



Social media influencers and their role in political communication in India

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Abstract

Social media influencers have become important intermediaries in political communication in India. Through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, X, WhatsApp, and short-video applications, influencers interpret political events, discuss public policies, endorse political viewpoints, and shape conversations among their followers. Unlike traditional political representatives or news organizations, influencers often communicate through informal, personal, and entertainment-oriented formats. This style enables them to reach audiences that may not regularly engage with conventional political content.

This paper examines the growing role of social media influencers in Indian political communication. It discusses the relationship between influencer credibility, audience engagement, political participation, regional-language communication, and electoral campaigning. The paper also analyzes the major democratic concerns associated with influencer politics, including undisclosed sponsorship, misinformation, ideological polarization, privacy risks, and weak accountability. It argues that influencers can strengthen democratic participation when they promote informed discussion and public accountability. However, their political influence also requires greater transparency from influencers, political parties, advertising agencies, social media platforms, and election authorities.

Keywords: Political communication, social media influencers, India, digital politics, elections, political participation, misinformation, media literacy

Introduction

Political communication in India has experienced a major transformation because of the expansion of digital media. Political parties, public officials, journalists, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens now use social media to produce and circulate political content. This transformation has created new opportunities for political communication beyond television debates, newspapers, public meetings, and official party statements.

One of the most significant developments in this environment is the rise of social media influencers. Influencers are individuals who develop substantial online audiences and shape the opinions, preferences, or behavior of their followers. Their influence may be based on expertise, popularity, entertainment value, personal identity, regional connection, or perceived authenticity. Although many influencers are associated with fashion, fitness, comedy, technology, lifestyle, or entertainment, they increasingly participate in political discussions.

The involvement of influencers in politics may be direct or indirect. Some creators openly support political parties or ideological positions. Others discuss public issues without formally identifying themselves as political actors. Some participate in interviews with politicians, visit government projects, or create content about national achievements and social concerns. In several cases, political messages are integrated into apparently non-political content.

This development has changed the relationship between politicians and citizens. Political communication is no longer limited to messages delivered by parties and reported by established media institutions. Instead, political information is frequently filtered through individuals with whom users feel personally connected. This can make political communication more accessible and engaging, but

it can also reduce transparency and increase the circulation of misleading or emotionally manipulative content.

This paper explores the role of social media influencers in political communication in India. It focuses on their functions, opportunities, challenges, and implications for democratic participation.

Literature Review

The growing political importance of social media influencers reflects a broader transformation in political communication. Traditionally, political information was mediated primarily by journalists, political parties, and institutional actors. However, platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and X have enabled individual content creators to become influential political communicators. Influencers do not simply transmit political information; they interpret, personalize, and frame political issues for their followers. As a result, political communication increasingly takes place through informal, personality-driven, and visually engaging content.

The role of influencers can be understood through the two-step flow model of communication, which identifies opinion leaders as intermediaries between media institutions and wider audiences. In the digital environment, influencers perform this intermediary role by selecting issues, simplifying complex political messages, and encouraging followers to adopt particular opinions or behaviors. Their influence is also connected to parasocial interaction. Frequent posts, personal disclosure, and direct communication create a sense of familiarity and intimacy between influencers and their audiences. Consequently, followers may perceive influencers as more authentic, relatable, and trustworthy than traditional political actors.

A significant theme in the literature is the relationship between influencer culture and political engagement. Influencers often integrate political messages into lifestyle content related to fashion, entertainment, fitness, gaming, or everyday experiences. This form of lifestyle politics can make political issues more accessible to individuals who may not actively follow conventional political news. Influencers can therefore contribute to political awareness, voter registration, protest participation, and online mobilization. Micro-influencers may be particularly effective because they usually maintain closer relationships with smaller, more specialized communities, resulting in higher levels of engagement and perceived credibility. Despite these democratic possibilities, the literature also identifies several risks. Political parties and campaign organizations increasingly collaborate with influencers to reach targeted audiences outside traditional advertising channels. Although such collaborations can increase political participation, undisclosed sponsorships and covert political marketing raise concerns about transparency and accountability. Influencer communication may also contribute to misinformation and political polarization, especially when sensational, emotional, or conspiratorial content receives greater algorithmic visibility. The commercial logic of social-media platforms can encourage creators to prioritize engagement over accuracy, thereby blurring the boundaries between political expression, advertising, and manipulation. Existing research employs a range of methods, including surveys, interviews, experiments, social-network analysis, content analysis, and computational analysis of large-scale platform data. These approaches have helped scholars examine political endorsements, audience engagement, message diffusion, and the effects of influencer communication on political attitudes. However, the field remains relatively new, and several gaps remain. Much of the research focuses on short-term electoral campaigns and Western democratic societies. Less attention has been given to the long-term effects of influencer exposure, differences between platforms, political communication in the Global South, and the role of influencers in authoritarian or hybrid political systems.

