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Trust, Doubt, and Influence: The role of social media on Public Perception of Political News

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, social media has emerged as an important platform for political communication and information dissemination. This study investigates how social media platforms influence the public's perception of political news. Drawing from a survey of 100 participants and using a quantitative approach, the research explores consumption habits, trust levels, engagement behaviors, and the perceived credibility of political content. The findings reveal that while social media is a widely used source for political news, it does not significantly alter political opinions or voting behavior. Trust in content remains moderate, with misinformation being prevalent and influencers having limited sway. This study underscores the necessity of media literacy to help users discern credible information in a landscape saturated with both factual and opinion-driven content.

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Threads have transformed the way people access, share, and interpret political news. These platforms allow users not only to receive news but also to participate in political discussions, comment, and share content instantly. Unlike traditional media, which relies on journalistic standards and editorial oversight, social media is driven largely by user-generated content. This shift has democratized information sharing but has also made it easier for misinformation to spread unchecked. The boundaries between factual news and opinion are increasingly blurred, raising concerns about the public's ability to critically engage with political information.

This research explores how individuals perceive political news on social media, whether they trust the information, and how such exposure affects their political views and decisions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Media and Political Polarization

Stroud (2010) argues that social media can deepen political divides. Individuals are inclined to follow accounts and pages that reinforce their beliefs, leading to echo chambers where opposing views are filtered out. This can intensify partisan attitudes and reduce open-mindedness.

Misinformation on Social Media

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that fake news was more likely to be shared than factual stories during the 2016 U.S. elections. Misinformation can heavily influence political perception, especially when users lack tools or motivation to verify content.

Social Media as a Primary News Source

Pew Research Center (2020) notes that many individuals now rely on social media as their main source of political

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news. This makes political information more accessible but also opens the door to unverified and biased content.

While social media is a primary source of political news, its actual influence on changing political beliefs and behaviors remains underexplored, particularly in terms of how users critically engage with content. This highlights the importance of studying not just consumption patterns but also the role of digital literacy in shaping informed political perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study used an online survey completed by 100 randomly selected participants. The survey explored how often people consume political news on social media, their preferred platforms, engagement habits, trust levels, and the perceived influence of social media influencers. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in user behavior and perception.

Objectives

- To analyze the influence of social media on political perception.
- To measure changes in political opinions due to social media exposure.
- To examine the impact of user engagement on political understanding.
- To assess the type of content that has the most influence on public opinion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Agenda-Setting Theory. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that individuals actively choose media sources that satisfy their personal needs and preferences, often reinforcing selective exposure and confirmation bias as they seek content that aligns with their existing beliefs. At the same time, Agenda-Setting Theory highlights how media influences what people think about by emphasizing certain issues over others. On social media, this effect is amplified through algorithms, trending hashtags, and viral posts that shape political discourse by prioritizing specific topics and narratives in users' feeds. Together, these theories help explain how social media both caters to individual preferences and guides collective attention in the political sphere.

Findings and Analysis

The study explored how individuals consume and respond to political news on social media, drawing insights from a diverse sample of 100 participants. The results revealed that a significant proportion of users engage with political news on social media regularly, with 35.3% consuming such content daily. Another 31.4% reported accessing political news a few times a week, while the rest engaged more infrequently. This indicates that political news is indeed a recurring part of social media use for a large section of the public, though the time spent on such content is relatively low. Seventy percent of respondents stated that they spend less than 30 minutes per day engaging with political news online, suggesting that their interaction is often brief and possibly superficial.

When it comes to platform preference, Instagram emerged as the most popular app for political news, used by 46% of respondents. Other commonly used apps included WhatsApp, Facebook, and X, though to a lesser extent. Interestingly, most individuals do not rely on just one platform; nearly 59% of respondents use two to three apps to access political news. This cross-platform consumption suggests a wide exposure to diverse content types and perspectives, though not necessarily diverse viewpoints.

Regarding content engagement, the majority of users around 54.9% primarily interact with news articles. This reflects a strong inclination toward more traditional formats of information even within the informal environment of social media. However, a considerable percentage also engage with political memes and opinion posts, indicating that entertainment and personal expression play a notable role in how political content is consumed. When asked about the type of content they found most persuasive, respondents showed a clear preference for fact-based reports (44.2%), although opinion pieces also carried substantial weight, influencing 42.3% of respondents. This suggests that while users value factual information, editorial commentary and personal opinions still hold significant sway in shaping perspectives.

