

Influence of Social Media on Political Attitudes, Political Awareness and Voting Behaviour among Young Voters

Dnyanprabha Rajendra Wagh

Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sabarmati University,
Ahmedabad (Gujarat)

Dr. Suvarna P. Suryawanshi

Research Guide, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sabarmati University, Ahmedabad
(Gujarat)

Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed political communication, information dissemination and public engagement, particularly among young voters who constitute an increasingly important segment of the electorate. The present study examines the influence of social media on political attitudes, political awareness and voting behaviour among young voters. The study aims to assess the extent of social media usage for political information, examine its influence on political attitudes, determine its contribution to political awareness, and analyse its relationship with voting behaviour. A quantitative research approach was adopted using a descriptive and analytical research design. Primary data were collected from a sample of 420 young voters through a structured questionnaire covering social media usage patterns, exposure to political content, political attitudes, political awareness and voting behaviour. The collected data were analysed using appropriate statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analysis, to identify relationships and determine the predictive influence of social media engagement on political outcomes. The study is expected to demonstrate that social media serves as an important source of political information and contributes to increased political awareness among young voters. Exposure to political discussions, news, campaigns and opinion-based content may also influence political attitudes and shape perceptions of political parties, candidates and public issues. Furthermore, regular engagement with political content may encourage political participation and affect voting decisions.

Keywords: social media, political awareness, voting behaviour, young voters, political participation, digital citizenship

1. Introduction

The contemporary political landscape has been significantly transformed by the rapid expansion of digital media and the growing integration of social networking platforms into everyday life. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp have become important spaces for accessing political information, discussing public issues, expressing political opinions and interacting with political actors. Unlike traditional forms of political communication, social media enables users to receive and circulate information rapidly while also allowing them to participate actively in political discussions. This transformation is particularly significant among young voters, who constitute one of the most digitally connected sections of the population. Their frequent use of social media exposes them to political news, election campaigns,

political advertisements, opinions of public figures, influencer content and discussions generated by other users. Consequently, social media has become an increasingly important source through which young people develop perceptions of political parties, candidates, government policies and contemporary social issues. Boulianne (2015) emphasises the growing relationship between social media use and civic and political engagement, suggesting that digital platforms can create new opportunities for political participation. At the same time, the influence of social media is not necessarily uniform or entirely positive, as the nature, credibility and diversity of information encountered online can affect how individuals interpret political events and construct political opinions.

Political awareness represents an important dimension of democratic participation because informed citizens are better positioned to understand political institutions, public policies, electoral issues and the choices available during elections. For young voters, social media can facilitate political learning by providing immediate access to information and enabling interaction with diverse political viewpoints. However, the same platforms can also facilitate the rapid circulation of misinformation, politically biased content, propaganda and misleading narratives, potentially influencing political attitudes and electoral preferences. The relationship between social media and voting behaviour is therefore complex and requires systematic empirical investigation. Political attitudes may be shaped through repeated exposure to political messages, online discussions, endorsements, campaign content and interactions with peers and political communities. These attitudes can subsequently influence perceptions of candidates and parties and may contribute to voting intentions and actual electoral participation. Kahne and Bowyer (2018) highlight the importance of examining how digital environments influence young people's political learning and engagement. In this context, the present study focuses on the influence of social media on political attitudes, political awareness and voting behaviour among young voters. It seeks to examine the extent to which social media usage contributes to political awareness, shapes political attitudes and influences electoral decision-making, while also considering the broader implications of digitally mediated political communication for democratic participation among young citizens.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite a substantial and growing body of research linking social media use to political outcomes, findings across the literature remain mixed with respect to the strength, direction and demographic distribution of these effects (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Some studies report robust positive associations between digital media use and political knowledge or participation, while others find that online engagement substitutes for, rather than complements, offline civic activity (Barati, 2023). There remains, in particular, limited empirical clarity on whether the effects of social media on political awareness and voting behaviour are uniform across demographic sub-groups such as age and gender, or whether they are conditioned by the intensity of platform use. This study addresses that gap by empirically testing a structured set of hypotheses linking social media usage, exposure and engagement to political awareness, voting behaviour and participation among a demographically diverse sample of young voters.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study carry relevance for multiple stakeholders. For electoral authorities and civic organisations, the results clarify which platforms and which forms of engagement most

effectively reach young voters, informing the design of voter-education and mobilisation campaigns. For political parties and candidates, the study underscores the strategic importance of digital engagement in shaping voter cognition and behaviour. For scholars of political communication, the study contributes empirical evidence, grounded in a large and demographically varied sample, to the ongoing debate over whether social media's political effects are broadly distributed or concentrated among particular sub-groups (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardévol-Abreu, 2017).

