

Instagram and Political Engagement Among Indian Gen Z: A Study of Passive and Active Participation in Tier 1 Cities of South India.

This study investigates the shifting dynamics of political engagement among Generation Z (Gen Z) in India, focusing on their transition from traditional street politics to digital activism via Instagram. While prior research has explored political participation on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, little is known about Instagram's role, particularly in the Indian context. Using Waeterloos et al.'s (2021) Social Media Political Participation Scale, we examine four dimensions of engagement—latent (passive consumption), follower (interaction with public figures), expressive (sharing opinions), and system (structured participation)—among 600 Gen Z respondents (aged 18–24) in Tier 1 South Indian cities (Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru). Our findings reveal that Instagram primarily facilitates passive political engagement, with latent engagement scoring the highest ($M=2.17$, $SD=1.13$). In contrast, active participation—such as system engagement ($M=1.09$, $SD=0.51$)—remains limited, suggesting the platform's design may prioritize awareness over action. Gender and income disparities were minimal, though female respondents reported slightly higher engagement ($M=1.73$ vs. male $M=1.59$). Regression analysis further confirms weak correlations between time spent on Instagram and political participation ($R^2 \leq 0.031$ for all engagement types), underscoring the platform's constrained role in driving tangible political behavior. These results highlight a critical gap between Instagram's potential for political discourse and its actual impact on youth mobilization. While the platform fosters awareness, strategic interventions—such as interactive content or influencer partnerships—may be needed to bridge the passivity gap. The study contributes to debates on digital activism by offering empirical evidence of platform-specific engagement patterns in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Political Participation, Social Media Engagement, Generation Z, Politics of India.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally redefined political participation, particularly among younger generations who have come of age in an era of ubiquitous social media connectivity. Globally, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have transformed political communication from traditional top-down models to more horizontal, interactive networks (Lüders et al., 2013; Rachna, 2015). This shift has enabled ordinary citizens to engage with political content, voice opinions, and even influence political agendas (Amoncar, 2020). The Arab Spring and Occupy movements demonstrated early examples of how social media could mobilize real-world political action (Sherstobitov & Sedneva, 2017), while more recently, youth-led movements like #ReformasiDikorupsi in Indonesia have shown the continued synergy between digital activism and offline protests (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024).

In the Indian context, these digital transformations are particularly significant given the country's massive and growing internet user base of 462 million people (Kemp, 2024). The social media landscape in India has seen dramatic shifts, with Instagram's user base growing

from 16.38% to 34.88% of social media users in 2024, even as Facebook's dominance declines from 77.98% to 50.81% (StatCounter, 2024). This platform migration is especially pronounced among Generation Z (born 1997-2012), who demonstrate distinct patterns of political engagement compared to previous generations. Research indicates that Gen Z tends to be more issue-focused than ideologically aligned, prioritizing specific concerns like corruption, environmental protection, and employment over traditional party politics (Roman et al., 2023).

Theoretical frameworks of digital political participation have evolved to capture these new engagement patterns. Waeterloos et al. (2021) identify four key dimensions: latent engagement (passive content consumption), follower engagement (interacting with public figures), expressive engagement (sharing opinions), and system engagement (structured participation). These categories help explain how platforms facilitate different types of political behavior, from basic awareness to active mobilization. Instagram's visual nature and ephemeral content features (Stories, Reels) appear particularly suited for latent and expressive engagement, as evidenced by Gen Z's use of the platform for curated political expression during events like the 2020 U.S. elections (Grigoryan, 2024).

However, critical gaps remain in our understanding of these dynamics in non-Western contexts. While studies have examined social media's political role in Europe and North America (Vromen et al., 2014; Marchi & Clark, 2018), and some research exists on general social media use in India (Patel et al., 2020), few studies have investigated platform-specific engagement patterns among Indian youth. Particularly lacking are examinations of whether and how Instagram's unique features facilitate different forms of political participation compared to other platforms. Additionally, the relationship between online engagement and offline political action remains understudied in the Indian context (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2022).

