

# SOCIAL MEDIA'S DIGITAL DIVIDE IN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: BRIDGING REACH, CREDIBILITY, AND DEMOCRATIC INCLUSIVITY IN UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA

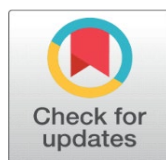
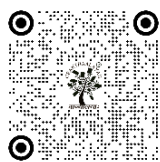
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## ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the role of social media in political campaigning in Uttar Pradesh, which is a politically significant state and has a large and varied electorate. The use of digital platforms was found to increase campaign outreach, albeit disproportionately across demographic lines. The study analyzes survey data from 503 individuals across 17 cities. The results show that social media enables rapid dissemination of political content but lacks the credibility of traditional media. Four main dimensions are identified as online accessibility and political participation, accessibility and platform reach, quality and privacy of information, and lastly, participation of youth in politics. Out of these four dimensions, accessibility and platform reach were found to be the most important. Information quality and privacy were found to be of moderate importance. It was also found that respondents with formal education participate more than those who do not have formal education. The urban-rural gap was found to be relatively insignificant. The study showed that social media penetration is extremely high, but a negligible number of respondents believe it to be trustworthy. Unlike social media, traditional media was considered to be more trustworthy. The research shows that access to the internet does not ensure equal participation. In political communication, not only trust but also systemic and perceptual barriers must be considered.

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**Keywords:** Social Media, Political Campaigns, Digital Divide, Voter Behaviour, Platform Credibility, Democratic Participation, Political Inequality, Digital Communication



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In recent years, political communication has developed rather rapidly. This is closely related to the advent of digital platforms. Social media plays a pivotal role in organising campaigns, disseminating messages, and engaging voters.

5 billion individuals are currently using social media throughout the world. Out of these, Indian users alone account for 450 million. This is a substantial figure, but it shows how social media has become important for political communication.

This change is associated with some contradictions. Although access to social media has increased, its credibility is still questionable. Unlike traditional media, these platforms are less controlled by editors, which often leads to the spread of misinformation. People have started paying attention and are discussing the overall standard of political discussion.

## **1.2. IMPORTANCE OF UTTAR PRADESH**

The state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) plays a very important role in the Indian politics. It has around 140 million voters. This is the reason why it is said that this state decides the national elections. This is a highly diverse state.

The diversity exists in geography, education, and access to media. On the one hand, there are urban centres such as Lucknow or Noida and on the other hand, there is a wide rural base where there are problems related to infrastructure. This contrasting overview of UP cannot be overlooked.

Because of the present diverse situation, UP needs special attention in examining social media and political activity. It will help us to find out the mode of interaction of the various groups with digital platforms. This will also help to ascertain whether these platforms are decreasing inequalities or just strengthening them.

## **1.3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Political communication has changed drastically with the increase in mobile devices and internet penetration in India. It is particularly apparent in such states as Uttar Pradesh (Mishra et al., 2021; Schroeder, 2017). To a large extent, this change has been brought about by increased smartphone penetration and availability of cheap data. Consequently, the political actors can now access larger groups and spread information faster (Sarma and Hazarika, 2023).

However, this growth is not evenly distributed. The digital divide exists and operates at multiple levels. Access, usage, and participation vary across socio-economic groups, gender, and caste (Dahdah et al., 2024; Goswami, 2022). These gaps can be even more evident in such a diverse state as UP, the rural population of which is significantly high (Patel et al., 2020).

The use of social media in political campaigns is currently common particularly during an event such as the Lok Sabha or Assembly elections. Such platforms affect voter behaviour and tend to mobilise voters (Chauhan, 2024). Meanwhile, one should not ignore the problem of misinformation and disinformation. This type of content has an impact on the perception of political messages and poses significant questions of credibility.

It is also necessary to mention that social media does not just completely replace the traditional media. Rather, the two forms interrelate in complicated manners. Online sources can expand access and interaction, but they may also reproduce existing inequalities when digital literacy and connectivity remain uneven (Chatterjee and Dutta, 2023; Shivarajan, 2025).

With the growing reliance on social media as a political communication platform, there is a need to study such dynamics in greater detail. The way they affect the democratic participation and the quality of communication in general should be taken into consideration (Neyazi and Schroeder, 2021).

The proposed study is based on the literature. It aims at examining the influence of social media in the process of political participation in UP, specifically, the issue of accessibility, credibility and involvement among various groups.

## **1.4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper unites various theoretical positions to understand the way social media influences political communication. The effect does not operate at a single level. Instead, it works on the individual behaviour, platform design, and larger social structures.

To deal with this complexity, six major theories are incorporated. These include Uses and Gratifications Theory, Media Richness Theory and Network Society Theory. These theories explain that the cultural and technical framework around us emerges through various social networks and connections. Network Society Theory explains how the cultural

and technical infrastructure emerges through networks. The framework also includes Diffusion of Innovations Theory, Public Sphere Theory and Digital Divide Theory.

