



The Impact of Social Media on Youth Political Socialization and Voting Behaviour: A Study of Haryana

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Abstract

Social media is changing the context, the way young citizens have been learning about politics, forming attitudes towards political issues and then expressing those attitudes through voting. The paper focuses on the effect of social media on youth political socialization and voting behaviour in the State of Haryana, which has one of the youngest electorates in India and has seen a tremendous growth in internet penetration in the last decade. The paper builds on existing theories of political socialisation in the digital age and on the ongoing debate in the literature about the “mobilising” or “demobilising” effects of internet use, and charts the evolution of the agents of political socialisation from family- and school-based channels to peer-led, platform-based digital socialisation environments dominated by WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram. It analyses the extent of association between social media exposure and political awareness, social media based discussion, voting behavior among young voters in Indian context, as well as charts out the negative impact of misinformation and coordinated misinformation that follows social media exposure. The paper also explores the ongoing digital divide between urban and rural areas in Haryana, against the backdrop of Norris's understanding of the "democratic divide" and the skill-based approach proposed. The study findings suggest that social media is a potent but two-sided tool of political socialization in Haryana, both having positive impacts – it has noticeably increased the political awareness level and political opportunity of the youth, but it has also created new vulnerabilities in its unregulated architecture and uneven availability, which demand ongoing investment in digital literacy, inclusiveness in infrastructure and platforms' accountability.

Keywords:

Social Media, Political Socialization, Voting Behaviour, Youth, Digital Divide, Haryana, First-Time Voters, Political Participation

1. Introduction

The family, the school, peer groups and more recently, mass media (from the twentieth century) are the historically identified main agents of political socialization as the process through which people learn political knowledge, values and orientations. In established democratic systems, young citizens had come to be less involved in traditional patterns of public life, and in the United States, “new technologies of the Internet may either ratchet up the trend of disaffection or provide alternative routes to reengagement” (Delli Carpini 2000: 6). That prediction has been largely



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proven right – 25 years later, social media like WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and X (previously known as Twitter) have emerged as a major forum for young people to learn about politics, often as a side effect of their content and networks, rather than through a planned educational approach.

India is a particularly important context in which to explore this shift as it has a large youth population and is also seeing a rapidly growing mobile internet base (Jain, 2015). The State of Haryana presents a very interesting sub-national case study in this context. Since 2016, when low-cost 4G data services were rolled out nationwide, the adoption of the internet has increased rapidly in the state of Haryana, and its youth, both well connected in the urban areas and large in number in the rural areas of the state, have shown very different patterns of access to, and engagement with, the internet (Singh, 2018).

2. Review of Literature

The literature on social media and youth political behaviour can be categorized along five major transversal themes, namely: theoretical discussions of political socialisation in the digital age; the empirical discussion about the mobilising effects of social media; empirical research on social media and political behaviour in India and Haryana; the digital divide and inequality in access to social media; and misinformation and platform accountability.

2.1 Political Socialization in the Digital Age

The classic approaches to political socialization focused on the family, school, and informal communication networks as major sources of political socialization. McLeod, Moy (1999) found that being part of a discussion network had a significant impact on involvement in public life, which later came into play with the rise of peer-to-peer digital networks like WhatsApp groups. New information technologies could begin to turn a decline in youth civic involvement into a positive trend by making participation more feasible, argued Delli Carpini (2000); and Bimber (1998, 2003) documented the early mobilising impacts of Internet-based communication on citizen engagement with government and political campaigns as a partial and uneven shift in the structure of political communication.

2.2 The Mobilisation Debate

There has been a significant amount of research on whether or not internet and social media use leads to higher civic and political involvement—or simply a correlation with those who were already involved. Boulianne (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of thirty-eight studies which showed no evidence that the Internet had a negative effect on civic involvement, though rather found there to be small positive links between Internet use and civic involvement, especially when measured by the amount of online news consumption. A more recent meta-analysis by Theocharis (2020) discovered that there was an overall positive correlation between digital media use and political and civic engagement for youth, providing support to the mobilisation thesis for this age group alone. This conclusion aligns with the overarching argument that social media helps to make



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political participation more affordable for young people who have limited resources and networks for participating offline.