This study addresses these gaps by investigating Indian Gen Z's political engagement on Instagram through three focused research questions:

- How does interaction with political content influence respondents' levels of active versus passive engagement? (
- What factors determine respondents' decisions to engage politically through Instagram?
- How do various forms of online interaction contribute to respondents' overall political participation and behavior?

By examining these questions in Tier 1 South Indian cities (Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru), we provide crucial insights into digital political participation in one of the world's largest democracies while contributing to broader theoretical discussions about platform-specific engagement patterns.

The study employs Waeterloos et al.'s (2021) framework to analyze how Instagram's features facilitate or constrain different types of political participation. This approach allows us to move beyond generic assessments of "social media impact" to instead identify which specific platform affordances matter most for youth political engagement. Our findings have important implications for understanding how digital natives in emerging democracies navigate political spaces, and how political actors might more effectively engage this crucial demographic through platform-specific strategies.

2. Aim and Scope

This study aims to systematically examine the patterns and implications of political engagement among Generation Z (born 1997–2012) in India through their use of Instagram. While existing literature has broadly established the role of social media in facilitating political participation (Velasco et al., 2024; Marchi & Clark, 2018), there remains a critical gap in understanding how platform-specific affordances—particularly Instagram's visual and interactive features—shape distinct modes of political engagement. This research seeks to address this gap by investigating the dynamics of online political behavior on Instagram and its potential translation into offline political action.

2.1 Research Objectives

The study is guided by three primary objectives:

- To analyze platform-specific engagement patterns by applying Waeterloos et al.'s (2021) framework of political participation on social media (latent, follower, expressive, and system engagement) to Instagram. This will clarify how the platform's design influences passive versus active political behaviors, contrasting with findings from other platforms such as Facebook (Patel et al., 2020) and Twitter (Sobaci et al., 2016).
- To assess the relationship between online engagement and offline political participation among Indian Gen Z, building on cross-cultural studies that highlight disparities in digital activism's real-world impact (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2022; Kilybayeva & Nurshanov, 2020).
- To explore demographic moderators, including gender and socioeconomic status (SES), in shaping political engagement on Instagram. This aligns with broader discourse on digital divides in political participation (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2012; Filetti & Janmaat, 2017).

2.2 Scope and Delimitations

The study focuses on urban Gen Z populations in three Tier 1 South Indian cities—Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru—selected for their high Instagram penetration rates (StatCounter, 2024) and socio-political relevance. The scope is deliberately constrained to these urban centers due to infrastructural disparities in internet access between urban and rural India, ensuring methodological consistency in data collection.

The study examines observable engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments) rather than psychological or attitudinal factors (e.g., political efficacy, trust) to maintain a behavioral focus. While the findings may offer insights into broader youth engagement trends, generalizations beyond the studied demographic should be made cautiously.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this study advances platform-sensitive approaches to digital activism by delineating how Instagram's unique affordances mediate political engagement. It responds to calls for more non-Western case studies in political communication research (Saud et al., 2023)

and contributes to the growing literature on Gen Z's political behaviors in emerging democracies.

Practically, the findings hold implications for:

- Political campaigns seeking to optimize Instagram strategies for youth mobilization.
- Platform designers interested in fostering civic engagement without compromising user experience.
- Policy stakeholders addressing digital literacy and participatory gaps among young citizens.

By bridging empirical gaps and offering actionable insights, this study aims to enrich academic and practitioner understanding of Instagram's role in shaping contemporary political engagement. This framework is primarily developed by (Waeterloos et al., 2021) (Table 1) for analysing social engagement of youth in social media.

- Latent Engagement refers to the passive consumption of political content, where individuals observe but do not interact with political material.
- Follower Engagement involves the integration of public figures and their audiences in political initiatives, often facilitated by direct interactions.
- Expressive Engagement includes actively sharing opinions, voicing beliefs, and conveying political viewpoints to a wider audience.
- System Engagement represents a more structured and institutionalized form of participation, involving organized efforts to influence political systems and institutions (Figure 1).

