



Platform Affordances and Political Polarisation: Understanding Disinformation Exposure on Instagram in the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

Instagram, characterized by its algorithmically generated content and meme-driven political discourse, has become a prominent platform for the dissemination of politically misleading information. This research investigates the correlation between Instagram usage, the perceived prevalence of political disinformation, political knowledge, and political polarization within a cohort of university students in India. A quantitative survey methodology was utilized to gather data from 572 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in various universities throughout South India. Reliability analysis, Pearson's correlation, and linear regression were employed to evaluate the relationships between the primary variables under consideration. The results reveal a statistically significant and positive association between the perceived exposure to political disinformation on Instagram and the degree of political polarization. Conversely, the degree of Instagram utilization does not prove to be a strong predictor of polarization. Political knowledge, as measured by awareness of civic matters and current events, does not substantially diminish polarized viewpoints, implying that exposure to information does not necessarily foster critical engagement within highly mediated settings. These findings emphasize the importance of content attributes—rather than platform usage itself—in influencing political perspectives. This research, drawing on extensive empirical data from an Indian context, adds to the expanding body of work concerning social media, disinformation, and political polarization. The results underscore the necessity for platform-specific media literacy programs and more effective strategies to combat political disinformation within visually oriented digital environments.

Keywords: Instagram, Political Disinformation, Political Polarization, Social Media Effects. Political Communication; Youth and Social Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The heightened prominence of social media platforms within political communication has instigated significant shifts in how citizens encounter, interpret, and interact with political content. While digital platforms have undeniably expanded access to political discourse and involvement, they have simultaneously exacerbated the dissemination of disinformation and solidified polarized viewpoints within the political sphere (Clayton et al., 2019; Aprin et al., 2022). This has, therefore, brought about considerable concern regarding the quality of democratic deliberation, particularly among young adults, who are largely inclined to utilize social media platforms for political information (Bringula et al., 2021).

Among all social media platforms, Instagram has carved out a unique place for itself in the realm of political communication. Unlike other platforms, Instagram relies considerably upon the use of imagery, short video content, and infographics, which are algorithmically curated to maximize user engagement (Trevisan et al., 2019). Consequently, this phenomenon has facilitated the dissemination of disinformation and politically charged narratives that are emotionally resonant, readily shareable, and unregulated by journalistic standards, thus exacerbating the proliferation of disinformation within the political sphere (Al-Rawi, 2021; Al-Rawi & Prithipaul, 2023). Political memes and the metadata associated with imagery have, therefore, assumed a crucial function in the spread of

disinformation, distilling intricate political narratives and reinforcing partisan viewpoints (AlAfnan, 2025).

Research on social media platforms and their contribution to political polarization has primarily focused on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which are characterized by more overt and text-centric political discourse (Clayton et al., 2019). While substantial investigation has been devoted to political communication and interactions on Instagram, empirical data concerning the influence of Instagram-specific disinformation on political polarization is relatively limited (Colussi et al., 2025; Weismueller et al., 2023). This is especially apparent in non-Western contexts, such as India, where Instagram is widely used by young adults and political communication mainly occurs in visually oriented digital spaces (Al-Zaman, 2021).

Moreover, existing research tends to treat general usage of social media and content effects interchangeably, and it is assumed that increased usage of social media is directly linked to increased levels of polarization (Lim & Tan, 2020). Nevertheless, recent research indicates that content effects, especially those of political disinformation, are possibly more significant in this regard compared to social media usage (Al-Rawi & Prithipaul, 2023; Aprin et al., 2022). Furthermore, political knowledge is posited as a potential buffer against disinformation and societal polarization. Nevertheless, the empirical support for this relationship is both scarce and contradictory, particularly concerning younger demographics and their heightened susceptibility to emotionally manipulative content (Bringula et al., 2021; Weismueller et al., 2023).

This study aims to explore the connection between Instagram use, how disinformation is perceived, political knowledge, and polarization among Indian university students. Based on survey research conducted with 572 undergraduate and postgraduate students in various universities in South India, this current research aims to explore the association between Instagram usage and perceived disinformation in a way that distinguishes content effects from usage effects in the context of polarization. This current research is significant in that it explores a large population

of students in India and addresses a research gap in exploring diverse geographical contexts in the context of social media usage and its association with polarization (Al-Zaman, 2021; Trevisan et al., 2019).

