

Memos, Satire and Political Engagement: A Study of Young Social Media Users Just a Joke or A Political Voice?

Richa Rajawat¹, Shreya Dwivedi²

¹Post Graduation, Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication, SAGE University, Indore, M.P.

²Assistant Professor (CO.HOD), Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication, SAGE University Indore, M.P.

doi.org/10.64643/IJIRTV13I5-209381-459

Abstract—Political memes and satire have become an ordinary route through which young social-media users encounter political ideas, personalities and controversies. This study examines how such exposure relates to perceived political engagement among young social-media users aged 18–35, with particular attention to comprehension, peer discussion, information-seeking and perceived misinformation risk. A quantitative, descriptive and analytical cross-sectional survey was conducted using a structured Google Forms questionnaire. The study draws on 86 responses obtained through purposive and convenience sampling, with respondents concentrated in Gwalior and Indore; question-wise valid counts were 84, 85 and 52 where missing responses occurred. The analysis combines frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, Spearman rank-order correlations, reliability analysis and an exploratory OLS regression. Political meme exposure was common: 50.0% of valid respondents encountered political memes often or very often, while Instagram was identified by 75.6% of the total sample as the principal exposure platform. At the same time, 76.5% agreed or strongly agreed that political memes can spread misleading or false information. The study also finds that 53.6% associated memes with greater awareness of current political issues, 51.2% found political issues easier to understand through memes, and 63.5% reported discussing political issues with friends after encountering memes or satire. Spearman correlations show positive associations between exposure and awareness, exposure and information-seeking, self-expression and peer discussion, and discussion and perceived contribution to engagement. The exploratory regression explains 42.3% of the variance in perceived contribution to political engagement ($R^2 = .423$; adjusted $R^2 = .386$), with ease of understanding, discussion with friends and misinformation concern emerging as significant predictors. Exposure itself was not significant once these factors were considered. The findings suggest that political

memes are better understood as socially processed communication cues than as simple exposure stimuli. The study contributes to political communication scholarship by connecting uses and gratifications, connective action and a dual-process account of interpretation to an Indian youth sample, showing that political significance depends less on how often a meme is seen than on how it is understood, discussed and critically evaluated.

Index Terms—political memes, satire, political engagement, social media, young adults, youth participation, political communication, misinformation, media literacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Political communication no longer depends on a clearly bounded set of institutional spaces. Parliamentary speeches, newspapers and television debates remain important, but political meaning is also encountered in the ordinary movement of a social-media feed, where news, entertainment, personal expression and political commentary appear side by side. The historical movement from broadcast communication toward screen-based and networked media has altered not only where audiences receive political material but also the form in which that material reaches them (Dwivedi, Choubey, & Das, 2026). Within this environment, memes and satire have particular communicative advantages: they are compact, visual, culturally recognisable and easily circulated.

Dawkins (1976) introduced the term meme to describe a unit of cultural transmission. In digital culture, the concept has acquired a more specific meaning. Memes are usually recognisable through recurring templates,

images, captions, videos or combinations of text and visual cues that users copy, modify and recirculate. Shifman (2014) argues that internet memes are better understood as interconnected groups of cultural artefacts than as isolated viral objects. Their political significance follows from this capacity for adaptation. A single template can be used to praise a political leader, ridicule an opponent, criticise policy, express ideological identification or frame a public controversy.

Satire predates digital media, but social platforms have altered its circulation and audience relationship. Political cartoons, parody and humorous commentary traditionally depended on identifiable media outlets or performance spaces; digital memes can now be created and distributed by ordinary users with little institutional mediation. Penney (2020) shows how humour can lower the social cost of political expression among young users, making political talk feel more compatible with everyday online interaction. This is particularly relevant in India, where young audiences increasingly move across platforms and formats rather than relying on a single news channel. Research on media convergence among Generation Z in Indore, for example, indicates that news consumption is shaped by cross-platform reliance and changing habits rather than by a strict separation between traditional and digital media (Baghel & Dwivedi, 2026).

The contemporary digital environment also complicates the distinction between political information and entertainment. Young users may encounter a political claim in a reel, meme page, WhatsApp forward or comment thread before encountering it in a conventional news report. Work on changing media consumption patterns similarly points to a broader movement away from fixed, legacy-media routines toward flexible, platform-based and participatory consumption (Dwivedi & Kishore, 2025b). Podcasting research adds another dimension to this shift by showing how younger audiences increasingly move between production, participation and consumption across multiple digital formats (Dwivedi & Kishore, 2025b). In this setting, a meme can be a joke, a political cue, a social signal and an invitation to conversation at the same time.

The political value of such content, however, cannot be inferred from visibility alone. Humour can make an issue easier to approach, but compression can also

remove context. Satirical framing may encourage critical reflection, yet a misleading claim can acquire additional memorability when packaged as entertainment. Research on young adults' responses to AI-generated news further indicates that digital audiences are negotiating credibility in an environment where synthetic and algorithmically mediated content can complicate judgments of accuracy and authenticity (Sen & Dwivedi, 2026). The same credibility problem is relevant to political memes, particularly when users encounter them outside established editorial structures.