### **1.5. COMBINATION THEORETICAL METHODOLOGY**

The combined model can be used to understand the interaction between user motivations, attributes of online platforms, and social situations to determine how political behaviour is influenced online (Lim et al., 2019). It also enables us to explore the role played by digital literacy, digital access as well as socio-economic background in participation.

These factors do not always have a mere effect of engagement in most circumstances. They may also increase the existing imbalances in the digital worlds (Laskar, 2023; Sindakis and Showkat, 2024).

This line of thinking is especially helpful when researching civic engagement via digital platforms. On the one hand, social media can make voices heard. Alternatively, it can be discriminatory to some groups. This dual nature is particularly apparent in politically varied societies. Other areas have also reported similar trends such as Sub-Saharan Africa (Toumaras, 2025).

Simultaneously, political involvement is never deliberate anymore. A significant number of users deal with political posts as they accidentally view them when they use social media to communicate non-politically. This change from proactive to passive exposure is very instrumental in political awareness (Lee et al., 2022).

### **1.6. USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY**

According to Uses and Gratifications Theory, users actively select media based on their needs. They are not passive recipients; rather, they engage with platforms to seek information, interact with others, shape their identities, and find entertainment (Ketemaw, 2017).

On the political scene, this can be translated into users keeping up with political information, expressing their views, and finding other people to share their opinion (Nwafor et al., 2023). Interaction, thus, is more deliberate and user driven.

Exposure is not, however, invariably unplanned. Political information is presented to many users as they scroll through. Even such incidental exposure may raise awareness and may occasionally result in basic participation (Barati, 2023).

### **1.7. MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY**

According to Media Richness Theory, communication facilities vary in their capacity to pass information across. Others are even richer since they include text, visuals and audio.

An example of such is the video-based delivery of messages and emotions which are stronger than the text-based messages (Tawiah, 2025). This usually renders them more convincing in the political process.

Simultaneously, there is an apprehension. Misinformation can also appear more credible in rich media. Visual content reduces cognitive effort, yet it can also save critical thinking. Consequently, platforms with broader reach are not necessarily reliable (Chen et al., 2021).

### **1.8. DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS THEORY**

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains how new technologies spread among people over time (Bick, 1963). Adoption is not a uniform process: some individuals embrace innovations early, while others take longer to adopt them.

Regarding political communication, it helps to understand why various groups start engaging with social media. Such factors as ease of use and the perceived usefulness are significant.

It also highlights how digital tools can create new cohorts within political processes. On the one hand, barriers to participation are reduced, which, in the case of young users, makes them more active (Tagle et al., 2025; Durotoye et al., 2025).

## 1.9. NETWORK SOCIETY THEORY

Network Society Theory explains how digital networks alter power structures. Traditionally communication was controlled by institutions. But now it is not centralized; instead, it is shared via networks (Muswede, 2022).

In this context, social media provides political actors with a chance to place themselves within these networks and enlarge their reach (Medina et al., 2023). But this enlargement does not ensure equality. Many times, the same power structures continue to exist, but in somewhat altered arrangement (Mackova & Stetka, 2016).

Variations can be observed in participation patterns, with digital spaces largely occupied by younger users. This trend may be attributed to the limited appeal of traditional political systems for them (Montt et al., 2025). The role of platforms cannot be overlooked, as they not only shape participation but also influence 'whose' voices are amplified and 'whose' are marginalized (Licenji, 2023).

## 1.10. DIGITAL DIVIDE THEORY

Disparities in access to and use of technology are explained well with Digital Divide Theory. According to this theory there is access 'inequality', skill 'inequality', and outcome 'inequality' (Kashaka, 2025). Political engagement is directly influenced by these differences. It has been noticed that those who have less digital literacy or may have restricted access, participate less. This reinforces existing social disparities.

At the same time, digital platforms tend to repeat similar views very frequently. This gradually leads to the shaping of user opinions and creates political polarization (Alex et al., 2025; Muhammad et al., 2024).

Digital power structures have been found to create gender related inequalities by suppressing the voices of women (Raiq et al., 2025). In addition to this, algorithmic systems further reinforce such biases by influencing how political content is viewed and interpreted by the users (Rocha et al., 2025).

## 1.11. PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

Democratic discussion in communication space is examined by Public Sphere Theory. It aims at inclusive participation, rational debate and informed opinions (Papathanassopoulos and Giannouli, 2025; Sjoraida et al., 2024).

Earlier, social media was seen as something that expands the public sphere. However, recent studies show a different picture. Issues like misinformation and fragmentation are now widely observed (Asrijal & Larisu, 2025; CICEK, 2024). Platform algorithms play a major role in prioritizing engagement over content quality thus changing the shape of the political discussions in a certain way (Corella & Moreno, 2025; Garajamirli, 2025).

Political communication today is increasingly emotional and visual, which has contributed to greater participation. At the same time, however, it raises concerns about the authenticity and seriousness of political discourse (Kulsum et al., 2025). Studies say that political parties influence how the content is to be framed and circulated causing fragmentation (Chambers, 2023).

