

Youth Political Awareness in the Age of Instagram-Based Citizen Journalism

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Instagram-based citizen journalism in shaping youth political awareness and engagement. It employs a cross-sectional survey of 500 respondents aged 18–30, evaluating exposure to digital news, trust in peer-generated media content, and concerns about misinformation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and one-way ANOVA. The study found that exposure to citizen journalism on Instagram significantly increases political awareness and serves as a key predictor of political engagement. Although trust in these platforms is associated with increased engagement, high concern about misinformation leads to a more critical approach to digital news consumption. Notably, ANOVA results showed statistically significant differences in engagement across age subgroups, challenging the assumption of a homogeneous youth audience. This study provides insights into digital political communication through an age-comparative analysis. The findings highlight the importance of age-sensitive civic education and critical media literacy in promoting effective democratic participation in digitally mediated environments.

Keywords

citizen journalism, Instagram, political awareness, political engagement, youth

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1. Introduction

Political awareness and engagement are crucial indicators of democratic vitality, particularly among young people. Political engagement involves understanding political institutions, processes, and actors, as well as participating in both online and offline activities such as digital activism, political discussions, and voting. In the contemporary digital media landscape, political awareness is no longer shaped solely by traditional media; instead, it is increasingly influenced by social media algorithms, visual storytelling, and interactive communication practices. Recent studies indicate that digital environments significantly affect youth motivation, participation, and engagement through interactive and socially mediated platforms (Sharma, 2024). Social media platforms function not only as communication channels but also as participatory spaces shaping civic awareness and behavior. Within this context, Instagram-based citizen journalism represents a unique

convergence of information production, visual advocacy, and community building, influencing youth engagement and awareness formation in digitally mediated environments (Begum & Sharma, 2024).

Despite the growing prominence of this phenomenon, systematic studies examining its platform-specific effects remain limited. Previous studies either examine trends in general or explain specific social media crises, often neglecting Instagram's visual-orientation-based affordances or the developmental heterogeneity present in the demographic of youth. Moreover, existing studies primarily focus on descriptive correlations in many of these studies, leaving a research gap for more powerful statistical methods (such as one-way ANOVA) to explore how age-based differences in the demographics of youth relate to levels of engagement.

The present study fills in these lacunae by investigating the interaction of Instagram-based citizen journalism and the political knowledge and engagement of youth (18–30 years old). As a framework, purposive sampling with the selection of 500 active users, the study avoids the "homogenization" of young audiences, exploring the experience of specific subgroups (18–24, 25–27, and 28–30) with digital political content.

This study is based on methodological concepts of participatory communication theory, public sphere theory, and uses and gratifications theory. All three theories depict how Instagram is a digital public sphere where youth actively look for specific gratification (for example, surveillance and development of identity) and engage. Contrary to previous paradigms, this study uses ANOVA only as a statistical method, not as a lens of conceptualization. Instead, ANOVA is used to find significant intra-group differences in how different age groups in the population of youth learn and act politically in the mediated arena. Ultimately, the research gives an empirical aspect of how citizen journalism acts as an instrument of empowerment as well as a challenge to democratic communication in terms of trust and misinformation.

The study is guided by these objectives

1. To explore the levels of political knowledge as well as political engagement amongst youth consuming citizen journalism on Instagram.
2. To examine the level of correlation between political knowledge, trust in peer-produced content, and the behavior of participation.
3. To assess the predictive effects of political knowledge on the political engagement of youth by making use of multiple regression.
4. To investigate the paradox between the trust in digital journalism and the overwhelming amount of worry about misinformation on the part of young audiences.
5. To analyse statistically significant intra-group differences in political involvement between different age groups (18–24, 25–27, and 28–30) using one-way ANOVA.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Evolution of Citizen Journalism and Information Dissemination

Citizen journalism is theorized as a transformative and emancipatory component in the modern media environment. Early conceptualizations by Bowman and Willis (2003) define it as the involvement of non-professionals in news processing, reporting, and distribution. This is enabled through digital platforms that

lower barriers to entry, allowing for immediate information circulation in political demonstrations and crises. Allan (2013) contends that this phenomenon challenges the traditional journalistic authority by privileging personal testimony and eyewitness experiences over institutional knowledge, promoting a collective style of news production.

Research suggests that citizen journalism influences political awareness the most during times of political unrest. For example, user-generated content during the Arab Spring had a significant influence on global news agendas (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Further, according to Goode (2009), these media diversify political coverage by amplifying the voices that are traditionally excluded from dominant mainstream media. Yet, the lack of professional regulations brings forth significant concerns about authenticity, credibility verification, and accountability.