This study therefore treats political memes and satire as a form of informal political communication whose consequences depend on interpretation and social processing. It examines everyday exposure rather than focusing on a single election cycle, and it asks whether exposure is associated with awareness, understanding, discussion, information-seeking, self-expression and perceived political engagement. The central question is not whether memes are inherently beneficial or harmful, but under what conditions they appear to become politically meaningful.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Young social-media users increasingly encounter political material through informal and humorous formats rather than through conventional news alone. The analytical problem is that exposure and engagement are not equivalent. A user may see dozens of political memes without becoming more informed, while a single comprehensible or provocative meme may initiate a discussion, prompt information-seeking or alter the way an issue is considered. Humour may also reduce the perceived seriousness of a claim, making misleading content easier to remember and circulate. The study consequently examines the relationships among political meme exposure, awareness, understanding, discussion, information-seeking, opinion formation, self-expression, misinformation concern and perceived political engagement among young social-media users.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study contributes to communication research by examining meme-based political communication as an everyday audience practice rather than treating memes

as peripheral entertainment. It is also relevant to Indian media education because the findings illuminate how young users in a Gwalior–Indore sample encounter, interpret and socially process political content. For political communicators, the results identify comprehension and peer discussion as more consequential correlates of perceived engagement than exposure alone. For journalism and media-literacy educators, the strong misinformation concern reported by respondents underscores the need to teach users how to distinguish satire, opinion, factual claims and misleading content before sharing or endorsing it.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Memes as Digital Political Communication

Internet memes are participatory communication objects: their political meaning is produced not only by the original creator but also through repetition, modification and recirculation. Shifman (2014) describes this culture of imitation and transformation as central to internet memes. In political contexts, the flexibility of the meme form permits the same visual grammar to be redirected toward different actors, events and ideological positions. Ross and Rivers (2017), in their study of memes surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election, demonstrated how recurring visual and textual strategies could contribute to the discursive delegitimation of political candidates. The political work of a meme, therefore, does not disappear because it is humorous; ridicule and symbolic positioning can themselves constitute political communication.

The literature on political memes also intersects with scholarship on digital political cynicism. Ahmed and Masood (2024) argue that memes can operate as a bridge between political cynicism and online political participation, suggesting that humorous content may provide a low-threshold route into political expression. Yet the bridge is not automatic. Zerback et al. (2026) show that political memes can influence issue-specific interest and perceived issue importance without necessarily producing straightforward changes in information selection.

This distinction is important for the present study because it shifts attention from simple exposure counts toward the interpretive and social processes that may follow exposure.

Satire, Humour and Political Processing

Political satire works through irony, parody, exaggeration and incongruity. Its effects depend on the interaction between the message and the audience's prior beliefs, appreciation of humour and willingness to engage cognitively with the content. Boukes et al. (2015) found that appreciation, processing and persuasiveness can vary substantially across viewers, reinforcing the point that humorous political messages cannot be treated as uniform persuasion devices. Penney (2020) similarly situates memes within youth political expression, showing how humour can make political participation socially easier and less formal. This variability also connects satire research to the concept of affective publics. Political expression online is frequently organised around shared feelings, humour, irritation, identification and symbolic reactions rather than around formal organisational membership (Papacharissi, 2015). A meme can therefore function as an affective cue that tells users not only what an issue is about but also how a networked peer group is responding to it. Such cues may facilitate discussion while simultaneously reinforcing simplified or polarised interpretations.

Young People, Digital Media and Political Engagement

Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) found in their meta-analysis that the relationship between digital media use and youth civic engagement is stronger when the activity itself is explicitly political. This distinction supports a multidimensional conception of engagement in the present study. Awareness, discussion, expression, information-seeking and perceived contribution to political engagement are treated as related but distinct indicators rather than collapsed into a single behavioural outcome.

For Indian youth, the broader media environment is increasingly characterised by cross-platform consumption. Baghel and Dwivedi (2026) document the importance of media convergence in shaping Generation Z news consumption in Indore, illustrating how young audiences combine platforms and formats in their everyday information routines. This context matters for political memes because exposure may be incidental rather than intentional: users may encounter political material while consuming entertainment, following creators or participating in peer networks. The movement toward participatory, multi-platform

formats is also visible in digital audio, where Gen Z audiences increasingly operate across listening, sharing and content production practices (Dwivedi & Kishore, 2025a).

Recent Evidence from India

Indian scholarship on political satire and memes remains smaller than the corresponding body of Western research, but the emerging evidence is increasingly relevant. Rani (2025) found that online political satire can influence youth political engagement beyond simple entertainment, while also emphasising the role of audience interpretation. The present study extends that conversation by moving beyond election-period analysis and examining routine political meme exposure.

The credibility dimension is particularly important in this environment. Sen and Dwivedi (2026) show that young adults' judgments of AI-generated news are shaped by perceived credibility, accuracy and authenticity. Although AI-generated news and political memes are not equivalent genres, both illustrate a broader communication problem: digital content can circulate rapidly outside conventional editorial gatekeeping, placing greater responsibility on audiences to evaluate claims. The contrast with legacy broadcast media is instructive. Research by Dwivedi and Kishore (2025c, 2025d) highlights the enduring credibility associated with radio even as audiences move into fragmented digital audio environments. Meme-based political feeds, by comparison, often lack the stable institutional cues through which audiences traditionally evaluate source credibility.

Indian Context and the Researcher's Earlier Dissertation

The researcher's earlier undergraduate dissertation examined the role of memes and satire in political communication during Indian elections, identifying recurring themes including leader-focused satire, ideological critique, policy criticism, nationalism, scandal, propaganda, youth engagement and misinformation (Rajawat, n.d.). The present study builds on that line of inquiry but changes the empirical frame. Instead of restricting attention to election periods, it examines everyday exposure among young social-media users aged 18–35.

That shift is consequential because every day meme circulation can normalise political communication as

part of ordinary social interaction. A user may not describe an act of forwarding or discussing a meme as political participation, even when the act contributes to political awareness or group discussion. The questionnaire therefore places awareness, comprehension, expression, discussion, information-seeking and misinformation concern alongside one another rather than assuming that any single measure captures the full process.

V. RESEARCH GAP

Three gaps motivate the study. First, much of the established empirical literature on political memes has emerged from North American and European contexts, while Indian platform cultures, languages and political identities require context-sensitive investigation. Second, India-focused work often concentrates on election periods, leaving routine, non-election exposure comparatively underexamined. Third, exposure, persuasion and participation are frequently studied as separate outcomes. The present study addresses the third gap most directly by examining exposure, awareness, understanding, self-expression, discussion, information-seeking and misinformation concern within the same sample. Its contribution is therefore not a claim that memes cause engagement, but an examination of which dimensions of meme-related experience are most closely associated with perceived political engagement.