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study is confined to young voters aged 18 years and above, drawn from rural, semi-urban, urban and metropolitan settings, and employs a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal design; causal inference is therefore approached with appropriate caution. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature across four thematic areas. Section 3 details the research methodology across three sections: research design and sampling, instrument and measurement, and data analysis techniques. Section 4 presents the results, supported by six tables and five figures. Section 5 concludes the paper with a discussion of implications and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Social Media and Political Communication

Research on digital media and political engagement has expanded rapidly since the early 2010s, driven initially by interest in the Arab Spring and the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns (Boulianne, 2015). Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis of 36 studies found that more than 80% of reported coefficients linking social media use to political participation were positive, though only about half reached statistical significance, underscoring both the promise and the methodological heterogeneity of this literature. A subsequent twenty-year meta-analysis by Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) similarly found a consistent, if modest, positive relationship between digital media use and civic and political engagement among young people across dozens of countries, with average effect sizes strengthening over time as digital platforms became more deeply embedded in everyday political life. The theory of incidental exposure offers one explanation for these effects: citizens increasingly encounter political information as a by-product of routine social media use rather than through deliberate information-seeking, a pattern that Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) describe through the concept of "news finds me" perception, whereby individuals believe that important information will reach them via their social networks regardless of active effort. Complementing this, Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) argue that social media has broadened the repertoire of low-cost, low-threshold political actions available to ordinary citizens, from sharing a political post to signing an online petition, thereby lowering the traditional barriers to entry into political life, though they caution that these low-cost actions do not automatically translate into more demanding forms of participation such as voting or campaign work.

2.2 Social Media Usage, Exposure and Political Awareness

A substantial body of evidence links social media usage and exposure to political content with gains in political awareness and knowledge. Weeks, Lane and Hahn (2022) found that incidental news exposure on social media was particularly beneficial for individuals with otherwise low motivation to seek out political news, helping to narrow interest-based knowledge gaps across two

United States election cycles. Lee and Xenos (2020) similarly demonstrated reciprocal effects between incidental exposure and political participation, such that exposure both results from and contributes to political engagement over time, suggesting a mutually reinforcing cycle rather than a simple one-directional causal chain. Kahne and Bowyer (2018) found that youth social media activity, including following political actors and sharing political content, was significantly associated with political knowledge and voice, though the strength of this association varied with the platforms used and with the political significance of the individual's social network. Alodat, Al-Qora'n and Hamoud (2023), studying Jordanian youth, likewise found that social media platforms significantly predicted political participation, with exposure to political content emerging as a particularly strong predictor, a pattern broadly consistent with findings from Western democracies despite considerable differences in media systems and political context. Skoric, Zhu, Goh and Pang (2016), synthesising a large body of prior research, concluded that social media's association with civic and political engagement, while generally positive, is stronger for expressive and informational forms of engagement than for more demanding organisational or mobilisational activity, a distinction that anticipates the pattern later observed in the present study between exposure-related and participation-related outcomes.

2.3 Social Media Engagement and Voting Behaviour

Engagement with political content, distinct from mere exposure, has been linked to voting behaviour and electoral participation in several recent studies. Belcastro et al. (2022), analysing social media data from the 2020 United States presidential election, demonstrated that patterns of online opinion expression and engagement corresponded closely with observable shifts in political sentiment and voter mobilisation, illustrating that engagement metrics derived from platform data can serve as a meaningful proxy for offline political dynamics. Knoll, Matthes and Heiss (2020) proposed a goal-systems model in which even incidental political engagement can stimulate further offline political action through a psychological "spillover" mechanism, whereby low-cost online behaviours gradually build the motivational and informational scaffolding needed for more demanding forms of participation. Keating and Melis (2017), however, cautioned that social media's mobilising effects may disproportionately benefit those already predisposed toward political engagement, a phenomenon sometimes described as "preaching to the converted" rather than reaching disengaged citizens, a caution that tempers overly optimistic readings of social media's democratising potential. Barati's (2023) causal analysis using instrumental-variable methods found a strong effect of casual social media use on online political participation but a comparatively small direct effect on offline voting behaviour, suggesting that the pathway from online engagement to electoral action is indirect rather than immediate, operating primarily through intervening increases in online political participation rather than through a direct behavioural effect.