2.2 Instagram as a Visual Vector towards Political Literacy

In the Indian context, media such as Instagram and Twitter have increasingly crystallized as alternative political avenues for information, namely during elections and protest movements. Instagram's unique visual-centric affordances, which include content such as reels, images, and infographics, enable "visual framing" as a way to clarify complex political issues for younger audiences. Scherman et al. (2015) show that visual political information increases recall and emotional engagement, resulting in increased political awareness. Studies on mediated communication further demonstrate that visual media significantly shape adolescents' social cognition, emotional perception, and awareness formation (Shalu et al., 2025). In the context of Instagram, visual storytelling and algorithm-driven content may therefore influence not only political exposure but also cognitive interpretations of political realities among youth audiences. However, despite these benefits, the debate continues on the deeper levels of this awareness. While there continue to exist scholars who posit that visual political storytelling encourages meaningful political discussions, others contend that social media might be a superficial vector of understanding instead of helping to spark critical thinking.

2.3 Incidental Exposure & Youth Political Awareness

A central concern in current literature is how social media shapes the political consciousness of youth. Prior (2007) first asserted that selective exposure in digital spaces, in which users avoid absorbing political information, might lead to a reduction in overall knowledge. On the other side, recent studies have suggested that "incidental exposure"—wherein users encounter news by accident—can in fact boost political awareness (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Especially in relation to minors and young adults, exposure to participatory political information is positively associated with identification of issues and with civic knowledge (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018).

2.4 Digitally networked engagement and internal efficacy

Political participation has transformed into "digitally networked engagement," which includes a range of behaviors from liking and sharing to organizing protests (Theocarhis, 2015). While earlier critics derided these actions for being mere acts of "slacktivism," more recent longitudinal studies note a positive correlation

between social media usage and political organization, especially amongst younger cohorts (Boulianne, 2019). This process often manifests through what is known as "internal political efficacy," wherein interactive content enables users to conclude that political change is attainable to them (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Instagram enables this by facilitating crowdsourced content and collective narrative creation, where such an "interactive medium" extends from traditional, non-emergency, or non-participatory forms of political dynamics.

2.5 The Paradox of Trust & Misinformation

Trust is a crucial mediator of digital engagement, yet it functions as a "double-edged sword." Peer-generated content provides relatability and authenticity, a common ingredient that Millennials and Gen Z audiences look for over the authority of institutions (Marchi, 2012). Yet, the blurred ethos between journalism and activism poses issues for discernment regarding credibility (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Influencing emotionally charged content and misinformation, Instagram's algorithmic virality-centric approach stresses viral content, often more associated with polemical discourse that leads to higher risks of confirmation bias. Recent studies further indicate that misinformation on social media platforms often spreads rapidly through emotionally amplified and translated digital content, complicating users' ability to distinguish credible political information from manipulated narratives (Hamdi et al., 2025). This increases the importance of media literacy and critical evaluation skills among young social media users. Therefore, for young people, "conditional trust" often manifests over content, evaluating consistency and transparency but not considering the status of the owner of content, which emphasizes the critical need for critical platform literacies to reduce the negative risks of the mediated nature of the political ecosystem.

2.6 Theoretical Integration and Research Gaps

The existing scholarship points to a complex relation between citizen journalism, political awareness, and youth's engagement. The study integrates and synthesizes three predominant theories to explain such dynamics. Participatory Communication Theory stresses the active agency of youth as content creators and distributors, not limited to mere consumers. The model of the public sphere emphasizes the potential of Instagram to create a digital, interactive space with potential for deliberation and community building among citizens. Finally, Uses and Gratifications Theory provides the rationale that youth seek Instagram-based citizen journalism in order to fulfill particular surveillance, identity, and social interaction needs.

Despite the scope of research in these areas, there exist a few critical gaps in the literature:

- Platform Specificity: There's no research dedicated to platform Instagram as a prime arena for citizen journalism, despite the increasing weight of Instagram-
- Methodological Rigor: Existing studies are reliant on descriptive correlations and designate "youth" a monolithic demographic.

