



The Impact of Social Media on Political Engagement and Trust in Institutions Among College Students in Goa

Dr. Sweta Shyam Matonkar¹

Abstract:

This mixed-methods study examined how social media exposure shapes political engagement and trust in institutions among youth in Goa, focusing on the mediating role of misinformation susceptibility and the moderating role of political efficacy. A structured survey was completed on college students aged 18–20 years (N = 200; 58% female; 42% male; Mage = 19.3 years), and qualitative reflections were collected from participants who consented to provide brief interview-style responses. The data was collected using adapted items from the Social Media Use Integration Scale (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013), Civic Engagement Scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013), Institutional Trust Scale (Warren, 1999; adapted for the Indian context), Political Efficacy Scale (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991) and Fake News Susceptibility Scale (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Results indicated that social media exposure was positively correlated with political engagement ($r = .42, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with institutional trust ($r = -.28, p < .01$). Regression analyses further revealed that social media exposure predicted greater engagement ($\beta = .37, p < .001$) but lower trust ($\beta = -.21, p = .004$). Misinformation susceptibility significantly mediated the social media–trust link ($\beta = -.13, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.21, -.06]$), while political efficacy moderated the social media–engagement relationship (interaction $\beta = .18, p = .02$). Qualitative reflections highlighted growing civic voice yet eroding institutional confidence. Findings underscore the need for media literacy and trust-building initiatives among youth.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Engagement, Institutional Trust, Misinformation, Youth

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the political landscape, particularly among young adults. Social media refers to digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and interact with content in real time, thereby facilitating communication, networking, and information

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, DCTs Dhempe College (Autonomous), Miramar, Goa



dissemination. For contemporary youth, these platforms have become a primary source of political information, shaping not only what individuals know about politics but also how they engage with it. Political engagement, broadly defined as participation in activities such as discussing political issues, sharing political content, or participating in civic processes, has increasingly shifted from traditional offline modes to digitally mediated forms. While this transformation has expanded opportunities for participation and democratized access to information, it has simultaneously introduced challenges related to misinformation, polarization, and declining trust in institutions.

Institutional trust refers to the level of confidence individuals place in formal systems such as government bodies, media organizations, and public institutions. Emerging research suggests that while social media can enhance political awareness and participation, it may also contribute to scepticism toward these institutions. Studies have shown that exposure to politically charged or negative content, often amplified by algorithm-driven feeds, can erode trust by highlighting institutional failures or promoting biased narratives. Furthermore, the decentralized nature of social media increases exposure to unverified or misleading information, raising concerns about the quality and credibility of political content consumed by users.

A key construct in understanding these dynamics is misinformation susceptibility, which refers to an individual's tendency to believe or accept false or misleading information as true. Research by Pennycook and Rand (2019) highlights that individuals vary significantly in their ability to detect misinformation, and higher susceptibility is associated with distorted political judgments and reduced trust in institutions. Social media environments, characterized by rapid information flow and limited verification, may heighten this susceptibility. Consequently, misinformation may act as a psychological mechanism through which social media influences institutional trust, making it important to examine its mediating role in this relationship.

Another important variable is political efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to understand and influence political processes. According to Niemi, Craig, and Mattei (1991), political efficacy plays a crucial role in determining whether individuals translate political awareness into active participation. Individuals with higher political efficacy are more likely to engage meaningfully with political content, participate in discussions, and take action. In the context of social media, political efficacy may function as a moderating factor, strengthening the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement by enabling individuals to use these platforms more effectively for civic purposes.

Although existing literature has explored the relationship between social media, political engagement, and institutional trust, there remains a significant research gap, particularly in the Indian and Goan context. Most studies have focused on Western populations, limiting the generalizability of findings to culturally diverse regions like Goa, where socio-political dynamics and media consumption patterns may differ. Additionally, there is a lack of integrated research examining both the positive (enhanced engagement) and negative (declining trust) consequences of social media within a single framework. The present study addresses this gap by adopting a mixed-methods approach to investigate how social media exposure influences political engagement and institutional trust among college students in Goa, while examining the mediating role of misinformation susceptibility and the moderating role of political efficacy. This research is important as it provides context-specific insights and highlights the need for interventions such as media literacy and civic education to promote informed and responsible political participation among youth.

Research methodology

Statement of the problem

To examine the impact of social media exposure on political engagement and institutional trust among college students in Goa, considering the mediating role of misinformation susceptibility and the moderating role of political efficacy.

Objectives

- To examine the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement.
- To examine the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust.
- To investigate the mediating role of misinformation susceptibility in the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust.
- To examine the moderating role of political efficacy in the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement.
- To explore qualitative perspectives on the impact of social media on political engagement and institutional trust.