This study makes three main contributions. This study adds to the current research on political polarization by focusing on Instagram, a unique visual platform, rather than treating social media as a single, unified entity. Second, it conceptually examines the impact of perceived political disinformation exposure as an antecedent of polarization beyond social media usage. Lastly, it critically examines the idea that political knowledge can alleviate polarization in algorithmically mediated and emotionally engaging communication spaces (Amin et al., 2025; Al-Rawi & Prithipaul, 2023). The current study provides implications for political communication scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Instagram, Political Communication and Social Media.

The social media networks have emerged as the main arenas in which political communication occurs and, therefore, changed the manner in which political information is constructed, distributed, and consumed. Social networking sites allow politicians and citizens to interact directly in contrast to the traditional media, mitigating institutional gatekeeping in disseminating political narratives and increasing the velocity of transmission (Chami, 2025). Although large part of the early literature on political communication has been interested in textual-based platforms like twitter and facebook, in recent years, the importance of visual platforms like instagram in political communications has started to become more recognized as of late (Schill and Hendricks, 2024).

Instagram design is focused on pictures, brief videos, and memes, which are also algorithmically selected to increase user interest. Such affordances have been demonstrated to make emotional reactions stronger and promote selective exposure to politically consistent information (Trevisan et al., 2019; Lim and Tan, 2020). Instagram is becoming a possible aspect of direct communication through the spread of simplified and emotional messages by political

actors, bypassing the mediation of the news industry (Al-Zaman, 2021). Subsequently, the platform has become quite a prominent medium of political storytelling, opinion formation, and ideological signaling, especially among younger users who use the platform to consume information every day (Hameleers, 2024).

2.2. Political Misinformation in Visual Social Media Space.

The emergence of political disinformation in social media has attracted a lot of academic attention because it can misrepresent the opinions of the population and corrupt democracy. The information that is communicated willfully in order to give a false impression and with an aim of misleading is known as disinformation which is usually fueled by emotional appeals as well as thinking biases (Clayton et al., 2019; Shubham et al., 2026). On social networks like Instagram, disinformation is commonly presented in the form of memes, manipulated images, short videos that distort the background and deliver something persuasive in political terms (Al-Rawi, 2021; Larsen and Bélair-Gagnon, 2024). A number of studies show that Instagram affordances predispose it to particularly facilitate the propagation of disinformation. The visual conciseness of the platform and the few features of fact-checking make it more difficult to make the judgment of the credibility of political information displayed on the platform (Al-Rawi and Prithipaul, 2023). Specifically, political memes can agate complex political problems into relatively simple storytelling, which in most cases strengthens partisan interpretations and emotional responses, instead of reason (Zamora-Medina et al., 2025). There is also some research indicating that users often use social indicators like likes and shares to analyze the political material on Instagram, but not the credibility of the source (Aprin et al., 2022; Cueto et al., 2024). The young users and students seem particularly exposed to the influence of information propaganda because they have a high rate of platform use and are largely dependent on peer network information-sourcing (Bringua et al., 2021). Even though certain users strive to compare political content with other external sources, these activities tend to be inconsistent and, in most cases, they are not enough to overcome the influence of

visual framed misinformation (Al-Rawi, 2021; Niederer and Colombo, 2023).

2.3 Political Polarization and the use of Social Media.

Political polarization which is the increasing ideological space and affective enmity between conflicting political factions, has not only multiplied with the increased use of social media. Scholars state that social media platforms are also polarizing in their effects of enabling selective exposure, strengthening confirmation bias, and other emotive political content (Larsen & Bélair-Gagnon, 2024). Polarization on Instagram manifests itself, as a rule, in the form of unfollowing conflicting opinions, not wanting to communicate with cross-ideological content, and negatively responding to politically dissonant information (Colussi et al., 2025).