2.4 Demographic Variation and the Research Gap

Findings on demographic moderation of social media's political effects remain inconsistent. Arias and Montalbo (2024) found that social media's influence on adolescents' political awareness and activism varied modestly by age and educational background. Pew Research Center (2024) survey data indicate that younger social media users engage with political content differently across platforms, with video-centric platforms such as YouTube playing an outsized role among the youngest cohorts, while Pew Research Center (2022) survey data on teenagers further show that

political engagement on social media, while still a minority activity even among the young, is somewhat more common among older teenage girls than among younger teens or teen boys of any age, pointing to gender- and age-related nuances that warrant closer empirical examination within adult young-voter populations specifically. At the same time, several studies report that once intensity of platform use is accounted for, demographic differences in political awareness diminish substantially (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). This inconsistency constitutes the principal gap addressed by the present study: whether, within a single demographically diverse sample of young voters, differences in political awareness and voting behaviour are better explained by behavioural variables, such as usage intensity and engagement, than by fixed demographic attributes such as age and gender. Resolving this question has practical significance, since an affirmative answer would imply that interventions aimed at improving young-voter political awareness should target patterns of platform behaviour rather than particular demographic segments.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

The study adopted a quantitative, descriptive and explanatory research design, implemented through a cross-sectional survey. The quantitative approach was selected because the study sought to measure the extent and statistical significance of relationships between social media variables and political outcomes across a large sample, an objective requiring numerical data amenable to inferential analysis, rather than the depth of subjective meaning that a qualitative approach would provide. The design is descriptive in that it portrays the patterns of social media usage, exposure, engagement, awareness and voting behaviour exhibited by the sample, and simultaneously explanatory in that it examines the relationships among these variables using regression, correlation, analysis of variance and chi-square techniques. The target population comprised young voters aged 18 years and above who were eligible to vote and who used at least one social media platform, spanning rural, semi-urban, urban and metropolitan settings. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling, guided by an implicit quota logic to ensure demographic diversity across age, gender, education, occupation, income and residence, yielded a final valid sample of 420 respondents after the exclusion of incomplete or inconsistent responses. This sample size comfortably exceeds the minimum thresholds conventionally recommended for regression, ANOVA, t-test and chi-square analyses, and the resulting demographic spread, confirmed in the results reported in Section 4.1, supports reasonable confidence in the external validity of the findings notwithstanding the non-probability sampling approach.

3.2 Instrument and Measurement

Primary data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed through digital channels, an approach well suited to a study of a digitally active population and one that minimised interviewer bias while affording respondents privacy on politically sensitive questions. The instrument comprised two parts: eight demographic items (age, gender, education, occupation, income, residence, frequency of social media use, and primary platform for political information) and fifty substantive statements organised into five ten-item constructs, namely social media usage, exposure to political content, social media engagement, political awareness, and voting behaviour and participation. All fifty substantive items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Composite construct scores were computed as the

arithmetic mean of each construct's ten constituent items, providing a single summary indicator of each respondent's standing on each of the five underlying dimensions for use in the correlation and regression analyses that follow.

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were screened for completeness and consistency prior to analysis and processed using standard statistical software. Internal consistency of each scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable, above 0.80 good, and above 0.90 excellent (Taber, 2018). Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis, were computed for all composite constructs to confirm approximate normality prior to parametric testing. Bivariate relationships were examined using Pearson product-moment correlation. Ten research hypotheses were tested using simple and multiple linear regression (for predictive hypotheses), Pearson correlation (for the engagement-awareness hypothesis), one-way ANOVA and independent-samples t-tests (for demographic and usage-level comparisons), and the chi-square test with Cramér's V (for the association between usage frequency and voting intention). A significance level of 0.05 was adopted throughout, with the null hypothesis rejected where the associated probability value fell below this threshold. Where a difference-based test returned a significant result, the corresponding descriptive means were examined to establish the direction and practical magnitude of the effect, and where a regression model was significant, both unstandardised (B) and standardised (Beta) coefficients were reported to allow assessment of both the substantive and the relative predictive strength of each variable.