Meaning and Characteristics of Social Media Influencers

A social media influencer is an individual who uses digital platforms to communicate with an audience and affect the attitudes, opinions, or behavior of followers. Influencers usually possess three important characteristics.

First, they have a recognizable digital identity. Their followers may associate them with a particular profession, region, language, lifestyle, political viewpoint, or cultural community. Second, influencers maintain regular communication with their audiences through videos, livestreams, posts, stories, podcasts, and comments. Third, they often create a sense of familiarity and personal connection with followers.

This personal connection distinguishes influencers from traditional political advertisements. Political advertisements generally communicate through formal and one-directional messages. Influencer communication, by contrast, is often conversational. Influencers use personal experiences, humor, informal language, emotional storytelling, and direct audience interaction.

Influencers may be divided into several broad categories in the context of Indian political communication

1. **Political commentators:** who regularly discuss elections, government policies, political parties, and public affairs.
2. **Journalistic and explanatory creators:** who simplify complex political or social issues for general audiences.
3. **Entertainment influencers:** who include political themes in comedy, satire, music, or popular culture.
4. **Lifestyle and celebrity influencers:** who occasionally express political preferences or participate in political campaigns.
5. **Regional and vernacular influencers:** who communicate with audiences in languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Kannada, Punjabi, Bhojpuri, and other Indian languages.
6. **Issue-based influencers:** who focus on subjects such as the environment, gender rights, education, employment, public health, or social justice.

These categories frequently overlap. A single creator may perform several roles depending on the political context.

The Changing Structure of Political Communication in India

Traditional political communication was largely controlled by political parties, newspapers, television networks, and radio broadcasters. These institutions acted as gatekeepers by selecting which political issues would receive attention. Digital platforms have weakened this centralized structure.

Influencers now operate as independent or semi-independent intermediaries between political institutions and citizens. They can comment on speeches, interpret policy announcements, criticize government decisions, promote political campaigns, and organize public discussions without relying entirely on established media organizations.

This transformation has several important consequences.

a. Decentralization of Political Messaging

Political communication is increasingly produced by numerous actors rather than by a small number of institutions. A speech delivered by a politician may be discussed by hundreds of creators, each presenting a different interpretation. Political messages can therefore be modified, simplified, criticized, or emotionally reframed as they move through online networks.

b. Personalization of Politics

Influencers often present political issues through their own personalities. A policy may be discussed through a personal story, a reaction video, a street interview, or a humorous performance. This makes politics more relatable, but it may also shift attention from institutions and policies toward personalities.

c. Expansion of Political Audiences

Influencers can engage younger people and citizens who do not regularly read newspapers or watch conventional news

programs. They can also reach audiences in small towns, rural areas, and regional-language communities.

d. Faster Circulation of Political Content

Digital content can be produced and circulated within minutes. A political statement, controversy, or campaign message can quickly move from a long-form video to short clips, memes, messaging groups, and offline conversations.

e. Greater Audience Interaction

The audience is not simply a passive receiver. Followers can comment, share, remix, criticize, or produce responses to influencer content. This creates a more interactive political environment, although the quality of interaction varies considerably.

Influencers as Political Opinion Leaders

The role of influencers can be understood through the concept of opinion leadership. Opinion leaders are individuals who interpret information and influence the opinions of others. In digital environments, influencers often perform this role by explaining political events to their followers.

Followers may trust influencers because of their perceived knowledge, consistency, accessibility, or cultural similarity. A regional-language creator may be considered more relevant than a national television anchor because the creator understands local concerns and uses familiar expressions. Similarly, an influencer who has built a reputation through educational or investigative content may be trusted when discussing political issues.

However, influencer credibility is not always based on formal expertise. It may also arise from popularity and familiarity. The audience may accept a political message because it is delivered by a creator they regularly watch. This form of trust can make political communication highly persuasive, especially when the message is embedded in entertainment or personal storytelling.

Influencers can perform several opinion-leadership functions

- Selecting which issues deserve attention.
- Explaining political events in simple language.
- Interpreting statements made by politicians.
- Encouraging followers to support or oppose public policies.
- Mobilizing audiences around social and political causes.
- Criticizing political institutions.
- Providing alternative viewpoints to mainstream media.
- Encouraging voting and civic participation.

The effectiveness of these functions depends on the influencer's reputation, the platform used, the political context, and the relationship between the influencer and the audience.