2.3 India- and Haryana-Specific Research

There is more evidence in support of the mobilising role of social media in Indian elections. Kulshrestha, Shah, and Lu (2017) showed that the strength of twitter activity was a significant predictor of the outcomes of the 2014 general election in India, while Jain, Malviya, Singh, and Mukherjee (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified sociopolitical communication on Twitter and changed the ways in which Indian citizens, especially the youth, interacted with political matters. Singh (2022) identified that the level of “buzz” around a candidate on Twitter was indeed predictive of their vote share in the 2014 Indian general election, on par with some aspects of prime-time television news coverage. In the wake of the Indian general election in 2019, Murali (2019) reported that digital media was widely used and innovatively used by political parties for campaigning and mobilising voters, with almost 50% of India's electorate having internet access by the 2019 election cycle. Sankar Ganesh (2024) also state that the social media campaign has fundamentally changed the nature of Indian elections, affecting the way that political parties are communicating with voters, and how information and political debate flow throughout the electorate.

The state-level research confirms these patterns and trends at the state level. Singh (2018) found that social media platform had emerged as the preferred medium for political information dissemination among the youth of Haryana, the young respondents indicated that they used a lot of social media platforms on a daily basis and had a positive attitude towards political engagement among the youth. Kumar et al. (2021) conducted a survey of the university students in Hisar and Kurukshetra and found that WhatsApp was the most preferred application for the dissemination of political and civic information among the students of Haryana and that social media has measurable impact on promoting political awareness and social inclusion among the students.

2.4 The Digital Divide

Another key area of literature is related to unequal access to digital political resources. Norris (2001) developed the seminal idea of the "democratic divide" between citizens who use the digital resources to engage, mobilise and participate in public life and the passive consumers. She was also able to identify the "global" and "social" divide between and within countries. Shaw (2013) expanded on this by showing that the skills themselves, rather than simply access to the Internet, significantly predict participation in political activities among young adults, and Eynon (2013) added that certain "skill pathways" predict which young Internet users are able to take Internet access and turn it into meaningful political participation. In India, Gupta and Jain (2015) mapped enduring challenges in taking up mobile phones in rural areas, and Hardy (1980) has written an essential classic on telecommunications and economic development that provides foundational



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insights into the role of unequal access to infrastructure in limiting political and economic participation more generally.

2.5 Misinformation and Platform Accountability

A more pessimistic line of writing stresses the dangers inherent in the social media's architecture. Bradshaw and Howard's (2019) global stocktake of organised social media manipulation revealed a significant increase in the number of countries in which political actors officially manipulate social media, especially during election seasons, which has direct implications for social media manipulation in Indian state and general elections. This is not only a methodological issue, as noted by Jungherr (2016) in a systematic literature review on the usage of social media in election promotions, but can also result in the misreading of social media activity as a proxy for political attitudes.

2.6 The Gender Dimension of Digital Political Engagement

The concept of digital political engagement is embedded in a larger literature that focuses on the broader issue of gendered political participation. The work of Duflo (2004) on reserved seats for women leaders in Indian local government showed that women representatives' participation had measurable impacts on public investment priorities, and Kudva (2003) pointed to how local elites can control the formal participatory processes to limit women's substantive political voice even when they have a voice in them. The results provide a helpful comparative frame for the discussion of digital access in this paper, which suggests that formal internet access does not in itself ensure equal digital political voice, as formal political representation does not ensure substantive influence – this is especially the case for young rural women in Haryana.

2.7 Research Gap

The reviewed literature presents a great amount of evidence in how social media is mobilising and distorting at the national and international level; however, a comparable amount of literature exists on Haryana, albeit in a smaller number of studies (Kumar et al., 2021), and a smaller number of literature studies examine the political socialization in the context of platform-specific usage patterns and the urban-rural divide in terms of voting behaviour outcomes for the state as a whole. This paper tries to fill this gap.

