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Political Communication of Youth on Instagram and X: Opinion Formation and Polarisation

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Abstract:

Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) have become important spaces in which young Indians receive, discuss and produce political messages, yet the two platforms work in very different ways. This paper examines how youth political communication on these platforms shapes opinion formation and whether it contributes to polarisation. Drawing on the two-step flow of communication, the spiral of silence, the filter-bubble debate and the concept of affective polarisation, it compares the affordances of the two platforms and reviews secondary evidence from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025, the Lokniti-CSDS Youth and Politics Survey 2024 and platform-audience data, together with international and Indian research on echo chambers, misinformation and extreme speech. The paper argues that Instagram mainly shapes political opinion through personality, imagery and influencers, while X works as an elite and agenda-setting arena, and that polarisation is better understood as a product of identity, emotion and organised campaigns than of algorithms alone. It suggests steps in media literacy, platform transparency and civic education, and identifies the need for primary research on young Indian users.

Keywords: *Political communication, Instagram, X (Twitter), youth, opinion formation, polarisation, India, etc.*

Introduction:

Young Indians do not meet politics mainly through party meetings or newspaper editorials. They meet it through the phone: a clip of a speech cut to thirty seconds, a meme on a feed, a thread on a trending issue, a reel by a creator who explains a budget or a protest. Two platforms stand out in this setting. Instagram, owned by Meta, is built around images and short video and is used by a very large and young audience. X, formerly Twitter, is built around short text posts, hashtags and rapid reaction, and is used by a smaller audience that includes politicians, journalists and activists. Both are now part of the daily information diet of educated youth, but they are used for different purposes and shape political opinion in different ways.

The topic matters for three reasons. First, India has one of the largest young populations in the world, and its youth are an important electoral and social force. Second, platform design, and not only the content of political messages, affects what young people see, share and believe. Third, there is public concern that social media divides society by feeding anger, spreading misinformation and locking users into groups that hear only their own side. Whether these fears are justified is an empirical question on which research in different countries gives mixed answers.

This paper asks two questions. How do Instagram and X shape the formation of political opinion among young Indians? And what is the evidence that they contribute to polarisation? The paper argues that the two platforms play different roles, with Instagram working through personality and imagery and X through elite agenda-setting, and that polarisation online reflects deeper identity divisions and organised campaigns more than the technology alone. The paper ends with suggestions for media literacy, platform transparency and further research.

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Review of Literature:

Research on political communication has long asked how messages influence opinion. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found that media effects were often indirect: ideas flow from media to opinion leaders and from them to people in their personal networks, in what is called the two-step flow of communication. Noelle-Neumann (1974) proposed that people who believe their view is in a minority tend to stay silent, which makes the dominant view look stronger than it is, a process she called the spiral of silence. Both ideas are relevant online, where influencers act as opinion leaders and where visible counts of likes and shares can signal which view is dominant.

A second body of work concerns echo chambers and polarisation. Sunstein (2001) warned that the internet allows people to filter what they hear and so to move toward more extreme versions of their existing views. Pariser (2011) described filter bubbles produced by personalised algorithms. Later empirical work has complicated the picture. Flaxman, Goel and Rao (2016) found that social media and search engines were associated with somewhat greater ideological separation in news consumption, but also with more exposure to opposing views. Barberá and colleagues (2015) found that on Twitter, users tended to talk mainly with those of similar views on political topics, though the pattern varied by issue. Bail and colleagues (2018) found that exposing users to opposing views on Twitter did not reduce polarisation and could increase it for some. Guess and colleagues (2023), in a large experiment during the 2020 US election, found that changing the algorithmic feed altered what users saw but did not change their political attitudes in the short run. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) showed that polarisation is as much about dislike and distrust of the other side, called affective polarisation, as about differences on policy.

A third body of work looks at social media and participation. Gil de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) and Boulianne (2015) report generally positive, if modest, links between social media use for news and political participation. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe connective action through personalised sharing, and Chadwick (2013) shows how old and new media interact in a hybrid system. For India, Banaji and Bhat (2022) analyse how WhatsApp and other platforms carry prejudice and misinformation, and Udupa (2019) studies how humour and 'fun' help to spread extreme speech in nationalist online cultures. Studies that compare Instagram and X specifically for young Indians are few, which is the gap this paper addresses by combining the concepts above with available audience data.