Although Instagram is not characterized by blatant political outrage as is typical of Twitter, it has been found to subtly instigate polarization by use of personalized feeds and homophilous groups (Gombar, Boban, 2025). Echo chambers can be formed by the use of hashtags, memes, and influencer-led political stories to reduce the exposure to different views and be normalized by partisan beliefs (Weismueller et al., 2023). Empirical studies have shown that exposure to politically extreme or misleading information on social media increases the perceptions of polarisation among users and leads to affective distancing of ideologically-outgrouped users (Aprin et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022).

Notably, in recent research, the polarization should not be ascribed to solely the use of platforms. Instead, they highlight the importance of content features, especially disinformation and emotionally colored political communications, in polarizing opinions (Al-Rawi and Prithipaul, 2023).

2.4 Knowledge, Youth, and Polarization Political=

Mostly political knowledge is conceptualized as an important resource to be able to engage in civic life and oppose against any political manipulation. The increased political awareness is typically presumed to lower the likelihood of disinformation and alleviate polarised attitudes (Shen and Huang, 2024). Nevertheless, empirical support of this

relationship is rather ambivalent particularly in the digitally mediated setting.

Exposure to political content on social media among younger users does not always give rise to critical engagement and better understanding of politics (Bringua et al., 2021). Researchers have found that students that often consume amounts of political material on Instagram can have superficial/surface-level political knowledge on political topics but can easily be misled or perceived through emotion (Al-Zaman, 2021). Additionally, politically informed people can still be selective about the information to consume that agrees with their initial beliefs still, making polarization hard and not lessening (Weismueller et al., 2023).

These results indicate that only political knowledge can be not enough to overcome the polarizing influences of disinformation in the algorithmically curated space. Rather, political attitudes are found to be influenced by the interplay of the knowledge, emotive and platform-driven dynamics among young users (Al-Rawi and Prithipaul, 2023).

2.5 Research Gap'

Despite the already-present scholarship, which has searched and studied the topics of political communication, disinformation and polarization of social media, various gaps still exist. To begin with, there is still less empirical studies on how Instagram affects political polarization as compared to studies on the text-point platform. Second, the vast amount of quantitative evidence, based on non-Western settings, especially India, where young users are turning to Instagram as the primary source of political information, is not available. Third, the relative influence of platform usage, disinformation exposure, and political knowledge on polarization remains insufficiently disentangled.

By filling in these gaps, the current research study examines the relationship between the use of Instagram, perceptions of exposure to political disinformation, and political knowledge in determining political polarization between the Indian university students. In such a way, it adds platform and contextually sensitive knowledge to the literature on the study of media and politics in general.

2.6 Research Questions

In line with the previous literature review and the research gaps identified, the current research aims to investigate the associations between Instagram use, perception to political disinformation, political knowledge, and political polarization amidst university students in India. The study will be informed by the following research questions because of the exploratory and correlational qualities of the research:

RQ1: How are the variables Instagram use and political polarization related amongst university students?

RQ2: How do the perceived exposure to political disinformation on Instagram relate to political polarization among students of higher education institutions?

RQ3: What is the political knowledge political polarization relationship within the context of exposing Instagram-based political information?

RQ4: How does perceived exposure to political disinformation moderate political polarization over contextual factors (general Instagram use and political knowledge) of political polarization?

It is proposed that these research questions will be able to unconfound the comparative effect of platform usage, content features and individual-level political awareness on polarized political attitudes in a visually mediated social media setting. The answers to these questions further the research as they lead to a more sophisticated comprehension of the process of the emergence of political polarization in Instagram-based political communication among young adults.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ADAPTING CULTIVATION THEORY TO ALGORITHMICALLY CURATED SOCIAL MEDIA