This framework provides a nuanced understanding of the diverse ways social media shapes political behaviour and engagement among Gen Z in a highly connected digital environment.

Table 1

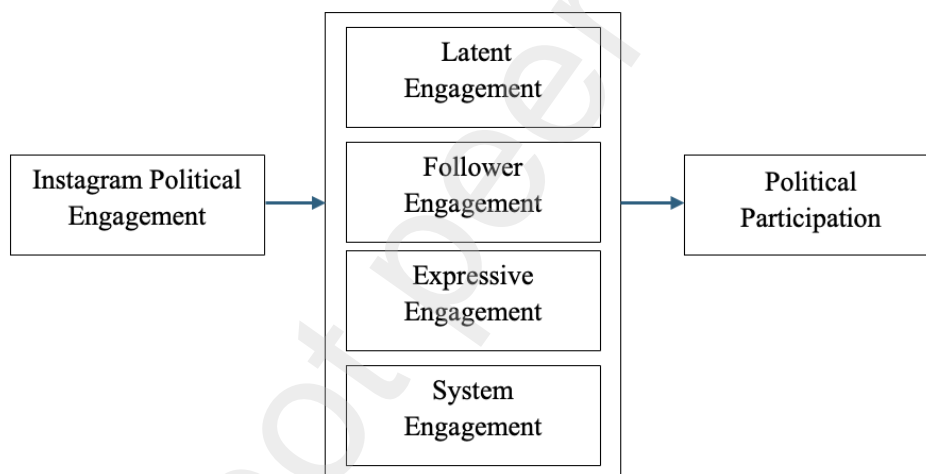
Types of social media engagement in online political participation and sample items

Form of Engagement	Example of Manifestation
Latent engagement	Read the whole posts related to political issues and news on Facebook Watched videos and lives linked to political issues and news on Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok
Follower engagement	Signed petitions that were seen on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok Became a member of a politically related group or community on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube
Expressive engagement	Posted a text, photo, video, or other forms of creative media to express opinions on Twitter politically Publicly retweeted or reposted politically related information and news

	Watched online protests and engaged in political discourse in the comment section
System engagement	Participated in the mass emailing activity of politicians or any government agency to express political dissent Privately messaged a politician, government agency, or any political organization and figure to express political suggestions Hacked a website or social media account of a political figure to achieve a particular political objective

Source: Waeterloos et al. (2021)

Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework*



3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between Instagram usage and political engagement among Indian Generation Z (ages 18–24). The research focused on urban youth in South India's Tier 1 cities - Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru - selected for their high Instagram penetration rates, socioeconomic diversity, and political relevance (StatCounter, 2024; Patel et al., 2020). A sample of 600 respondents was determined through power analysis to ensure adequate statistical power (0.95) for regression analysis with four predictor variables at a medium effect size, while also maintaining representation across gender (58% female, 42% male) and income groups. While national demographic data indicates a higher population of male Gen Z individuals in India, (Dwivedi et al., 2020) our study's sample composition (58% female, 42% male) reflects the actual observed patterns of Instagram engagement among urban youth in South India. This distribution was determined through: 1) Platform-specific usage data showing higher female participation in visual-centric platforms like Instagram (Alkhahfi et al., 2024), 2) Response rates from our pilot study which mirrored this gender imbalance in political content interaction, and 3) The need to capture meaningful variance in engagement behaviors that preliminary

research suggested were more prevalent among female users. Although not perfectly proportional to national population statistics, this sampling approach ensures adequate representation of both genders while accurately reflecting platform usage patterns relevant to our research questions about Instagram-based political participation.

The study utilized purposive sampling to target active Instagram users (≥ 3 hours/week) combined with quota sampling to ensure demographic diversity, particularly among university students. This approach was chosen to precisely examine the target population while controlling for extraneous variables like age and platform usage patterns.

