

Digital Political Engagement: The Convergence of Politainment and Social Media Campaigns Among Tamil Nadu's Youth

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Abstract

In the contemporary political landscape, the rise of politainment—the fusion of politics and entertainment—has been accelerated by social media platforms, significantly shaping how young voters engage with politics. This study examines how young, first-time voters' political awareness, views, and voting behaviour are affected by politainment fuelled by social media. This study examines how young, first-time voters' political awareness, views, and voting behaviour are affected by politainment fuelled by social media. This study examines the impact of political memes, trolls, and viral content on electoral outcomes and democratic engagement through qualitative focus group discussions.

Keywords: Politainment, Digital Influence, Social Media Campaigns

Introduction

The blending of politics and entertainment, or "politainment," has become more well-known in recent years, particularly due to the growth of social media. The distribution of political information has changed as a result of this tendency, and it is now frequently difficult to distinguish between serious political conversation and amusement. Social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube play a crucial role in presenting politics to younger populations through memes, trolls, and viral material. Young voters are therefore exposed to political content in both traditional news and more informal, entertainment-oriented formats, which raises the question of how this medium affects political behaviour.

Review of literature

Politainment: Salazar (2023) highlights TikTok's significance in Spanish political communication, showing how political parties use the platform's emphasis on visuals and fun to appeal to younger people. The study demonstrates how TikTok's use of humour and condensed political messaging promotes greater participation and a move towards "pop-politics."

Bernos-Gonzalo (2023) states that during Spain's 2019 legislative elections, the uses Twitter to expose politainment. According to the study, users actively enjoy and spread political content, but their interactions are frequently passive and consist of quick, scathing remarks made in everyday language.

The Dmytrenko (2024) study looks at the political potential of the digital generation, showing how developed and emerging democracies differ in their engagement and emphasising the role of digital platforms in mobilisation, protest, and participatory democracy, with both opportunities and risks. The study revealed a tendency towards individualisation of political participation and globalisation of the political consciousness of young people, which is manifested in a focus on concrete issues and participation in transnational movements. These findings are significant for developing strategies to engage young people in political processes and modernise democratic institutions in the digital age.

Digital politics and engagement: Faisal (2019) explores political memes in Uganda and finds a positive relationship between millennials' exposure to memes and their political participation. According to the study's findings, political memes effectively encourage engagement and advocate for the establishment of regulatory frameworks to control political discourse online.

Sobande (2019) highlights how the rise of digital remix culture has affected British politics, posing problems including the propagation of hate speech and false information as well as chances for democratising news reporting.

Abdullah et al (2024) review examines how social media influences youth political information and engagement, highlighting its potential to increase participation through real-time access and direct communication, but also noting challenges like misinformation and echo chambers. Social media has transformed traditional channels for political engagement by providing unique opportunities for real-time contact and access to a variety of viewpoints. Digital literacy, which develops the ability to assess information sources critically, can assist young people in overcoming these obstacles. The report highlights the need for social media corporations, educational institutions, and policymakers to support youth engagement in politics in a responsible and informed manner.

Ariestandy et al (2024) study examines the role of social media in shaping public opinion and mass mobilization in the digital age, finding that it expands political participation, but also raises concerns about misinformation, polarization, and manipulation, necessitating cautious policy adaptation. Social media has the potential to revolutionise political engagement, but its negative effects must be carefully managed. Further research is needed to understand how policies can be adapted to this new reality to ensure more inclusive and healthy political participation in the digital age.

Salu and Meena (2024) study examines the impact of political parties' social media usage on voter perceptions, exploring how parties leverage social media to disseminate ideas, build reputation, and shape public discourse, with a focus on the Indian context and the 2020 elections. This article investigates the effect that political parties' usage of social media has on voters' perceptions of such parties. Political parties' use of social media to disseminate their beliefs and establish their own brands among their supporters and the public was examined in this study. People are able to put aside their differences and work together thanks to social media. It provides the benefits of participatory democracy in the current setting as a horizontal communication medium.