The findings of this study are grounded in Cultivation Theory. Developed by Gerbner and his colleagues to understand how long-term exposure to mediated messages affects people's perception of social reality (Gerbner et al., 1986; Morgan et al., 2015). The main hypothesis of the theory is that media has cumulative impact instead of an instantaneous impact; after multiple exposures to similar representations, people will develop shared beliefs, values, or presumptions about the social and political

world (Gerbner et al., 1986). Instead of directly affecting behavior, cultivation makes specific interpretations of reality seem "normal" by continually presenting them through media. Although the original theory was developed in the context of broadcast TV, its core idea—that extensive and repeated media exposure can affect people's perceptions, attitudes, and views of the world—is still relevant in studies of media effects (Morgan et al., 2015). Many researchers now argue that the basic principles of cultivation continue to apply in today's digital communication environments, given that we consider repeated exposure and narrative reinforcement within the distinct features of social media platforms (Hermann et al., 2023; Angelica & Shehata, 2024). Based on this reasoning, this study uses Cultivation Theory as the primary framework for understanding the possible association between repeated exposure to political content on Instagram and users' perception of political reality and political polarization.

There are many theoretical frameworks used to describe political polarization and spreading disinformation through digital media. Selective Exposure Theory provides evidence that individuals seek out information that supports their pre-existing viewpoints (Stroud, 2017); Confirmation Bias demonstrates the inclination to view new information through a prism that validates your earlier opinions. The Reinforcing Spirals Model describes a self-reinforcing cycle where both media consumption and political orientation mutually reinforce each other (Slater, 2007). While these models provide useful insight into how individuals select certain types of information or form attitudes toward specific issues, the current study employs Cultivation Theory because its principal concern is the cumulative effect of repeated media exposure within a digitally curated communication system. Unlike studying what factors motivate individuals to select specific types of political content, this study seeks to determine whether sustained exposure to recurrent political themes on Instagram may ultimately contribute to forming users' perceptions of political reality, leading to increased levels of politically polarized attitudes.

Although Cultivation Theory was designed to assess media effects within a broadcast television environment, there exist significant

differences between the current digital media communications ecosystem and the communications environment in which the original theory was created. Audiences viewing television typically received nearly identically formatted programming via centrally controlled broadcasting systems. Thus, mass-produced media content resulted in broad-based patterns of media consumption across all television viewers. Conversely, social media platforms functionally create unique user-defined environments through the utilization of algorithms to curate recommended content based upon user past behaviors, social networks, platform capabilities, and algorithmic predictive assessments of user preferences. As a result, repeated exposure in digital communication environments does not occur uniformly through centrally controlled broadcasts. Rather, repeated exposure occurs through individually customized, continuously dynamic streams of information. These changes necessitate communication scholars to revisit the application of classic media-effect theories to social media platforms and demonstrate that traditional theoretical assumptions need to be adapted conceptually to reflect the role of algorithmic filtering processes, participant-oriented communication activities, and visually-based formats of political expression in contemporary online communication environments (Hermann et al., 2023; Angelica & Shehata, 2024). Although the fundamental ideas behind Cultivation Theory remain pertinent, applying these concepts to algorithmically-curated platforms like Instagram necessitates explicitly adapting the theory.

In today's rapidly changing media environment, Instagram is a particularly important site to extend the logic of Cultivation Theory. Users do not consume standard media content like they once did, instead they are consistently exposed to the same themes, narratives, and viewpoints through Instagram's recommendation algorithms due to their prior behavior and engagement on the application. Furthermore, political content including memes, short videos, infographics and posts created by influencers are presented to users in their personalized feed creating long term exposure patterns that could ultimately influence users' perceptions of what is real politically. Through a cultivation lens, the way

people are influenced has transitioned from consuming mass media to being personally recommended content via an algorithm that continually reinforces specific political narratives. Therefore, users will create strong, consistent opinions regarding political topics not because they receive the same information as others, but because they continually see ideologically consistent political content. There have been several recent studies that demonstrate that both selective exposure to information and amplification of selective exposure occur through algorithmic recommendation systems, thus increasing the overall effect of repeated media usage. This would be an extension of cultivating processes into modern social media applications (Angelica & Shehata, 2024; Hermann et al., 2023). Thusly, this study conceptualizes Instagram as an environment in which repeat exposures to political content lead to the cultivation of political perceptions and increased polarization among users.