This study progresses over the homogenization of young audiences and embraces an age-comparison analytical approach by implementing one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), an econometric technique, to examine how experiences about political matters and levels of engagement vary greatly with subgroups of age (18–24, 25–27, and 28–30) from the youth demographic. This empirical approach allows inspection and appreciation of

more nuanced facets of how varied stages of early adulthood affect digital political behaviors, providing a meaningful methodological contribution to the field of media studies and political communications literature.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper uses a quantitative research design, with a cross-sectional survey approach, to explore the phenomenon of Instagram-based citizen journalism and its influence on youth. This selected design allows for the gathering of information about media exposure, attitudinal variables, and participatory behavior from a large population at one time.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The target population for this research comprises youth between the ages of 18 and 30 years old who are active Instagram users and are consumers of political content on the application. A purposive sampling method was utilized to ensure all 500 respondents who met the requirements for regular Instagram use and prior exposure to citizen journalism content were included in the sample.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N=500)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18-21 years	160	32.0
	22-25 years	190	38.0
	26-30 years	150	30.0
Gender	Male	240	48.0
	Female	250	50.0
	Other	10	2.0

To present the demographic makeup of the respondents, Table 1 summarizes the age and gender distribution of the study participants.

3.3 Data Collection

Research instrument data were gathered using a self-administered questionnaire divided into five different sections:

1. Demographics: Participant age, gender, level of education, and frequency of Instagram use.
2. Exposure: The frequency of viewing, following, and engaging with citizen journalistic accounts.
3. Political Awareness: Self-assessed knowledge of political events, policies, and institutions.

4. Political Participation: Measures of online engagement (sharing and commenting) and offline activity (attending protests and having voting intent).
5. Trust and Misinformation: Scales measuring perceived credibility and concern about digital misinformation.

All attitudinal items used were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), which was selected for its reliability and interpretability across the research of political communication.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

The instrument's content validity was established using expert evaluation by scholars in the fields of media studies and political communication. The document was subjected to pilot testing with 50 respondents to ensure clarity and internal consistency.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Political Awareness	6	0.82
Political Engagement	7	0.85
Trust in Political Information	5	0.78
Perceived Misinformation	6	0.80

The table above presents the reliability analysis of the study constructs using Cronbach's alpha. The values range between 0.70 and 0.85, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency of the measurement scales used in the questionnaire.

3.5 Data Analysis Plan

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics provided summaries of the respondents' characteristics and average scores of key variables. A Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to explore the correlation and the predictive power of awareness and trust on engagement. Additionally, one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was applied as the primary statistical method to determine significant within-group differences of engagement levels. The approach was specifically used to test for variations among the four age cohorts: 18–24, 25–27, and 28–30, thus challenging the assumption of homogeneity of the youth demographic.

4. Results

The results are structured logically, beginning with the descriptive statistics of the main variables, followed by the correlation and regression analysis, and ending with the results of the one-way ANOVA exploring the age-based differences of political engagement.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis shows relatively high levels of respondents' political attentiveness and engagement when it comes to consuming citizen journalism on Instagram. The findings indicate that respondents demonstrate relatively high political awareness.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean Score
Political Awareness	4.10
Political Engagement	4.00
Trust in Political Information	3.30
Perceived Misinformation	4.20

Descriptive statistics indicate relatively high mean scores for political awareness ($M = 4.10$) and political engagement ($M = 4.00$). Trust in political information shows a comparatively moderate mean score ($M = 3.30$), while perceived misinformation concern appears relatively high ($M = 4.20$). These findings suggest that respondents demonstrate significant awareness and engagement while remaining cautious about the reliability of political information.

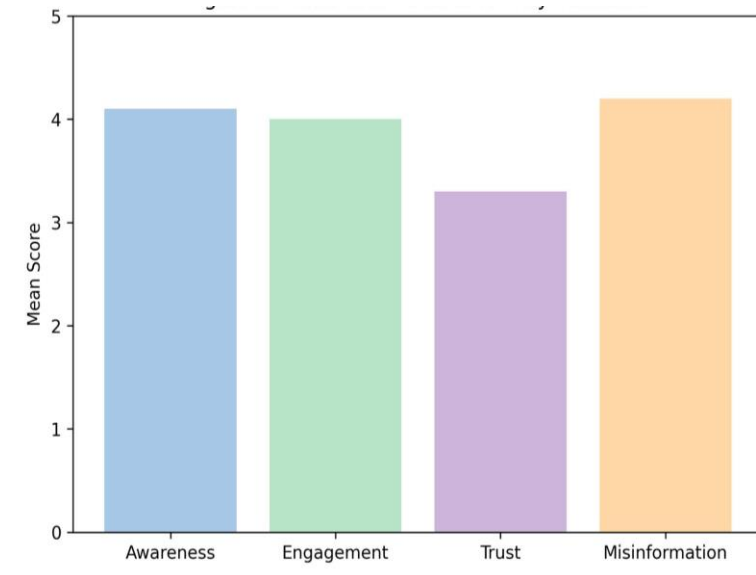


Figure 1: Mean Likert Scores of Key Variables

Figure 1 represents the Mean Likert scores for political awareness, political engagement, and citizen journalism trust and concern about misinformation.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to analyze the associations between the study's variables. The