## 1.12. COMBINED THEORETICAL IMPLEMENTATION

All six of these theories do not work independently. Each describes some other part of the same wider process.

Media Richness can be used to understand why certain mediums are more convincing. Network Society emphasizes the ways in which disparities might survive even under the broadened access. Uses and Gratifications is user oriented. Diffusion of Innovations describes the process of adoption. Digital Divide highlights the topic of exclusion. The Public Sphere Theory challenges the quality of the discourse on democracy.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a more nuanced understanding. Social media can expand access to political communication; however, it does not eliminate inequality and, in most cases, merely transforms it. Moreover, greater participation does not necessarily guarantee an improvement in the quality of public debate.

### **1.13. LITERATURE GAP: THE NEGLECTED**

Research on social media and political communication has grown rapidly. However, certain gaps remain, particularly evident in the Indian context. Closer examination reveals that current studies are not sufficiently comprehensive in capturing contemporary realities.

#### **1.13.1. GAP 1: CREDIBILITY-REACH DISJUNCTURE**

Numerous studies note that social media offers broader coverage than traditional media and plays a significant role in voter mobilization. Nevertheless, an underexplored issue remains: does increased reach necessarily lead to persuasion? This question is particularly important in contexts where users are uncertain about the accuracy of online information, as reach alone may not be sufficient. According to Zhang et al. (2024), trust and distrust are not simple opposites; they can coexist simultaneously. Yet this multifaceted understanding is largely absent from Indian scholarship, leaving the credibility dimension under-theorized.

#### **1.13.2. GAP 2: RETHINKING DIGITAL DIVIDE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

Digital Divide Theory has traditionally linked accessibility to factors such as education and location, with greater access assumed among urban users. However, emerging trends suggest shifts in these patterns, indicating that the conventional framework requires reconsideration.

In India, basic access disparities have lessened in an urban setting. Nevertheless, more fundamental divisions also remain. These will be skill differences, content differences and political results. These secondary and tertiary divisions are hardly explored. Our paper, thus, raises the question of whether past beliefs continue to be applicable in the modern day or not.

#### **1.13.3. GAP 3: THE DEFICIENCY IN STATE-LEVEL COMPARATIVE STUDIES**

There are certain studies of the region. Kumar et al. (2023) have examined the example of Bihar. Similarly, Meti et al. (2020) have studied Hyderabad-Karnataka. However, there is not much interstate comparative work. This presents an issue. There is no comparison to know whether it is local or generalisable. This is a wide gap in a multicultural nation such as India. It should be attended to.

#### **1.13.4. GAP 4: NARROW ANALYSIS OF PLATFORMS**

Most of the research considers the social media one space. However, in fact, it is not so. There are many platforms available. WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram are different from each other. They differ in their user base. Their style of communication is different as well. However, platform-level differences are not often studied in detail. Little is done regarding the distinction between trust, engagement and political messaging between platforms. Our paper is an attempt at doing that.

### **1.14. RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND OBJECTIVES**

With these gaps in mind, the paper proposes the following five objectives:

**RO1:** To establish important dimensions of voter perceptions on the use of social media in politics campaigns. It is concentrated in its engagement, information use and participation in the Uttar Pradesh setting.

**RO2:** To look at the relationship between the demographic variables (age, education, and urbanicity) and these dimensions. This also assists in testing the applicability of Digital Divide Theory in the current times.

**RO3:** To make comparisons on the credibility of the social media and the traditional media. The paper also analyzes the difference between the reach and trust and their impact on the campaign effectiveness.

**RO4:** To examine platform differences. It examines the way WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram assist political communication. Differences in trust are also investigated.

**RO5:** To learn the trends of online political participation. The paper examines the motivators to participate and how campaign tactics are evolving to a disjointed digital space.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study under consideration qualifies as quantitative, cross-sectional and non-experimental study. It analyzes the practical political involvement on social media. No experimental manipulation is presupposed.

A positivist approach is adopted. Both exploratory and confirmatory methods are involved.

Exploratory Factor Analysis is used to help identify the underlying dimensions of voter perception. Hypothesis testing was performed at the same time to test demographic relationships.

This design is suitable because it enables one to find patterns in large data sets. Several variables may as well be analyzed. This method is consistent with the literature in quantitative political communication.

### 2.2. SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data were collected using an online survey form administered across 17 major cities in UP, including Lucknow, Kanpur, Varanasi, Prayagraj, Ghaziabad, and Noida. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed. In total, 516 responses were received. After screening, 13 were excluded due to missing or conflicting data. The final sample comprised 503 valid responses, yielding a high retention rate of 97.5%.

The sample is relatively young, with an average age of 35.2 years (SD = 12.4). Approximately 72% of respondents were between 18 and 39 years old, 18% were aged 40-59, and 10% were 60 or older. Gender distribution was 56.5% male and 43.5% female, broadly consistent with India's gender ratio.