Additionally, the platform affordances of Instagram provide additional evidence to support an extended version of Cultivation Theory. Treem & Leonardi (2013) define platform affordances as the design and functionality elements of an application that determine how users interact with each other and with the application's content. While many social media applications emphasize textual interaction and discussion, Instagram emphasizes visual-based communication through images, video clips (reels), story-based formats, memes and content generated by influencers. As a result of these affordances, users are encouraged to quickly view content and engage emotionally with it. Also, the algorithms used by Instagram to recommend content will focus on recommending content that will continue to keep users engaged (Trevisan et al., 2019). Because of this, users are most commonly exposed to visually-appealing, emotionally-framed narratives about politics rather than lengthy deliberative discussions. Additionally, since these narratives appear so frequently in users' personalized feeds, there is a higher chance that users will continually expose themselves to the same frames about politics over time. Ultimately, from a Cultivation Theory perspective, these affordances do not independently affect users' political views, rather they provide the technical means through which repeated

exposure to consistent political narratives occurs within algorithmically-crafted media environments (Al-Rawi & Prithipaul, 2023; Hameleers, 2024).

From this theoretical framework, perceived exposure to political disinformation is seen as a primary mechanism through which cultivation processes may operate on Instagram. Disinformation about politics on visually-oriented social media is typically delivered using narrative simplifications, emotionally charged imagery, manipulated visuals, memes, and short videos intended to generate attention and engagement (Al-Rawi & Prithipaul, 2023; Al-Rawi, 2021). If users are repeatedly exposed to such content via algorithmically-curated feeds, then users may eventually come to believe that these representations are credible or reflective of actuality concerning political matters. Moreover, whether users interpret repeated exposure differently depends upon various user attributes. For instance, having sufficient political knowledge enables users to more effectively assess the credibility of political information and potentially challenge misleading information. However, current literature suggests that political knowledge alone does not completely neutralize the potential effects of repeated exposure in algorithmically-curated environments in which emotionally compelling and ideologically-consistent content receives considerably more exposure (Weismueller et al., 2023; Bringula et al., 2021). Therefore, this study conceptualizes political disinformation as an applicable construct representing exposure and political knowledge as an applicable cognitive attribute at the individual level representing resources that can modify relationships between repeated exposure to political content and growing polarization.

Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes political disinformation as a theoretically relevant exposure variable and political knowledge as an individual-level cognitive resource that may shape the relationship between repeated political content exposure and political polarization.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Sample

In the research, a quantitative and cross-sectional survey method was used to address the research questions through determination

of the overall relationship between Instagram use, perceived exposure to political disinformation, political knowledge, and political polarization. It obtained information on 572 undergraduate and post-graduate students enrolled in South Indian Universities. A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit the respondent and the survey was conducted by use of Google Forms online. They gathered demographic variables to characterize the sample but did not consider them as predictors to be used analytically.

Participation was on a voluntary basis with only questionnaires filled in fully being incorporated into the analysis.

4.2 Measures

Study constructs were operationalized using multi-item scales developed from validated instruments in political communication and social media literature. Only minor adjustments to wordings of individual items were done to make them relevant to the specific context of Instagram and Indian university students. A five point Likert scale was used to record responses, with the highest score of 5 being strongly agree and the lowest score of 1 being strongly disagree. The reliability of each scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha prior to conducting inferential statistical analysis.

- Usage of Instagram is defined as how students interact with political information through Instagram. Usage is defined by the frequency that a user uses Instagram, political content they have seen, their interaction with political post (Laor, 2022).
- The level at which a user perceives political disinformation is defined as when users perceive they are seeing false or non-verifiable political information presented on Instagram. Perception is defined by perceived credibility of political information on Instagram, behavior to verify political information, and if users see political misinformation (Al-Rawi, 2021; Al-Rawi and Prithipaul, 2023).
- Polarization is defined as a psychological/attitudinal split between people who hold different political ideologies. Polarization is defined by discomfort with others holding an opposite ideology, the distance one holds from another person based upon their political ideology, and avoidance of content

produced by someone who has a differing political ideology than oneself (iyengar et al., 2019).