VI. OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Objectives of the Study

- To examine how frequently young social-media users encounter political memes and satire, and which platforms carry most of that exposure.
- To assess whether political memes and satire help young users become aware of current political issues and understand them more easily.
- To examine whether political memes shape how respondents view political leaders, parties and government performance.
- To analyse whether active engagement with political memes—expressing opinions and discussing content with friends—is associated with higher political engagement.

- To identify concerns around misinformation, credibility and the humorous packaging of misleading political content.

Research Questions

- What are the main platforms and usage patterns through which young users encounter political memes and satire?
- How does exposure to political memes relate to awareness of current political issues and information-seeking behaviour?
- How do perceived ease of understanding and emotional connection relate to discussion and engagement?
- Is active use of political memes for self-expression associated with political discussion and information-seeking?
- What concerns do respondents report about misinformation and the believability of humorous political content?

Hypotheses

- H1: Higher exposure to political memes and satire is positively associated with political awareness and information-seeking.
- H2: More frequent use of political memes to express personal political opinion is positively associated with political discussion and information-seeking.
- H3: Perceived ease of understanding is positively associated with awareness, discussion and perceived contribution to political engagement.
- H4: Higher concern about misinformation is associated with caution toward political meme content and recognition of the risks of humorous misinformation.

VII. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Gratifications Approach

Uses and Gratifications theory positions audiences as active participants who select media in relation to needs such as information, entertainment, identity, social interaction and diversion (Katz et al., 1973). Political memes can satisfy several of these needs simultaneously. A user may encounter a meme because it is amusing, learn a political reference through it, share it as an identity signal and then

discuss it with friends. The framework therefore supports treating meme exposure as a starting point within a broader sequence of audience activity rather than as an outcome in itself.

The Indian context reinforces this approach. Cross-media news habits among Generation Z indicate that young users increasingly combine platforms and media forms when meeting informational and social needs (Baghel & Dwivedi, 2026). Research on changing consumption patterns likewise suggests that digital technologies have weakened the boundaries between previously distinct media routines (Dwivedi & Kishore, 2025b).

Logic of Connective Action

Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) logic of connective action explains how digitally networked communication can support personalised political expression without requiring formal membership in an organisation.

Memes fit this model because they are inexpensive to reproduce, easy to personalise and readily circulated through peer networks. The political significance of a meme can therefore emerge through accumulation: a share, comment, reaction or private conversation is individually modest, but repeated across a network it can sustain attention and discussion.

The present findings make this perspective especially relevant. Peer discussion is not merely an additional behaviour in the dataset; it is one of the variables most strongly associated with perceived political engagement.

The meme becomes consequential when it enters a social interaction in which users interpret, contest, endorse or verify its meaning.

Dual-Process Cognitive Perspective

A dual-process perspective helps explain why exposure alone may be insufficient to predict perceived engagement. Political memes are often encountered in environments designed for rapid, low-effort attention. Their visual familiarity, humour and brevity can support relatively automatic or heuristic processing. At the same time, users may engage in more deliberate processing when a meme raises uncertainty, challenges an existing belief, invites discussion or prompts verification. Kahneman (2011) distinguishes fast, intuitive processing from slower, more deliberate reasoning; in political

communication, the two modes need not be mutually exclusive.

Applied to meme culture, the distinction suggests that comprehension and misinformation vigilance may matter because they influence what happens after initial exposure. A meme that is immediately legible may become a cue for discussion, while a suspicious or contested claim may trigger checking or further information-seeking.

This perspective is consistent with the present regression findings: raw exposure was not a significant predictor once ease of understanding, discussion and misinformation concern were considered. The study does not establish a causal cognitive sequence, but the pattern is theoretically compatible with a shift from rapid recognition toward socially and cognitively elaborated processing.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model proposes a relational sequence rather than a causal chain. Exposure to political memes and satire is expected to be associated with awareness, ease of understanding and emotional connection. These experiences may accompany active engagement through self-expression and discussion, which in turn may be related to information-seeking and perceived political engagement. Misinformation concern, platform choice, daily social-media use and demographic background provide contextual conditions around this process. Because the research is cross-sectional, the model is evaluated through associations and exploratory prediction rather than causal inference.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

The study uses a quantitative, descriptive and analytical cross-sectional survey design. The descriptive component establishes the sample profile, platform habits and distribution of attitudes toward political memes and satire. The analytical component examines relationships among exposure, awareness, ease of understanding, self-expression, discussion, information-seeking, misinformation concern and perceived contribution to political engagement. The design is appropriate for identifying patterns of association within the sample while remaining explicit about the limits of causal interpretation.

Research Design at a Glance

Table 1 Research Design at a Glance

Component	Description
Research approach	Quantitative
Research design	Descriptive and analytical survey
Target population	Young social-media users aged 18-35 years
Sample size	86 respondents
Sampling technique	Purposive and convenience sampling
Data collection method	Structured Google Forms questionnaire
Measurement	Categorical questions and five-point Likert/frequency scales
Analysis	Frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, reliability, Spearman correlation and exploratory regression
Research focus	Relationship between memes, satire, awareness, discussion, information-seeking and political engagement

Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised young adults aged 18–35 who use social media and are likely to encounter political content in the course of everyday platform use.

Respondents were reached through the researcher's student, peer and social-media networks. Purposive and convenience sampling were used rather than random selection. The findings should therefore be interpreted as evidence from the sampled respondents and not as a statistically representative estimate for all young adults in India.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire covering demographic characteristics, social-media use and scale-based statements concerning political memes and satire. The instrument measured meme exposure, platform of exposure, perceived awareness, ease of understanding, emotional connection, opinion influence, self-expression, discussion with friends, information-seeking, perceived contribution to political

engagement and misinformation concern. The questionnaire items are reproduced in Appendix A.

Variables and Measurement

Agreement items used a five-point scale coded from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Frequency items used 1 (Never) through 5 (Very often). The overall-contribution item ranged from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (To a very great extent). The coding scheme is reproduced in Appendix B. These common numeric scales enabled descriptive analysis, reliability testing, Spearman rank-order correlations and an exploratory regression.