Educational attainment varied: about half of the respondents held undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, 38% had completed secondary education, and 12% reported education below the secondary level. Geographically, 62% were urban residents, 31% rural, and 7% semi-urban.

Social media use was high, with respondents spending an average of 4.2 hours online daily (SD = 2.1). WhatsApp was the most widely used platform (94%), followed by Facebook (85%) and YouTube (68%). Political engagement was also notable: nearly three-quarters followed politics, 76% discussed politics online, and 63% interacted with candidate-related content. All respondents were over 18, active internet users, and had been exposed to political content within the past 30 days, ensuring that responses reflected real interaction.

Nevertheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The proportion of urban respondents (62%) was higher than the national average, which is expected in online surveys given urban users' greater inclination to participate. While the number of rural respondents was reasonable, caution is warranted in interpreting results. Another limitation is the gender imbalance, which reflects broader trends in digital access. These issues are recognized and discussed in subsequent sections.

### 2.3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The structured questionnaire consisted of 45 items covering demographics, attitudes toward social media during campaigns, and platform-based interaction. Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale. The instrument was developed through a literature review and expert validation. Initially, 48 items were included, followed by a pilot study (n = 49). Three items were subsequently eliminated, following Ferrando and Lorenzo-Seva (2017), due to poor correlation.

The final instrument demonstrated strong validity. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.833, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was highly significant ( $\chi^2 = 4390.297$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Reliability was also acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70 (George & Mallery, 2006). Factor extraction was conducted using principal component analysis, and after refinement, a four-factor solution was retained.

Normality tests indicated slight deviations; nevertheless, the findings remained robust. Hypothesis testing was carried out using ANOVA and t-tests, with effect sizes reported to ensure meaningful interpretation. Data quality checks revealed no significant outliers or response bias. Overall, the dataset was consistent and suitable for analysis.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. FACTOR ANALYSIS: DIMENSIONAL STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Principal component analysis of 45 items produced a clear four-factor solution. Together, these factors explained 37.0% of the total variance. All four factors showed strong reliability (Table 1).

**Table 1**

Table 1 Four-Factor Solution - Dimensions of Social Media Political Engagement						
Factor	Items	Eigenvalue	Variance %	Cumulative %	$\alpha$	Interpretation
F1: Digital Political Engagement & Accessibility	10	3.847	14.80%	14.80%	0.812	Voter frequency accessing SM for political information, online political discussions, candidate research, opinion formation
F2: Social media Political Influence & Reach	8	2.156	8.30%	23.10%	0.804	Campaign reach breadth, message persuasion effectiveness, behavioural influence through SM campaigns, voter mobilization
F3: Information Quality & Privacy Concerns	7	1.984	7.60%	30.70%	0.798	Trust in SM political information accuracy, concerns about data privacy, misinformation fears, editorial credibility concerns
F4: Youth Political Participation & Discourse	8	1.625	6.30%	37.00%	0.789	Youth activism and mobilization, online political discourse participation, generational differences in engagement, digital activism
Total Variance Explained	33	—	37.00%	—	—	—

#### 3.2. MEASUREMENT QUALITY INDICATORS

The model shows strong statistical adequacy.

- The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value is 0.833, which indicates excellent sampling adequacy and is well above the required threshold of 0.60.
- Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant,  $\chi^2$  (528, N=503) = 4390.297,  $p < 0.001$ , confirming that the data is suitable for factor analysis.
- The average communality is  $M = 0.641$  ( $SD = 0.104$ ). All values are above 0.40, showing that the items are well explained by the extracted factors.

#### 3.3. FACTOR INTERPRETATION

The four-factor structure aligns well with both the research objectives and the theoretical framework. Social media facilitates political participation by engaging users across all dimensions captured by the factors. These dimensions do not operate in isolation; rather, they function in an interconnected manner, continuously influencing one another.

##### 3.3.1. F1: ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS

In digital space, this factor represents the initial phase of engagement with political content. It indicates how individuals frequently use social media for receiving information about political matters. It also indicates how comfortable they feel while doing so. The initial stage of interaction between users and political content is captured.

Checking political updates, participating in online discussions, searching for information about candidates is one of the most common ways of digital engagement. This kind of behaviour is routine rather than planned. This aligns with

the Diffusion of Innovations and Uses and Gratifications theories. Here, the user focuses not only on usage but also on motivation which creates such usage patterns.

### 3.3.2. F2: SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL REACH AND INFLUENCE

This factor focuses on the effectiveness of social media as a tool for political campaigning. It evaluates how users perceive its reach, find it persuasive, and to what extent it influences the voter behaviour. It is not only about creating visibility but also about the content's efficiency to shape voter opinion during elections. These encompass areas like reach to the audience, message delivery and opinion-shaping capabilities. These impacts are sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit. This element is closely related to Media Richness and Network Society theories since it is an indication of the growing and intensifying political communication through digital platforms. Joy (2026)

### 3.3.3. F3: CONCERNS ABOUT INFORMATION QUALITY AND PRIVACY

This factor highlights the tension between usage and trust. While social media is widely used, concerns about credibility persist. It encompasses issues of information trust, perceived accuracy, and privacy. Users rely on these platforms yet remain cautious. This duality reflects the paradox at the heart of our study. This factor also connects to Public Sphere and Digital Divide theories, highlighting its broader theoretical relevance.