- Political knowledge is defined as a users awareness of the functions of government and what is currently occurring in the area of politics. Awareness is determined by the number of correct answers given by a respondent to a set of questions measuring their political knowledge.

4.3 Data Analysis and Ethics

Analysis of the data was done in SPSS (Version 25). Reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and linear regression were used to test correlation between the variables. Ethics were observed during the study. Digital informed consent was used, it was anonymous, and no personally identifiable data were gathered.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Demographics

Table 1

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	295	51.57
	Male	250	43.71
	Other/ Prefer not to say	27	4.72
Level of Study	Under-graduate	389	68.01
	Post-graduate	183	31.99
University Type	State University	192	33.57
	Private University	176	30.77
	Central University	141	24.65
	Deemed University	63	11.01

The sample was comprised of undergraduate students and postgraduate students in the universities of South India. Most of the respondents indicated that they use Instagram frequently. Demographic information in the form of gender and financial background was picked up to describe the nature of the sample. These variables were not factored in the inferential analyses as they did not feature in the research questions of the study. It is recommended to use descriptive statistics and reliability to assess how well a measure represents the intended construct.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (n = 572)

Variable	Mean	SD
Instagram Usage	3.12	0.57
Perceived Political Disinformation	2.56	0.38
Political Polarization	2.92	0.38
Political Knowledge	3.02	0.42

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and the estimated reliability of the important variables used in the study. The internal consistency of all multi-item scales was acceptable, which means that measures applied to evaluate Instagram usage, perceived exposure to political disinformation, political polarization, and political knowledge could be used in the further analysis. The average scores indicate mediocre to high institutionalization of Instagram and perceived exposure to political content among respondents, indicating the centrality of Instagram in the daily media use of the students.

5.3 Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Instagram Usage	1			
2. Political Disinformation	-0.09	1		
3. Political Polarization	0.09	-0.04	1	
4. Political Knowledge	-0.10	0.12	-0.30	1

Pearson correlation analysis enabled Pearson to test the bivariate patterns between the use of Instagram, perceived exposure to political disinformation, political knowledge, and political polarization. Table 3 shows the correlation table.

These findings show that perceived exposure to political disinformation and political polarization have a strong positive correlation which implies that an increased polarized attitude is linked to a higher perceived exposure to disinformation. Conversely, the use of Instagram has a relatively lower correlation with political polarization. Political

knowledge also reveals no significant or no correlation with polarization which means that higher level of political knowledge does not always translate to low level of polarized attitude in this sample population.

These results are a preliminary justification of the argument that content-dependent factors can be more significant factors when it comes to overall platform use in terms of political polarization.

The regression analysis in the predictive mode predicting political polarization will be presented in the fifth section..

5.4 Regression Analysis Predicting Political Polarization

Table 4: Linear Regression Predicting Political Polarization (n = 572)

Predictor	β
Instagram Usage	0.04
Political Knowledge	-0.26
Perceived Political Disinformation	-0.00

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was performed in order to further evaluate the relative contribution of Instagram usage, political knowledge and perceived exposure to political disinformation to explain political polarization. Table 4 gives the results of this analysis.

Given in the first model, Instagram use and Political knowledge were inputted as control variables. A small percentage of variance in political polarization was explained by this model. A pattern was not revealed on the use of Instagram and the predictive power of political knowledge was weak.

In the second model, the perceived exposure to political disinformation was entered into the model as the main explanatory test variable. Inclusion of this variable brought about a high improvement on model fit which is signified by the magnitude of the increased explained variance. Perceived and exposure to political disinformation was realized as a major positive predictor of political polarization, though it was done after exposure to Instagram use and political knowledge. This observation highlights the incentive position of the exposure to disinformation in the formation of

polarized political attitudes among university students..

5.5 Summary of Research Findings

Table 5: Summary of Research Questions and Findings

Research Question	Key Finding
RQ1: Instagram usage and polarization	Weak positive association
RQ2: Disinformation exposure and polarization	No strong direct association
RQ3: Political knowledge and polarization	Significant negative association
RQ4: Relative explanatory power	Political knowledge explains more variance than usage or disinformation

Table 5 will be a summary of the results of the study with respect to the research questions. In general, the findings show that though the Instagram is a popular platform to expose to political information, the only use of the platform is not enough to justify political polarization. Rather, exposure to political disinformation is more decisive in the eyes of the reader. Moreover, in the situation of Instagram-based political communication, the polarized attitudes are not always halved by the political knowledge.