Data Screening and Ethical Considerations

The raw dataset contained 86 submitted responses. Names and email addresses were removed before analysis and are not reported in the manuscript. Most substantive items produced 84 or 85 valid responses, while two later optional items had lower valid counts because of missing responses. The analysis therefore retains question-wise valid totals rather than artificially imposing $N = 86$ on every result. Participation was voluntary, and all findings are reported in aggregate form.

Data Analysis Procedure

Frequencies and percentages were used for demographic and categorical variables; means and standard deviations were used to summarise the Likert and frequency items.

Spearman rank-order correlation was selected for the ordinal core measures. An exploratory OLS regression examined the extent to which meme exposure, awareness, ease of understanding, discussion with friends and misinformation concern predicted perceived overall contribution to political engagement.

Given the ordinal measures and non-probability sample, the regression is interpreted cautiously as exploratory evidence rather than as a definitive predictive model.

IX. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Sample Profile

The final sample comprised 86 respondents. The largest age group was 21–23 (41.9%), followed by 24–

26 (26.7%) and 18–20 (17.4%). The gender distribution comprised 48 male respondents (55.8%), 36 female respondents (41.9%), one respondent who preferred not to say (1.2%), and one missing response. The sample was concentrated in Gwalior and Indore, with 46 respondents from Gwalior and 36 from Indore.

Table 2 Demographic Profile of Respondents ($N = 86$)

Variable	Category	n	% of total
Age group	21-23	36	41.9
	24-26	23	26.7
	18-20	15	17.4
	27-30	8	9.3
	31-35	3	3.5
	Missing	1	1.2
Education	Postgraduate	40	46.5
	Undergraduate	34	39.5
	Higher Secondary	5	5.8
	Other	4	4.7
	Missing	3	3.5
Gender	Male	48	55.8
	Female	36	41.9
	Prefer not to say	1	1.2
	Missing	1	1.2
City	Gwalior	46	53.5
	Indore	36	41.9
	Missing	4	4.7

Note. Percentages are calculated on the total sample of 86 respondents; missing values are shown where present.

Figure 1
Gender Distribution of Respondents

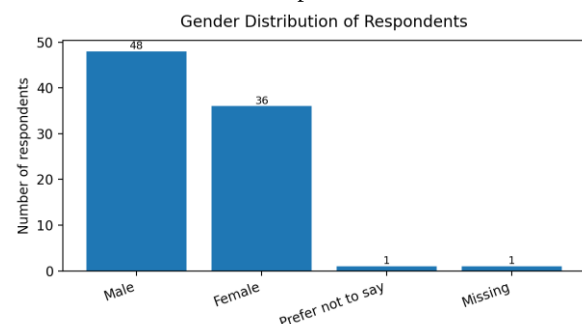
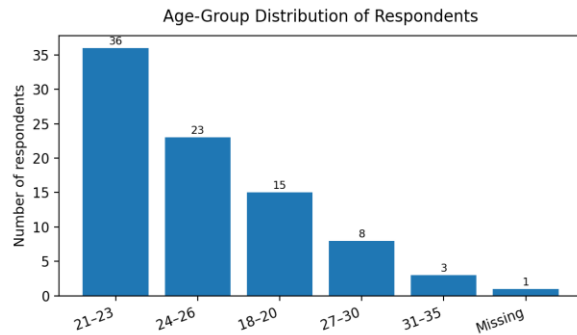


Figure 2
Age-Group Distribution of Respondents



Social Media Use and Political Meme Exposure

Social-media use was substantial within the sample. The largest group reported 2–4 hours of daily use (38.4%), followed by 1–2 hours (32.6%) and more than 4 hours (19.8%).

Political meme exposure was also common: 32.6% reported encountering political memes often and 16.3% very often, producing a combined 50.0% who encountered them often or very often. Instagram was the dominant exposure platform, identified by 65 respondents (75.6% of the total sample), while X (Twitter), YouTube and WhatsApp were substantially less frequently selected.

Table 3 Social Media Use and Political Meme Exposure

Variable	Category	n	% of total
Daily social-media use	2-4 hours	33	38.4
	1-2 hours	28	32.6
	More than 4 hours	17	19.8
	Less than 1 hour	7	8.1
	Missing	1	1.2
Political meme exposure	Often	28	32.6
	Sometimes	25	29.1
	Very often	14	16.3
	Rarely	14	16.3
	Never	3	3.5
	Missing	2	2.3
Main platform for political memes	Instagram	65	75.6
	X (Twitter)	11	12.8
	YouTube	6	7.0
	WhatsApp	2	2.3
	Other	1	1.2
	Missing	1	1.2

Note. Percentages are calculated on $N = 86$. Question-wise missing values are retained in the table.

Figure 3
Platform Where Respondents Encounter Political Memes Most Frequently

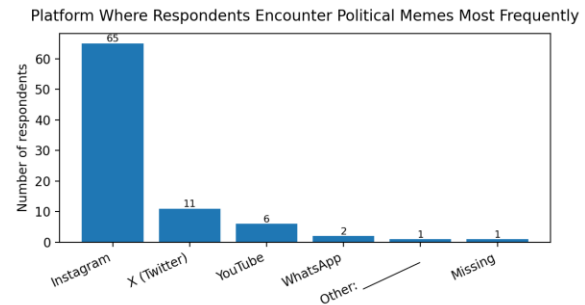
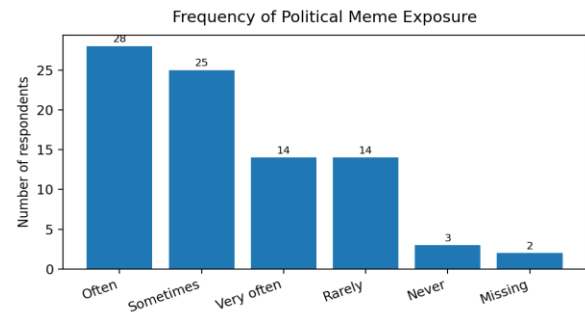


Figure 4
Frequency of Political Meme Exposure



Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

The descriptive results show a pattern of moderate-to-high exposure accompanied by substantial concern about misinformation.