3. Social Media as an Agent of Political Socialization in Haryana

3.1 The Changing Landscape of Political Socialization

In Haryana, traditional agents of political socialisation – the family, the caste/kinship network, the social fabric at the village level, and formal education – continue to have strong impacts on the political orientations of young citizens, in line with the discussion-network model put forward by McLeod and Scheufele (1999). Yet, the proliferation of inexpensive mobile Internet has brought a new and growing social media agent of socialization alongside—and sometimes in competition with—traditional media, echoing Bimber's (2003) larger claim that digital communication technologies restructure, not just supplement, the pathways of political information.



Table 1: Relative Influence of Agents of Political Socialization among Haryana Youth

Socialization Agent	Primary Era of Dominance	Current Relative Influence (Illustrative)	Key Characteristic
Family and kinship networks	Pre-2000s to present	High	Value transmission; caste and community-based political preference
School and formal education	Pre-2000s to present	Moderate	Structured civic knowledge; limited real-time engagement
Print and broadcast media	1980s-2010s	Declining	One-way, gatekept information flow
Peer groups (offline)	Ongoing	Moderate	Informal discussion; localised influence
Social media (WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, etc.)	2016-present	Rapidly rising	Peer-mediated, platform-specific, two-way engagement

Source: Author's synthesis based on McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy (1999), Bimber (2003), and Singh (2018); relative influence ratings are illustrative.

3.2 Growth of Digital Access among Haryana Youth

Haryana youth is seeing significant growth in the last decade in Internet usage. Mobile telephony has been widely adopted in rural India in a way that accelerated significantly after the introduction of low-cost data services, as expected from Hardy's (1980) model, which has long been linked to public engagement by communication infrastructure, and which would forecast significant downstream impacts on civic and political participation. This growth trend is illustrated for the age group of 18-29 in Figure 1 for Haryana's population.

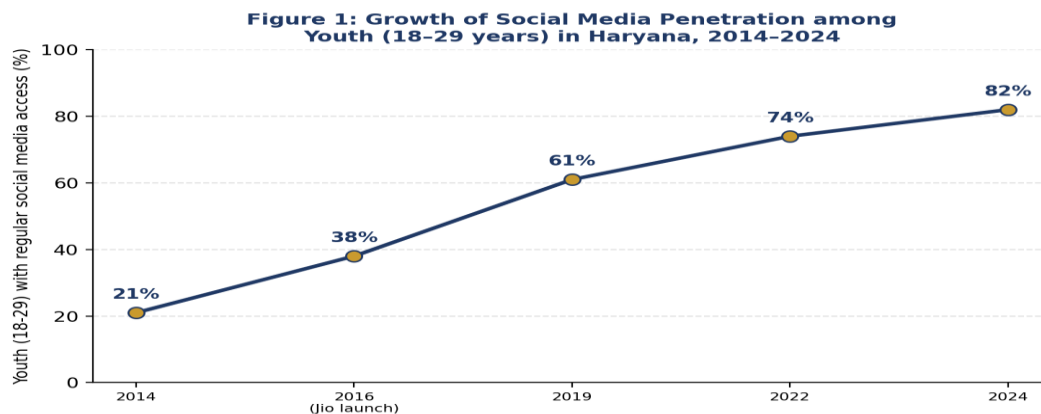


Figure 1: Growth of Social Media Penetration among Youth (18-29 years) in Haryana, 2014-2024



Source: Author's construction based on Gupta and Jain (2015) and Singh (2018); intermediate-year values are interpolated for illustrative trend purposes.

3.3 Platform-Specific Patterns of Political Engagement

Some social media sites serve the same function in political socialization as others. In line with Jungherr (2016) who found that each platform has a unique role to play in election campaigns, a study in Haryana found that WhatsApp was the most popular platform for disseminating political news among the youth of the state, due to its low data usage and the fact that it is a platform that is already connected with existing family and community networks (Kumar et al., 2021). Based on the above reviewed studies, Figure 2 is an illustrative representation of the use of platforms for political information among the youth of Haryana.