results show strong positive associations between political awareness and political engagement, indicating higher levels of engagement based on higher levels of awareness. Additionally, trust in citizen journalism was also significantly linked to their level of engagement.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Variables	PA	PE	TPI	PM
Political Awareness (PA)	1.00	0.62**	0.55**	-0.48**
Political Engagement (PE)	0.62**	1.00	0.59**	-0.51**
Trust in Political Information (TPI)	0.55**	0.59**	1.00	-0.46**
Perceived Misinformation (PM)	-0.48**	-0.51**	-0.46**	1.00

Pearson’s correlations are presented in a matrix in Table 4. Correlation was also visually portrayed as a heatmap in Figure 2 for better understanding.

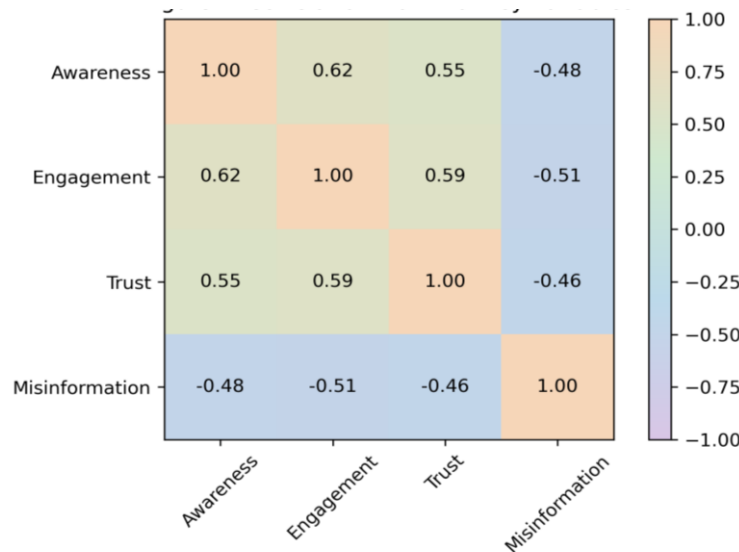


Figure 2: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Citizens’ trust in citizen journalism was also significantly positively related to their engagement, meaning that the perceived credibility added to their likelihood of politically participating. These results align with prior research on cognitive and affective mediators of digital political engagement.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

To assess the predictive ability of the independent variables, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results show that political awareness is the best predictor of political engagement, even when considering trust in citizen journalism levels. This result emphasizes awareness as the key mechanism through which Instagram-

based journalism impacts political youth behavior.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Political Behavior

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
Political Awareness	0.41	0.07	0.38	5.86	0.000**
Political Engagement	0.36	0.08	0.32	4.75	0.000**
Trust in Political Information	0.29	0.06	0.27	4.32	0.000**
Perceived Misinformation	-0.33	0.07	-0.30	-4.90	0.000**
Model Summary	R=0.71	R ² = 0.50	Adj. R ² = 0.48	F = 52.34	P = 0.000**

Results from the regression model are summarized in Table 5 above.