Conceptual Framework:

The paper uses four concepts. The first is platform affordance, meaning the features of a platform that make some kinds of communication easy and others hard. Instagram's affordances include visual posts, short video, stories, direct messages and a strong role for creators. X's affordances include brief text, reposts, trending topics and public replies, with a focus on news and commentary. The second is opinion leadership, following Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), which explains how individuals with large followings translate public messages into personal recommendations. The third is the spiral of silence, which helps in understanding why some young users avoid expressing political views in public. The fourth is affective polarisation (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), which allows the discussion to go beyond differences of opinion to feelings of hostility and distrust between groups.

Objectives and Method:

The objectives are to compare how Instagram and X structure political communication among youth, to examine how opinions are formed through each, to assess the evidence for polarisation, and to suggest measures for healthier political communication. The study is conceptual and analytical and relies on secondary sources. For India, it draws on the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025 as reported in the press, the Lokniti-CSDS Youth and Politics Survey 2024, which covered 1,290 respondents aged 18 to 22, and audience data reported by media outlets. For theory and comparative evidence, it uses the scholarly works listed in the references. The platform comparison is an interpretation by the author, based on these sources and on widely observed features of the platforms. No new data were collected, and statements about causes are therefore treated as arguments and not as proven effects.

Youth, Politics and Platforms in India:

The evidence suggests that young Indians are interested in politics and use digital platforms heavily for information. In the Lokniti-CSDS survey of January 2024, 78.7 per cent of respondents aged 18 to 22 were very or somewhat interested in politics, 91.9 per cent said that young people should follow national affairs, and 63.5 per cent said they discuss politics with friends often or sometimes (Lokniti-CSDS, 2024). These figures come from a survey that did not ask about social media, so they establish interest and not the role of platforms. For the platforms, other sources are needed.

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025, as reported by WION (2025), found that 41 per cent of people aged 18 to 34 in India rely mainly on social media and YouTube for news, against 24 per cent who go to publisher websites, and that video-based, personality-led news is preferred over traditional reading. The same report found that more than half of English-speaking Indian respondents with internet access sometimes avoid the news. It should be noted that this survey is based on online respondents and therefore reflects an urban, connected and mostly English-speaking audience, and that the press report does not give separate figures for Instagram and X. On Instagram, a report in 2025 put active users in India at more than 250 million, with the highest engagement among those aged 18 to 34 (PratidinTime News Desk, 2025); advertising-audience estimates based on Meta tools are higher, which shows that the figures depend on the definition used. Political leaders have noticed: the Prime Minister's Instagram account passed 100 million followers, while the Leader of the Opposition's account had about 12.7 million, according to a February 2026 audience estimate (Khanduri, 2026).

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Taken together, these sources show that the audience is large, young and increasingly oriented toward personalities and video. They do not tell us how much of this audience seeks political content, or how it responds to it, which is why the discussion below relies on theory and on comparative research.

Instagram: Personality, Imagery and Soft Politics:

Instagram is primarily a social and entertainment platform. Users go there to see friends, lifestyle content and short videos, and political messages reach them in between. This produces what may be called soft politics: politics presented through personality, emotion and image, with little argument. Leaders show their daily routines, meetings with youth and cultural events; creators explain public issues in a few lines; and memes turn political events into jokes. The result is that political information is encountered incidentally, by users who did not seek it. Studies of social media and participation suggest that such incidental exposure can raise interest and engagement among those who would otherwise follow little news (Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012).

Opinion formation on Instagram follows the pattern of opinion leadership. A creator with a large following becomes a trusted voice for a particular age group or community, and followers take cues from the creator's tone as much as from the evidence presented. This is the two-step flow in a new form (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The risks are that the creator may lack knowledge, may be paid or politically aligned without saying so, and may simplify complex issues. Because Instagram favours short and emotional content, nuance tends to be lost, and a post that makes users laugh or feel anger travels further than a post that informs.