4. Results

This section presents the empirical findings in the order of sample profile, scale reliability, descriptive statistics, inter-construct correlations, and hypothesis-testing outcomes, supported by six tables and five figures.

4.1 Sample Profile

Table 1 summarises the key demographic characteristics of the 420 respondents. The sample skewed towards the youngest voter cohorts, with 61.7% of respondents aged between 18 and 23 years, and was reasonably balanced by gender (55.0% male, 45.0% female). Figure 1 illustrates the age distribution graphically.

Table 1: Demographic and Usage Profile of Respondents (N = 420)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18-20 years	126	30.0
	21-23 years	133	31.7
	24-26 years	71	16.9
	27-29 years	56	13.3
	30 years and above	34	8.1
Gender	Male	231	55.0
	Female	189	45.0

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Social Media Use	2-4 hours/day (modal)	148	35.2
	2 hours or more/day (cumulative)	309	73.5
Primary Platform	YouTube	111	26.4
	Instagram	110	26.2

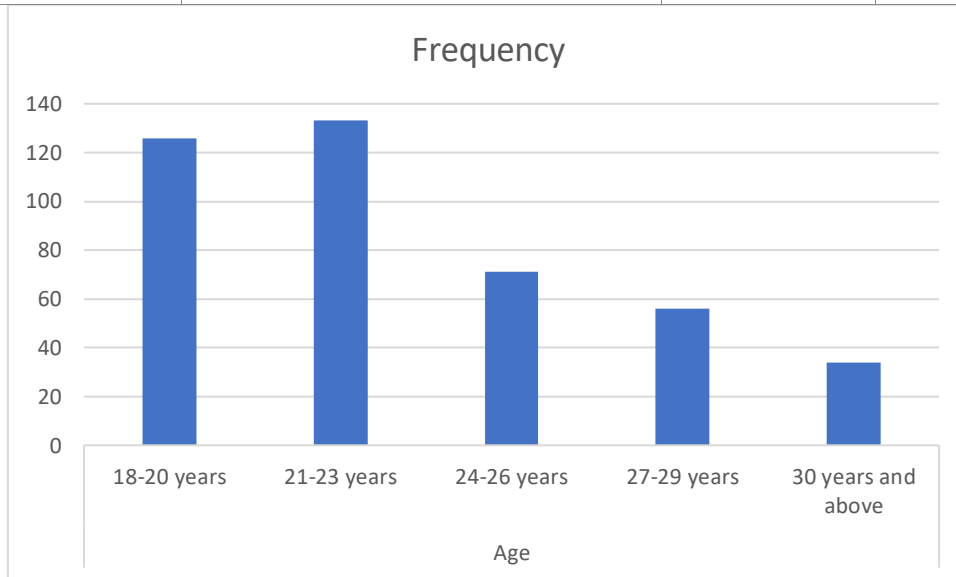


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents (N = 420)