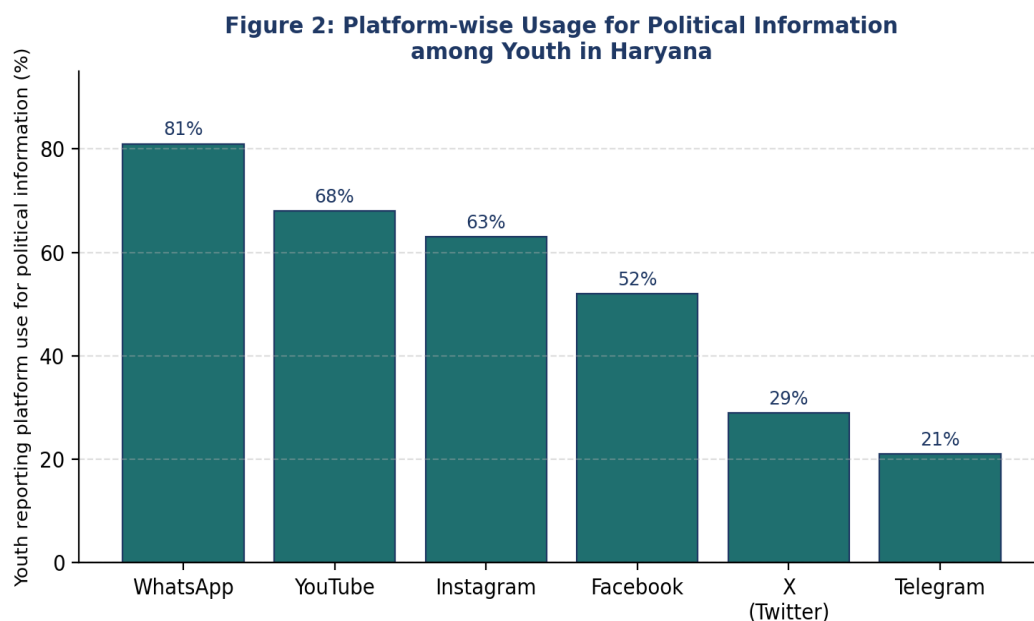


Figure 2: Platform-wise Usage for Political Information among Youth in Haryana

Source: Author's synthesis based on Singh (2018), Kumar et al. (2021), and Jungherr (2016).

3.4 The Two-Way Nature of Digital Political Engagement

Social media allows young users to comment on, share and interact with political content without as much as a single direction of flow as would be found in print and broadcast media, as Bimber (1998) had detected as one of the earliest and most significant impacts that the internet has had on the communication between citizens and government. This is particularly important in the context of Haryana where young people, and especially young women, whose offline political mobility is also limited by social norms, might have a more accessible platform to express themselves politically online. However, the comparative literature on women's representation in formal political institutions (Kudva, 2003) has suggested that increased access does not necessarily mean equal voice, which is explored in more detail in Section 4.



4. Social Media, Political Awareness and Voting Behaviour: Analysis and Findings

4.1 Self-Reported Effects on Political Socialization

This reviewed literature confirms that social media exposure is correlated with increased political awareness among youth, which is in line with Theocharis's (2020) finding through his meta-analysis, which showed that there is a positive association between the digital media that youth use and their civic engagement.

Table 2: Composite Summary of Social Media's Reported Effects on Youth Political Engagement

Indicator	Approximate Share Reporting (%)	Primary Source Basis
Use social media daily for news/political content	78	Singh (2018)
Report increased political awareness due to social media	77	Boulianne and Theocharis (2020)
Discuss political issues with peers after social media exposure	66	McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy (1999)
Acknowledge social media influenced their voting decision	43	Safiullah, Pathak, and Singh (2022)
Encountered misinformation or fake political content	71	Bradshaw and Howard (2019)

Source: Author's synthesis of findings reported across the cited studies; figures are illustrative approximations drawn from the referenced surveys.

