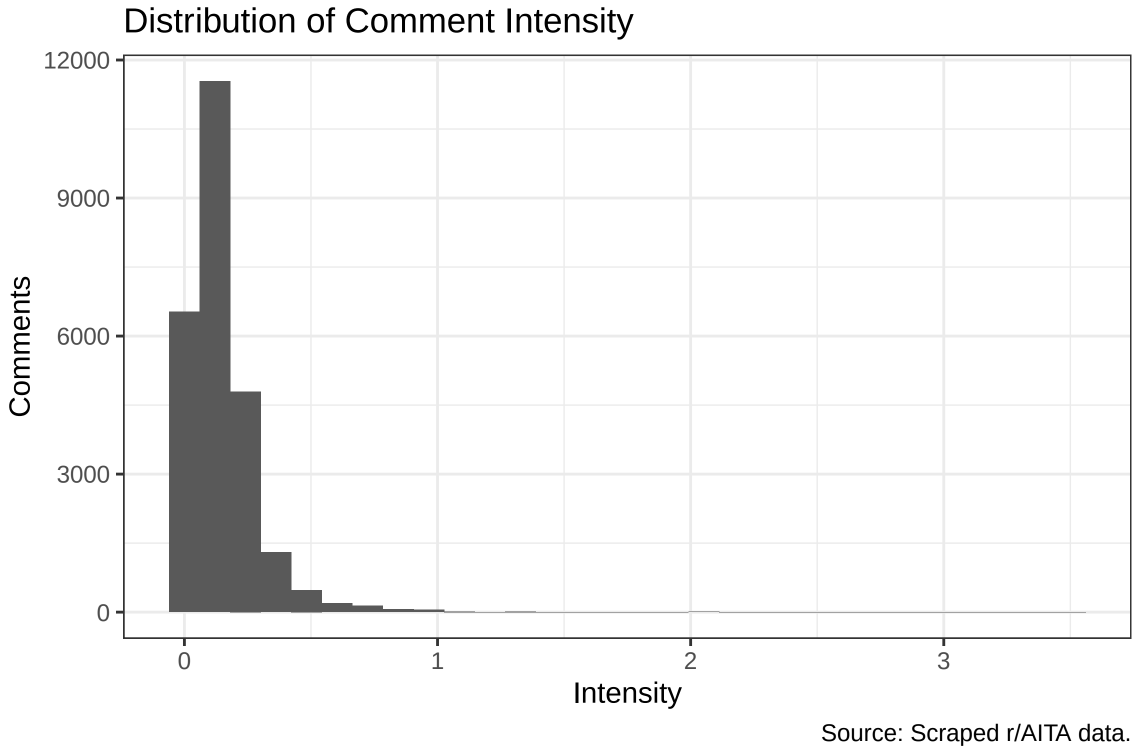
Logs

```
##                                lev_lev                 log_log
## Dependent Var.:    reply_count_comment log(reply_count_comment)
##
## (Intercept)          2.276*** (0.1315)     -0.2562*** (0.0232)
## score_comment      0.0027*** (3.16e-5)
## log(score_comment)                          0.3249*** (0.0039)
## Fixed-Effects:     ------------------- ------------------------
## id                                  No                       No
## __________________ ___________________ ________________________
## S.E. type                          IID                      IID
## Observations                    13,550                    7,545
## R2                             0.34276                  0.47560
## Within R2                           --                       --
##                        lev_lev_post_fe         log_log_post_fe
## Dependent Var.:    reply_count_comment log(reply_count_comment)
##
## (Intercept)
## score_comment       0.0026*** (0.0001)
## log(score_comment)                          0.3352*** (0.0069)
## Fixed-Effects:     ------------------- ------------------------
## id                                 Yes                      Yes
## __________________ ___________________ ________________________
## S.E. type                       by: id                   by: id
## Observations                    13,550                    7,545
## R2                             0.39341                  0.56281
## Within R2                      0.35060                  0.51896
```

Lastly, we want to check the distributions of intensity and balance.