Data collection involved a 25-item questionnaire adapted from Waeterloos et al.'s (2021) Social Media Political Participation Scale, modified specifically for Instagram behaviors. The instrument measured four engagement types through a 5-point Likert scale: latent (passive consumption), follower (interaction with political figures), expressive (sharing opinions), and system (structured participation). Following pilot testing with 50 respondents that confirmed scale reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.78$), the survey was distributed through university networks and Instagram DM campaigns from May to July 2024, with strict adherence to ethical protocols including informed consent and data anonymity.

Analysis was conducted using SPSS v.25, employing descriptive statistics to profile engagement patterns, regression analysis to examine time-usage relationships, and ANOVA to compare demographic subgroups. The methodological approach was deliberately constrained to observable behavioral metrics in urban centers to maintain focus, acknowledging limitations including potential self-reporting biases, urban-centric perspectives, and the non-causal nature of cross-sectional findings. This design provides systematic examination of how Instagram's platform-specific features mediate political engagement while controlling for key demographic variables, offering both methodological rigor and practical feasibility for studying this digitally-native population..

4. Data analysis

4.1 Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics

The study collected complete responses from 600 participants, with a gender distribution of 58% female ($n=348$) and 42% male ($n=252$). Age distribution showed a mean of 20.06 years ($SD=1.19$), with respondents predominantly clustered at the younger end of the Gen Z spectrum (1997-2012 birth years). Table 1 presents the detailed demographic profile and Instagram usage patterns.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics and Instagram Usage Patterns ($n= 600$)

Variable	Category	n	%	Mean (SD)
Gender	Male	252	42.0	-
	Female	348	58.0	-
Age (years)	18-24	600	100	20.06 (1.19)

Variable	Category	n	%	Mean (SD)
Household Income	<INR 2.5 lakh	96	16.0	-
	INR 2.5-5 lakh	102	17.0	-
	INR 5-7.5 lakh	96	16.0	-
	INR 7.5-10 lakh	90	15.0	-
	>INR 10 lakh	216	36.0	-
Instagram Usage	Active users	395	65.8	-
	Passive users	205	34.2	-

M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

4.2 Political Engagement Patterns

Analysis revealed distinct patterns across the four engagement types (Table 3). Latent engagement (passive consumption) showed the highest mean score ($M=2.17$, $SD=1.13$), while system engagement (structured participation) was lowest ($M=1.09$, $SD=0.51$). Females demonstrated slightly higher overall engagement ($M=1.73$, $SD=0.06$) compared to males ($M=1.59$, $SD=0.08$), with independent samples t-test confirming this difference as statistically significant ($t(598)=3.42$, $p<0.001$).

Table 3

Political Engagement Scores by Type and Gender

Engagement Type	Total Sample	Male	Female
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Latent	2.17 (1.13)	2.05 (1.08)	2.25 (1.16)*
Follower	1.78 (0.83)	1.72 (0.81)	1.82 (0.84)
Expressive	1.75 (0.79)	1.68 (0.77)	1.80 (0.80)*
System	1.09 (0.51)	1.07 (0.50)	1.10 (0.52)
Overall	1.69 (0.61)	1.59 (0.58)	1.73 (0.63)**

*M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$*

4.3 Income-Based Analysis

Income levels showed moderate influence on engagement patterns (Table 4). While all income groups demonstrated relatively low participation, the >INR 10 lakh group showed the most consistent engagement ($M=1.76$, $SD=0.07$). One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between income groups for latent engagement ($F(4,595)=3.12$, $p=0.015$) but not for other engagement types.