### 3.3.4. F4: POLITICS AND DISCOURSE YOUTH POLITICS

This aspect defines the differences of generational politics. It targets primarily youth engagement, web-based debates, and digital activism. Younger users engage with political content in more dynamic ways. Engagement is sometimes expressive and at other times it is issue-based. This is consistent with the Diffusion of Innovations and Network Society theory particularly in the forms of emerging participation.

Overall, the four-factor solution explains 37.0% of the total variance. This is acceptable in social science research. The rest of the variance could be because of measurement error or other unmeasurable causes. This is a variation that one should expect in research involving the use of complex human behaviour. The model can thus be applicable to further analysis.

## 3.4. DEMOGRAPHIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT DIMENSIONS

### 3.4.1. AGE EFFECTS: NO SIGNIFICANT GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

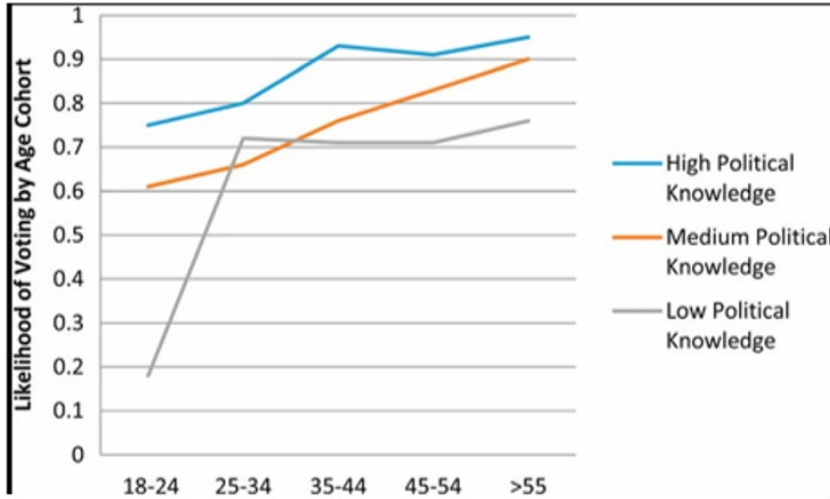
A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether Digital Political Engagement (F1) and Youth Political Participation (F4) vary across age groups.

**Table 2**

Table 2 Age Effect on Political Engagement Dimensions				
Age Group	n	M	SD	95% CI
18-29 years	364	3.65	0.62	[3.59, 3.71]
30-39 years	33	3.57	0.57	[3.37, 3.77]
40-49 years	63	3.72	0.46	[3.60, 3.84]
50-59 years	38	3.62	0.62	[3.42, 3.82]
60+ years	5	3.76	0.52	[3.27, 4.25]

The results show no significant differences in Digital Political Engagement across age groups.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Effects of Age and Urbanicity on Digital Political Engagement (Non-Significant Differences)  $F(4, 498) = 0.420, p = 0.794, \eta^2 = 0.003$ . Post-hoc tests also confirm that no pairwise differences are significant. The effect size is extremely small, indicating that age explains almost none of the variation.

**Table 3**

Age Group	n	M	SD	95% CI
18-29 years	364	3.51	0.72	[3.44, 3.58]
30-39 years	33	3.55	0.71	[3.31, 3.79]
40-49 years	63	3.55	0.51	[3.41, 3.69]
50-59 years	38	3.52	0.58	[3.33, 3.71]
60+ years	5	3.67	0.33	[3.20, 4.14]

A similar pattern appears for Youth Political Participation. The ANOVA result,  $F(4, 498) = 0.122, p = 0.974, \eta^2 = 0.001$ , again shows no significant differences. All age groups show almost same level of participation excepting a small variation

**Interpretation**

These results dispute the postulations of Diffusion of Innovations Theory. In this regard, age does not play an important role in determining digital political participation. This is an indication that the use of social media in politics has become normalized with age groups in UP. The younger and the older users are interacting at equal levels. The reason could be that once a technology has gained critical usage, differences in demographics start to vanish. Social media is no longer considered as a new technology but rather it is a normal aspect of communication. Meanwhile, the sample may be subject to sampling bias. Being an online survey, the latter could be more represented by digitally active people of all age groups. In future research, it ought to be studied with more balanced sampling approach.

**3.4.2. EDUCATION EFFECTS: THRESHOLD RATHER THAN LINEAR PATTERN**

An independent-samples t-test compared Digital Political Engagement (F1) between two groups: “secondary or below” and “tertiary or above.”