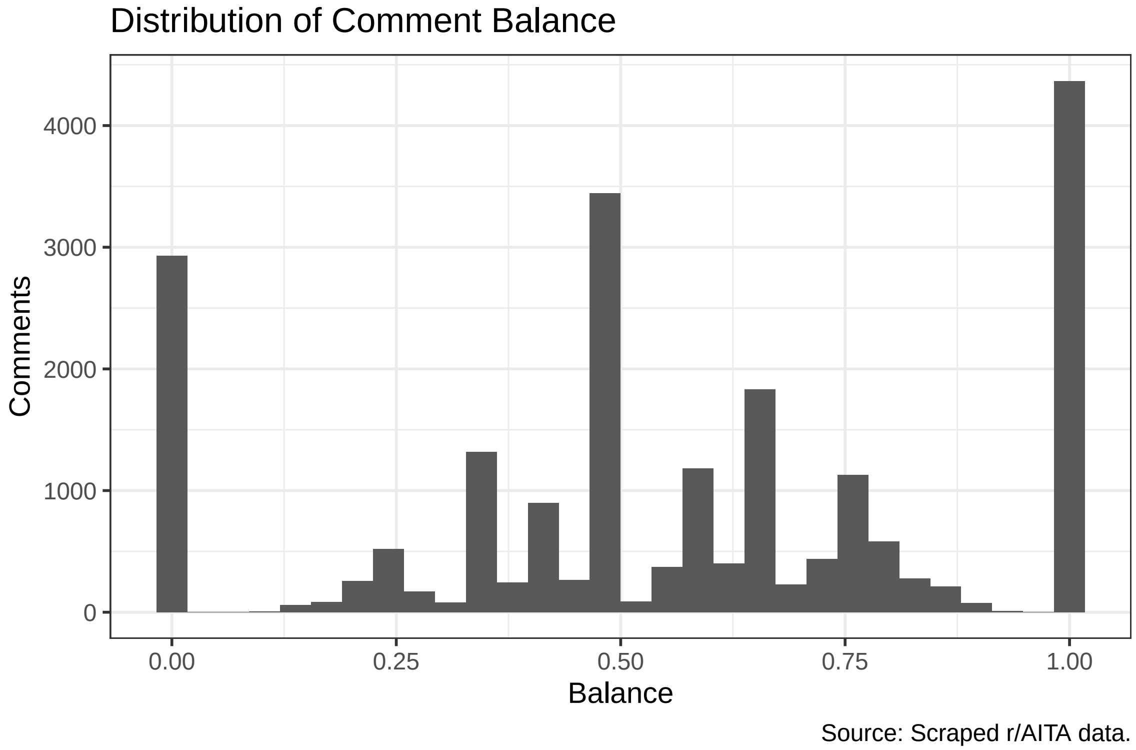
We observe that intensity ranges greatly and is severely right skewed. Most comments tend to be very unintense, but some are very intense. Note that values above 1 come from comments with words that appear in multiple emotions.

We observe that balance is fairly evenly distributed, but is concentrated at 0, 0.5, and 1, as well as 1/3, 2/3, 1/4, 3/4, and other fractions. This is because most comments are much shorter than posts, and so often have few if any valance (positive or negative) words.



Distribution of Comment Intensity

Source: Scraped r/AITA data.