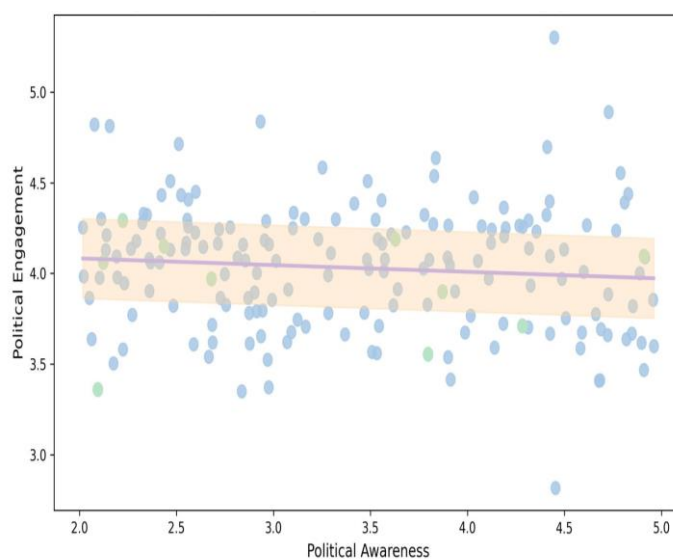


Figure 3: Regression Analysis: Political Awareness vs Engagement

4.4 One-way ANOVA: Age-Based Differences in Engagement

To break away from the homogenization of the youth demographic, a one-way ANOVA was used to identify statistically significant differences in political engagement in age cohorts. The analysis showed that the engagement levels differ significantly depending on the age stage of the respondents in the 18–30 range. Post hoc comparisons show that the 25–27 respondents have the most moderate engagement, the 28–30 group has the least, but still significant, engagement, whereas the 18–24 age group is the most highly engaged. This implies that Instagram is a crucial tool for all youth, but more incorporation of the young generations (more digital-first political participation) is happening.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis Results

Significant $p < 0.01$ Dependent Variable: Political Behavior

Path	Effect (B)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Result
PA→PE	0.63	0.06	10.33	0.000**	Supported
PE→ Political Behavior	0.36	0.08	4.75	0.000**	Supported
PA→ Political Behavior (Direct)	0.41	0.07	5.86	0.000**	Supported
PA→PE→Political Behavior (Indirect)	0.22	0.05	4.40	0.000**	Partial Mediation

ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was conducted to investigate individual differences in political engagement. The differences in ANOVA are listed in Table 6.