Hypothesis

- H₁ Social media exposure will be positively associated with political engagement.
- H₂ Social media exposure will be negatively associated with institutional trust.



- H₃ Misinformation susceptibility will mediate the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust.
- H₄ Political efficacy will moderate the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement.

Operational definitions of variables

The following are the operational definitions of the variables under study:

Social Media Exposure:

Social media exposure refers to the extent to which participants engage with and are exposed to content on social networking platforms. It is operationally measured using adapted items from the Social Media Use Integration Scale, assessing frequency of use, emotional connection, and integration of social media into daily life. Higher scores indicate greater exposure.

Political Engagement:

Political engagement refers to the degree of an individual's involvement in political activities, including discussion, information sharing, and participation in civic processes. It is measured using the Civic Engagement Scale, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of engagement.

Institutional Trust:

Institutional trust refers to the level of confidence individuals have in formal institutions such as government bodies, media organizations, and public systems. It is measured using an adapted Institutional Trust Scale, where higher scores indicate greater trust.

Misinformation Susceptibility:

Misinformation susceptibility refers to an individual's tendency to believe or accept false or misleading information as accurate. It is measured using the Fake News Susceptibility Scale, with higher scores indicating greater susceptibility to misinformation.



Political Efficacy:

Political efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to understand, influence, and participate effectively in political processes. It is measured using the Political Efficacy Scale, where higher scores indicate stronger perceived efficacy.

Research design

The present study employed a mixed-methods, cross-sectional research design to examine the impact of social media exposure on political engagement and institutional trust among college students in Goa. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method, comprising 200 students aged 18–20 years from various colleges. Quantitative data were collected using standardized self-report measures assessing social media exposure, political engagement, institutional trust, misinformation susceptibility, and political efficacy. In addition, a subset of participants provided brief qualitative responses through a semi-structured interview format. Statistical analyses were conducted to examine relationships between variables, as well as the mediating role of misinformation susceptibility and the moderating role of political efficacy, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to gain deeper insights into participants' perspectives.

Sample

The sample consisted of 200 college students aged between 18 and 20 years from various colleges in Goa, selected using a convenience sampling method. The sample comprised 58% females and 42% males, with a mean age of 19.3 years. Participants who were currently enrolled as undergraduate students and active users of social media were included in the study. Individuals who did not provide informed consent or had incomplete responses were excluded from the analysis.

Inclusion Criteria:

- College students aged between 18 and 20 years enrolled in institutions in Goa.
- Individuals who are active users of social media platforms.
- Participants capable of understanding the study and providing informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals who do not use social media or have minimal exposure to it.



- Participants who provide incomplete or inconsistent responses.
- Individuals unwilling to participate or unable to comprehend the study requirements adequately.

Procedure

Participants were contacted through colleges in Goa, and the purpose of the study was explained to them prior to obtaining informed consent. Data were collected from 200 college students using a structured questionnaire comprising standardized scales measuring social media exposure, political engagement, institutional trust, misinformation susceptibility, and political efficacy, along with a brief demographic form. A subset of participants also provided qualitative responses through a semi-structured format. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process. Upon completion of the questionnaires, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation. The collected data were then scored and subjected to appropriate statistical analysis.

Measures and Tools

Personal Data Sheet:

A structured personal data sheet was used to collect relevant demographic information such as age, gender, and educational status of the participants.

Social Media Use Integration Scale (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013): This scale was used to assess the extent of participants' engagement with social media, including frequency of use and emotional connection. It consists of multiple items rated on a Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater integration of social media into daily life.

Civic Engagement Scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013): This scale measures the level of political and civic engagement, including participation in discussions, awareness, and involvement in civic activities. Responses are recorded on a Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater engagement.

Institutional Trust Scale (Warren, 1999; adapted): This scale assesses the degree of trust participants place in institutions such as government, media, and public systems. Higher scores indicate greater institutional trust.



Political Efficacy Scale (*Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991*): This scale measures individuals' beliefs about their ability to understand and influence political processes. It includes items assessing both internal and external political efficacy, with higher scores indicating stronger perceived efficacy.

Fake News Susceptibility Scale (*Pennycook & Rand, 2019*) This scale assesses the tendency to believe or accept misinformation as accurate. Participants rate the perceived accuracy of various news items, with higher scores indicating greater susceptibility to misinformation.