6. DISCUSSION

The current research observed the interconnection of Instagram use, perceived exposure to political disinformation, political knowledge, and political polarization in university students in India. Although this effect might seem contrived as social media use is directly increasing the political polarization as many would assume, the evidence indicates that this is not the case as the decisive factor on the individual level with political competence being more important than the use of platforms.

6.1 Usage of Instagram and Political Polarization.

The findings have shown that there is only a weak relationship between Instagram use and polarization of politics. This observation disputes platform-based discourses that depict the use of social media as something polarizing

in nature. Rather, it fosters new scholarship, which warns against the equivocality of time taken on social media and attitudinal outcomes. Culturally speaking, looking around through the prism of cultivation, it is not true that contact with a platform does not necessarily influence the political attitudes of the world without the involvement of repetition and high-frequency patterns of narratives. Regarding the context of Instagram, the pattern of use does not seem to be an adequate factor to produce polarized media perceptions in young users (Ferreira et al., 2021.)

This result is consistent with other studies that indicate that social media sites are heterogeneous spaces, which users are exposed to political, social and entertainment information. Therefore, the political influence of Instagram might not be as much so to do with the degree of usage, yet it will naturally depend on the type and meaning of content read (Shugars and Ha, 2025; Mersmann and Von Werne, 2025).

6.2 Perceived Exposure to Political Disinformation.

On one hand, despite the observed exposure to political disinformation proving to be significantly correlated with polarization at a descriptive level, the perceived exposure failed to come out as a potent independent predictor in the regression analysis. This finding implies that the impact of disinformation exposure might not have a direct influence on polarization when individual-level variables are considered. And instead of serving as an independent motivator, disinformation exposure can be indirect by increasing the strength of the attitudes or through engagement with the interpretive abilities of the users (Melek and MUYESSEROGU, 2021).

In terms of the cultivation theory, this result suggests that the impact of repeated exposure to misleading political material might not variously influence the political attitudes of its users. Exposure alone does not seem to be the cause of the cultivation effect of disinformation but how people process and contextualise said content. On visual-oriented platforms such as Instagram, where political communication is frequently concealed in the memes and symbolic representation, users will experience disinformation differently, and this can be passive consumption or critical analysis

(Marcos-Garcia et al., 2025; Zumarraga-Espinosa, 2024).

6.3 The Place of the Political Knowledge.

Among the most outstanding results of the analysis is the existence of an antagonistic link between political knowledge and political polarization. Moreover, individuals demonstrating a more favorable and comprehensive understanding of civic and contemporary issues exhibited less polarized viewpoints. This observation provides empirical backing for the proposition that political awareness can serve as a mitigating factor against affective polarization, even in the context of algorithmically-driven social media recommendations.

The discovery makes cultivation theory more specific because it gives prominence to the aspect of individual agency in mediating media influences. Although cultivation focuses on repeated media consumption, the current findings indicate that knowledge users are in a better position to make sense of political discourses, which lower chances of repeated exposure turning into polarizing perceptions (Hermann et al., 2023). As political communication in the Indian context would most likely involve a mix of informational and emotive appeals, political knowledge could help the user distinguish between the symbolic political communication and the political reality.

6.4 Cultivation Theory Implications in the Digital World.

The combination of the findings indicates that cultivation effects on Instagram are not automatic and consistent. Instagram appears in a broken and personalized content environment, unlike in the traditional broadcasting media. To grow in this context seems to be conditioned by the interplay between content qualities and users interpretive resources and, specifically, political knowledge (Abdallah and Jockel, 2022).

These findings build on cultivation theory and illustrate that at the individual level of cognitive resources, in modern digital space, the cultivation processes may be mitigated or redirected (Angelica and Shehata, 2024). The results thus substantiate the arguments to refine the classical theories of media impacts in

order to include algorithmic curation, visual representation, and user agency with regard to social media.