Meme exposure had a mean of 3.43, awareness of current political issues a mean of 3.36, and ease of understanding a mean of 3.37. Misinformation concern recorded the highest mean among the attitude measures ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.91$).

Discussion with friends was also relatively high ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.97$), whereas using memes to express one's own political opinion was lower ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.96$).

The descriptive profile therefore distinguishes between encountering and discussing political memes, on the one hand, and using them as an overt vehicle for personal political expression, on the other.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Valid n	Mean	SD
Exposure to political memes	84	3.43	1.07
Awareness of current political issues	84	3.36	1.12
Perceived misinformation risk	85	3.96	0.91
Influence on leader/government performance perception	85	3.25	0.91
Use of memes to express own political opinion	84	2.48	0.96
Political issues become easier to understand	84	3.37	0.92
Emotional connection through memes/satire	85	3.09	0.92
Discussion with friends after seeing memes	85	3.55	0.97
Influence on opinion about leaders/parties	85	3.01	1.10
Motivated to seek more political information	85	3.05	0.95
Overall contribution to political engagement	85	3.35	0.98
Encouragement of youth political engagement	52	3.83	0.86

Note. Scale values range from 1 to 5. Higher scores indicate greater exposure, agreement, frequency or perceived contribution.

Table 5 High-Agreement and High-Frequency Summary

Statement Indicator /	n	Valid n	%
Awareness of current issues	45	84	53.6
Can spread misleading or false information	65	85	76.5
Influence performance perceptions	35	85	41.2

Statement Indicator /	n	Valid n	%
Make issues easier to understand	43	84	51.2
Emotional connection	27	85	31.8
Discussion with friends	54	85	63.5
Influence opinion about leaders/parties	33	85	38.8
Encounter political memes often/very often	42	84	50.0
Use memes to express opinion often/very often	8	84	9.5
Seek more information often/very often	26	85	30.6

Note. For agreement statements, the table reports Agree + Strongly Agree. For frequency statements, it reports Often + Very often.

Figure 5 Agreement with Key Meme and Engagement Statements

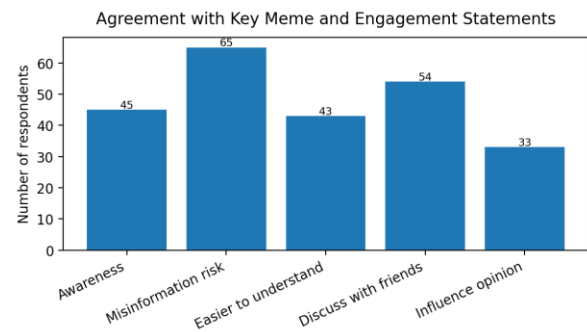
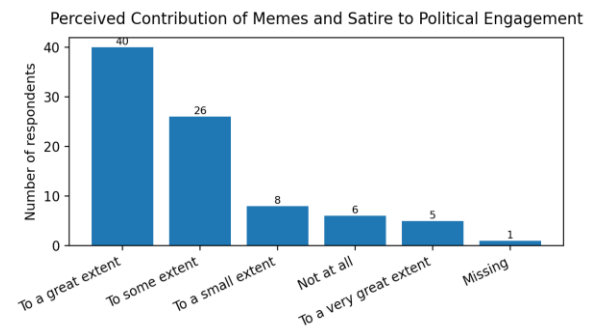


Figure 6 Perceived Contribution of Memes and Satire to Political Engagement



Political Awareness and Understanding

The results indicate that political memes function as more than entertainment for a substantial share of respondents. A majority of valid respondents (53.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that political memes help them become aware of current political issues, while 51.2% agreed that memes make political issues easier to understand. These responses are consistent with the proposition that humour and visual compression can provide an accessible entry point to political information. The effect should not, however, be treated as universal: the distribution also contains neutral and disagreeing responses, indicating meaningful variation in how respondents process meme-based political material.

Discussion, Expression and Information-Seeking

Peer discussion was one of the strongest engagement outcomes. A total of 63.5% of valid respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they discuss political issues with friends after encountering political memes or satire online. By contrast, only 9.5% reported using political memes to express their own political opinion often or very often. Within this sample, then, memes appear to function more consistently as prompts for interpersonal political conversation than as direct instruments of public self-expression. Information-seeking occupied an intermediate position: 30.6% reported that memes or satire motivated them to seek more political information often or very often.

This distinction is important for understanding connective action. A political meme need not produce a public political statement to have a communicative consequence. Its political significance may lie in the conversation it initiates between friends, the question it raises, or the search for additional information that follows.

Misinformation Concern

Misinformation concern was the strongest descriptive signal in the study. Over three-quarters of valid respondents (76.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that political memes can spread misleading or false information. The open-ended responses reinforced this concern: 71.9% of valid comments were coded as yes or conditional yes in relation to the possibility that humorous presentation can make political misinformation more believable. Respondents commonly associated humour with reduced perceived

seriousness, greater memorability and easier circulation. At the same time, some comments indicated that satire can encourage critical thinking when users understand its context and verify the underlying claim.

Table 6 Summary of Open-Ended Views on Humor and Political Misinformation

Open-ended response category	n	% of valid comments
Yes / conditional yes	23	71.9
Unclear / no substantive comment	7	21.9
No / less likely	2	6.2

Note. Open-ended comments were available from 32 respondents. Categories are based on thematic coding of the responses.

Correlation Analysis

Spearman rank-order correlations indicate that exposure is related to awareness and information-seeking, but the strength of association varies across outcomes.