Distribution of Comment Balance

Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

4.2 Comment Polarization Robustness

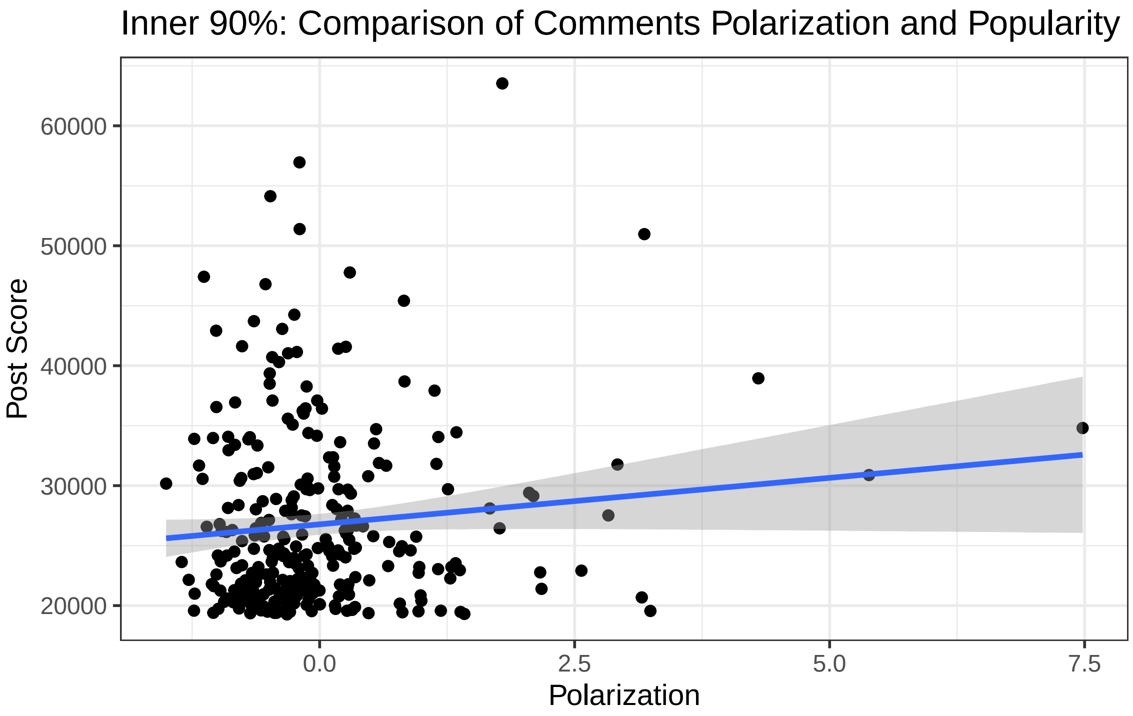
We consider two robustness checks for the estimates for comment polarization on popularity.

The first is to limit the posts used to calculate the sentiment standard deviation to the inner 90% of comments. Thus, strong negative comments and strong postive comments are dropped from the polariztion measure. We still observe largely similar results: slight positive assocaition with score, a negative association with comments, and a larger positive association with score when controlling for comments.

The second is to use IQR instead of standard deviation to measure polarization. Again, we see similar estimates using IQR instead of SD.

In both robustness checks, the relationship is less strong, but is still significant at the 5% level when using comments as a control variable.