**Table 4**

Education (grouped)	n	M (F1)	SD
Secondary or below	79	3.52	0.73
Tertiary or above	424	3.67	0.57

Levene's test indicated unequal variances,  $F(1, 501) = 9.23, p = .003$ . Therefore, Welch's t-test was used. The difference between groups was small and not statistically significant,  $t(96.38) = -1.81, p = .073$ . The effect size was also small ( $d = -0.26$ ).

### Interpretation

The outcomes depict that the engagement of higher-educated respondents increases slightly. Nonetheless, this difference is not that high to be significant. This implies that higher education does not play a major role in digital political participation after the attainment of a minimum level of education. The social media platforms can have minimized the role of formal education because interfaces became more user-friendly.

### 3.4.3. MULTI-CATEGORY EDUCATION ANALYSIS

The results of the one-way ANOVA of all the levels of education indicate a significant effect,  $F(5, 497) = 3.906, p = .002, \eta^2 = .038$ .

Nevertheless, this impact is predominantly caused by the uneducated group that demonstrates significantly less engagement. Other groups show the same levels.

### Interpretation

This favours a threshold model. The lack of basic education also makes a difference among people without it. However, at a certain point of engagement, it becomes steady. This observation perfects Digital Divide Theory. It implies that access and primitive skills are considered but beyond that, education does not have a further effect. Social media design, which is more based on images and easy-to-use interfaces, probably minimizes higher literacy.

### 3.4.4. URBANICITY EFFECTS: MINIMAL GEOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

A one-way ANOVA examined whether engagement varies across rural, semi-urban, and urban groups.

Table 5

Table 5 Urbanicity Effects on Minimal Geographic Differences				
Urbanicity	n	M	SD	95% CI
Rural	157	3.75	0.66	[3.64, 3.86]
Semi-urban	34	3.73	0.61	[3.50, 3.96]
Urban	312	3.86	0.62	[3.80, 3.92]

For Social Media Influence (F4), the result was not significant,  $F(2, 500) = 1.960, p = 0.142, \eta^2 = 0.008$ .

Table 6

Table 6 Urbanicity Effects on Digital Engagement				
Urbanicity	n	M	SD	95% CI
Rural	157	3.64	0.69	[3.52, 3.76]
Semi-urban	34	3.61	0.72	[3.35, 3.87]
Urban	312	3.66	0.54	[3.60, 3.72]

For Digital Engagement (F1), no differences were found,  $F(2, 500) = 0.104, p = 0.902, \eta^2 = 0.000$ .

### Interpretation

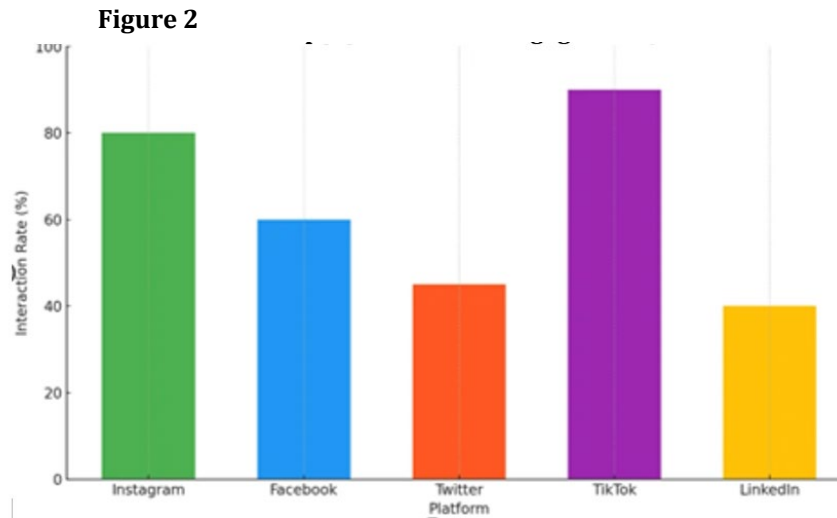
Urban and rural respondents show very similar levels of engagement. Geographic location does not significantly predict political engagement on social media. This finding challenges traditional Digital Divide assumptions. It suggests that access to social media has become widespread enough to reduce urban-rural differences. However, caution is needed. The sample includes only respondents with internet access. This may exclude less connected rural populations. Future studies should include offline samples to better capture these differences.

### 3.4.5. PLATFORM-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS: TRUST, ENGAGEMENT, AND REACH

Descriptive analysis examined three major platforms: WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube.

**Table 7**

Table 7 Platform-Specific on Trust, Engagement, and Reach					
Platform	n	Trust M (SD)	Engagement M (SD)	Reach M (SD)	% Primary Platform
WhatsApp	503	0.33 (0.47)	3.68 (0.81)	4.12 (0.92)	34%
Facebook	503	0.17 (0.38)	3.42 (0.95)	3.89 (1.04)	18%
YouTube	503	0.40 (0.49)	3.95 (0.84)	4.28 (0.88)	35%



**Figure 2** Comparative Analysis of Trust, Engagement, And Reach Across Platforms

### 3.5. KEY FINDINGS

#### **YouTube is the most engaged and reached.**

YouTube has the highest score in reach ( $M=4.28$ ) and engagement ( $M=3.95$ ). This helps in proving Media Richness Theory. Video material gives more power to emotion and information which make it more persuasive.