Young voters and political participation: Abdhel Salam et al. (2023) observed that social media platforms greatly increase young people in Jordan's political participation. Additionally, the study found that political activity varies by gender, indicating the necessity for customized social media tactics. Holbein & Hillygus (2020) contend that whilst explaining political enthusiasm, young voters are unable to cast their ballots due to a lack of non-cognitive abilities like self-regulation. According to their findings, youth political participation could be increased by reforming civic education.

Vilenchik, and Literat (2024) explores how social media enables young people to experiment with and hone their political voice, challenging traditional notions of political expression and highlighting the diverse and creative ways youth engage with politics online, social media as a space for youth political expression necessitates putting aside dominant normative expectations about the forms that political expression should take. Discovering the diverse and innovative forms of political expression used by young people should be the goal instead of comparing them to a normative model

Research objectives

- To examine the role of politainment (memes, viral campaigns, and influencer content) in shaping political perceptions among first-time voters (18–25 years) in Tamil Nadu.
- To assess the influence of social media politainment on voting behaviour, including decision-making and political engagement.
- To evaluate youth trust in digital political content compared to traditional media and institutional sources.

Methodology

This study explores a mixed methodology. The study designed in open-ended survey and close ended survey only, the questions are circulated through google forms and also direct in person to know the feed backs of the participants, and focus group discussion was happened with college students who are first time voters the purpose of the research is to identify the political perception of the first-time voters in Tamil Nadu Four focus groups, each consisting of 10 college students aged 18 to 21, were conducted at two-week intervals. The focus groups discussed various topics, including:

- How first-time voters cast their votes.
- What factors will influence their future voting decisions.
- The mediums through which they receive political information.
- The impact of political memes and trolls on their voting behavior.
- Their perceptions of current politics.

For the focus group discussion, the purposive sampling method was used to select participants who had basic awareness on politics