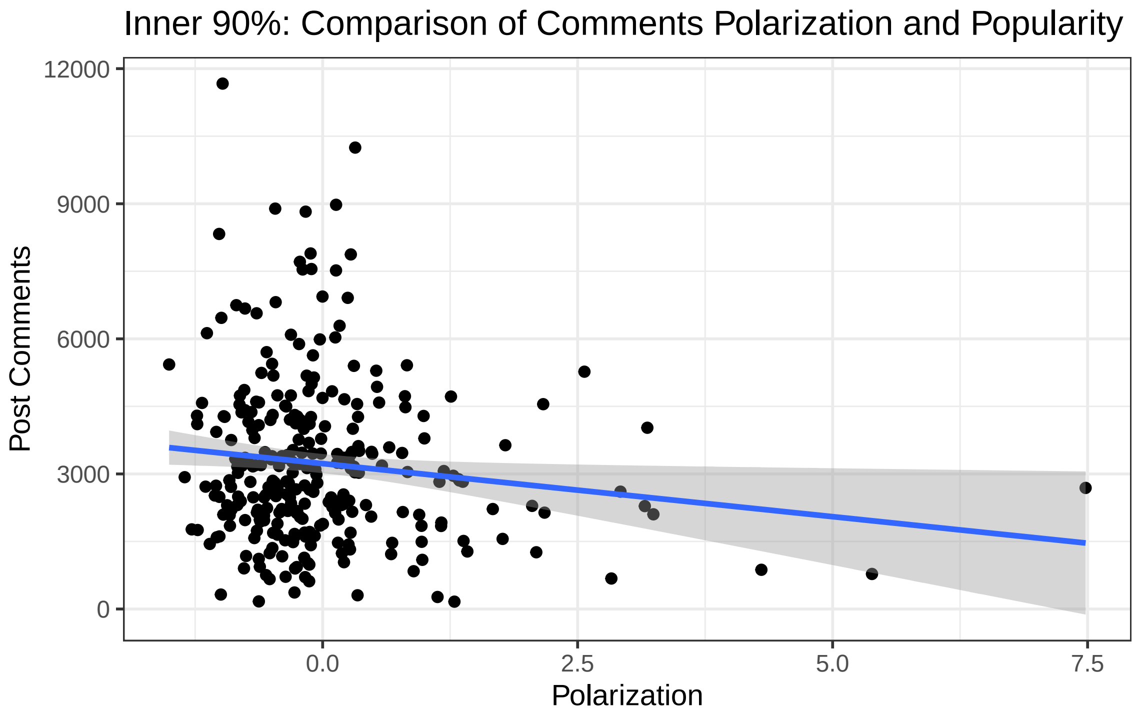
4.2.1 Inner 90% Estimates



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                                 lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                   score
##
## (Intercept)        26,776.1*** (442.5)
## polarization_index      774.7. (437.8)
## ------------------ -------------------
## S.E. type                           IID
## Observations                        285
## R2                              0.01094
## Adj. R2                         0.00745
```

4.2.2 Results of Polarization on Number of Comments

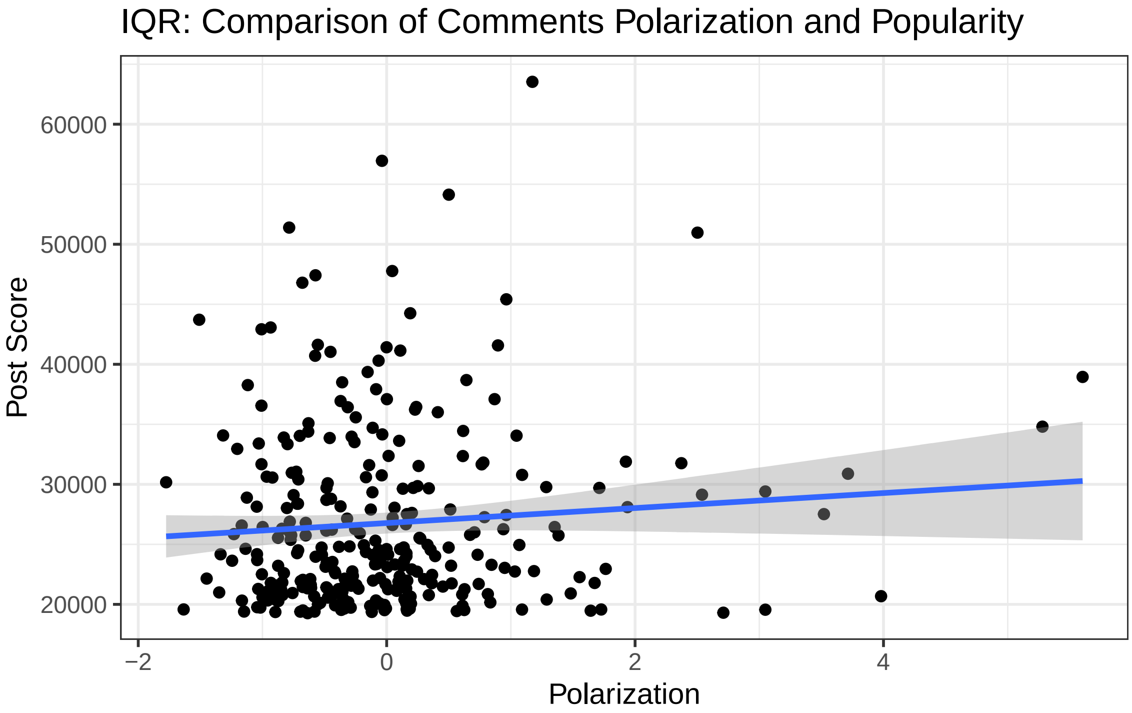


Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                               lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:          num_comments
##
## (Intercept)        3,229.3*** (108.0)
## polarization_index    -235.7* (106.9)
## ------------------ ------------------
## S.E. type                         IID
## Observations                      285
## R2                            0.01689
## Adj. R2                       0.01342
```