X: The Elite and Agenda-Setting Arena:

X works differently. Its audience in India is smaller than Instagram's, but it includes many politicians, journalists, commentators, party spokespersons and activists, and so it has strong influence on what the wider media discuss. A trending hashtag can set the agenda for television debates and newspaper editorials, and statements made by leaders on X are treated as official positions. For young users who follow politics closely, such as students of political science, aspirants for civil service and party volunteers, X serves as a source of news, a space for debate and a way of reaching decision-makers directly.

The platform's design also produces particular risks. Public replies and quote-posts make conflict highly visible, and trending topics reward speed and outrage. Organised groups can use coordinated posting to push a hashtag or to harass an opponent, and the appearance of mass support created in this way may influence users through the spiral of silence, discouraging those who disagree. The Barberá et al. (2015) finding that Twitter users cluster with like-minded accounts on political topics suggests that debates on X often involve people who already agree and then spill out to attack those who do not.

Table 1: Instagram and X compared as spaces of youth political communication

Feature	Instagram	X
Main format	Images, reels, stories	Short text, links, reposts
Typical exposure	Incidental, within entertainment	Intentional, news-driven
Key actors	Leaders' personal brands, creators, meme pages	Politicians, journalists, spokespersons, activists
Main influence on opinion	Personality, emotion, peer cues	Agenda-setting, framing, elite signals
Main risks	Oversimplification, undisclosed promotion, visual misinformation	Outrage, coordinated campaigns, harassment

Source: Compiled by the author from the literature reviewed in Sections 2 and 5.

How Opinions Are Formed :

Opinion formation in this environment follows several pathways. The first is peer influence: young people form views in groups of friends, classmates and family networks that overlap with their online contacts, and the Lokniti-CSDS data on frequent political discussion with friends show how important these circles are (Lokniti-CSDS, 2024). The second is influencer influence, in which creators and commentators provide cues. The third is elite signalling, in which statements by leaders and parties filter down through trending topics and shared posts. The fourth is algorithmic selection, which determines which posts a user sees, though Guess et al. (2023) caution that its short-term effect on attitudes may be smaller than often assumed.

In the hybrid media system described by Chadwick (2013), these pathways are connected with older media. A post on X may become a television story, which is then clipped and shared on Instagram, which in turn leads to further discussion in WhatsApp groups. Young users do not live on one platform, and opinion is formed through repeated exposure to the same theme across platforms. This also makes it hard to attribute any change of view to a single source, and it is one reason that research on single platforms may miss the larger picture.

Opinion formation also depends on trust. When users distrust mainstream news, as the finding that many Indian respondents avoid the news suggests, they are more likely to rely on personalities they find authentic. This can be healthy if those voices are accurate and open about their interests; it can be harmful if they spread falsehoods. The Reuters data on preference for video and personality-led news (WION, 2025) indicate that this shift in trust is already under way among younger groups.

Polarisation: What the Evidence Shows:

The concern that social media polarises is plausible but not simple to prove. Table 2 sets out evidence that supports the concern and evidence that complicates it.

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Table 2: Evidence on social media and polarisation

Supports the polarisation concern	Complicates the concern
Users cluster with like-minded accounts on political topics (Barberá et al., 2015)	Social media also increases exposure to opposing views (Flaxman et al., 2016)
Exposure to opposing views on Twitter did not reduce polarisation and could increase it for some (Bail et al., 2018)	Changing the algorithmic feed did not change attitudes in the short run (Guess et al., 2023)
Affective polarisation is strong and driven by group identity (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015)	Polarisation has offline sources such as identity, history and party competition
Online spread of prejudice and extreme speech in India (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Udupa, 2019)	Social media use is linked with higher participation (Boulianne, 2015)

Source: Compiled by the author from the sources cited.

The international findings suggest caution about blaming algorithms alone. The Indian evidence points to a second factor: organised and emotional content. Banaji and Bhat (2022) show how messaging platforms in India carry hateful and false content, often produced by organised networks, and Udupa (2019) shows how humour and memes help to normalise extreme speech by making it look light-hearted. These findings concern Indian online culture generally and WhatsApp in particular, and the same mechanisms can operate on Instagram, where memes are widespread, and on X, where coordinated campaigns are common. For young users, who spend more time on these platforms and are still forming political identities, exposure to such content may have a stronger effect, though this has not been shown by research and should be tested.