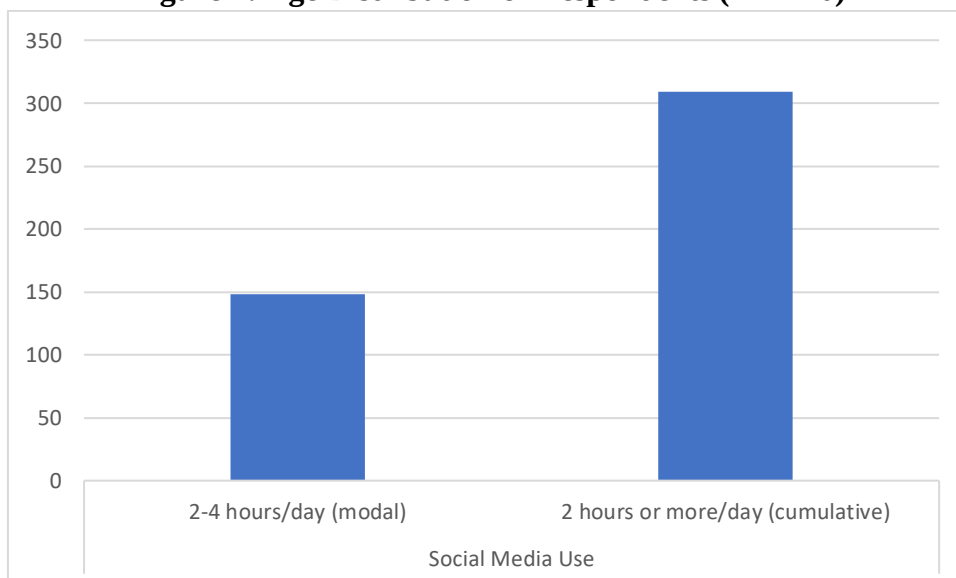


Figure 2: Daily Frequency of Social Media Use (N = 420)

Figure 2 shows that 73.5% of respondents used social media for two or more hours daily, with the modal category (35.2%) reporting two to four hours of daily use, confirming that social media constitutes a deeply embedded feature of the sample's daily routine.

4.2 Reliability of the Measurement Scales

Cronbach's alpha was computed for each of the five ten-item constructs and for the overall fifty-item instrument. As shown in Table 2, every scale returned a coefficient above 0.96, placing all scales in the "excellent" reliability band and confirming that the instrument provides a dependable basis for the subsequent inferential analyses (Taber, 2018).

Table 2: Reliability Statistics (Cronbach's Alpha) for Each Construct

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Social Media Usage	10	0.963	Excellent
Exposure to Political Content	10	0.962	Excellent
Social Media Engagement	10	0.970	Excellent
Political Awareness	10	0.967	Excellent
Voting Behaviour & Participation	10	0.969	Excellent
Overall Instrument	50	0.987	Excellent

4.3 Descriptive Statistics of Composite Constructs

Table 3 reports the mean, standard deviation, and distributional statistics of the five composite constructs. Social Media Usage recorded the highest mean (3.436), followed by Exposure to Political Content (3.329) and Political Awareness (3.261), while Social Media Engagement (3.015) and Voting Behaviour and Participation (3.058) recorded the lowest means, an ordering consistent with a descending gradient from usage and exposure through awareness to more demanding behavioural outcomes. All skewness and kurtosis values fell within ± 1 , supporting the assumption of approximate normality required for the parametric tests that follow. Figure 3 presents these composite means graphically.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Composite Construct Scores (N = 420)

Construct	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social Media Usage	3.436	0.934	-0.366	-0.492
Exposure to Political Content	3.329	0.923	-0.195	-0.549
Social Media Engagement	3.015	1.019	0.036	-0.778
Political Awareness	3.261	0.973	-0.221	-0.570
Voting Behaviour & Participation	3.058	1.012	-0.027	-0.746

4.4 Inter-Correlations Among the Constructs

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation matrix among the five composite constructs, all significant at the 0.01 level. Social Media Usage correlated most strongly with Exposure to Political Content ($r = 0.792$), while Political Awareness correlated most strongly with Exposure ($r = 0.762$) and Usage ($r = 0.756$). Figure 4 isolates each construct's correlation with Political Awareness, the study's central cognitive outcome variable.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Composite Constructs (N = 420)

Construct	1. Usage	2. Exposure	3. Engagement	4. Awareness	5. Voting Behaviour
1. Social Media Usage	1.000	-	-	-	-
2. Exposure to Political Content	0.792**	1.000	-	-	-
3. Social Media Engagement	0.777**	0.698**	1.000	-	-
4. Political Awareness	0.756**	0.762**	0.688**	1.000	-
5. Voting Behaviour & Participation	0.709**	0.761**	0.746**	0.690**	1.000