In terms of user behavior following exposure to political content, nearly 40% of respondents said they were likely to share political news. About 31.4% reported taking the extra step of researching the information further, showing some degree of critical engagement. However, 27.5% admitted to simply ignoring the political content they came across. A smaller percentage reported engaging in discussions or debates, indicating that while political news prompts some to act, the majority remain passive consumers.

A concerning observation was that only 38% of participants verified political news sometimes, while the rest either rarely or never checked the accuracy of the information they encountered. This inconsistent fact-checking behavior raises significant concerns about the spread of misinformation. Despite this, many users acknowledged that they frequently encountered false or misleading political news. Nearly half said they occasionally came across misinformation, while 29.4% said it occurred very frequently. This highlights the dual reality of social media as both a source of information and a breeding ground for misinformation.

The trust in political content on social media appeared to be moderate at best. Most respondents held a neutral

stance regarding the credibility of such content. Compared to traditional media, 43.1% of participants found political news on social media to be less trustworthy. Only a small number regarded it as equally or more credible than traditional news outlets. When asked what factors influenced their perception of a post's credibility, the majority (56.9%) pointed to the source of the content as the most important determinant. This was followed by the tone of comments and discussions (19.6%) and the number of likes or shares (17.6%). Surprisingly, only a minor segment of users reported that their personal beliefs played a significant role in how they assessed the trustworthiness of a political post.

The influence of social media on actual political opinions was more nuanced. Although 35.3% of respondents admitted they engage more with content that aligns with their existing views, an equal percentage reported not doing so, while 29.4% were unsure. This balance suggests that while selective exposure is common, there remains some degree of openness or uncertainty among users. When asked whether they had ever changed their political stance due to discussions or debates on social media, the majority said no, indicating that while people may engage with political content, it rarely leads to a fundamental shift in beliefs. About 29.4% were unsure, and only a few acknowledged a change in opinion, suggesting that social media's role in shaping core political views is limited.

Furthermore, when it came to voting decisions, only 8% of respondents stated that social media trends influenced their choices at the ballot box. The overwhelming majority (38%) said their voting behavior remained unaffected by what they saw online. This finding supports the notion that while social media plays a significant role in everyday political discourse, it does not necessarily translate into meaningful changes in democratic participation.

The influence of social media influencers and content creators was also relatively limited. About 38% of respondents said they were not influenced by these figures, and only a small number claimed to be strongly influenced. Another 28% maintained a neutral stance, indicating that while influencers can amplify political content, they do not significantly alter public opinion in most cases.

An additional finding related to the social pressure felt by users in online spaces. About 39.2% of respondents reported that they did not feel pressured to conform to popular political views on social media, though 29.4% admitted to feeling pressured occasionally. A smaller portion (13.7%) said they frequently felt such pressure, and 17.6% remained uncertain. These mixed responses reveal that while social media can foster open discussion, it also has the potential to create echo chambers and silence dissent through social pressure.

Finally, the study explored user behavior regarding political disagreements. A slight majority (54.9%) said they had never unfollowed or blocked someone due to political differences, while 29.4% had done so, and 15.7% had done so occasionally. This suggests that although political disagreement does not always lead to digital distancing, it can still influence users' social media networks.

In summary, the findings reveal a complex yet consistent trend: social media is an important avenue for political information and engagement, but its influence on deeply rooted political beliefs and behaviors is modest. Users engage regularly but for short durations, prefer factual content yet often share unverified information, and rarely shift their views or voting decisions as a result of what they encounter online. While social media promotes wide access to political news, its ability to truly transform political thinking remains limited, reinforcing the need for digital literacy and critical engagement skills in today's information landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a complex and layered relationship between social media and how people perceive and interact with political news. While social media has clearly become a major source of political information, it does not necessarily lead to significant changes in political beliefs or behavior. Most participants access political news through platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and X, often preferring short, easily digestible content such as news articles, memes, and opinion posts. However, engagement tends to be brief—most users spend less than 30 minutes per day on political content—and largely passive, with many simply scrolling through without interacting deeply or verifying authenticity.

Despite widespread access, trust in political content on social media remains moderate to low. Many users express doubt about its credibility, especially compared to traditional news sources like newspapers or television. The most important factor influencing trust was the source of the content, showing that people still rely on perceived authority or reputation. Social validation—through likes, shares, and comments—also plays a role, suggesting that popularity is sometimes mistaken for accuracy.

A troubling finding is that misinformation remains common on social media. Many users reported encountering false or misleading political content yet admitted to verifying it only occasionally or not at all. This behavior fuels the spread of fake news and underscores the urgent need for stronger digital literacy and critical engagement among social media users.

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