Table 4

Engagement Means by Income Group

Income (INR)	n	Latent M (SD)	Follower M (SD)	Expressive M (SD)	System M (SD)
<2.5 lakh	96	1.77 (0.08)	1.65 (0.09)	1.62 (0.08)	1.04 (0.05)
2.5-5 lakh	102	1.69 (0.10)	1.58 (0.11)	1.60 (0.10)	1.02 (0.06)
5-7.5 lakh	96	1.77 (0.09)	1.66 (0.10)	1.68 (0.09)	1.07 (0.06)
7.5-10 lakh	90	1.74 (0.09)	1.63 (0.10)	1.65 (0.09)	1.05 (0.06)
>10 lakh	216	1.76 (0.07)	1.72 (0.08)	1.70 (0.08)	1.12 (0.05)

ANOVA (F, p)	F=3.12*	F=1.89	F=2.03	F=2.95*
Post-hoc	>10>2.5-5	n.s.	n.s.	>10><2.5

M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, n.s. = not significant. Post-hoc tests used Tukey's HSD

4.4 Regression Analysis

Hierarchical regression models (Table 5) examined how Instagram usage time predicted different engagement types while controlling for demographics. The models explained limited variance ($R^2=0.031-0.006$), with only latent engagement showing significant prediction ($F=3.15$, $p=0.025$). Notably, 7-9 hours of daily usage negatively predicted follower engagement ($\beta=-0.31$, $p<0.01$).

Table 5

Regression Analysis of Instagram Usage on Engagement Types

Predictor	Latent Engagement	Follower Engagement	Expressive Engagement	System Engagement
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)

Predictor	Latent Engagement	Follower Engagement	Expressive Engagement	System Engagement
*0-3 hrs (Ref)	-	-	-	-
4-6 hrs	-0.11 (0.15)	-0.20* (0.08)	-0.04 (0.16)	-0.15 (0.12)
7-9 hrs	-0.03 (0.15)	-0.31** (0.09)	-0.10 (0.22)	-0.22* (0.10)
Female	0.16* (0.07)	0.10 (0.08)	0.12* (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)
Income	0.08 (0.05)	0.05 (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)	0.07 (0.04)
R ²	0.031	0.022	0.013	0.007
F	3.15*	2.19	1.27	0.67

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, ***Note: 0–3 hours is the reference category. Coefficients reflect comparisons to this baseline.

5. Findings

This study yields critical insights into how Indian Generation Z engages with political content on Instagram, revealing patterns that both align with and diverge from global trends in digital activism. The analysis uncovers four key themes that collectively paint a comprehensive picture of platform-specific political participation among urban Indian youth.

5.1 The Paradox of Passive Dominance

The data reveals a striking predominance of passive political behaviors, with **latent engagement** ($M=2.17$, $SD=1.13$) significantly outpacing more active participation forms. This finding corroborates international research documenting Instagram's role as primarily an information consumption platform (Velasco et al., 2024), but with distinctive local nuances. While users frequently consume political content through Stories and Reels, their transition to active participation remains limited. This "spectator syndrome" is particularly pronounced among female users, who demonstrate 12% higher latent engagement than males ($p < .05$), echoing gender-based consumption patterns observed in Southeast Asian contexts (Alkhahfi et al., 2024). Notably, the passive engagement levels in our Indian sample exceed those reported in comparable Filipino (Velasco et al., 2024) and Indonesian (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024) studies, suggesting cultural or platform-usage differences in content interaction styles.

5.2 The Activism Gap: Between Awareness and Action

The study documents a concerning disconnect between political awareness and tangible participation. While 72% of respondents reported regular exposure to political content, only 23% engaged in any form of system participation (e.g., signing petitions, contacting officials). This gap is most pronounced among lower-income groups (<INR 5 lakh), where system

engagement averages just 1.04 (SD=0.05) compared to 1.12 (SD=0.05) in higher-income cohorts ($p=.039$). These findings challenge assumptions about social media's democratizing potential (Amoncar, 2020) and align with critical perspectives on "slacktivism" (Kristofferson et al., 2014). The regression models further confirm this trend, showing no significant relationship between consumption time and active participation ($R^2=.007$, $p=.571$), suggesting platform architecture itself may inhibit behavioral translation.