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

4.5 Hypothesis Testing

Ten hypotheses were tested using the techniques described in Section 3.3. Simple linear regression confirmed that Social Media Usage significantly predicted Political Awareness (Beta = 0.756, $F = 558.55$, $p < .001$) and Political Participation (Beta = 0.697, $F = 394.58$, $p < .001$), and that Exposure to Political Content significantly predicted Voting Behaviour (Beta = 0.761, $F = 575.32$, $p < .001$). Pearson correlation confirmed a strong positive relationship between Social Media Engagement and Political Awareness ($r = 0.688$, $p < .001$), with the two variables sharing approximately 47.3% of common variance. Voting-behaviour scores rose systematically across tertiles of engagement, from 2.42 (low engagement, $n = 141$) to 3.05 (moderate engagement, $n = 139$) to 3.71 (high engagement, $n = 140$), as shown in Figure 5. One-way ANOVA confirmed a statistically significant difference in voting behaviour across levels of social media use ($F = 21.77$, $p < .001$), and a chi-square test confirmed a significant association between usage frequency and voting intention (chi-square = 40.45, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.310$). By contrast, political awareness did not differ significantly across age groups ($F = 1.04$, $p = .384$) or between genders ($t = -0.941$, $p = .347$). Multiple regression confirmed that Usage, Exposure and Engagement jointly predicted Political Awareness ($F = 262.01$, $p < .001$), with Exposure emerging as the strongest unique predictor (Beta = 0.400).

Table 5: Multiple Regression Coefficients Predicting Political Awareness

Predictor	B	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	0.268	-	2.39	0.017
Social Media Usage	0.321	0.308	5.598	< 0.001
Exposure to Political Content	0.422	0.400	8.270	< 0.001
Social Media Engagement	0.161	0.168	3.586	< 0.001

Table 5 presents the multiple regression coefficients predicting political awareness among young voters. The results indicate that all three predictors significantly influence political awareness. Social Media Usage has a positive and significant effect ($B = 0.321$, $\beta = 0.308$, $t = 5.598$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that greater use of social media is associated with higher political awareness. Exposure to Political Content demonstrates the strongest predictive effect ($B = 0.422$, $\beta = 0.400$, $t = 8.270$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that frequent exposure to political information contributes substantially to political awareness. Social Media Engagement also has a significant positive effect ($B = 0.161$, $\beta = 0.168$, $t = 3.586$, $p < 0.001$). The findings demonstrate that social media usage, political content exposure and active engagement significantly contribute to variations in political awareness among young voters.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of social media on political awareness and voting behaviour among young voters. Drawing on primary data from 420 respondents and a reliable, well-validated measurement instrument, the analysis found consistent and statistically significant support for the proposition that social media usage, exposure to political content, and social media engagement each meaningfully predict political awareness, voting behaviour and political participation among young voters. Exposure to political content emerged as the single strongest predictor of political awareness, consistent with theories of incidental exposure in which political learning occurs as an unintended by-product of routine platform use rather than solely through deliberate information-seeking (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Weeks et al., 2022).

Importantly, the absence of significant differences in political awareness by age or gender suggests that social media's political effects in this sample were not confined to particular demographic sub-groups but were instead distributed according to the intensity of platform engagement, a finding that carries a cautiously optimistic implication for digital citizenship: the awareness-enhancing potential of social media appears accessible to any young voter who engages with political content, regardless of demographic starting point. At the same time, engagement and participation scores remained consistently lower than usage and exposure scores throughout the sample, echoing prior findings that social media is more reliably effective at informing young citizens than at mobilising them into sustained, active political participation (Barati, 2023; Keating & Melis, 2017).

These findings carry practical implications for electoral authorities, civic educators and political communicators seeking to engage young voters, suggesting that visually oriented, video-centric platforms and incidental-exposure strategies may be particularly effective for building awareness, while dedicated efforts, such as media-literacy programming, may be required to convert that awareness into sustained participation (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). The gap observed between strong exposure and awareness scores on one hand, and comparatively more modest engagement and participation scores on the other, echoes the caution raised by Keating and Melis (2017) that social media's mobilising power may be unevenly distributed, more readily reaching those already inclined toward political activity than those who remain disengaged. Addressing this gap is likely to require interventions that go beyond simply increasing the volume of political content in young voters' feeds, extending instead to the cultivation of the motivational and skill-based prerequisites for active participation. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and cross-national designs capable of establishing the temporal and causal ordering of these relationships more definitively

than the cross-sectional design employed here permits, as well as from platform-specific analyses that could disentangle the distinct roles played by visually oriented platforms such as Instagram and YouTube from those played by text-based platforms such as X and WhatsApp in shaping the political cognition and behaviour of young voters.

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