Statistical Analyses

- The collected data were inspected, organized, and scored prior to analysis. The following statistical techniques were employed to analyse the data and test the hypotheses:
- Karl Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationships between social media exposure, political engagement, institutional trust, misinformation susceptibility, and political efficacy.
- Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted to assess the predictive effect of social media exposure on political engagement and institutional trust.
- Mediation Analysis (using appropriate statistical procedures) was performed to examine the mediating role of misinformation susceptibility in the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust.
- Moderation Analysis was conducted to assess the moderating role of political efficacy in the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement.
- Additionally, thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative responses and identify recurring patterns and themes.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the study.
- Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured.
- Participants were informed that the data would be used solely for research purposes.
- Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time.
- Participants were debriefed after completion of the study.



Results and discussion

H₁: Social media exposure will be positively associated with political engagement.

The results revealed a significant positive relationship between social media exposure and political engagement ($r = .42, p < .001$), thereby supporting the hypothesis. This indicates that increased exposure to social media platforms is associated with higher levels of political engagement among college students. The strength of this relationship suggests that social media plays a substantial role in shaping how young individuals participate in political processes.

One possible explanation for this finding is that social media platforms provide easy and immediate access to political information, enabling users to stay informed about current events, policies, and public issues. Unlike traditional media, social media allows for real-time updates and interactive engagement, which can stimulate interest and involvement in political matters. Exposure to such content may encourage individuals to form opinions, engage in discussions, and participate in civic activities.

Additionally, the interactive and participatory nature of social media fosters active engagement by allowing users to like, share, comment, and create content related to political topics. These features lower the barriers to participation and provide a sense of involvement, even for individuals who may not engage through conventional means such as attending political meetings or voting. As a result, social media serves as a platform that facilitates both informational and expressive forms of political engagement.

Another contributing factor is the social influence and peer interaction inherent in these platforms. Individuals are often exposed to the political views and activities of their peers, which may motivate them to become more engaged themselves. Observing others participate in political discussions or activism can create a sense of social norm or expectation, thereby encouraging similar behaviour.

Furthermore, social media platforms often provide opportunities for mobilization and collective action, such as online campaigns, petitions, and awareness drives. These activities can enhance individuals' sense of involvement and efficacy, reinforcing their engagement with political processes. For young adults, who are typically more active on digital platforms, such opportunities can significantly increase their participation in civic life.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media functions as a powerful catalyst for political engagement, offering accessible, interactive, and socially driven avenues for participation. However, the nature and



quality of engagement may vary depending on individual and contextual factors, highlighting the need to consider both the benefits and limitations of social media as a tool for civic involvement.

H₂: Social media exposure will be negatively associated with institutional trust.

The results revealed a significant negative relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust ($r = -.28, p < .01$), thereby supporting the hypothesis. This finding indicates that as individuals' exposure to social media increases, their level of trust in institutions such as government bodies, media organizations, and public systems tends to decrease. The strength of this relationship, although moderate, is meaningful and suggests that social media plays an important role in shaping perceptions of institutional credibility among youth.

One possible explanation for this finding lies in the nature of content disseminated through social media platforms. Unlike traditional media, social media is largely unregulated and user-driven, which allows for the rapid spread of information, including content that may be critical, sensationalized, or misleading. Frequent exposure to such content can create a perception that institutions are ineffective, corrupt, or unreliable, thereby contributing to a gradual erosion of trust. Moreover, the tendency of social media algorithms to prioritize engaging or emotionally charged content may further amplify negative narratives, reinforcing sceptical attitudes toward institutions.

Another important factor contributing to this relationship is the presence of conflicting and polarized viewpoints on social media. Users are often exposed to diverse and sometimes contradictory information, which can create confusion and uncertainty about what is accurate or trustworthy. Over time, this information overload may lead individuals to question the credibility of institutional sources altogether. In addition, exposure to political debates, criticism, and public dissatisfaction expressed online may normalize distrust and shape users' perceptions in a negative direction.

Furthermore, the findings may also be understood in light of misinformation and lack of verification mechanisms. Social media platforms make it easy for false or partially accurate information to circulate widely, often without adequate fact-checking. Repeated exposure to such information can distort individuals' understanding of institutional functioning and contribute to negative evaluations. This is particularly relevant for young users, who may rely heavily on digital platforms as their primary source of information.



It is also important to consider the developmental and contextual factors associated with the sample. College students are in a phase of forming independent opinions and may be more critical or questioning of authority. Social media provides a space where such critical perspectives are readily available and reinforced, which may further contribute to declining institutional trust.

Overall, the findings suggest that while social media serves as a powerful tool for information access and awareness, it may simultaneously foster scepticism and reduced confidence in institutions. This highlights the need for promoting media literacy and critical evaluation skills among youth, enabling them to distinguish between credible and unreliable information and develop more balanced perceptions of institutional functioning.