Influence on Electoral Campaigns

Political parties in India increasingly use digital creators as part of their election strategies. Influencers can be useful to political campaigns because they provide access to specific audiences. Instead of sending the same message to the entire population, campaigns can work with creators who are

popular among particular age groups, professions, regions, or language communities.

Influencers may support campaigns in several ways.

a. Candidate Promotion

Influencers may interview candidates, visit campaign events, or publish content highlighting a candidate's personality and achievements. These activities can make politicians appear more accessible and relatable.

b. Policy Communication

Political parties may use influencers to explain welfare programs, development projects, government schemes, or election promises. Influencers can present policy information in formats that are easier to understand than formal party documents.

c. Youth Mobilization

Young voters are among the most active users of digital platforms. Influencers can use music, humor, short videos, and popular cultural references to encourage youth participation in elections.

d. Regional Outreach

Local creators help political campaigns communicate in regional languages and address local issues. Their regional identity may increase audience trust and make campaign messages appear less distant.

e. Reputation Management

Influencers may defend political parties against criticism, respond to negative news, or challenge opposing narratives. This may occur through explicit political commentary or through indirect comparison of competing parties.

f. Event-Based Communication

Political campaigns may invite creators to rallies, government project inaugurations, press events, or public interactions. Influencers then produce content that expands the reach of these events beyond the physical audience. Although such strategies can improve communication, they can also blur the distinction between independent opinion and paid political promotion.

The Importance of Regional and Vernacular Influencers

India's linguistic and cultural diversity makes regional influencers especially important. National political communication often receives considerable attention, but local audiences may be more interested in employment, agricultural conditions, transportation, public services, caste relations, local development, and state-level leadership.

Regional influencers are able to connect political messages with local experiences. They may explain a national policy through its effects on a particular state or district. They may also discuss local candidates and issues that are overlooked by national media.

Vernacular communication has several advantages

- It improves accessibility for audiences who are less comfortable with English.
- It strengthens cultural and emotional identification.
- It allows local idioms and political references to be used effectively.
- It increases the visibility of regional issues.

- It enables political parties to reach diverse electoral groups.

At the same time, regional communication can contribute to the spread of rumors and misinformation when local content is produced without verification. Language barriers may also make it more difficult for independent fact-checkers and national institutions to monitor political content.

Influencers and Political Participation

Social media influencers can encourage political participation in both formal and informal ways. They may motivate followers to register as voters, learn about candidates, attend public meetings, participate in online campaigns, or discuss political issues with family and friends.

Influencers are particularly effective at making political communication appear relevant to everyday life. Topics such as inflation, education, employment, public safety, climate change, healthcare, and gender equality can be connected to personal experiences. This can help audiences understand that politics affects their daily lives.

Influencers may also provide opportunities for marginalized groups to express their views. Individuals who receive limited attention from mainstream media can use digital platforms to discuss social exclusion, discrimination, regional inequality, disability rights, or minority concerns.

However, participation does not always mean informed participation. Clicking, sharing, commenting, or watching a video may create the appearance of political engagement without leading to deeper knowledge or constructive action. Digital participation can also become highly emotional and confrontational.

Political Communication Through Parasocial Relationships

A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship in which audiences feel connected to a media personality. Influencers often strengthen this connection through frequent updates, personal disclosures, livestreams, direct replies, and informal conversation.

The political importance of parasocial relationships lies in the fact that followers may interpret an influencer's political opinions as personal advice rather than as formal propaganda. A recommendation from a familiar creator may therefore seem more trustworthy than a conventional political advertisement.

This relationship can have positive effects. Influencers may encourage followers to examine public issues, challenge political misinformation, or participate in democratic processes. They can also make political communication less intimidating.

Nevertheless, parasocial trust creates risks. Followers may accept unsupported claims because they trust the creator. They may also treat criticism of the influencer as a personal attack and respond aggressively. This can encourage political loyalty based on personality rather than evidence.

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Political Polarization

One of the most serious challenges associated with influencer-driven political communication is the rapid spread of false or misleading information. Political

misinformation may involve incorrect facts, manipulated videos, fabricated quotations, misleading images, or inaccurate interpretations of public events.

Influencers may spread misinformation intentionally or unintentionally. Some may lack the resources required to verify claims. Others may prioritize speed, engagement, and controversy over accuracy. In competitive digital environments, sensational content can receive more attention than careful analysis.

Political disinformation may be distributed through coordinated networks. Political organizations, anonymous accounts, public relations agencies, and online supporters may work together to amplify selected messages. Content can move from public platforms into private messaging groups, where it becomes difficult to trace or correct.

Influencer communication may also intensify polarization. Platforms reward content that attracts strong emotional responses, including anger, fear, pride, and outrage. As a result, creators may have incentives to use divisive language and portray political opponents as threats rather than legitimate competitors.