Data collection

Figure 1: Platforms for Political Content Consumption

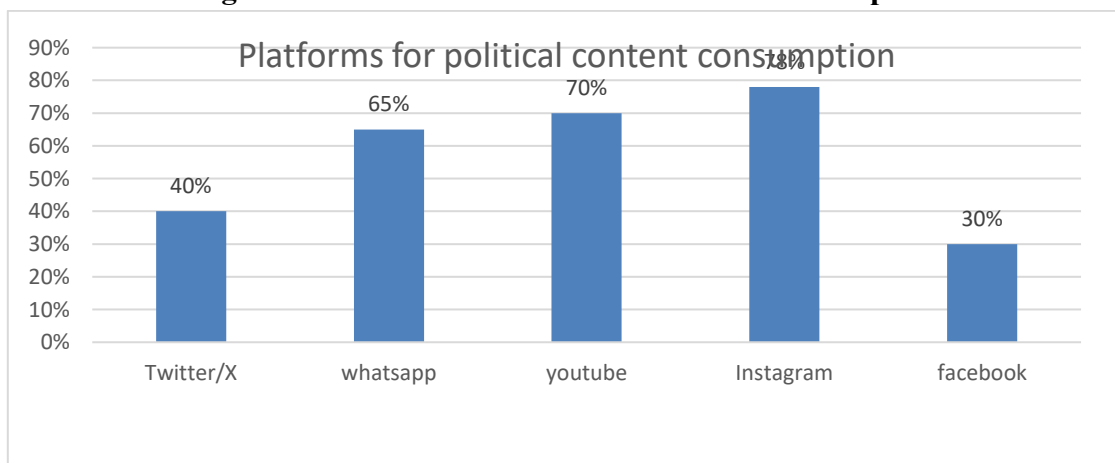


Figure 2: Trust in Political Content Sources

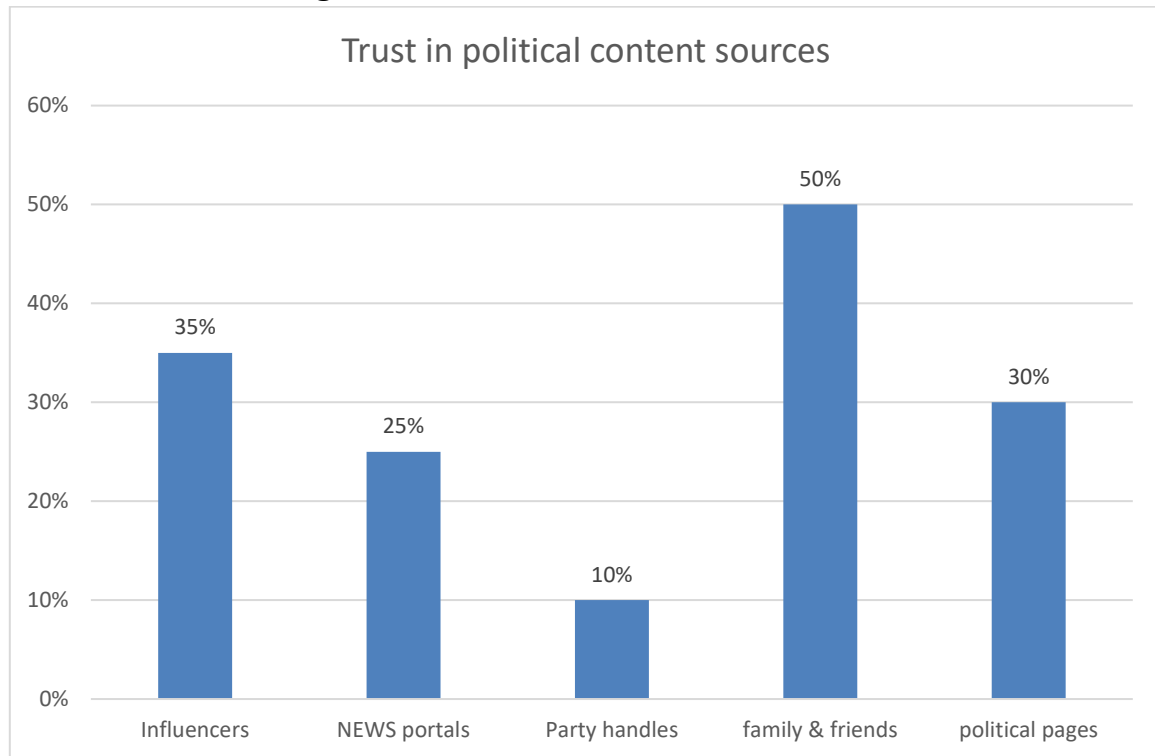
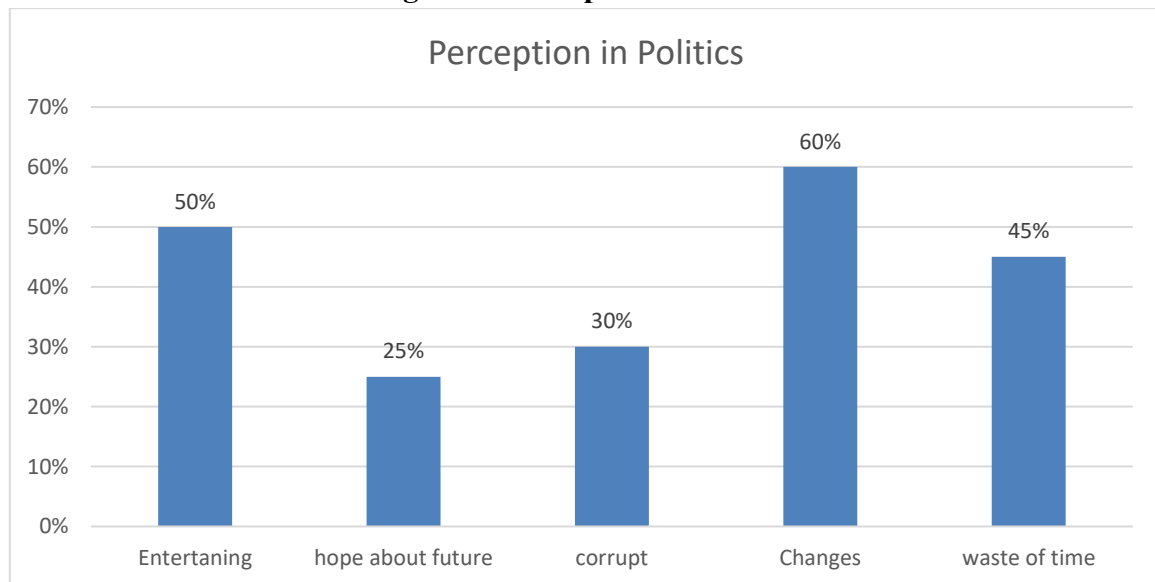


