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Instagram Use and Political Polarization in India

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# Title: Instagram Use and Political Polarization in India

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## Background and Research Question

Instagram, with over 516 million (Forbes, 2024) users in India as of 2023, is significant in shaping the political opinions of young people. The platform's focus on visual content and social engagement has transformed it from a simple photo-sharing app into a powerful space for political expression and discussion. While this opens new avenues for political participation, it also raises concerns about misinformation, polarization, and its impact on mental health.

By focusing on lived experiences, this research seeks to uncover *the criteria young people use to evaluate political content, the role Instagram plays in either bridging or widening political divides and the impact these interactions have on their mental health and personal relationships.*

**Keywords:** Instagram, political polarization, India, misinformation, mental health, echo chambers, trust, cognitive bias, social media, algorithms, political discourse, relationships

## Methods

I interviewed five people who use Instagram. Four of these participants were Indian students at UC Berkeley, and one participant was based in India. The selection of participants was intentional to ensure representation across the political spectrum left, centre, and right-wing were included to capture diverse viewpoints. This representation was also required to understand people's wider perception of the importance of having these discussions about polarization on social media

Participant profiles:

- P1: Female, 30 years old, aligns with left-leaning political views
- P2: Female, 22 years old, aligns with centre-right political views
- P3: Male, 26 years old, aligns with right-leaning political views
- P4: Female, 35 years old, aligns with left-leaning political views
- P5: Male, 29 years old, aligns with center-leaning political views

## Themes:

### How Users Verify Political Content on Instagram

One of the most significant findings from the interviews was the pervasive skepticism participants expressed regarding political content on Instagram. Some admitted to distrusting nearly all political posts they come across on the platform. Participants mention varied criteria they use for verifying information but a common strategy was looking at comments. They gauge the authenticity of posts by looking at the discourse in the comment section.

“I find it interesting that on left-leaning Instagram pages, nearly all the comments tend to agree with the post, and the same happens on right-leaning pages everyone in the comments aligns with the content being shared.”

Interestingly, the comments served as both a space for validation and, at times, a further contributor to echo chambers, with users finding widespread agreement. This reliance on communal vetting, while helpful, also exposes users to a greater risk of being swayed by the prevailing sentiment in the comments, which may not always be informed or accurate.

Other strategies include looking at who is posting the content and the ways it's written. On top of that, some users mention that they refer to their network of friends to verify information while some look at multiple sources to verify news. The interviewees also agreed to trust some sources more than others. On further probing, it was clear that people tend to trust content that aligns with their viewpoints but question it when it does not. This goes on to prove a point put forward by one of the respondents: People are already polarised and they bring their biases to Instagram.

Some also admitted that when content aligns with their preconceived beliefs, they are more likely to accept it without much scrutiny, illustrating the influence of cognitive bias. This highlights the complexities of how trust operates on social media, where users are often navigating a minefield of confirmation biases and skepticism.

### Polarization and Its Impact on Real Relationships

When asked whether Instagram brings people closer together or pushes them further apart, most participants felt that the platform generally fosters connection. However, they all expressed caution about its potential to drive people apart in certain situations. One of the most striking findings from the interviews was how Instagram-fueled political polarization affects users' personal relationships. While some participants stated that Instagram has little to no influence on their relationships, others shared more intense experiences of division.

P2: “I argue a lot with my mom because of some of the problematic stuff she believes and posts about.”

For instance, one participant recounted how political disagreements on social media had strained their relationship with their family, particularly their mother, whose conservative views often clashed with their own. Another participant described a painful experience after a former friend posted extreme Islamophobic content, leaving them feeling shocked and distant. The digital interactions escalated into real life, culminating in a confrontation during a dinner that ultimately ended their friendship.

Participants also reflected on how Instagram's format exacerbates polarization by intensifying users' existing views. People often make snap judgments based on shared opinions, which tend to be more extreme on social media. The anonymous nature of online interactions makes it easier for individuals to express extreme views that they might hesitate to voice in person. One participant mentioned how the lack of face-to-face interaction allows people to be more provocative or even abusive, making it harder to bridge ideological divides. This dynamic led some participants to disengage from political conversations entirely, particularly when faced with trolling or aggressive responses. Another participant noted that Instagram's design as a business-driven platform encourages this type of engagement, even though it may have negative consequences for real-world relationships.