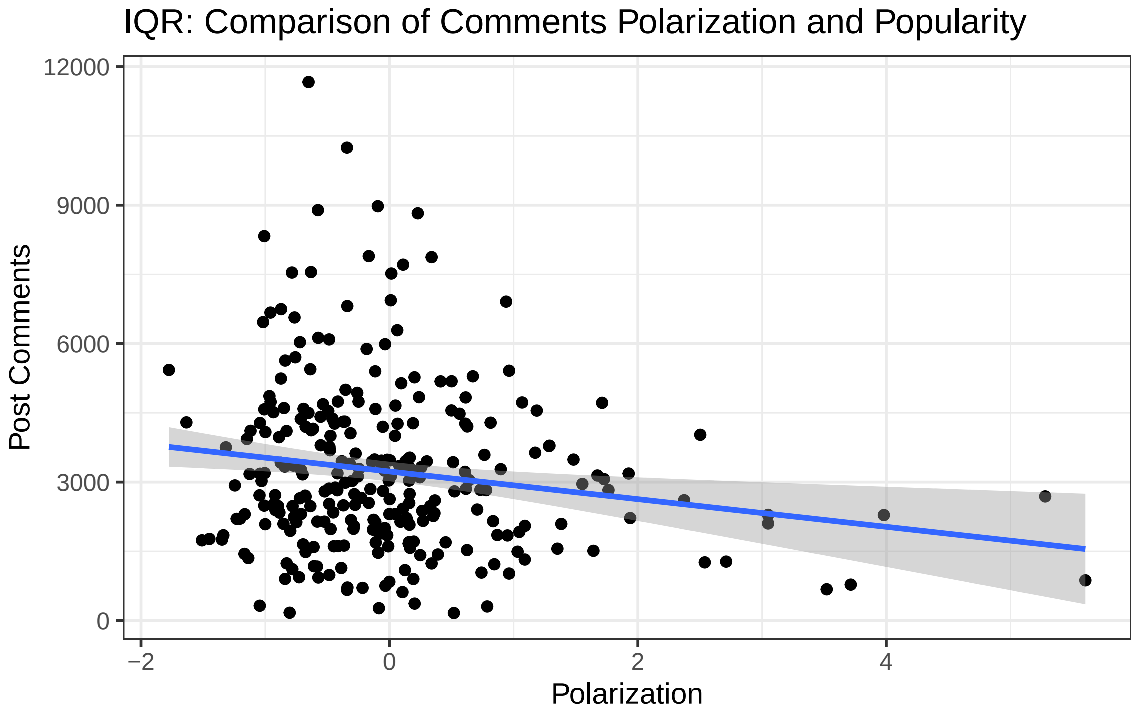
```
##                                lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                  score
##
## (Intercept)        23,665.8*** (878.3)
## polarization_index    1,001.7* (429.9)
## num_comments        0.9631*** (0.2370)
## ------------------ -------------------
## S.E. type                          IID
## Observations                       285
## R2                             0.06565
## Adj. R2                        0.05902
```

4.2.3 IQR Estimates



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                                          lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                            score
##
## (Intercept)             26,774.1*** (443.3)
## polarization_index_IQR        625.0 (440.4)
## ______________________ ___________________
## S.E. type                                   IID
## Observations                                285
## R2                                      0.00706
## Adj. R2                                 0.00356
```



Source: Scraped r/AITA data.

```
##                                    lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:              num_comments
##
## (Intercept)            3,229.2*** (107.5)
## polarization_index_IQR   -299.7** (106.8)
## ______________________ __________________
## S.E. type                             IID
## Observations                          285
## R2                                0.02708
## Adj. R2                           0.02364
```

```
##                                     lev_lev
## Dependent Var.:                       score
##
## (Intercept)            23,628.2*** (883.3)
## polarization_index_IQR      916.9* (434.7)
## num_comments            0.9742*** (0.2387)
## ______________________ ___________________
## S.E. type                              IID
## Observations                           285
## R2                                 0.06245
## Adj. R2                            0.05581
```