Polarization can weaken democratic dialogue by reducing willingness to listen to alternative viewpoints. It may also create separate information environments in which different groups encounter entirely different descriptions of political reality.

Transparency and Ethical Concerns

Political influencer communication raises important ethical questions.

a. Undisclosed Paid Promotion

If an influencer receives payment or other benefits from a political party, candidate, campaign organization, or agency, audiences should be informed. Without disclosure, paid political communication may appear to be independent opinion.

b. Ambiguous Sponsorship Arrangements

Political messages may be presented as interviews, personal travel videos, event coverage, or entertainment content. Such formats can make it difficult for viewers to understand whether the content is sponsored.

c. Manipulation of Audiences

Influencers may use emotional storytelling, selective information, or misleading comparisons to persuade followers. Persuasion is a normal part of politics, but manipulation becomes problematic when essential information is hidden or distorted.

d. Privacy and Data Collection

Digital campaigns may rely on audience data to identify political preferences and target specific groups. The collection and use of such data can create privacy risks, particularly when users do not understand how their information is being used.

e. Accountability

Traditional media organizations generally have editorial structures, professional standards, and identifiable owners. Individual influencers may operate without comparable oversight. When they publish harmful or false content, it may be difficult to determine responsibility.

Regulatory and Institutional Challenges in India

The regulation of influencer-based political communication involves several institutions and legal frameworks. Election authorities regulate campaign conduct and expenditure, while advertising bodies address disclosure and misleading advertising. Social media platforms apply their own content policies and political advertising rules.

Despite these mechanisms, several regulatory gaps remain. First, it may be difficult to determine whether an influencer is acting independently or as part of a political campaign. Payments may be routed through marketing agencies, consultants, or informal networks. Second, content can be uploaded from outside formal campaign structures, making expenditure monitoring difficult. Third, private messaging services create challenges for identifying the original source of political content.

Regulation must balance accountability with freedom of expression. Excessive control may suppress legitimate political criticism, satire, or independent commentary. At the same time, a complete absence of transparency allows political actors to influence voters without public scrutiny.

A stronger regulatory approach should focus on disclosure, traceability, platform accountability, and media literacy rather than on suppressing political speech.

Recommendations

The following measures can improve the quality and transparency of influencer-based political communication in India.

a. Mandatory Disclosure of Political Sponsorship

Influencers should clearly disclose payments, gifts, contracts, or other benefits received from political parties, candidates, campaign organizations, or government agencies.

b. Public Political Advertising Libraries

Social media platforms should maintain searchable databases containing political advertisements, sponsors, target audiences, publication dates, and expenditure information.

c. Clear Standards for Political Influencer Content

Election authorities and advertising regulators should establish specific guidelines for sponsored political content, including disclosure labels and requirements for identifying the sponsoring organization.

d. Improved Digital Media Literacy

Schools, universities, civil society organizations, and election authorities should teach citizens how to identify manipulated content, verify sources, recognize sponsored communication, and distinguish opinion from evidence.

e. Greater Support for Regional Fact-Checking

Fact-checking organizations should expand their work in Indian languages and collaborate with local journalists, researchers, and community organizations.

f. Voluntary Ethical Codes for Influencers

Influencers who discuss political issues should follow basic ethical principles, including source verification, correction of errors, respect for privacy, avoidance of hate speech, and disclosure of financial relationships.

g. Independent Academic Research

Universities and research institutions should conduct systematic studies of influencer campaigns, political advertising, audience behavior, and regional-language political communication.

Conclusion

Social media influencers have become significant participants in political communication in India. They connect political institutions with audiences through informal, interactive, and personality-driven communication. Their ability to simplify political issues, reach young citizens, communicate in regional languages, and mobilize public attention gives them considerable democratic potential.

Influencers can strengthen political participation by encouraging discussion, increasing awareness, and bringing neglected issues into public debate. They can also challenge powerful institutions and provide alternative perspectives that may not receive sufficient attention in mainstream media.

However, influencer politics also creates serious risks. Undisclosed sponsorship, misinformation, emotional manipulation, algorithmic polarization, privacy violations, and weak accountability can undermine the quality of democratic communication. The informal appearance of influencer content may make these problems more difficult to detect.

The future of political communication in India will likely involve closer interaction among political parties, influencers, advertising agencies, platforms, journalists, and citizens. A democratic digital environment requires more than technological access. It requires transparency, ethical responsibility, institutional oversight, and informed audiences. Social media influencers should therefore be recognized not merely as entertainers or marketing professionals, but as emerging political communicators whose actions can influence public opinion and democratic decision-making.

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