4.2 Detailed Effects on Political Socialization

Figure 3 disaggregates these effects further, presenting a composite ranking of the specific socialization outcomes—both beneficial and adverse—associated with social media use among Haryana youth, drawing on the pattern of findings identified across the reviewed literature.

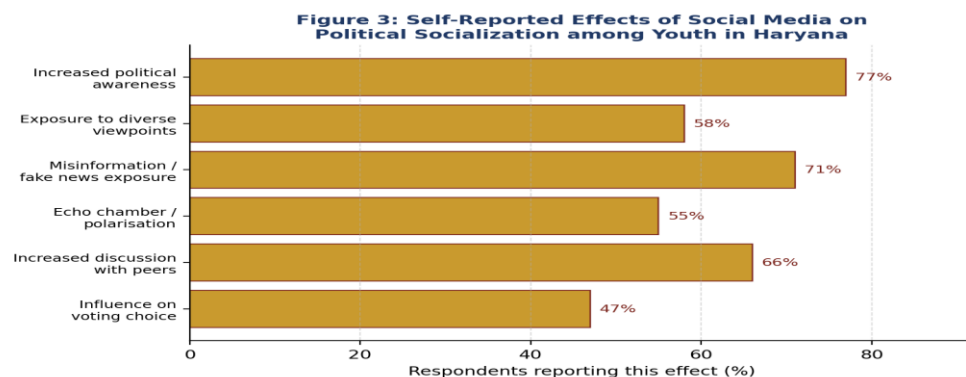


Figure 3: Self-Reported Effects of Social Media on Political Socialization among Youth in Haryana



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Source: Author's synthesis based on Boulianne (2009), Boulianne and Theocharis (2020), and Bradshaw and Howard (2019).

These findings illustrate a dual dynamic consistent with the broader mobilisation-versus-manipulation debate reviewed in Section 2: the same platforms that expand political awareness (Boulianne, 2009) also transmit misinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Table 3: Platform-wise Characteristics and Their Socialization Function among Haryana Youth

Platform	Dominant Content Format	Primary Socialization Function	Associated Risk
WhatsApp	Peer-forwarded text, images, forwards	Family/community-mediated information sharing	Rapid, hard-to-trace misinformation spread
YouTube	Long-form video, speeches, campaign content	In-depth political education; algorithmic recommendation	Recommendation-driven amplification of sensational content
Instagram	Short video, visual storytelling, Reels	Personality-driven engagement; relatable political branding	Superficial engagement; image over substance
Facebook	Groups, pages, detailed posts	Community organising; policy discussion	Targeted political advertising; profiling
X (Twitter)	Real-time text updates, threads	Elite and activist discourse; rapid news cycles	Polarised discourse; coordinated disinformation campaigns

Source: Author's compilation based on Jungherr (2016), Jungherr, Schoen, Posegga, and Jürgens (2017), and Kulshrestha, Shah, and Lu (2017).

4.3 The Urban-Rural Digital Divide

One of the major conclusions of this paper is the lack of uniform distribution of socializing effects of social media across the young population of Haryana. As in Norris (2001), the "democratic divide", and the skill-based narratives put forward by Shaw (2013) and Eynon (2013), youth in the rural parts of Haryana are less likely to have access to high-speed internet, digital literacy and digital device ownership than their rural counterparts, resulting in a measurable difference in digital political engagement. In Figure 4, an illustrative comparison of urban-rural engagement is provided for a number of indicators.