A balanced reading is that Instagram and X are channels through which existing divisions of religion, caste, region and party are expressed and sometimes amplified, and not their original cause. Their design makes emotional and identity-based content travel faster, which can deepen hostility toward opponents, the feature that Iyengar and Westwood (2015) call affective polarisation. Yet the same platforms also allow young people to organise, to learn about issues they would not otherwise hear of and to meet people with different views. The outcome depends on how users, creators, parties, platforms and regulators behave.

Governance and Regulation:

Indian law and election rules reach political communication on these platforms only in part. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 place duties on large platforms, such as grievance redress and the removal of unlawful content, and the Election Commission of India has extended its rules on campaign conduct to social media accounts of candidates and issued guidance on paid political advertising. In 2019 the major platforms also agreed a voluntary code of ethics for the general election. These measures address the formal campaign but are less effective against the diffuse activity that matters most to young users: anonymous accounts, meme pages, influencers who promote political messages without disclosure and coordinated posting that falls outside the official campaign.

The regulatory dilemma is that rules strong enough to curb disinformation and hate can also be used to limit lawful criticism, and a platform that removes content on government request may be accused of political bias. The risk is greater for young people, whose political expression is often satirical and informal. The more promising approach is therefore to combine narrowly drawn rules on transparency and paid promotion with independent oversight and with investment in the skills of users themselves. This links the governance question back to media literacy, and it suggests that regulation and education should be treated as complements and not as alternatives.

Findings:

Five findings follow. First, young Indians' political communication is increasingly video-based, personality-led and mobile, and a large share rely on social media and YouTube for news. Second, Instagram and X occupy different positions: Instagram shapes opinion through incidental exposure, imagery and influencers, while X shapes the agenda through elite actors and trending topics. Third, opinion formation is a multi-step and multi-platform process involving peers, creators, leaders and algorithms, in which trust in personalities is growing as trust in traditional news is tested. Fourth, evidence of polarisation is mixed internationally and thin for young Indians specifically; the stronger evidence concerns misinformation, extreme speech and organised campaigns. Fifth, the main gap is in primary research that follows what young Indians see, share and believe on these platforms.

Suggestions:

Four sets of measures can be suggested. Colleges and universities should teach media literacy as a civic skill, including how to check sources, how to recognise manipulated images and how to identify paid or partisan promotion. Platforms should be asked to give greater transparency about political advertising, labelling of paid content and the working of recommendation systems, and to make data available to independent researchers. Political parties and leaders should adopt clear norms against coordinated harassment and disinformation and should disclose paid influencer campaigns. Finally, creators and journalists who reach young audiences should be encouraged to link to sources and to present more than one view, and civil society groups can support fact-checking in regional languages.

Limitations and Scope for Further Research:

This paper is conceptual and uses secondary data, and several of the figures are taken from press reports of larger studies and from audience estimates that depend on how users are counted. The Reuters data represent online and largely English-speaking users, and the Lokniti-CSDS sample is limited to ages 18 to 22 and did not ask about

social media. The comparison of the two platforms reflects the author's interpretation. Future research could survey students in one region, such as Maharashtra, about their platform use and political attitudes, analyse a sample of political posts on both platforms, and use experiments to test how exposure to different kinds of content changes opinion among young Indians.

Conclusion:

Instagram and X have become important sites in which young Indians form and express political views, but they do so in different ways. Instagram makes politics personal, visual and incidental; X makes it elite, fast and combative. Together with other platforms and older media, they form a hybrid system in which opinion is shaped by peers, creators, leaders and algorithms, and in which trust is moving toward personalities. The evidence on polarisation is mixed: the platforms can amplify divisions and spread falsehoods, but the roots of polarisation lie in social identities and organised political action. The task for educators, platforms and political actors is therefore not to condemn the technology but to build the skills, transparency and norms that allow young citizens to use it for informed participation. Without such efforts, the speed and emotion of online communication may outrun the reflection that democracy requires.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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