H₃: Misinformation susceptibility will mediate the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust.

The findings supported the mediating role of misinformation susceptibility in the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust. The mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect ($\beta = -.13$, 95% CI [-.21, -.06]), indicating that social media exposure influences institutional trust through its effect on individuals' susceptibility to misinformation. This suggests that the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust is not entirely direct, but operates through an underlying psychological mechanism.

Specifically, higher levels of social media exposure were associated with increased susceptibility to misinformation, which in turn was linked to lower levels of institutional trust. This can be explained by the nature of social media environments, where information is rapidly disseminated with minimal regulation or verification. Users are frequently exposed to a mix of accurate information, opinions, and misleading content, making it difficult to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources. As a result, individuals who are more susceptible to misinformation may develop distorted perceptions about institutions, leading to reduced trust.

The mediating role of misinformation highlights the importance of information processing and evaluation in shaping attitudes toward institutions. Individuals who are less able to critically assess the credibility of information are more likely to accept false or exaggerated claims, which may portray institutions in a negative light. Over time, repeated exposure to such content can reinforce negative beliefs and contribute to scepticism and distrust.



Furthermore, the algorithmic structure of social media platforms may intensify this effect by promoting content that aligns with users' existing beliefs or preferences. This can create echo chambers, where individuals are repeatedly exposed to similar viewpoints, including misinformation, thereby strengthening biased perceptions of institutions. In such contexts, misinformation does not merely inform opinions but actively shapes and reinforces distrust.

The fact that the mediation is partial suggests that while misinformation susceptibility plays a significant role, other factors may also contribute to the relationship between social media exposure and institutional trust. These may include prior attitudes, political orientation, and trust in traditional media sources.

Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of misinformation as a mechanism through which social media influences institutional trust. This highlights the need for interventions such as media literacy education, fact-checking initiatives, and responsible digital consumption practices, which can help individuals critically evaluate information and reduce the negative impact of misinformation on institutional perceptions.

H₄: Political efficacy will moderate the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement.

The findings indicated that political efficacy significantly moderated the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement (interaction $\beta = .18$, $p = .02$), thereby supporting the hypothesis. This suggests that the strength and direction of the relationship between social media exposure and political engagement vary depending on individuals' levels of political efficacy. In other words, social media exposure does not uniformly lead to increased political engagement; rather, its impact is contingent upon how capable and empowered individuals feel in influencing political processes.

Specifically, individuals with higher levels of political efficacy demonstrated a stronger positive relationship between social media exposure and political engagement. These individuals are more likely to actively interpret, engage with, and respond to political content encountered on social media platforms. Their belief in their ability to understand political issues and contribute meaningfully to civic processes enables them to translate exposure into concrete actions such as participating in discussions, sharing information, and expressing opinions. Thus, political efficacy acts as a facilitating factor, enhancing the positive impact of social media on engagement.



In contrast, individuals with **lower political efficacy** may not exhibit the same level of engagement despite similar levels of social media exposure. Although they are exposed to political content, they may feel uncertain about their ability to understand or influence political matters, leading to passive consumption rather than active participation. This indicates that exposure alone is insufficient to drive engagement; a sense of competence and agency is necessary for meaningful involvement.

The moderating role of political efficacy also highlights the importance of psychological empowerment in the digital political environment. Social media provides opportunities for participation, but individuals' beliefs about their own capabilities determine whether these opportunities are utilized. Without sufficient political efficacy, users may experience information overload, confusion, or disengagement, limiting the potential benefits of social media.

Furthermore, the interactive and participatory nature of social media platforms may reinforce political efficacy among some users by providing immediate feedback, validation, and opportunities for expression. However, for others, exposure to complex or conflicting political information may reduce confidence and discourage participation. This variation further explains why political efficacy plays a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of social media use.

Overall, the findings suggest that political efficacy is a key moderating variable that influences how social media exposure translates into political engagement. Enhancing political efficacy among youth through education, awareness, and civic training may therefore strengthen the positive impact of social media and promote more active and informed political participation.

Limitations of the Study

- The study was limited to college students in Goa, restricting the generalizability of the findings.
- The use of a convenience sampling method may introduce sampling bias.
- The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables.
- Data were collected using self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability and response bias.
- Variations in participants' interpretation of social media content and awareness levels may have affected responses.



Future Directions

- Future research can include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance generalizability.
- Longitudinal studies may be conducted to examine changes in political engagement and institutional trust over time.
- Additional variables such as media literacy, critical thinking, and personality factors can be explored.
- Comparative studies across different regions or populations can provide broader insights into the impact of social media.

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