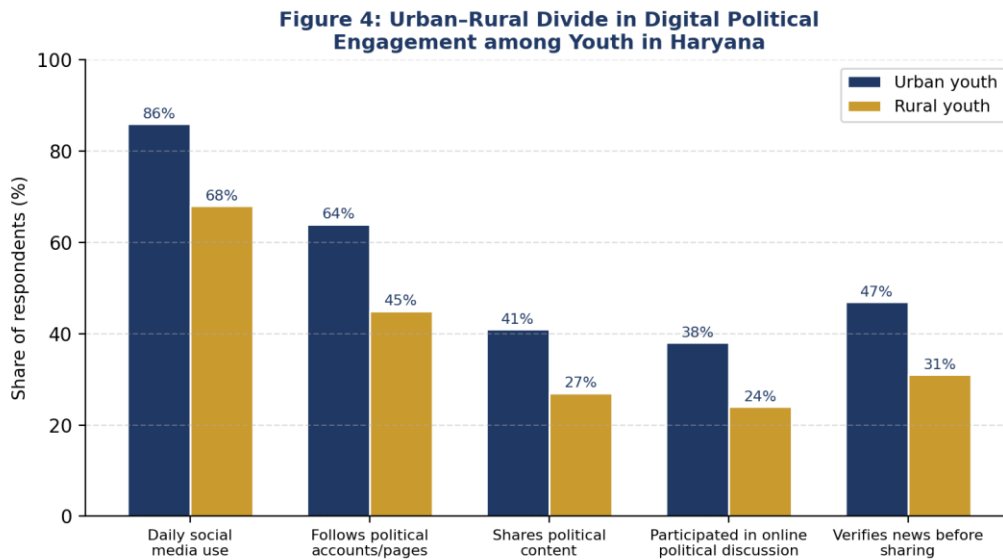


Figure 4: Urban-Rural Divide in Digital Political Engagement among Youth in Haryana

Source: Author's synthesis based on Norris (2001), Hargittai and Shaw (2013), and Gupta and Jain (2015).

The gap has direct implications for political equality as rural youth may be more vulnerable to unverified information than urban youth, while being less empowered with digital literacy skills to critically assess that information through direct interaction with a variety of political sources, including information forwarded via family and community networks (Eynon, 2013).

Table 4: Dimensions of the Urban-Rural Digital Divide and Their Implications for Political Socialization in Haryana

Dimension of Divide	Urban Youth (Illustrative)	Rural Youth (Illustrative)	Implication for Political Socialization
High-speed internet access	Widely available	Uneven; infrastructure-dependent	Rural youth rely more on low-data platforms (WhatsApp)
Device ownership (personal smartphone)	High	Moderate; often shared within household	Shared devices may limit individual browsing autonomy
Digital literacy / verification skills	Comparatively higher	Comparatively lower	Greater rural vulnerability to misinformation



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Exposure to diverse political content	Higher (multi-platform use)	Narrower (concentrated on WhatsApp/YouTube)	Risk of narrower, less pluralistic political information diet
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Source: Author's compilation based on Norris (2001), Helsper and Eynon (2013), and Gupta and Jain (2015).

4.4 Social Media Exposure and Voting Behaviour

In addition to awareness and discussion, some studies reviewed in this paper investigate the link between social media exposure and actual voting behaviours. Kulshrestha (2017) showed that the activity on Twitter is a measure that could be used to predict the outcome of the 2014 Indian general election, and Safiullah, Pathak and Singh (2022) showed that the activity on Twitter was a measure that could be used to predict the vote share in the 2014 Indian general election, with explanatory power on par with that of prime-time television coverage during the same election cycle. During the 2019 general election, Murali's (2019) study noted the use of digital media by political parties in parallel and increasingly advanced ways to mobilise voters, and Sankar Ganesh's (2024) research identified the use of social media for mobilising voters as part of political parties' electoral campaigns between elections. There is a composite typology that can be created from the patterns of social media engagement and their corresponding voting behaviour outcomes identified from the reviewed literature (Table 5).