Exposure to political memes was positively associated with awareness of current political issues ($\rho = .268$, $p = .014$) and information-seeking ($\rho = .311$, $p = .004$), supporting H1 at the correlational level. Use of memes for personal political expression was associated with discussion with friends ($\rho = .346$, $p = .001$) and more strongly with information-seeking ($\rho = .418$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Ease of understanding showed the strongest bivariate association in the dataset with awareness ($\rho = .536$, $p < .001$) and was also positively associated with discussion ($\rho = .272$, $p = .012$), supporting H3. Discussion with friends was positively associated with perceived contribution to political engagement ($\rho = .419$, $p < .001$).

Table 7 Spearman Correlation Results

Variable relationship	Valid n	Spearman rho	p
Exposure and awareness	84	0.268	= 0.014
Exposure and information-seeking	84	0.311	= 0.004

Variable relationship	Valid n	Spearman rho	p
Expression through memes and discussion	84	0.346	= 0.001
Expression through memes and information-seeking	84	0.418	< .001
Ease of understanding and awareness	84	0.536	< .001
Ease of understanding and discussion	84	0.272	= 0.012
Exposure and perceived contribution	84	0.310	= 0.004
Discussion and perceived contribution	85	0.419	< .001
Misinformation concern and perceived contribution	85	0.349	= 0.001

Note. Spearman correlation was selected because the main survey measures are ordinal. Results indicate associations, not causation.

Exploratory Regression Analysis

The exploratory OLS model examined perceived overall contribution of memes and political satire to political engagement as the outcome, with meme exposure, political awareness, ease of understanding, discussion with friends and misinformation concern as predictors. The model accounted for 42.3% of the variance in perceived contribution ($R^2 = .423$, adjusted $R^2 = .386$, $F(5, 78) = 11.44$, $p < .001$). Ease of understanding, discussion with friends and misinformation concern were significant predictors; meme exposure and political awareness were not significant once the other predictors were entered.

The regression pattern is analytically important because it separates visibility from political consequence. Exposure had a positive bivariate association with perceived contribution ($\rho = .310$, $p = .004$), yet its coefficient in the multivariable model was not significant. This indicates that frequency of encountering memes may overlap with more proximate processes—understanding, interpersonal discussion and vigilance about misinformation—that better account for respondents' perceived engagement.

Table 8 Exploratory Regression Predicting Perceived Contribution to Political Engagement

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	-0.438	0.523	-0.84	= 0.404
Meme exposure	0.024	0.091	0.26	= 0.796
Political awareness	0.107	0.093	1.15	= 0.255
Ease of understanding	0.360	0.111	3.26	= 0.002
Discussion with friends	0.237	0.094	2.53	= 0.013
Misinformation concern	0.328	0.103	3.19	= 0.002

Note. Dependent variable: overall perceived contribution to political engagement. $N = 84$. $R^2 = 0.423$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.386$. OLS is used exploratorily and should be interpreted cautiously with ordinal survey data.

A seven-item scale spanning awareness, ease of understanding, emotional connection, discussion, opinion influence, information-seeking and perceived contribution showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.823$, $n = 84$). The result supports viewing these items as related indicators of meme-linked political engagement, while retaining item-level reporting to preserve the distinctions among different forms of engagement.

X. HYPOTHESIS SUMMARY

Table 9 Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Result	Basis of interpretation
H1	Exposure is positively associated with awareness and information-seeking.	Supported	Exposure correlated with awareness and information-seeking.
H2	Active expression through memes is positively associated with discussion and information-seeking.	Supported	Expression correlated with discussion and information-seeking.

Hypothesis	Statement	Result	Basis of interpretation
H3	Ease of understanding is associated with awareness, discussion and engagement contribution.	Supported	Ease of understanding showed the strongest bivariate link with awareness and was significant in regression.
H4	Misinformation concern is linked with caution and recognition of risk.	Partially supported	Strong descriptive support; no direct trust item was included, so inferential testing was limited.

Note. Hypotheses are interpreted as relational claims because the research design is cross-sectional.

XI. DISCUSSION

The findings position political memes and satire as a meaningful, informal layer of political communication for the young users represented in this sample. Half of the valid respondents encountered political memes often or very often, and Instagram accounted for 75.6% of reported primary exposure. This concentration is consistent with the visual and participatory affordances of contemporary social platforms and with evidence that Generation Z increasingly consumes news and public-affairs content across converging media environments (Baghel & Dwivedi, 2026). It also reflects the wider movement from broadcast-centred communication toward networked screen cultures described by Dwivedi et al. (2026).

The findings nevertheless caution against equating exposure with engagement. The correlation analysis shows that exposure is positively associated with awareness and information-seeking, supporting H1, but the regression demonstrates that exposure does not remain significant after ease of understanding, discussion with friends and misinformation concern are considered. This distinction is theoretically useful. In a uses-and-gratifications account, exposure is only the beginning of audience activity; users attach different purposes and meanings to what they encounter. In a connective-action account, political significance develops through circulation and interaction. The present data fit both propositions: memes appear most consequential when they become understandable material for social conversation rather than when they simply increase the volume of political content in a feed.

Ease of understanding is particularly important. It showed the strongest bivariate association in the dataset with awareness ($\rho = .536$, $p < .001$) and was

also a significant regression predictor ($B = 0.360$, $SE = 0.111$, $t = 3.26$, $p = 0.002$). This pattern suggests that the communicative value of a meme may depend on whether compression and humour make a political issue accessible without stripping away so much context that interpretation becomes distorted. The dual-process perspective provides a useful way of reading this result: an immediately intelligible meme can function as an initial heuristic cue, while subsequent discussion or verification can move interpretation toward more deliberate processing. The study cannot demonstrate that cognitive sequence causally, but the empirical pattern is compatible with it.