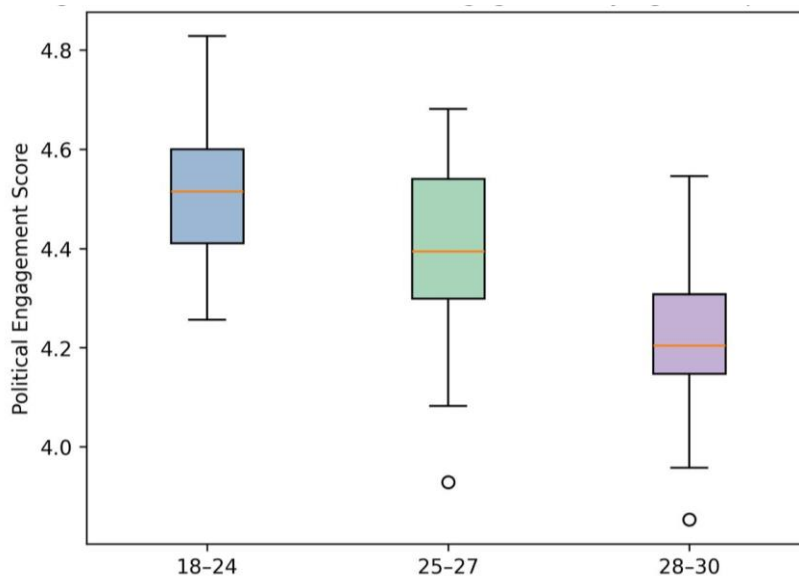


Figure 4: Box plot of political engagement level by age groups

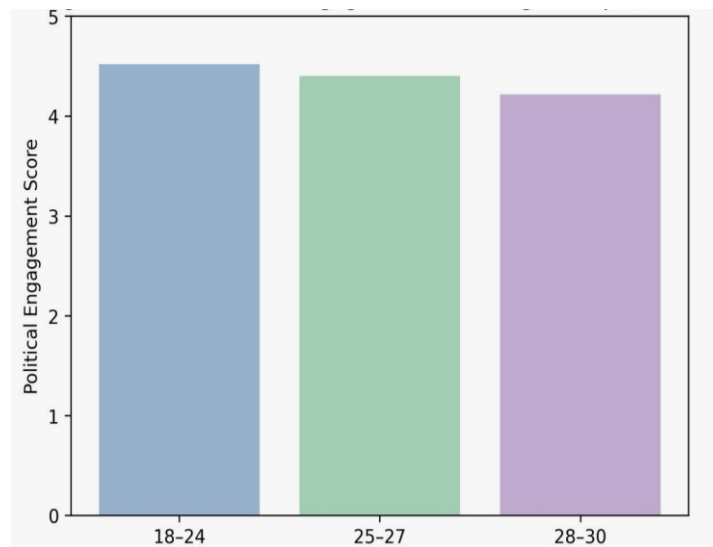


Figure 5: compares mean engagement across age categories

5. Discussion

The results of this study provide novel perspectives on the dynamic interplay between social media, citizen journalism, and youth political behavior. Examining the effects of Instagram-based content raises empirical insights into the assumption that youth are passive and monolithic political actors. Theoretical Integration and Participatory Communication. The observed robust positive association between political awareness and engagement is consistent with the premise of participatory communication theory. The high mean score for political awareness ($M=4.10$) and engagement ($M=4.00$) indicates that an informed citizenry is more than a mere result of news from traditional media but is increasingly associated with the proactive agency of youth in digital environments. The role of Instagram-based citizen journalism as an informal educational tool affirms its efficacy in transforming intricate political information into accessible and engaging visual representations (i.e., reels and infographics). This indicates that for the youth demographic, digital platforms enable the transition from information to active democratic engagement. This finding aligns with Sharma (2024), who argues that digitally mediated environments increasingly influence motivational behavior, engagement patterns, and participatory learning among younger populations.

The Digital Public Sphere and Intra-Group Differences. According to the public sphere model, Instagram operates as a digital space for deliberation and community building. However, one-way ANOVA finds it not to be a single or unified paradigm. The ANOVA found significant differences throughout the 18–30 age span, uncovering the levels of engagement in the 18–24, 25–27, and 28–30 subgroups. Vigorously, the 18–24 group showed the highest levels of political engagement. This reflects that people at this particular period of early adulthood are susceptible to the "networked engagement" affordances of Instagram, with the benefit of increased exposure to digital media and developing civic awareness. With the use of ANOVA as a statistical methodology to shed light on these intra-group differences, the study advances the movement away from the homogenization of young audiences and sheds light on how political socialization differs, even for merely narrow age groups.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

Despite offering significant insights into Instagram-based citizen journalism and youth political engagement, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study employed purposive sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the selected respondents. Since the participants were active Instagram users already exposed to political content, the study may not fully represent broader youth populations with varying levels of digital engagement. Second, the research adopted a cross-sectional design, capturing respondents' perceptions and behaviors at a single point in time. As political attitudes and social media practices are dynamic and continuously evolving, longitudinal studies would provide deeper understanding of how sustained exposure to citizen journalism influences political awareness and participation over time. Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported responses, which may involve response bias, selective recall, or socially desirable answers. Future studies may incorporate mixed-method approaches, including interviews, digital ethnography, or behavioral analytics, to generate more nuanced findings. Additionally, the research focused exclusively on Instagram, while youth increasingly consume political information across multiple platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok. Comparative platform-based studies would therefore broaden understanding of digital political communication patterns. Future research may also explore variables such as political ideology, socio-economic background, media literacy, gender differences, and algorithmic influence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of youth political behavior in digitally mediated environments.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

This study's primary aim was to examine the effect of Instagram-based citizen journalism on the political consciousness of youth, with a subsequent focus on age-related differences. The findings provide empirical evidence that citizen-generated content consumption on Instagram has a significant impact in terms of increasing political awareness, ($M=4.10$), which then provides a key variable predicting both political online and offline engagement. ($M=4.0$). The findings indicate that alternative (peer-generated) news media become more and more effective in the formation of political consciousness among the younger generation.

Theoretically, this study advances digital political communication by offering an empirical model that links citizen journalism to political learning and action. It affirms the study of participatory communication and public sphere models with the finding that Instagram serves as an informal means for educational instruction, transforming complex political issues into digestible visual representations that encourage engagement.

Methodologically, this research highlights the requirement of moving beyond generalized "youth" audiences. Whereas ANOVA is generally used to compare discrete, wide cohorts, here, we use it to reveal the statistically significant subgroup differences within the youth demographic (18–30) to conclude that political participation isn't homogenous throughout the different stages of early adulthood. The discovery of greater engagement shown in the 18–24 cohort than in older subgroups confirms the importance of including intra-group details, usually neglected in social media scholarship.

The revelation from this research opposes the preconception that youth are a homogeneous political

audience and stresses the need for age-sensitive civic education and political communication efforts. In practice, the results indicate that the civic potential of Instagram is rather high; however, the "two-edged sword" of misinformation (M=4.20) calls for greater focus and urgent concern. Policymakers and educators need to stress critical platform literacy to equip young citizens with adequate strategies for countering the risks of algorithmic amplifications and emotionally charged content. With the support of critical and more informed engagement with digital journalism, we can ensure the democratic potential of these platforms reaches its potential while dampening the threats to the mechanisms of democratic communication.

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AI Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript involves no plagiarism or fabrication of data, and all ethical guidelines for educational research have been strictly adhered to during the conduct of the study. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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