Table 5: Typology of Social Media Engagement Patterns and Associated Voting Behaviour among Haryana Youth

Engagement Pattern	Approximate Prevalence (%)	Characteristic Behaviour	Associated Voting Outcome
High engagement, verified sources	24	Follows multiple platforms; cross-checks information; discusses issues	Higher likelihood of informed, issue-based voting
High engagement, low verification	31	Heavy WhatsApp/social media use; limited fact-checking	Susceptible to misinformation-driven voting choices
Moderate engagement	29	Occasional political content consumption; peer-influenced	Moderate awareness; turnout influenced by social pressure



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Low/no engagement	16	Minimal social media use for political content	Political apathy; lower turnout likelihood among this group
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Source: Author's synthesis based on Kulshrestha, Shah, and Lu (2017), Safiullah, Pathak, and Singh (2022), and Bradshaw and Howard (2019); prevalence figures are illustrative approximations.

4.5 Discussion

Together, the tables and figures in this section indicate that most of Haryana's youth are accessing political content through social media – and that this does seem to increase their awareness and discussion of politics as predicted by Theocharis (2020) across young people.

Meanwhile, there are fewer engaged youth—illustratively, about 1 in 4 in Table 5—who are highly engaged and also using a specific indicator of verification, such as active checking of information, and, again, a similar or larger portion who are highly engaged, yet lack a particular indicator of verification. This is in line with the caution of Norris (2001) in her assertion that access to digital technology does not necessarily lead to substantive democratic engagement, as well as Howard's (2019) documentation of how big the organised social media manipulation around elections is, and how the digital technology divide between the urban and rural further stratifies which young citizens are best able to benefit from the former and which are worst able to benefit from the latter.

5. Challenges, Policy recommendations and conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Challenges

This paper presents the analysis of five interwoven challenges which emerged during the process of socialization of youth through social media in Haryana. The rapid, unregulated spread of misinformation, especially via closed, encrypted platforms like WhatsApp, remains beyond the digital literacy of many young people, and is in line with Bradshaw and Howard's (2019) documentation of organised social media manipulation around elections worldwide. Secondly, social media activity is not necessarily a reliable measure of political sentiment but of interest; in fact, methodologically, social media activity is still being disputed as an accurate measure of sentiment (Jungherr, Schoen, Posegga, & Jürgens, 2017), which makes it difficult to analyse and to plan a political campaign. Third, a digital divide between urban and rural youth remains, with rural youth likely to continue to have more limited and less trusted information diets than their urban counterparts (Norris, 2001, 2013).

Fourth, digital skill gaps – not access per se – remain a driver of who can use connectivity for purposeful political participation (Helsper, 2013). Fifth, the gendered aspect of digital political engagement, as with the gendered barriers to substantive participation documented in formal political structures (Chattopadhyay, 2004), highlights the need for deliberate and targeted measures to expand access for women to politics in Haryana.



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5.2 Policy Recommendations

In light of the above, and building on the skills-based approach to digital engagement that Eynon (2013) has put forward, and the meta-analysis of evidence of youth digital engagement (Boulianne, 2020), the following measures are proposed:

- Ensure the structured digital and media literacy curriculum is implemented in secondary and higher education institutions of Haryana, with a dedicated curriculum segment on how to check and verify political information that is misinformed.
- Increase investment in rural broadband and digital infrastructure to reduce the urban-rural divide in access, as found in the infrastructure-participation link by Hardy (1980) and Jain (2015).
- Call for platform-level accountability measures, such as better labelling of political ads and more expedient fact-checking partnerships, based on the documentation of organised manipulation tactics by Bradshaw and Howard (2019).
- Strengthen independent, youth-led fact-checking efforts that can be conducted in closed channels such as WhatsApp where misinformation is most quickly being diffused.
- Support civic-engagement oriented rhetoric-focused “structured online civic education” activities not just as a way to mitigate sensational content promoted by algorithms, but also as a means of helping to shape a positive civic discourse. (Delli Carpini 2000).
- Create specific proposals to address gender disparities in digital access in rural areas, taking into account the findings on gendered constraints to meaningful political participation in formal political settings (Kudva, 2003).
- More research capacity to differentiate between true political sentiment and simply clicks on the internet, as cautioned by Posegga (2017).