#### **WhatsApp indicates greater trust.**

WhatsApp is the one that logs the most trust (33%). This is attributed to the fact that it is interpersonal. Communication also occurs between acquaintances thereby raising credibility.

#### **The least trusted is Facebook.**

It is only 17 percent of the respondents who trust Facebook. This is extremely low compared to other platforms. The fear of misinformation and algorithm-feeding content is probably a source of this.

#### **Very distinct gap between trust and reach.**

Ranking platform varies when using different metrics.

Reach: YouTube > WhatsApp > Facebook.

Credibility: YouTube > WhatsApp > Facebook.

Interaction: YouTube > WhatsApp > Facebook.

Whereas there is a moderate relationship between reach and engagement ( $r=0.56$ ), trust has a weak relationship with them. This implies that it does not require platforms to develop trust and gain high reach.

### 3.5.1. SOCIAL MEDIA VS TRADITIONAL MEDIA: THE CREDIBILITY GAP

Respondents rated trust in social media (33%) lower than traditional media (40%).

**Table 8**

Table 8 Social Media vs Traditional Media				
Media Type	n	% Trusting	M Trust	SD
Social Media (Combined)	503	33%	0.33	0.47
Traditional Media (Combined)	503	40%	0.4	0.46
Newspapers	503	44%	0.44	0.5
Television	503	42%	0.42	0.49
Outdoor Advertising	503	32%	0.32	0.47

#### Interpretation

This is one of the central issues raised. Although social media usage is extensive. 94% on WhatsApp, 85% on Facebook, and 68% on YouTube. Credibility remains comparatively low. This weakens the effectiveness of digital campaigns. In other words, while social media messages travel widely, confidence in their content is limited, reducing their persuasive power.

### 3.6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS INTERPRETATION.

The credibility gap fits well with the issues that have been brought out in the Public Sphere Theory. There is no doubt that social media does widen the gap. However, not everything is in the form of quality of communication. The traditional media is still more credible. This is attributable to editorial filtering, fact-checking and institutional responsibility. Algorithms driven platforms tend to have such mechanisms which are weak or non-existent. In this regard, the point given by Habermas has remained relevant, commercial and algorithmic logic can scramble meaningful debate in a civic sense.

In the way of the Media Richness Theory, the tendency is partly ambivalent. The richest and the most reached medium is YouTube, whose level of trust is 40 percent. This is greater than Facebook (34%) and WhatsApp (33%). Nevertheless, wealth is not a sufficient explanation of credibility. The reliance of trust seems to lie more in transparency of sources and perceived control.

On a bigger scale, the results echo with the cross-cultural evidence. Noman et al. (2024) demonstrate that responses to misinformation differ depending on contexts and platforms. Likewise, as claimed by Zhang et al. (2024), trust and distrust can usually go hand in hand. Users can use social media as their source of outreach, but they are not likely to trust its accuracy.

### 3.7. DISCUSSION

These findings are currently discussed with reference to theory and previous literature. It is a retrospect on the previous theories of communication in a Global South context. Most of these structures have been made in the west. But the pattern of participation and media systems varies greatly in other countries such as India.

### 3.8. DIGITAL DIVIDE THEORY: CHANGING THE INEQUALITY PATTERNS

Primary divide: Urbanicity was found not to impact digital political engagement ( $e^2 = 0.000$ ). Though the %age of rural respondents is not as equal as the urban respondent (only 31%), yet their engagement levels are like the urban users. The difference is very small and is also statistically insignificant ( $p = 0.902$ ). This shows that once connectivity is established where people reside does not matter much. This finding should be taken seriously because the sample here includes people who use the internet. In UP, about 45% of people do not use the internet very often. Thus, real inequality lies outside this group. It can be presumed that the gap exists among those who are still offline. Future study should be done to include this group too.

Secondary Divide: There is a plateau shown by education rather than a linear one. Respondents with no formal education ( $M = 2.20$ ) show less engagement. If they have a basic formal education, the differences become minimal ( $e^2 = 0.038$ ). This clearly depicts that literacy is important but number of years of schooling makes not much difference. This is because social media has been designed to be very simple to use and is such that a person with basic literacy level can use it. This is unlike traditional media which requires higher literacy levels and efforts to understand.

Tertiary Divide: The point which needs deeper understanding is that having access to digital platforms does not guarantee real political change. The current study is on engagement and not on the effect of engagement. The questions that remain unanswered here are whether engagement leads to real participation, whether engagement leads to increased awareness and enhances representation. Thus, further study is required to investigate these questions.