Figure 3: Perception of Politics



Key findings

- Around 78% of the participants uses Instagram has their political content consumption platform
- 50% of the participants expose that their trust in political content sources was their family & friends
- 60% of the participants perspectives about the politics is to change

Analysis and Interpretation

Focus group 1:

In this group, **two participants** had previously voted, both casting their votes randomly, without external influence. Most participants do not follow official political social media pages, although they receive political information passively through social media posts and memes. The group noted the **influence of political trolls**, with many citing viral contents like the troll video “**Stalin tha vaararu neechal adika vitaru**”. The perception of today’s politics was largely negative, with terms like “**caste-based**,” “**untrustworthy**,” and “**selfish**” frequently mentioned.

Focus group 2:

In this group, **five members** had already voted, with some casting votes randomly and others influenced by family. The participants enjoyed viral troll videos such as “**Stalin dancing**” and “**Stalin riding a bicycle**”, which highlighted both the humorous and critical aspects of political engagement. However, they viewed politics as **money-driven** and **rowdyism-influenced**.

Focus group 3:

This group, consisting of **three voters**, showed a mix of independent decision-making and family influence. While the majority did not actively follow political pages, they agreed that memes and trolls significantly affect the voting mindset. The group identified a **75/25 split**, with political memes being more entertaining than educational.

Focus group 4:

In this group, five members had voted, often influenced by factors such as **education and political experience**. While no one followed official political pages, they received political updates through Instagram and memes. The group saw political memes as mostly entertaining but acknowledged their influence on voters' mindsets. Their overall view of politics was that it is **selfish and money-minded**.

Findings from the Focus group discussion:

- **Random Voting:** A significant portion of first-time voters cast their votes randomly, influenced more by family than by direct political engagement.
- **Politainment:** The majority of participants get their political information from **social media** platforms like Instagram and YouTube, with memes and trolls being dominant sources.
- **Influence of Memes: Political memes and trolls** were found to have a substantial influence on voter perception and behavior, with many participants acknowledging their ability to shape political opinions.
- **Negative View of Politics:** Most participants had a negative perception of current politics, describing it as money-driven, selfish, and focused on publicity.
- **The "Meme-ification" of Politics:** Short-form content increases engagement but dilutes policy understanding.
- **Trust Paradox:** Youth distrust institutions yet trust viral content from unverified influencers.

Conclusion

The study underscores a significant shift in how young voters engage with politics, revealing a landscape where social media particularly Instagram dominates political content consumption, and trust is placed more in personal networks than in traditional institutions. While a majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction with current politics, viewing it as corrupt and self-serving, their political awareness is increasingly shaped by viral memes, troll videos, and short-form content that prioritize entertainment

over substantive discourse. This "meme-ification" of politics has led to a paradox: young voters' distrust official sources yet are influenced by unverified viral content, often resulting in random or emotionally driven voting behaviour. The findings highlight both the potential and pitfalls of digital political engagement while it fosters participation, it also risks oversimplifying complex issues and deepening cynicism. To cultivate a more informed electorate, there is a pressing need for media literacy programs that encourage critical thinking alongside efforts by political actors to rebuild trust through transparency and meaningful engagement with youth audiences. Ultimately, the challenge lies in balancing the accessibility of digital politainment with the necessity of informed, issue-based voting. The reimagining of youth political socialization in the digital age—one that balances the engaging nature of social media with the depth required for substantive democratic discourse.

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