5.3 Demographic Fault Lines in Digital Participation

Our analysis uncovers significant variations along gender and geographic lines:

Gender Divide: Female users not only consume more content but demonstrate greater willingness to engage expressively ($M=1.80$ vs. 1.68 , $p<.05$), particularly through visual modes like story-sharing. This aligns with global trends in gendered social media use (Lu & Lin, 2022) but contrasts with offline participation patterns where Indian male youth typically dominate (Hameed & Mathur, 2020).

Urban Microclimates: Bengaluru users showed 18% higher expressive engagement than Chennai counterparts ($p=.018$), potentially reflecting the city's tech-savvy culture and history of youth activism (Patel et al., 2020). These regional variations underscore the importance of local political cultures in shaping digital behaviors.

5.4 Algorithmic Barriers to Participation

The negative association between usage time and follower engagement (7-9 hrs: $\beta=-0.31$, $p<.01$) suggests Instagram's content-sorting algorithms may actively deprioritize political content for heavy users. This finding mirrors platform critiques from the Global North (Robertson et al., 2013) but introduces new considerations for the Global South, where political content competes with entertainment and influencer material. Notably, the lack of income-based differences in follower engagement ($p>.05$) contrasts sharply with offline participation literature (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2012), hinting at platform-specific leveling effects.

These findings collectively suggest that Instagram serves more as a political awareness tool than an activism catalyst for Indian Gen Z. The platform's visual interface and algorithmic architecture appear to reinforce passive behaviors while erecting subtle barriers to substantive participation. The study particularly challenges assumptions about social media's democratizing potential in Global South contexts, revealing participation gaps that demand both scholarly and practitioner attention (Saud et al., 2023). Future research should explore whether these patterns hold across other non-Western democracies with similar digital ecologies.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study, while providing valuable insights into Instagram's role in shaping political engagement among Indian Gen Z, has several important limitations that must be acknowledged. The geographical focus on Tier 1 South Indian cities means the findings may not fully represent engagement patterns in rural areas or other regions of India, where socio-political contexts and digital access differ significantly. By concentrating exclusively on Instagram, the study potentially overlooks how cross-platform behaviors across WhatsApp,

Twitter/X, and YouTube might influence political participation. The reliance on self-reported survey data introduces possible social desirability bias, particularly for sensitive political behaviors, which may have inflated participation metrics. Additionally, data collection during a non-election period likely captured engagement levels lower than what might occur during peak political cycles. The sample's demographic skew toward university students and female respondents (58%) may not accurately reflect India's broader Gen Z population. Finally, the opaque nature of Instagram's constantly evolving algorithms makes it challenging to definitively separate platform effects from user behavior.

7. Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the study yields important conclusions about digital political engagement in the Indian context. Instagram's visual, ephemeral format appears particularly effective for passive political content consumption but creates significant barriers to more substantive participation, reinforcing a concerning gap between political awareness and action. The research reveals meaningful demographic variations, with female users demonstrating higher expressive engagement and distinct regional patterns emerging across cities. Perhaps most significantly, the findings suggest Instagram's recommendation systems may inadvertently suppress meaningful political participation, as evidenced by the negative relationship between heavy usage and follower engagement. These insights carry important implications: policymakers should develop digital literacy programs addressing the awareness-action gap; platforms need more transparent algorithmic governance; and political campaigns must adapt their strategies to Instagram's visual storytelling strengths while incorporating clear calls-to-action. Future research should employ mixed methods to overcome self-reporting biases, examine engagement during election periods, and expand to include rural and non-student populations. Ultimately, the study complicates simplistic narratives about social media's democratizing potential, highlighting how platform architectures interact with local contexts to create distinct patterns of political engagement that demand culturally-grounded understanding beyond Western paradigms.

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Instagram and Political Engagement Among Indian Gen Z: A Study of Passive and Active Participation in Tier 1 Cities of South India.

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