Peer discussion emerges as the clearest social mechanism in the findings. Discussion with friends was positively associated with perceived contribution to political engagement ($\rho = .419$, $p < .001$) and remained significant in the regression ($B = 0.237$, $SE = 0.094$, $t = 2.53$, $p = 0.013$). This reinforces Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) argument that networked political activity can develop through personalised and informal acts rather than through formal organisational participation. It also suggests that interpersonal dialogue deserves greater attention in research on meme politics. Communication is not completed when the meme is viewed; meaning may be negotiated in the conversation that follows. The broader communication literature likewise recognises dialogue as a resource through which people process contentious experiences and make meaning together (Dwivedi & Kishore, 2025d). In the present context, a meme may become politically relevant precisely because it gives friends something to question, interpret, challenge or verify.

The misinformation findings add an important qualification. Perceived misinformation risk had the highest mean ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.91$), and 76.5% agreed or strongly agreed that political memes can spread misleading or false information. Misinformation concern was also a significant regression predictor (B

= 0.328, SE = 0.103, $t = 3.19$, $p = 0.002$). This coefficient should not be interpreted as evidence that misinformation itself produces healthy engagement. Rather, within this exploratory model, respondents who reported greater concern about misinformation also reported greater perceived contribution to political engagement. One plausible interpretation is that political engagement in a meme environment may coexist with heightened vigilance: users who take political content seriously enough to evaluate it may simultaneously recognise the risks attached to its circulation.

This finding is consistent with wider concerns about credibility in fragmented digital information environments. Sen and Dwivedi (2026) show that young audiences' judgments of digital news increasingly involve questions of accuracy, authenticity and credibility. Research on radio, by contrast, indicates that institutional legacy media can retain credibility even while audiences migrate toward more fragmented digital audio spaces (Dwivedi & Kishore, 2025c, 2025e). The contrast helps clarify what is distinctive about meme-based political communication: the content may be highly accessible and socially engaging while lacking stable source cues. For this reason, media literacy cannot be treated as an external add-on to meme culture; it is part of the communicative competence required to interpret it responsibly.

The relatively low level of direct meme-based self-expression also deserves attention. Only 9.5% reported using political memes to express their own political opinion often or very often, yet expression through memes was significantly associated with both discussion and information-seeking ($\rho = .346$, $p = .001$; $\rho = .418$, $p < .001$). This suggests that active political expression may be less frequent than passive or conversational engagement but may still be connected to broader forms of political activity when it occurs. The pattern is compatible with affective-public scholarship, in which political participation can take the form of sharing sentiments, symbolic affiliations and reactions rather than conventional public argument (Papacharissi, 2015).

Taken together, the results support a conditional rather than celebratory account of meme politics. Memes can lower the threshold for political awareness and discussion, but their effects are mediated by

comprehension, social interaction and critical attention to misinformation. This interpretation is also consistent with Indian research showing that the political significance of satire depends on how audiences process it rather than on exposure alone (Rani, 2025). The present study extends that argument by demonstrating, within its sample, that raw exposure loses predictive significance when more interpretive and interpersonal variables enter the model.

XII. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between political memes, satire and perceived political engagement among young social-media users aged 18–35 using 86 survey responses concentrated in Gwalior and Indore. Political memes were a routine part of respondents' social-media experience, with 50.0% encountering them often or very often and Instagram accounting for 75.6% of reported primary exposure. The findings also show that memes are associated with political awareness, easier understanding, peer discussion and information-seeking, while misinformation concern is widespread.

The inferential results sharpen this picture. Exposure was positively associated with awareness and information-seeking, and meme-based expression was associated with discussion and information-seeking. Yet exposure itself was not significant in the exploratory regression. Instead, ease of understanding, discussion with friends and misinformation concern significantly predicted perceived contribution to political engagement, with the model explaining 42.3% of the variance ($R^2 = .423$). The theoretical contribution lies in bringing together audience activity, connective action and a dual-process interpretation of political meme processing. Political communication through memes appears less dependent on how often users encounter content than on whether they can make sense of it, discuss it and evaluate its credibility.

The study therefore supports neither a dismissal of memes as trivial entertainment nor an assumption that they are inherently politically empowering. Their significance is conditional and socially produced. Memes can open a route into political attention and conversation, but the same characteristics that make them accessible can facilitate simplification and

misinformation. Their democratic value depends in part on the interpretive capacities of the audiences who circulate them.

XIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build media literacy among young users so they can distinguish satire, opinion, factual claims and misinformation before sharing political memes.
- Encourage journalism and communication programmes to include meme analysis, visual political communication and digital political communication in the curriculum.
- Encourage political communicators to use humour responsibly and avoid misleading edits, decontextualised claims, communal stereotyping and personal attacks.
- Improve the visibility of fact-checking and source information around viral political content, especially when humour carries an underlying factual claim.
- Encourage young users to verify consequential political claims through reliable news sources before allowing a meme to shape a strong opinion.
- Support civic-education and voter-awareness initiatives that use meme formats responsibly while keeping the underlying political message transparent and factually defensible.

XIV. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study relies on purposive and convenience sampling, so its findings cannot be generalised to all young adults in India.
- The sample is concentrated mainly in Gwalior and Indore, which limits geographic diversity.
- The questionnaire depends on self-reported behaviour, which can be affected by recall error or social desirability.
- Some questions had missing responses, particularly later optional items, so valid totals vary somewhat across analyses.
- The cross-sectional design can identify associations but cannot establish causal effects.
- The study does not include a content analysis of specific memes, nor does it examine platform recommendation algorithms directly.

XV. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could extend the study through larger and more representative samples covering additional Indian states, languages and regional media cultures. Comparative work could examine whether meme-related engagement differs across Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, X, Facebook, Reddit and Telegram. Longitudinal studies could test whether repeated meme exposure is associated with changes in political knowledge, political attitudes, voting intention or participation over time. Experimental designs could compare humorous, satirical and straightforwardly factual versions of the same political message to examine effects on comprehension, trust, memory and verification. Further work should also investigate AI-generated memes, synthetic political satire and deepfake formats, where the boundary between creative expression and misleading political communication may become increasingly difficult for audiences to evaluate.