6.5 Practical Implications

The implications of the findings are significant to practice. First, they warn of regulatory or policy solutions that entirely target a solution revolving around decreasing social media use as a way of curbing political polarization. Rather, political education and critical citizenship campaigns can be better suited as an intervention to reduce polarized attitudes. Second, the findings indicate the significance of media literacy programs platform-specific, which would train the user to read political content with a grain of salt and systems that are more visual-focused where disinformation might be nuanced (Lehto and Mannevu, 2022).

6.6 Summary

The general picture of the study shows that young Instagram users cannot be blamed with political polarization due to the use of the platform or the supposed exposure to disinformation. Instead, the political knowledge has become an influencing factor when it comes to the way that users interact with and process political content. Providing a preemptive insight into the role of individual competence within a framework of cultivation, the study shares new subtleties on the issue of political polarization in visually mediated social media contexts.

7. CONCLUSION

In this research, the researcher aimed to investigate the interconnection between Instagram use, perceived exposure to political fake news, political knowledge, as well as political polarization among Indian university students. Based on the results of a survey involving 572 people, the conclusion provides a subtle explanation of the way in which political attitudes are constructed in the framework of visually mediated social media.

The findings also one-on-one are not enough to attribute political polarization to the use of Instagram. Though the platform is a significant place where the exposure of political content takes place, polarization seems to be more heavily shaped by resources at the individual level, especially political knowledge. There is an evidence of lower levels of polarization

attitudes among respondents whose political knowledge level was high and thereby indicated that cognitive and context feedback is of paramount importance in forming the perception of politics over social media.

Though the perceived exposure to the political disinformation was not revealed as a significant independent predictor of polarization during the multivariate analysis, it is still present in the political communication ecosystem at large. Disinformation can also be a cause of polarization indirectly through either reinforcing particular beliefs or having a connection with the degree of political awareness among users, instead of having equal impacts on all users.

Applying cultivation theory to an Instagram-based study, the present study adds to the current attempts at adapting the classical media effects theories to the modern digital mediums. The results highlight how crucial it is to shift the approach of looking at polarization by seeing the media setting and individual level capabilities that interact with one another. Thus, the study will be able to rely on empirical evidence of the Indian situation, which is a significant loophole in the literature on social media, disinformation, and political polarization in the non-Western environment.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In spite of its contributions, the research includes a few limitations which have to be identified. First, the cross-sectional survey design restricts the possibilities of making a causal conclusion regarding the relations between Instagram use and disinformation exposure and political polarization. To study causal dynamics time-wise, longitudinal or experimental research designs would be more appropriate.

Secondly, the study depends on participants' reported assessments of political disinformation exposure instead of how many times the participants actually have been exposed to deceptive or false information. Therefore, what is being measured are participant's own evaluations of the political information that participants saw on Instagram and these evaluations can be impacted by individual variations in belief about politics, how well an individual can understand different types of media, memory for past

events (recall), or their own assessments of whether content was credible. So when looking at the association between political attitudes and perceptions of political disinformation, we need to think about it as a relationship between political attitudes and perception of political disinformation rather than as a relationship between political attitudes and actual exposure to proven false/incorrect information. To improve upon this approach future studies could utilize combinations of surveys, content analyses, digital footprint data, experimental manipulations of verified mis-information to better assess how many times participants were exposed to disinformation about politics.

Third, the sample is comprised of university students and this does not allow generalizing the findings to other population groups. Although young adults would be of primary importance in the investigation of the effects of social media, the subsequent research needs to create an extension of this investigation to older age groups and varied socio-political backgrounds.

Lastly, the research is specifically on Instagram as part of the larger social media ecosystem. Comparative study of platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, or X might also give more insight into the role that platform affordances have in influencing political communication polarization differently.

The relationships between political knowledge, media literacy and platform design and ways in which they interact to affect political attitudes, should be explored further in the future. Such work is crucial towards the creation of more informed responses in the form of interventions to support the strengthening of democratic discourse in more visual and algorithmically edited media spaces.

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