### **3.9. MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY: CONTENT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN MEDIUM**

The theory of Media Richness states that the richer the media the more persuasive it should be. This is supported partly by the findings. The largest reach ( $M=4.28$ ) and the engagement ( $M=3.95$ ) are registered in YouTube. It also exhibits most confidence between the social media (40%). Nevertheless, this strength is not very significant when compared to the traditional media. Credibility still is higher in newspapers (44%), and television (42%). Therefore, quantity is not enough. Transparency and perceived reliability are also important to trust. This is well exemplified by Facebook. Although it presents abundant content, it is the lowest on trust (17%). This may be caused by algorithmic curation and perceived bias. The theory of Media Richness should be extended to incorporate credibility as an additional dimension.

### **3.10. NETWORK SOCIETY THEORY: TRUST VS REACH**

This theory draws attention to the increased role of digital networks. It is supported by the findings but partially. The level of engagement is good ( $M=3.65-3.82$ ), indicating the high outreach potential. Nevertheless, being reachable does not necessarily mean being persuaded. The degree of credibility is a constraint on the success of network-based communication. WhatsApp demonstrates a comparatively equal trend-average reach with a relatively better trust. Instead, Facebook tells the opposite. This implies that the campaigns should focus on reach and credibility, and not on scale alone.

### **3.11. PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY: AVAILABILITY VS EXCELLENCE**

Participation has obviously been increased through social media. Most users use political material frequently. However, trade-offs are associated with this expansion. The quality of discussion could be lower. The use of traditional media is more trusted (40% vs 33%) which is indicative of the importance of editorial control and verification. Meanwhile, one cannot disregard social media. It develops a more participatory environment.

What we observe thus is a system of duality. Social media assists in the mobilisation and engagement. The traditional media offers reliability and trustworthiness. Neither can be done without in a healthy democratic process.

### **3.12. COMPARISON OF RESEARCH WITH THE EXISTING LITERATURES**

Findings from other Indian contexts show notable variance. For example, Kumar et al. (2023) report that 72% of people in Bihar use WhatsApp, compared to 94% in the present study. This highlights regional differences in adoption.

Cross-cultural research also supports these trends. Noman et al. (2024) found that levels of trust in social media vary across societies. The average trust level of 33% observed here suggests a risk-averse attitude among Indian users.

Frey (2024) argues that internet access tends to boost voter turnout rather than activism. This contrasts with the high engagement reported in the current study. Such differences may stem from varying definitions of “engagement” across studies.

### **3.13. APPLICATION TO STRATEGY OF THE CAMPAIGN**

#### **3.13.1. DUAL-CHANNEL STRATEGY**

Political campaigns require more than one medium to function effectively. In view of this fact, social media provides larger and quicker reach and direct interaction. It offers quick and real-time communication and sharing of updates so that engagement can be improved.

Traditional media, on the other hand, builds trust and credibility. For elucidation policies and formal messages, it has been found to be more useful. The idea is that both should be used in tandem for effective results. Every platform has its own utility like YouTube can be used for visual content and persuasion, WhatsApp can be used in a closed group for trust-based communication, and Facebook is best for spreading awareness. However, it is important that credibility is managed for all such platforms.

#### **3.13.2. OVERCOMING THE CREDIBILITY GAP**

Electoral bodies have a crucial role to play in addressing the credibility gap. Building trust requires careful relationship management, including factchecking before information is shared. Sources of information should be clearly identified to help citizens evaluate reliability. To ensure accuracy, electoral authorities should collaborate closely with trustworthy media outlets. In addition, direct and personal interaction with voters is vital for strengthening trust and making political communication more effective.

#### **3.13.3. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Electoral bodies are required to monitor misinformation in real-time and keep a close check on digital platforms to disseminate reliable political content. They also need to increase the awareness level of voters, so they become careful about online content. To improve access a lot of effort needs to be made. A good way to do this is to create public digital access points. This should provide content in regional languages and for differently abled users. Platform governance needs attention so that political advertisements become more transparent. Different steps should be taken to protect user data.

### **4. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has certain limitations. The sample is more concentrated in urban areas and may not fully represent rural contexts. The data are self-reported, which introduces potential biases. Moreover, the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation.

Future research should focus on offline populations to capture perspectives beyond digital users. It should also examine changing trends and scrutinize political outcomes rather than only levels of involvement. Detailed investigation into the effects of misinformation is required, as well as cross-state comparisons to highlight regional variations.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

This study highlights a distinct paradox. Social media demonstrates high reach and engagement yet suffers from lower credibility (33%) compared to traditional media (40%). This disconnects between access and trust stresses on one of the central challenges in contemporary political communication.

Trends in the digital divide further complicate the picture. While differences in access are narrowing, deeper disparities persist. Platform-specific variations in reach, engagement, and trust also add complexity, as each medium operates with its own dynamics.

Overall, social media enhances participation but simultaneously raises concerns about the quality of discussion. It cannot fully substitute for traditional media, which continues to hold greater credibility. The findings emphasize that credibility is more important than reach in shaping effective political communication.

Future research should explore how digital engagement can be translated into tangible political participation and examine strategies to strengthen trust in digital platforms. Addressing misinformation, conducting cross-state

comparisons, and studying offline populations will be essential for building a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving media landscape.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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