## Mental Health Effects of Polarisation

The impact of Instagram's political content on mental health emerged as another significant concern among participants. Some reported feeling deeply affected by the constant exposure to political content while some shared a more moderate response, explaining that Instagram makes them think more about certain issues. On the other hand, some users also felt largely unaffected by Instagram's political content, emphasizing that it does not influence their mental well-being. This varied response led to a further inquiry which led me to discover that the participants who aligned their leanings to the center wing tend to be less affected.

A recurring theme was the decision to cut back on Instagram use as a strategy for coping with its negative effects like doom-scrolling but admitted most of them had yet to take concrete action. The lingering effects of Instagram content also proved to be significant for some users.

P4: "There are certain visuals from Instagram that I still can't get out of my head"

Some noted that certain visuals from Instagram stayed with them long after they logged off, contributing to their decision to take a break from the platform. The mental health impacts of Instagram's political content are both immediate and, in some cases, lasting, shaping how users interact with the platform and their willingness to continue engaging with it.

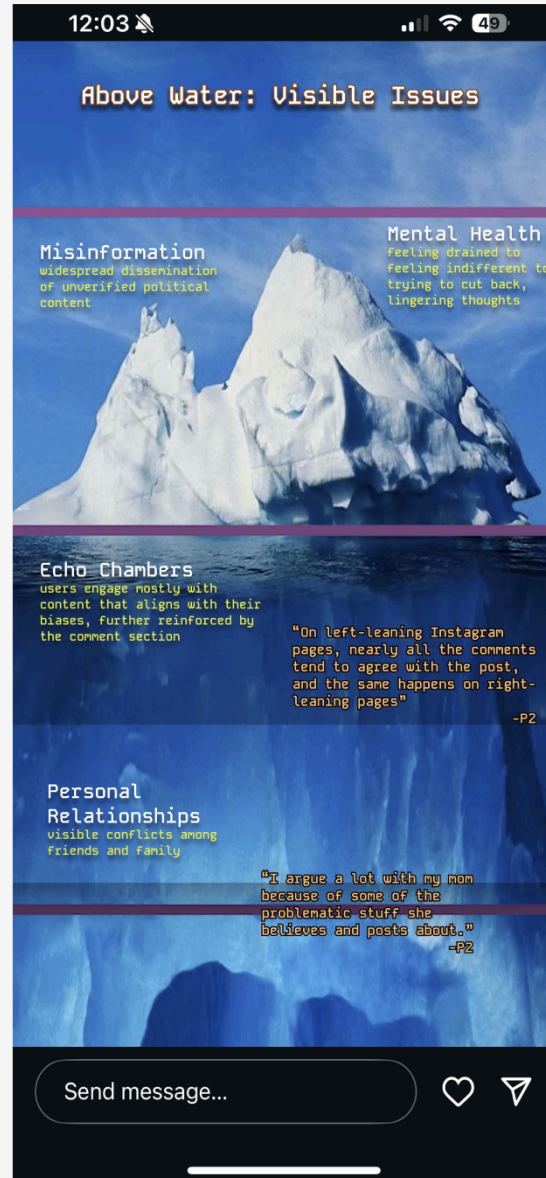
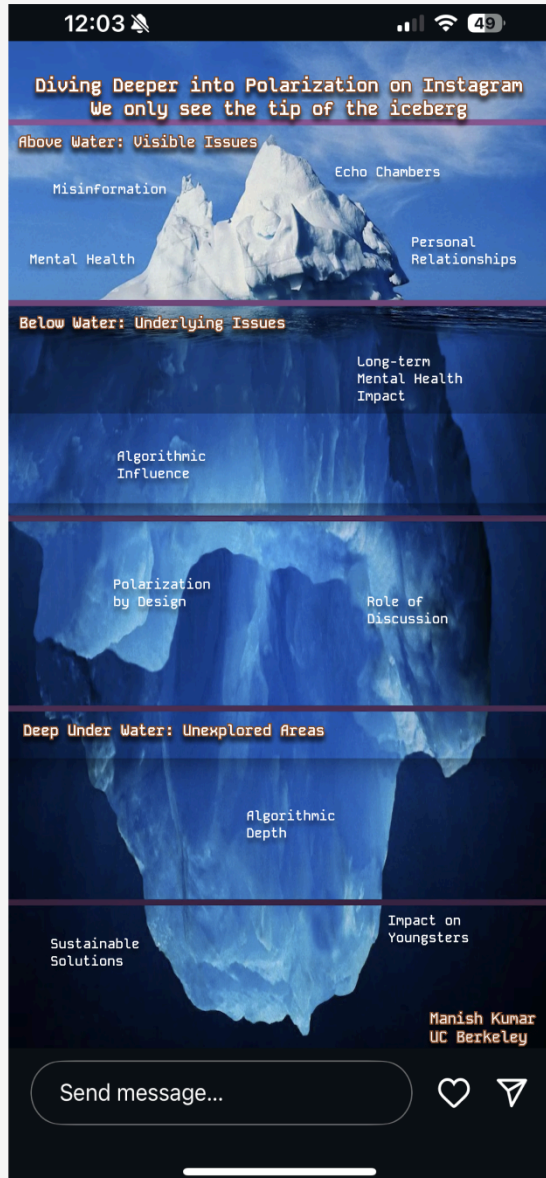
## Importance of Discussion