REFERENCES

- [1] Zerback, T., M. Johann, and K. Haas, "Can political internet memes influence information selection of young adults? Examining the mediating roles of issue-specific interest, perceived issue importance, and humor," *Popular Communication*, advance online publication, 2026, doi: 10.1080/15405702.2026.2645565.
- [2] Shifman, L., *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014, doi: 10.7551/mitpress/9429.001.0001.
- [3] Sen, A., and S. Dwivedi, "AI-generated news and audience trust: A study of young adults' perception of credibility, accuracy and authenticity," *International Journal of Innovative Research in Technology*, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 582–595, 2026. OnlineOnline. Available: https://ijirt.org/publishedpaper/IJIRT208962_PAPER.pdf
- [4] Ross, A. S., and D. J. Rivers, "Digital cultures of political participation: Internet memes and the discursive delegitimization of the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates," *Discourse, Context & Media*, vol. 16, pp. 1–11, 2017, doi: 10.1016/j.dcm.2017.01.001.

- [5] Rani, P., "A whimsical wisdom: Exploring consumption of online political satire and its impact on political engagement of youth in India," *The European Journal of Humour Research*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 131–158, 2025, doi: 10.7592/EJHR.2025.13.3.1039.
- [6] Rajawat, R., "The role of memes and satire in political communication during Indian elections," unpublished bachelor's dissertation, ITM University Gwalior, n.d.
- [7] Penney, J., "It is so hard not to be funny in this situation: Memes and humor in U.S. youth online political expression," *Television & New Media*, vol. 21, no. 8, pp. 791–806, 2020, doi: 10.1177/1527476419886068.
- [8] Papacharissi, Z., *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- [9] Katz, E., J. G. Blumler, and M. Gurevitch, "Uses and gratifications research," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 509–523, 1973, doi: 10.1086/268109.
- [10] Kahneman, D., *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
- [11] Dwivedi, S., and K. N. Kishore, "Trusted through change: Radio's role in an expanding digital audio landscape," *Journal of Research and Development*, vol. 17, no. 9(II), pp. 139–147, 2025.
- [12] Dwivedi, S., and K. N. Kishore, "The power of dialogue: Navigating divorce through effective communication," in *Untying Bonds: In-Depth Studies of Marital Dissolutions*, vol. 1, pp. 51–61. Malik & Sons, 2025.
- [13] Dwivedi, S., and K. N. Kishore, "The enduring credibility of radio in a fragmented digital audio landscape: Strategies for advertisers," *YMER*, vol. 24, no. 7, pp. 442–457, 2025.
- [14] Dwivedi, S., and K. N. Kishore, "Technological catalysts and shifting paradigms: An examination of evolving media consumption habits," *Advances in Nonlinear Variational Inequalities*, vol. 28, no. 6s, pp. 903–921, 2025.
- [15] Dwivedi, S., and K. N. Kishore, "From mic to multi-platform: The rise of Gen Z in podcasting," *Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, vol. 2, no. 9, pp. 103–109, 2025.
- [16] Dwivedi, S., T. Choubey, and R. Das, *From Radio Waves to Digital Screens: A Journey Through Modern Communication*. OrangeBooks Publication, 2026.
- [17] DataReportal, *We Are Social, and Meltwater, Digital 2026: India*, 2026. OnlineOnline. Available: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-india>
- [18] Dawkins, R., *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- [19] Boulianne, S., and Y. Theocharis, "Young people, digital media, and engagement: A meta-analysis of research," *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 111–127, 2020, doi: 10.1177/0894439318814190.
- [20] Boukes, M., H. G. Boomgaarden, M. Moorman, and C. H. de Vreese, "At odds: Laughing and thinking? The appreciation, processing, and persuasiveness of political satire," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 65, no. 5, pp. 721–744, 2015, doi: 10.1111/jcom.12173.
- [21] Bennett, W. L., and A. Segerberg, "The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics," *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, pp. 739–768, 2012, doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661.
- [22] Baghel, A. S., and S. Dwivedi, "Impact of media convergence on news consumption habits among generation Z in Indore, M.P.," *International Journal of Innovative Research in Technology*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 2030–2042, 2026. OnlineOnline. Available: https://ijirt.org/publishedpaper/IJIRT208565_PAPER.pdf
- [23] Ahmed, S., and M. Masood, "Breaking barriers with memes: How memes bridge political cynicism to online political participation," *social media + Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2024, doi: 10.1177/20563051241261277.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS

1. Email ID (removed from analysis)
2. Name (removed from analysis)
3. What is your age group?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. What is your gender?

6. What is your city?
7. Which social media platform(s) do you use most often?
8. How much time do you spend on social media daily?
9. How often do you come across political memes on social media?
10. Which platform do you encounter political memes most frequently?
11. Political memes help me become aware of current political issues.
12. Political memes can sometimes spread misleading or false information.
13. Political memes influence how I perceive the performance of political leaders or governments.
14. How often do you use political memes to express your own political opinion?
15. Political memes make political issues easier for me to understand.
16. I feel emotionally connected to political content when it is presented through memes or satire.
17. I discuss political issues with friends after seeing political memes or satire online.
18. Political memes influence my opinion about political leaders or parties.
19. Have political memes or satire ever motivated you to seek more information about a political issue?
20. Overall, how much do you think memes and political satire contribute to political engagement among young social media users?
21. Do political memes and satire encourage young people to become more politically engaged?
22. Do you think the humorous presentation of political content can sometimes make political misinformation appear more believable? Please share your thoughts.

Scale / item type	Coding rule
Contribution scale	Not at all = 1; To a small extent = 2; To some extent = 3; To a great extent = 4; To a very great extent = 5
Encouragement scale	Not at all = 1; Not much = 2; Not sure = 3; Yes, somewhat = 4; Yes, significantly = 5
Personal identifiers	Email ID and Name were excluded from analysis and reporting.

APPENDIX B: CODING SCHEME FOR QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Table B1 Quantitative Coding Scheme

Scale / item type	Coding rule
Agreement scale	Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5
Frequency scale	Never = 1; Rarely = 2; Sometimes = 3; Often = 4; Very often = 5