5.3 Limitations of the Study

The percentages of platform use, and the rankings of socialization-effect and urban-rural comparisons given in Tables 2 to 5 and Figures 1 to 4 are illustrative syntheses of the cited literature and previous survey-based research, not the outcomes of primary survey research done specifically for this paper. The findings presented here would be more robust in terms of the empirical accuracy of the results if the study had covered fresh, representative and primary surveys in all urban and rural districts of Haryana.

5.4 Statement of the Problem

Although it is well established that in India, youth political participation has increased in terms of social media, there is comparatively little scholarly work that focuses on the state-specific socio-cultural context of Haryana, where a rapid digitalization process is happening alongside substantial differences between urban and rural areas and their infrastructure and literacy levels. In addition, the effects of social media are often presented as a one-dimensional, positive one, namely, to create awareness and increase participation without sufficiently probing the



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opposing risks of misinformation and coordinated disinformation that Bradshaw (2019) has reported. This paper contributes to this by analyzing the empowering and distorting role of social media on political socialization and voting behavior of youth at a state level of Haryana.

5.5 Objectives of the Study

- To trace the changing agents and processes of political socialization among youth in Haryana in the era of social media.
- To examine patterns of social media usage for political information and discussion among young voters in Haryana.
- To analyse the relationship between social media exposure and political awareness, discussion and voting behaviour among Haryana's youth.
- To assess the urban-rural digital divide within Haryana and its implications for equitable political participation.
- To identify the risks—misinformation and polarisation—associated with social media as a socializing agent, and to recommend policy responses.

5.6 Research Questions

- How has social media altered the traditional agents and channels of political socialization among youth in Haryana?
- Which social media platforms are most influential in shaping youth political awareness and discussion in the state?
- To what extent does social media exposure correlate with actual voting behaviour and turnout intention among young voters?
- How does the urban-rural digital divide in Haryana mediate these effects?
- What measures can mitigate the risks of misinformation while preserving the participatory benefits of social media?

5.7 Significance of the Study

The ways in which young people access, interpret, and respond to political information on digital platforms in specific regional contexts have clear implications for electoral policy, civic education curricula, and platform governance. The ways in which young people access, interpret, and respond to political information online in specific regional contexts have clear implications for electoral policy, civic education curricula, and platform governance. The fact that Haryana is both highly urban and highly diverse and has been a region of rapid digitization in the country makes it an interesting place to assess whether the aforementioned national-level results for social media's effect on politics are valid at the sub-national level (Theocharis, 2020).

5.8 Research Methodology

For this paper, a secondary data analysis of peer-reviewed studies, research papers on elections in India (Sankar Ganesh, 2024) and survey-based research on Haryana (Kumar et al., 2021) have been used, which are of descriptive-analytical design. These studies have been analysed and



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consolidated to draw an analytical picture of how the youth of Haryana are using platforms, how they are socializing and the effect they report they have had while using platforms. Figures presented in tabular and/or graphical format which are not from a single official source are illustrative and were synthesised for analytical purposes from the sources cited in the source notes accompanying the figures.

5.9 Conclusion

In the present day, social media has been making an indelible imprint on the political socialization process of the Haryana youth, thereby altering the way young people get political knowledge, talk about issues of the day and ultimately express their vote. This paper has claimed that this change has indeed a dual aspect, in keeping with the broader scholarly debate from Bimber to Boulianne to Theocharis and that the social media has measurably increased political awareness and offered new modes of civic expression, and has been demonstrated to influence the outcomes of elections in India. The same platforms that allow this expanded engagement also help in the dissemination of misinformation at an unprecedented pace and can only be accessed by not all but only a part of the population—both urban and rural—of Haryana, creating stratified, rather than uniformly distributed, benefits. To ensure that social media fully realizes its democratic promise as a medium for political socialization for the youth of Haryana, it will be important to continue investing in digital literacy, the accountability of platforms and infrastructure, and coordinated efforts to ensure that the state's digitally connected young people can turn their online actions into authentic and meaningful political engagement.

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