The importance of discussing political issues on Instagram was another key theme that emerged from the interviews. Several participants emphasized the necessity of engaging in these conversations despite feeling that their individual efforts might not lead to significant change. Some expressed concern over how quickly unverified content can spread on the platform, potentially reaching millions without any fact-checking.

## Conclusion

While this report provides valuable insights from just five participants, the findings merely scratch the surface of a much larger and more complex issue. I use the “tip of the iceberg” metaphor to explain that these interviews represent only a small fraction of the broader dynamics at play. One might argue that polarization has always existed, even before the rise of social media. Yet, platforms like Instagram have fundamentally altered political communication, particularly for those previously disengaged from political discourse (Settle, 2018). Through behaviour-data-driven algorithms, social media not only exposes individuals to political content they might otherwise avoid but also curates it in ways that reinforce existing biases. This targeted exposure can amplify polarization, even for those who may not actively seek out political content. As such, the role of social media in political polarization goes beyond simply providing a platform for expression; it actively shapes users’ political experiences.

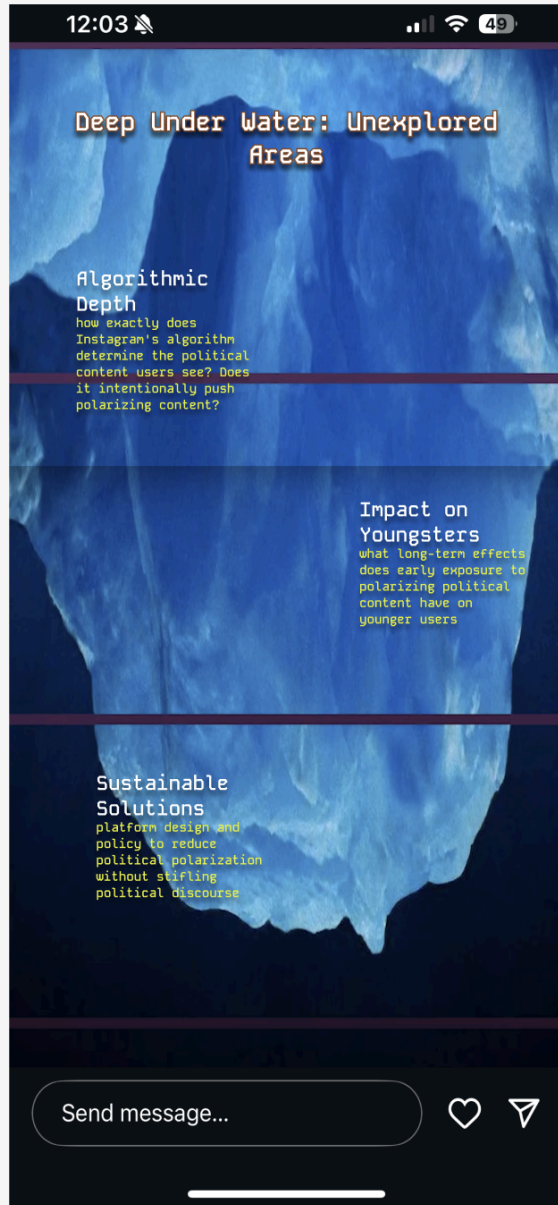
Despite these findings, many questions remain unanswered. For example, how does long-term exposure to politically polarizing content affect users' mental health and political beliefs over time? What role do Instagram’s algorithms play in deepening ideological divides, and how does this vary across different age groups or political affiliations? Additionally, how can social media platforms, including Instagram, create better systems to address the spread of misinformation while still fostering productive political discussions? Future research should explore these questions in greater detail. This could ultimately inform policy decisions, platform design, and public awareness initiatives aimed at minimizing the harmful effects of polarization and promoting healthier political discourse online.



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iPhone 16 Pro Max - 4



## References:

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2. Settle, J. E. (2018). Frenemies: How social media polarizes America. Cambridge University Press.